

MIRRORS AND VISIONS: NỮ LƯU THƠ QUÁN AND THE WOMAN QUESTION IN
INTERWAR VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the varied output of a small press called *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* (Women's Bookstore) that operated in Gò Công, Cochinchina from 1928 until 1930. Under the editorial direction of a woman named Phan Thị Bạch Vân (1903-1980), this press sought to influence Vietnamese women's involvement in their families and communities through novels and biographies, along with instructive and prescriptive literature. Bạch Vân and her cohort of Vietnamese intellectuals derived influence from women's movements in France, the United States, China, and Japan. They translated a diverse range of ideas and concepts through their own unique lens, with attention paid to their audience and desired influence. I combine literary and historical analyses to consider the significance of works in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's* catalogue, such as: Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels, *Kiếp hoa thám sử* (1928-1929), *Nữ anh tài* (1928), and *Lâm Kiều Loan* (1932), the biographies of Madame Roland (1754-1793) and Qiu Jin (1875-1907), and instructive books by Bạch Vân and a writer named Đạm Phương (1881-1947), called *Văn Quốc ngữ* (1929) and *Gia Đình Giáo Dục* (1928). This dissertation examines written media that has hitherto been unexplored and shows Vietnamese women's serious involvement in what contemporaries termed "the Woman's Question." Additionally, I show how a director of a small women's press sought to ensure a remarkable future for the Vietnamese derived from her own vision and through the direction of other women.

INTRODUCTION: Part I

“Xưa nay người ta thường nói: “tiểu thuyết là để cảm xúc lòng người”; nhưng về phần tôi, thì tôi nói rằng: vì có cảm xúc mới làm ra tiểu thuyết...” – Đạm Phương

“In days past, people would often say “novels are meant to evoke emotion in people’s hearts,” but for my part, I say that novels are made because we possess emotions...” – Đạm Phương

“Kính gửi các nhà Văn sĩ

Tôi đang trù liệu để dựng nên một cái thư quán ở Gò Công để hiệu là Nữ lưu thư quán chuyên bán các thứ truyện sách tạp chí hoặc xuất bản trong xứ, hoặc ở bên Pháp gửi sang, không có phần hại cho đường tinh thần của chị em bạn gái.

Vậy trong Tam kỳ chư văn gia ai có xuất bản những sách hay truyện lạ đáng bỏ ích cho phụ nữ nước nhà, muốn được bán giúp thì hãy viết thư, hoặc gửi nguyên bản đến thương lượng – những quyển nào thật hản có giá trị sẽ được mua nhiều và gửi tiêu thụ rất chóng trong Đông Pháp.

‘Nữ lưu thư quán’ không bao giờ nhận những truyện sách nhảm nhí để bán.

Xin các ngài biết cho.

Madame Võ Đình Dần dite Pham

Phan thị Bạch Vân Gò công”¹

¹ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Kính gửi các nhà Văn sĩ” *Đông Pháp thời báo* (April 19, 1928), p. 9.

“Dear writers

I am in the process of planning to set up a bookstore in Gò Công called Nữ lưu thư quán, which will specialize in selling books and journals either published in the country or imported from France, as there is nothing to support women and girls’ spiritual path.

In Tam kỳ, if any writers have published good books or unusual stories that are useful for our country’s women, or who want to help sell them, then write a letter, or send the original text for negotiation – books that are truly valuable will be purchased a lot and sold rapidly in Indochina. ‘Nữ lưu thư quán’ will never accept trivial books for sale.

Please let me know.

Madame Võ Đình Dần called Pham

Phan thị Bạch Vân Gò công”

Shown above is Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s first call for writers and submissions to her proposed Women’s Bookstore in Gò Công. Phan Thị Bạch Vân used both her own name and that of her husband, Võ Đình Dần, who owned a prominent pharmaceutical business in Cochinchina. Cochinchina was the name for the French colony located in what is today the southern portion of Vietnam. The major city located within Cochinchina was Saigon, which was a commercial and cultural hub during the late-colonial period, and boasted of myriad presses, newspapers, and

journals. Phan Thị Bạch Vân resided and conducted business concerning her press in Gò Công, a town located in a province just south of Saigon.

In the short article, from the pages of the newspaper *Đông Pháp thời báo* (Indochina Times), Bạch Vân identified a lacuna in the already-bustling publishing culture of Cochinchina; according to her, there were no titles that supported women and girls and provided spiritual guidance, either published from within the Vietnamese context or coming from the metropole. When Bạch Vân brought up girls' spiritual path, she used the word *tinh thần*, which translates to one's spirit, mind, and can denote a sense of morality as well. She wanted to find works that would be useful to women in a moral sense and entertain them at the same time. She also assured potential authors that there was a market for these books, as a work that was "truly valuable" would have no problem generating customers' interest and monetary profits. Phan Thị Bạch Vân concluded her piece with the assertion that she would not publish anything "trivial," using the term *nhảm nhí*, which could also mean something untrue or in poor taste. This ad was Bạch Vân's first step in realizing her goal of publishing material for women that would develop their intellectual and moral character. She wished to publish this material professionally and within a publication that would garner respect. To Bạch Vân, writings that developed women's intelligence and morality were something Vietnamese women were missing and sorely needed. While not much about Bạch Vân's philosophy and impetus behind the establishment of her press can be gleaned from this brief advertisement, Bạch Vân's vision would become clear and defined as her press came to fruition and maintained an impressive output.

Within the same year, she would be facilitating the publication of both novels and biographies and working with a handful of authors. 1929 was the press's most productive year, however; a publication list from the first section of Bạch Vân's novel *Nữ anh tài* showed over

twenty titles that had been published or were in the process of publication.² The list showed a diversity of topics, as well, with novels by Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa (Bạch Vân's pen name) and Nguyễn Thị Đan Tâm (or Huỳnh Anh Thị), biographies about Gandhi and Russian revolutionaries, such as Sophia Perovskaia, a history of *Nam tiến* (the expansion of Vietnamese people from the Red River Delta into southern territories of what is today Vietnam), and the American Revolution. Additionally, the writer Đạm Phương (1881-1947) wrote books outlining women's place in the home and family, rounding out Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's catalogue with material emphasizing the art of domesticity. While not solely authored by women, the presence of multiple female authors was significant, as the majority of Vietnamese authors writing for presses and newspapers during the interwar years were male. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's press was primarily made for women, by women, and was ground-breaking in both the publications' content and motivations that drove their various authors.

It is also important to note that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán were intrinsically part of a southern Vietnamese press community, with the city of Saigon operating at the center. Bạch Vân knew of, and was known by, those in charge of other publications operating in Saigon, such as *Đông Pháp thời báo* (Indochina Times) and *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News). She wrote in their papers and was profiled by them, and expressed similar intellectual, moral, and cultural interests as the authors within their pages. While she possessed ties to the other regions of French Indochina (Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán featured authors from, and sold copies of their publication in, Tonkin and Annam as well) she can primarily be viewed as a southern woman writer who shared commonality with other authors operating within the dynamic press

² *Nữ anh tài* or "Woman of great talent."

community of Cochinchina. Her novels demonstrate this tie to the south as well, with Bạch Vân making narrative use of settings and protagonists hailing from southern provinces.

In this dissertation, I argue that by writing novels, biographies, literacy primers, and domestic instruction books, Phan Thị Bạch Vân and those behind *Nữ Lư Thợ Quán* created a vision of the Vietnamese society they wanted to see through a unique image of aspirational femininity. This visionary Vietnamese society was grounded by *Nữ Lư Thợ Quán*'s idea of the perfect Vietnamese woman: a woman who was self-sufficient, independently-minded but still loyal to her family, morally upright, intelligent, educated, concerned with the wellbeing of others, kind towards children, and attentive towards the needs of her community. While *Nữ Lư Thợ Quán*'s perfect woman was partially inspired by the women who created and wrote about her, she was ultimately an ideal and an aspiration, rather than a specific set of recommendations upon which women could realistically act. The writers who engaged with this aspirational femininity understood this trajectory towards a better Vietnamese society was far-off, but their attempts to mold their readership into this ideal reveal their concerns over contemporary society, their varied influences, and their interests. Bạch Vân and the writers of *Nữ Lư Thợ Quán* were worried about women's access to rights, their self-sufficiency, their relationships with men and their families, and the progression of Vietnamese society in a modern era. They were interested in the histories and contemporary events of France, China, Japan, and the United States. They read widely and wrote about many different topics they believed concerned Vietnamese women.



Figure 1.1

Phan Thị Bạch Vân pictured in
Thiếu Sơn's article about her
and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán.



Figure 1.2

Đạm Phương pictured outside her
Women's Labor Association with
her fellow members in *Trung lập báo*
(The Impartial), 1928.

Their contemporary concerns chiefly centered around women's place in society, their ability to live fulfilled lives, enjoy both academic and practical educations, participate in public life, care for their children, and select the best husbands for their own happiness. Outside of their own lived experiences and communities, these authors derived most of their influence from France, the United States, China, and Japan, but cited influences from other places as well.³ They read widely and touched on diverse genres and topics: from the history and significance of England's Glorious Revolution to folk tales about China's Warring States period. This influence – a significant part of *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán*'s material – grounds both the press and its authors within a broad, international, and ongoing global movement that focused on women and their place within society. Commonly known as the "Woman's Question," it also included the concept of the New Woman, or how women should act and be treated with the advent of the twentieth century. This discussion was taking place in most Euro-American cultures at the time within their respective intellectual circles, with many cultures of the Global South engaging as well. In its modern iteration, the Woman's Question had its origins in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, but the question of women had also been discussed in France as early as the fifteenth century, and the question was raised in England by the eighteenth century.⁴ The Woman's Question and interest in the New Woman expanded to include places such as Egypt, Japan, China, and British Burma.⁵ Those who engaged with this topic debated over women's suffrage, their right to an education, their place within the family, their relationship with consumerism, and how they should conduct themselves and dress. *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* owed its

³ Some authors, especially in the newspaper *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News) wrote articles about Indian women, Turkish women, and Tunisian women.

⁴ See Karen Offen, *The Woman Question in France, 1400-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). And Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

⁵ The presence of the Woman's Question in Asian and African countries stemmed from their interactions with the West brought on by colonialism.

very existence to the idea of the New Woman and the Woman's Question and its authors contributed to the discussion, referencing and engaging with conversations happening in foreign countries, and in foreign languages. Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán acted as a sponsor of these discussions, which places it centrally and significantly within both a Vietnamese and global context.

This dissertation considers both the intellectual and social aspects of these women's lives. These women read, translated, condensed, and filtered ideas and stories from other cultures to be consumed by their Vietnamese readership. They were part of the Vietnamese intelligentsia that became a force in the 1920s after the French colonial administration encouraged education in *quốc ngữ*, or the Vietnamese writing system based on the Roman alphabet, rather than the previous writing system that was based on Chinese characters; this education, which came to include women, allowed the Vietnamese to read and challenge European philosophies, ideas, and literature.⁶ Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the authors in her women's press both engaged with current intellectual trends and raised new questions about what it meant to be a good woman in interwar Vietnam. To these women, a good woman was one who was educated and could educate her children, and act as both a companion and counterpart of her husband. Yet this idea of becoming an educated wife and mother was not simply about the individual; it connected to what they viewed as their community, and how they wanted to mold those who purchased and read their books. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's press was both an intellectual and social endeavor; she sought a community and wished to expand the group of women like her and her cohort working with NLTQ. By and large, NLTQ was an intellectual community that was created for Vietnamese women but involved the participation of people beyond the borders of Indochina; this was an intellectual community speaking to and about women throughout the world. In Phan Thị Bạch

⁶ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 3.

Vân's novel, *Nữ anh tài* (1928), for example, the female protagonist visits and speaks with Chinese women who are involved in political associations and campaigning for women's rights in the country. She is aware of, and eager to, communicate with educated Chinese women with whom she shares common interests. *Nữ anh tài's* protagonist also enthusiastically wishes to foster domestic and international women's interest groups; this is a reflection of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's goals for Vietnamese women and their relationships with their female counterparts in other countries. What these women wished to accomplish with their publications was as important as the content of their publications.

This introduction will set the stage for the following chapters. Here, I will outline the relevant history and discussion around the Woman's Question in the three *kỳ* of Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina and what we know about Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her women's press. I will consider the theoretical implications of studying and writing about Vietnamese women during the 1920s and 30s. Lastly, in the second part of this introduction, I will take a comparative look at studies of the New Woman and Woman's Question in America, Europe, Japan, and China and discuss how they informed the views of writers engaging with the Woman's Question. From their written works, it is clear that those involved in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* interpreted and translated a diverse range of works and topics intended for a Vietnamese audience. Through her translations and writings, Phan Thị Bạch Vân sought to ensure a social future for the Vietnamese marked by the hard work and intelligence of other women.

This thesis rests upon the translation and analysis of sources that for the most part have yet to be examined by scholars of colonial-era Vietnam. There are no studies analyzing these sources' content or significance in English. There is an article by Đặng Thị Ngọc Phượng, published in 2016, which engages with works of fiction by women authors at the beginning of

the twentieth century.⁷ The author does discuss Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels, *Nữ anh tài*, *Kiếp hoa thâm sử*, and *Lâm Kiều Loan*, and points to Bạch Vân's characterization as embodying the idea of talented and progressive women who overcome difficulties in order to live a free life.⁸ To Phụng, these works also express the idea of sacrifice for worthy causes and ideals. Additionally, Đặng Thị Ngọc Phụng writes that authors who worked with Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán (such as Đạm Phương) derived inspiration from, and reflected, the realities of living in early-twentieth century Vietnamese society.⁹ These women writers' works were assessments of their experience living in their contemporary society as well as prescriptions for how the Vietnamese should move forward further into the century. Unfortunately, there has not been substantial scholarly interest in Bạch Vân's works, in particular. More work has been done concerning the writings of Đạm Phương, but that also has to do with Phương's position as a minor member of Vietnamese royalty, as she was a grandchild of Emperor Minh Mạng.

What are the reasons for this oversight? Chiefly, this oversight has to do with how we study and write about the histories of women and the category of "woman" more broadly. Historian Nhung Tuyet Tran points out that "In Vietnam, the image of 'woman' serves as the embodiment of authentic tradition and as a sign of the country's readiness for modernity."¹⁰ In the few histories that examine the lives of Vietnamese women, interest in their political participation, their part in revolutionary activities, and how they have expressed the perceived uniqueness of Vietnamese identity abounds. Interest in women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm

⁷ Đặng Thị Ngọc Phụng, "Những thể nghiệm về kỹ thuật tiểu thuyết của các nhà văn nữ Việt Nam nửa đầu thế kỷ XX" *Tạp chí Khoa học và Giáo dục* 37 (2016): pp. 16-25.

⁸ Đặng Thị Ngọc Phụng, "Những thể nghiệm," p. 17.

⁹ Đặng Thị Ngọc Phụng, "Những thể nghiệm," p. 22.

Kiếp hoa thâm sử can be roughly translated as "Tragic life of a flower," with reference to the protagonist's name. *Lâm Kiều Loan* references the protagonist's name.

¹⁰ Nhung Tuyet Tran, *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463-1778* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), p. 1.

Phuong, who promoted a complex strategy encouraging women to embrace colonial modernity, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism, is less evident in historical studies of the era. These women did not wholly embrace any clearly defined ideologies or courses of action; rather, their written materials demonstrate interest in a variety of countries, ideas, histories, and literature. Further, *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* did not last for more than two years and did not enjoy the same level of fame or interest as periodicals like *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News). These writers were multivalent historical actors who never neatly fit into any categories such as *traditional*, *modern*, *political*, *radical*, or *conservative*. This applies to many women who wrote and acted as cultural activists throughout history, and this study applies to a host of female authors discussing the Woman's Question in the early twentieth century. Vietnam was not the only region wherein women acted as symbols of the nation or used to measure how ready the nation was for modernity; this has led to scholarly oversight regarding the thoughts, feelings, and goals of women themselves.

By targeting a female readership and writing for that female readership, Phan Thị Bạch Vân showed she was a true visionary who sought to build a new class of women based on their intellectual merit. While her press did not achieve longevity or reach beyond Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin, Bạch Vân's editorial and literary contributions provide a rich canon through which we might understand more about Vietnamese women and their interactions with the complex and contested concept of modernity.

The lack of studies analyzing these sources means that scholars have not provided analysis for, or been aware of, a significant movement in Vietnamese women's intellectual and social history. This study considers women as cultural and intellectual agents. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the authors she published in her press felt strongly about the status of Vietnamese women. They utilized various methods and adopted varied cultural outlooks in order to

accomplish their goals of improving Vietnamese women's lives. These were the first Vietnamese women to document their debates and discussions over the future of Vietnamese women and the general Vietnamese population; their writings provide us insight into the intellectual and social sphere of the time.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A vibrant sphere of discourse: the Vietnamese intellectual space and its changes

The intellectual space in which Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán came to be existed due to a variety of special historical circumstances. Many of those circumstances began with the colonial encounter, an effort by the French which began in the late-nineteenth century in the southern region of Vietnam and ended with French control over five areas called Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, Laos, and Cambodia. These five *pays* made up French Indochina, with Cochinchina existing as a colony and the other areas forming the Indochinese Union from 1887.

The regions that make up modern-day Vietnam were historically heterogenous, with varied ethnicities, religions, and languages existing throughout the centuries preceding French colonization. The primary cultural influences over Vietnam were India and China, with Mahayana Buddhism and Confucianism prevalent amongst a population also practicing animist traditions.¹¹ Christianity and Islam were present, with the persecution of Christians acting as a pretext for French military involvement in the nineteenth century. These diverse cultural underpinnings existed in the Vietnamese cultural milieu prior to the French colonial period, and they continued to exist during the period. This is a large part of why Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương showed such varied literary interests; this was consistent with a historically-heterogenous culture accustomed to contact with other cultures.

¹¹ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 5.

Total French domination over the Vietnamese was not assured at the beginning of their colonial project, as “the French had to defeat a lengthy armed opposition and to break the monarchy morally, ideologically, and politically.”¹² The opposition continued throughout the colonial period. The *Cần Vương* (Aid the King) movement, comprised of literati and peasants engaged in armed insurrection and guerilla warfare, resisted French rule from 1885 until 1897. Even after its defeat, French military officers commented on the repression of profound feelings in the defeated Vietnamese populace, which was now suffering from a complete change in their political and cultural worldview.¹³ Though successful by the turn of the century, French colonization was never consistent, monolithic, or assured. This history of resistance, and the fracture of Vietnamese intellectual and cultural traditions, would inspire later figures and have consequences reaching into the early-twentieth century. Though not apparent during the late-nineteenth century, these consequences eventually manifested in a nationalist intelligentsia that used the press as their primary method of debate and discussion. It was to that intelligentsia that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương interreacted with and belonged, as they both wrote for and were featured in newspapers of the day, such as *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, *Đông Pháp thời báo*, and *Trung lập báo*.

The press first came to Vietnam as a result of colonization, through settlers and missionaries. It was sparse during the turn of the century but would gain traction as more Vietnamese became literate and linguistic standards solidified into the twentieth century. Eventually, the Vietnamese intelligentsia would be overwhelmingly represented by both the French and Vietnamese-language press in the 1920s and 30s. The decade following the First World War was a time in which the Vietnamese press was just beginning to find its footing. By

¹² Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, p. 69.

¹³ Brocheux and Hémery, *Indochina*, p. 69.

the late-1920s and early 1930s, it had blossomed into a cultural juggernaut through which authors and journalists could discuss what was happening domestically and abroad, as well as offer commentary about such disparate topics as literature, beauty pageants, and important historical events and figures. Its journey to that status was chiefly predicated on changes to the educational system, which, largely due to French reforms, profoundly changed the Vietnamese intellectual landscape.

Indochina's Governor-General from 1912-1914 and 1917-1919, Albert Sarraut (1872-1962), declared the need for Vietnamese to modernize through a Franco-Vietnamese educational system which trained native elites; this would, theoretically and through French guidance, eventually lead to indirect French rule.¹⁴ Above all, this Franco-Vietnamese school system was meant to subsume the former influence of China over Vietnamese education and governance and replace it with a universal system taken from France's example. Eventually, primary education in Vietnam favored the use of *quốc ngữ*, the Romanized alphabet, while students learned French at higher levels of education.¹⁵ This directly facilitated the boom of Vietnamese print culture, primarily read in French and *quốc ngữ*. But this did not erase the influence of past educational systems in Vietnam, which were modeled after the Chinese imperial examination system and meant to train civil servants in a neo-Confucian blend of education, morality, and governance. Students trained through this system were familiar with Chinese texts and literate in a writing system based on Chinese, called *chữ Nôm*. The change between the two educational and writing systems under the French facilitated a significant transformation in the Vietnamese intellectual sphere. This transformation was not singularly French or Chinese, but something complex and

¹⁴ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 2.

¹⁵ Micheline Lessard, "Tradition for Rebellion: Vietnamese Students and Teachers and Anticolonial Resistance, 1888-1931" (PhD Diss., Cornell University, 1995).

grounded in several traditions. This mixture of traditions is apparent in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's literary references and ability to read in multiple languages; she was educated and interested in both literary canons. Whereas her audience may have been the most comfortable with reading in *quốc ngữ*; therefore, Phan Thị Bạch Vân was her audience's window into other rich cultures and traditions.

Due to these changes and gradual subsumption of French and Romanized Vietnamese over Chinese, no longer did young Vietnamese students exclusively read the same books their fathers had in the prior century. Instead, this new Franco-Vietnamese system featuring *quốc ngữ* and French-language instruction led students to consume (and critique) European literature. Authors educated in this system did not passively read European literature, but “translated, adapted, and challenged European ideas of modernity, rationality, universalism, and nationalism to critique Vietnam's sociopolitical situation.”¹⁶ Additionally, they did not only consume literature stemming from European traditions; some intellectuals were heavily inspired by Chinese reformism as well, especially if they could read Chinese or were training during the transition period before education shifted to focus on French and *quốc ngữ*. If they were products of the newer system, these Vietnamese intellectuals could read other works from foreign cultures in translation either in *quốc ngữ* or in French. This change “created a new generation of anticolonial intellectuals who helped establish modern Vietnamese vernacular print culture.”¹⁷ Yet for Vietnamese intellectuals born during this vibrant period, no small amount of the former Chinese influence remained. This is clear in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's body of work, which featured references to Chinese figures and literature (as we will see in later chapters). There was also

¹⁶ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 19.

¹⁷ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin*, p. 3.

Chinese influence in the writings of Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940), the famous anticolonial writer and himself a product of the former education system. Phan Bội Châu was a massive influence on the Vietnamese intelligentsia, and immensely popular in the Vietnamese press, with newspapers such as *Đông Pháp thời báo*, *Trung hòa nhật báo*, *Lục Tỉnh Tân Văn*, and *Công luận báo* releasing articles about his writings and appearances in the 1920s. Phan Bội Châu was famous intellectual who organized against the French colonial government and participated in a number of educational movements aiming for reform of the Vietnamese under French rule. When the French put him on trial in 1925 for criminal charges, representatives of daily newspapers and other Vietnamese publishers attended the trial and printed thousands of pamphlets describing the trial proceedings.¹⁸ Not only did Phan Bội Châu study Confucian texts, and participate in the former Confucian examination system, he actively fostered contacts in East Asia, notably escaping to Japan in 1905 with help from the Chinese intellectual, Liang Qichao (1873-1929).¹⁹ In Japan, he encouraged Vietnamese students to join him in the country and study while sending anticolonial literature back to Indochina. There was never a clean or complete break from Chinese intellectual or cultural influence; young Vietnamese students simply expanded their repertoire of materials, influences, and references to include other traditions. Therefore, it is best to view this time period and intellectual mood as dynamic, multi-faceted, and cosmopolitan. Some may refer to it as transitional. This implies that these historical actors were merely awaiting the next era, or that this transitional time period was less influential, but I suggest that the students and writers responsible for Vietnamese print culture during the interwar

¹⁸ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 16.

¹⁹ Matthew A. Berry, "Confucian Terrorism: Phan Bội Châu and the Imagining of Modern Vietnam" (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2019).

years were drawing from a massive array of influences (in creative and intellectually stimulating ways) and this interval merits its own distinction and study.

By the 1920s, newspapers became a new cultural center for literate Vietnamese, and especially in cities such as Saigon, newspapers created “a new social urban consciousness.”²⁰ This new consciousness led educated Vietnamese youth to question their place in society and relationships between one another, which guided authors towards what became known as the “Woman’s Question” (*vấn đề phụ nữ*). The Woman’s Question was not unique to the Vietnamese; as I will discuss later in this introduction, other countries and cultures grappled with similar debates in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It prompted the discussion of topics such as how women should select a marriage partner, what skills women needed to successfully raise children, how women should be educated, and if women should be included in politics. These discussions represented a gradual shifting away from former methods of controlling relationships, marriage contracts, and viewing women. It signified that the diffusion of multiple cultural and literary traditions into the Vietnamese public sphere was bearing fruit.

Those involved with newspapers first engaged with the question of women in *Nữ giới chung* (Women’s Bell) in 1918. The motivation behind the endeavor stemmed from a need to promote Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, as French administrators saw that “the Vietnamese had the will and the capacity to establish a politically uncontrolled organization of modern popular education,” meaning that French colonial authorities were threatened by the establishment of Vietnamese educational associations, such as the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục, or the Tonkin Free School.²¹ This was an educational institution founded by Vietnamese nationalists in

²⁰ Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 67.

²¹ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 227.

1907 and involving the participation of Phan Bội Châu with the aim of encouraging the Vietnamese to learn about and adopt Western and Japanese ideas.²² Since this endeavor began without French involvement or approval, it was quickly shut down, with French colonial leaders finding it politically prudent to fund publications that stimulated harmony between the French and Vietnamese, as well as interest in promoting the adoption of *quốc ngữ*. Important in this endeavor was the inclusion of women, as the French were “Convinced that uneducated Vietnamese women posed a serious threat to France’s civilizing mission and colonial rule itself.”²³ With women educated to understand French and French culture further, they could both become better companions to Vietnamese men who studied in Franco-Vietnamese schools and accept Franco-Vietnamese partnership more readily. Thus *Nữ giới chung* came to be. Edited by Sương Nguyệt Anh and produced in Cochinchina, *Nữ giới chung* was the first Vietnamese periodical aimed specifically at women, and heavily involved the participation of Governor-General Albert Sarraut and Phạm Quỳnh. Quỳnh was a prominent intellectual at the time, known as a conservative moralist who advocated selective adoption of Western ideals.²⁴ From the first issue, Sương Nguyệt Anh stated that her newspaper would not take up any political stance, and would instead focus on moral education and instruction in handicrafts and daily tasks. The paper did not last long; *Nữ giới chung* closed its doors within a year and did not have a chance to build a large readership or exert prominent influence over Vietnamese women. Yet its example remained, and it was not long before others saw the potential in aiming their periodicals at women readers, or including women in their political and cultural visions.

²² Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 227.

²³ Micheline Lessard, “The Colony Writ Small: Vietnamese Women and Political Activism in Colonial Schools During the 1920s” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 18 (2007): p. 8.

²⁴ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), pp. 204-205.

The next women's newspaper of prominence was *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News) which lasted for five years (1929-34) and attracted a readership from each region of Vietnam.²⁵ This newspaper featured writers who were less careful in avoiding politics or sensitive topics. They wrote about women who flew airplanes and travelled, and featured debates between intellectuals about women's liberation.²⁶ Some authors have posited these debates over women's liberation and place in the world were methods of actually discussing questions of Vietnamese freedom from French colonialism in a covert way,²⁷ yet the sheer volume and diversity of topics relating to women at this time suggests that Vietnamese men and women were earnestly grappling with their relationships with one another. Women's heightened opportunities in the realms of education and literacy meant that they could participate in discussions about themselves, as by the 1920s there were a number of girls' schools which not only focused on girls' eventual status as wives and mothers, but where they could read French literature and gain the reading skills required to read and write for both *quốc ngữ* and French-language newspapers.²⁸ By the late 1920s, the idea of girls attending school en masse was not out of the ordinary; all the female characters in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels had attended some form of schooling, and some characters expressed the desire to be educated further. Women who possessed the skills to participate in discussion over the Woman's Question did so. As seen in the works of Phan Thị Bạch Vân (both editorially and as an author), men were not the only people engaging in the Woman's Question. Women discussed their own position in family and

²⁵ Shawn McHale, "Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women's Place in Society, 1918-1934" in K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (eds.), *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 177.

²⁶ Shawn McHale, "Printing and Power" p. 187.

²⁷ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 91.

²⁸ Micheline Lessard, "The Colony Writ Small: Vietnamese Women and Political Activism in Colonial Schools During the 1920s" *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 18 (2007): p. 8.

social life because it directly involved them; their self-interest became a profitable and intellectually stimulating topic.

Writers discussed women's rights, the improvement and teaching of work skills, and education. Some prominent figures, such as Đạm Phương of the Hue Women's Work Association (*Nữ công học Hội*), believed that Vietnamese women needed to first improve themselves with appropriate education and skills in order to have political power.²⁹ Others took a stronger stance and criticized the traditional Vietnamese family, arranged marriages, and restrictions to women's ability to educate themselves and find occupations. Phan Thị Bạch Vân took a stance in the middle of these two positions; she featured Đạm Phương's writing in her *Women's Press*, and espoused similar views relating to the importance of women receiving education in literacy and practical skills. Yet her novels reveal a dissatisfaction with the state of familial relations and women's place in the Vietnamese family and wider community. Her forays into writing fiction were a powerful way of exploring these topics and communicating with a female readership. She was not the only woman, or person, to express her dissatisfaction with the state of culture and women's place in it; many men and a handful of articulate women took these topics on as well.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán

While there were a number of authors responsible for Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's catalogue and output, in this dissertation I will primarily be focusing on three novels, two biographies, and a reading primer, all authored by Phan Thị Bạch Vân, as well as a book about housewifery and general considerations for women and families authored by Đạm Phương. The novels demonstrate that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her fellow women writers (Đạm Phương also authored

²⁹ Đạm Phương quoted in David Marr, "The 1920s Women's Rights Debates in Vietnam," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (1976), p. 385.

a novel) saw fiction as an entertaining means by which they could communicate morality and point to what they viewed as essential traits for Vietnamese women. These novels also demonstrate engagement with wider trends outside of the Vietnamese cultural milieu. More than Bạch Vân's works of fiction, her biographies about Madame Roland and Qiu Jin followed popular trends in China, Japan, and Korea pertaining to feminine hagiography and prescriptive literature meant for women. Lastly, the practical reading primer (by Bạch Vân) and housewifery book (by Đàm Phương) drew heavily from Vietnamese cultural norms, folk tales rooted in historical myth, and foreign discussions about national health and women's place in the nation-as-a-family. All these works show a clear vision on Bạch Vân's part, which she sought to bring to life through the dissemination of material from *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*.

In one scholarly work discussing Southern fiction from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries, Nguyễn Kim Anh writes that the first indication of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s existence was on April 19th, 1928 in an article published in *Đông Pháp thời báo*.³⁰ This was the call for authors and submissions we saw at the beginning of this introduction. The author of the article was listed as Madame Võ Đình Dần, or Phan Thị Bạch Vân. Her husband's name, Võ Đình Dần, was associated with various enterprises in the Southern region at the time, with a pharmacy and women's make-up business bearing the name since 1921. He was a wealthy man and it is likely he supported Bạch Vân's desire to write and operate a publishing house. Bạch Vân had been writing for *Đông Pháp Thời Báo* for over a year at this point, and she was known to those in charge of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* as a collaborator.³¹ Both of these newspapers were well-read and well-known in Cochinchina, with *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* boasting an average circulation of

³⁰ Nguyễn Kim Anh, "Phan Thị Bạch Vân" chapter in *Tiểu thuyết Nam Bộ Cuối thế kỷ XIX đầu thế kỷ XX* eds. Nguyễn Kim Anh (Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 2004), p. 603.

³¹ Nguyễn Kim Anh, "Phan Thị Bạch Vân" chapter in *Tiểu thuyết Nam Bộ Cuối thế kỷ XIX đầu thế kỷ XX* eds. Nguyễn Kim Anh (Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 2004), pp. 603 & 604.

over 8,500 copies between 1929 and 1931.³² Phan Thị Bạch Vân's presence and connections in the South were established and she was able to establish connections in Annam and Tonkin as well, demonstrated by the participation of Đạm Phương (already well-known in Annam for her upper-class family and her establishment of the Women's Work Association in Huế in 1926) and Á Nam Trần Tuấn Khải (an author who was at that point based in Hanoi). With Phan Thị Bạch Vân's networks in the South, and the participation of others across Vietnam's different regions, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán was able to pique interest in an already-bustling Vietnamese print community. Yet Bạch Vân wanted to make her press publish material of value, and we can see this desire in discussion of NLTQ's purpose and mission.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân highlighted Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's mission frequently, displaying a similar message before each of the press's published works. For example, before the novel *Một đời mấy thân?* By Nguyễn Thị Đan Tâm, a subheading states that the publication is released "each month in the three regions for women." Other books featured more in-depth discussions of NLTQ's purpose. Madame Roland's biography, written by Phan Thị Bạch Vân, had a page dedicated to outlining the press's purpose (*mục đích*), their editorial members (*bộ biên tập*), and the workings of the publication department (*sở phát hành*). Bạch Vân specified that she wanted to sell NLTQ's material to all women and girls at a low price, publish within the country, publish material beneficial to readers' morality, and advance women's education.³³ She emphasized that the editors for the press were famous women authors and other famous writers; this was meant to facilitate the publication of useful materials meant for women's consideration. Lastly, she outlined the publication process, in which monthly output is completed reliably and quickly. Phan Thị Bạch Vân was advertising her press in a way that emphasized its adherence to modern

³² David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 47.

³³ "Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán" in Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Giương Nữ Kiệt* (Gò Công, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1928).

publication standards and a high consideration for the moral and intellectual cultivation of women readers.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote about her vision and how she wanted the existence of NLTQ to positively impact the whole of Vietnamese publishing. In a piece titled “Chính nghề xuất bản – và bán sách ở xứ ta,” or “The industry of publishing and selling books in our country,” Bạch Vân discusses issues impacting those who want to publish written work in Vietnam and wants to “encourage authors to come into the open.”³⁴ This piece also functioned as an advertisement for the press. She writes that it is presently a “transient time” in the country, and that current publishers put out similar material to one another and enact the same publishing practices; to Bạch Vân, it is clear that there are some issues affecting the state of publishing.³⁵ She lists various problems, such as high prices, late publication, literary content that does not agree with a publication’s stated principles, and resulting dissatisfaction amongst subscribers and consumers. She also writes that it is difficult to be prosperous in publishing if one does not have the aid of money and a personal drive to succeed. With NLTQ’s press, Bạch Vân states that they “want to be of service to our fellow men and woman-citizens and so we are always looking for ways to uplift, we hope this is useful for society.”³⁶ As benefits to customers, Bạch Vân writes that buyers who pre-paid for their books would save ten percent, they could be sure of the books’ value, and that NLTQ was a sure investment, as it was big enough to merit customers’ trust. She writes that NLTQ will separate their publications into two genres so that people may choose what they would enjoy reading: the sciences and books meant for entertainment and leisure. The

³⁴ “Mưu khuyến khích các văn nhơn ra đời” Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Chính nghề xuất bản – và bán sách ở xứ ta” (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ Quán, 1928), p. 1.

³⁵ “...một thời kỳ rất ngắn ngủi” Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Chính nghề xuất bản – và bán sách ở xứ ta” (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ Quán, 1928), p. 1.

³⁶ “...mong giúp ích Nam, Nữ đồng bào nên hằng tìm phương thế tiện lợi để dâng lên, ước rằng cũng có ích ngẫm cho xã hội.” Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Chính nghề xuất bản – và bán sách ở xứ ta” (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ Quán, 1928), p. 2.

science books she advertises include books about politics, history, theology, economics, medicine, agriculture, and industry. The books reserved for entertainment included comedies, travelogues, and novels dealing with morality, psychology, familial situations, society, and adventure. Bạch Vân casts a wide net and appeals to wide interests, while also emphasizing the use NLTQ would bring to the Vietnamese community. Bạch Vân ends her piece with a call for those who love their country and care for its future (*Vậy thì ai thương nước thương dân, biết lo cho hậu vận nước nhà*), as well as those who love and want to preserve their national culture (*biết mến quốc văn biết bảo tồn quốc túy*) to buy her books so that she can fulfill her national duty (*làm hết bổn phận mình đối với tổ quốc giang san*).

In this advertisement for her press, Phan Thị Bạch Vân established problems in the contemporary publishing community and how her press would ensure customer satisfaction and trust; additionally, Bạch Vân promises that her press would add value to Vietnamese culture as a whole. In purchasing material and subscriptions from NLTQ, buyers would be working to ensure a bright future for not only Vietnamese women, but the entire Vietnamese community. The press's value is not just in the material itself, or NLTQ's business practices, but the moral and intellectual benefits it can provide in the future.

Another author who wrote for NLTQ and lent an aspect of prestige to the press was Đạm Phương, who was a looming figure in intellectual circles in Huế. In Đạm Phương's novel titled *Kim Tú Cầu*, we see that Phương selectively borrowed from reality and portrayed what it meant for women to live in Vietnamese society during the early-twentieth century.³⁷ *Kim Tú Cầu* is about a young woman who fell in love with a poor scholar but was forced to marry another man at her father's insistence. After she becomes a widow and experiences a number of hardships

³⁷ Đặng Thị Ngọc Phượng, "Những thử nghiệm về kỹ thuật tiểu thuyết của các nhà văn nữ Việt Nam nửa đầu thế kỷ XX" *Tạp chí Khoa học và Giáo dục* 37 (2016): p. 20.

stemming from merely existing as a woman living alone, Tú Cầu attempts to end her own life. While Đạm Phương chiefly described what she viewed as negative aspects of current society, her story reflected aspects of traditional culture that continued to exist in Vietnamese society, such as the idea of a widow refusing to remarry and remain chaste. This was a break from narratives of prior decades; in the nineteenth century, Vietnamese stories often followed a conventional structure and were heavily influenced by Chinese literature.³⁸ *Kim Tú Cầu* is an example of a Vietnamese author maintaining heavy moral overtones in her works and some conventionality – common in narratives of the past – while reflecting a more modern outlook by incorporating the contemporary era, rather than retelling historical tales as a way to push a moral imperative. This was a step closer to the Vietnamese novels that emerged in the 1930s and 40s, featuring grittier depictions of contemporary life and grappling with what authors viewed as the ills of modernity.³⁹ *Kim Tú Cầu* is not a gritty critique of modern life; rather, is a tragic romance featuring a woman protagonist of high moral caliber. This marks the story with traditional elements, but as the author Lê Tú Anh writes, Đạm Phương possibly meant for Tú Cầu’s tragic fate to serve as a cry for help and an interrogation of the unfortunate status of women at the time.⁴⁰ This interrogation was sorely needed and set the stage for discussion of solutions amongst the Vietnamese.

This commitment to material of moral and intellectual value distinguished NLTQ from other presses during the time period. Phan Thị Bạch Vân sought to shape her readership – specifically women – in order to shape a future Vietnamese culture in the image that her press

³⁸ Though there were differences that speak to the unique Vietnamese-ness of historical and traditional tales. Eric Henry writes that Vietnamese tales featured more magic, Buddhist elements, female autonomy, etc. than their Chinese counterparts. Eric Henry, “Chinese and Indigenous Influences in Vietnamese Verse Romances of the 19th Century” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15 (2001): p. 16.

³⁹ Such as Nguyễn Công Hoan, Vũ Trọng Phụng, and Nam Cao’s works.

⁴⁰ Lê Tú Anh, “Đạm Phương Nữ Sĩ và cốt cách của một tiểu thuyết gia giai đoạn giao thời” *Khoa học, Trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội* 56 (2011).

promoted. Some Vietnamese scholars have called her a cultural activist (*một nhà hoạt động văn hóa*) who wished to contribute to others' knowledge about Western civilization.⁴¹ As we will see in later chapters, she was not only concerned with the West, though she derived much inspiration and held a great amount of interest in Western literature and philosophy. We will also see that Bạch Vân contributed to her readers' knowledge of international issues, trends, and history; she did so in order to strengthen Vietnamese culture and mold the Vietnamese into an image of which she approved. There were exciting opportunities to learn about foreign cultures at this time, and Phan Thị Bạch Vân, along with her editors at NLTQ, transferred her own knowledge and made it accessible for a Vietnamese audience. As stated in the paragraphs above, there was a cohort of mostly Vietnamese men who possessed similar goals through their Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự-Lực văn-đoàn), but this Group did not come into being until the early 1930s. Like Bạch Vân, they wanted to improve the state of the Vietnamese press, encourage education throughout the populace, promote women's rights, and introduce readers to Western ideas and influence. Their endeavors were more successful; perhaps they came at the right time, or they were able to promote their ideas in a manner more palatable to the government and general populace. *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, as an initiative that began in 1928, was visionary on Phan Thị Bạch Vân's part, but proved too ambitious for a woman living under colonial control; less than two years after her call for contributions appeared in *Đông Pháp thời báo*, NLTQ closed for business.

Unfortunately, *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* shut down in 1930, at the behest of colonial government authorities. Historian David Marr writes that first the press shut down, then their books were banned from circulation, and lastly that Phan Thị Bạch Vân went to court to pay 2.50

⁴¹ Nguyễn Kim Anh, "Phan Thị Bạch Vân" chapter in *Tiểu thuyết Nam Bộ Cuối thế kỷ XIX đầu thế kỷ XX* eds. Nguyễn Kim Anh (Nhà xuất bản Đại học Quốc gia TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 2004), p. 605.

francs as a fine for the crime of upsetting the region's security through the publication of Nũ Lũu Thơ Quán's catalogue.⁴² An administrative bulletin originating in Annam from 1928 wrote about "d'un arrêté portant interdiction sur le territoire de l'Annam de l'introduction, de la circulation etc. ... des 2 brochures en quocngu 'Gian Ho Nu Hiep' éditée par par la librairie Nu Luu Tho Quan..." while another bulletin from Cambodia banned circulation and possession of the same work, stating "sont interdites sur le territoire du Cambodge l'introduction, la circulation, la mise en vente, la distribution et la detention de la brochure en quôc-ngu intitulée *Giam-Hô-Nũ-Hiep*, éditée par la librairie Nu-luu-tho-Quan à Gocong et sortie des presses de l'imprimerie Bao-Ton, 56^{bis}, boulevard Bonnard, Saïgon."⁴³ In 1929, Annam's administrative bulletin wrote that the same treatment would be given to the circulation, sale, and possession of the title "'Hôn tu Lâp', tome II – Ba Tay Hiệp Nu Nuoc Nga (Le genie de l'I tome II – Les trois héroïnes Russes), éditée par l'imprimerie Nu-Luu-Tho-Quan à Gocông." Lastly, the same bulletin banned "'Bang-Tam-Ngoc-Chat' (la pureté du cœur comparable à celle du jade) par Huynh-anh-Thi (Thanhhoa) imprimerie Nu-Luu-Tho-Quan, Gocong."⁴⁴ It appears as though NLTQ had been stirring trouble in the governing bodies of Indochina before their untimely closure in 1930; at least three of their books were prohibited from sale and distribution soon after the press's founding. *Giám Hồ Nũ Hiệp*, written under Phan Thị Bạch Vân's pen name, Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, attracted several bans. It was about the Chinese revolutionary and heroine, Qiu Jin (1875-1907), who tried and failed to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. She was, at times, known as the Chinese Joan of Arc. I will be analyzing this biography and what may have made it so threatening to the colonial government in the third chapter of this thesis.

⁴² David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 220.

⁴³ "Bulletin administratif de l'Annam" Hué, 1928-12-15, p. 224. And "Bulletin administrative du Cambodge" Pnom-Penh, 1928-07, p. 1542.

⁴⁴ "Bulletin administrative de l'Annam" Hué, 1929, pp. 1300 & 1588.

Certainly, these orders for bans over multiple works within NLTQ's catalogue imply a level of influence or provocation on the press's part; at the very least Phan Thị Bạch Vân's punishment demonstrates discomfort from the colonial government, especially concerning the promotion of foreign heroines who had the potential to be viewed as martyrs against immoral governments. Once the press shut down, it was not forgotten. Thiều Sơn (1908-1978) wrote an article in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News) in 1934, discussing the writings and efforts of Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương. Though he writes that "Nữ lưu Thơ quán's books are now lost," Thiều Sơn mentioned that he had been able to get a hold of a few books published by Nữ lưu thơ Quán in the north (Tonkin).⁴⁵ Thiều Sơn also wrote that Phan Thị Bạch Vân followed the example of men who initiated talk of state affairs and "opened [Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán] in order to enlighten and propagandize women to strive for their own interests and obligations."⁴⁶ Though NLTQ had been closed for four years at this point, Thiều Sơn's article demonstrates the respect the press and Phan Thị Bạch Vân inspired in the print community of the 1930s. There was respect for her initiative – for her decision to write on women's behalf – and for the content of NLTQ's books. Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương were considered the face of a cohort of women, following the example of men who had come before them, who attempted to "lead women on a path of progress."⁴⁷ While they had not been able to reach all Vietnamese women or effect massive change, their efforts made them significant contributors to this time period of discussion and consideration over the future of the Vietnamese. Now that I have discussed the history surrounding Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's beginning and end, I will discuss the theoretical concerns in writing the histories of Vietnamese women writers during the interwar years.

⁴⁵ "Những sách của NLTQ nay đã thất lạc..." Thiều Sơn, "Nữ sĩ Việt Nam" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (January 4, 1934).

⁴⁶ "...mở ra để giác ngộ và cổ động cho phụ nữ biết phấn đấu vì quyền lợi và nghĩa vụ của mình." Thiều Sơn, "Nữ sĩ Việt Nam" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (January 4, 1934).

⁴⁷ "...để dắt dìu chị em lên đường tiến bộ." Thiều Sơn, "Nữ sĩ Việt Nam" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (January 4, 1934).

Theoretical Concerns

Attempting to elucidate the motivations, thoughts, and goals of Vietnamese women writers in the early-twentieth century is no simple task. Women's historical position at the margins of Vietnamese society means that finding sources is a primary difficulty. Vietnamese women, historically and before the twentieth century, were not formally educated or literate. This has made the sources that we have "an eclectic mix of local and foreign sources that can be broadly classified as prescriptive and descriptive."⁴⁸ There are more sources as we venture into the twentieth century, but many writings *about* women were often written by men before the middle of the twentieth century. I have attempted to collect as many woman-authored sources as possible in this study.

Also relevant to the study of Vietnamese women is understanding how the categories of "woman" and womanhood have changed over time. Scholar Tani Barlow writes that womanhood, or the idea of belonging to a particular group based on one's identity as a woman, has not historically been stable or guaranteed. In Chinese history, there were differences between the categories of genteel women, servants, literate women, and cloistered women.⁴⁹ Similar cleavages centered around social class existed historically in Vietnam, with women's sexual behaviors being regulated based on their social status from the fifteenth century onward.⁵⁰ Womanhood, and the idea of women being the same, had to be created and maintained through social mores, codes of behavior, and written media such as what Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán produced. This was a recent idea and one that Phan Thị Bạch Vân was promoting in her women's press.

⁴⁸ Nhung Tuyet Tran, *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463-1778* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2018), p. 12.

⁴⁹ Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2004), p. 21.

⁵⁰ Nhung Tuyet Tran, *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463-1778* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2018), p. 86.

The women who wrote for *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* viewed other women as their target audience and saw themselves as sharing experiences and insights due to their position as “women.” At times, this identification transcended social and economic status, though these factors did influence their writings, as I will describe in later chapters. These writers also adopted a view of womanhood based on biology. They placed emphasis on women’s ability to bear and raise children, and focused on their roles as mothers and wives. These women were further establishing femininity and womanhood as categories of knowledge but did not necessarily interrogate or challenge inequality within prevailing gender systems. Rather, the biological differences between men and women made their writings necessary, in their eyes.

Next, there is the issue of characterizing their intellectual mindset: how they understood specific works by other Vietnamese or foreign authors, what preconceived notions they brought with them when debating women’s place in society, how the languages they knew and their familial backgrounds informed their opinions, and the like. We must also analyze their contributions to the social sphere of the day and theorize what this might mean for study of the time period and culture; I suggest that Vietnamese women were much more involved in discussion and dissemination of the Woman’s Question than previous studies have argued. I also show that Vietnamese women were highly engaged in a cosmopolitan, international intellectual culture that other scholarly studies have not indicated. The decades of the 1920s and especially the 1930s attracted a host of scholars due to their intellectual vibrancy, and the press community in particular has been the subject of many monographs and articles. Most scholarly works pertaining to the press community during the interwar years have included at least a modest section discussing the question of women. This is because the Woman’s Question cannot be ignored; it saturates printed material of the 1920s and 30s. To this day, the most celebrated

novels by Vietnamese authors during the interwar years meaningfully engaged with the Woman's Question. The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực văn đoàn) of Tonkin in the 1930s produced famous authors such as Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng, whose works such as *Đoạn tuyệt* (Breaking off) (1934-1935) and *Nửa Chừng Xuân* (The Midst of Spring) (1934) feature female protagonists and narratively challenge Vietnamese culture's treatment of women, marriage, and familial relationships. The question of women and their place in society was something that reached every person who read and wrote in the early-twentieth century, but scholarly studies have primarily analyzed how men dealt with the question of women. But what about the women themselves? Study of how the Woman's Question affected women – how they viewed themselves and their place in society – is necessary. Typically, scholarly discussions about gender roles in the Vietnamese context have included the Woman's Question as a surface-level topic of debate within periodicals, rather than a profound engagement with how this affected social interactions and the intellectual development of women and men.

Scholars who have analyzed and read Vietnamese sources engaging with the Woman's Question have surmised that the debate was not always about women themselves; rather there have been assertions that writings about women and their place in society were more about men or nascent Vietnamese nationalism.⁵¹ To some scholars, the Woman's Question in Vietnam represented indigenous male anxieties over women becoming “modern” and leaving their culture behind; to others, writers used the category of “woman” as a method of communicating their feelings pertaining to the potential Vietnamese nation. This is not a view without merit, as most discussions about women during the interwar years were attributed to male authors, many of

⁵¹ Such as in Ben Tran's well-researched book, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (Fordham University Press, 2017) or Hue-Tam Ho Tai's *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

whom sought Vietnamese nationhood. Even though the well-read and popular newspaper, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, was edited by a woman (Madame Nguyễn Đức Nhuận) and featured female authors, many of the articles published in the paper were the work of male authors – some quite famous, such as Phan Khôi, Hồ Biểu Chánh, and Thiều Sơn. Additionally, the writers perhaps best known for engaging with the Woman's Question – those part of the Self-Reliant Literary Group – were all men.⁵² While these authors were likely writing about a complex amalgamation of self-perception, the perception of women and relationships between genders, the potential nation, masculinity, and femininity, the presence of literate women should prompt us to consider their perspective. There were indeed literate women who wished to express their views through publications in newspapers and books. Were their writings about women and their place in the world the same as these male authors? Were they also writing about masculinity and nationhood? Women held many of the same interests as men, and shared opinions about what was happening in their society; Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương certainly worked with men and Bạch Vân promoted their works within her press. Yet if there existed differences in how women grappled with the advent of colonial modernity, then it would be intellectually prudent to analyze the differences between their works and why those differences existed. It is certain that their work presents us with a rich mixture of motivations, inspirations, references, and creative choices which we may analyze.

One word I would like to address is *modernity*, a complex word of contested connotations, and which Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Đạm Phương, and the writers involved in the southern press community tackled in their writings. Of course, the abstract idea of what is modern refers to common cultural trappings of modernity, such as urbanization, increased

⁵² Such as Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, or Thạch Lam. Authors like Vũ Trọng Phụng and Nguyễn Công Hoan also engaged with the Woman's Question, but were not part of the Group.

literacy, interest in science and new technologies, and the like. It also refers to the filtering of the world through a colonial lens, a perception of modernity that set out to replicate the environment – social, cultural, and intellectual – of the metropole, without completely doing so. This was a *dominance without hegemony*, to borrow Ranajit Guha’s description of the colonial state in South Asia. The dominance of French intellectual culture, history, and education was coercive, and demanded efforts to reproduce it within a Vietnamese context, but even the colonial state did not allow Vietnamese writers to freely reference their famous figures and traditions; as we will see, Phan Thị Bạch Vân came under fire from colonial censors for a biography she wrote about a French woman. Therefore, we may classify the material conditions in which these women lived, the ideas with which they engaged, and the ideas they professed as part of colonial modernity. Yet this modernity was uneven, in that the Vietnamese did not experience modernity in the same way as the French.

I would also like to address Bạch Vân and her cohort’s position at the margins; while Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đàm Phương did not necessarily experience economic or material marginalization, their position as women living in a colonized society puts them firmly outside the political center and means that their endeavors were often contested, at times legally if not socially. Because of her interest in foreign women who had been labelled revolutionary and contributed to modern history, Bạch Vân found herself on the wrong side of colonial censors and authorities due to multiple writings published through NLTQ. Her ability to write freely was inhibited by her position as a colonized woman and this places her within the concept of marginality, or existing outside of mainstream institutions. A part of what drew censors’ attention to her work was her engagement with ideas about modernity, modern history, women’s contributions to nationalism and the modern nation state, and their ability to act as agents of

change and progress. With these ideas in mind, we can identify Phan Thị Bạch Vân's press, *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, as a parallel public space created with the intention to spark a movement centered around women. This, combined with discussions about nationalism, is what made *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s publications threatening to colonial censors and resulted in attempts to silence Bạch Vân.

Another function of marginality, and the necessity of creating a parallel public space, is that it reinforces one's sense of identity and identification with a community, such as a community of women. While Bạch Vân shared ideas and concepts through NLTQ, she wanted to foster a community and, through that community, encourage certain "values, norms, ways of speaking, of thinking, and of behaving."⁵³ While those operating at the margin are not commonly attributed with wielding any meaningful power, I believe that Phan Thị Bạch Vân was attempting to do so by trying "to shape the communication environment" with her recruitment of like-minded authors, operation of a professional press, and vigorous advertisement of the press.⁵⁴ This raises the idea of Bạch Vân acting as a cultural activist who was using NLTQ as a "subaltern counterpublic," wherein she could contest and reinterpret dominant conceptions of femininity and how women should behave.⁵⁵ Her counterpublic competed with both the male-dominated press community and the colonial state.

Bạch Vân may not have wielded enough power or capital to challenge the colonial state, address colonial censors, or appeal their decision to ban circulation of her books, but she was theoretically able to contribute powerfully to public perception of what constituted proper

⁵³ Susan Hearst, *Politics at the Margin: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 23.

⁵⁴ Susan Hearst, *Politics at the Margin: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 27.

⁵⁵ Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, 25 (1990): p. 67.

conduct for Vietnamese women, what they should read, and to which countries they should look for examples of successful women. She was able to present herself as an authority through her identity as a woman; though marginal, she possessed more education and skills than the average Vietnamese woman, and could thus teach, instruct, and prescribe morality to others. Male authors may have been able to use their closer proximity to the mainstream, and their enhanced social capital, to become the most prominent arbiters of the Woman's Question, but Bạch Vân's identity as a woman gave her the community and ability to speak from personal experience about women's issues.

Is the Woman's Question the men's problem?

The inclusion of women in the public sphere has not always resulted in positive reactions. In Vietnam and other regions of the world, the Woman's Question led to criticism from male authors and reproach aimed at literate women. In other countries, such as France, women did engage with the Woman's Question; this prompted writings by men that questioned the femininity of such literate, critical women and sought to re-establish the gendered status quo. This antifeminist surge has led some scholars to characterize the Woman's Question as a "Man Problem," a growing problem stabilizing particularly fragile male identities, of bolstering the egos of men who only understood masculinity as based on domination of women, children, and underlings..."⁵⁶ As men came to see women as participants in public spaces, or who could generate their own parallel public spaces of significance, they felt threatened on the basis of their identity and social roles, and sought to protect that sense of identity through attacks on feminists and women who attempted to exist in mainstream culture. This issue was common enough in

⁵⁶ Karen Offen, "Is the 'woman question' really the 'man problem'?" chapter in *Confronting modernity in fin-de-siècle France: bodies, minds and gender* eds. Elinor Ann Accampo and Christopher E. Forth (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 47.

multiple countries and cultures that it has earned scholarly study from academics focusing on places such as colonial British Burma.⁵⁷ While there were men who supported the legal establishment of women's rights, the presence of antifeminist literature and views means that the prospect of women's emancipation, at least in France, threatened a portion of men who were willing to write about it. In some ways, for some people writing at the turn of the century, the Woman's Question did become about men and their position in society. Therefore, the idea that the same conversations happening in Vietnamese culture during the interwar years were, in reality, a man's problem is not without merit or precedent. Ben Tran has proven that male authors' interest in women and their nascent rights was primarily about the fundamental change in a formerly homosocial intellectual space, as well as a creeping colonial modernity that had the potential to shut Vietnamese men out of their own culture. Yet men were not the only writers who found themselves inspired by the Woman's Question and, while women were not as involved or literate, their contributions shed light on how they wanted Vietnamese women's future to proceed. Their contributions also demonstrate how they wished to translate and interpret a literary pantheon they believed should be available to women.

I believe the books within NLTQ were not written to say anything substantial about men or nationhood; rather, in this dissertation I show that NLTQ's publications were a method by which women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương might define femininity, popularize that definition through *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s success, and build a community of like-minded women. This was fundamentally about women, and the education Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương advocated was meant to serve a function for women and girls, specifically. There were references to a Vietnamese nation (*nước nhà*, *nước ta*, and the like), but the first order of

⁵⁷ Such as Chie Ikeya's study on the New Woman in Burma, which includes incisive analysis of masculinity as well. *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

business was to ensure the education and intellectual enfranchisement of Vietnamese women. This is where authors for *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* directed their focus. According to NLTQ, this would benefit the whole of society and strengthen all Vietnamese people. In this case, for these women, the Woman's Question can be taken at face-value, with no hidden motives or ideologies. Indeed, they wore their ideologies on their sleeve, proudly, and stated clearly what they wanted to accomplish through their work. While prior decades saw instructions for girls determined by Confucian societal dictates and inter-familial dynamics, *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* had the potential to serve as the new determinate of feminine behavior. This was a new solution for the new world in which women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân found themselves. If they could convince the feminine population to subscribe to their dictates, they would be responsible for a new ideal of femininity. And, as their ideal for femininity was often based on motherhood and women's importance as teachers (or examples and 'mirrors' *gương*, as some women put it) within families and generations, at some point, the women of NLTQ would indirectly contribute to the future of the Vietnamese. This endeavor relied on a sense of capital belonging to these women. If successful, it would enhance their capital if their reach expanded as far as they wished.

Social theory and forms of capital: the ability to define

Through her writings, editorial work, and establishment of *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán*, Phan Thị Bạch Vân was attempting to define and frame the contours of femininity in an image congruent with her (and her cohort's) desires for the future of the Vietnamese community. In this way, both the categories of "woman" and "Vietnamese" were of almost-equal importance, with the woman/feminine category slightly higher in importance; this is to say that Phan Thị Bạch Vân was primarily attempting to define the feminine contours of Vietnamese-ness rather than what constituted being Vietnamese in a general sense. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and women such as Đạm

Phuong used their position as literate, well-read, and (in Đạm Phuong's case) aristocratic and upper-class in order to promote their image of femininity and Vietnamese-ness. Through their writings and participation in upper-class femininity (their women's associations and fundraising), these women also generated symbolic capital which provided them further ability to define the contours of "woman" as a social category in the Vietnamese cultural milieu. This turned into a feedback loop of definition and generation of symbolic capital in the Vietnamese intelligentsia. For this reason, I find Pierre Bourdieu's social philosophy and social theory, as well as his definitions of various forms of capital, helpful in understanding NLTQ's desired impact and purpose. Most important is Bourdieu's ideas discussed in a feminist and gender-specific context.

While Pierre Bourdieu himself did not meaningfully engage with the categories of gender and sexuality in his work, feminist scholars have used his theories to advance our understanding of women and the social. Lisa Adkins writes that "gender is extraordinarily relational, with a chameleon-like flexibility," while Beverly Skeggs reminds us that femininity "is inherently ambiguous, indeterminate, contradictory and unstable...the appearance of femininity is a constantly transformable act based on attachment and detachment of practices and objects in a circuit of exchange..."⁵⁸ This is also tied to class, as ideas of femininity and what constitutes the feminine have historically been determined in opposition to working and lower classes. To Steph Lawler, "part of the different meanings attached to different forms of masculinity and femininity cohere around class," and class can additionally establish *who* is allowed to determine gendered

⁵⁸ Lisa Adkins, "Introduction: Feminism, Bourdieu and after" chapter in *Feminism After Bourdieu* eds. Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 6 and Beverly Skeggs, "Context and Background: Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of class, gender and sexuality" chapter in *Feminism After Bourdieu* eds. Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 24.

meaning and how masculinity or femininity looks in an idealized state.⁵⁹ This is why, by and large, women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân needed to possess material wealth in order to successfully determine what constituted femininity; this is why Phan Thị Bạch Vân used her husband's name and reputation as a successful owner of a pharmaceutical business to generate interest in her first advertisement about *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*.

A subject's *habitus*, to borrow another concept of Bourdieu's, or the histories, dispositions, attitudes, and tastes a person possesses, is also informed by their class position. *Habitus* includes how a person expresses their masculinity or femininity. *Habitus* is inherently social, relational, and hierarchical; a subject might enact and display femininity in a particular way due to their position in a class hierarchy. The relational aspect of the *habitus* additionally means that judgement and comparison exists within a person's inward self-perception and outward comportment, though "only some people have the authority to make such judgements stick."⁶⁰ Phan Thị Bạch Vân used her written and editorial work in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* to affirm her idealized perception of femininity and encourage others to adopt the same outlook. Because of this, NLTQ's conception and operation was a social endeavor rooted in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's symbolic capital and *habitus*. Without her social status, and the social status of writers featured in NLTQ, she would not have considered herself (or been considered by others) to be an authority on aspirational femininity.

Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's output defined its aspirational femininity as literate, well-read, educated in various arts of homemaking, and possessing an affinity towards the less-fortunate. This woman was by definition middle or upper class, as she participated in charities and

⁵⁹ Steph Lawler, "Rules of engagement: Habitus, power and resistance" chapter in *Feminism After Bourdieu* eds. Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 110-111.

⁶⁰ Steph Lawler, "Rules of engagement: Habitus, power and resistance" chapter in *Feminism After Bourdieu* eds. Lisa Adkins and Beverly Skeggs (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 112.

fundraising meant to aid those beneath her in status. These women's definitions of femininity were clearly not unchanging or even established at the time – their written works were meant to do the work of establishing an agreement upon the ideal form of Vietnamese womanhood. They wanted to solidify their definition of femininity through their access to various forms of capital. Their definition of idealized femininity was derived from their own education, experiences, and familial connections. For Đạm Phương, her familial connections to royalty (as the granddaughter of Minh Mạng, second emperor of the Nguyễn Dynasty) and education in Chinese, French, and Vietnamese led her to adopt the title *nữ sĩ* at the end of her name, which was an old-fashioned term indicating an educated woman of high status. These status markers made Phương a woman whom others could trust and believe when practicing and promoting femininity. While Phan Thị Bạch Vân was not in possession of the same royal pedigree as Phương, those who read her works can clearly see how well-read and educated she was. Not only that, but her husband was the owner of a successful and bustling pharmaceutical company in the South, lending name recognition and financial backing towards her women's press. So, while these women's class positions lent several forms of credibility to their writings, their intellectual background and content was another aspect of their success as writers and editors. For this reason, analysis of the intellectual genealogy behind these women's writings and the intellectual content they promoted is essential for this subject. It is also essential to consider their experience of reading and address the intertextuality present within their writings. It is doubtless that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương interpreted and translated a selection of texts from diverse authors and regions; as we will see in the following chapters, their interpretations were unique and represented their own backgrounds and desires in educating a female audience.

The acts of reading, translating, referencing, and synthesizing

Within the publications put out by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đàm Phương demonstrated that they read widely and possessed varied tastes. For example, Bạch Vân cited Mary Wollstonecraft in *Nữ anh tài*. The male character who referenced Wollstonecraft's work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, stated that the book's publication sparked the modern women's movement; according to this character, after it was released, people re-examined and did away with customary ideas about differences between men and women.⁶¹ In the same novel, in a short advertisement that emphasized the importance of reading, Phan Thị Bạch Vân quoted a Chinese poet from the Song dynasty, Huang Tingjian (1045-1105). She selected a warning which the poet and calligrapher had for his son, that said:

“If a scholar stops reading for three days, moral principles will not come to his heart. Looking at the mirror he will find his face disgusting; speaking to people he will find his words dull and tasteless...”⁶²

Huang Tingjian was an important Chinese scholar and credited with founding the Jiangxi School of Poetry. Bạch Vân used his quote as it tied reading to a scholar's very identity and ability to communicate with others; this was an effective way to persuade women of intellectual persuasion to continue to purchase and read her material. She drew a firm connection between readers of books such as *Nữ anh tài* and celebrated Chinese poets like Huang Tingjian. Not only

⁶¹ “Từ đó bao nhiêu cái tư tưởng tập quán đòi sự phân biệt nam nữ đều quét sạch.” Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ ba, p. 22.

⁶² Huang Tingjian quoted in Yugen Wang, *Ten Thousand Scrolls: Reading and Writing in the Poetics of Huang Tingjian and the Late Northern Song* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 76, 2020), p. 1. Phan Thị Bạch Vân translates his words as “Sĩ-phu mà ba ngày không xem sách. Thì soi gương thấy mặt mũi đáng ghét, nói chuyện lạt lẽo khó nghe.”

does this demonstrate Bạch Vân's belief in the importance of her press and the work she was undertaking, it also shows the breadth of knowledge she possessed. She was able to confidently weave discussions between characters about English feminist writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and, within the same book, advertise her press with words from a Chinese scholar who lived in the eleventh century. But how did she "read" these texts? Did she interpret them the way their original authors intended? Did she present texts and writers accurately and faithfully to her own readership?

We do not know how Phan Thị Bạch Vân became familiar with most of the books she read; my research shows that she lived in the south her entire life. Therefore, she did not travel to the metropole to read the French authors whom she referenced in her own writing; she read these works in Cochinchina, in Vietnamese, Chinese, or French. Chinese reformist literature (authored by figures such as Liang Qichao) had helped introduce ideas pertaining to the Enlightenment before the 1920s, threatening French colonial administrators and prompting them to further educational systems prioritizing Franco-Vietnamese partnership.⁶³ But Bạch Vân, being multilingual, was able to read French works in their original language. Within her knowledge of multiple languages was a knowledge of multiple cultures; regardless of the material she read, she doubtless interpreted them with a mind possessing familiarity with Chinese culture, French culture, and Vietnamese culture. It is true that "the meaning of a text is always the product of a relationship between the text's propositions and its appropriations by its readers" and this applied to Phan Thị Bạch Vân's reading (and later, translating or synthesizing) of books, poetry, and biographies.⁶⁴ Readers bring a host of backgrounds, interests, and preconfigured ideas to the act

⁶³ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 227.

⁶⁴ Roger Chartier, "Introduction: *Reading Practices and the Materiality of Texts*" *French Historical Studies* 41 (2018): p. 397.

of reading and therefore, we may view Bạch Vân's project of interpreting what she had already read as a dynamic relationship between the original author of a work, Bạch Vân, and her Vietnamese readership. In addition to the knowledge of culture and languages which Bạch Vân brought to the act of reading, she also brought her position as a woman. While there were female authors whom Bạch Vân read and with whom she was familiar, the largest portion of her reading material was produced by men. As a writer of prescriptive literature, Bạch Vân read prescriptive literature and consumed the ideas of how women should conduct themselves. By and large, prescriptive literature until this time was written by men.

There is a connection between Bạch Vân's reading habits and those of a seemingly disparate group of women: women of the American South in the eighteenth century. While it may not appear that women in the American South and Vietnamese women living in Cochinchina would have much in common, there are comparisons between the two which helps us ground the intellectual development (and her acts of reading and interpretation) of women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân. In the eighteenth century, southern women in what is today the United States were part of an Anglo-Atlantic literary tradition; they received many of their ideas for how to best represent and enact femininity from England. Southern women were so tied to English literary culture that they enthusiastically read periodicals such as *The Spectator*, a daily periodical founded in 1711 by Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and Richard Steele (1672-1729), who famously attempted to cultivate the moral and intellectual character of their readership. They aimed their periodical at an aspirational middle class. A significant portion of their desired audience was women, and the periodical became popular enough among women that it inspired emulation in *The Female Spectator* published by Eliza Haywood. The *Virginia Gazette's* "Monitor," attempted to match *The Spectator* as well; it became so popular among women to

cause one Virginia wife to beg her husband to send it to their remote plantation so that she could read it, in addition to other reading material.⁶⁵ Phan Thị Bạch Vân was familiar with *The Spectator* as well; in her novel *Nữ anh tài*, she inserts discussion about Joseph Addison and Richard Steele in a conversation between the female protagonist, Tú Anh, and her friend of English and Chinese heritage, Y Nhĩ Đất. This was the same conversation I discussed earlier in which Bạch Vân referenced Mary Wollstonecraft. As I will discuss in the second chapter of this dissertation, Y Nhĩ Đất brings up both Addison and Steele when discussing the development of women and women's rights in England. Y Nhĩ Đất states that Addison and Steele's influence (*ảnh hưởng*) led to England's better treatment of women and women's eager consumption of literature.⁶⁶ He identifies the two men as fundamentally important to the contemporary position of English women, a position that Vietnamese women would be wise to match. While Bạch Vân was not *only* tied to the Anglo-Atlantic literary tradition, her consumption of *The Spectator* and Mary Wollstonecraft's work shows that she should be considered a small part of this tradition and intellectual exchange. Within that tradition was a host of ideas pertaining to women and the best ways in which they should live their lives. As a woman, how did Phan Thị Bạch Vân interpret this?

When attempting to craft an intellectual history of women, a different approach is required than when synthesizing histories of the ideas of men. First, one must reconsider the appropriate source base for studying ideas wielded by women. In her intellectual history of women in the American South, Catherine Kerrison writes that southern women "left so few

⁶⁵ Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 25 & 60.

⁶⁶ He says "...cũng nhờ cái ảnh hưởng của nhà văn sĩ: Addison (1672-1719) và Sterle (1671-1729) mà trong nước mới sanh ra cái tư tưởng ưu đãi phụ nữ, cùng khai đạo cho đàn bà có khiêu ham văn chương..." From Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ ba, p. 21.

writings behind as to make an intellectual history impossible” but this was because their avenues for education were fundamentally different than those of men.⁶⁷ Therefore, Kerrison stresses the importance of examining the avenues through which these women learned. In their case, women learned through their homes, apprenticeships, and books that taught them sewing, mending, and the subordinate nature of women compared to men. Southern women read prescriptive literature produced in England, which outlined the differences between women and men and presented them as natural; these ideas were “ubiquitous in all the literature” regardless of if the book was religious or secular.⁶⁸ While most Vietnamese women were not exposed to Christian ideas of original sin and Eve’s part in that sin, they did learn that women were supposed to listen to their husbands, fathers, and sons within the hierarchical functions of Confucianism, especially if they were part of prominent and educated families. Like women of the American South, Vietnamese women were not always afforded the same education as their male counterparts; as a result, we should turn our analysis to the alternative methods through which they learned how to be appropriately female. Prescriptive literature was a significant part of that process. Yet for prescriptive literature produced in different cultures at different times, it reflected ideas of how *men* thought women should behave rather than how women truly thought and behaved. But Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán helpfully provided female readers with Đạm Phương’s works, which carefully discussed the place and function of women in families. She advocated women’s knowledge of sewing, mending, and embroidery. The literary output of NLTQ demonstrates that, in this instance, women did indeed endorse prescriptions for women grounded in their subordination to men, their existence within the home, and their command of duties attributed to housewives. The

⁶⁷ Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 17.

⁶⁸ Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen*, p. 18.

difference between Đạm Phương and Phan Thị Bạch Vân's prescriptive writings, versus men's prescriptions for women, was that they were women who were using their position as women (and experiences with womanhood) to persuade other women to adopt their ideals. This suggests an affinity with men and those who encouraged the presence of women in traditional familial Structures. This encouragement was tempered by a small amount of change and attention paid to the new century and world in which Vietnamese women found themselves.

Kerrison brings up another point elucidating women's education and intellectual development in the south, describing them as colonized and citing P. Joy Rouse's thoughts about women's education in the nineteenth century, in which "the colonized identify, as a result of the education system, with the oppressor and see themselves as the colonizer does. The crucial point here is that female-specific education colonizes female identity."⁶⁹ Of course this has a multi-faceted meaning for Vietnamese women who found themselves colonized by both the French and Vietnamese men, but what does it mean when women promote an education congruent with the colonizers? Did they identify with French culture and Vietnamese men more than women? The works in NLTQ advocated changes that would make women literate and enjoy higher status than they may have had previously, but the lessons in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's book teaching literacy in *quốc ngữ* instructed young girls to be obedient and dutiful, just as many primers and lessons crafted by men had instructed young women before. But these women wanted to establish communities of women and they wanted to come to terms with cleavages in society brought on by changes in traditional relationships between women, men, and their families. It would be a mistake to dismiss these women as simply internalizing the attitudes of the French or of Vietnamese men, but their endorsement of attitudes associated with colonization complicate

⁶⁹ P. Joy Rouse quoted in Catherine Kerrison, *Claiming the Pen: Women and Intellectual Life in the Early American South* (Cornell University Press, 2015), p. 20.

the prospect of liberation associated with women seeking societal acceptance of their rights. This was a liberation that bolstered and buoyed *their* status within the Vietnamese milieu while speaking of eventual liberation for others, through their mastery of professionalized, ideal femininity and housewifery. Women who wrote for NLTQ put themselves on pedestals the same height as men while calling to other women to join them if they embraced the lessons in their written works.

The writers and editors of *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* were touched by their own life experiences, educations, linguistic backgrounds, and so on. They brought all this with them when they dipped into literary traditions from China, Japan, England, and France. It is apparent that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương were familiar with many literary traditions and thus, in their translation of these traditions to their audience of Vietnamese women, brought their interpretations with them. Reading and writing often involves many pieces that move, unseen, beneath the surface. To historians, literature and the way historical actors write and read literature is a useful tool. While Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương undoubtedly brought the influence of the men they grew up reading, respecting, and to whom they were accustomed to listening, this did not detract from their primary goals of educating and enfranchising women. In their writings, they at times deviate from male authors' views of, and prescriptions for, women. Therefore, it is important that historians understand a multitude of issues; namely, the writings that inspired authors' works and how authors might make the choice to endorse or reject certain narratives and opinions. In this way, scholars will gain insight into the minds and motivations of women writers.

Now that we have meaningfully looked at the historical background of what is today Vietnam and how we might interpret and study Vietnamese women's engagement with the Woman's Question, we should turn to a discussion of Vietnamese print culture and how the print

community engaged with the Woman's Question more broadly. We should also consider some of the specific and varied influences behind *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s material. What made *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* special was the cosmopolitanism in its pages; I will highlight the admiration of, and consideration for, the Enlightenment, salonnières, French feminist figures of the fin-de-siècle, and Japanese women's movements in the newspaper *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, another entity in the southern Vietnamese print community. *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*'s authors admired Phan Thị Bạch Vân's work with *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* and shared the same interests.

INTRODUCTION: Part II

Vietnamese print culture, women, and the Woman's Question

While assessments of material from authors involved with Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán have been sparse, there have been studies about Vietnamese engagement with the Woman's Question and New Woman phenomenon. These conversations stemmed from broader negotiations over modernity, culture, and change during the early-twentieth century. As I have stated, scholars have viewed these negotiations as Vietnamese efforts at anticolonial resistance through print culture, such as journalism.⁷⁰ To these scholars, they were reactions against, and engagements with, colonial contact maintained by the French. This is certainly true, as some newspapers, journalists, and editors were anticolonial advocates and supported Vietnamese independence from the French. Yet politics and anticolonialism were not the only concerns. There existed a rich variety of preoccupations, opinions, and writings through the medium of print at this time, especially during the interwar years. For the most part, these writings were disseminated through a vibrant newspaper village (*làng báo chí*) that found a particular vibrancy in the largest urban center of French Indochina, the southern port city of Saigon (Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán operated just outside of Saigon, in the town of Gò Công in the southern province of the same name).⁷¹ Philippe Peycam speaks of a “public sphere” fostered during the interwar years, led by “a newly assertive, urban Vietnamese middle class.”⁷² This urban middle class actively debated with one another over a host of topics, but their arguments over the position of women are most pertinent to this thesis. In one article written for *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* in July of 1932, the writer and editor of

⁷⁰ Such as Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). Or Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), and David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁷¹ Philippe Peycam, *Birth*, p. 4.

⁷² Philippe Peycam, *Birth*, p. 4.

the paper Phan Khôi (1887-1959), who participated in the Tonkin Free School that frightened French administrators into pushing Franco-Vietnamese collaboration, wrote:

“Mấy năm gần đây, giữa xã hội Việt nam ta đã phát sinh ra vấn đề phụ nữ. Coi trong đám thức giả đã có nhiều người để ý đến vấn đề ấy. Mà nhất là trong khoảng vài tháng nay, ở Nam-kỳ, trên đàn ngôn luận, lại còn thấy tranh biện về sự giải phóng cho phụ nữ một cách rất hăng.

In recent years, the Woman's Question has arisen amidst Vietnamese society. It seems that many within the intelligentsia have paid attention to this issue. Especially in the past few months, in Cochinchina and in the realm of speech, I have seen a very enthusiastic discussion about the topic of women's liberation.”⁷³

Phan Khôi went on to describe some disagreements, between men and women alike, that had occurred in recent months. There had been books written by men about the topic, speeches made by women at Women's Fairs, and a book written in French by a woman who opposed the aforementioned book and speech. Phan Khôi sought to synthesize these works and insert his own opinion into the mix. The woman who wrote the book in French was named Nguyễn Thị Chính, and she also used her husband's name, Tạ Thu Thâu. The book she critiqued was written by two men named Trần Thiên Ty and Bùi Thế Phúc. The speech came from a woman named Phan Văn Gia. According to Phan Khôi, Nguyễn Thị Chính believed that, if one wishes to study the Woman's Question, one must completely remove their subjective thoughts pertaining to individuality, the family, the nation, and the line of descent. She believed that one must get to the

⁷³ Phan Khôi, “Vấn đề phụ nữ giải phóng với nhân sinh quan” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (July 7, 1932), p. 5.

root (*tận gốc*) of the Woman's Question, which lies in the evolution of society's history and the economic aspects of a society. Phan Khôi agreed with Nguyễn Thị Chính but wished to add more to this criteria for examining the issue of women's liberation: that which he called one's outlook, or way of looking at life (*nhân sanh* [sic] *quan*). According to Phan Khôi, men and women viewed the world differently, and also according to Phan Khôi's views, one's worldly outlook is important in determining their level of individual skill or talent and success; it is the same for a particular society and the world view they share. Phan Khôi ties this to the Woman's Question and states that men are conquerors while women are the conquered. In his estimation, though, he states:

“Tuy vậy, hơn một thế kỷ nay, cuộc phụ nữ vận động (le féminisme) ở các nước phương Tây càng ngày càng thấy thành công, phụ nữ họ càng ngày càng được giải phóng, là vì cái nhân sinh quan cũ kỹ ấy đã đổi khác rồi.

However, for more than a century now, the women's movement in all the Western countries has day by day been more successful, their women have achieved liberation, and this is because they have changed their old way of viewing the world.”⁷⁴

Therefore, according to Phan Khôi, women will be successful in achieving their liberation by changing their world view. It is up to women to match the world view of men to become equal with them. This was very different than the hypothesis proposed by Nguyễn Thị Chính and, in a later issue of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* she expressed her disagreement and reiterated her,

⁷⁴ Phan Khôi, “Vấn đề phụ nữ giải phóng với nhân sinh quan” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (July 7, 1932), p. 5.

as Shawn McHale phrases it, “strongly Marxist argument” which emphasized historical materialism and her belief that women would not see liberation until history and the economy changed.⁷⁵ The two fundamentally disagreed over the cause and solution to the Woman’s Question; this was typical of the diverse voices finding a place in Vietnamese print culture. This was also typical in that we saw a mixture of ideologies being touted, the differences in the two authors’ backgrounds are clear in these articles. For Phan Khôi, a participant in the Tonkin Free School and member of an older generation (being in his forties at this point), there are ideas closely aligned with Western emphasis on the power of the individual within societies, or thoughts that would have been shared with Chinese reformers such as Liang Qichao. Yet Nguyễn Thị Chính was married to the Trotskyist Tạ Thu Thâu, who ran the leftist newspaper, *La Lutte* in Saigon. Tạ Thu Thâu and other Vietnamese Trotskyists were opposed to petit bourgeois nationalists, and reform nationalism that cooperated with French capitalism.⁷⁶ This was quite different than Phan Khôi’s outlook, which allowed for selective interest and adoption of Enlightenment and Western ideals. Within these articles, we see a man who views the cause and solution to women’s subordination as lying within the individual, while a woman fervently believes the cause and (eventual) solutions for the issue of women’s rights lie in broad superstructures and the inevitable march of history. It would be tempting to characterize this debate as a simple disagreement between generations, the older, respected editor and the young, Marxist upstart author, but the cleavages between the two writers were more complex than that; additionally, not every young and enthusiastic intellectual possessed the same, heavily Marxist

⁷⁵ Shawn McHale, “Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women’s Place in Society, 1918-1934” chapter in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts* eds. K.W. Taylor and John K. Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 187.

⁷⁶ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 388.

views. As we will see, new intellectual groups also came to embrace blends of ideas and outlooks derived from European bourgeois nationalism rather than hard line Marxism.

This debate occurred about four years after Phan Thị Bạch Vân established *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, and two years after her press got shut down. The conversation around the Woman's Question had shifted a bit, but I believe Phan Thị Bạch Vân would have agreed more with Phan Khôi's assessments and estimation. Phan Thị Bạch Vân sought to change society through change of the individual, and, while she found economic status important to women's self-sufficiency and livelihood, she did not take the same Marxist stance as Nguyễn Thị Chính. Phan Thị Bạch Vân focused on education and women's ability to have a voice; her emphases on the education of women by examples of well-known, famous, and talented women was in-line with Phan Khôi's assertion that European and American women have changed their world view and therefore achieved liberation. Both Phan Khôi and Phan Thị Bạch Vân advocated a self-strengthening focus on the self; doing so, in their minds, would bleed into the world at-large and result in women achieving equality and thus a solution to the Question of Women.

While Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote and published into the 1930s (her novel *Lâm Kiều Loan* was published in 1932), her contribution to the Woman's Question primarily lies in the late-1920s and early 1930s. Further into the decade, there emerged a new and what would become a highly famous group of men who engaged with the Woman's Question. It is their contribution that is most prominently remembered by historians and literary scholars; they called their group the Self-Reliant Literary Group. I believe it is important to address the ideas and writings of the Self-Reliant Literary Group because they engaged with similar ideas as the writers of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, were the most successful advocates of the Woman's Question, and transformed their ideals into action through what they called the League of Light, which was an organization

meant to solve the issue of unsanitary housing in the North.⁷⁷ This organization would have been an endeavor which Phan Thị Bạch Vân enthusiastically approved; judging by what her female protagonists were able to accomplish in her novels, she herself would have liked to put her ideas into practice in the form of charity organizations, women's associations, and girls' schools. There were differences between Phan Thị Bạch Vân's writing and portrayal of female characters versus the ways members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group portrayed women in their writings, but overall I believe both groups of people wanted to change Vietnamese society in similar ways, with similar results.

The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tự Lực văn đoàn) was established in Hanoi in 1932 with the publication of *Mores*, a popular satirical journal that sold over 8,500 copies a week after its first year.⁷⁸ Further into the 1930s, the Group founded the paper *These Days* and the This Life publishing house; in their publications they addressed many topics they felt were essential in modernizing and improving the lives of the Vietnamese, such as fashion, politics, economics, prostitution, tradition, marriage, women's rights, and education. Their members, such as Nhật Linh, Khái Hưng, Thạch Lam, and Hoàng Đạo, also addressed these issues in short stories, novels, and newspaper articles. The authors of the Self-Reliant Literary Group drew from diverse intellectual and cultural traditions, so that they “defied narrowly defined alternatives, such as those juxtaposing anticolonial nationalism or internationalism on the one hand and capitalism and communism on the other. Theirs was a cosmopolitan vision of national culture that clearly resonated with Vietnamese.”⁷⁹ They are best remembered for their contributions to writing and

⁷⁷ As described in Chapter 6 “The League of Light” in Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength: The Self-Reliant Literary Group and Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Late Colonial Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021).

⁷⁸ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength: The Self-Reliant Literary Group and Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Late Colonial Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), p. 4.

⁷⁹ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength*, p. 3.

literature, but they dabbled in a host of other areas in order to advance their vision of a modern Vietnamese culture and state. In the broader historiography of Vietnamese literature, the Group was neglected for decades for ideological reasons, mostly because communist historians (which became the norm in Vietnam in the second half of the twentieth century) found the Group lacking in revolutionary thought and believed they were too collaborative with the French and pro-French Vietnamese. Yet the Group “envisioned a different kind of revolution, one that Vietnamese could undertake immediately and without necessarily rejecting the French empire...[they chose] to forge a civil society with an enlightened polity as a precondition for eventual statehood.”⁸⁰ Their vision included women as essential participants in this transformation of culture and society; while women were not the focus of their output, they figured heavily in their literature. Yet in my view, the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s inclusion of women in their novels and short stories showed their female characters as little more than caricatures with little dimension. Members of the Group portrayed impoverished people in a comparable way.

While the Group wished to foster sympathy for, and include, women and the impoverished into their cosmopolitan national vision, they presented these two groups in ways that lacked depth. This is in contrast with some of the characters within Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s work, and I compare Bạch Vân’s characterization of the female protagonist from her 1928 novel, *Nữ anh tài* and the Self-Reliant Literary Group author, Nhất Linh’s, characterization of his protagonist Loan, from *Đoạn tuyệt* (1934) in the next chapter.

One effective example of the Group’s attitude towards the marginalized can be gleaned from Thạch Lam’s story, *Cô hàng xén*, which was published in a collection of short stories in

⁸⁰ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength: The Self-Reliant Literary Group and Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Late Colonial Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), p. 10.

1942. In *Cô hàng xén*, the main character is named Tâm and works to help support her family as a market girl: someone who sells notions or odds and ends at various local markets. Tâm is selfless to a fault and possesses little interior thought or motivation beyond helping others. As an example, when we first meet Tâm and she has come from a long day of work, she thinks to herself that “She was happy because her mother was looked after, and her siblings were affectionate with one another. Her feelings of tiredness began to dispel when she felt this. At this moment she forgot all her fears of hardship. She felt happy and her heart full and she wanted to give everything that was beautiful to her family.”⁸¹ This attitude and disposition continues throughout the story, making Tâm’s life difficult and unhappy. Tâm does possess dreams of freedom, and girlish desires for jewelry or a pair of earrings, but they do little to impact the loyalty she feels for her family and, later, her husband. When Tâm gets married and moves in with her husband’s family (this is traditional in Vietnamese culture), she must help support them, as her husband earns a low wage as a teacher. This becomes a conflict in which Tâm must choose between helping to support her young siblings and help pay for the schooling, or help pay for expenses and give money to her mother-in-law and husband. While this story may have been written in order to generate sympathy for the plight of young village women, and to highlight the unfortunate fact that they were expected to live and work for others, not themselves, the language and characterization surrounding Tâm does little to turn the caricature of the sweet and innocent village girl on its head. Without a better look into Tâm’s conflicting feelings, and without a resolution to her plight, the story simply becomes a window into what Thạch Lam sees as village life, and the life of a young girl. While there may have been sympathy in *Cô hàng*

⁸¹ In Vietnamese, “Tâm mỉm cười xoa đầu em. Cô sung sướng vì thấy mẹ săn sóc, các em mến yêu. Bao nhiêu nỗi mệt nhọc cô thấy tiêu tán cả. Những lúc này khiến cô quên hết cả bao nhiêu nỗi e ngại khó khăn. Cô thấy vui vẻ và nẩy nở trong tâm những ý muốn tốt đẹp cho gia đình.” From Thạch Lam, “*Cô hàng xén*” in *Sợi tóc* (Đời Nay, 1942), p. 3.

xén's pages, the story is little more than a voyeuristic examination of how much women are willing to sacrifice, coming from the mind of a male author.

This attitude continues with the Group's portrayal of the contrasts between those of their (high) status and village people. While this example does not directly involve women or the Woman's Question, I believe it is important and relates to the Group's overall attitude towards outsiders within society. In Nhất Linh's *Hai vẻ đẹp*, published in 1936, the protagonist, named Doãn, returns home after studying abroad in Paris and possesses a strong desire to paint. Doãn is wealthy and was able to travel to France due to the generosity and funding of his adoptive family. Doãn himself was born into a poor family and escaped that poverty when he was adopted, but he has little trouble viewing himself as superior (compared to others) due to his education and privilege. When he visits his home village and sees how his adoptive mother's tenants live, he is struck by their poverty and feels immense guilt. This causes Doãn to lose his desire to paint. Yet Doãn does not take action to better the lives of those living in poverty, instead Doãn retreats into himself, because "whenever he encountered something unpleasant, he could enter his painting studio and close the door, and Doãn would feel lighter inside and forget everything."⁸² Rather than setting plans to bring wealth to the village peasants or his mother's tenants, Doãn privately decides to live a simpler life that is removed from the luxury to which he was previously accustomed. He wishes to discover the beauty in life, but this does not translate to anything material or meaningful for those truly suffering under the system from which Doãn benefitted most of his life. This story is fundamentally different than Thạch Lam's story, *Cô hàng xén*, but the similarity lies in the lack of depth and resolution that implies any meaningful change for those living lives on the margins of society. In the case of *Cô hàng xén*, the main

⁸² "Mỗi lần gặp bất cứ việc gì khó chịu, hễ vào tới xưởng vẽ đóng cửa lại, là Doãn thấy trong người nhẹ nhàng ngay, quên được hết mọi sự." From Nhất Linh, *Hai vẻ đẹp* (Đời Nay, 1936).

character Tâm resolves to work harder and support both her family and her in-laws. One assumes she will work herself to death. In *Hai vẻ đẹp*, the main character Doãn cannot abide by the extreme suffering he witnesses and resolves to vaguely live less extravagantly and find beauty in the mundane. One assumes, by the end of the story, that Doãn will only withdraw further into himself and continue to live separately from the village poor. Neither story treats women or the impoverished as fully-fledged characters and neither story resolves with their lives becoming better. Instead, both main characters in these stories retreat within themselves. Tâm privately suffers and hides her earnings from her husband's family, and Doãn physically walks away from his family in order to be alone with his thoughts. Hue-Tam Ho Tai makes a striking point – if slightly unfair – by writing that Nhất Linh “depicted his heroes as loners at a time when real anticolonial activists were focusing on organizing themselves and mobilizing others. Indeed, they were more like the knights-errant of old than modern revolutionaries.”⁸³ The Self-Reliant Literary Group did organize and attempt to engage in meaningful action through the League of Light.

The League of Light was a physical manifestation of the ideals about which the Group wrote in their journals, poetry, and literature. Begun in 1937 by Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, Thạch Lam, and Hoàng Đạo, the League of Light involved collaboration between the Group and architects in Hanoi. They were working together in order to alleviate unsanitary housing in Tonkin, exacerbated by increasing, rapid urbanization. Through the League of Light, members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group wanted “to carve out a pluralistic public space for civic collective action where one had barely existed before”; additionally, the members wished to “change how the peasant masses thought and behaved by manipulating the physical space in

⁸³ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 251.

which they lived, and to create for urban elites a modern sense of community.”⁸⁴ This was the material realization of a modern Vietnamese housing community informed by Western reform movements, where peasants and the urban poor could enjoy the benefits of The Self-Reliant Group’s lofty rhetoric. I believe the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s actions represented the type of work which Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đàm Phương were attempting to spark, but without the same focus on women and women’s intellectual development. These women dabbled in social welfare associations, but perhaps did not have the same resources, contacts, and popularity to establish and run organizations like the League of Light. Prior to these developments, in the 1920s, Đàm Phương was the President of the Huế Women’s Work Association, where she also attempted to organize an association for orphaned children. Her involvement in women’s organizations and welfare organizations cemented her role as a leading figure in Vietnamese discussions over women’s status. Phan Thị Bạch Vân did not participate as prolifically in charities and welfare organizations, but the presence of women’s associations and women’s schools in her works leads me to believe she would have enthusiastically been part of these entities as part of realizing her vision of Vietnamese women’s rights. Additionally, in a literary sense, there are similarities in the goals which Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the Self-Reliant Literary Group were working towards. Like the Self-Reliant Literary Group, the authors of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* expressed the desire to foster a modern civil society comprised of educated and enlightened individuals. For *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, that came about by providing educational and informative literature. For the Self-Reliant Literary Group, this involved much more than literature, but their strategy also involved the education and changing of individuals’ attitudes and knowledge. For both of these entities, societal change began with singular men and women

⁸⁴ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength: The Self-Reliant Literary Group and Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Late Colonial Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), p. 180.

who could share their knowledge and spark a cultural shift for the betterment of society. The Self-Reliant Literary Group had more resources and people on their side, and they were more successful in their endeavors. Yet Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's efforts, led by women and begun four years before the Group's inception, was successful in its sheer volume of output and scope in its two years of existence. Here, I will engage in a more focused analysis of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's influences before and during its tenure.

Varied Influences in the World of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán

At the time of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's inception, the Vietnamese were interested in a host of topics and a variety of other cultures. But this was nothing new; even in the state of Đại Nam, centered in the city of Huế under the Nguyễn Dynasty, "cultural borrowing from abroad had been a long tradition," with "annual purchasing missions dispatched to Batavia, Manila, and Singapore" meant to keep the court aware of Western culture and international events.⁸⁵ Vietnamese elites were not isolated prior to French intervention, but it is certain that forced contact between the French and Vietnamese produced individuals well-informed regarding French and European culture. The publication output of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán drew inspiration from French, Chinese, English, and American writings; to a lesser extent, they were aware of other European and East Asian works. In the realm of French literature and philosophy, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán published works that engaged with two major periods of history: the Enlightenment and the fin-de-siècle. For example, in the third chapter of this thesis, I will be analyzing Phan Thị Bạch Vân's biography about the salonnière known for her involvement in the French Revolution, Madame Roland. In the last chapter, I look at Đạm Phương's book outlining women's roles in families and engage with the many references the author made throughout, most of which

⁸⁵ Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 11.

include French and American writers from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. These were two periods which Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương identified as periods of intellectual growth to which women contributed. Their focus on these eras suggests a desire to spark similar actions on the part of Vietnamese women; they wished to accelerate discussions about women's rights through past examples in other countries.

The idea of women facilitating and leading intellectual circles was one that the women involved with Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán found attractive. In my chapter about Madame Roland's biography, we will see that Phan Thị Bạch Vân found Roland's support for her husband and position as a host for great minds and discussions one of her most important attributes. Phan Thị Bạch Vân herself was familiar with Enlightenment thinkers (along with other intellectual traditions) and was creating an intellectual space through her establishment of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán; as shown at the beginning of this introduction, she wanted to create a place that would host good writing and support women's spiritual enlightenment. Through Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, Phan Thị Bạch Vân was hosting her own version of a printed salon, featuring members of the Vietnamese intelligentsia, focused on women's issues and development. It was through this medium that Bạch Vân would be able to wield the influence she needed in order to regulate the trajectory of Vietnamese women's intellectual and social development. She was not the first to attempt to foster this kind of space, and she (among her fellow writers) was aware of this fact.

Salonnières and intellectual development of the Enlightenment

The most influential salons of eighteenth-century Paris were maintained by women, and women acted as intellectual companions of philosophers. Women created, maintained, and fostered these intellectual and political spaces; while women were not viewed as equal in the eyes of their male contemporaries, they were able to “overcome deeply ingrained doubts about

women among the philosophes.”⁸⁶ This ability for women (of mixed social and economic status) to overcome prejudices of the day and facilitate parallel space that mirrored a public, mainstream forum was inspirational to those aware of their contributions, and members of the Vietnamese press wrote about these women with admiration. Vietnamese authors were aware of famous salonnières and how integral they were for the spread and development of Enlightenment thinking. In an article outlining the history of women authors and intellectuals in France, published in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, Thiệu Sơn wrote about the importance of the *Encyclopédie* edited by Denis Diderot and how it owed its enthusiastic circulation to the efforts of the salonnières. He pointed out three famous salonnières: Marie Thérèse Geoffrin (1699-1777), Marie Anne de Vichy-Chamrond, marquise du Deffand (1696-1780), and Julie de Lespinasse (1732-1776), and how their salons were places where philosophers gathered and issued the *Encyclopédie* amongst one another to discuss and disseminate.⁸⁷ He called the women of this period, who participated in the salons, “loyal and capable comrades to: Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, and d’Alembert, etc....”⁸⁸ While he pointed to these women as companions and facilitators of Enlightenment thought, rather than as singular figures contributing intellectually, Thiệu Sơn did not diminish their importance and presented salonnières as fundamental to the spread of the Enlightenment. In the first part of the article, published two weeks prior, Thiệu Sơn asserted that the establishment of the Académie française in 1635 could not compete with the influence of women’s salons, at

⁸⁶ Susan Herbst, *Politics at the Margin: Historical Studies of Public Expression Outside the Mainstream* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 58.

⁸⁷ “Được vậy cũng một phần lớn nhờ ở những nhà sa-lông có các nữ sĩ trợ lực cho nhiều lắm. Thời kỳ này có bà nhà sa-lông trứ danh hơn hết là: sa-lông của bà Geoffrin, sa-lông của bà Du-Deffand và sa-lông của cô Lespinasse... thường là những chỗ tích trữ và nơi phát hành của Bách Khoa tự điển...” from, Thiệu Sơn, “Nữ sĩ Pháp” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (November 23, 1933), p. 9.

⁸⁸ “... hết thấy các nữ sĩ ở thời kỳ này đều là bạn đồng chí trung thành và đắc lực của những ông: Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, d’Alembert, v.v....” from, Thiệu Sơn, “Nữ sĩ Pháp” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (November 23, 1933), p. 9.

least in the realm of literature and literary discussion.⁸⁹ His respect for the salonnières as the facilitators of intellectual culture and change is clear in his writing. Thiều Sơn might be familiar as the author who wrote the aforementioned 1934 article in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* discussing Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Đạm Phương, and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's unfortunate closure in 1930. He pointed to Phan Thị Bạch Vân as a figure who prompted women to aim for their own enlightenment; both he and Bạch Vân saw the importance of women in intellectual movements and sought to educate readers about the salonnières as women whom the Vietnamese should study and emulate.

The Belle Époque Feminists

Vietnamese intellectuals also closely followed French engagements with feminism and the Woman's Question during the nineteenth century. This is easy to see in selections of articles and topics in newspapers such as *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, which published prolifically in the period during and immediately after NLTQ's existence and with which Phan Thị Bạch Vân was familiar. Here, I will discuss a few articles from *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* engaging with Belle Époque feminism and figures, further showing that NLTQ's similar invocation of foreign authors and historical figures was not atypical within the social circles to which they belonged.

The most well-known feminist publication during the Belle Époque was *La Fronde*, founded in 1897 by Marguerite Durand (1864-1936) and staffed entirely by women. The newspaper ran until 1903 and Durand, as its founder, sought to "take on the male establishments of France...on equal terms with other quality press of the time."⁹⁰ The newspaper produced quality work and targeted educated women of middle-to-high social status. It featured articles addressing current events and general topics, along with a 'Tribune' section that featured women

⁸⁹ Thiều Sơn, "Nữ sĩ Pháp" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (November 9, 1933), p. 8.

⁹⁰ Maggie Allison, "Marguerite Durand and *La Fronde*: Voicing Women of the Belle Époque" chapter in *Women in French Society and Culture, 1890-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 38.

writers using long-form journalism to engage with social or historical topics using a feminist slant.⁹¹ In August of 1932, one author for *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* wrote that the publication of *La Fronde* marked the beginning of the current women's movement and that Marguerite Durand wanted to give feminism a more agreeable, soft appearance.⁹² The author believed that she had devoted herself, throughout her life, to the advancement of the women's movement, cementing her as an important figure in France's history of feminism. This points to Durand's application of "genteel feminism" in which she "went to great lengths to exercise her feminine charms."⁹³ This was done in an attempt to avoid the negative perceptions to which women had been subject as part of their campaigns to ensure women's independence; men's criticisms of feminists made it difficult to be taken seriously in intellectual and press circles. Durand wished for her paper to be taken seriously, and, while she featured and platformed outspoken feminists in her newspaper, she presented herself as beautiful and feminine, in other words: nonthreatening. While the writer of PNTV's article appeared to appreciate this genteel feminism, other writers within the pages of *La Fronde* did not practice similar, nonthreatening forms of feminism. One author who contributed regularly and addressed the concerns of working-class women, Séverine, also caught the attention of the Vietnamese press.

Writers for *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* wrote multiple articles mentioning the French writer and leftist social critic, Séverine, born Caroline Rémy de Guehard in 1855. When Séverine passed away in 1929, PNTV ran an article with the subheading emphasizing the "loss of a famous woman" (*Mất một người đàn bà có tiếng*). The beginning of the article principally focused on facts surrounding Séverine's birth and accomplishments, with discussion about her contributions

⁹¹ Maggie Allison, "Marguerite Durand and *La Fronde*," p. 39.

⁹² "muôn cho cuộc phụ nữ vận động cũng có cái vẻ mềm mại dễ thương." B.T.M. "Liếc qua cuộc phụ nữ vận động ở nước Pháp" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (August 4, 1932), p. 5.

⁹³ Maggie Allison, "Marguerite Durand and *La Fronde*," p. 40.

to *Le Cri du peuple*, a socialist newspaper established in 1871 by Jules Vallès (1832-1885). The author wrote that Séverine possessed a “noble mind” (*có cái tư tưởng rất cao thượng*) and advocated for the impoverished through her work. The author also expressed the belief that if a person held frustrations or pain, Séverine would be willing to comfort and defend them.⁹⁴ The author ended the article with a comparison between Séverine’s loss to humanity and the loss of flowers in a garden, writing that newspapers in Europe and America were expressing grief (*cho nên các báo Âu Mỹ đều tỏ lòng thương tiếc lắm*). Such a touching tribute treated Séverine as a humble but significant figure in French journalism who advocated for the poor and those experiencing injustice, as evidenced by her writings and participation in the Human Rights League. Yet this author was but one writer discussing Séverine and her societal contributions in *PNTV*. Other authors did not view Séverine so positively; instead, other authors characterized Séverine as a radical too extreme in her views, especially when compared to her contemporaries advocating women’s rights.

In much the same way Phan Thị Bạch Vân described the advent of feminism and development of women’s rights in England in *Nữ anh tài* (which will be discussed further in another chapter), *PNTV* ran articles discussing women’s rights and development in France. One article, attributed to an author identified by the initials B.T.M., began with a discussion of the Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen (1815-1887) and his views on prehistoric matriarchy. The article was titled *Liếc qua cuộc phụ nữ vận động ở nước Pháp* (A glance at the women’s movement in France) and an earlier entry to the multi-issue article that mentioned Marguerite Durand and her establishment of *La Fronde*. The author translated the “women’s movement” (*cuộc phụ nữ vận động*) as *Le féminisme* and begins the article correcting any

⁹⁴ “Bà Séverine” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (June 6, 1929), p. 2.

reader's belief that feminism is a new movement by stating "it is a mistake [to believe that]."⁹⁵ They go on to make the claim that there has been a women's movement, in some form or another, from time immemorial. Though it has not progressed in a straight, successful line, the author believes feminism has been historically present. The author presents readers with the aforementioned Bachofen's theories about matriarchy, asserting that ancient peoples respected women and citing the prominence of women's positions within families. The author mentions prominent French women (such as Marie de Gournay, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, and Juliette Adam), but brings readers' attention to developments in other countries, such as Italy during the Renaissance.

The author views the late-nineteenth century as a watershed moment for women's rights in France, and devotes a large portion of the article to discussion of developments in the Belle Époque. They point to the careers of Maria Deraismes (1828-1894) and Hubertine Auclert (1848-1914) as providing strong influence on the movement. These women's writings and stated purpose was meant to improve the lives of women; the author identifies later figures as focusing on women's involvement in politics and sciences. When describing Séverine, the article's author focuses on her accomplishments as a writer who wrote over six-thousand articles as a journalist; however, the author also describes Séverine as "revolutionary," (*cách mạng*) an "instigator," (*một tay phiến động*) "extreme," (*quá khích*) and possessing a "steadfast" (*cứng cỏi*) heart. This was presented in contrast to the author's characterization of Marguerite Durand in their August article. The author goes on to discuss the accomplishments and work of Clémence Royer (1830-1902), known for her controversial and eugenics-laced translation of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and Jeanne Schmahl (1846-1915), known for her work campaigning for

⁹⁵ B.T.M., "Liếc qua cuộc phụ nữ vận động ở nước Pháp" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (July 28, 1932), p. 6.

women's suffrage and labor rights. The article provided an in-depth look at prominent feminist figures and authors from the Belle Époque, most of whom were involved in the same circles and publications, such as *La Fronde*. The author expressed respect and support for most of these figures, but that respect chiefly extended to middle and upper-class women in France who advocated moderate change based on suffrage and women's right to work and control use of their own wages. It was with less support that the article's author discussed Séverine and her radicalism, in contrast to the article from *PNTV* published after Séverine's death in 1929. This author was less interested in Séverine's contributions to French feminism, even though she "spearheaded the feminist content of" *La Fronde*.⁹⁶ It is clear that she did not directly fit in the mold set forth by other feminists at the time, and she led the way regarding certain topics. She existed outside of the mainstream of French feminism advocated by her contemporaries, and espoused subversive views about topics such as abortion, prostitution, and the plight of working women. She also saw her participation in *La Fronde* as an opportunity to speak out about the Dreyfus Affair, the 1890s political scandal in which a Jewish artillery officer was wrongfully found guilty of treason and exiled. Séverine viewed *La Fronde* as a free and open space in which she could express her opinions as a supporter of Dreyfus without fear of censorship.⁹⁷ This support towards Dreyfus was consistent with Séverine's preferred topics about people existing on the margins of society, especially the lower class. Interests like hers were outside the realm of common respectability most women adhered to at this time, and outside of the topics women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote about in their novels, biographies, and lessons in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*.

⁹⁶ Maggie Allison, "Marguerite Durand and *La Fronde*: Voicing Women of the Belle Époque" chapter in *Women in French Society and Culture, 1890-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), p. 38.

⁹⁷ Évelyne Le Garrec, *Séverine: une rebelle (1855-1929)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), p. 187.

Yet the most important information we may derive from this article is that the author was well-informed concerning the women's movement in France and this knowledge of women's writings and contributions represented an intertextuality in which Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her cohort were steeped. These writers, many of whom worked and lived in Cochinchina, were interested in women's movements in France and other countries and wanted to convey this interest and knowledge to readers. Just as Bạch Vân wrote about Madame Roland and was aware of news articles and current events in places such as England and China, writers affiliated with the press in Cochinchina were well-informed about women at home and abroad. They read widely and diversely and, through historical overviews such as the article described above, wished to convey a sense of continuity in the realm of women's rights across the globe. Whether or not that continuity was presented accurately is immaterial; this author held an interest in women's heightened status and wanted to relay this information to *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn's* readership. We see that a number of writers in Cochinchina, some women, many men, were deeply aware of trends relating to feminism and women's rights in the metropole. Yet this did not simply extend to France; as we saw in the previously-discussed *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* article, and will see in Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương's writings, Vietnamese women in these intellectual circles were also aware of the New Woman phenomenon in America, Japan, and China. It is because of this international awareness that we must briefly delve into the outlook and trends in the realm of women's rights occurring across the world during the early-twentieth century. In better understanding the New Woman as an international icon, we can better understand the knowledge the women behind NLTQ possessed and wished to communicate to their audience.

Mentioned above, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* featured famous and notable female writers in an article from 1933, titled *Nữ Sĩ Pháp*, or "French Woman Authors," by Thiều Sơn. In the third

part of his lengthy article, Thiều Sơn wrote about women authors at the turn of the century and into the beginning of the twentieth century. Thiều Sơn introduced the topic of French women writers of the twentieth century with the concept of the *femme masculinée*, or the idea that the blending of gendered readership, writership, and topics (such as the emancipation of women) in the press of the Belle Époque was resulting in masculinized women and “the end of” the female sex.⁹⁸ This issue gradually resolved through the proliferation of women-focused magazines, journals, and female reporters, but it was a significant dispute in which women’s appropriation of typically-male space became a crisis in the press. Thiều Sơn wrote that this masculinization issue was, in reality, just women wanting careers that were comparable to men’s careers. Women wanted the opportunity to practice writing criticism, speeches, and journalistic reportage.⁹⁹ A similar phenomenon occurred during the French Revolution; in response to women’s involvement in the public sphere, Jacobins and Girondins began to call women who participated in the Revolution *femme-hommes*, portraying their activism as unnatural and masculine.¹⁰⁰ Men’s worry over the masculinization of women was primarily a state of anxiety over their own futures and place in society.

Thiều Sơn’s discussion about the Belle Époque’s masculinization issue was an astute observation of a critical juncture in the press and press culture in France at the beginning of the twentieth century. This demonstrates a deep knowledge of the topic and belief in its applicability to Vietnamese women and their strides in authorship and journalistic enterprise. Comparisons could be made between the press culture of France at the turn of the century and Vietnam’s press

⁹⁸ Guillaume Pinson, “La femme masculinisée dans la presse mondaine française de la Belle Époque” *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 30 (2009): pp. 5 & 7.

⁹⁹ Thiều Sơn, “Nữ sĩ Pháp” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (November 30, 1933), p. 9.

¹⁰⁰ Anaïs Dallara, “The Femme-Homme of the French Revolution: Gender Boundaries and Masculinization” (Master’s thesis, California State University Long Beach, 2017), pp. 72-73.

during the interwar years. Vietnamese women possessed newfound opportunities to write about and for one another; that, at times, led to criticism from men threatened by the idea and practice of women's emancipation.¹⁰¹ The major difference between the two examples was that Vietnamese women's magazines, journals, and newspapers did not develop as gradually as their counterparts in France. In France, eventually, anxieties over the masculinization of women gave way to the publication of women's magazines that reconciled male and female interests; they balanced representations of housewives and liberated women and became reflections of what it meant to be a woman.¹⁰² In Vietnam, however, the first women's publication, *Nữ giới chung*, came to be through a partnership between the Governor-General of Indochina and Vietnamese intellectuals, with the aim of promoting Franco-Vietnamese cooperation amongst women. While women's magazines and media did not stem from the same historical circumstances in France and Vietnam, similar outcomes and discussions meant that the comparison was important to Vietnamese writers. In these debates and amongst these authors of the Belle Époque, Vietnamese writers could present readers with a roadmap for potential movements in the Vietnamese example.

Another author who was closer to a contemporary of the 1920s and 30s Vietnamese intelligentsia was Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, simply known as Colette (1873-1954). Thiệu Sơn devoted a few paragraphs to Colette in his analysis of French women writers throughout history. Thiệu Sơn wrote that contemporary critics considered Colette the best woman writer in women's literature. He discussed some of Colette's frequently-tread topics within her writing, such as the

¹⁰¹ Such as when the writer and poet, Nguyễn Thị Kiêm (who also wrote for *PNTV*) received criticism for engaging in a speaking tour, or when a male writer wrote that *PNTV* encouraged women to possess equal rights to "gambling, extramarital sex, and conspicuous consumption." Discussed in David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 227.

¹⁰² Guillaume Pinson, "La femme masculinisée dans la presse mondaine française de la Belle Époque" *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés*, 30 (2009): pp. 13 & 20.

private struggles women suffer and their experiences with love, which were careful ways of describing Colette's more scandalous engagements with sexuality, age-gap relationships, and dissatisfaction with one's marriage. Her works that Thiều Sơn cites, such as *La Vagabonde* (1910), *Les Vrilles de la vigne* (1908), and *L'Envers du music hall* (1913) all perceptively deal with women's relationships, their efforts to support themselves (such as through dancing, as Colette did in real life) and, while there are reflections on Colette's love of nature or the passage of time, Colette's writing and life was at times shocking, and certainly outside the behavioral norms for Vietnamese women of the time. It is also important to note that Colette was not politically involved; in fact, she opposed women's participation in politics, stating:

“Women are—thank god—an explosive anarchistic power the opposite of all bureaucracy. It is an absurd nonsense for woman, whose own energy is a match for bureaucracy, and sets its boundaries, to lock herself up within it. Take her out of this empty and barren order; and if you want a woman's power then make her into a queen –give her the famous *royaume* secret, which she rules not from the throne room, but from the bedroom. It is the only power that a woman ever wanted and with it she will achieve what no man could achieve.”¹⁰³

With this quote, and Colette's emphasis on women's sexuality – rather than their intellect – providing their power, it is easy to see why the Vietnamese might admire Colette less than women like Marguerite Durand. Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Thiều Sơn, and Đàm Phương, amongst many others, were pushing hard for women's access to education and participation in public life. While Durand no doubt used her good looks and sexuality to present feminism in a positive light,

¹⁰³ Colette quoted in Kathleen Antonioni, “Colette Francaise: Colette and French Singularity” *French Politics, Culture and Society* 38, no. 1 (2020): p. 113.

she still stressed the importance of women's enfranchisement and ability to run for elected office. This was important to Vietnamese writers, men and women alike, who wrote about the Woman's Question. There are few authors from this time who draw such attention to women's sexuality, especially as it relates to their ability to hold and wield power. The authors who did draw similar lines between women's sexuality and power (such as the authors Nguyễn Công Hoan and Vũ Trọng Phụng) presented women's sexuality as malevolent. But these authors were not common, and many of those engaging with the Woman's Question in Vietnam wanted to provide women with access to more traditional avenues of power. This meant that an author such as Colette, while respected, did not receive the same treatment as other figures. While Thiều Sơn does not provide pages of analysis and praise for Colette's work, he does describe her writing as beautiful and honest.¹⁰⁴ Thiều Sơn ends his article series about women writers throughout French history by drawing comparisons between women's rights and women's movements with history itself; he implies that no one can stop either women's liberation or the march of history (*không ai ngăn cản được*). His last lines were meant to inspire readers by stating “Ở Pháp vậy, mà ở ta cũng vậy,” or, that, in France, this is the way things are, and it is the same in Vietnam. He expresses his belief that Vietnamese women's liberation is intimately tied to the progression of history, in the same way it is in France. This is an optimistic way of viewing the women's movement and Vietnamese women's ability to achieve rights for themselves. His ending call to action further cements the connections that Thiều Sơn (among other members of the print community) wanted to reinforce between Vietnamese and French women.

Writers involved with *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* were additionally interested in women's movements in Japan. A woman named Madame Vũ Hữu Vân wrote an article titled “Nhật bản

¹⁰⁴ Thiều Sơn, “Nữ sĩ Pháp” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (November 30, 1933), p. 10.

lao động phụ nhon hội” or “Japanese women’s labor association” in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* in July of 1931. She began her piece by writing:

“Chị em ta thường nghe nói đến nước Nhật, là vì Nhật bản là một nước ở về Á đông này, cũng một giống da vàng như ta, vì sớm biết cải cách, duy tân mà nay đã thành ra một nước phú cường đứng vào hàng thứ năm trong Liệt quốc.”¹⁰⁵

Or,

“We often hear about Japan, this is because Japan is a country in East Asia, also a yellow skin race like us, and because [Japan] knew to innovate and reform early, that modernism has made them a rich and powerful country ranking the fifth in the world.”

Mme Vũ then turns to writing about women. She states that, in the past, the status of Japanese women was similar to that of Vietnamese women (*Địa vị người đàn bà trong xã hội Nhật trước kia cũng gần giống như chị em Việt nam mình*). Things have changed in Japan, though, and women have begun to organize and agitate for change in their country. According to Vũ, some women writers and the wives of politicians established a working women’s association which was welcomed by many other women. Vũ wrote that the association had two purposes, to improve the skill levels of working women, and to motivate women into a political force.¹⁰⁶ She also wrote that the association focused on including women from many different backgrounds. Most of the administrative and major duties involving running the association fell to high-class women, who came from aristocratic families. Middle class women were welcome to join and asked to pay a fee of one yen. Working class women formed the bulk of the association and the

¹⁰⁵ Madame Vũ Hữu Vân, “Nhật bản lao động phụ nhon hội” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (July 2, 1931), p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ Madame Vũ Hữu Vân, “Nhật bản lao động phụ nhon hội” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (July 2, 1931), p. 21.

leaders of the group focused on lobbying to set up social services that would make these women's lives easier. Most of all, the women involved in the association wanted to help women become more independent. Mme Vũ ends the piece by asking when Vietnamese women will do something similar, and states that she is hopeful.

Japanese women were indeed organizing for increased access to rights in the early twentieth century, making them a sensible example for Vietnamese women to emulate. Notions of rights (women's rights included) stemmed from "the tidal wave of Western ideas engulfing Japan after the Meiji Restoration (1868)."¹⁰⁷ The popularity surrounding the notion of rights also drew from indigenous thought and came to meld with Japanese values of self-cultivation, self-strengthening, and the importance of cultivation "through education and ethical development."¹⁰⁸ With this self-cultivation would come respect amongst the public and inclusion in the state. Interwar feminists would draw from these same ideas when they pushed for women's suffrage in the 1920s. This melding of indigenous and foreign philosophy that created a baseline for certain individuals' and groups' participation in the modern state was inspirational to the Vietnamese who encountered Japanese thought in the first decades of the twentieth century. Through this model, Vietnamese women could select aspects of Enlightenment and Western philosophy while still drawing from their Vietnamese and East Asian background. The Vietnamese felt a sense of camaraderie with the Japanese, as shown in the first paragraph of Madame Vũ Hữu Vận's article, due to their perceived racial similarities. To Vietnamese women aware of the strides Japanese women were taking in the 1920s and 30s, this was a culture with a shared background and history demonstrating their ability to become wealthy and powerful through the development of

¹⁰⁷ Barbara Molony, "Women's Rights, Feminism, and Suffragism in Japan, 1870-1925" *Pacific Historical Review* 69 (2000): p. 640.

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Molony, "Women's Rights, Feminism, and Suffragism," p. 640.

the self and self-strengthening. This made Vietnamese women's interest in, and emulation of, the Japanese example similar to their coverage of Euro-American women and women's movements.

Vietnamese women were not the only observers and admirers of the Japanese at this time. As stated earlier in this introduction, the famous anti-colonialist Phan Bội Châu escaped to Japan in 1905 with the help of Liang Qichao. In Japan, Phan Bội Châu encouraged Vietnamese students to study and learn from the Japanese in what was called the *Đông Du*, or the Journey East, movement. Therefore, this interest in the Japanese example had an anticolonial precedent. While Madame Vũ Hữu Vân may not have been expressly anti-colonial in thought or action, her article about Japanese women and the affinity between the Japanese and Vietnamese acted as a call for Vietnamese women to learn from cultures other than French and Euro-Americans. Through a culture that had already sought cultural strengthening in the shadow of Euro-American colonialism, the Vietnamese could seek reform and prosperity with careful study and selective emulation.

In this introduction, I have provided a look into the cosmopolitan world which Phan Thị Bạch Vân inhabited. This was a world in which the Vietnamese still harbored cultural ties to China but were beginning to experience increased contact, and interest in, French cultural influence. Phan Thị Bạch Vân embraced this cosmopolitanism and her interest in many different historical traditions, figures, and literatures extended to her work with *Nữ Lữ Thơ Quán*. As a writer and an editor, Bạch Vân demonstrated that she wished to bring her own knowledge to others, foster the same love of knowledge she possessed, and make a positive difference in the lives of Vietnamese women. Her literature was prescriptive and aspirational, but it drew upon conversations already happening in the Vietnamese print community. Men were having

conversations about how women should behave, think, and learn, so Phan Thị Bạch Vân threw herself into the conversation and has provided us with a woman's point of view.

This dissertation is a look at how women viewed the Woman's Question, and there is little focus on men except in a comparative context. This analysis of material written by women separates this study from others about the time period. Most scholarly studies have engaged with men's prescriptions for women; indeed, most of the material during the interwar years was written by men. Women's presence in the print community, rare or not, necessitates study and analysis. Their thoughts and feelings concerning their own advancement – in addition to their opinions on the advancement of their fellow women – deviate from and are congruent with men's in intriguing ways. The output of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* has been overlooked in historical studies of Vietnamese literature but the ideas the writers within the press were attempting to promote became well-known and famous with the advent of other groups into the 1930s, such as the Self-Reliant Literary Group. *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s writers were visionary, and under the direction of Phan Thị Bạch Vân, they sought to create an aspirational ideal to which women could refer. Most of all Phan Thị Bạch Vân wanted to inspire her fellow women to spread their education to others and promote participation in civil society for an enlightened and civically involved populace.

In the following chapters I will analyze material written by Phan Thị Bạch Vân or published through her press, *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, between the years 1928 and 1932. In the next chapter, I will be analyzing three of her novels, *Lâm Kiều Loan* (1932), *Nữ anh tài* (1928), and *Kiếp hoa thám sử* (1928-1929). In these novels, Phan Thị Bạch Vân expressed her opinions on the state of affairs for women; namely, that relationships between men and women were fraught, women needed to take the selection of a marriage partner seriously, and that education, economic

independence, and maturity were the best ways to guarantee stability and happiness. She sought to warn her audience from selecting a bad husband, through dramatic plotlines featuring wicked male partners enacting various forms of tragedy on their wives. She provided her readers with a solution to this problem through the idea of a companionate marriage. She demonstrates the ideal marriage through the partnership between two sets of couples in *Nữ anh tài*. Chiefly, women's ability to receive a proper education protected them from malevolence while setting them up to make a love match with a husband of the same caliber.

CHAPTER ONE: LOVE AND ROMANCE IN THE WORKS OF PHAN THỊ BẠCH VÂN

INTRODUCTION

One day, a girl named Bích Liên visited a small school outside of Saigon and asked to see her former teacher, Ngọc Anh. Having just finished lunch, Ngọc Anh and Bích Liên sat down to chat, along with a recently-hired teacher named Kiều Loan. Bích Liên began to tell a story about her older sister, who was seventeen. She told the other women that her sister became engaged and married too hastily; she began to have marital problems soon after her wedding. Her husband took a lover, with whom he shamelessly stepped out publically. Soon, Bích Liên's sister found a love letter between her husband and her own close friend, making her so angry she lost consciousness. She became suicidal and took on the persona of a princess named Huỳnh Nga. Her separation from reality was so dramatic that she needed to be hospitalized. Bích Liên explained neither she nor her brother-in-law knew to whom the persona of Huỳnh Nga could be attributed, or represent, but the character involved her sister acting like a jealous concubine and asking for the favor of a prince through pleading letters. Bích Liên ended her story with the admission that her sister was now living in a mental institution where she prayed to the bodhisattva Guan Yin¹⁰⁹ and wrote letters signed as Công Chúa (Princess) Huỳnh Nga.¹¹⁰

The situation was shocking and tragic. Hearing the end of the story, the new teacher named Kiều Loan bitterly thought about how women must learn resignation at how men treat them. She reflected that if a woman's husband was good, she had to be resigned to this; yet if her

¹⁰⁹ Or Phật bà.

¹¹⁰ It is not clear whom this figure is, but she could also be Quỳnh Nga, the princess Thạch Sanh rescues and marries in the Vietnamese myth.

husband was bad to her, she also had to accept this with resignation.¹¹¹ If women were not resigned to their marital fate, or showed anger at this fate, they could appear crazy and bring shame upon their families. No matter what they did or how they themselves acted, women were forced to live with the actions, feelings, and attitudes of their husbands. They also had to live with the consequences of their husbands' actions. Kiều Loan identified a profound issue in marriages at the time, spurred by a lack of mobility and independence for many women, stifling women's liberty and happiness and tying them tightly to at-times unscrupulous husbands.

Not long after their meeting at the school, all the girls went to visit Bích Liên's sister at the mental hospital, along with Bích Liên's mother. The hospital was in Biên Hòa, and Kiều Loan described the mental hospital as having padded walls, with people eating and talking to themselves in shabby clothing. All the women found the hospital frightening. They met with Bích Liên's sister, named Bích Ngọc, and visited her in her room. She spent their meeting speaking incoherently and uttering nonsense about Guan Yin. As the women left, Kiều Loan caught a glimpse of Bích Ngọc's letters addressed to a king, asking about harem life and pleading with him to allow Bích Ngọc back at the palace. Utterly shaken, the women later ruminated over how ruined Bích Ngọc appeared to be and how disturbing the experience was.

Described above is the final scene of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novel, *Lâm Kiều Loan*, an unfinished story that had remarkable potential. The front cover of the first section describes the work as "a novel about hidden matters in Southern society."¹¹² The story deals primarily with the main character, Kiều Loan's, hardships and failed marriage, along with the hardships of other women she encounters. *Lâm Kiều Loan*, though unfinished at only thirty-two pages, features

¹¹¹ "Thôi thì đành, chồng hay cũng đành, chồng dở cũng đành, chồng hiền cũng đành, chồng dữ cũng đành" from Phan thị Bạch Vân, *Lâm Kiều Loan* (Saigon, Imprimerie Tran-trong-Canh, 1932), p. 25.

¹¹² "tiểu-thuyết về ân-tình xã hội Nam-kỳ"

several similarities in tone and theme with some of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's other works. Yet there are key differences, namely in the grittiness of the subject matter and the frank way with which Bạch Vân discusses mental illness and infidelity. Phan Thị Bạch Vân published *Lâm Kiều Loan* in 1932, two years after her women's press (Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán) closed after being censored by colonial authorities.¹¹³ The novel is an early attempt by a Vietnamese woman writer to address the difficulties that women experienced during the interwar years and to offer different methods and outcomes for dealing with these difficulties. Bạch Vân identifies these difficulties as stemming from tradition, familial conflict, and lack of opportunities for women to become self-sufficient.

In this chapter, I will analyze three novels by Phan Thị Bạch Vân: *Lâm Kiều Loan* (1932) (described above), *Kiếp hoa thám sử* (1928-1929), and *Nữ anh tài* (1928). *Kiếp hoa thám sử* is about a young woman named Như-hoa who experiences familial tragedies and must escape her greedy and murderous stepmother. Along her journey, she meets friends and provides aid to those experiencing their own hardships. The novel ends with Như-hoa living with two adopted children and supporting them as a seamstress, a far cry from the wealth in which she lived as a child. *Nữ anh tài* follows the talented and clever Tú Anh as she solves mysteries and goes on adventures in the pursuit of her true love, Hồng Minh. Throughout the episodic tale, Tú Anh starts her own business and opens a local school for young girls, ensuring the education of young women and contributing to the betterment of society. While *Lâm Kiều Loan* and *Kiếp hoa thám sử* showcase tales of sorrow and tragedy, *Nữ anh tài* is a novel of love and adventure. While *Nữ anh tài* still shows Phan Thị Bạch Vân grappling with serious matters (such as murder, infidelity, and kidnapping), it possesses a tone similar to dime novels with sensational cliff-hangers and a

¹¹³ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 220.

heroine who never fails to land squarely on her feet. Phan Thị Bạch Vân thoroughly entertains readers with *Nữ anh tài* while still retaining the lessons which would instill in young women a sense of both daring and autonomy. Most of all, *Nữ anh tài* presents us with an example of a companionate marriage – a rare occurrence, at the time – between the educated husband and wife, Tú Anh and Hồng Minh.

As a starting point, one way these novels may be superficially compared is through their covers. If one takes a cursory look at novels, periodicals, and magazines during the early-1920s, one would find very plain covers featuring the title, the author's name, and publication information. Into the late 1920s and early 1930s, one would find covers featuring or alluding to the characters engaged in some sort of activity. For media aimed at women, the covers often depicted women reading or posing with items pointing to their intellectual prowess and curious mind, such as a globe or compass. The figures below (**Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3**) are the covers of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Lâm Kiều Loan*, *Nữ anh tài*, and *Kiếp hoa thám sử*. The cover of *Nữ anh tài* shows us three women standing together and holding what must be copies of the publication in question; that is, they are reading a periodical from Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán. The women are dressed demurely, their hair is pulled back, and there is not much in their dress or comportment that distinguishes them from one another. This cover of *Nữ anh tài* looks very similar to other journal and newspaper covers aimed at women; another example of a publication that used three Vietnamese women on their cover was *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*. For *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, there is a woman confidently standing alone, holding a torch and a book, and posing next to a globe and what looks to be a Greek-style Doric column. The items she holds and stands beside connote intelligence and worldliness. The torch calls *illumination* to mind, especially in the context of the Greek myth of Prometheus. This female character illuminates the world for other Vietnamese

women to see. The cover leads viewers to believe that they will become enlightened once they have read the contents of the publication. The design that went into *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s covers communicated that the women who read their publications were intellectual; further, that they had other female friends with whom they could read and discuss these books. There was also a message that women had both the ability and duty to enlighten society at large. Through their covers, they were modeling the women they wanted to attract and encourage. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's cover of *Lâm Kiều Loan* is quite different. *Lâm Kiều Loan* came out four years after *Nữ anh tài* and was not published through *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*. Therefore, Phan Thị Bạch Vân may not have possessed as much artistic input when it came to creating a cover for her new novel. Yet it is worthwhile to compare the cover to *Nữ anh tài*'s, as the two appear to communicate different messages. In contrast to *Nữ anh tài*, the cover of *Lâm Kiều Loan* is simple and understated. The typeset uses a beautiful, flowing, and modern-looking font where the title only has lower-case letters and little to no space between words. There are only words and shapes on this cover, and only two colors: black and red. The result is a sleek and minimalist book cover that might have been the result of less funding, a lack of design control on Phan Thị Bạch Vân's part, or a simple change in what was popular at the time. Gone are the figures of women reading with one another, or the self-referential book they read and discuss together. Instead, this cover of *Lâm Kiều Loan* places readers' focus on what it is saying; namely, that it is a novel about "hidden matters" (*về ẩn tình*) in Southern society. Readers' interest is piqued and they might think that this novel presents us with truths about ourselves, our relationships, and our society.

Through these novels it is apparent that, as an author, Phan Thị Bạch Vân displayed striking views of love and marriage in her works. She presented readers with the dire consequences of having a disloyal husband while writing about the positive potential when a

love-match of equals occurred. She saw Vietnamese women as vulnerable in the face of a changing society and sought to fortify young women with prescriptive literature. Above all, she believed that equally educated husbands and wives could strengthen the nation, while wicked husbands could spell ruin for Vietnamese women. She wished to mitigate the potential for ruin through various literary strategies serving as gentle direction to her readers. These included the dialogue between her characters, comparative plot lines, and characters who experienced hardship and success in equal measure.

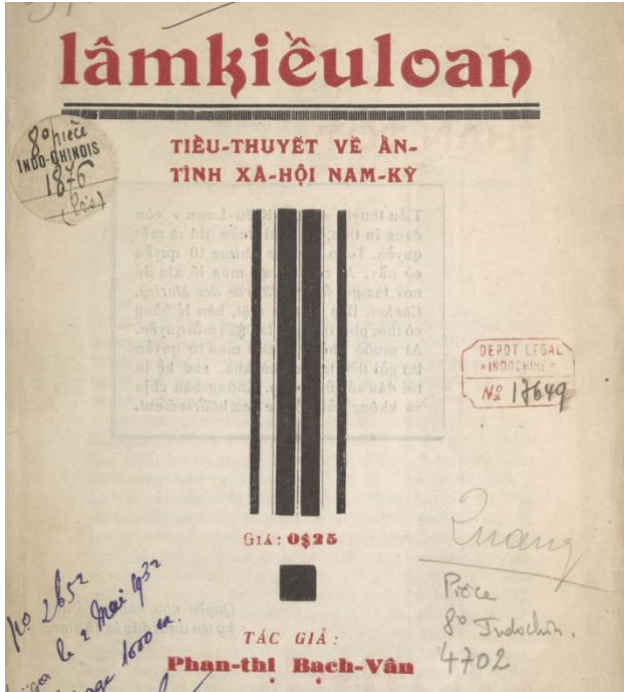


Figure 2.1

Cover of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Lâm Kiều Loan*, published in 1932. Notice the simple design, sleek lines, and use of the phrase “a novel about secret matters in southern society.”

Figure 2.2

Cover of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's (under the pen name of Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa) novel, *Nữ anh tài*, published in 1928. This was a much more typical cover for a novel at the time, featuring three women reading, dressed in modest clothing.





Figure 2.3

Cover of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Tinh thần Phụ nữ*, within which the story *Kiếp hoa thắm sử* appeared from 1928-1929.

BACKGROUND: the development of Vietnamese novels

Phan Thị Bạch Vân was part of an emergent literary canon that developed out of Sino-Vietnamese tradition and the more recent consumption of French novels, and her work shows meaningful engagement with a diverse selection of literature. Bạch Vân's novels are genealogically tied to China, Vietnam, and France, and feature aspects of contemporary culture such as prominent news stories gracing the headlines of the day. Therefore, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's literary contributions were intimately tied to the period in which she wrote them and profoundly and uniquely Vietnamese. Bạch Vân wrote with many disparate influences that were meant to influence her readership in different ways: learning about women's involvement in Enlightenment salons might inspire her readers to read and write more, while reading about China's Warring States period might communicate the importance of community loyalty. While her works feature multiple cultures and time periods as inspiration, Bạch Vân's purpose and goal in writing novels was quite simple: she wished to convey appropriate morality and behavior for women in the context of a changing cultural landscape, all while entertaining her female audience enough to sell copies of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* and succeed as an author. This is what made her writing intrinsically Vietnamese; Bạch Vân synthesized many literary influences and canons for the promotion of her world view and the benefit of Vietnamese women living in the early-twentieth century. As we will see, she adapted and changed certain aspects of other literary traditions in order to suit her own preference and the goals for which she strove. This is consistent with a Vietnamese past where authors derived influence from Chinese literature, encouraged cultural borrowing from abroad, and sought to keep their leaders aware of international events.¹¹⁴ Bạch Vân made this tradition accessible to women.

¹¹⁴ As described in the Introduction of this thesis.

Vietnamese novels in the early-twentieth century were heavily inspired by their Chinese counterparts. In China during the late Qing, authors used novels to reach and target a female audience, “spurred by the sense that women were crucial to China’s entry into modernity.”¹¹⁵ Earlier in the Qing dynasty, women were the targets of fiction called “scholar-beauty stories,” which typically featured a love story between a beautiful young woman and a handsome scholar. In these stories, the lovers may have had at least one parent die before the story, and the woman had a female servant who sent messages between her mistress and the scholar. The plot often featured a scene in which the lovers met and experienced love at first sight before they subsequently faced obstacles that prevented them from being together. The plot typically resolved with the scholar passing his examinations and the two marrying. Ellen Widmer writes that the Chinese author Zhan Kai (1860-1910) wrote “new novels” that took modern young women as their subjects. Published in 1907, these novels dealt with similar themes and ideas. The first novel, titled *Zhongguo xin nühao* (China’s new heroine, sixteen chapters) outlines the belief that if women are not allowed to be outdoors¹¹⁶ and receive an education, it will harm the nation and humiliate China.¹¹⁷ The novel was set in a future in which China has a constitution, and the female characters are able to travel and study abroad in places like Japan. In the second novel, titled *Nüzi quan*, was also set in a future time period (1940), when China has evolved into a constitutional monarchy. Like *Zhongguo xin nühao*, *Nüzi quan* shows Zhan Kai’s support for female education, as well as women’s ability to freely choose their marriage partners and travel

¹¹⁵ Ellen Widmer, “Inflecting Gender: Zhan Kai/Siqi Zhai’s ‘New Novels’ and Courtesan Sketches” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 6 (2004): p. 137.

¹¹⁶ Traditionally, upper-class women and women considered “respectable” in Chinese culture (“since at least the Han”) lived in a home’s inner quarters and were kept separate from men and strangers. An authority on this is Patricia Buckley Ebrey, in either *Women and the Family in Chinese History* or *The inner quarters: marriage and the lives of Chinese women in the Sung period*.

¹¹⁷ Ellen Widmer, “Inflecting Gender: Zhan Kai/Siqi Zhai’s ‘New Novels’ and Courtesan Sketches” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 6 (2004): p. 148.

the world.¹¹⁸ Zhan Kai's female characters are not radical (as they do not wholly reject their culture or the concept of marriage) though they encounter radicals, and they are eager to marry the intelligent men with whom they fall in love. There are a number of similarities between Zhan Kai's new novels and, in particular, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Nữ anh tài*. Zhan Kai's new novels center around a young and modern female protagonist who is intelligent and talented. Like Tú Anh, his protagonists travel and study, making connections as they go. Additionally, Zhan Kai's female characters have companionate relationships with men of high intellectual caliber. These similarities are not coincidences, but representative of the movement of literature and ideas between China and Vietnam in the early-twentieth century. These similarities are also connected to an international interest in women and the idea of the New Woman. It is certain that Phan Thị Bạch Vân read Chinese novels, and may have read Zhan Kai's new novels. The similarities between their works make it clear that Zhan Kai and Phan Thị Bạch Vân were familiar with certain works and historical figures. For example, in *Zhongguo xin nühao*, Zhan Kai makes references to "the model of Russian revolutionaries" and "activist women like Mme. Roland," whom his female protagonists hold in high regard.¹¹⁹ As we will see in the third chapter of this thesis, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's press published biographies about Madame Roland and the Russian revolutionary, Sophia Perovskaia. Whether this intertextuality was intended or accidental, it is apparent that these two authors were members of an international literary milieu. While these developments in Chinese literature come close to developments in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's works, it is also important to take a look at how the modern novel came to the Vietnamese.

The emergence of the modern novel came to Vietnamese culture gradually during the twentieth century. Early Vietnamese novelists were inspired by the Sino-Vietnamese traditions

¹¹⁸ Ellen Widmer, "Inflecting Gender," p. 152.

¹¹⁹ Ellen Widmer, "Inflecting Gender," p. 150.

of knight-errant and scholar-beauty stories, which followed pre-existing formulas and historical settings.¹²⁰ That began to change during the interwar years. Scholars have generally viewed Hoàng Ngọc Phách's *Tố Tâm* (1925) as the first example of a modern Vietnamese novel.¹²¹ Published in Hanoi, *Tố Tâm* is a romantic tragedy that describes a young woman's love for a man whose parents have arranged his marriage to another woman. After marrying someone else and experiencing extreme suffering, the young woman eventually dies of a broken heart. The novel caused a stir in Hanoi upon its release, with readers becoming entranced by Hoàng Ngọc Phách's depiction of forbidden and doomed love. There were worries that impressionable young women readers would become corrupted by depictions of courtship that existed outside the Confucian norm of an arranged marriage agreed upon to the mutual satisfaction of the families involved, often regardless of the groom's and bride's feelings towards the matter. In this conception of marriage, the union was not one of romantic love, but a joining of two separate families and rooted in *filial* love. Theoretically, sons and daughters would honor the marriages their parents arranged for them based on respect and love for their parents. Therefore, contemporaries saw *Tố Tâm*, in its depiction of characters' dissatisfaction with arranged marriages and eventual death due to heartbreak, as a challenge to Confucian morality. While the author did not intend to challenge tradition, readers and critics viewed the novel as an endorsement of romantic love, at any cost. This reaction was akin to the moral panic experienced in Europe in the late-eighteenth century, wherein opponents of the novel (or opponents of women reading novels) decried the degrading influence of literature not dedicated to appropriate moral or intellectual instruction of young women, and believed novels "to be the evil agents of

¹²⁰ Such as the typical scholar-beauty story formula described on page 10 of this chapter. John C. Schafer and Thé Uyên, "The Novel Emerges in Cochinchina," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (1993), pp.855 and 857.

¹²¹ John C. Schafer and Thé Uyên, "The Novel Emerges in Cochinchina," *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (1993), p. 868.

seduction and ruin.”¹²² To these observers, like Vietnamese observers during the twentieth century, women’s interest in novels (especially novels featuring stories of romance or courtship) challenged the marital, romantic, and sexual status-quo. Despite this panic over women’s interest in fictional romance and courtship novels, women continued to read and write novels at an ever-increasing pace in Europe. With the founding of Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s press in 1928, only three years after the publication of *Tố Tâm*, it is apparent the same thing happened once Vietnamese women were presented with the opportunity to read and write novels. This occurred regardless of the moral panic over the degradation of Confucian norms and arranged marriages.

There existed differences in the use of influence between northern and southern Vietnamese writers. John C. Schafer and Thế Uyên write that these interwar Vietnamese novelists in the North found inspiration for their own works through sentimental European novels and Chinese butterfly fiction.¹²³ Like *Tố Tâm*, novels in this genre focused on doomed love and the internal conflicts of their characters. However, there is less evidence that writers in the South (where Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán operated) found inspiration from the same sources; John Schafer and Thế Uyên argue that southern writers such as Hồ Biểu Chánh (one of the most famous southern writers, and from the same province as Phan Thị Bạch Vân) were, at first, most influenced by a southern intertextuality rather than inspiration from French and Chinese writers. Early southern writers (such as Nguyễn Trọng Quản, Trương Duy Toàn, and Trần Chánh Chiếu) had works which featured local settings and characters, as well as themes of revenge, murder, and greed which diverged from the more genteel scholar-beauty stories. Aspects such as these

¹²² Katherine Binhammer, “The Persistence of Reading: Governing Female Novel-Reading in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 27 (2003): p. 2.

¹²³ Called “mandarin duck and butterfly fiction,” for the romantic symbols of lovers, these stories were popular in China 1910-30 and followed a general formula of 1: extraordinary inborn gifts, 2: supersensitivity, 3) falling in love, 4: cruel fate, 5: worry and disease, and 6: destruction. From John C. Schafer and Thế Uyên, “The Novel Emerges in Cochinchina,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (1993), p. 869.

represent experimentation and deviation from the traditional norms of historical settings.¹²⁴

There was a mix of influence for southern writers that showed deviance from literary norms – they did not follow the same trajectory as northerners, but developed novelistic forms of writing concurrently, if not earlier.

Some works that Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán published followed earlier traditional and formulaic trajectories akin to scholar-beauty stories (such as *Băng tâm Ngọc chất* by Huỳnh Anh Thị), with a meeting of lovers, separation, and a happy reunion. Phan Thị Bạch Vân had works which either twisted these formulas or did away with them altogether. For example, Bạch Vân's *Nữ anh tài* (1928) could be read as a scholar-beauty or knight-errant story with the novel's heroine, Tú Anh, as the scholar of renowned talent, or the knight who rights wrongs in the countryside and spurns material rewards. Additionally, Như-hoa in *Kiếp hoa thắm sử* bears similarities to stories of errant knights who rebelled against authority and aided the downtrodden in the countryside. Yet Kiều Loan of *Lâm Kiều Loan*, while unfinished, is a heroine of intelligence but no particularly special talent. The novel was meant to be a grittier depiction of the aspects of life not typically discussed in polite circles: unfaithfulness, insanity, and ruined marriages. This novel bears notable similarities to the works of the later Tự Lực văn đoàn, or Self-Reliant Literary Group, and is a departure from Bạch Vân's earlier writings.

Further into the 1930s, Vietnamese literature expanded to include both novels that purposefully challenged Confucian tradition and reportage that sought to depict the ills of colonial society. Famous for this, the Self-Reliant Literary Group advocated individualism and found inspiration in Western ideals and art. Members of the Group insisted “on realistic portrayal of everyday life” and held “unwavering interest in all aspects of Vietnamese society”; one of the

¹²⁴ John C. Schafer and Thế Uyên, “The Novel Emerges in Cochinchina,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52 (1993), pp. 870-1.

Group's stated agendas was to produce works that reflected on society, with the purpose of improving it.¹²⁵ The most famous member of the Group, Nhất Linh, wrote *Đoạn tuyệt* (1934) about a young woman named Loan who marries a man she does not love out of a sense of filial piety. After enduring an abusive mother-in-law and stifling familial dynamics, Loan accidentally murders her husband and is put on trial. Throughout the novel, Nhất Linh portrays Loan as an intelligent, educated, and level-headed woman who is a victim of circumstance and outdated tradition. Loan had a sweetheart before her marriage, whom she originally wished to marry, named Dũng. Dũng is an independent thinker and educated revolutionary who represents the antithesis of adherence to Confucian dictates; by the end of the novel, Loan and Dũng are able to get in touch with one another and arrange to reunite. This couple is a match of equals, in a similar fashion to the modern couple in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Nữ anh tài*. Though by no means did Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán change the Vietnamese literary scene in the same way as the Self-Reliant Literary group, Phan Thị Bạch Vân dealt with many similar themes and advocated similar reconsideration of Confucian norms and principles.

In the following sections I will discuss and analyze Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Lâm Kiều Loan* and *Kiếp hoa thắm sử*; both works portrayed women facing tragedy at the hands of men. They reveal Bạch Vân's belief that women must self-strengthen against the potential for harm by wicked men. Additionally, these novels uncover the complex expectations of women and the precariousness of their standing in the wider Vietnamese community. Next, I will analyze *Nữ anh tài* and how the relationship between Tú Anh and Hồng Minh is Phan Thị Bạch Vân's depiction of a romantic ideal; this couple represented the modern and educated couple which writers debating the Woman's Question thought could help strengthen the nation. I will compare

¹²⁵ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength: The Self-Reliant Literary Group and Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Late Colonial Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021), pp. 4 and 24.

some aspects of *Nữ anh tài* to Nhất Linh's *Đoạn tuyệt* and pinpoint where Phan Thị Bạch Vân, as a woman writer interested in women's independence and wellbeing, diverged from famous male authors of the era.

Faithless husbands & the wives who love them

Kiều Loan begins *Lâm Kiều Loan* with a stated desire to impart wisdom on her readers through her own example. Using the singular pronoun of *tôi*, she emphasizes that she is older and would like her younger readers to benefit from her narration. She describes her early life in which her father died young and her mother moved them south to be closer to family. Kiều Loan was able to attend a school for girls in Saigon until her mother brought up the prospect of marriage. Kiều Loan attempted to stall marriage as long as she could, hoping she could study further and work on her writing. But her mother became insistent.

As Kiều Loan describes it, one day, her mother claimed that she would die soon, and would like to have the peace of mind that Kiều Loan is married and taken care of. Kiều Loan, internally, grieved for her “female body. [She had] the same eyes, ears, head, and mind as men,” yet men were allowed the independence to study while she must resign herself to her fate as a woman.¹²⁶ So began Kiều Loan's life trajectory wherein she married out of a sense of filial piety and concern for her mother's peace of mind. Though she stated that the two debated and argued over Kiều Loan's potential marriage for days, Kiều Loan eventually conceded and agreed to marry out of love for her mother and resignation at the life path that had been set out for her. But the marriage, happy in its beginning, deteriorated as her husband became distant and Kiều Loan lost her mother and newborn baby within a short span of time. Eventually, her husband began an

¹²⁶ “Mình cũng mắt cũng tai cũng đầu cũng óc như Nam-nhì” from Phan thị Bạch Vân, *Lâm Kiều Loan* (Saigon, Imprimerie Tran-trong-Canh, 1932), p.2

affair with Kiều Loan's neighbor, whom she had considered her best friend and comfort while she grieved her losses.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân narrates two outcomes of unhappy marriages and philandering husbands in *Lâm Kiều Loan*, one of tentative triumph and one of complete hopelessness. The story's introduction to Kiều Loan depicted her husband leaving her for her close friend, Kim Hoa. Kiều Loan was devastated by this betrayal, and felt intense sadness over her ruined marriage. Yet she eventually left her husband's home and stayed with relatives, contacting an old friend to help her secure a teaching job. There is emphasis on Kiều Loan working towards financial independence, through her job and refusing the money her husband offered her. She began teaching with other young women and felt accomplished, commencing on a road to happiness and personal fulfillment. This is an example of a woman beset by sadness and misfortune but who was ultimately able to rise above her circumstances through her emotional strength, resilience, and education.

Yet Kiều Loan is not immediately happy and her trajectory is not depicted unrealistically; Phan Thị Bạch Vân gave her protagonist time to grieve. Neither was her protagonist solely depressed during her emotional ordeal; Kiều Loan's emotions shifted to anger once she found a love letter in her husband's pocket. When her husband left their home for three days after acting rudely towards her, Kiều Loan was upset and consumed by thoughts of her husband and her deteriorating relationship with him. Her young domestic servant implored her to step outside and into the garden; Kiều Loan did so and began to compose poetry. This led to a positive shift in which Kiều Loan woke up early, dressed herself, thought about teaching lessons to her servant, Hạnh, and made sure her home was well-kept. Kiều Loan is portrayed as the best outcome a woman could hope for if she must experience hardship and misery at the hands of her husband.

She is emotional and willing to provide love to a family of her own (thus still endorsing the traditional family) while being self-sufficient enough to endure pain and upheaval without going mad.

In stark contrast, Phan Thị Bạch Vân uses the same situation to explore what could happen if a woman was unable to emotionally deal with an unfaithful husband. After Kiều Loan became a teacher, she and her friend Ngọc Anh met Bích Liên, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Bích Liên's older sister, Bích Ngọc, became suicidal and adopted the persona of a fictional princess. At this point in the story, Bích Liên's sister resides in a mental institution, which later distressed all the women who visited her there. Bích Liên mentioned that her sister was young when she married; this reinforces Kiều Loan's (and Phan Thị Bạch Vân's) stated purpose early in the novel that younger readers learn from her story. There is attention paid to the naïveté which young women may experience when selecting a husband early in their lives. In other works, too, Phan Thị Bạch Vân writes that some women were young when they married and did not (along with their families) carefully or wisely choose their husbands.

Bích Ngọc represents what could have happened to Kiều Loan if she did not have the mental and emotional strength to grapple with her husband's betrayal. Bích Ngọc was driven insane by her husband's selfishness, and Kiều Loan bitterly ruminates over how society teaches women resignation and their need to resign themselves to however their husbands may act or treat them. Kiều Loan had the mental fortitude and will to continue on in her life after experiencing her mother's death, child's death, and betrayal of her husband in a short span of time. In the face of her circumstances, she was able to stay with family and begin supporting herself with a career in teaching. Bích Ngọc was not able to do this. Kiều Loan's education contributed to her ability to maintain a livelihood and achieve financial independence. While she

had wished to go further in her studies, she was not as young as Bích Ngọc and had the strength, both internal and from external forces, to weather the storm of unpleasant life circumstances.

Another character who represents what could happen to helpless women at the mercy of wicked men is Cô Lang from *Kiếp hoa thâm sử*, written by Phan Thị Bạch Vân in 1928 and 1929 under the pseudonym Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa. *Kiếp hoa thâm sử* follows the protagonist Như-hoa after the death of her widowed father, who had recently married a greedy and unkind woman. Như-hoa's sister and half-brother, Như-ngọc and Tiểu-minh, soon die of a mysterious illness, which is implied to be the effects of poison by her stepmother. Tiểu-minh had consumed the poison meant for Như-ngọc, and Như-hoa is soon blamed for both of their deaths. Realizing that she will suffer a dreadful fate if she does not leave, Như-hoa escapes her stepmother and leaves to live freely on her own. She meets with an old friend, Cô Lang, and soon runs into more tragedy.

Cô Lang is an old school friend of Như-hoa. When Như-hoa left the home of her stepmother after the death of her siblings, Lang took Như-hoa into her home for the night. While Lang had married a man whom Như-hoa thought was a good and kind, Lang quickly reveals to Như-hoa that her husband has become negligent and abusive, leaving Lang and her baby alone while he spends the family's money and returns to beat her. Lang replies to Như-hoa's incredulity with bitter commentary over the ways of men; they treat women well until they marry them, and then their wives become slaves and must pay for their husbands' gambling habits and violence.¹²⁷ Như-hoa pities Lang and ruminates over the current state of marriage and relations between husbands and wives.

¹²⁷ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sử" in *Tinh thần phụ nữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thơ quán, 1928-1929), p. 138.

Cô Lang attempts to escape her husband by leaving their home to live with her mother, but her husband sends a letter begging Lang to meet him at a hotel to discuss their marriage and arrange an end to their separation. When she arrives at the hotel, she is met with a man she does not know, dressed in Western clothing. The man identifies himself as a school friend of her husband's, but Lang had walked into a trap. Her husband made it appear she was meeting a lover at a local hotel for a tryst; his school friend keeps her in the hotel room long enough for a French judge and his interpreter to arrive at the hotel and see Lang alone with the other man.¹²⁸ At the shock of this betrayal, Cô Lang eventually goes insane. After a brief stay in a hospital, she is taken home but has lost all sense; she laughs and cries at random things and tears at her own clothes.¹²⁹ Cô Lang's husband took advantage of her willingness to reconcile and betrayed that kindness with a plot to discredit and arrest her.

Lang's husband takes both her sanity and good reputation away, leaving her with nothing and reducing her to a pitiful story and helpless individual, unable to take care of herself or live a full life. In the room with her purported lover, the judge, and the interpreter, her husband asks Lang how she could bring such shame upon him [*làm nhục cho ta*] and Lang becomes so shocked and afraid that she loses her ability to speak. The only words she is able to form are a respectful yes to the judge's interpreter and a shout of *My God!* when the understanding of her situation dawns. As the interpreter asks if she and the strange man are lovers, loud noises of protest are all she can muster, and her actions only make her appear crazy to the men before her. The scene is emotional and intense; Lang clutches to her husband's shirt in desperation and he pushes her off, throwing her to the floor. This is how the passage ends, with Lang powerless and on the ground in front of a group of upright men. After she is admitted to the hospital, people say

¹²⁸ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sử" p. 250.

¹²⁹ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sử" p. 252.

that she was so ashamed [*xấu hổ*] of herself and being caught in her crime that she lost consciousness. Her husband angrily asks how she could bring such shame upon him, but the true shame and consequences rest upon Lang.

Lang does not go insane simply due to her husband's treachery. Rather, she loses her sanity as a result of both his treachery and her loss of good social standing. Without a husband to support or love her, without her good reputation, Lang is left alone in a room with men who are either actively plotting her downfall or abetting it. Had she kept her sanity and been arrested for her unfaithfulness, she would have been *déclassé*, a degraded woman of low social standing. Yet she loses her mind and becomes someone to be pitied. Như-hoa reflects on this pity and extends it to Lang's son, who must listen to his mother's ramblings and is being cared for by his elderly grandmother.¹³⁰ She notes that, at first, some sympathetic acquaintances visited Lang and came to her mother's house. Yet this did not last very long. Lang is left a social outcast and unable to take care of herself or her son. Once her mother passes away, Lang is truly alone and at the mercy of family friends willing to pay for her stay in an asylum. The true tragedy is that Lang, as a result of a wicked husband, lost her meaningful ties and connection to her community vis-à-vis her reputation. Bạch Vân paints this as especially tragic as Lang was a kind woman who wished to repair her relationship with her husband and do what was best for her son.

Lang is a woman willing to love and care for a husband who betrays her out of spite; more than that, he damaged her reputation through his indiscretions and further attempted to discredit her through fabricated infidelity. When his last attempt to damage her reputation succeeds, this proves too much for Lang. Her descent into insanity is a demonstration of the limits women possess and the lack of empathy unfaithful men hold towards their wives. The

¹³⁰ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sử" in *Tinh thần phụ nữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thơ quán, 1928-1929), p. 252.

situation is also a demonstration of the importance Phan Thị Bạch Vân places on outward appearance and social relationships. This theme of betrayal, especially from intimate partners and husbands, is common in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's works. Yet this theme did not simply stem from women fearing their positions as wives and mothers during a time of flux and change; they feared for their place in their own communities and in their cultures.

Ben Tran argues that Vietnamese men used narrative depictions of female prostitutes to engage with fear over their position in modernity: they defined their own identities, anxieties, and access to modernity by writing about sex workers who experienced frequent encounters with European men.¹³¹ To these male writers, sex workers' dealings with European men provided them with certain benefits that Vietnamese men could not access. In contrast to this fear over not having access to Europeanization or modernity, Phan Thị Bạch Vân depicts a feminine fear that men will leave or harm their wives, only for their wives to be left with nothing, not even their sanity. Within this fear also lies anxiety over a woman's good reputation and social status; the ultimate dilemma in Lang's trap was the destruction of her reputation as a faithful wife. Without a husband and the financial, emotional, or physical support he represented and, finally, without even her good reputation, Lang went insane.

Vietnamese women who wished to live and participate within mainstream society at this time had a vested interest in protecting their reputation. In order to stay in-line with Confucian orthodoxy, women strove to become loyal wives and mothers. Women who were not tied to a husband or father, or lived separately from male family members, would not enjoy good reputations or be seen as having good morals. A useful category of *déclassé* women to examine at this time were actresses and sex workers. Though acting and sex work often did overlap, in China,

¹³¹ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin*, p. 40.

Chinese actresses were “despised by much of the community” and experienced a “popular identification...with prostitutes.”¹³² Actresses were not seen as good women and their association with sex work made their reputations suffer further. These women were not tied to a home or family and did not act faithfully and loyally to any husband, barring their classification as good women. In *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, Cô Lang’s husband accuses her of infidelity; therefore, she is accused of disobeying one of the most important moral standards in Confucian orthodoxy. Lang’s fall from grace became all the more devastating because she was a faithful wife and mother, and only left her marital home to stay with her own family. Additionally, Vietnamese women were not simply in charge of their own reputations; they had to shield and protect their husbands’ reputations as well, for the good of the family.¹³³ Lang’s husband is known to be a bad father and family man around their village; people commented on his philandering ways and discussed their pity for Lang when speaking to Như-hoa. To the village and wider community, Lang’s fall from grace became complete when she was accused of adultery.

When Lang is at her mother’s home, she misses her husband and thinks about how badly she wants him to love and take care of her, and to show remorse for his prior behavior. Amidst her resentment and hurt, Lang ultimately wishes to experience romantic love and have a happy life and family. Lang is an example of a woman loyal to her husband without reservation, exemplifying ideal Confucian morality in the face of betrayal and hurt. Louise Edwards discusses the prominence of unfailingly loyal women in fiction during China’s imperial era.

¹³² Weikun Cheng, “The Challenge of the Actresses: Female Performers and Cultural Alternatives in Early Twentieth Century Beijing and Tianjin” *Modern China* 22 (1996): pp. 204-205.

¹³³ David Marr, “The 1920s Women’s Rights Debates in Vietnam,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (1976), p. 374. He bases the responsibility of women over their husbands and families on his reading of “Gia huấn ca” by Nguyễn Trãi.

Edwards argues that these women held a romantic appeal owing to their vulnerability and helplessness in the face of the whims of their husbands and fathers. Female suffering was an important part of traditional Confucian thinking; a woman's virtue became tied to her fidelity to the men in her life.¹³⁴ In Confucian orthodoxy, women should not find other husbands or lovers after being discarded by their first husbands; rather, they should suffer indefinitely. In *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, Lang is a suffering woman, but her example is not one to be followed. It is Như-hoa who watches her close friend experience hardship and it is Như-hoa who remains unmarried by the novel's end. Yet while Như-hoa does not marry, she adopts two children. This aspect of the narrative demonstrates a new emphasis on motherhood and its connection to self-sufficiency.

Within this fear of loss at the hands of wicked men, Phan Thị Bạch Vân places importance upon women staying strong in order to raise children; she emphasizes compassion in the face of tragedy and loss. When Cô Lang stays with her mother after leaving her husband, her mother calls to her and tells her that the love between a mother and child is the only true love one has; therefore, she needs to take care of herself for the sake of her son.¹³⁵ Her sadness could overwhelm her and contribute to poor health; without her health she could not raise her son well. Once Lang has lost her mind and lives in an asylum, and after Lang's mother passes away, Như-hoa raises Lang's son Đức as her own. Như-hoa, at times, gives into the temptation to reflect sadly on her own life trajectory; she often thinks about how her mother, father, sister, childhood friend, and adopted mother have died, leaving her alone. Yet she stops to think about the fate of Đức, motherless and a young child, and ceases her self-pity. At the end of the story, Như-hoa

¹³⁴ Louise Edwards, *Citizens of Beauty: Drawing Democratic Dreams in Republican China* (University of Washington Press, 2020) p. 134.

¹³⁵ “Con buồn râu làm chi vô ích. Con phải biết ở đời này mọi tình thương yêu đều do nơi đồng tiền mà ra cả, chỉ có cái tình mẹ con là thân thiết chơn thật mà thôi. Con đã có con rồi thì cái lòng mẹ thương con thể nào con cũng dư hiểu, vậy con nên vì cái lòng thương ấy mà bảo-trọng tấm thân, đừng có râu buồn lắm, rủi sanh bệnh hoạn thì cũng chỉ khổ cho mẹ chớ nào ai vô đó mà chịu.”

fakes her death and leaves for Mỹ Tho, where she works as a seamstress in order to support herself, Đức, and a girl named Lành. Throughout the story, Như-hoa suffers profound loss. Without family or much money, she finds purpose in living for her adopted children. She is able to find this strength through her intelligence, resourcefulness, and the compassion she feels for others.

A new form of motherhood was becoming more important during the late-colonial era; writers began to view women as the potential guides of young citizens through what was called scientific motherhood. Members of the Vietnamese print community “highlighted the link between scientific motherhood and a nationalist agenda, calling for mothers to...prevent the potential degeneration of the Vietnamese race.”¹³⁶ A cult of domesticity emerged which communicated to women that care for children was a noble endeavor. Both Lang and Như-hoa receive external and internal cues reminding them of the importance of raising healthy and happy children; the children’s well-being is placed above their own. Further, Lang’s son Đức gives her an (albeit brief) reason to live. Như-hoa’s adoption of Đức later gives her a reason to seek out a stable and comfortable life as well. An emphasis on motherhood and care for children was a method through which the Vietnamese could self-strengthen and morally ground Vietnamese women in a time of flux and change. Phan Thị Bạch Vân emphasized childrearing, rather than marriage; this speaks to the complexities of relationships between men and women at this time. In this novel, Bạch Vân warns young women about husbands’ potential for harm; in other novels, she considers the prospect of happy marriages and relationships between equals. Children, in Bạch Vân’s literary canon, do not possess the same capacity to harm their mothers.

¹³⁶ Thuy Linh Nguyen, *Childbirth, Maternity, and Medical Pluralism in French Colonial Vietnam, 1880-1945* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016), p. 144.

Earlier in *Kiếp hoa thâm sử*, Cô Lang talks to Như-hoa and discusses the issue with marriage. According to her, women should choose their husbands wisely, and be educated. But when they are educated, they are, at times, seen as spinsters and relegated to the home. She contemplates how Vietnamese women can find a man with a similar outlook. To Lang and Như-hoa, the best outcome is a marriage of equally educated husbands and wives, who know one another's heart and mind.¹³⁷ The major issues, according to Phan Thị Bạch Vân's characters, are that women are not educated enough and not respected when they *are* educated. Her characters also believe they cannot find husbands who are kind and equally educated.

Lang had married young, and neither she nor her parents had properly vetted her husband before their engagement; Như-hoa thinks about how many of her female classmates had married and become unhappy. She also thinks bitterly about how her own father had told her to study only until she would marry and manage a household of her own; she feels as though women should not only count on men and she would like to hold a career that would raise the position of her fellow women and promote their independence (*nung cao cái địa-vị Nữ-lưu*).¹³⁸ Yet she struggles with her own response to her father's demands and the fact that most people do not consider elevating women's status in wider society. Through Như-hoa's ruminations over Cô Lang and women as a whole, Phan Thị Bạch Vân illustrated her own goals for Vietnamese women and their abilities to become independent and well-educated, with partners of similar caliber. In other novels, Phan Thị Bạch Vân promotes the educated young couple, or the

¹³⁷ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sử" in *Tinh thần phụ nữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư quán, 1928-1929), p. 177.

¹³⁸ "...khi trước cha mình làm đến Tri phủ mà còn bảo mình ăn học cầm chừng, rồi chẳng bao lâu lại bắt về nhà mà lo việc tề-gia đặng đợi buổi lấy chồng thôi, thì kẻ dân gian tâm thường còn ai có cái ý-kiến cho con mình đi học cho thông nghĩa lý, cho biết chức nghiệp, để sau này nung cao cái địa-vị Nữ-lưu..." from Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sử" in *Tinh thần phụ nữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư quán, 1928-1929), p. 183

companionate marriage, as a way in which women could embody their elevated status and remain in the traditional family.

Vietnamese women were not the only people who wrote about cheating spouses during the interwar years. The famous author, Nguyễn Công Hoan, wrote a short story in 1931 about a wife named Tuyết Anh who moves to France to study and leaves her husband for another man. *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây* is told in vignettes, in letters from the wife (*mợ*) to her husband in Haiphong. She peppers her letters with pet names and affirmations of love, telling the unnamed husband how desperately she misses him and their young son. We never hear from her husband, or see his letters back to her, but we *are* privy to the devastation he must feel when his wife confesses her infidelity. In a short, final letter, Tuyết Anh states that she will be living with a doctor who had just finished his own studies. She calls herself ungrateful (*bạc bẽo*) and apologizes for not being able to care for her husband. In prior letters, she had worried over his lungs, as he may have been diagnosed with tuberculosis. She had also promised to come back to Haiphong to help her husband with his business; he is now solely responsible for his business, a young child, and the cost of his wife's studies. The story is a damning portrait of a woman who professed her love for her family yet abandoned them with little more than a half-page letter. There is also irony in the letters where Tuyết Anh, more than once, told her husband not to mess around or be unfaithful (*đừng chơi bời gì cả*). In the end, Tuyết Anh has traveled to France, an expensive endeavor, and herself become unfaithful. With a baccalaureate degree and a lover who works as a doctor, Tuyết Anh has risen in status at the expense of her husband and son in Tonkin.

Briefly outlined earlier in this chapter, Ben Tran writes about male authors' use of reportage (*phóng sự*) in order to document "his own culture in order to define himself through an

other”; in this case, the “other” is “the indigenous female sex worker.”¹³⁹ According to Tran, these authors wrote about women in order to contend with their own masculinity and sexuality in the upheaval of the colonial moment. Female sex workers, in addition to Vietnamese women more broadly, were able to convey a sense of cosmopolitanism from relationships with European men. This gave them a form of power, in which they possessed an upward mobility determined by sex; to male authors wishing to express their own positions in the colonial encounter, women’s upward mobility vis-à-vis sex was a mobility they were not allowed. These women were “modernization’s starting point,” and their Europeanization came directly from their sexual relationships with European men.¹⁴⁰ Generally, the male authors writing *phóng sự* were able to view this starting point of modernization, but excluded from the practice.

While Tuyết Anh in *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây* is not a sex worker, she does experience upward mobility as a result of her infidelity to her husband. The story is an expression of anxiety surrounding what would happen were Vietnamese women to leave the oversight of their husbands, families, and community. Tuyết Anh embarks on a more exciting and liberated life in the South while her husband wastes away from consumption in the North. Importantly, her new lover is a school friend (*bạn học*) who had recently passed his exams and received his medical degree. He is a peer – a person with whom Tuyết Anh had studied and experienced France. This is an experience, and a distinction, to which Tuyết Anh’s husband was not privy. Implied within one’s completed degree from a European institution was a higher status; further implied was an aspect of Europeanization. Tuyết Anh and her lover are Europeanized and have ties to modernity which her abandoned husband cannot possess himself. While *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây* is not

¹³⁹ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 24.

¹⁴⁰ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin*, p. 40.

reportage, and thus not an expression of reality, it represents a real censure of Vietnamese women and their perceived potential for duplicity. It is also representative of a woman's perceived ability to increase her social rank with a Western education and a successful lover. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Nguyễn Công Hoan engage with themes of infidelity and a person's social status, yet their fears are oppositional: Bạch Vân writes that women fear loss of their social status through infidelity, while Nguyễn Công Hoan writes that women may *increase* their social rank through infidelity.

The frequent theme of wicked men in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's works was a reciprocal manifestation of the anxiety over familial life and romantic relationships which men were also experiencing in this historical moment. Bạch Vân sought to ameliorate what she saw as feminine vulnerability through the teaching of practical skills, literacy, business acumen, and caution in the realm of love. She did show readers the liberatory and positive potential of love, mainly through the depiction of Tú Anh and Hồng Minh in *Nữ anh tài*. These two were a match of equals; though they experienced hardship, they were the manifestation of a husband and wife who knew one another's heart and mind. Their relationship was one which Phan Thị Bạch Vân sought to promote to her readership.

The Match of Equals & Companionate Love

Phan Thị Bạch Vân presented readers with the ideal, modern Vietnamese couple in her novel *Nữ anh tài*. Much happier and lighthearted than her other novels, *Nữ anh tài* is a romantic adventure story that follows Tú Anh as she confronts obstacles using her intellect and bravery. The first, overarching conflict is her wish to marry a man named Hồng Minh, who becomes engaged to another woman. She must fend off her own rival suitors and, once her father is accused of murder, travel to places as far off as China in order to clear his name. The novel ends

happily, with Tú Anh and Hồng Minh married. They are an educated union of equals, and they make friends with other educated couples concerned with civic duty and gender equality.

In the novel, Hồng Minh is Tú Anh's childhood sweetheart and their families had planned their engagement for years. At the end of the story, Hồng Minh has graduated with a degree in engineering from a school in France,¹⁴¹ and Tú Anh already oversees a school for young girls and belongs to a women's association. Both are committed to helping the Vietnamese people with their education and expertise, creating a model for citizen-couples through their example.¹⁴² This is a fictional depiction of the nationalism that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her milieu of educated women wished to promote; though they did not put their fictionalized ideas into practice, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels put these ideas onto the page in order to broaden readers' minds and demonstrate what could be possible with the right attitudes and thoughtful action.

Louise Edwards argues that the One Hundred Beauties genre in Republican China promoted "small families" and monogamy in an attempt to create a "democratic, Republican consciousness" for readers.¹⁴³ For promoters of the small family, husbands and wives would foster a partnership in which both parties helped build the modern Chinese nation. Illustrations for One Hundred Beauties collections show the nuclear family as connected to the emerging nation; further into the 1920s and 30s, illustrators would place more emphasis on Chinese women's roles as housewives and hygienic mothers. Writers and contributors for Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán focused on the importance of women's motherly and familial roles as well, and Phan Thị

¹⁴¹ "chàng tốt nghiệp kỹ-sư trở về" Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), cuốn thứ sáu, p. 24.

¹⁴² Tú Anh tells Hồng Minh at one point, "khi đi du học về, sẽ đem cả tài liệu ra má giúp ích cho quê hương, nở mặt với dân đoàn Nam Việt." Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ nhứt, p. 25.

¹⁴³ Louise Edwards, *Citizens of Beauty: Drawing Democratic Dreams in Republican China* (University of Washington Press, 2020) p. 111.

Bạch Vân emphasized the importance of motherhood in *Kiếp hoa thám sử*. Yet *Nữ anh tài* takes a step back and features the young unmarried woman as the foundation for an ideal and modern nuclear family. Through her own education and choice of an equally educated partner, girls like Tú Anh would advance the potential Vietnamese nation.

A useful comparison to make is the nationalism which the Self-Reliant Literary Group promoted during the interwar years. I engaged with some similarities between Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the leaders of the Self-Reliant Literary Group in the introduction of this thesis, but a discussion about their national vision, in concert with Phan Thị Bạch Vân's national vision, merits discussion. Martina Nguyen describes this nationalism as “cosmopolitan nationalism” which the Group hoped “would facilitate Vietnam's entrance into the wider international community.”¹⁴⁴ They were committed to a selective appropriation of ideals, some borrowed from other nations, and some from within traditional Vietnamese cultural institutions. To these writers and intellectuals, the best outcome for the Vietnamese would be as an independent nation, eventually, yet with strong ties to the global community. They did not advocate immediate independence from France, and they believed the Vietnamese should help fellow Vietnamese; this was an ideology of self-reliance with attention paid towards what they deemed the best aspects of other cultures.

The Self-Reliant Literary Group put their ideals into action with the League of Light, a project that focused on reducing the presence of unsanitary housing in urban and rural Tonkin. This project revealed the Group's desire to host a “pluralistic public space for civic collective action.”¹⁴⁵ In addition to contributing to the common good, they wanted to “create for urban

¹⁴⁴ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength*, p. 180.

elites a modern sense of community, civic duty, and social responsibility.”¹⁴⁶ This would further Vietnamese autonomy and place their culture in a wider progressive movement, like others in the same global milieu. Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote with similar sentiments in her novels; this is especially apparent in *Nữ anh tài*, where each woman given narrative attention expresses some commitment to the greater good, or fostering a community of like-minded women. Some of her characters compare the Vietnamese to those in other cultures, and they voice their desire to bring the Vietnamese into a global community of progressive-minded individuals who aid the impoverished and uneducated in their countries. This attitude represented the best future for the Vietnamese people; women who held these sentiments were to be admired and emulated. Her female characters who sought to contribute to civil society became a beacon within a fictional Vietnam, and readers would see their actions as idealized but hopefully feasible in the near future.

Towards the novel’s beginning, Tú Anh meets with Hồng Minh and his best friend, Bá Chơn, and impresses Bá Chơn with her commitment to helping improve society. She and Hồng Minh are equally interested in helping others; when Hồng Minh wanted to study in France so that he could fulfill his duty (*nghĩa vụ*) to society (*xã hội*), he ran out of money and had to borrow funds from Bá Chơn, who is studying with him. Tú Anh heard about this and immediately sent money to Bá Chơn discreetly, with instruction not to tell Hồng Minh that she was his benefactor. She does this so that Hồng Minh would not have to worry about money and work a job while studying, so that he could focus on receiving a degree and coming home to begin his work improving society. Together, they use their wealth and education to look outwardly and build

¹⁴⁶ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength*, p. 180.

their surroundings according to their worldview. Their worldview centered around a Vietnamese population of educated, self-sufficient, and enterprising men and women.

To make these ideals more feasible in the novel, Phan Thị Bạch Vân places emphasis on economic self-sufficiency and personal enterprise. Tú Anh uses her entrepreneurial spirit to open a school for young girls that teaches them reading, writing, and practical skills such as silk weaving, which also makes her a profit. Through this endeavor she becomes a successful businesswoman. Her work also focuses on making poor young women and girls into proper wives, mothers, and examples for future generations.¹⁴⁷ This earns her fame and respect throughout the country; she attracts potential shareholders (*cổ đông*) with the beautiful silk items she produces. Her major goal is to aid young women in establishing a form of independence through vocational training and literacy, but Phan Thị Bạch Vân places a heavy emphasis on Tú Anh's renown within the Vietnamese milieu. This, to Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Tú Anh, has the effect of boosting general Vietnamese renown as well.

At this time there were similar calls to boost the Vietnamese potential for renown, especially within a wider global context. *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (Women's News), published in Saigon, highlighted successful women in other countries and wrote of Vietnamese women's need to emulate their prominence and garner recognition for the Vietnamese people. In the late-1920s and early 1930s, this emphasis on mirroring famous international women became a feminine archetype promoted in print. There was a desire to foster relationships of equal footing with women in other areas of the globe; concurrently, Phan Thị Bạch Vân promoted civil society as a pluralistic space for like-minded women to meet one another. Here, women could participate in civil society while promoting their own ideas of what was best for the Vietnamese.

¹⁴⁷ "...lớn lên lại thành ra những bậc vợ hiền mẹ quý làm khuôn mẫu cho hậu lai." Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ nhất, p. 31.

Further, Tú Anh's success as a businesswoman keeps her independent of patriarchal control, making any romance she pursues one of equality and pure romantic feeling. In other words, she would embark on a companionate marriage rather than a marriage of necessity. David Marr writes that similar calls for women to acquire marketable skills in periodicals such as *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* emerged out of a need to supplement declining men's incomes due to the Great Depression.¹⁴⁸ Yet Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote *Nữ anh tài* in 1928 and 1929, and emphasized women's need to be skilled and educated throughout the story, which challenges Marr's focus on men and male providers. Early conflicts in *Nữ anh tài* emerge out of Tú Anh's familial lack of wealth. Though her family is still well-to-do, they are not rich, and this causes Hồng Minh's family to reconsider his and Tú Anh's engagement. Tú Anh's independently-acquired wealth brings her opportunity and cements her engagement and devotion to Hồng Minh. It is because of her money that Tú Anh is able to send her sweetheart funds when he studies in France; here, Tú Anh holds power in the form of personal economic wealth. Phan Thị Bạch Vân reversed the common trope of women being dependent on men for their wealth; yet she does not write this plotline at the expense of Hồng Minh's masculinity.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân does not make Hồng Minh *knowingly* dependent on Tú Anh. Instead, readers see a woman using her own money to support a man with whom she is in love, in secret. Tú Anh keeps her patronage a secret out of consideration for what she predicted would be Hồng Minh's hesitance (*ngại ngùn*) and reluctance to accept it. This also points to Tú Anh's selfless character, as she expected no acknowledgement of her kindness. Tú Anh chooses to help Hồng Minh without duress or coercion, and Hồng Minh does not find out about Tú Anh's support until he is traveling back to Cochinchina. This plot point also is a reversal of the novel's beginning, in

¹⁴⁸ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, p. 225.

which Hồng Minh had to beg his parents to not break his engagement with Tú Anh when they consider another bride with more money. Once Tú Anh is in control of a thriving small business and sends Hồng Minh money to France, his parents quickly change their opinion of Tú Anh's suitability.

While Hồng Minh's wealth-conscious parents are interested in Tú Anh's money, Phan Thị Bạch Vân places more narrative emphasis on her female characters' intelligence and education rather than their capital. Bạch Vân's female protagonists also do not steal or take money away from male characters. Tú Anh is a far cry from Nguyễn Công Hoan's female characters, such as Tuyết Anh in *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây*. Additionally, Phan Thị Bạch Vân does not idolize or promote a romantic or idealistic view of poverty; while her protagonists are not greedy, they understand the importance of money and strive for a comfortable life of economic stability. This can also be compared to the views of poverty espoused by the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Members of the Group such as Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng, and Thạch Lam showed "a romanticized vision of rural poverty," demonstrated in their stories such as *Hai vế đẹp*, in which a young man feels intense guilt as a result of his village paying for his Western education, or *Cô Hàng Xén*, a story focusing on a sweet and simple market salesgirl.¹⁴⁹ Group members wished to emulate the perceived simplicity of peasants, and viewed the rural countryside as a cure for the jaded city center. Phan Thị Bạch Vân did not lift poverty to romanticized heights, and stressed the importance of financial security for both marital, familial, and personal comfort.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels typically touch on the subject of wealth, yet her narratives suggest a belief that poverty may be overcome with proper education, training, and outlook. Her protagonists are rarely, if ever, from poor families, yet they at times experience tragedy in the

¹⁴⁹ Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: The Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), p. 102.

form of parental death, conniving stepmothers, or faithless husbands. This leads to financial difficulty or ruin. Phan Thị Bạch Vân shows through her characters that adequate education is the first protection against tragedy and resultant poverty; additionally, having a skill, such as Như-hoa's embroidery and sewing, allows characters living in a precarious situation (due to their gender) a form of independence and economic security. Next, characters must have a strong emotional resilience in order to live through the twists and turns of fate. Women like Cô Lang and Bích Ngọc do not have the ability to survive the emotional harm their husbands cause them. Readers see that the most talented, resilient, and intelligent women find their perfect matches. There is the dual implication that if one wanted a harmonious marriage, one must deserve it; additionally, that women always needed to protect themselves from maltreatment in the form of self-reliance.

Teaching women readers about resilience and self-sufficiency was connected to the need to strengthen the Vietnamese as a whole. Commentators frequently involved Vietnamese women in realizing Vietnamese “modernist and nationalist aspirations” through motherhood and childrearing, but Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote about unmarried young women who demonstrated aspirational qualities *before* having children.¹⁵⁰ The female characters in *Nữ anh tài* acted as building blocks for an independent and self-reliant milieu of young Vietnamese women. Women who emulated Tú Anh in her enterprising endeavors, selfless attitude, and companionate marriage would be at the forefront of modernizing and progressing Vietnamese society.

Tú Anh and Hồng Minh's love also becomes a conduit through which other educated and modern couples could be formed. The first conflict in the novel begins when Hồng Minh's family almost breaks his engagement to Tú Anh in favor of a wealthier young woman named

¹⁵⁰ Thuy Linh Nguyen, *Childbirth, Maternity, and Medical Pluralism in French Colonial Vietnam, 1880-1945* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2016), p. 169.

Ngọc Liên. Hồng Minh fights to honor his engagement to (and love for) Tú Anh, pleading with his parents, and Ngọc Liên eventually becomes friends with Tú Anh after the situation clears up. Ngọc Liên sparks the friendship after she reads about Tú Anh's business, requests a tour, and expresses her admiration for Tú Anh's melding of industry and philanthropy. Because Ngọc Liên shows an interest in women's issues, such as establishing a women's association with the help of Tú Anh, she becomes a suitable match for Hồng Minh's civically-minded friend, Bá Chơn. Bá Chơn's mother finds Ngọc Liên to be a fitting potential bride for her son, and others encourage the match, saying Ngọc Liên is a person of talent and virtue (*tài đức*). In the wake of potential heartbreak over the broken engagement to Hồng Minh, Ngọc Liên finds an equally-educated and brilliant fiancé who would support her own philanthropic endeavors.

This outcome of a mutually-joyful, double marriage results from couples of suitable and similar educational backgrounds; happy marriages, in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's literary canon, are a product of marriage partners who are in harmony with one another.¹⁵¹ The couples in *Nữ anh tài* will lead happy lives together, in accord, working collectively to better society and the position of the Vietnamese people. This happiness contrasts with the unhappy marriages featured in *Lâm Kiều Loan* and *Kiếp hoa thâm sừ*. Rather than their husbands wasting their money or engaging in extramarital affairs with their friends, Tú Anh and Ngọc Liên's fiancés have money of their own and are always faithful. Phan Thị Bạch Vân points to these marriages as the ideal, and they are a foil to the marriages of Loan and Cô Lang, who married men whom they did not know well. Additionally, these malevolent husbands did not take education or the well-being of the country seriously, and their careers are not given much, if any, attention.

¹⁵¹ "...muốn chọn chồng cho được hiệp ý cùng nhau" from Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sừ" in *Tinh thần phụ nữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thơ quán, 1928-1929), p. 177.

Tú Anh is a woman whom Vietnamese women could aspire to emulate, but the reality of Vietnamese women's situation at the time meant that her adventures were unlikely to be replicated. Her eventual happy relationship with Hồng Minh is the overarching goal of the novel, and her bold undertakings always stem from her engagement to him. Tú Anh is able to avoid engagement to other men while she hurdles barriers between herself and Hồng Minh, making the plot highly fantastical for readers during the interwar years. Most Vietnamese women would not have been able to thwart rival suitors or persuade their parents to allow them to take the lead in settling their engagements; in *Nữ anh tài*, Tú Anh twice avoids a marriage to a wealthy man named Văn Đạt. In the first instance, she simply tells her parents she does not approve of him as a potential husband. In the second, she must outwit Văn Đạt after he kidnapped her father and set a ransom (in the form of a marital guarantee) for his safe return. While Tú Anh is respectful to her parents throughout the novel, she is able to convince them to give her time to find an alternative to marriage with a man whom she does not hold in high esteem.

In Nhất Linh's *Đoạn tuyệt*, the female protagonist is not able to escape her own arranged marriage or her feelings of obligation to her family. It is not until she has accidentally killed her husband that she is able to escape some of the bounds of traditional marriages and familial structures. At the novel's beginning, the main character, Loan, reflects on her life trajectory compared to that of the man she loves, Dũng. It seems to her that she is as intelligent and educated as he, yet she must be submissive to her family and deal with outdated (*cổ hủ*) things because she is a young woman. At one point in the novel, Loan sees a group of school girls and thinks about how learning and education only make one's suffering in life clearer to them.¹⁵² As an educated young woman, Loan suffers under the thumb of her mother-in-law and husband, yet

¹⁵² “Cái học kia chỉ làm cho mình biết và cảm thấy rõ những nỗi khổ phải gặp trên đường đời” Nhất Linh, *Đoạn Tuyệt* (1934), p. 74.

does not take concrete steps to escape. During the scene that leads to her husband's death, Loan speaks to her marital family in a way she had never dared before; she calls her husband and mother-in-law cowardly (*hèn nhát*) and resists their insults to her intelligence and conduct. After Loan kills her husband, and when she is being led away to jail, she feels as though she is leaving a place of imprisonment (*một nơi tù tội*). It is only after she is forcibly taken away from her marital home, by authorities and on the way to a jail, that she feels the bonds of tradition leaving her, liberating her in an incongruous way.

In *Đoạn tuyệt*, Loan gives the impression that she is being buffeted by the wind; she is at the mercy of forces larger than she, and only may assume control once the unthinkable has happened. She chafes at old-fashioned notions and attitudes, but does not do much to free herself from her situation; even her major narrative act, the murder of her husband, was accidental. Loan is an educated woman, and does not blindly engage with tradition, yet she does not act against it either. She, at multiple points in the novel, thinks about her education and how it clashes with her husband's traditional family. She holds the ideas of knowledge and studying in high esteem but they do not serve her well until she has unintentionally changed her life irreparably by committing a murder. Tú Anh in *Nữ anh tài* holds similar, positive attitudes towards education but acts freely and independently. Phan Thị Bạch Vân never presents narrative obstacles as insurmountable, and at varying points in the novel, Tú Anh uses both her femininity and intelligence to solve these obstacles.

Additionally, Tú Anh and Hồng Minh are a match of equals; their similar levels of education make them well-suited to one another and to helping others around them. Loan's husband does not hold the same modern ideas as she, and while she went to school with him for a time, their attitudes and worldviews clash. Loan feels as though she was brought into his family

to be little more than a maid and a bearer of children; she is isolated and bored with her monotonous life. Loan wishes to marry Dũng instead, a man who rejects tradition and whose family disowned him for his independent views and radical actions. Loan and Dũng share a bond and know one another's hearts and minds, much like the ideal bond Cô Lang and Như-hoa described in *Kiếp hoa thám sử*. Once Loan has been acquitted for the murder of her husband, she reads a letter from Dũng confessing his love for her and decides to find him and share his life of political activism, free of bonds and attachments. Both novels, *Nữ anh tài* and *Đoạn tuyệt*, feature love matches of equals, but present readers with differing trajectories and ends for their couples. While Phan Thị Bạch Vân ends *Nữ anh tài* with Tú Anh and Hồng Minh happily married, *Đoạn Tuyệt* ends somewhat uncertainly, with Loan and Dũng's relationship status and future not confidently known. *Nữ anh tài* also ends with other couples finding love and happiness, while *Đoạn tuyệt* focuses on just Loan and Dũng and their friends, who are already married.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote *Nữ anh tài* with a blindingly happy and somewhat formulaic ending, but Tú Anh demonstrates more independent thought and action than Nhất Linh's Loan. Both authors use their main characters as archetypes and devices in order to communicate to readers how society should change or function. Tú Anh comes across to readers as a stand-in for the perfect woman of talent and virtue. Loan, conversely, is a stand-in for women who are disenfranchised by Vietnamese backwardness.

CONCLUSION

As an author, Phan Thị Bạch Vân used the novel as a medium through which she could explore contemporary problems facing young women and offer solutions to such problems. A new generation of Vietnamese intellectuals emerged as a result of French educational reforms.

The increasing use of *quốc ngữ* and women's literacy rates meant that women could passively and actively participate in print culture, through reading and writing. The early-twentieth century brought with it a host of changes and, with such changes, came fluctuating norms for men and women and the way they interacted with one another. The early-twentieth century saw the formation "of a new Vietnamese collectivity that included and seriously considered the place of women."¹⁵³ Starkly different from prior generations, this milieu of young Vietnamese grappled with a host of changes in the public and private spheres.

As the new Vietnamese middle class emerged in urbanized city centers, they possessed the leisure time to read debates in periodicals and newspapers. They worked as clerks, teachers, or journalists and were part of a young intelligentsia which emerged after the First World War.¹⁵⁴ The women who were part of this privileged group became the subjects of and participants in what became known as the Woman's Question – discussions over women's rights, their place in society, and their roles as wives and mothers. The venturing into private matters of familial ties and relations between men and women led to discussions of other sensitive topics, such as polygyny, faithfulness in marriage, and madness. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's treatment of some of these topics in her novels was an attempt to offer solutions to her audience.

Discussions of insanity in the early-twentieth century "provided a new language with which to register critiques of colonial society" such as "the erosion of traditional gender norms...the romantic idealism of young women..."¹⁵⁵ To writers and commentators during the interwar years, insanity was a consequence of rapid social and cultural change. Madness became "at once a mark of civilization and proof of an inability to keep up with the fast pace of modern

¹⁵³ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin*, p. 22.

¹⁵⁴ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, p. 9.

¹⁵⁵ Claire Edington, *Beyond the Asylum: Mental Illness in French Colonial Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 17 & 18.

life.”¹⁵⁶ Lang’s descent into insanity was a direct result of her choice of husband; she and her family chose a man who presented himself as one thing but became another. Lang’s husband was duplicitous and his marriage to Lang began under false pretences. Phan Thị Bạch Vân indicates this type of wicked man was a danger to women in the contemporary moment. Through Lang’s example and her fate, Bạch Vân presented readers with Như-hoa’s strength and resilience as she adopted Lang’s son and another local girl and worked to support them. *Kiếp hoa thám sử*’s insanity plotline was a critique of modern society and an endorsement of self-strength.

To Phan Thị Bạch Vân, the solution to degrading relationships between the sexes was resilience. A significant part of Bạch Vân’s ideas around becoming resilient came from contemporary views of society becoming corrupt and the theory of Social Darwinism. Intellectuals, armed with new ideas coming from Europe, China, and Japan, considered the treatment of individuals in the family versus individuals in society; according to their views, in society at large, individuals had to survive through struggle and competition.¹⁵⁷ This struggle and competition translated to relationships *between* individuals as well. To Bạch Vân, women could not necessarily rely on their male partners anymore; the solution, then, was to acquire the acumen and skills needed to survive independently.

Tú Anh in *Nữ anh tài* characterizes and embodies this need to act and survive independently. She builds her own business, achieves fame and success across the country, and helps other women at the same time. She was able to move on from and prosper after her broken engagement to Hồng Minh; further, once she has opened her business and vocational school for young girls, she is able attract the attention of Hồng Minh’s wealth-conscious parents as well as

¹⁵⁶ Claire Edington, *Beyond the Asylum: Mental Illness in French Colonial Vietnam*, p. 156.

¹⁵⁷ George Dutton, “‘Society’ and Struggle in the Early Twentieth Century: The Vietnamese neologistic project and French colonialism” *Modern Asian Studies* 49 (2015): p. 2014.

other suitors. Tú Anh is able to succeed on her own, without a fiancé or husband, and more importantly, she is able to aid other women and girls in becoming independent. Though Tú Anh does not become a mother in *Nữ anh tài*, she demonstrates a concern for those younger than her and acts as a mentor akin to an older sister. Phan Thị Bạch Vân characterizes Tú Anh as maternal without writing a plotline around childbirth and motherhood.

Tú Anh's characterization privileging concern and care for others addressed both the contemporary emphasis on motherhood and strengthening the nation. Through her school for local village girls, she could instruct the younger generation of women and assure Vietnamese education. Tú Anh's efforts would produce virtuous wives and mothers who would shape the future.¹⁵⁸ This would lead to a class of women who could pass down the knowledge and expertise they learned from Tú Anh to their children, fostering a literate populace with practical skills. Tú Anh's companionate marriage to Hồng Minh was additionally a model for others to follow; educated husbands and wives would elevate Vietnamese status in the world and encourage others to follow suit.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels are not inherently feminist or progressive; to characterize them as such would obscure their complexities and the discussions happening at the time in the wider print community. Bạch Vân does write about women challenging gender norms and traditions, but her writing is consistent with other ideas in the public sphere in the early-twentieth century. Bạch Vân was not alone in identifying marriage and romance as fraught occupations for women. *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* wrote critiques of polygyny, including one article by Nguyễn-Thị Bạch-Minh which instructed women to "keep resisting the system of polygamy. Because it

¹⁵⁸ "...thành ra những bậc vợ hiền mẹ quý làm khuôn mẫu cho hậu lai." From Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ Anh Tài* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), cuốn thứ nhất, p. 31.

debases women's dignity!"¹⁵⁹ Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her milieu sought to make conditions more favorable towards women, but "ideologies of femininity and masculinity do not form logical or closed structures. Rather they are fraught with internal contradictions and ambiguities..."¹⁶⁰ It would be more accurate to characterize *Lâm Kiều Loan*, *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, and *Nữ anh tài* as contributions to Vietnamese debates over how society should function. Regardless of whether Phan Thị Bạch Vân was seeking to instruct young readers to self-strengthen and seek companionate marriages, this prescription was also a form of exerting one's outlook over others. Phan Thị Bạch Vân took what she considered to be best practices on the road to women's increased independence and imbued her written works with this notion.

¹⁵⁹ "Chị em Annam cứ phẫn-đối cái chế-độ đa-thê đi. Vì nó làm hèn cho phẩm-giá đàn-bà!" From Nguyễn-Thị Bạch-Minh, "Bài bên Paris gửi về" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* no. 96 (August 20, 1931).

¹⁶⁰ Louise P. Edwards, *Men and Women in Qing China: Gender in The Red Chamber Dream* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), p. 51.

CHAPTER TWO: HỘI CHỊ EM, WOMEN, AND THEIR OPINIONS ON OTHER WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF PHAN THỊ BẠCH VÂN

INTRODUCTION

“Ngọc-Liên đứng dậy cầm tay Tú-Anh từ giã ra chiều quyến-luyến. Tú-Anh đưa Ngọc-Liên ra xe. Tiến đi một bước một dừng, bước đi dừng lại trong chừng nhìn nhau, nhìn nhau tỏ nỗi yêu nhau, yêu nhau như thế biết nhau những ngày...”¹⁶¹

“Ngọc Liên stood and took Tú Anh’s hand, saying goodbye with an air of affection. Tú Anh saw Ngọc Liên to her car. She showed her out one step and one stop at a time; they would step and stop again while looking at one another. As they looked at one another they showed their love for each other; they loved one another as though they had known each other for some days.”

The above passage describes the ending of a first meeting between two female characters in Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s novel, *Nữ anh tài*. Tú Anh, the novel’s protagonist, showed an intrigued Ngọc Liên around her silk business and school for young girls. Unbeknownst to Ngọc Liên, Tú Anh was engaged to Ngọc Liên’s former fiancé, Hồng Minh, before the events of the novel. After Tú Anh has told Ngọc Liên about their shared relationship with Hồng Minh, Ngọc Liên says that she only came to visit Tú Anh to learn from her and to emulate her example. She admires Tú Anh for her commitment to people, and especially for her commitment to teaching and helping disadvantaged women. Setting aside their involvement in a love triangle, Ngọc Liên

¹⁶¹ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ nhất, p. 46.

asks for Tú Anh's help in organizing their fellow women and leading a group to discuss and publish about women's and girl's issues in the country. As they say their goodbyes, Phan Thị Bạch Vân describes their deeply affectionate feelings towards one another in an almost-romantic way.

Ngọc Liên and Tú Anh's friendship is built on mutual respect as well as affection; though they were both engaged to the same man, their interest in civic responsibility overcomes any potential for jealousy or resentment. In the quote above, their initial affection for one another is so strong that they find it difficult to say good-bye, displaying a love for one another through glances back and forth. The quote represents the easy affection with which women treated one another in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's works, especially between young women of the same social sphere. At times, such as in the quote above, this affection bordered on romance.

In Nữ Lữ Thơ Quán's published material, women's attitudes towards other women either demonstrate a belief in their ability to rise above their circumstances or a disenchantment, on the writer's part, with their lack of initiative. It is important to look at women's views of other women – not merely at “the print community at-large,” which is a general way of saying men's views of women. Women writing about the ability for Vietnamese women to rise above the obstacles they faced – illiteracy, lack of skills and employment, lack of independence, polygamy, unhappy marriages – signified a reciprocity and a closeness to the issues at hand. Women who wrote about women faced these same issues; thus, they were not necessarily speaking *about* women or about the *category* of women. Instead, they spoke to women and had their own lives in mind, or the lives of their sisters, daughters, mothers, and friends. To these women of letters, their engagement with the Women's Question represented a closeness to the issue and a perspective one would not encounter reading men's discussions of women and their rights. They

possessed a closeness to the issue because they faced the same problems, difficulties, and restraints. As discussed in the previous chapter, these women cautioned their readership against marrying too young and advocated selectively choosing one's husband based on comparable intellect. The titular character in *Lâm Kiều Loan* speaks to the audience using the first-person pronoun *tôi* and warns them away from making the mistakes she did. Women writers' experiences of hardship informed their use of characters, plotlines, and their ultimate message within their novels.

First, I will discuss how Phan Thị Bạch Vân, through her novels, presents Vietnamese women and their relationships with one another. Next I will examine her literary strategies involving foreign women, notably Chinese women, and her attitude surrounding women studying abroad. Lastly, I will analyze Bạch Vân's use of the Western wife (*vợ đầm*) and the mother-in-law (*mẹ chồng*) as villains in *Nữ anh tài* and *Kiếp hoa thám sử*. Through these analyses, I will show that Phan Thị Bạch Vân displayed a positive view of female friendship in her works. She imbued her characters with a marked belief in female coalition building for the betterment of society under a banner of universal sisterhood. Yet Bạch Vân also wrote of villainous female characters; typically, these women acted as impediments to the trajectories of her protagonists. Two of her villainous women embodied two female character tropes: the "other" woman and the evil stepmother. In her fiction, Bạch Vân demonstrated idealism and pessimism in the best and worst of what women could be; this served as a prescription for her young female audience. Through her work featuring (and written for) women, Phan Thị Bạch Vân was able to solidify her own vision for ideal relations between Vietnamese people as a whole.

Women writing about (and for) women

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, scholars have long identified the “Woman’s Question” as a topic of intense debate in the Vietnamese press during the interwar years. However, much of this scholarly discussion has focused on the presence of male writers and their penchant for dictating and recommending their notions of what constituted best conduct for women. Vietnamese discussions surrounding women and women’s issues in the press were written for a general audience and *about* the whole of society, rather than simply written about and for women.¹⁶² It is clear that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her fellow writers held strong beliefs pertaining to the advancement and inclusion of women in public life. Phan Thị Bạch Vân also wanted women to contribute to and develop Vietnamese culture through their own advancement. Inherent to the development of Vietnamese culture was the idea of Vietnam as a nation; writings at the time frequently referred to *nước nhà* or *nước ta*, our nation, when discussing the Vietnamese and the three *kỳ* of Cochinchina, Annam, and Tonkin. Therefore, there was an aspect of nascent nationalism to these women’s ultimate goals, but their first priority was to set the parameters by which young Vietnamese women should be marked and measured. Attached to that priority was their insistence that *they* be present and accounted for in the debates over Vietnamese women’s future. Aware that men were the most prominent voices in the conversation, those who worked for and with Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán sought to bring their expertise and opinions to the table with sophisticated reading material targeted towards their female audience, rather than towards a general audience ready to read about whether or not women

¹⁶² Consider Minh Dân, “Phụ nữ có nên đòi quyền không?” *Hà Thành ngọ báo*, September 20, 1934, which addresses women’s rights and the rights of everyone in society (such as men). Or Hoàng Đạo, “Phụ nữ ra ngoài xã hội,” *Ngày Nay*, November 1, 1936, which addresses the general benefits of women being out in society.

should involve themselves with activities outside of the home, or if their attainment of rights would benefit men as well.

Scholar Ben Tran argues that male intellectuals represented women in their writings in order to “forge a modern subjectivity and a national identity,” through the portrayal of women.¹⁶³ These men sought to define themselves through their representations of Vietnamese women. Martina Nguyen explores the output of the Self-Reliant Literary Group and how the men of the Group “laid out prescriptive reforms for their female compatriots – what to wear and how to exercise, among others – with little or no input from them...the Group introduced body norms and beauty ideals aimed at creating a vision of femininity that complied with their own newly-constituted masculinity.”¹⁶⁴ Male intellectuals, therefore, wrote about women in an attempt to define themselves and their masculinity. Within this construction of oppositional gender roles was men’s newfound sense of self in a constantly changing society. Their writings about (and for) women were not about the women themselves – not entirely. It must be said that the Women’s Question was about both men and women; further, that men’s writings about women were mostly about men themselves. Can their contributions be accurately classified as part of a movement that would incorporate women within a new national milieu? Yes, but their discussions say much less about the *true* status of women during the late-colonial period than scholars have realized. We should therefore de-emphasize the importance stemming from men’s discussion of the Woman’s Question, and especially question their relevance to women and women writers. Of that small number of women who became part of the discussion, we should attempt to analyze their contributions against those of male intellectuals.

¹⁶³ Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 6.

¹⁶⁴ Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On Our Own Strength*, p. 80.

While male intellectuals wrote about women in order to explore their own masculinity, women's writings in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* featured men as footnotes, if not simple plot devices. The defining of the self through a gendered Other was not a reciprocal relationship in which women used representations of men to create a modern womanhood. They did not define themselves through male characters or discussions of male issues. Yet they *did* create what they saw as a modern womanhood. How did they do this? They first acknowledged pertinent issues facing Vietnamese women; as discussed in the previous chapter, Phan Thị Bạch Vân used fictional tales of romance and heartbreak to discuss the profound challenges for Vietnamese women in the early-twentieth century: poverty, reliance on men, lack of education and skills, and lack of opportunity. After identification and discussion of these issues, Bạch Vân and her cohort of female writers suggested ways of alleviating women's vulnerability through friendship and meaningful interaction with other women. They also warned female readers of how one should not conduct oneself through portrayals of female villains. Additionally, Phan Thị Bạch Vân did express anxiety over Vietnamese men's future contributions to society and their commitment to the Vietnamese nation. Yet she expressed this anxiety through women – specifically, through *Nữ anh tài's* plotline about a French woman and her marriage to a Vietnamese man. She also portrayed how this affected Vietnamese women and might affect Vietnamese culture more broadly. *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* and the material coming out of the press reflected women's own identifications of, and prescriptions for, women's issues.

Vietnamese women writers spent time identifying challenges women faced and ways they could mitigate these issues through education about certain topics, increased literacy and access to reading materials, and vocational training. The solution for many of these challenges rested upon women helping other women. In the literary canon of Phan Thị Bạch Vân, women

acted as dear friends and, at times, bitter foes. Phan Thị Bạch Vân also addressed women directly and the intended audience for *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* was young women. Though men featured in her works, they were typically as romantic interests or antagonists with few glimpses into their inner thoughts and motivations. Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote internal monologues for her female protagonists and wrote about their profound inner struggles and adversity. It is to their inner worlds and minds which we are privy. Additionally, it is their friendships and conflicts with fellow women that shape their character and life trajectories.

This choice to focus on women and women's issues had to do with Bạch Vân's interest as an author, the goals she had for her work, and the way she wanted to reach her intended audience. By and large, Bạch Vân sought to reach women and young girls as a way to shape and mold them into ideal citizens. In the potential Vietnamese nation, women who read and had come to adopt Bạch Vân and her publishing house's works would represent Vietnam and Vietnamese women at-large. Bạch Vân wanted her work to reach a wide audience of women from a variety of backgrounds and interests; in her descriptions of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s mandate and purpose, she specified that her press would provide both short and long-form material.¹⁶⁵ The need to attract and keep readers' interest led to an output that featured a diverse array of products. Additionally, in *Nữ anh tài* during the meeting between Tú Anh and Ngọc Liên when they discuss the creation of a women's association, Tú Anh proposes to publish literature and educational tracts to ordinary women, that are accessible everywhere, so that all women can derive value from them, develop their intelligence, and learn to love one another as one

¹⁶⁵ This description of the publishing house's mandate, purpose, and operations can be found in the front of *Nữ lưu thơ quán*'s biography of the Chinese revolutionary feminist, Qiu Jin (1875-1907) and the prominent French salonnière, Madame Roland (1754-1793). They are called *Giám hồ nữ hiệp* and *Giương nữ kiệt*, respectively.

family.¹⁶⁶ This presents us with the goal of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s accessibility and Bạch Vân's target audience comprising the entirety of young women in the three regions of Vietnam (she mentions Trung Nam and Bắc, or the central, southern, and northern regions) and beyond. Bạch Vân wanted women to be widely literate and have the ability to purchase texts suitable to their age and gender, at a price they could pay so that they could develop their intellect and feelings of unity she wished to foster. Bạch Vân sought to place her largely upper-class ideologies within the Vietnamese community at-large and influence the coming generation of women through that lens.

In a description of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s purpose, Bạch Vân writes that the press will be “helpful for the foundation of our country's moral spirit” (*có ích cho tinh-thần đạo-đức về nền luân-lý nước nhà*) and help women (*Nữ-lưu*) develop their intelligence and learning to further heights.¹⁶⁷ She sought to include writings, collections, and translations that had value (*giá trị*) for readers. We see the emphasis on not just readers, but citizen-readers who would find use and help from the tracts *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* would publish. She wanted her literature to reach all booksellers, those who would purchase year-long subscriptions, and all women and girls who had a good heart and would help the press sell their material (*các chị em ai có lòng tốt muốn tiêu thụ giúp*). This suggests an ambitious business plan in which the press would seek out female partners and representatives willing to advertise and pass along knowledge of their material by word of mouth. Bạch Vân not only targeted her audience as citizen-readers, but as those who

¹⁶⁶ The quote is: “Sách vở có giá trị phải lo xuất bản cho thường, lập thế bán rầy cùng khắp nơi để chị em trong nước đều đọc mà mở mang trí thức, mau khôn, mau giỏi, biết yêu nhau mến nhau Trung Nam Bắc liền hiệp như một nhà...” Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công, *Nữ lưu Thơ quán*, 1929), cuốn thứ nhứt p. 45.

¹⁶⁷ This description of the press's purpose comes from the first information page of Bạch Vân's *Guơng nữ kiệt*, her biography of Madame Roland. Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Guơng nữ kiệt* (Gò Công, *Nữ lưu Thơ quán*, 1928).

could potentially spread her ideology and vision for the Vietnamese in a form of feminist-nationalist proselytization.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân legitimized her feminism with calls to national empowerment, self-improvement, and morality. Her discussions of women's issues, women's education, and women's rights always affirmed ties to the national wellbeing. While there are times Bạch Vân illustrated individual women's struggles and private tragedies in her fiction, these vignettes are bookended by scenes emphasizing the potential for national prestige through Vietnamese women. This was not simply education for education's sake, or skills for private use and profit, but the intrinsic goal of making the Vietnamese a significant cultural, political, and entrepreneurial force. Bạch Vân sought to participate in this through her status as a woman who could teach other women. Further, she sought to encourage her readers to participate in this endeavor with her prescriptive fiction and advertising. While Bạch Vân ultimately wanted to influence the behavior and minds of young Vietnamese women, her first step would need to be fostering a community of women readers. To do this, she facilitated the production of a wide variety of material which women might enjoy reading.

Women as readers in colonial Vietnam

As Historian Shawn McHale writes, reading in Vietnam was a gendered practice into the early-twentieth century.¹⁶⁸ Even by the 1920s, men had higher rates of literacy than women; additionally, men looked down at women's propensity to read Chinese novels in Vietnamese translation, rather than reading material in French.¹⁶⁹ Some commentators were wary that young women would read novels and sink into depravity, depression, or debauchery, citing suicides of

¹⁶⁸ Shawn McHale, "Printing, power, and the Transformation of Vietnamese Culture, 1920-1945," (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1995), p. 137.

¹⁶⁹ Shawn McHale, "Printing, power," pp. 144 & 145.

young women in Hanoi; while Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her cohort were aware of this, Bạch Vân continued to promote reading and novels as gateways to women's knowledge and education.¹⁷⁰ She also wrote novels featuring either romance she deemed appropriate, such as the companionate marriage between Tú Anh and Hồng Minh described in the previous chapter, or romance with consequences, as seen in Cô Lang's disastrous fate after marriage to a man without morals. Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán both profited from the popularity of romance while still publishing material that would speak to women's reform and development into readers.

In order to both develop a large enough group of women willing to purchase and read Bạch Vân's published material and foster the correct morals and interests for these women, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán had to strike a balance between texts that would entertain and educate. Judging by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's catalogue of offerings, their target audience enjoyed reading novels, translations of educational and literary works from China and Europe, histories, biographies, and books about homemaking and vocational skills. In the description of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's mandate, Bạch Vân writes that they will publish manuscripts relating to politics, history, memoirs, fiction, the Woman's Question (*phụ nữ vấn đề*), women's work (i.e., home economics), literature, science, commerce, and industry. This was a mix of leisure material and writings designed to foster a sense of industriousness and independence in young women. Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán did not simply reflect women readers' interests; rather, it reflected what Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her associates believed women should read and learn. We cannot know which materials women readers skimmed or skipped over versus which pieces they voraciously consumed. Yet it is likely that young women most enjoyed pieces of fiction, adventure, and

¹⁷⁰ As described in Linh Vu, "Drowned in Romances, Tears, and Rivers" *Explorations: A graduate student journal of southeast asian studies* 9 (2009): p. 35. Vu mentions that *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* featured articles speaking to this phenomenon of young, educated women committing suicide (pp. 38-39).

romance, as evidenced by some of the moral panic over works such as *Tố Tâm* in 1925. With this popularity in mind, Bạch Vân and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's contributors presented subscribers with entertainment and valuable knowledge regarding education and conduct.

Authors have historically used prescriptive literature to attempt to shape the conduct, behavior, and outlooks of young women. Yet these tracts have not necessarily been limiting or repressive in a physical sense. In early modern England, prescriptive literature did not teach women to be unfailingly obedient; on the contrary, prescriptions taught women that they held the power influence others and should thus act virtuously in order to maintain social and familial harmony.¹⁷¹ Nationalists in the modern period recognized this power as well. In Egypt during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, feminists began to leave “confinement in the home” and started their own journals focused on women's issues; some of these women reinforced traditional gender distinctions within “a new cult of domesticity. Others shaped a feminist ideology.”¹⁷² These early Egyptian feminists reinforced the appeal of the home and promoted education for girls because “the idea that to educate a mother was to educate the nation was infused into the nationalist discourse.”¹⁷³ Thus they attempted to expand and acknowledge the power of the mother in order to expand the collective power of the nation. Women's influence gave them the space to influence and hold power over others, though this power came to be limited to the family and within women's reproductive abilities. Feminists and traditionalists alike understood the power that women held, especially as the mother figure held sway over the home, domestic life, and the lives of their children. Bibin Yang writes that, in

¹⁷¹ Jessica C. Murphy, “Feminine Virtue's Network of Influence in Early Modern England,” *Studies in Philology* 109 (2012): p. 260.

¹⁷² Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 61.

¹⁷³ Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, p. 63.

China's Qing dynasty, female authors were able to critique the "very foundation of the kinship system" by affirming their dedication to kinship ties at the beginning of their works.¹⁷⁴

Therefore, discussion and encouragement of women's place in the traditional familial structure was not always a tacit reinforcement of women's submission.

Vietnamese women who possessed the ability to work in the public sphere and publish used this knowledge of women's influence and made their inclusion in the conversations of the day indispensable. Their prescriptions for their fellow women centered their views and their visions for the Vietnamese future. The Vietnamese women involved in *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* did not only discuss women's presence in the home; at times, they highlighted truly revolutionary women who experienced backlash over their views and actions. Yet the tracts published through *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* did not instruct women to act in a revolutionary way. These tracts emphasized and idolized a woman with revolutionary spirit who engaged in activities that still upheld the status-quo. Phan Thị Bạch Vân demonstrated a sympathy for radical women while placing emphasis on women's need to work, study, and marry within their existing environments. She prompted women to modify, not destroy and remake anew.

Bạch Vân was demonstrating agency in her assortment of novels and editorial work, but women's agency is not in and of itself subversive. While some women have failed to subvert authority due to their acceptance of gendered conventions¹⁷⁵, others have taken their position as women and sought to encourage feminine submission through their insider status. Phan Thị Bạch Vân cannot be faithfully categorized as either subversive or strictly conventional; her motivation lies somewhere between the two. She indeed subverted and challenged traditional roles for

¹⁷⁴ Binbin Yang, *Heroines of the Qing: Exemplary Women Tell Their Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), p. 155.

¹⁷⁵ Jessica C. Murphy, "Feminine Virtue's Network of Influence in Early Modern England," *Studies in Philology* 109 (2012): p. 260.

women, especially when it came to their relationships with men and position in the public realm. But Phan Thị Bạch Vân did not advocate a complete break from familial and cultural ties. This places Phan Thị Bạch Vân in a murkier and complex space which makes her work in the publishing and editing world defiant towards any attempts to classify it.

FEMALE FRIENDSHIP: HỘI CHỊ EM

Friendship as restorative

In her quest to mold women into potential citizen-readers, Phan Thị Bạch Vân emphasized the benefits of female friendship in the face of life's upheavals and hardships. Phan Thị Bạch Vân writes scenes wherein women act as sources of comfort to one another after personal suffering; specifically, Bạch Vân writes that the school friend may act as an ultimate source of protection and security (such as in *Kiếp hoa thám sử* and *Lâm Kiều Loan*). In her novels, male characters seldom aid female protagonists in any meaningful way: women either helps themselves or other women support them. For example, in *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, after Như-hoa has escaped her abusive stepmother, she immediately turns to Cô Lang, an old friend from school. While Cô Lang and Như-hoa know that she cannot stay for more than a night, in case their other school friends recognize Như-hoa and tell her stepmother, she opens her home to Như-hoa and they commiserate over their mutually unhappy circumstances.

The next safe place to which Như-hoa turns is Cô Lang's mother's home, Bà Nhàn. Bà Nhàn allows Như-hoa to live with her in exchange for Như-hoa taking care of the housework and cooking. Bà Nhàn worries over her own daughter, Cô Lang, and is happy when she leaves her husband and returns to her mother's home. Bà Nhàn immediately fusses over Cô Lang's health, and tells her she will bring her a remedy (*hốt thuốc*) for Cô Lang to take. After some time spent with her mother and Như-hoa, Cô Lang is more herself and acts more assured (*yên lòng*)

than before. She is also better able to focus on raising her son Đức, and all three women fuss over and play with him frequently.

When Cô Lang thinks about her ruined marriage at night and becomes sad, Như-hoa comforts her with advice and encouraging words. Như-hoa tells Cô Lang that she has her young child and mother with her and should derive comfort (*an ủi*) from that. She also tells Lang that she should divert herself and offers encouragement for the future, comforting Lang temporarily. The three women spend a month together, with Như-hoa and Lang frequently embroidering and reading in each other's company. They are peaceful and happy (*yên vui*) before Lang's husband attempts to reconcile with her.

Women also present one another with practical support in times of need. In *Lâm Kiều Loan*, after Loan has left her husband and moved in with her family, she reconnects with her friend Ngọc Anh, who teaches at a girls' school, and discusses the possibility of becoming a teacher as well. She and Ngọc Anh travel to Biên Hòa by car and she introduces herself to the school's headmistress. After she receives the job offer, she feels happy and accomplished. Ngọc Anh acts as a potential comfort for other girls as well. When Bích Liên, the woman whose sister resides in an insane asylum, visits the school, she does so with the intent of speaking with Ngọc Anh and potentially receiving advice.

Additionally, Ngọc Anh defends Loan when others pry into her personal affairs. Before the two had arrived in Biên Hòa and the girls' school, Loan asked Ngọc Anh not to discuss her history with anyone. With this in mind, when Bích Liên asks after Loan's husband, Ngọc Anh immediately chides her and instructs her to "not ask" about it.¹⁷⁶ She and Loan effectively change the subject and take the attention away from Loan. Ngọc Anh acts as a friend to Loan,

¹⁷⁶ She says, "Thôi đừng hỏi, có chồng cũng như không, bây giờ cũng lên đây kiếm việc làm ăn đó." From Phan thị Bạch Vân, *Lâm Kiều Loan* (Saigon, Imprimerie Tran-trong-Canh, 1932), p.23

helping her secure employment and treating her personal struggles with discretion and care. For Loan, her female friends and job teaching young women distracts her from her ruined marriage while enabling her to live away from her husband and reject his offers of monetary support. Friendship turns into material support and allows Loan to live independently. Her intelligence, education, and friendships with other women give her the support she needs to live the life of a modern woman – a life Phan Thị Bạch Vân advertised in her written work.

These female friends act as safe havens and aid in the heroines' time of need. Further, these women are distinguished as school friends or teachers; they are educated and intelligent women of the same milieu. These women also have the benefit of strong connections with their families, the schools they work for, and within their community. They are able to sustain these connections through their knowledge of practical skills and the benefits they provide their community. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her publishing house emphasized the need for women to hold practical skills and have the ability to secure employment;¹⁷⁷ in her stories, she uses her female protagonists to demonstrate this and communicate to readers the benefits of having school friends, being able to teach, and having strong ties to the larger community. With these support systems, women are able to live their lives without the fear that separating from their husbands or leaving them will result in disaster. They live with the knowledge that they have options and the ability to secure their own livelihood through strategic connections. In the case of *Nữ anh tài*'s heroine, Tú Anh, she actively fosters these connections and, without them, her adventures would not have been possible.

¹⁷⁷ E.g. in her mandate's written pledge to “xuất bản những cảo-văn thật có giá trị về...NỮ-CÔNG...THƯƠNG-MÃI VÀ THIẾT-NGHIỆP.” Or, women's work, trade and commerce, and industry.

Fictional women's groups and internationalism

In *Nữ anh tài*, Tú Anh is focused on women's rights and participation in women's groups, befriending women of similar outlooks and mutually supporting one another through their shared interests. When Hồng Minh's former fiancée, Ngọc Liên, visits Tú Anh's silk business and girl's school, she asks for guidance in becoming enlightened about women's issues. Tú Anh replies that her business occupies too much of her time, but suggests that she and Ngọc Liên join forces in order to create a space for well-read women to meet and discuss science and women's issues. In a self-referential nod to Phan Thị Bạch Vân's own women's publishing house, she also suggests that they open a place to publish books for women so that they could "know and love one another in the central, south, and northern regions like a family" and in the future they could advance and progress.¹⁷⁸ The two women bond over their shared visions for the Vietnamese people and proceed to recruit other women in helping with their goals. Their goals are given further weight by the knowledge that Phan Thị Bạch Vân held the same ambitions and put them into practice with Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán; by giving her character of perfect talent and intelligence (Tú Anh) the same objectives, Phan Thị Bạch Vân suggests her own greatness as the real-life embodiment. Through this aspect of the novel's plot, Bạch Vân has allowed fact and fiction to converge and presented herself as a model for women to emulate. Her own success in reality had the potential benefit of convincing hesitant young women to follow her example.

Nữ anh tài features encounters wherein nervous and uneasy women must be convinced to join the women's association's cause. Once they have arranged the first meeting of the women's association, Ngọc Liên and Tú Anh passionately describe the changes they would like to make, emphasizing that their association will publish books and reading material for all women,

¹⁷⁸ "biết yêu nhau mến nhau Trung Nam Bắc liền hiệp như một nhà, thì sau này mong cơ tiên hóa." From Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ Anh Tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ nhất, p. 45.

wealthy and poor, which “fosters the admiration of foreigners.”¹⁷⁹ After they have spoken, a girl named Châu stands and asks whether the issues they face are too considerable and too expensive to fund. Tú Anh responds that she believes in their cause and abilities to make a difference, inspiring the women assembled for the inaugural meeting and assuaging any doubt they may have had. Tú Anh and Ngọc Liên’s friendship makes them a formidable pair able to inspire the hesitant and dubious through their rhetoric and passionate beliefs in their own abilities. Their easy friendship and desire to help all Vietnamese women convince those around them that their goals are attainable and admirable.

The affection depicted between women in the novel leads them to help one another in times of need. At their first meeting, Bạch Vân points to Tú Anh and Ngọc Liên’s love for one another, writing that they loved each other (*yêu nhau*) from the moment they had met as though they had known each other for many days. Despite their former competition over marriage to Hồng Minh, the two become close friends and partners in forming the women’s association. Additionally, when Tú Anh’s father is wrongfully arrested for murder, she faints and wakes in a room surrounded by her female friends. They tell her that when she was implicated in the murder as well, they sent a complaint to the government claiming Tú Anh’s innocence. With their help, Tú Anh was able to escape a prison sentence, unlike her father. Tú Anh’s friendship and popularity amongst well-connected, educated, and civically involved women helped her at one of her lowest points in the novel.

Towards the end of the novel, Tú Anh travels to China in order to apprehend her arch-nemesis Văn Đạt. When she discovers that he has not framed her father for murder and was not involved in the murder himself, she sees that he has married a Chinese woman who grew up in

¹⁷⁹ “Làm cho kính phục cả người dị-chủng.” From Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ hai, p. 17.

Vietnam. When they reach Văn-Đạt's new home in Shanghai (*Thượng-Hải*), Tú Anh is delighted to meet his wife, named Tuyết Châu. Tuyết Châu has Chinese parents and speaks fluent Vietnamese, given that she lived in the country as a child. Like Tú Anh and her group of educated friends, Tuyết Châu attended a school for girls and belongs to several groups of Chinese women focusing on politics and women's rights in their own country.

Tuyết Châu brings Tú Anh to meet the women in these groups to discuss her own work in Vietnam and discuss similar issues with Chinese women. Tuyết Châu tells Tú Anh that, with the information she gathers from her Chinese counterparts, she can return to her country and tell her fellow Vietnamese women about it. One woman explains to Tú Anh that their purpose (*mục đích*) is to give women a place in politics and demand that "the constitution recognize equality between men and women."¹⁸⁰ The women in the association were working for women's equal political, economic, and educational opportunities and held similar views to Tú Anh in her pursuit of the same goals in Vietnam. When asked about the status of women in Vietnam, Tú Anh self-consciously replies that Vietnamese women are more hesitant and behind in their pursuit of women's rights, so she and her friends must raise awareness and organize themselves. One of the women tells Tú Anh not to worry and expresses her belief that Vietnamese women will eventually succeed.

Tuyết Châu's friends at the women's association also are familiar with French, many having studied in Paris, and are able to speak with Tú Anh in that language. This allows Tú Anh to feel welcome and enjoy her time with Tuyết Châu's educated and politically involved friends. Once Tú Anh and Tuyết Châu return home, Tú Anh speaks highly of the Chinese women she

¹⁸⁰ "Mục đích của chúng tôi đây, chủ trương yêu cầu cho phụ-nữ được dự tham-chính và yêu cầu trong hiến-pháp phải qui định cho nam nữ bình đẳng cùng nhau." From Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ tư, p. 24.

met at the association meeting. Bạch Vân's inclusion of the Chinese women and development of a rapport between them and Tú Anh shows a vested interest in cross-cultural exchange between Vietnamese and Chinese women. In the novel, the pursuit of women's rights transcends national and cultural boundaries, and women may learn from other women. They are cosmopolitan, too, speaking multiple languages and expressing interest in women's status in other countries. These women embody an international perspective that is also embodied within Tú Anh and her travel to different countries and cities. Tú Anh is highly mobile, and her adventures not only bring her into contact with dangerous situations, they allow her to visit women's associations and hear from foreign women about what she could do to encourage the pursuit of women's rights amongst her own countrywomen.

This scene is an expression of women's travel across national boundaries during the interwar years. There were a number of prominent international associations for women at this time, including the International Alliance of Women (IAW), the International Council of Women (ICW), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF). While these organizations had been founded earlier in the century, after the First World War they began to focus on expansion into what they termed "the East."¹⁸¹ Regional women's interest groups began to appear during these years as well, with the British Commonwealth League (BCL), the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), and the Pan-Pacific Women's Association (PPWA) challenging the prominence of Euro-American women's leagues and conferences as the only options for non-Western women.

In these organizations and the goals they set out to achieve, there was a mixture of internationalism, differing nationalisms, and opinions about colonialism. Within the overarching

¹⁸¹ Marie Sandell, "Regional versus International: Women's Activism and Organisational Spaces in the Inter-war Period," *The International History Review* 33 (2011): p. 607.

interest in feminism was a host of competing interests that spoke to the global struggles over self-determination and colonialism. At the expense of true international sisterhood, “international feminism in the 1930s found itself entangled in the dynamics of colonialism,” with emphasis on white Euro-American women and lack of concern towards difference.¹⁸² In *Nữ anh tài*, we do not see an explicit disapproval of international feminism, but conclusions may be drawn from conspicuous exclusions on Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s part. Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s writings first demonstrate a curiosity about (and knowledge of) women in other countries. Regardless of whether or not Phan Thị Bạch Vân herself travelled internationally, her female protagonist makes an almost three-thousand-kilometer trek between Saigon and Shanghai. Further, Tú Anh engages with a host of characters of diverse backgrounds, speaking a multitude of languages. While these languages might include those of the Euro-American variety, the majority of *Nữ anh tài*’s characters are of Asian descent.

While Bạch Vân’s writings also demonstrate a concern with the way Vietnamese women appeared to international observers, she does not write a situation in which Tú Anh (and, by extension, Vietnamese women as a whole) will be cowed or judged by European women. There are multiple references to the slow progression of Vietnamese women, especially when Tú Anh compares the status of women in Vietnam to the Chinese women’s association and in conversation with her English-Chinese friend, Y Nhĩ Đật. Tú Anh enthusiastically meets with the Chinese women’s organization, suggesting a belief in the importance of international women’s groups. Yet she does not directly mention or interact with famous and well-known international feminist groups such as the IAW or WILPF, which were overwhelmingly staffed and represented by European women. Tú Anh is first and foremost concerned with Vietnamese women’s

¹⁸² Marie Sandell, “Regional versus International,” p. 608.

progress, and happy to discuss strategies with a local Chinese women's group. She displays an interest in feminist internationalism, but does not meaningfully engage with or discuss Euro-American women's associations prevalent at the time. She has no personal contact with a European woman, despite her knowledge of English and French women's progress and status in their own countries. The only time Tú Anh obliquely has contact with a European woman is through a letter meant to end her engagement to Hồng Minh. That letter, and the European woman involved within it, will be discussed later in this chapter.

The interwar years were marked by strengthening interest in feminism in movements across the globe, yet feminist movements did not treat all participants equally. Tú Anh's engagement, knowledge, and interest in women of other cultures is demonstrative of this phenomenon, but Phan Thị Bạch Vân's narrative omission of any European women in *Nữ anh tài* speaks to the complexity of universal sisterhood. By and large, international women's organizations did not take the plight of the colonized into account, and their interactions with women from colonized areas did not pay heed to their unique struggles for national self-determination, or their experiences with racism combined with misogyny. In *Nữ anh tài*, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's focus is on an inter-Asian exchange of feminist strategy and thought; this suggests a belief that regional conversations would be the most conducive to elevating Vietnamese women's status at home. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her fellow writers were more than likely aware of women's organizations such as the IAW – their meetings made headlines throughout the first half of the twentieth century.¹⁸³ Much like the founding of regional women's interest groups, *Nữ anh tài*'s meeting of Vietnamese and Chinese women was an alternative to the potential chauvinism of working with European feminists.

¹⁸³ *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* wrote about the IAW's congress in Berlin in 1929. "Tại hội Thế giới phụ-nữ-đoàn: Mấy khoản xướng nghị lạ lùng," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (August 15, 1929).

Studying Abroad

As discussed in the previous chapter, some Vietnamese writers such as Nguyễn Công Hoan expressed anxieties over Vietnamese women's potential for duplicity, especially if they were able to achieve upward mobility through study and travel. In *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây*, Tuyết Anh studies abroad in France and eventually abandons her sickly husband and son in order to embark on a relationship with another man. This was a fear that chiefly represented men's fears over their own ability to be modernized, Europeanized, and achieve upward mobility. *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây* explores Nguyễn Công Hoan's personal fears relating to women's deceit at the expense of his own masculinity. This was a fear that was not grounded in reality; Vietnamese women did not travel or study abroad at great rates during the colonial period. If they did, they were almost exclusively expected to go to France. Such was the case of Henriette Bui who studied medicine in France. However, it should be noted that this was a rare phenomenon and that Henriette Bui, unlike most educated Vietnamese women, benefitted from her wealthy father's connections.¹⁸⁴ While Nguyễn Công Hoan expressed his negative views pertaining to women's study outside of the Vietnamese milieu, Phan Thị Bạch Vân herself did not share those views and indeed attempted to change the dearth of study abroad opportunities for Vietnamese women.

In an article she wrote for *Đồng Pháp thời báo*, Phan Thị Bạch Vân expressed her support for women's ability to study abroad and called on readers to donate and help advance the cause. Titled "Phụ nữ Việt Nam ta thử lập vài cái học bổng" or "Vietnamese women try to establish some scholarships," Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote that Vietnamese women have not

¹⁸⁴ Micheline Lessard, "The Colony Writ Small: Vietnamese Women and Political Activism in Colonial Schools During the 1920s" *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 18 (2007): p. 9.

historically possessed a reputation for working in the public interest.¹⁸⁵ This is because, according to Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Vietnamese women do not keep up with changes in society and have hesitant personalities.¹⁸⁶ She encourages Vietnamese women to not rely on men to advance their cause and tells them that they need to “split the burden” and open their eyes (*chị em ta phải bùng con mắt giấy, phải cũng ra mà chia gánh non song*). If they show up and participate in advancing women’s rights to study abroad they will “quickly bring a good reputation” to Vietnamese women (*đem lại cái danh thơm tiếng tốt cho gái nhà Nam*). Bạch Vân did not want Vietnamese women to only travel to France, however. She wanted women to be able to travel to neighboring countries and all around the world (*lên quốc, ở thế giới*). She writes that women should donate to this cause, and that once women are able to combine their donations to establish a scholarship fund for studying abroad, that will be the day “we can increase our standing by one level” (*tức ngày ấy chị em ta được tự tăng cái địa vị mình lên một cấp*).¹⁸⁷ Bạch Vân called on Vietnamese women to help poor students and accomplish this task for all women’s benefit.

This article is clearly supportive of Vietnamese women leaving their country in order to advance their education. In this piece, Phan Thị Bạch Vân is not concerned with Vietnamese women leaving the supervision of their families and making poor decisions. She implies that it has been to Vietnamese women’s detriment that they have not already funded other women’s scholarships. It is important to note that when Bạch Vân wrote this, she emphasized that women themselves should be able to accomplish this, without receiving all their help or funds from men.

¹⁸⁵ Historically, Vietnamese women were prohibited from working in official public service. Bạch Vân likely means that, in her opinion, women have not used what leverage they did possess to enact cultural and social change. A good study about how Vietnamese women were able to manipulate a patriarchal system to their advantage in the early modern era is Nhung Tuyet Tran, *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463-1778* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018).

¹⁸⁶ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Phụ nữ Việt Nam ta thử lập vài cái học bổng” *Đồng Pháp thời báo* (November 24, 1927), p. 9.

¹⁸⁷ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Phụ nữ Việt Nam ta thử lập vài cái học bổng” *Đồng Pháp thời báo* (November 24, 1927), p. 9.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân wanted women to be able to stand on their own, and fund other women's study abroad fees, without placing any responsibility and reliance on men. She believes that Vietnamese women are too hesitant, and do not stay up to date or in the know when it comes to current historical trends, such as the push for women's rights. This echoes Phan Thị Bạch Vân's character, Tú Anh's, conversation when she met with the politically involved Chinese women in *Nữ anh tài*. She was self-conscious when discussing Vietnamese women's advancements and their contributions to women's rights in the country. While her new Chinese friends encouraged her and expressed beliefs that Vietnamese women would be able to organize themselves, the fact remained that this was an illustration of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's own opinion regarding her fellow women and their lack of initiative.

Additionally, Phan Thị Bạch Vân emphasizes Vietnamese women's ability to foster renown and increase their status by fundraising for other women to study abroad. Through a robust study abroad fund, not only would Vietnamese women be able to travel and learn, they would foster relationships with foreigners and cultivate a reputation for cosmopolitanism and intelligence. This is important to Phan Thị Bạch Vân; in *Nữ anh tài* Tú Anh's character travels to China and this movement is important to her character development and the development of the plot. She makes friends and connections in China, and is able to accomplish mightier feats due to her connections and friendships. Increasing an individual Vietnamese woman's intelligence and education is one part of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's plan for a stronger woman's movement. A significant part of her vision included Vietnamese women fostering their connections throughout the world and making a name for the Vietnamese community amongst an international audience. Unlike Nguyễn Công Hoan, Phan Thị Bạch Vân was in favor of women travelling far away so that they could meet new people and act as ambassadors for Vietnamese culture. This was

diametrically opposed to the antagonist wife in Nguyễn Công Hoan's *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây*; rather, Phan Thị Bạch Vân possessed faith in Vietnamese women's ability to conduct themselves well for an international audience.

Gender ambiguity, sexuality, and femininity

Just as Phan Thị Bạch Vân uses international exchange and travel as a method to discuss the place of Vietnamese women in a wide barometer of progress, she plays with gender ambiguity and gender expression to reach the same goals. When Tú Anh travels to China, she presents herself as a man throughout the trip. This has profound implications in the study of Vietnamese women during the interwar years, especially in regards to the way Vietnamese women viewed their own gender and the gender expression of their fellow women. The study of nonconforming gender presentation and alternative, non-heterosexuality in the Vietnamese context is sparse for this time period, yet it is assured that such inclinations existed. While it was unlikely that Vietnamese women would have frequently dressed as men at this time, the inclusion of crossdressing in a novel presents readers with the idea and ability to imagine themselves doing the same. It also implies gender and sexual transgressions on Tú Anh's part. While Tú Anh has been willful and independent for the majority of *Nữ anh tài*, she has typically remained traditionally feminine and focused on women's issues. Further, in descriptions of her physical appearance in this part of the novel, she is still slender and feminine, despite her dress in men's clothing. Prior to her adventure, she has only deviated from her (more appropriate) focus on educating women and girls when extending her goals to the potential nation of Vietnam and thus including the entire Vietnamese community in her vision. Yet Tú Anh strives to change Vietnamese culture *through* feminine means and her connections with other women. These feminine means are complicated by her gender transgression through crossdressing.

In a study of China's Ming and Qing literature, Zuyan Zhou writes that marginalized literati felt a shared identification with women and projected this marginalization onto characters who were "transgressive women or feminine men."¹⁸⁸ To Zhou, this made these works and characters subversive to the patriarchal order. This subversion denotes a desire (to Zhou, on the part of Qing-Ming male authors) to resist political and cultural gender dictates. Phan Thị Bạch Vân sought to do something similar in *Nữ anh tài*; through Tú Anh, Bạch Vân wanted to push and inspire young women to follow her (decidedly extreme) example. On her adventure, Tú Anh interrogates and questions Vietnamese dictates for women that force and encourage them to remain concealed and hidden within their familial homes.¹⁸⁹ Through humor and shock tied to her daring adventure and disguise, Tú Anh transgresses acceptable gender presentation and, by extension, principles that restrict Vietnamese women's travel.

Tú Anh acknowledges the unlikelihood of her deception: when she first meets her friend Y Nhĩ Đát, she tells him that Vietnamese women would never be so bold as to dress as a man and travel so far from home. Both parties gloss over Tú Anh's obvious femininity and bring up stories about women in other countries changing their identities, dressing as men, and contributing to women's progress. Y Nhĩ Đát brings up Victor Barker, the English transgender man, and later discusses England's Queen Anne (1665-1714), the authors Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and Richard Steele (1671-1729), and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797). Y Nhĩ Đát believes that, in the Western world, women began to develop organizations and become more literate by the eighteenth century, and by the nineteenth century, they had begun to work with

¹⁸⁸ Zuyan Zhou, *Androgyny in Late Ming and Early Qing Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ Such as when she slyly states that Vietnamese women do not go out into the world, they obey the three submissions, and could not think to do something (such as crossdressing and travelling to China) so startling, "đàn bà nước tôi khuê-môn bất xuất, còn trọng đạo tam tòng, có đâu làm được, cùng là nghĩ đến những việc kinh thiên động địa ấy được," From Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ ba, p. 21.

men in the public domain.¹⁹⁰ The chosen figures feature two undoubtedly famous women in the history of England, and two men who are more famous for their contributions to English print culture than any advancements for women's rights.

Why did Bạch Vân choose the above historical figures to illustrate women's advanced status in England? The reason for her inclusion of Queen Anne and Mary Wollstonecraft is obvious, owing to Queen Anne's high position as a female monarch, and Wollstonecraft's famous proto-feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. What is more interesting is her mention of Addison and Steele. Joseph Addison, along with Richard Steele, began a well-known periodical titled *The Spectator*, which published for a general middle-class audience, and with a particular focus on women. Both Addison and Steele were concerned with the moral and intellectual development of their readers, and aimed to foster their visions of polite society through their publication; they focused on appropriate conduct and the development of intellect through essays. Their focus on women created and enforced a gender ideology centered around patriarchal norms, and this ideology sought to control women's activities in the public and private spheres.¹⁹¹ *The Spectator* included women as readers, writers, subjects, and objects in a new ideal of domestic femininity. This outcome is clearly similar to Bạch Vân's own purpose for her editorial and writing work, in that she sought to influence and shape the modern Vietnamese woman and include women as writers and collaborators. To Bạch Vân, as well, women would best be served as writers, readers, subjects, and objects; further, her establishment of her own women's press put her at the center of this mold, and in creating this ideal. Her knowledge and discussion of Addison and Steele's work is indicative of that ultimate goal and Bạch Vân's belief

¹⁹⁰ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ ba, p. 21 & 22.

¹⁹¹ Katherine Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 93.

that Addison and Steele were successful in shaping an ideal eighteenth century Englishwoman who participated in civic life and founded women's organizations.

With similar disappointment as when she speaks to the Chinese women's association, Tú Anh replies to Y Nhĩ Đất's summary of the development of women's rights in Europe with the admission that Vietnamese women are not as developed because their learning and education has not been (allowed to be) developed (*vì học thuật không được mở mang*).¹⁹² She also compares the status of Vietnamese women with what women in China and Japan have accomplished in recent decades, stating that their progress has now enabled them to do great things. The conversation between the two is bold and cheekily acknowledges both their awareness that Tú Anh is pretending to be a man without stating it out loud. Had Tú Anh been dressed as a woman, she would have not had the opportunity to travel so freely alone, and would not have had such open and frank conversations with complete strangers.

Her disguise enables not only her physical freedom, but her conversational and rhetorical freedom as well. This freedom allows her to express her dissatisfaction with the state of women's rights openly. She appears removed from the Woman's Question because she is posing as a man. This means that she cannot be accused of possessing a personal bias or strong emotions towards the topic at hand. Her discussion about a lack in development for Vietnamese women does not seem intimately tied to her, and she can speak authoritatively on the subject as a male observer. Yet the audience, Y Nhĩ Đất, and Tú Anh all know that she is a woman speaking about woman's rights. While she pretends to be a man, she is allowed a detached distance and thus able to confidently speak to her expertise and personal experience as a woman.

¹⁹² Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ ba, p. 21.

Not only is Tú Anh given more authority while presenting as a man, Bạch Vân uses Tú Anh's gender ambiguity as an opening through which she can discuss and critique the status of Vietnamese women with an outsider. Tú Anh's disguise, which is unconvincing and later makes her a target of nefarious characters, attracts the attention of Y Nhĩ Đát. Y Nhĩ Đát is of mixed Chinese and English descent, well-traveled, well-read, and well-informed. The boldness of Tú Anh's deception spurs Y Nhĩ Đát to approach her and her boldness takes their conversation in directions it would not have gone should Tú Anh been dressed appropriately as a Vietnamese woman and escorted by a trusted male relative. Tú Anh's performance as a man speaks to her ability to converse frankly with a male stranger about the Women's Question (*vấn đề phụ nữ*) as it has been dealt with in Vietnam.

There is also the question of Tú Anh's disguise and her attractiveness in the eyes of men. Tú Anh's gender nonconformity and independent thinking do not work to deter the interest of Y Nhĩ Đát; on the contrary, Y Nhĩ Đát eventually expresses romantic interest in Tú Anh, which she must discourage due to her loyalty to Hồng Minh. In spite of this deception and gender transgression, Phan Thị Bạch Vân is still able to make Tú Anh attractive to men. In the pages of *Nữ anh tài*, Tú Anh possesses the best of both worlds: defying the patriarchal and heterosexual order as she succeeds within it. For readers, this bears the implication that they may be rewarded if they begin to present themselves in ways that challenge traditional Vietnamese femininity.

At one point in the novel, Tú Anh meets with Văn Đạt in China and reveals herself to him. Văn Đạt is surprised and tells Tú Anh that he did not think she would travel alone to a foreign country. Tú Anh explains that she does not enjoy being deceitful and concealing her identity, but must dress as a man because it was not socially acceptable for young, unmarried women to travel without their families to foreign countries. While she was ashamed of her

deceit, she was forced into the disguise as her social status would have been in danger had she travelled without it.¹⁹³ She was aware of the shame her independence and boldness may bring upon her and her reputation, which was already in jeopardy due to the accusation of murder for which her father was serving jail time. She donned her disguise in order to mitigate this shame and societal disapproval that would result as she strives towards her goal of clearing her father's name; therefore, she transgresses traditional gender presentations and norms for practical reasons. More than that, she engages in gender transgression for the sake of her family and filial piety. As discussed in the chapter about women and their relationships with men, women were primarily responsible for their families' good reputations. Therefore, Tú Anh is simply fulfilling her familial responsibilities by crossdressing and travelling unaccompanied, though her methods are unconventional.

Tú Anh does not only demonstrate gender transgression; she also hints at sexual transgression in her affectionate encounters with other women. Before Tú Anh makes the trip north to China by boat, she visits a resort town and extracts information from a relative of Văn Đạt's. In order to do this, she poses as the young woman's sweetheart, a man who had gone to school with Văn Đạt, and proposes marriage. The young woman is fooled by Tú Anh's deception and completely in her thrall. Tú Anh, posing as Văn Đạt's friend Hồng Anh, talks about proposing marriage and asking permission from the girl's family in approving their union, and the young woman enthusiastically agrees. Once the young woman is satisfied with their discussion addressing the future of their relationship, Tú Anh (as Hồng Anh) begins asking questions about Văn Đạt and his current location. Having received the information she needs, Tú

¹⁹³ She says, “Còn mưu mẹo giả dối kia là cũng vì hoàng cảnh nó bó buộc, nên dối với tình trạng xã hội thì càng thêm nhục nhã chứ có vinh diệu cho đâu.” From Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ tư, p. 6.

Anh escorts her sweetheart back to their Long Hải resort and they part ways. Tú Anh's method for collecting intelligence is her most pointed form of rebelliousness. Rather than just *looking* like a man, she pretends to be a specific man and flirts with his bride-to-be. Though she takes the situation no further than words, and the purpose of the interaction is gaining information, Tú Anh's decision to learn Văn Đạt's whereabouts is ultimately predicated on a romantic interaction between herself and another woman. While not explicitly homosexual, at least not to the unassuming fiancée, readers are aware of Tú Anh's true gender once her plan and disguise are revealed. Tú Anh's contrarian gender and sexual performances solidify her as a defiant and adventurous character and suggest an encouragement (or approval), on Phan Thị Bạch Vân's part, of affection between women that bordered on romantic and sexual.

While Tú Anh's penchant for success and adventure may make her appear one-dimensional, her gender and sexual transgressions add dimension to her character. They also allow her to question Vietnamese cultural issues pertaining to women through her temporary distance from traditional, feminine womanhood. Through her plotline at Long Hải, successful affectation of masculinity, and seduction of Hồng Anh's sweetheart, Tú Anh is able to travel to China and apprehend her arch-nemesis. She is also able to discuss women's issues with men and women along the way. Tú Anh's added dimension becomes not a simple vehicle for the novel's plot, but a vehicle in which Phan Thị Bạch Vân may compare the state of Vietnamese women to others in a similar international milieu. We see Phan Thị Bạch Vân treat female characters with further dimension, and discuss other cultural issues, when we consider her female villains.

WOMEN AS VILLAINS

The Western Wife: *vợ đầm*

When Hồng Minh has been in France for over a year, Tú Anh receives a letter with his signature. In the letter, Hồng Minh writes that he recently hosted some mutual Vietnamese friends; when he asked about Tú Anh, they told him some news about her that was “not good” (*không tốt*). With this news in mind, Hồng Minh writes that he wishes to break off their engagement, as he has found a Frenchwoman to marry. He tells Tú Anh not to write to him any longer, as he will not receive her letters.

Tú Anh is upset and confused, and when she sits down with her parents for a meal, she learns they have heard the news as well. They heard from Văn-Đạt that Hồng Minh “boasted” (*khoe*) that he was marrying a Western lady (*vợ đầm*).¹⁹⁴ Her parents believe that Hồng Minh had lost his good manners (*mất nét*) and they are glad Tú Anh had not married him. Tú Anh confirms that Hồng Minh did indeed marry a Frenchwoman and that she no longer has any regard for him. She parries her parents’ insistence that she consider marrying Văn-Đạt with her preference for remaining single and focusing on her business.

Later in the story, it is revealed that Văn-Đạt had forged Hồng Minh’s letter and bribed the postman to give it to Tú Anh. While Hồng Minh remained faithful to Tú Anh while studying abroad, the specific mention of his potentially marrying a Western woman was an anxiety Văn-Đạt exploited for his own gain. This anxiety was not simply related to Hồng Minh leaving Tú Anh for a Frenchwoman, but that Hồng Minh would reject the customs and traditions of his culture in order to marry a woman from France. The fear that Vietnamese men would abandon their culture for European women was an anxiety not unique to Tú Anh or Phan Thị Bạch Vân,

¹⁹⁴ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ nhất, p. 33.

but featured in wider discussions occurring after the First World War, when Vietnamese men and French women came into more contact than they had previously.

There are few studies focusing on liaisons between Vietnamese men and French women, but these unions did occur. Kimloan Hill writes that, during the First World War, Vietnamese men and French women “interacted not only in brothels but also in workplaces. These liaisons could result in serious relationships and sometimes even in marriage.”¹⁹⁵ French supervisors of these Vietnamese men went to lengths to deter them from beginning relationships with French women, but they continued to occur. Approval from families in Vietnam was also an issue, prompting some Vietnamese men to marry their French girlfriends in secret. Unions between Vietnamese men and French women were demonstrative of a shift in status for Vietnamese men; they were colonial subjects, of lower status compared to the French, but could marry local women in the metropole. Through liaisons with French women in France, Vietnamese men could transcend their lower status in a relationship of mixed power dynamics. Yet their decisions to date and marry French women showed a dismissal and lack of care towards Vietnamese customs and parental authorization, which caused tension surrounding the practice.

Marriages between Vietnamese men and French women were exceedingly rare, chiefly because potential relationships between Vietnamese men and French women found discouragement on both sides of the colonial encounter. For its part, the colonial administration actively sought to sabotage these unions when they became aware of their existence.¹⁹⁶ Vietnamese observers were also not supportive of unions between French women and Vietnamese men. One newspaper article from 1937 recounted a Vietnamese mother’s demand

¹⁹⁵ Kimloan Hill, “Sacrifices, sex, race: Vietnamese experiences in the First World War” in *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, ed. Das Santanu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 60.

¹⁹⁶ Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 140.

that her son divorce his French wife after he studied abroad and married her; the mother threatened disownment if her son did not comply. Eventually, her son set fire to her house. The author of the article wrote that the incident occurred “because of a French wife.”¹⁹⁷ In the French-language newspaper, *L'Écho Annamite*, one article discussed the murder of a young Frenchwoman, Christiane Lagarde, by her Vietnamese husband, Jean Thanh. Jean Thanh had shot Christiane under the influence of ether, which he had taken to escape the “anguish” he felt after the couple had an argument.¹⁹⁸ Other articles described Thanh’s feelings as those of a passionate nature after Christiane had abandoned him.¹⁹⁹ *L'Écho Annamite*’s article bookended the facts of the case with warnings about sending young Vietnamese men to France who could not defend themselves against the lessons of youth, the intoxication of love, or disappointment.²⁰⁰ These writings characterize Vietnamese men as particularly weak and prone to recklessness in the face of Western women’s wiles, and unable to protect themselves against their own passionate feelings. Yet French women were not the sole concern here; rather, it was the metropolitan society to which they were tied. There was the implicit concern that young Vietnamese men would act this way far from their families and culture; far away from the watchful eye of their parents, Vietnamese men would not be able to resist the allure of the metropole. Subsequently, they would abandon their country and countrymen.

Similarly to Vietnamese men expressing anxieties at the prospect of Vietnamese women forming unions with French men,²⁰¹ there were concerns over Vietnamese men marrying and romantically pursuing French women. Yet this did not simply have to do with petty jealousy;

¹⁹⁷ “Vì một người vợ đảm: con đòi đốt nhà mẹ” *Sài Gòn* (April 10, 1937), p. 8.

¹⁹⁸ “Une ingénieur Annamite: tue sa femme d’un coup de revolver” *L'Écho Annamite* (October 5, 1928), p. 1.

¹⁹⁹ Such as in *L'Œuvre*, September 2, 1928. The article misidentifies Thanh as Chinese and spells his name “Tchan.”

²⁰⁰ “Une ingénieur Annamite: tue sa femme d’un coup de revolver” *L'Écho Annamite* (October 5, 1928), p. 1.

²⁰¹ And their own lack of access to modernity or “Europeanization,” Ben Tran, *Post-mandarin*, pp. 39-40.

these anxieties were connected to the Vietnamese pursuit of modernity and the strengthening of the potential nation in the face of colonial control. Typically, Vietnamese men went to France to work and study with the goal of sending money to their families and returning home to start a business or lend a hand with their degree and expertise. After the First World War, Vietnamese who aided the war effort had their education paid for by the government on the condition that they would return to Indochina to work in industries such as paper mills, cement, and rubber factories.²⁰² In *Nữ anh tài*, the main characters emphasize Hồng Minh's duty to the Vietnamese as he travels to France to earn a degree; his primary motivation in finishing his schooling in France is to be able to help his country and boost the renown of the Vietnamese with his skilled labor.

Had Hồng Minh truly married a Frenchwoman and rejected Tú Anh, this would have been akin to rejecting the Vietnamese and the vision for their advancement he expressed prior to his departure. Presumably, Hồng Minh's parents had not approved of his marriage in France; in Vietnamese culture at this time, it was commonplace and expected for parents to arrange marriages for their children. At this point in the story, Hồng Minh had already invited his parents' ire after he rejected his arranged marriage to Ngọc Liên in favor of his former engagement to Tú Anh. When Tú Anh reads the forged letter, she is already aware that Hồng Minh had defied his parents in her defense; this makes his unexpected marriage more believable. After they heard the news from Văn Đạt, Tú Anh's parents also comment that Hồng Minh has lost his manners (*nết*), which could also be translated to his good conduct and virtue. Through a potential marriage to a Western woman, Hồng Minh demonstrated a disregard for his family and the expected conduct in Vietnamese society.

²⁰² Kimloan Hill, "Sacrifices, sex, race: Vietnamese experiences in the First World War," p. 62.

The story's original villain, Văn Đạt, sent the forged letter with the intent of upsetting Tú Anh enough to persuade her to marry him instead. Hồng Minh and Tú Anh previously bonded and commiserated over their shared concern for the Vietnamese and their shared desire to contribute to the country's progression in industry and business. Văn Đạt both feeds into Tú Anh's insecurities relating to Hồng Minh's fidelity and the fear that their mutual concern over the state of the country was not reciprocated. Narratively, Văn Đạt's major sin as a villain is his attempt to break up Phan Thị Bạch Vân's well-educated, companionate couple who sought to strengthen the nation.

Văn Đạt's scheme to make Tú Anh believe Hồng Minh had been unfaithful and married a French woman was indicative of anxieties surrounding Vietnamese students' behavior when studying in the metropole. Not only did some authors express similar anxieties pertaining to female students, such as in *Thế là vợ nó đi Tây* by Nguyễn Công Hoan, male students endured censure from both colonial authorities and their own families when the prospect of romantic involvement with European women presented itself. For Phan Thị Bạch Vân and others, the fear of the Western wife was not simply an expression of jealousy, but an anxiety over future involvement of Vietnamese men in the potential Vietnamese nation.

The Mother figure: a complex relationship

While much of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's works showcase female friendship and positive relationships between women, her novels also present readers with feminine potential for harm and evil. The most vilified feminine trope in Vietnamese culture and literature is the mother-in-law (*mẹ chồng*). Nhất Linh famously dealt with the domineering mother-in-law in *Đoạn tuyệt*, writing the main character, Loan's, mother-in-law as an aggressor and constant source of tension in the novel's plot. The common, negative cultural opinions of the mother-in-law characterized

her as harsh, dictatorial, and unwelcoming to her young daughter-in-law. Traditionally, newlywed Vietnamese women would move with their husbands into his family home. Daughters-in-law could be treated as slaves, with mothers-in-law able to extract valuable household labor and domestic work out of their new family members. The mother-in-law became an avenue through which commentators could discuss the plight of Vietnamese women in the modern era. In an article discussing the issues between mothers and daughters-in law, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* printed one common saying meant for potential mothers-in-law that instructed them to look for a wife for their son as one “buys a pig.”²⁰³ Other newspaper headlines in the 20s and 30s included mothers-in-law who drove their sons’ wives to suicide,²⁰⁴ and the abuse to which young women were subjected at the hands of their husbands’ families became a battleground in the struggle for progress.

Journalists and authors alike discussed and dissected the mother-in-law for her reputation as an unkind and domineering figure; she continued and replicated traditions that viewed young wives who had not yet produced male children as little more than chattel. Loyal daughters who were able to navigate difficult familial dynamics represented ideal young women in the Confucian kinship system. This also pertained to the ways in which daughters interacted with women who married their fathers, or stepmothers. Though less discussed in contemporary debates, the figure of the stepmother featured in Vietnamese folklore and verse romance (*lục bát*) prior to the twentieth century. In *lục bát* poetry, authors frequently based their plots and characters on earlier Chinese sources, though indigenous characteristics dominate the stories as

²⁰³ “Đi coi vợ cho con như đi mua heo!” From “Mẹ chồng, nàng dâu” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, April 26, 1934.

²⁰⁴ Such as from *Hà Thành ngọc báo*, “Vì mẹ chồng mà tự tử” March 1, 1933. Or, from the same periodical, “Lại một người thiếu phụ reo mình xuống hồ Hoàn-kiên,” August 8, 1930, about a young woman who attempted suicide in Hoàn Kiếm Lake because of how harsh her mother-in-law was towards her.

well.²⁰⁵ Evil stepmothers are prominent characters in both *lục bát* works and older myths such as *Phạm Công Cúc Hoa*, *Quả bí vàng*, and *Tấm Cám*. These stepmothers mistreat and trick their stepchildren; they serve as foils and malevolent counterparts to virtuous daughters. Further, they are typically portrayed as wicked compared to the children's moral and kind birth mothers. These characters mistreat and abuse their stepchildren, only for the children to be aided or vindicated by higher powers. For example, in *Tấm Cám*, a supernatural being witnesses Tấm's suffering at the hands of her stepmother and half-sister and, to help her escape this situation, the being helps her marry a king. Tấm's happy ending after extended suffering at the hands of her stepmother served as a belief in the cessation of misery, especially if one conducted themselves in an admirable way. Tấm's stepmother acted as a stand-in for life's suffering and highlighted the folktale's Buddhist overtones.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Kiếp hoa thâm sử* possesses Buddhist overtones as well. In *Kiếp hoa thâm sử*, Như-hoa's stepmother acts as the story's villain and prolongs the heroine's suffering after the deaths of her parents. Unlike the story's protagonist (Như-hoa), her sister, Như-ngọc, is outspoken and does not accept suffering easily. At times in the novel's beginning, Như-hoa must instruct her sister to hold her tongue or accept their stepmother's machinations and vitriol. Yet Như-ngọc has trouble with this, and suffers further for it. As will be explained later, Như-ngọc experiences sickness and an early death because of her emotional and headstrong nature. The novel implies that Như-hoa, with her acceptance of life's troubles, is better able to adapt and survive the tribulations that life throws at her.

The novel's narrator describes the stepmother (*kế mẫu*) as a widow who married Như-hoa and Như-ngọc's father for material reasons. She does not love her stepdaughters and shows them

²⁰⁵ Eric Henry, "Chinese and Indigenous Influences in Vietnamese Verse Romances of the Nineteenth Century," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15 (2001): p. 3.

little affection; with her new husband, she gives birth to a son named Minh-lang. After the girls' father dies, she wants to take their inheritance for herself and her son, planning to arrange marriages between her stepdaughters and male relatives. One of the young men she has in mind is named Quang-lộc. Much like the girls' stepmother, Quang-lộc is morally bankrupt and does not wish to marry either Như-hoa or Như-ngọc for honest or romantic reasons.

Như-ngọc is the more outspoken of the two sisters. When her stepmother attempts to match them with Quang-lộc, he tries to curry favor with the girls by making a speech about wanting a good, virtuous woman rather than a beautiful or wealthy wife. While Như-hoa does not comment, Như-ngọc questions Quang-lộc's sincerity and tells the young man that he should try to win over the daughter of a local rice grower named Liền. Though desperately poor, Liền is a good and kind woman, but no one in their village speaks to her due to her family's poverty. While Quang-lộc is confused and finds the situation humorous, the girls' stepmother is furiously angry and insulted. She asks Như-ngọc how she could suggest that Quang-lộc marry such an impoverished, lowly woman. Như-ngọc feigns innocence and replies that she was simply suggesting a kind wife after Quang-lộc had expressed interest in finding a humble woman.

The girls soon hear that Quang-lộc has bragged to people in the village that Như-ngọc is his lover; upset, Như-ngọc confronts her stepmother and refuses to marry Quang-lộc or see him any longer. She also rejects Quang-lộc when he visits their home. Her stepmother, angry that she will not convince Như-hoa and Như-ngọc to marry her relatives, attempts to poison Như-ngọc. Yet her plan goes awry and her young son ingests the poison in Như-ngọc's stead. Soon after, Như-ngọc also dies under suspicious circumstances. Her stepmother blames Như-hoa for both of their deaths, and Như-hoa escapes their home to avoid being framed for murder.

Importantly, Nhu-hoa's stepmother represents an unfaithful widow who remarried after the death of her husband, flouting the Confucian principle that the most honorable women remain widowed until they themselves pass away. Exemplary women, many of whom were chaste widows, were important in defining feminine roles in the family and society in China as well. During the Qing period, righteous wives and chaste widows received court rewards in acknowledgement of their admirable qualities.²⁰⁶ It was important that women be seen as following Confucian cultural dictates so that the bulk of Chinese society would learn from their moral example. This cult of female chastity not only dictated how women should conduct themselves; women gained prominence and fulfillment in becoming a moral exemplar. Women defined themselves through their kinship relations; further, they derived their sense of self through social relationships and moral authority.²⁰⁷ Nhu-hoa's stepmother's remarriage places her outside of both exemplary familial relationships and any semblance of moral authority. Her characterization as an unfaithful widow immediately suggests to readers her wickedness and potential for harm. More than the harsh mother-in-law, the widowed stepmother is recognizable through her status and, due to her remarried status, is instantly suspect.

It is important to note that these two Vietnamese tropes of villainous women involve those of older age. Both the evil stepmother and the domineering mother-in-law are women past (or close to past) childbearing age and no longer represent the hopefulness, beauty, and talent of youth. Due to their age and marriages, these women hold a degree of power. In the case of the mother-in-law, she holds power over her daughter-in-law. For the stepmother, she holds power over her stepchildren. These women wield their power in negative ways and, in the case of the

²⁰⁶ Binbin Yang, *Heroines of the Qing: Exemplary Women Tell Their Stories* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), p. 5.

²⁰⁷ Binbin Yang, *Heroines of the Qing: Exemplary Women Tell Their Stories*, p. 14.

stepmother in *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, she is motivated by greedy designs on her stepdaughters' inheritance. Vietnamese writers did not view young women as agents of malevolence or dishonesty; they reserved this negative view for older women of experience and means. Their malevolence stems from their misuse of their influence and authority over those of young and measly means.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed Phan Thị Bạch Vân's treatment of female characters in *Lâm Kiều Loan*, *Nữ anh tài*, and *Kiếp hoa thám sử*. I have also examined Vietnamese attitudes surrounding the idea of women as villains through the Western woman, the mother-in-law, and the stepmother. An analysis of Bạch Vân's women characters provides insight into her perceptions of female friendship, community, international feminist movements, the presence of European women in her feminist ideation, and the darker sides of femininity. While Bạch Vân tended to focus on relationships between men and women in her novels, as well as men's abilities to inflict harm upon women, her engagements with women's relationships with one another show that she felt women had potential for both greatness and harm.

We can clearly see that Phan Thị Bạch Vân found the most value in young women fostering strong ties between themselves and other women of educational and intellectual merit. In the friendships of Tú Anh and Ngọc Liên or Loan and Ngọc Anh, women rely on one another and their closeness provides them with job opportunities, emotional support, safe havens in times of need, and protection. Through her own women's publishing house, and the fictional house described in *Nữ anh tài*, we see that Phan Thị Bạch Vân wished to create a community of Vietnamese women who represented her ideal and what she saw as the future of the nation. In addition to these practical considerations, however, Phan Thị Bạch Vân knew that ties between

women were essential for their emotional wellbeing. She shows readers varying levels of intimacy among women that speaks to the necessity of creating bonds with other women. In her article with *Đồng Pháp thời báo*, Bạch Vân emphasized that *women* needed to help raise funds so that girls could study abroad and help Vietnamese women make a name for themselves on the world stage. Rather than relying on men, Bạch Vân felt it was important for women to help other women. Phan Thị Bạch Vân viewed women's independence as fundraisers and contributors to scholarships as important for their development and reputation.

These Vietnamese women of high repute would be literate, educated, possess practical skills, business knowledge and acumen, and be worthy representatives of the Vietnamese on the world stage. Bạch Vân was aware of international feminist organizing, and sought to tie the Vietnamese in with these movements. She provided her characters with this knowledge as well, and, in the case of Tú Anh, wrote plot points in which she meaningfully exchanged ideas and organizing strategies with Chinese women of the same caliber. Her focus on Chinese women and Chinese feminism suggests an inter-Asian alliance of women that would take the place of prominent Euro-American women's associations. Bạch Vân did not present her characters with any meaningful contact with European women, though she did use European examples when discussing the progress women have made throughout history. European woman represented an example for the Vietnamese, but at a distance. This was likely due to the unfortunate fact that European women who led international women's organizations did not acknowledge the different experiences of colonized women. This made connection and friendship on the basis of equality difficult between European and Vietnamese women. However, Bạch Vân does use a French woman as a point of conflict between Tú Anh and Hồng Minh. In *Nữ anh tài*, French women are not potential friends and allies to Vietnamese women; the specter of the "Western

wife” is a metaphor for Vietnamese men’s potential to lose sight of their educational goals and their loyalty to Vietnamese culture. Just as Vietnamese men wrote and expressed anxiety over women’s Europeanization, the prospect of Vietnamese men seeking marriage with a Frenchwoman was tantamount to abandoning their culture. It was for this reason, along with the aforementioned difference in colonial experience, that Phan Thị Bạch Vân chose to represent Vietnamese relationships with one another and Chinese women most prominently. Her female characters distinguish themselves at home and within neighboring countries. Overall, Phan Thị Bạch Vân writes with a desire for the Vietnamese to participate and succeed within their domestic sphere, and in an international milieu of women.

The aforementioned novels represent, for the most part, a positive belief in the youth and young women of Vietnam, as well as a certain optimism. Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s female protagonists were chiefly young women and girls on the cusp of adulthood. Their trials and the novels’ conflicts stem from their decisions over marriage, marriage partners, and their positions in their families. This is because, according to Phan Thị Bạch Vân, women made the most important decisions they would ever make early-on in life. She wanted her readers to walk away from her works with this idea in mind. It was also through Vietnamese youth that a better, stronger, and more advanced Vietnamese nation might be realized. I develop this idea further in the fourth chapter of this thesis, but Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the women she worked with at Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán wanted to target a young audience so that they could direct the development of Vietnamese children. Focusing on women’s designations and biological abilities as mothers, literature published through Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán ensured women would marry, bear children, and raise their children with attention paid to the future of Vietnamese culture. This assigns a certain

amount of significance and gravity to women in the prime of youth. In Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels, it was young women who acted as protagonists and older women who acted as villains.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's treatment and inclusion of villainous women point to her warnings for men and women alike. These treatments of bad, villainous, and murderous women relate to the ways Vietnamese people should aspire to interact with one another. To Bạch Vân, her readers would learn from the protagonists in the books she wrote and both act like those women, emulate their positive relationships (based on friendship and intellectualism), and avoid confrontation with women of low moral character. The dictation of relationships between people was a lofty goal, but this was part of Bạch Vân's plan to facilitate a better overall culture.

Bạch Vân sought to accomplish this with prescriptive literature and the writing of exemplary women. Yet Bạch Vân needed to persuade women to follow the examples she provided in an encouraging and convincing way. One way that prescriptive literature could mitigate a didactic tone was through the use of exemplary women to provide women with a moral and worthy model for their study. Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán primarily accomplished this through fictional women in novels and stories. In Bạch Vân's stories, her characters Tú Anh, Loan, and Như-hoa represent women of talent and good character. Though Loan and Như-hoa suffer and experience adversity, they overcome adversity through their innate intelligence, practical attitudes, and care for others. Their fictional lives and adventures lent an aspect of disbelief, and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán was careful to supplement these fictional, exemplary women with biographies and discussions of real-life exemplary women to whom their readers could look. It is to those real-life examples of astonishing and talented women which we turn next.

CHAPTER THREE: WOMEN'S BIOGRAPHY IN THE WORLD OF NỮ LƯU THƠ

QUÁN

INTRODUCTION

“Trịnh Dục-Tú là người nào?”

Là cô gái rất tự-do ở nước Trung-Hoa.

*Là cô con gái rất tự-do mà không phải là tội-nhân
trong phong-hóa, độc-trùng ở cương-thường vậy...*

Trịnh Dục-Tú là người nào?

*Là cô con gái đã giải-phóng cho nữ-giới nước Trung-
Hoa khỏi nạn cấm-cung.*

Là cô con gái cách-mạng vậy.

Trịnh Dục-Tú là người nào?

*Là cô con gái đã vào đảng Quốc-Dân với ông Tôn-
Trung-Sơn (Tôn-Văn)...*

Trịnh Dục-Tú là người nào?

*Là cô con gái đã sang Pháp, Mỹ du-học, đỗ tới bằng
Luật-Khoa Tấn-Sĩ.*

Là cô con gái đã làm đại-biểu cho nữ-giới nước Trung-

Hoa ở Hòa-Bình Hội-Nghị bên Thái Tây vậy... ”²⁰⁸

“Who is Trịnh Dục-Tú?

She is a very free girl from China.

She is a very free girl but she is not a sinner

in her morals, or degenerate in her moral obligations...

Who is Trịnh Dục-Tú?

She is a girl who liberated the women of China

from their disastrous seclusion.

She is a revolutionary girl.

Who is Trịnh Dục-Tú?

She is a girl who joined the Nationalist Party with Sun Yat-sen...

Who is Trịnh Dục-Tú?

She is a girl who travelled to France, took a study trip in America, and passed

her Doctorate of Law.

She is a girl who acted as a representative for Chinese women

at the Peace Conference in the West...”

²⁰⁸ Nguyễn Học Hải, *Trịnh Dục Tú: Trung-Hoa Nữ-Kiệt* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), p. i.

Above are excerpts from the foreword of a biography about Trịnh Dục-Tú, or Tcheng Yu-hsiu (1891-1959) by Nguyễn Học Hải and published by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán in 1929. The foreword highlighted Tcheng's character and extraordinary deeds; Tcheng Yu-hsiu did indeed act as a Chinese representative at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, and she did receive a law degree, enabling her to practice law in China. These were astounding accomplishments for a Chinese woman at the time. Her singularity and achievements as an intellectual and political revolutionary made her a fitting biographical subject. The author's ultimate goal for her biographical treatment was to present Tcheng Yu-hsiu as an inspiration for Vietnamese women. On the title page, the author writes that the biography is "respectfully offered, to all the cloistered women of Việt-Nam, with the hope that all women can be like Trịnh Dục-Tú."²⁰⁹ This biography, published by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán in 1929, was part of a popular 1920s genre of female hagiography, in which biographies acted as idealized approval of certain women's lives and calls to action for Vietnamese readers. These biographies were but one step in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's goal of Vietnamese women's self-sufficiency and independence.

Tcheng Yu-hsiu received interest as a biographical subject in multiple publications meant for consumption by Vietnamese women. To briefly outline Tcheng Yu-hsiu's significance in the Vietnamese print world of the 1920s and 30s, she caught the eye of writers and journalists and became an example for a host of desirable feminine qualities, some which were consistent with her character, and some that were not. In reality, Tcheng Yu-hsiu was an astonishing woman and exhibited revolutionary and singular thought from a young age. As a young woman, she refused to have her feet bound by her parents, in defiance of a traditional Chinese custom and status symbol for the upper classes. As a teenager, she participated in China's 1911 Revolution and hid

²⁰⁹ "Kính tặng các cô tú-các hương-khuê nước Việt-Nam nhà, và hi-vọng cho các cô, hết thầy được như Trịnh Dục-Tú..." from Nguyễn-Học-Hải, *Trịnh Dục-Tú: Trung-Hoa Nữ-Kiệt* (Gò Công: Nữ-Lưu Thơ-Quán, 1929).

bombs in a suitcase as a member of the Chinese Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang).²¹⁰ She then lived in France and studied at the Sorbonne, where she received her law degree. She is well known for her participation in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, where she was selected to represent Chinese women. Tcheng Yu-hsiu was truly a unique woman who did not suffer the constraints typically enforced on her gender in the early-twentieth century. Yet her example in Vietnamese texts did not always faithfully represent her defiance of cultural norms.

Phan Bội Châu wrote a primary school text meant for girls in 1927, where he organized the lessons according to the Confucian three submissions and four virtues. Under *ngôn*, or appropriate speech, he cited Tcheng Yu-hsiu as a fitting example.²¹¹ In contrast, a writer named Phạm Văn Anh wrote an article in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* in 1930 and characterized Tcheng Yu-hsiu as having “revolutionary thinking” due to her refusal to have her feet bound.²¹² While Phạm Văn Anh’s characterization of Tcheng Yu-hsiu appears more consistent with her true personality, Phan Bội Châu’s invocation of Tcheng Yu-hsiu to represent appropriate speech makes little sense. Appropriate speech (*ngôn*) is placed within Confucianism’s four virtues, which also include capable work (*công*), deferential behavior (*hạnh*), and appropriate comportment or appearance (*dung*). These were virtues of women who did not defy their parents’ wishes to bind their feet or join a revolutionary group that wanted to overthrow the dynasty. Tcheng Yu-hsiu’s intelligence and success would have come at the cost of being deferential as befitting a woman of her age and position. Tcheng Yu-hsiu was not an ideal woman who observed the Confucian three submissions and four virtues; Phan Bội Châu’s use of her example in his primary school text demonstrates that, while some Vietnamese writers did faithfully represent women in their

²¹⁰ Mona L. Siegel, “Global Feminists and the Paris Peace Conference: A Historical and Teaching Note” *World History Bulletin* 35 (2019): p. 19.

²¹¹ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1981), p. 210.

²¹² Phạm Văn Anh, “Đàn Bà Đời Nay: Trịnh Dục Tú” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* no. 83 (May 21, 1931).

hagiographies, others did not. Rather, writers who altered the personality traits and actions of extraordinary women did so as a method for influencing Vietnamese women's behavior and prescribing idealized traits. Phan Bội Châu was a clear example of this, but the writers of *Nữ Lữ Thơ Quán* did the same in subtler ways.

In this chapter I analyze the use and function of two biographies written by Phan Thị Bạch Vân in 1928: those of Madame Roland (1754-1793) and Qiu Jin (1875-1907). I will also be analyzing the second part of a series by Trần Tuấn Khải that paints a biographical sketch of Sophia Perovskaia (1853-1881). The series was titled *Hồn tự lập* (Independent Soul) and also featured a section about Mahatma Gandhi. Unlike Tcheng Yu-hsiu, who passed away in 1959, these three women lived and died before their biographies came to be written and published in Vietnam. Madame Roland, Sophia Perovskaia, and Qiu Jin's biographies were popular in other countries, and their examples inspired a host of women in the early-twentieth century. Why did Phan Thị Bạch Vân choose to grant her personal literary attention to Madame Roland and Qiu Jin? Why did she feature Sophia Perovskaia's story in her publication? These women's deaths – all at the hands of the state – offered a sense of solemnity and drama, adding weight to Bạch Vân's use of their example to inspire Vietnamese women. They were all revolutionary, in the sense that each of them died attempting to participate in (or spark) a revolution, or assassinate a leader whom they found intolerable, and Bạch Vân and Trần Tuấn Khải passionately highlighted their senses of idealism and commitment to a better society.

The French colonial state perceived these biographies as dangerous due to the nationalist undertones within them. These women's deaths, and their involvement in the ideas and actions of revolution, also made them feminine figures who subverted social hierarchies. Maintenance of the colonial state rested on the preservation of social hierarchies, such as the authority of men

over women, especially in what has been called “civilizing colonialism.”²¹³ As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán’s publications (like all Vietnamese publications) were systematically subjected to censorship and potential circulation bans. The biographies examined here were subject to bans, with the protectorate of Annam banning circulation of Qiu Jin’s biography, titled *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp*. Annam also banned the circulation, sale, and possession of the book by Trần Tuấn Khải that featured Sophia Perovskaia’s biography, titled *Ba tay hiệp nữ nước Nga*. The Résidence supérieure du Cambodge banned Qiu Jin’s biography, because her revolutionary example easily lent itself to anti-imperialist and nationalist interpretations. It is clear that these women would pose a threat to any state, especially a colonial one. Their involvement in revolutions and attempted assassinations meant that presenting their lives as aspirational, as the writers in Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán were wont to do, was tacitly endorsing revolutionary actions by those who read the books. Did Phan Thị Bạch Vân wish to see the French colonial government violently overthrown? Based on her other works, I do not find this likely. Did she wish for the Vietnamese to eventually possess independence and the ability to govern themselves? Certainly. It is clear she found courage and intelligence – qualities these three women possessed in spades – necessary to a thriving nation and culture. She did not highlight the violent or potentially-violent aspects of changes in state in her biographies. Madame Roland did not violently participate in the French Revolution; she was chiefly a woman of ideas, intellect, and inspiration for others. Her death was unfair and at the hands of violent revolutionaries, but she herself was not a figure whom one could point to as violent. In Qiu Jin’s case, she did present herself as martial and famously posed with a sword, and she was found guilty of involvement in a plot to overthrow China’s Manchu government. Yet, as we will see in

²¹³ John Comaroff, “Images of Empire, Contests of Conscience: Models of Colonial Domination in South Africa” *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): p. 674.

this chapter, Phan Thị Bạch Vân did not draw much attention to these aspects of Qiu's biography; rather, she included excerpts from her writings and poetry. She did not instruct women to take up a sword or dress as a man, but perhaps her very inclusion of Qiu Jin acted as an unspoken endorsement of her example and actions. Qiu was much more than a failed revolutionary, but her attempt to overthrow the government was her most well-known deed. While we cannot know Phan Thị Bạch Vân's true ideas concerning the matter of violent revolution, we can look to her biography of Qiu Jin and interpret her views of this woman whom she deemed a heroine. Lastly, Sophia Perovskaia advocated violence and professed anarchist ideals; she was arrested multiple times and worked to overthrow the tsarist state in Russia. In an attempt to assassinate Alexander II of Russia, Perovskaia helped assemble the bombs and gave a signal when the time came to dispatch these bombs. Her example, that of a woman seeking to end a tyrannical state, certainly represented a direct threat to the colonial state. Phan Thị Bạch Vân did not write this biography (Trần Tuấn Khải did), but she did have an editorial hand in all the publications offered by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán. Perovskaia's inclusion was bold and could not be obfuscated by simple descriptions of Perovskaia's intellectual prowess or love of literature. Regardless of how Trần Tuấn Khải spun her biography, Perovskaia's life was one dedicated to the violent overthrow of the state.

These biographies were another tool in Bạch Vân's arsenal of methods and strategies for strengthening Vietnamese women and, eventually, the Vietnamese people as a whole. Biographies offer scholars certain unique historical insights. For example, biographies offer a look at an historical figure's impact on the person writing their biography; in other words, a biographer will often communicate their assumptions, opinions, and ideas about an historical figure through their writing. Further, the selection, omission, and editorializing of a historical

figure's life provides us with ample material in analyzing how the biographer thought of their subject. As will be clear through Qiu Jin's example, these editorial choices also communicate information about the historical moment in which the biography appeared. In this chapter, I therefore argue that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Trần Tuấn Khải carefully selected aspects and moments in the lives of Madame Roland, Sophia Perovskaia, and Qiu Jin's lives and crafted a narrative intended to encourage Vietnamese readers to aspire to their same intellectual and moral heights. This encouragement was part of Bạch Vân's fictional work as well, but it found further weight from the lives of real, historical women.

Women's Biography as a genre

Studying and writing about important figures supports prescriptive literature through real-life, salient examples. Writing commanding prescriptions and recommendations for women's conduct is one part of constructing and enforcing desired behavior, but pointing to the lived histories, examples, and lives of figures you wish your readership to emulate provides structure and a model through which women can examine and enact ideals.

At this time, the Vietnamese were still culturally influenced by China; for Phan Thị Bạch Vân's women's press, the connection was visible – the back of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's* issues translated the name of her Women's Bookstore into Chinese. While the text of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's* issues was only available in *quốc ngữ*, Chinese on the back cover would attract and interest customers who could read Chinese. Additionally, the press's focus on biography was connected to a similar phenomenon occurring in China. Therefore, this chapter examines, comparatively and closely, the use of biography in the Chinese context. In China, the recording and writing of women's biographies was a method through which commentators could “describe, contain, and regulate women's lives,” yet “the ultimate objective of these various texts was to

mold Chinese culture and morality” as a whole.²¹⁴ Tales about upright and morally righteous women held implications for the entirety of society, in that they presented these women as remedies to a morally corrupt culture. This idea surrounding biography as a method of moral regulation extended to Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and even nationalist circles – everyone who sought to cultivate a unified and proper society found biography a useful tool.

Biography could encompass a variety of themes; one could relate a person’s individual accomplishments, their partnerships and involvement with their community, their talents, their missteps, or their failures. Yet biography could add to these explorations of largely impersonal life events with the inclusion of relationships, affect, familial ties, and personal writings. This reveals that, while authors could use biography to provide examples of how to live a “proper” life, biographies could be dynamic and reflect shifting norms in gender and culture. In the study of an individual’s life are many opportunities for biographers to insert their own sentiments. Biographers are just as able to construct a persona that reflects their attitudes as they are write a “faithful” rendering of a person’s life and accomplishments.

This diversity of material and exploration was not always so, however. Appearing during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220CE), Liu Xiang’s *Lienü zhuan* (Biographies of women) was organized thematically to highlight women’s qualities (intelligence, wisdom, obedience, righteousness), rather than present her overall personality or character. Liu’s biographies “inspired imitation,” and thereafter, women’s biographies that presented women as paragons of virtue (and later, paragons of chastity) came to be included in subsequent dynastic histories.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Joan Judge and Hu Ying, “Introduction,” in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women’s Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) p.3.

²¹⁵ Harriet T. Zurndorfer, “The *Lienü zhuan* Tradition and Wang Zhaoyuan’s (1763-1851) Production of the *Lienü zhuan buzhu* (1812),” in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women’s Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) p. 57.

These biographies were formulaic and served the purpose of presenting women with examples of desirable feminine comportment. Women were not involved as writers or editors; rather, they acted as readers (or listeners) of these biographies until later centuries.

While, most often, men commented on Liu Xiang's work – and added their own discussions of women's proper comportment – there were times when scholarly women annotated and interpreted *Lienü zhuan*. Wang Zhaoyuan (1763-1851) completed an annotation of *Lienü zhuan* in 1812; she “strove to explicate, annotate, and expurgate passages” of the text in order to elucidate Liu Xiang's original work.²¹⁶ After Wang Zhaoyuan's annotation of *Lienü zhuan*, other women came to annotate Liu's biographies, such as Liang Duan in 1831. These women found success and recognition in a male-dominated intellectual activity and could be described as talented women (*cainü*) as a result of their contributions to the *Lienü zhuan* genre. These women's engagements with the genre paved the way for further explorations of feminine virtue and the advancement of women's writings and education.

Later uses of female biography served clear political and cultural exigencies during the modern era. During China's late imperial period, biographical material focusing on “faithful maidens” popularized and venerated female chastity. The idea of a faithful maiden is an extreme form of the Confucian moral figure of the faithful widow (a woman who refused to marry after the death of her husband). Faithful maidens pledged themselves to lifelong chastity in order to honor their first betrothed, whether the betrothed was living or deceased. At times, women chose suicide to demonstrate their morality and obedience. Weijing Lu writes that the usage of faithful maiden tropes peaked during times of political and national crisis:

²¹⁶ Harriet T. Zurndorfer, “The *Lienü zhuan* Tradition and Wang Zhaoyuan's (1763-1851) Production of the *Lienü zhuan buzhu* (1812),” in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) p. 64.

*“During the late Ming political disorder and the seventeenth-century Manchu conquest, for example, literati poignantly alluded to faithful maiden suicides to criticize corrupt officials or men who shifted their loyalty to the new dynasty, to lament the fallen Chinese dynasty, or to announce their own moral conviction.”*²¹⁷

Here, we see an extreme and public turn to loyalty and faithfulness in times of strife and dynastic infidelity. These young women were taking drastic action with the pressure of Confucian morality behind them. Yet the faithful maiden ideal was not completely agreed upon as a positive cultural norm; there were critics who believed the ideal went against Confucian teachings and “the rituals prescribed in the classics.”²¹⁸ Some critics argued that women who committed suicide after the death of their betrothed “violated Confucian teaching[s] about cherishing human life” and put the death of their fiancés above the status of their parents.²¹⁹ Nonetheless, both critics and proponents turned to biographies of faithful maidens to engage in discussion as to the merit, the usefulness, and the morality of the concept of the faithful maiden. Ultimately, we see that discussion of faithful maidens, in their biographies and otherwise, revealed tension over cultural ideals of female morality.

This tension between scholars over female morality was indicative of society-wide tensions that stemmed from times of flux and change, such as wars and political strife. Men and women alike felt the need to discuss and deliberate over the state of society during the end of the Qing dynasty as a way to preserve and enforce cultural codes. While the phenomenon of the

²¹⁷ Weijing Lu, “Faithful Maiden Biographies,” in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women’s Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) p. 90.

²¹⁸ Weijing Lu, “Faithful Maiden Biographies,” p. 91.

²¹⁹ Weijing Lu, “Faithful Maiden Biographies,” p. 92.

faithful maiden was followed and practiced by unmarried women, it was principally discussed and deliberated over by male scholars. In the very last two decades of the Qing, this began to change and women joined discussions about the faithful maiden figure as well. The beginning of the twentieth century and the advent of the New Woman concept in China led to public critique over chastity suicide.²²⁰ Qiu Jin, a woman whose biography by Nǚ Lú Thō Quán I discuss in this chapter, commented on women's position and status prolifically before her execution by the state. A woman such as Qiu Jin, who forcefully criticized and strove to improve the status of Chinese women, was able to accomplish what she did due to the unique historical conditions at the turn of the new century.

Hu Ying describes the late-Qing as “a period of intensified contact (and confrontation) between different cultures”; it is because of this contact that observers in China began to reassess their place and status in the world by engaging with, analyzing, and comparing China to other cultures they encountered.²²¹ As Western powers came to enforce their notion of the “civilizing mission” in Asia, including both China and Vietnam, commentators and intellectuals were confronted by the cultural, political, and military differences between their cultures. Intellectuals used comparison in order to assess the position of their culture within a global hierarchy. The status of Chinese and Vietnamese women became an intrinsic part of this comparison, as the question of women's rights had become an important subject of debate and legislation in the West, including in France and Great Britain, during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Within this context, comparison, and self-conscious assessment of culture, women's biographies provided a means to understand existing gender disparities, women's efforts to counter

²²⁰ Hu Ying, “Gender and Modern Martyrology: Qiu Jin as Lienü or Nülieshi,” in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) p. 129.

²²¹ Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 3.

inequalities, and the ways in which women contributed to the construction of “new societies.” History and the lived examples of women were effective tools in establishing an aspirational femininity. It is because of comparisons between China and the West (or the “othering” of one culture in order to define one’s own) that Western women’s biographies became the first biographies circulated in Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese contexts. These women (such as Sophia Perovskaia or Madame Roland) with their lives, deeds, and thoughts translated into non-Western languages, became something altogether different – new – as their biographies were written by Japanese, Chinese, or Vietnamese authors. In some cases, Western women became part of fictionalized stories in non-Western novels²²² in others, their example simply came to be another standard by which women could be judged.

Biography of non-Vietnamese women: Use in the Vietnamese context

While it is clear that increased contact with foreign countries engendered further comparisons between them, the use of non-Vietnamese women for *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*’s biographies raises the question of *why* translate the events of multiple foreign women’s lives, their decisions, and their actions for a Vietnamese audience? There were certainly cultural differences between Madame Roland, Qiu Jin, and Bạch Vân’s readership, but this speaks to Bạch Vân’s commitment to hybridity and cultural cosmopolitanism in her vision of a modern Vietnamese womanhood. Not only were Bạch Vân, the writers, and editors behind *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* aware of a diverse variety of cultural histories and women’s accomplishments (i.e., very well-read), they viewed these women as translate-able in the new Vietnamese context which they were attempting to shape. These women translated French and Chinese biographies because they

²²² Such as Madame Roland appearing in the dreams of a Chinese protagonist and teaching her embroidering patterns, or another Chinese protagonist encountering Russian anarchists and Sophia Perovskaia in *Dongou nü haojie* (The Woman Hero of Eastern Europe). Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 10.

were of the opinion that Vietnamese women would find interest and useful life lessons in their pages. Further, they chose to focus on aspects of these women's lives which would appear the most relevant for a Vietnamese audience. The translation of foreign texts, philosophies, and biography was popular during this period, and had enjoyed that popularity since the late-nineteenth century and very beginning of the twentieth century.

Vietnamese men had engaged with foreign ideas through translation earlier, in the first decades of the twentieth century. The concept of *văn minh* (civilization) found expression in the *Duy Tân* Reform Movement, which consisted of reformist Confucian scholars who sought “the transformation of Vietnam into an enlightened and civilized nation.”²²³ By reading Chinese sources, these scholars (such as the famed Phan Bội Châu) found inspiration in Japan's Meiji Restoration (which itself found inspiration from Western educational models) and China's Hundred-Days' Reform Movement. Members of the movement soon sent young Vietnamese men to study in Japan in the *Đông Du* movement, an undertaking which emphasized the international scope of Vietnamese scholars' interest and learning at this time.²²⁴ This was not unique to the Vietnamese, but part of a larger movement in which other Asian states sent their students to Japan in similar efforts to reform and modernize in the image of the Japanese.²²⁵ These students learned from an emerging regional Asian power, rather than solely from the French colonial system in place at the time. This resulted in diverse perceptions and definitions of concepts such as ‘modern’ and ‘civilized.’ Even after the end of the *Đông Du* movement, Japanese strategy and Western ideas continued to filter into Vietnam through Chinese texts.

²²³ Yufen Chang, “Spatializing Enlightened Civilization in the Era of Translating Vernacular Modernity,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76 (2017): p. 627.

²²⁴ Sara Legrandjacques, “Go East! 1905 as a Turning Point for the Transnational History of Vietnamese Education,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8 (2020): p. 101.

²²⁵ Such as Chinese and Indian students. Sara Legrandjacques, “Go East! 1905 as a Turning Point for the Transnational History of Vietnamese Education,” *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8 (2020): p. 104.

In this iteration and search for civilization, for the Vietnamese, two competing discourses of civilization existed: those of France and China. These discourses found their way into the written material of reformist scholars. For example, adventure stories, published during the interwar years, showed that male authors “imagined an alternative version of civilization that rejected neither the French nor the Chinese models, but rather aimed to surpass both by selectively mixing the ‘best’ elements of each with Vietnamese culture.”²²⁶ By doing this, scholars were able to critique both France and China, such as rejecting precolonial Confucian learning or criticizing the French civilizing mission. They could forge a distinctly Vietnamese path forward in a rapidly-changing world by translating foreign works into the Vietnamese vernacular Romanized as *quốc ngữ* and creating their own works of fiction and nonfiction. These men began writing their works about a decade before Phan Thị Bạch Vân, primarily because for Vietnamese women there existed less opportunity to participate in these movements. Before the educational reforms of the early-twentieth century, “Vietnamese women had no access to formal schooling.”²²⁷ One Vietnamese reformer, Phan Châu Trinh, allowed two women to attend the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục, or the Tonkin Free School in 1907.²²⁸ Yet it was only with the advent of the first women’s-focused periodical (*Nữ giới chung*), led by a female editor, Sương Nguyệt Anh, that Vietnamese women began to actively participate in this forging of a new Vietnamese civilization.

These women were aware of men like Phan Bội Châu translating foreign works and ideas into Vietnamese. In some cases, women who wrote in the public sphere in the 1920s and 30s

²²⁶ Yufen Chang, “Spatializing Enlightened Civilization in the Era of Translating Vernacular Modernity,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76 (2017): p. 629.

²²⁷ Marta Lopatková, “Văn quốc ngữ: Teaching Modernity through Classics” chapter in *Southeast Asian education in modern history: schools, manipulation, and contest* eds. Pia Jolliffe and Thomas Richard Bruce (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 103.

²²⁸ David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 165.

were the female relatives of male reformist scholars.²²⁹ However, while there were now new ways for Vietnamese men to think about the world, with information coming by way of Japan, China, and Europe, there was little material that specifically targeted women. There were few resources for women who were interested in a new or modern femininity, and hardly any material written (or endorsed) by a fellow woman. *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* sought to remedy this lacuna by providing their female audience with translations of biographies, many of which were already popular in other countries. Most of these biographies centered around women, but *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s writers also highlighted men such as Gandhi. The most important factor in determining what constituted a worthy translated biography was if the subject possessed a noble spirit and love of their culture or nation.

I have described Phan Thị Bạch Vân and *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s interest in foreign women in their published works.²³⁰ The biographies in this chapter featured the lives of non-Vietnamese women: a French woman, a Russian woman, and a Chinese woman. These choices are telling, as two of these countries exerted significant cultural influence on the Vietnamese. As a colonial power, France touted the virtues of republicanism while also depriving its colonies and its protectorates of benefitting from the republican ideal. In Vietnam, the colonial state did away with the traditional Confucian Vietnamese model and replaced it, at first, with a model based on metropolitan schools. Over time, however, the stated goals of assimilation through education and through attempts to inculcate French philosophical notions proved to be a failure. Colonial education reforms set in place around 1917 revealed French abdication of the assimilation ideal and engendered the institution, in its stead, of a policy of association. While influential for a

²²⁹ A good example of this is *Sương Nguyệt Anh* (editor of *Nữ giới chung* "Women's Bell") being the daughter of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, the famous southern poet and opponent of French colonization.

²³⁰ See the Introduction of this thesis.

small number of wealthy or well-placed Vietnamese families, this colonial education policy did little to raise literacy rates or to significantly raise the number of schools throughout the Indochinese union. In spite of this, for those Vietnamese women (and men) fortunate enough to attend colonial schools, the impact of access to knowledge (science, literature, language, history, and philosophy) was profound. As for China, it had been influential for Vietnamese elites for hundreds of years. Their close geographic proximity and the adoption of Confucian forms of education and governance by the Vietnamese meant that those of the upper classes shared similar interests and values.

Bạch Vân and her cohort did not choose to write biographies of women like Madame Roland and Qiu Jin in order to impose or encourage adoption of French or Chinese practices and moral principles; rather, like male reformist scholars, they sought to further contribute to the shaping of an ideal *Vietnamese* womanhood through example. They translated these examples in ways which would be intelligible for their audience. They chose to highlight and carefully selected actions, attitudes, and writings from these women which would interest their readers and effectively communicate their desired feminine characteristics. In Madame Roland's case, they highlighted her sacrifice, studiousness, and initiative. They glossed over less-than-ideal aspects of her inner life, such as her likely extramarital affair with François Buzot. Bạch Vân emphasized Qiu Jin's independence, her writings, and poetry. Bạch Vân chose to feature the opening essay from Qiu Jin's ill-fated women's periodical, in full, because of its emphasis on the improvement of women's status and access to education. In her essay, Jin also emphasized women's duty to themselves and other women, which was a principle that Bạch Vân endorsed in her writings.

As stated above, biographies of Western women such as Madame Roland, Sophia Perovskaia, and Joan of Arc proliferated through the literary world of Asia at this time: Japan, China, and Korea all had translations of female biographies or produced them based on readings of primary texts.²³¹ In Vietnam, there was talk of Vietnamese heroines (Hai Bà Trưng, Lady Triệu) in newspapers, but that talk was not encouraged or – often – allowed by the French colonial government.²³² Calls for readers to remember or emulate the sacrifice of the Trưng Sisters (mythologized for their legendary military action against Chinese invaders) did not comfort French authorities, who did not want to be compared to the invading Chinese of the prior millennium and were aware of the nationalist, anticolonial overtones in writings about the myth of the sisters' lives and actions.

Writers and readers did not always view foreign women favorably, but comparisons between women of differing nationalities occurred regardless. After Qiu Jin was executed by the Chinese state, her friend Wu Zhiying wrote biographical essays about her and addressed the fact that some people compared her “uncompromising personality” to Sophia Perovskaia and Madame Roland.²³³ Wu herself did not compare Qiu Jin to these Western women; instead she dismissed the comparison. To her, Western women were not viewed positively; rather, they indicated rigidity and a lack of tractability. Depending on a specific woman and the person analyzing her personality and deeds, traits that appeared well-liked to some might be perceived negatively by others. With the prevalence of foreign women's biographies in Asia – and, especially in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Western women's biographies –

²³¹ See Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 10 or Ji Eun-Lee, *Women Pre-scripted: Forging Modern Roles through Korean Print* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), p. 58.

²³² For example, Philippe Peycam notes authorities closed *Nữ giới chung* (Women's Bell) due to an article's reference to the Trưng Sisters. Philippe Peycam, *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism: Saigon, 1916-1930* (Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 66.

²³³ Hu Ying, “Writing Qiu Jin's life: Wu Zhiying and her family learning” *Late Imperial China* 25 (2004): p. 129.

Asian women of high status might be compared to these overseas exemplars. This is also because women's biography had been a popular genre in prior centuries, serving as a salient method through which authors could shape an age's culture or attitude. These biographies were consciously shaped by a particular author's outlook and what purpose they wanted the biography to serve. It was for this reason that Russian or French women could appear to be moral exemplars or an unfavorable comparison, depending on whom one asked. Regardless, women's biography was popular amongst the region's intellectuals at this time and merits our scholarly consideration. With this in mind, we now turn to Vietnamese women's engagements with the genre of biography.

MADAME ROLAND

France's first heroine – Gương nữ kiệt

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's biography of Madame Roland bears similarities to Madeleine Clemenceau- Jacquemaire's biography, published in France in 1926. Bạch Vân featured the same portrait of Roland (see **Figure 3.1** and **Figure 3.3**), as well as the same photo from the last lines of her memoirs written at the Sainte-Pélagie prison in Paris (see **Figure 3.2** and **Figure 3.4**). It is likely that Bạch Vân read Clemenceau-Jacquemarie's in Cochinchina and decided to translate and author her own version through her publishing house. This suggests an intertextuality and connection between women authors – as well as readers – at this time, through the published biographies of famous women. We cannot know exactly which biographies each author or translator read, as there were multiple works featuring Madame Roland in the first decades of the twentieth century. There was also a biography of Roland by Liang Qichao in Chinese, titled *The Biography of Madame Roland – the First Exceptional Woman of Modern Society* (1902).²³⁴ This

²³⁴ Wei Hu, "Beyond Life and Death: Images of Exceptional Women and Chinese Modernity" (PhD Diss., University of South Carolina, 2017), p. 3.

framing of Roland – as the first exceptional modern woman – is similar to the way Bạch Vân frames her, as a nationalist example for future nationalist leaders and statesmen.

The content of Bạch Vân's biography had differences, however; her opening page was not the same discussion of Roland's early life which Madeleine Jacquemaire-Clemenceau wrote (such as where she was born, a description of her family home, and when she was baptized). Rather, Bạch Vân focused on Roland's death, ties to nationalism, and the men she inspired. The first lines of the biography quote Roland's famous and sensational last words: *O Liberty! Liberty, what crimes we commit in your name!* This was a moving way in which she could catch readers' attention and speak to Roland's commitment to certain ideals.

In her book about Korean women's social roles in the early twentieth century, Ji-Eun Lee notes that a biography of Madame Roland, translated into Korean, also opened in an "emotional tone" with Roland's last words about liberty.²³⁵ Lee believes the Korean biography, serialized in 1907, came from a 1902 Chinese translation, which came from a Japanese translation of French or English biographies. The translations: Japanese, Chinese, and Korean, were all filtered through their respective languages and, at times, featured "authorial interjections" which represented Korean culture more so than Roland's French culture.²³⁶ This biography, along with a Korean version of Joan of Arc's biography, simultaneously portrayed both women as purveyors of revolution and as exemplary paragons of filial piety. The use of Western women to portray values which Koreans would endorse and recognize "underscores the turbulent nature of the times in which the biographies appeared," when "concepts such as the feminine hero, the role of Western ideals, domesticity, the genre of biography, and indeed the nation itself underwent a

²³⁵ Ji Eun-Lee, *Women Pre-scripted: Forging Modern Roles through Korean Print* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), p. 58.

²³⁶ Ji Eun-Lee, *Women Pre-scripted*, p. 60.

complicated structuring and restructuring.”²³⁷ Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s biography of Roland, published at a time in which “modernizing essays and translations increased...during the relatively liberal Varenne administration (1923-1928),” was an attempt to convince Vietnamese

²³⁷ Ji Eun-Lee, *Women Pre-scripted: Forging Modern Roles through Korean Print* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), p. 61.



COPIE D'UN PORTRAIT DE MADAME ROLAND,
EXÉCUTÉ D'APRÈS NATURE PAR UN DE SES CO-DÉTENUS
(Document communiqué par le général Marillier.)

Figure 3.1
Portrait of Madame Roland
from Madeleine
Jacquemaire-Clemenceau's
biography of 1926.

pluie au milieu des horreurs qui déchirent
ma patrie, je ne puis vivre ^{sur} ses ruines,
j'aime mieux m'y ensevelir. ouvre ton sein
Dieu juste, reçois-moi !
A trente-neuf ans,

FAC-SIMILE DES DERNIÈRES LIGNES DES MÉMOIRES DE MADAME ROLAND
ÉCRITS A SAINTE-PÉLAGIE

[...Je ne sais plus conduire la] plume au milieu des horreurs qui déchirent ma patrie, je ne puis vivre sur ses ruines, j'aime mieux m'y ensevelir. Nature, ouvre ton sein, Dieu juste, reçois-moi ! (Paraphrase habituelle de Madame Roland). A trente-neuf ans.

Figure 3.2
Copy of Madame
Roland's last words
written in her memoirs,
from Madeleine
Jacquemaire-
Clemenceau's biography
of 1926.

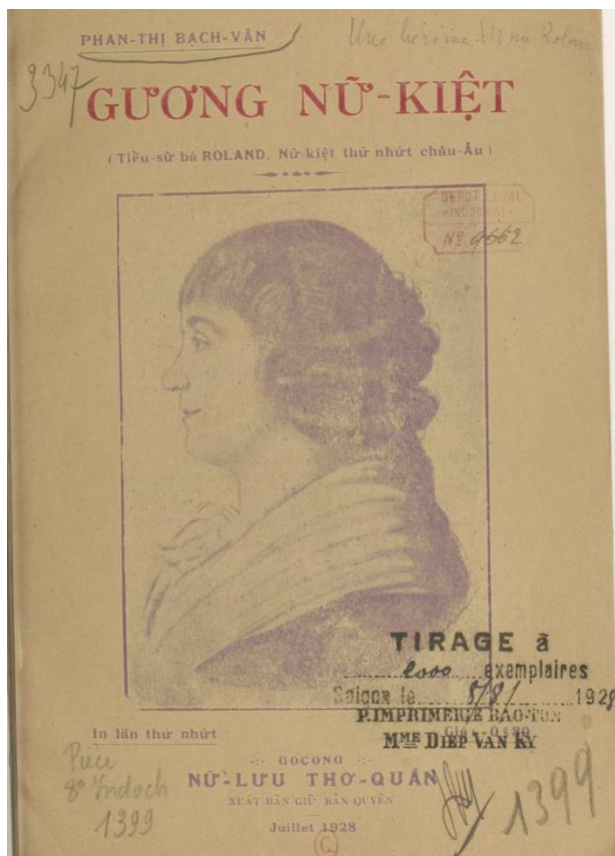


Figure 3.3
Portrait of Madame Roland
from Phan Thị Bạch Vân's
biography of 1928.

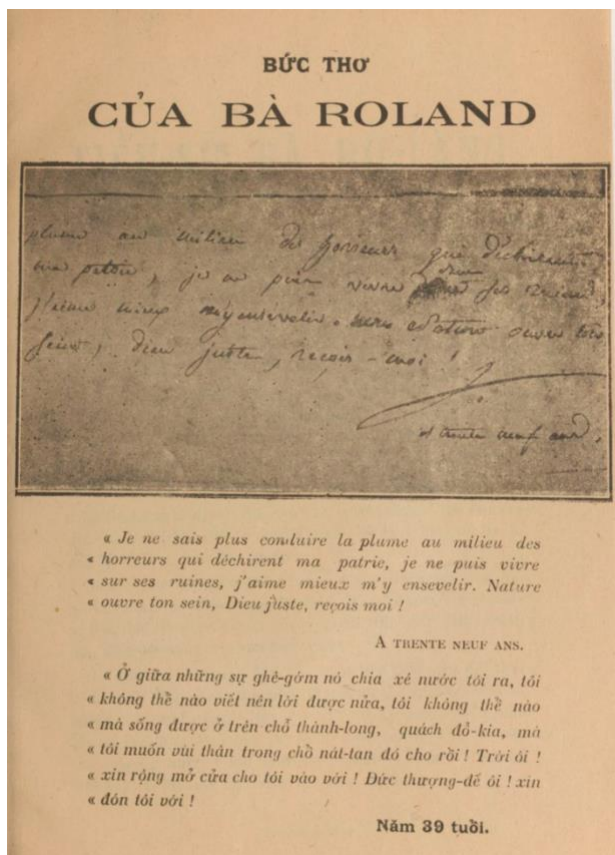


Figure 3.4
Copy of Madame Roland's
last words written in her
memoirs, in French and
Vietnamese, from Phan Thị
Bạch Vân's biography of
1928.

readers of the importance of commitment to one's culture and country.²³⁸ The work was about a French woman, but motivation behind its publication, its intended audience, and Bạch Vân's desire for women to emulate Roland's intellect and disposition were part of early-twentieth century Vietnamese culture.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's biography featured focus on Roland's revolutionary spirit and her connection to her parents. Bạch Vân also carefully underscored Roland's intellectual genealogy, listing and highlighting which authors Roland enjoyed reading. Perhaps most of all, Bạch Vân brought attention to Madame Roland's patriotism and dedication to the betterment of the nation. Prior to the biography's first page, Bạch Vân included a copy from a page of Roland's memoir, shown in French and translated into Vietnamese, stating,

“Je ne sais plus conduire la plume au milieu des horreurs qui déchirent ma patrie, je ne puis vivre sur ses ruines, j'aime mieux m'y ensevelir. Nature ouvre ton sein, Dieu juste, reçois moi!”

These quotations and the references to Roland's death in the midst of the Reign of Terror place more emphasis on her fate, cause of death, and dismay at the fate of France rather than the substance of her thought, political involvement, or writings. In this introductory passage, the biography treats Manon Roland as a symbol and an inspiration for others, rather than providing analysis or genealogy of the salonnière's own perspective. Not a philosopher or mere writer, Madame Roland is depicted as a *heroine* who died and engaged in a struggle for ideals such as liberty and freedom. While she was not able to achieve these ideals herself, her example and

²³⁸ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1981), p. 52.

martyrdom provided inspiration for subsequent men and women who influenced the trajectory of the nineteenth century.

This introductory passage centers Roland within a hagiographic narrative that placed more emphasis on Roland's place in (and impact upon) society, rather than Roland as an individual. Emphasis on her role in wider social structures and trends suggests that Madame Roland launched the nationalist spirit that seized France (and, later, all of Europe) during and after the French Revolution. Bạch Vân writes that Roland acted as a mother towards and made men such as Napoléon Bonaparte (1769-1821), Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882), Cavour (1810-1861), Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), and “Macdhonan,” which indicates Roland was a figure who preceded nationalist figures.²³⁹ These men are credited with sparking the formation of modern European nation-states and nationalism in the nineteenth century in countries such as France, Italy, and Germany. Bạch Vân points to Roland as the reason for the civilized strides made by France in the nineteenth century. She rhetorically asks how this happened and answers that first, the French Revolution created the nineteenth century in France and second, that Madame Roland created the French Revolution. The French Revolution had a clear tie to later secular nationalist movements in Europe and inspired the way people began to view the concept of nationhood and their place within the nation. Phan Thị Bạch Vân thus views (and wishes her readers to view) Madame Roland as the spark that ignited nationalism and national understanding in both France and the whole of Europe. Perhaps her biography could do the same for the Vietnamese.

²³⁹ Written as “ông Mắc-đô-nang,” this could be referring to Canada's first Prime Minister (credited with unifying the nation) Sir John A. Macdonald. Bạch Vân describes Madame Roland as “là người làm mẹ” to a number of prominent nationalist figures of the nineteenth century. Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Giương nữ-kiệt* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p. 1.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân begins discussion of Madame Roland's early life with descriptions of her parents and literary influences, emphasizing the importance of familial and intellectual power over extraordinary women such as Roland. Her father was good-natured (*tánh hiền lành*) and her mother was quick-witted, intelligent (*lanh-lợi thông-minh*), and industrious (*có tánh cần-kiệm*). Madame Roland learned how to read by the time she was four years old and fostered a love for books. Bạch Vân goes on to list the books that Roland read as a young person which influenced her such as the Bible (the Old and New Testaments), Appian's *The Civil Wars*, and Michel Febvre's *Theater of Turkey* (1682). These titles were also listed in Madeleine Jacquemaire-Clemenceau's biography of Roland. Bạch Vân deviates from Jacquemaire-Clemenceau when she discusses Roland's early interest in the works of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), John Locke (1632-1704), Montesquieu (1689-1755), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Bạch Vân notes that Roland's first taste of Rousseau "made [her] mad, hysterical. [She] only wanted to read his books" from that point on.²⁴⁰ Bạch Vân chose to emphasize Roland's familiarity with Enlightenment authors because Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's readership was also familiar with the works of Rousseau and Montesquieu; Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán published their ideas in *Tinh thần phụ nữ* (the same volumes in which Bạch Vân published *Kiếp hoa thám sử*). With this further endorsement coming from Madame Roland herself (in the form of a passionate declaration that Rousseau's ideas drove her crazy), Bạch Vân's readers found encouragement and a sympathetic figure with whom they could relate. Were young women to find similar passion in the works of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Madame Roland herself, perhaps they could come to influence the trajectory of another century as well.

²⁴⁰ "...nói rằng sách của ông Rút-xô, làm cho tôi như điên, như cuồng. Tôi chỉ muốn đọc sách ông thôi." Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Gương nữ-kiệt* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p. 3.

In this work, Bạch Vân carefully builds a genealogy for Madame Roland's intellectual development through discussion of her youth and early influences. Through this genealogy, Bạch Vân outlines the best methods through which women aspiring to Roland's influence and character may emulate her trajectory. Deemed most important for young women was an in-depth discussion of Roland's youthful personality traits and disposition. The biography highlighted Roland's dismissal of the material world, such as clothing (*sự trang-sức*) and happiness derived from material items, such as possessions (*vui sướng về vật-chất*). Madame Roland, however, critiqued what she believed were negative social activities (such as dancing and singing) and avoided deceitful features of life. Roland only wished to live modestly in a small home with a garden, near a church. Bạch Vân also notes that Roland had a close female friend with whom she could converse (*đàm đạo*) and find diversion (*tiêu-khiển*). Overall, Bạch Vân describes a young Madame Roland as a well-read, good-natured, and unassuming woman. She spends about a third of the biography on Roland's premarital life, emphasizing the need for young people to have an adequate foundation on which they may build an extraordinary life. Roland's dismissal of the material world mirrors both Buddhist philosophical warnings against material attachment and craving as well as New Testament verses against materialism and clinging to possessions. Here we see that Manon Roland's early life would be ideal for young Vietnamese women who wished to become productive and virtuous adults.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's description of Roland's marriage reveals her goals for Vietnamese women's relationships with men. Bạch Vân writes that Madame Roland's parents wished for her to marry a business man, but Roland was not amenable to this arrangement. Rather, Roland only wished to marry someone of ideas, learning, strong will, and a noble spirit.²⁴¹ Roland's father did

²⁴¹ "...một người có tư-tưởng, có học-thức, có chí-khí cao-thương mà thôi..." Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Guơng nữ-kiệt* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p. 7.

not understand why she felt this way, but she held fast to her beliefs and did not marry for wealth. Madame Roland married late, at the age of twenty-five, to a man who was well-traveled, well-read, and frank (*thành thật*). He was also twenty years Madame Roland's senior. In their early marriage, the two lived in poverty and her husband worked constantly. Madame Roland studied botany at the Jardin du Roi (today called the Jardin des Plantes) in her spare time. The couple welcomed a daughter in 1781, the year after they married. Their marriage, and Madame Roland's approach to selecting a husband, mirror Phan Thị Bạch Vân's beliefs relating to marriage and how Vietnamese women should approach matrimony. Madame Roland's assertion for *her own* desired qualities in a partner reflect Bạch Vân's portrayal of companionate marriage in *Nữ anh tài*, wherein Tú Anh defies her parents' wishes that she marry for wealth and status; rather, Tú Anh goes to great lengths to ensure she marries a man who shared with her a similar mindset and disposition. Roland, like Tú Anh, possesses her own interests outside of her marriage, providing a measure of independence and sense of accomplishment. Madame Roland's marriage was a worthy lesson for young women in the realm of love, but Bạch Vân additionally draws attention to Roland's love of her country and moral principles.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân next provides background to the French Revolution, discussing the reigns of Louis XIV, XV, and XVI, the resignation of Louis XVI's director-general of finances, Jacques Necker, and the storming of the Bastille. Bạch Vân identifies the moment the Bastille was breached as the moment in which Roland became a revolutionary.²⁴² Bạch Vân is careful to note that Roland did not simply love revolution for revolution's sake; rather, she loved France and thought her country was dying, therefore she must love and advocate revolution so that France could live. Around this time, Madame Roland began supporting and propagandizing the

²⁴² Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Guơng nữ-khiết* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p. 9.

works of Pierre Corneille and Voltaire. She also supported the efforts of any learned person who spread revolutionary and Enlightenment ideas to the common people. Bạch Vân notes Roland's friendship with the lawyer, Luc-Antoine de Champagneux, who published their correspondence in his newspaper, *Le courier de Lyon* in order to spread these new ideas to a wider audience.

Bạch Vân writes that Madame Roland personally put the lessons of encouraging revolution, which she had read about, into action. She also gathered Jean-Jacques Rousseau's essays about civil liberties and the announcement of America's independence. Bạch Vân described Roland's relationship with Jacques Pierre Brissot, a journalist who greatly admired Benjamin Franklin and George Washington, and wrote about Madame Roland's salon, listing her group of "friends" (*các bạn*) such as: Jacques Pierre Brissot, Jérôme Pétion de Villeneuve, Maximilien Robespierre, François Buzot, Louis de Noailles, Louis Bosc, and François Lanthenas. There is emphasis on the people with whom Roland associated, and how as a whole they contributed to a new sense of patriotism and idealism in France. Bạch Vân writes that Roland belonged to the Girondins, called the Party of Patriots, "*để gọi cái đảng Ái-quốc. 'Parti des Patriotes.'*"²⁴³ Here, we see that Madame Roland was supportive of prominent intellectuals of the day, knowledgeable of the goings-on in France and other areas of the world, and contributed to the press. This makes her life exactly what Phan Thị Bạch Vân and others involved in Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán wished Vietnamese women would curate for themselves, with open discussion of ideas and current events melding with genuine desire for positive change in their countries. Through Bạch Vân's biography of Madame Roland, she established herself as a savvy propagandist for women's rights and their participation in Vietnamese nationalism.

²⁴³ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Guơng nữ-kiệt* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p. 14.

As Bạch Vân described the Rolands' forays into Revolutionary government, she pointed to Madame Roland's role behind the scenes of her husband's post as Minister of the Interior. She wrote that "By day, [Madame Roland] gathered the parties together to discuss matters, by night, she dedicated herself to helping with her husband's work."²⁴⁴ Bạch Vân pointed out that Monsieur Roland typically invited his wife to help and discuss amongst the men when they gathered. Madame Roland did not trust King Louis XVI, and discussed this with her husband, calling the King stupid (*ngu*). Again, we see an emphasis on companionate marriage and love between equals, wherein a wife may contribute to her husband's important work as a government official. To Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Madame Roland was not a woman who sat idle, or relegated herself to private areas of the home while her husband enjoyed a public-facing occupation; rather, she made herself indispensable. Writing about Madame Roland's high position in her marriage and how she fostered respect in male circles promoted a sense of equality between her and her husband. Phan Thị Bạch Vân was encouraging young Vietnamese women to seek out similar marital relationships for themselves, which directly challenged cultural codes that taught women to submissively obey their husbands once married.

Bạch Vân quickly moves to Roland's arrest, in which she depicts a stoic yet heartfelt woman, attempting to spend her imprisonment productively. Roland read daily during her imprisonment, reading works by Plutarque (46-119), the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), and James Thomson (1700-1748), in addition to bringing an English dictionary with her. While Madame Roland was imprisoned, a female English writer visited her and commented on Roland's plight, the cramped space of the jail, and the books Roland read (noting her interest in the life of Plutarque). Yet Roland spoke with cheer and, when the Englishwoman tried to

²⁴⁴ "Ban ngày bà chiêu tập những đảng-phái bàn-bạc, ban đêm thì cúc-cung tận-tụy để giúp cho chồng..." Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Gương nữ-khiết* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), pp. 15-16.

comfort Roland, she appeared resigned to her fate. The woman asked Roland about her daughter, and this topic overwhelmed and struck Roland speechless. Bạch Vân, at this juncture, praises Roland for her heroism and the retention of her senses of love and attachment, despite her shaken reputation. When describing the day of Roland's death, Bạch Vân notes that she gave the impression of purity (*thanh khiết*) and nobility (*cao thượng*), like a rising tide. After her death, Bạch Vân noted that she lived on in the history of France. Readers see a woman who appears outwardly unruffled, holding onto her dignity in the face of undignified circumstances, yet keeping her love towards her daughter on display at appropriate moments. Here is a mother committed to both Revolution and her family in equal measure.

Bạch Vân makes pointed comparisons between the state of modern-day Vietnamese affairs to the people of pre-Revolutionary France, providing colonial censors with ample reason to question her motivations, and readers to find inspiration and necessity in improving their collective status. The governments of Annam, Tonkin, and Cambodia banned the “introduction, circulation, sale, distribution, and possession” of the biography through administrative bulletins in 1928, the same year it was released.²⁴⁵ This was consistent with the actions of the colonial authorities in the late-1920s, as they were “increasingly worried that [women's] social, educational, and intellectual organizations had definite political implications” and censored accordingly.²⁴⁶ In an afterword following Madame Roland's biography, Bạch Vân finds similarities between the current state of the Vietnamese to the French before the Revolution; she claims that the state of the country is uncertain and dark (*non-sông mù-mịt*) but that people should not despair. Instead, she calls on readers to tell Madame Roland's story. The biography's

²⁴⁵ “Bulletin administratif de l'Annam” Hué, 1928-12-15, p. 240, “Bulletin administratif du Tonkin” Hanoi, 1928-09-15, p. 141, and “Bulletin administratif du Cambodge” Pnom Penh, 1928-07, CVIII.

²⁴⁶ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1981), p. 217.

comparisons between pre-Revolutionary France and current-day Vietnam was undoubtedly one reason why censors and the colonial government fined Phan Thị Bạch Vân and did their best to stifle her writing. In 1930, Bạch Vân, among other writers, went to court “for the crime of disturbing the peace through ideological literature,” which included her biography about Madame Roland.²⁴⁷ Bạch Vân also wrote that the French Revolution was necessary; according to her, prior to this agitation, France had been suffering under hundreds of years of tyranny.²⁴⁸ She writes that after the Revolution, France – and Europe – was a free political sphere for over a hundred years. Bạch Vân attempts to convince the reader through the beginning of the biography and the afterword that the Revolution had been one of the most significant events in history. While she did not explicitly call for a bloody Revolution in Vietnam, or a violent break from French colonization, her biography of Roland calls for a change of the status quo through endorsement of certain ideals (such as freedom from tyranny, patriotism, and swift political action). Valorization of the beginning of the Revolution was cause for alarm amongst French administrators as they witnessed an intelligentsia increasingly calling for further self-determination and meaningful change.

Bạch Vân also called for disruption of the status-quo through her discussions about the lead-up to Revolution; her rhetoric compared the French before and during the First Republic to the English during their Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution, both discussed with appreciation. When read in conjunction with her enthusiastic approval of the Girondins (the Party of Patriots) and moderate phase of the French Revolution, readers would note this endorsement and see fit to advocate a similar trajectory, which could cause unrest in an active

²⁴⁷ “cũng vì cái tội làm rối cuộc trị an bằng văn chương tư tưởng” in “Gần đây trong nước có những việc gì” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (20 February 1930), p. 26.

²⁴⁸ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Guơng nữ-kiệt* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p. 29.

colony under European rule. In the biography, Bạch Vân describes Roland's private thoughts around the Revolution prior to the Constitution of 1791; as she saw the Revolution was "late," she pondered whether the people had the courage to carry it out.²⁴⁹ In the afterword of the biography, Bạch Vân discusses similarities between the French Revolution of 1789 to the English revolution (or restoration) of 1660; according to Bạch Vân, the English were prosperous after their revolution, while the French suffered a crisis. This was because the English behaved autonomously and quickly, while the French were slow and had little interest in Revolution prior to the end of the eighteenth century, resulting in sabotage and cruelty on the part of the people. Bạch Vân's assessment illustrates that she favored a moderate, bourgeois revolution or a constitutional monarchy akin to the outcome of the seventeenth century English revolution. This was not agitation or a call for violence, but the desire for change to a more independent, robust rule of the people.

According to Bạch Vân, Madame Roland was a moderate, intelligent, and self-sufficient woman who helped contribute to an event that "created the 19th century."²⁵⁰ This biography acted as an endorsement of moderate political change and women's role within that change. The major facts about Madame Roland were accurate, but it was Bạch Vân's role as the author which made Roland appear larger-than-life and a fitting role model for Vietnamese women. As Roland made herself indispensable for her husband's important work, so too did Phan Thị Bạch Vân wish to call for Vietnamese women to make themselves indispensable in Vietnamese people's potential for self-determination.

²⁴⁹ "...nhân-dân quả đã có cái phách-lực ấy chưa? Bà thấy việc cách-mạng tiến-hành chậm-trễ..." Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Giương nữ-kiệt* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p.12.

²⁵⁰ Bạch Vân writes that the French revolution "làm mẹ cho thế kỷ thứ 19," or was a mother to the 19th century. Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Giương nữ-kiệt* (Nữ lưu thơ Quán, 1928), p.1.

SOPHIA PEROVSKAIA

Hiệp nữ nước Nga – A Russian heroine

Sophia Perovskaia was born into an aristocratic family in Russia in 1853. While she was in school, she met friends interested in revolutionary ideas and joined a secret society called Land and Liberty, which advocated land distribution to peasants and the dissolution of the Russian Empire. She became interested in terrorism as a method of political agitation when the Land and Liberty society split into the People's Will and joined a plot to assassinate Alexander II of Russia. In 1881, the plot succeeded and Sophia Perovskaia was later arrested, sentenced to death, and hanged for regicide. She died a young woman at just 27 years old, but her legacy grew to capture the interest of people far outside of her home country.²⁵¹

What makes Sophia Perovskaia interesting as a biographical subject was not necessarily her commitments to revolutionary ideals or her tragic life trajectory that ended in violence. Rather, what makes Sophia interesting to study as a biographical subject is that Asian authors were fascinated with her and made her the subject of biographies in different countries. The Vietnamese were not alone in bringing their readers' attention to the life of Sophia Perovskaia; Qiu Jin herself (whose biographical treatment I analyze below) wrote that "Everyday I pray for (Chinese) women, and I wish they will throw off the shackles and become excellent women, women heroes, and exceptional women standing on the stage of a new world with freedom, just like Roland, Sophia, Beecher..."²⁵² Another writer, named Lingnan yuyi nüshi, wrote a book titled *Exceptional Woman from Eastern Europe* (1902-1903), which included Sophia as a character, and was the first example of a reform-minded novel to reach Chinese woman readers

²⁵¹ Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 10.

²⁵² Qiu Jin quoted in Wei Hu, "Beyond Life and Death: Images of Exceptional Women and Chinese Modernity" (PhD Diss., University of South Carolina, 2017), p. 3.

and provide them with moral and aspirational images for women.²⁵³ The novel featured collaboration between Chinese and Russian women who were committed to revolution; the book was inspired by a Japanese work called *Modern Anarchism* by Kemuyama Sentarō, the author's professor at Waseda University.²⁵⁴ David Der-wei Wang writes that what made Sophia Perovskaia so appealing to the Chinese was “not only because she was a female revolutionary but also because she modernized the virtues one would have found in Chinese chivalric womanhood...Sophia Perovskaia may well have appeared to Chinese readers as an updated and foreign woman warrior, forever traveling and doing good deeds, plagued by corrupt officialdom, committed to a noble cause at the cost of her own welfare and honored by legions of simple folk.”²⁵⁵ Sophia's actions in her own country and cultural milieu led to her renown in China. Additionally, the Chinese applied their own perceptions, histories, and literary traditions to her example, such as the parallels that Chinese readers made between Perovskaia and the knight-errant literary type found in Chinese literature. As David Der-wei Wang writes, Perovskaia's actions in Russia made her seem like a foreign woman warrior who was committed to a noble cause, travelling, and performing good deeds at personal cost. This perception fits within the common characteristics associated with knight-errant characters found in Chinese literature who sought to right wrongs and help others, often in defiance of the law.²⁵⁶ Through Sophia Perovskaia, Chinese admirers could see their own ideals reflected back at them, and they inscribed their idea of what was heroic onto her life and deeds.

²⁵³ Ellen Widmer, “Inflecting Gender: Zhan Kai/Siqi Zhai's ‘New Novels’ and Courtesan Sketches” *Nan Nü: Men, Women, and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 6 (2004): p. 163.

²⁵⁴ David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 166.

²⁵⁵ David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor*, p. 167.

²⁵⁶ James Liu, “The Knight Errant in Chinese Literature: a lecture delivered on January 23, 1961” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 1 (1960): p. 30.

That Sophia Perovskaia sparked so much interest was extraordinary, and her inclusion in a Vietnamese publication places the Vietnamese of this time squarely in an East Asian cultural sphere. There is no doubt that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Trần Tuấn Khải read and were inspired by Chinese reformist literature, especially reformist literature focusing on women. Through analysis of these biographies, we find that they modeled their biographical output on Chinese biographies of exceptional women, a popular genre at the turn of the century in China. While there were differences between Vietnamese authors' interpretations of Madame Roland, Sophia Perovskaia, and Qiu Jin's lives and biographies published by the Chinese, these Vietnamese authors derived inspiration from the earlier, Chinese books about these women. Nữ Lữ Thơ Quán's authors' interest in, and attention paid to, Chinese literary output places them in a cultural sphere equally inhabited by East Asian and European influences.

Trần Tuấn Khải's work about Sophia Perovskaia begins with the assumption that a reader of European history is familiar with the ascension of Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) and the execution of Charles I of England (1600-1649).²⁵⁷ Khải praises Cromwell and writes that, while it cost the blood and effort of his compatriots (*xương máu đồng bào*) in order to succeed, he achieved perpetual fame and gratitude amongst the populace. Khải compares Oliver Cromwell to Sophia Perovskaia (*Tô-phi-á*), whom he describes as a young and helpless, beautiful girl (*một ả thuyền duyên thơ yếu*). He writes that Cromwell possessed an army that would help him wrest power from the King and establish a Commonwealth, while Sophia only had her body and two

²⁵⁷ I understand the author is referring to Cromwell based on context, as the name the author uses does not make the identity clear. The first line goes, "Ta đọc lịch sử Âu Tây, nghe đến chuyện Khắc-luân-uy-nhi làm thủ tướng đăng độc lập, giết vua Charles đệ nhất nước Anh," Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập: Ba tay hiệp nữ nước Nga* (Gò Công: Nữ Lữ Thơ Quán, 1929), p. 8.

bombs (*chỉ có một thân với hai viên tạc đạn*). The author believes that Sophia eliminated a tyrant and was able to make other monarchs pay heed; this, he implies, earned her further merit.²⁵⁸

The comparison between Oliver Cromwell and Sophia Perovskaia is striking, mostly because Oliver Cromwell is a highly controversial historical figure. Even within a few years of his death, Cromwell's body was dug up from Westminster Abbey, displayed for the public, and beheaded. While Trần Tuấn Khải appeared to hold the general in high regard, many viewed Cromwell as a dictator with genocidal tendencies. The Irish, in particular, held a hatred for Cromwell, while historians today believe "the Cromwellian regime was a monarchy in all but name."²⁵⁹ Others have viewed Cromwell as a revolutionary and champion of liberty, which is closer to Trần Tuấn Khải's characterization of the man. The English author John Milton (1608-1674) praised Oliver Cromwell in his 1654 *Second Defense of the English People*, though he did not mention the general after that publication.²⁶⁰ This contested historiography surrounding Cromwell means that Trần Tuấn Khải either received his knowledge of Oliver Cromwell from one source, did not read further into his life and deeds, ignored his contested legacy, or believed his deeds necessary. Therefore, while his praise of Cromwell meant he viewed Perovskaia in a similar, positive light, her comparison with the English general is not flattering, as Cromwell did not possess the gratitude of many living within the British Isles at the time. Additionally, Khải's mention of the English Civil War in a biographical sketch about a woman famous for her anti-tsarist views compares Russia of the late-nineteenth century to England of the seventeenth

²⁵⁸ Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập: Ba tay hiệp nữ nước Nga* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), p. 8.

²⁵⁹ Jonathan Fitzgibbons, *Cromwell's House of Lords: Politics, Parliaments, and Constitutional Revolution, 1642-1660* (Boydell Press, 2018), p. 4.

²⁶⁰ Tobias Gregory, "Milton and Cromwell: Another Look at the Evidence" *Journal of British Studies* 54 (2015): p. 44.

century. It implies that the assassination of Alexander II was similar to the execution of Charles I, in that they were both justified and left their respective countries better off.

The description of Perovskaia as beautiful, helpless, weak, and young accomplishes two things: this softens her as a revolutionary and she is characterized as feminine. Assassins and political radicals are not viewed as physically beautiful or weak, but, to Khải, Perovskaia's youth and femininity are essential parts of her identity and force us to view her sympathetically. In the biography, Khải also wishes us to view Perovskaia as even more meritorious than Oliver Cromwell. While Cromwell commanded an army as a general, Sophia Perovskaia worked with bombs and her own ability to strategically place and throw them. Sophia Perovskaia, in all her youth, weakness, and identity as a woman, was able to bring down a tsar and thus frighten other monarchs. To Khải, this merits and garners admiration.

Trần Tuấn Khải emphasizes Sophia Perovskaia's good and caring qualities, and portrays her as a young woman who did not want or ask for much. He writes that, though she was born into a wealthy, aristocratic family, she was indifferent to wealth and did not need to live luxuriously.²⁶¹ He wrote that she began studying history at the age of eight, and read about Joan of Arc's campaign against the British; Sophia reportedly expressed admiration and believed Joan of Arc had lived a worthy life. This, of course, compares the French martyr's life to Sophia Perovskaia's own fate and hints at Perovskaia's eventual execution. Khải states that Sophia was deeply affected by the plight of the impoverished, and took off her own jewelry in order to help them. She wanted to support the hungry and poor, and believed that they were responsible for the functioning of society. She believed that the country needed the peasants and she was tasked

²⁶¹ “Nàng phú tính cao khiết kiệm cần, không cần những sự xa hoa an lạc, bởi vậy đối với cái cảnh gia đình chung đỉnh cao lương, nàng vẫn dửng dưng không thêm thiết đến.” From Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập: Ba tay hiệp nữ nước Nga* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), p. 8.

with defending them. This portrayal is a form of Marxist hagiography, in which Sophia is devoutly committed to the defense and advocacy of the proletariat, from a young age, and she wishes for little more in life than to aid their cause. Khải invites readers view Sophia as benevolent throughout her life and kind to others without hesitation.

Khải describes the relationship between Sophia and her father as fraught, due to their political disagreements. When Sophia began to attend school, she made friends who also felt deeply about the state of the country, and with whom she discussed national affairs and problems (*cùng nhau bàn tán việc nước việc dân, có khi nàng nhắc đến những nỗi bất bình trong nước*). Her father did not approve of this and disliked that his daughter thought differently. Khải writes that Sophia's father forbade her from going to school and seeing her friends.²⁶² Because of his lack of support, when Sophia reached the right age, she immediately left her family in order to pursue her political interests. Other revolutionaries in her midst saw that Sophia was intelligent with a rare spirit, and brought her into the fold to organize and plot against the tsar. Khải attributes most of the group's plans to Sophia, in effect portraying her as the ringleader amongst a group of political radicals mostly comprised of men.²⁶³

It was from this point, between the ages of 17 and 18, that Sophia began to make a name for herself within revolutionary circles. She also began to teach, but there followed a pattern of arrest and imprisonment as she attracted the attention of government authorities. Khải writes that Sophia learned about Alexander II's participation in a military parade on March 1st, 1881. Khải deemed the assassination was successful due to Sophia's efforts, writing that it was she who had thrown the second bomb which killed the tsar.²⁶⁴ While Sophia was directly involved in the

²⁶² Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập: Ba tay hiệp nữ nước Nga* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), p. 9.

²⁶³ Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập*, p. 9.

²⁶⁴ Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập*, p. 12.

attack, she did not throw the bombs herself. In reality, the person who threw the bomb that killed Alexander II was a man named Ignacy Hryniewiecki (1856-1881), who was fatally injured in the attack and died himself later that day. Presenting the main assassin as Sophia served to preserve her revolutionary spirit and kept the narrative focus on one woman who was so filled with love for the less fortunate that she single-handedly assassinated a monarch. Khải characterizes Alexander II as an evil tyrant (*Ma-vương chuyên chế*) and believes Sophia fulfilled the duty of a citizen (*người dân trong nước*) by killing him.

According to Khải, Sophia was not afraid of the consequences for killing the tsar, so she did not flee to another country as her comrades suggested. Because she did not take precautions and lived openly, the police soon arrested her. Yet throughout all of this, Sophia did not forget her love for her mother, and wrote a letter reassuring her and talking about her arrest. Her mother was saddened, and attempted to see her by travelling to Saint Petersburg, but she was unable to speak to her daughter. Khải writes that Sophia was asked why she killed the tsar, and she responded that he “was an enemy of the entire Russian nation, and therefore could not be forgiven.”²⁶⁵ When the judge commented that she was a weak girl, and did not seem to be frightened, Sophia replied that death is glorious if one dies in the service of their nation. The judge then sentenced her to death, and the news of Sophia’s heroism spread around the country. Khải also writes that Sophia loudly shouted “Revolution!” before her execution, to the shock of those around her.²⁶⁶

Khải ends this section about Sophia Perovskaia with a paragraph about the importance of learning for humanity, morality, and civilization. It is clear that Khải found learning about

²⁶⁵ “Vì Thánh-bì-dắc là một tên giặc chung chừa toàn quốc Nga-la-tư, nên không thể nào mà dung thứ được.” From Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập: Ba tay hiệp nữ nước Nga* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), p. 13.

²⁶⁶ Trần Tuấn Khải, *Hồn Tự Lập: Ba tay hiệp nữ nước Nga* (Gò Công: Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, 1929), p. 14.

Sophia's story to be essential for the moral character of Vietnamese readers, and that her example was one to be venerated. Her biography was embellished; the historical record demonstrates that Sophia did not act alone and was not the leader of the group who killed Alexander II. Additionally, it is unknown if she spoke at her execution, and it is certain that she did not shout anything about revolution.²⁶⁷ Khải frequently emphasized Sophia's bravery and commitment to Russia, and, in various parts of the biography, implied that this attitude was remarkable for a young woman. Khải wrote that Sophia was a martyr who acted alone, and the information he chose to convey leads his writing to the point of hagiography. It is clear that Khải wanted readers to view Sophia as a revolutionary hero. It is not surprising that colonial censors banned this work from circulation, as it advocated regicide in a generous summation, and violent overthrow of a standing government. This biography idolizes the death of a young woman who is so desperate to help kill the tsar that she willingly walks to her own execution and replies to judges with a brazen patriotism.

While Phan Thị Bạch Vân approved this work for publication in her press, this biography is profoundly different from her biography about Madame Roland. As I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, Trần Tuấn Khải's treatment of Sophia Perovskaia is also different from Bạch Vân's biography of Qiu Jin. Within Sophia's story, Khải draws attention to her boldness and revolutionary spirit, to the point of glorifying the violence she enacted, but Madame Roland is presented as intellectual and peaceful, while Phan Thị Bạch Vân glosses over the more martial aspects of Qiu Jin's personality in her work. Trần Tuấn Khải even goes so far as to inaccurately imply that Sophia mostly acted alone, and killed the tsar herself. Even if it is obvious that Phan

²⁶⁷ Adam B. Ulam, "After the Gallows" chapter in *Prophets and Conspirators in Prerevolutionary Russia* (Routledge, 1998), p. 365.

Thị Bạch Vân did not write this biography of Sophia, its inclusion in her press is an implicit approval of its content.

Trần Tuấn Khải's work about Sophia Perovskaia followed similar Chinese reformist literature. In China, while censorship did exist, this hagiographic treatment of a political dissident and assassin would not be subject to the same potential for banning and censorship as in Vietnam.²⁶⁸ In colonized Vietnam, under the control of the French, this biography was so brazen that censorship was certain.²⁶⁹ Even the mention of a woman who used bombs to murder a country's leader is bold, but to embellish and praise her deeds treads into audacity. As we will see in Qiu Jin's biography, her attempted involvement in a violent overthrow of the government was not the focus in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's writing.

²⁶⁸ Suyoung Son, *Writing for Print: Publishing and the Making of Textual Authority in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2018), p. 127.

²⁶⁹ At this point in the late-1920s, the French began to censor more Vietnamese publications and censored 30 biographies published earlier in the 1920s in 1929. David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1981), p. 264.



Figure 3.5

Portrait of Qiu Jin used for Phan Thị Bạch Vân's biography about her, published under the pen name Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa.

QIU JIN

Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp – A Chinese heroine

Another biography which Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán chose to translate was about Qiu Jin (1875-1907), a Chinese woman who wrote and agitated against the Qing dynasty and faced execution after a failed uprising. Qiu Jin was a contemporary of the Chinese reformer, Liang Qichao, who called for political modernization, increased women's education, and the translation of Western ideas for the consumption and benefit of the Chinese people. Liang Qichao also published a biography of China's first woman doctor, Kang Aidi (1873-1930), wherein he critiqued the status of Chinese women and compared women's educational opportunities in China and the United States.²⁷⁰ Liang Qichao and Qiu Jin shared many similar views and goals for Chinese people, culture, and government; both also spent much time in Japan. Phan Thị Bạch Vân would have been familiar with Liang, as he was a colleague of Phan Bội Châu's when the two lived in Japan at the same time; Liang Qichao also influenced Vietnamese reformers with his translations and interpretations of Enlightenment philosophers' writings. Further, as we saw in the section about Sophia Perovskaia, Bạch Vân and other writers for NLTQ were inspired by reformist literature in China. We see with the examples of Qiu Jin, Liang Qichao, Phan Thị Bạch Vân, and Phan Bội Châu the interconnected nature of the first quarter of the twentieth century. We also see that Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese intellectuals, both men and women, expressed similar interests. In the same spirit as Liang, Bạch Vân used her biography of Qiu Jin to open a conversation about the status of China at the turn of the century and the status of contemporary Vietnamese women.

²⁷⁰ Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 3.

Qiu Jin died a little over twenty years before Bạch Vân published her biography; throughout that time, China's political situation had been eventful with the 1911 Revolution, the establishment of the Republic of China, and the advent of the Warlord Era (1916-1928). As such, Qiu Jin's legacy and reputation changed throughout those years. Although Qiu Jin was executed as a traitor and not given a proper burial in 1907, two friends became her chief mourners and constructed a fitting place to publicly grieve for the "Swordswoman of Mirror Lake."²⁷¹ Through the creation of a tomb by the West Lake of Hangzhou, Wu Zhiying (1868-1934) and Xu Zihua (1875-1935) began to construct Qiu Jin's reputation as a martyr and a heroine. By the time of Nǚ Lù Thơ Quán's biography, Qiu Jin had come to achieve revered status; less than a year after her death, a memorial service in Qiu Jin's name became a political protest against Manchu "brutality toward ethnic Han people."²⁷² This was in the context of heightening tensions between the Qing and organized revolutionary groups wanting to overthrow the dynasty and establish an entirely new form of government. Qiu Jin's public memory and image changed further when the 1911 Revolution occurred. The early Republic saw Qiu Jin remembered as a nationalist hero in which she achieved "status as a canonized martyr in a pantheon of revolutionary heroes."²⁷³ She became part of a teleological narrative in which Republican China was the destined end to her efforts.

During the Warlord Era in China, Qiu Jin's tomb fell into decay and her memory was not as steadfastly preserved in the public sphere. Yet once the Nationalist Party gained a better hold of the region in the late-1920s, Republican heroes, including Qiu Jin, received renewed

²⁷¹ Hu Ying, *Poetry, Friendship, and Loss* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), p. 2.

²⁷² Hu Ying, "Qiu Jin's Nine Burials: The Making of Historical Monuments and Public Memory" *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 19 (2007): p. 148.

²⁷³ Hu Ying, "Qiu Jin's Nine Burials," p. 157.

attention.²⁷⁴ This set the stage for Phan Thị Bạch Vân, under her pseudonym Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, to present her readers with a female Republican hero already steeped in nationalist myth and veneration. Her use of Qiu Jin as a biographical subject is indicative of her desire to see women better educated, able to travel and study abroad, and help themselves improve their own status, and her editorializing of Jin's life and works shows less enthusiasm for some of Jin's more radical words and actions.

Born a generation apart, Qiu Jin and Phan Thị Bạch Vân lived during similar transitional periods in which tradition lingered at the threshold of modernity. Qiu Jin was part of a generation of women living between the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) and the 1911 Revolution; she was born into a literati family that fostered her desire to learn and write. She did not simply learn "the basic moral primers for women;" she was also instructed in "the Confucian classics, history, poetry, and even the high scholarship of the *Book of Changes*."²⁷⁵ Qiu Jin experienced the upheaval of the time and benefitted from increasing opportunities for women; she was born too early to experience the advent of the New Woman in China, though she did help create it through her actions and writings that "called for Chinese women to emulate new Western models as well as women warriors from China's past."²⁷⁶ China, like Vietnam, experienced a similar reinvention, adaptation, and molding of womanhood. Chinese women, too, read biographies of Madame Roland and Sophia Perovskaia in periodicals in an attempt to imagine and test new iterations of idealized womanhood. To further this point, Phan Thị Bạch Vân compared Qiu Jin to these women, noting that those whom Qiu Jin encountered made the

²⁷⁴ Hu Ying, "Qiu Jin's Nine Burials: The Making of Historical Monuments and Public Memory" *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 19 (2007): p. 162.

²⁷⁵ Hu Ying, *Poetry, Friendship, and Loss* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), p. 9.

²⁷⁶ Hu Ying, *Poetry, Friendship, and Loss*, p. 10.

same comparison.²⁷⁷ Qiu Jin and her close friends may not have found the comparison flattering, but regardless, Bạch Vân thought it was warranted.

The biography is much less dramatic than that of Madame Roland; Qiu Jin's execution is not discussed from the outset of the piece, and Bạch Vân does not highlight her last words. The first page details some quick and perfunctory facts about Qiu Jin's early life: her birth into a scholar-family, her education at a young age, and her marriage in young adulthood. We can interpret this muted introduction to Qiu Jin's life as signifying her death did not contribute to one of the world's most significant historical events; rather, her execution was an unfortunate end to a young woman's life. Additionally, her death occurring but two decades before the publication of her biography meant that there was less time to assess how exactly her life and death might echo across centuries. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's treatment of Qiu Jin as an historical and biographical subject is much more tentative than her treatment of Madame Roland, as we will see throughout this section.

The use of Qiu Jin as a biographical subject relates to Phan Thị Bạch Vân's interest in women who crossed cultural boundaries and travelled far from home. Qiu Jin bore similarities to Tú Anh from Bạch Vân's novel, *Nữ anh tài*. Like Tú Anh, Qiu Jin cross-dressed beginning in the year 1904, when she bought and wore a men's suit.²⁷⁸ Qiu Jin did so in order to act against harsh constraints, dictates, and prescriptions for women. Qiu Jin was known to cross-dress and wear these men's suits, or posed in a martial style, holding a sword. Qiu Jin's crossdressing could be understood as "an effort to break away from the lifelong prospect of physical and psychological constraints..."²⁷⁹ In order for Qiu Jin to study abroad, she had to sell all her jewelry to cover her

²⁷⁷ "Bởi vậy nhiều người gận bà và ví bà như bà Tô-phi-Á nước Nga, bà Rô-lăng nước Pháp." Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), p. 7.

²⁷⁸ Hu Ying, *Poetry, Friendship, and Loss* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), p. 122.

²⁷⁹ Hu Ying, *Poetry, Friendship, and Loss*, p. 123.

travelling expenses. Bạch Vân learned of this information from Qiu Jin's close friend, Wu Zhiying's, memoir.²⁸⁰ This was an acceptable way in which a married woman could finance her activities and ensure her livelihood, but it was likely that Jin received the money from a variety of sources. Qiu Jin's experience studying abroad contributed to her intellectual and political activism, cementing her beliefs in political revolution and radical thought. In *Nữ anh tài*, Tú Anh's travels and interactions with those of differing backgrounds were manifestations of her radicalism and inner journey.

It is certain that Qiu Jin's departure from China and traditional Chinese dictates for femininity held interest for Phan Thị Bạch Vân. In the biography, she discusses Qiu Jin's husband's disapproval of Jin studying abroad, writing that he was old fashioned and narrow-minded (*hũ-nho*); she also writes that Jin's husband accused her of not following the necessary obedience of a woman towards her husband (*không biết nghĩa tam cương*).²⁸¹ Qiu Jin travelled despite this attempt at censure, and so too did Tú Anh begin her journey without substantial worries over how it would be perceived. Phan Thị Bạch Vân also wrote that her heroine, Tú Anh, cross-dresses during her travels to China. In *Nữ anh tài*, Tú Anh cross-dresses in order to subvert Vietnamese expectations for women. Through her disguise as a man, Tú Anh is able to enjoy freedom of movement and conversation with men to whom she is not related. While Tú Anh did not exhibit a sense of martiality (like Qiu Jin did in real life) in Bạch Vân's novel, she did embark on an adventure in which she experienced grave danger, becoming captured at the hands of Chinese bandits and making a daring escape. Through the similarity of these details, it is clear that Qiu Jin served as a form of inspiration for Tú Anh, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's most courageous

²⁸⁰ In *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp*, Bạch Vân mentions Qiu Jin's friend, Ngô chi Anh, which can be transliterated to Chinese as Wú Zhī Yīng. See also Hu Ying, *Poetry, Friendship, and Loss* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016), p. 124.

²⁸¹ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), p. 2.

and talented character. While Bạch Vân did not engage profoundly with Qiu Jin's habit of cross-dressing and less feminine attributes in the biography, Qiu Jin's radical example served as a lesson for young Vietnamese women and provided Bạch Vân inspiration for her novels and nonfiction work. It is also likely that Qiu Jin's example served as personal inspiration for Bạch Vân, as Jin was known for her editorial work and writing for women-focussed publications. Her advocacy and interest in women's rights led her to found a women's newspaper in Shanghai.

While Qiu Jin's *Chinese Women's Journal* newspaper did not survive long, she did write for at least two issues; in her biography, Bạch Vân includes a Vietnamese translation – reproduced in full – of the lead article from the journal's first issue, addressed “To My Sisters.” Jin began her article by stating that she loves her country and fellow citizens (*người thương nước yêu đồng-bào*). She writes that men have been able to increase their own knowledge and enter civilization, but women remain “buried in the eighteenth level of hell.”²⁸² Qiu Jin warns of women who rely entirely on men and who are not able to enjoy personal freedom. She writes that, regardless of class level and number of possessions, women must suffer under men's tempers and act as slaves (*làm nô-lệ*). She implies that women of higher position are to blame for their lack of freedom, as they “do not have the disposition for independence.”²⁸³

We see parallels between Qiu Jin's first article in her *Chinese Women's Journal* and Bạch Vân's editorial and written work. Qiu Jin calls for women to help themselves and act as their own heroes; Phan Thị Bạch Vân sought to teach young women practical skills and prepare them for employment so that they would not rely on husbands and male family members for a living. This is a theme that runs central in all her written work, expressed as a clear warning in the

²⁸² Qiu Jin quoted in Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), pp. 12-13.

²⁸³ “không có tánh khí gì là tư-cách độc-lập” Qiu Jin quoted in Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), p. 14.

stories of Cô Lang in *Kiếp hoa thám sử* and Bích Ngọc in *Lâm Kiều Loan*. Both Jin and Bạch Vân advocated women's education to the same level of their male counterparts. Not only did they advocate women's education in sciences, reading, and writing, they wished for women to hold practical skills so that they could hold control of their own finances, wellbeing, and reputations. Both women wrote of the oppression other women and girls faced while living under the thumb of oppressive husbands. Qiu Jin believed that women who possessed profitable skills would earn the respect of the men in their lives, this would lead to "husbands and wives going out hand-in-hand" and a cessation of arguments.²⁸⁴ This was a hope for a future led by upstanding women who married husbands possessing the same level of education and same interest in the greater good; this was another focal point of Bạch Vân's, expressed in her writing of the companionate marriage between Hồng Minh and Tú Anh in *Nữ anh tài*. Their marriage of equal love, respect, and intelligence was a fictional model of what Phan Thị Bạch Vân advocated for all her fellow women of high merit and education.

Bạch Vân quotes Qiu Jin's views on women's education, writing "Girls must have independent thoughts and not rely on men."²⁸⁵ She also believed that young people who wrote and spoke about revolution should also look in the home – within families – and advocate women's rights. Jin (as well as Bạch Vân) read books and newspapers extensively and therefore were aware of events and what was happening in China and in the rest of the world. In her first issue of the *Chinese Women's Journal*, Jin writes that the printing, writing, and reading of journals offer a solution to Chinese women's problems. She writes that women are secluded and not aware of "outside affairs, as [they] do not have books and newspapers to develop [their]

²⁸⁴ "vợ chồng dắt tay đi chơi" Qiu Jin quoted in Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), p. 15.

²⁸⁵ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), p. 2.

intelligence.”²⁸⁶ Thus she decided to establish her own journal and print issues in both classical and vernacular language, through which she intended to attract a broad readership. Yet there were financial struggles inherent in this endeavor. Jin struggled with financing her journal alone, and sought partners to buy shares and help her rent a place to print the paper and hire editors and writers for regular issues. It was Jin’s hope that, with proper support, the paper would flourish and help women to establish a foundation (*cơ sở*) of learning, intellect, and awareness.²⁸⁷ She sought to be a spark that would lead other women to both enrich their own minds, and to also work to enrich the entirety of China’s female population. To her, this would elevate China as a whole and Chinese women’s positions within their families and outside the home.

Qiu Jin makes a point of stating that women who are particularly talented will be praised both in China and abroad, echoing similar sentiments found in Bạch Vân’s works. Jin believed that women and girls who accomplished great things would earn praise and good reputations. This would garner recognition both in their own country and internationally as well. Both women encouraged their female readers to strive for this goal; not only would it have the effect of boosting women’s reputations at-large, it would boost the reputations of the Chinese and Vietnamese in other civilized nations. Both women found the advancement of women’s reputations to be important. Their mutual interest in this endeavor represented two minds geared towards community building amongst women within their own countries and women within others.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân wished to build a large community of like-minded women, with her printed books and translations acting as the first step. Like Qiu Jin, Bạch Vân sought partners for her paper; she viewed the reading and publishing of newspapers as a method through which

²⁸⁶ Qiu Jin quoted in *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), p. 15.

²⁸⁷ *Giám Hồ Nữ Hiệp* (Gò Công, Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1928), p. 15.

women could broaden their horizons and become aware of the goings-on outside of Vietnam. According to both Jin and Bạch Vân, the prevalence of seclusion for women born into families of high status, combined with a high proportion of illiteracy amongst Vietnamese (and Chinese) women, perpetuated their lack of advancement and learning. Though Jin lived and died decades before Bạch Vân began her own press, it is clear that she viewed Jin as a model for both herself and her fellow Vietnamese women.

Bạch Vân includes much of Jin's poetry here, translated into Vietnamese, especially poetry addressing her views on women's strength, her personal feelings of loneliness and feeling adrift, and national belonging. One poem Bạch Vân chose to translate was about women's rights; in her translation of the piece, she glosses over some of Qiu Jin's more forceful language in favor of focusing on women's cooperation and independence.²⁸⁸ At one point in the poem, Qiu Jin references Joan of Arc and states that she will "fight" on Chinese women's side, but Phan Thị Bạch Vân's Vietnamese translation simply writes that Joan of Arc will be present, supporting the women as they cleanse themselves of their shame (*rửa cho sạch hết những lời nhục-nhơ. Kìa bạn gái Jeanne d'Arc nước Pháp*). She does include Jin's assertion that women should act as leaders towards their own independence (*độc lập ta phải chiếm trước tiên*) and that women would shoulder the responsibility of their knowledge and freedom (*trách nhiệm ấy hai vai gánh nặng*). Rather than highlighting Qiu Jin's martial qualities and interests, Bạch Vân editorialized and translated selectively in order to emphasize Jin's assertions with which she agreed.

As a subject, Qiu Jin was multifaceted; she presented Vietnamese women with a favorable example of a woman who fought for her own education and visibility in the scholarly

²⁸⁸ I am basing these discrepancies on a comparison between Phan Thị Bạch Vân's translation into Vietnamese and translations of Qiu Jin's poetry into English by Wilt Adema and Beata Grant from *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 799.

world, but Qiu Jin was not a woman who sought change in a measured or safe manner. Qiu Jin agitated against the ruling government and acted in what were deemed distinctly unfeminine ways. While Phan Thị Bạch Vân did not emphasize Qiu Jin's more radical notions and choices, we cannot say for certain if Bạch Vân *disapproved* of Qiu Jin's cross-dressing, fondness for swords, and references to violence. After all, Bạch Vân featured cross-dressing as a plot point in her own fictional work and enjoyed references to Joan of Arc as well.

Bạch Vân ends her biography honoring Jin by discussing her sentence, crime, and public opinion after her death. She was aware of Jin's close friend, Wu Zhiying's, efforts to have her properly buried, and of many scholars – men and women alike – who mourned her unjust execution. At the time of Bạch Vân's writing, Qiu Jin's memory enjoyed an exalted status due to the 1911 Revolution. There is much less glorification of Jin's death in comparison to Madame Roland's; rather, Bạch Vân discusses her tarnished reputation and the contrast between government and public opinion towards her death. While she was “China's first heroine,” (*Trung-quốc đệ nhất nữ-hiệp*), this distinction came late, and did not influence the tide of history in the same way as Madame Roland.

Bạch Vân's editorializing demonstrates that she did not approve of violent revolutionary protests. Bạch Vân did not feature violent women in her works and she did not call for women to pick up weapons against others. Bạch Vân preferred to feature books, globes, maps, and compasses on the covers printed through her press, signalling an affinity for weapons of the mind rather than physical might. Qiu Jin possessed both might of intellect and constitution; her existence and reputation as a woman of letters made her a subject Phan Thị Bạch Vân could not ignore. In contrast to Madame Roland's biographical treatment, Qiu Jin's featured more of her poetry and work as a writer. There was less historical context and a less hagiographic tone. The

reasons for this were a combination of Bạch Vân's affinity for Jin's work and goals for women and lack of interest in meaningfully engaging with Jin's personal expression and more radical views pertaining to politics.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's biographies of Madame Roland, Sophia Perovskaia, and Qiu Jin were meant to serve as examples to which their female readers could ascend, and as moral compasses that would direct the whole of Vietnamese society in the early-twentieth century. Bạch Vân identified a host of issues plaguing Vietnamese society at this time: most primarily affected women and their wellbeing. A lack of proper education, teaching of practical skills, support for women experiencing divorce and abandonment, and traditions which kept women and their families from carefully selecting proper spouses contributed to a female populace in need of guidance and change. Through biography as one method amongst many, Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her cohort of writers and editors sought to show foreign women as proper examples of moral and civic direction towards which the whole of Vietnamese society should look.

Biography represented a significant portion of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's early output, especially from Phan Thị Bạch Vân. Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán focused on women's biography because it was an established trend in Asia and because it helped develop their own thinking about idealized feminine traits for their fictional work. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's fictional female protagonists bore similarities to Madame Roland and Qiu Jin; they travelled, exalted companionate love, and sought to help other women. Especially when one considers the aspects of these women's personalities which Bạch Vân chose to highlight in her biographies, her subsequent protagonists derive their thinking and professed ideals from the example of famous

historical women. Yet historical, real women did not always exemplify the perfection of Bạch Vân's model woman. At times, real women faltered: they did not marry for love, did not enjoy a perfect family life, they were not perfect mothers, or they were *too* revolutionary in their thinking. Fiction was a greater tool for writers creating prescriptive literature as it allowed them complete control over their characters' actions and traits. Fiction, at this moment, allowed authors to present less feminine complexity in the interest of providing readers with easy-to-follow instructions for womanhood. Therefore, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's biographies did not represent reality and did not pay heed to complete accuracy in relating these women's lives – they were not meant to accomplish this task.

In comparison with Madame Roland and Qiu Jin's biographical treatment, Trần Tuấn Khải's treatment of Sophia Perovskaia placed much more emphasis on her bravery, martyrdom, and commitment to her country, to the point of violence and death. While it is not assured that Trần Tuấn Khải wanted other women to emulate Sophia Perovskaia, it is clear he sought to spread knowledge about her actions and sacrifice. Out of the three biographies discussed in this chapter, Sophia's stands out as the most embellished and the most idealized. In Trần Tuấn Khải's estimation, her only thoughts and words, from a young age, centered around the lower classes, plight of the peasantry, the good of the country, and issues of national importance. Phan Thị Bạch Vân, in a similar vein, presented her biographical subjects as intelligent and good-natured, but Sophia Perovskaia's biography was the furthest from reality and the most focused on her propensity for violence.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân chose to highlight aspects of these heroines' lives which made them appear assured, intelligent, and heroic. They were virtuous women, and their biographies were limited in their exploration of individual traits. For both women, Bạch Vân emphasized their

education and learning, as well as their talent with prose and (in Jin's case) poetry. In their biographies, both women were iterations of the Chinese *cainü*, or talented woman. While Bạch Vân's primary purpose was to help build a circle of women in their image, Jin and Roland's biographies also acted as eulogies to their talent and accomplishments. Their status as talented women necessitated their immortalization in print. What also necessitated their immortalization was their sacrifice as martyrs.

Though Qiu Jin's execution is not portrayed as romantically as Madame Roland's, both women's deaths due to participation in (attempted or successful) revolutions implies an approval of their causes. In these biographies, we see a veneration of heroism; specifically a veneration of these women through their positions as female martyrs. Their biographies were instructive as well as commemorative; they pointed to both these women's deaths as wrongful. For Qiu Jin, especially, other works published soon after her death pointed to her execution "as a miscarriage of justice."²⁸⁹ While the narrative focus is on their lives and what made them great women, Bạch Vân's commentary on their deaths points to the undeserved nature of such deaths.

One important aspect of these biographies is Phan Thị Bạch Vân's status as a talented woman writing about other talented women. Bạch Vân's interest in commemorating Madame Roland and Qiu Jin stems from her admiration and, perhaps, aspirations involving these women's accomplishments. Indeed, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's assured status as a talented and intelligent woman of letters is what allowed her to write about these women, as most biographies at the time in the region were written by men. Yet Bạch Vân laid claim to these women's lives, and in her writing of their biographies, cemented their status amongst Vietnamese readers.

²⁸⁹ Hu Ying, "Gender and Modern Martyrology: Qiu Jin as *Lienü*, *Lieshi*, or *Nülieshi*" in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History* eds. Joan Judge and Hu Ying (University of California Press, 2011), p. 124.

For Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, writing about past moral exemplars helped build a foundation for their press's content and output. In this press and in Gò Công, women could look to women of the past for aid in comparison and orientation of their own trajectory. David Marr discusses the prevalence of "the 'calling up of souls' (*gọi hồn*)," in the 1920s, in which Vietnamese writers pointed to historical figures who "had demonstrated great courage against seemingly insurmountable odds."²⁹⁰ They did this so that they could inspire readers to follow a heroic example and work together in order to accomplish great things. In the pages published by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, biography was a genre through which Bạch Vân could build a repertoire of idealized traits, represented through foreign women, and eventually solidify them with fictional Vietnamese protagonists. Biographies of foreign women may have been a regional trend, but Phan Thị Bạch Vân came to write them with her Vietnamese audience in mind; she came to move past this trend with original work and practical prescriptions for her readership.

The end of this chapter brings me to the next, which focuses on Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's efforts surrounding young women's practical education, and their connections to the print world outside of Gò Công. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương demonstrated a high awareness of pamphlets, trends, and books from France and the United States that spoke to women's ability to bear, raise children, and act as a beacon of proper comportment within the home. Their awareness of these trends, as well as their willingness to reference them in their own works, shows their desire to deliver these Western movements to the Vietnamese.

²⁹⁰ David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (University of California Press, 1981), pp. 263 and 264.

CHAPTER FOUR: NỮ LƯU THƠ QUÁN AND INSTRUCTIVE LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I would like to begin by considering two excerpts from books by Đạm Phương (1881-1947) and Phan Thị Bạch Vân, both published by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán. Đạm Phương's book was about various topics pertaining to the education of girls and their place in the home and family, titled *Gia Đình Giáo Dục* and published in 1928. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's work was meant to teach young girls how to read *quốc ngữ*, titled *Vườn Quốc ngữ*, and published in 1929.

In a section concluding her thoughts about girls' education, Đạm Phương cites a South African author named Olive Schreiner (1855-1920). First, I will show the quote in its original form, from Schreiner's novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Then, I will present Đạm Phương's interpretation of the quote and provide information on Olive Schreiner and why Đạm Phương may have found her work compelling.

Đạm Phương briefly cites a section from *The Story of an African Farm* in which the main character, Lyndall, is discussing the position of women in society. Lyndall does not fit into traditional Victorian norms for women and does not wish to become a wife and mother, as the prospect strikes her as restrictive. She simultaneously wishes to reject the work of motherhood while deeming it profoundly noble. When speaking to her male friend Waldo, Lyndall says:

“They say women have one great and noble work left them, and they do it ill. That is true; they do it execrably. It is the work that demands the broadest culture, and they have not even the narrowest. The lawyer may see no deeper than his law-books, and the chemist see no

further than the windows of his laboratory, and they may do their work well. But the woman who does woman's work needs a many-sided, multiform culture; the heights and depths of human life must not be beyond the reach of her vision; she must have knowledge of men and things in many states, a wide catholicity of sympathy, the strength that springs from knowledge, and the magnanimity which springs from strength. We bear the world, and we make it. The souls of little children are marvellously delicate and tender things, and keep forever the shadow that first falls on them, and that is the mother's or at best a woman's. There was never a great man who had not a great mother—it is hardly an exaggeration. The first six years of our life make us; all that is added later is veneer; and yet some say, if a woman can cook a dinner or dress herself well she has culture enough.”²⁹¹

This is a powerful statement that communicates the weight of women's work and motherhood while admitting society's inconsistent treatment of women's upbringing and education. To Lyndall, and Olive Schreiner by extension, women are inherently responsible for all of humanity due to their ability to bear children. They make their children in body and in mind, as children are highly impressionable, and therefore have the ability to transfer either greatness or mediocrity to them. If women influence all of humanity through their children, then they are responsible for the hallmarks of humanity and civilization, which is a responsibility that requires broad and deep knowledge. Yet Lyndall thinks women perform this function poorly due to their lack of knowledge, as women are taught how to cook and dress, and society views this as sufficient. This is to society's detriment. Lyndall believes that women are responsible for the whole of the world, for society, and for the greatness of men; this is also a weighty responsibility

²⁹¹ Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1890), p. 230.

many would find difficult to bear. In her writing, Đạm Phương does not include the entire citation; rather, she writes:

“Cho nên ông Ô-li-vơ Xé-ren-nê (Olive Schreiner) nói:

‘Chúng ta cũng có thể vẫn hồi được sự suy đồi của xã hội, bởi vì cái linh hồn của những đứa trẻ con mới sinh, là một vật còn đương thuần túy, trong sạch, dễ cảm hóa, nếu chúng nó chịu dưới bóng một bà mẹ hiền, thì là cảm hóa theo vậy, dường ấy không cần phải ta thán chi nữa, chỉ nên dạy cho những người làm mẹ sau này đứng hiền, tức là đào tạo nên một xã hội tốt đẹp.’”²⁹²

Which can be translated to...

“Thus Mr. (sic) Olive Schreiner said:

‘We [women] can also restore the degradation of society, because the souls of newly-born babies are pure, unblemished, and easily converted; should they bear the shadow of a gentle mother, then they will change according to that [gentleness], with that nourishment there is no need to complain, we should only teach future mothers to be gentle, that is to say, to educate for a good society.’”

There are differences between the two quotes. Some might question why I believe Đạm Phương’s quote is in reference to that passage from *The Story of an African Farm* at all, as Đạm

²⁹² Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), pp. 14-15.

Phuong's interpretation is quite different, and she additionally (mistakenly) represents Olive Schreiner as a man (calling her *ông*). I do believe that Đạm Phương is in fact quoting Lyndall from *The Story of an African Farm*, but, of course, she is choosing to highlight what she interprets as the most important part. She still focuses on the impressionability of young children and babies and emphasizes women's ability to influence them. She also ties women's relationship to their children to women's relationship with society as a whole. Additionally, she and Schreiner use the word "souls" (in Vietnamese, *linh hồn*) to discuss women's influence on children. This is an interesting choice; both women could have used words like "dispositions," or "character," to describe the outcome of a mother's impact on her children. Đạm Phương could have interpreted it this way, but she chose a direct translation of the term. The use of "souls" to describe young children and their intrinsic nature accentuates their impressionability, emphasizing mothers' duty to their children and civilization. This pertains to both quotes. Yet rather than focusing on Lyndall's struggle with the idea of motherhood and the immense pressure she feels from the responsibility of the role, Đạm Phương highlights the impressionable nature of babies and mothers' ability to permanently affect them with their character (ideally, their gentleness). To Đạm Phương, this means that current women have a duty to educate future mothers to be gentle and thus create a good society. Both women come to the same conclusion – that mothers create society and civilization and thus should be educated with this in mind – but their feelings about this reality (and how it might affect women's thoughts towards motherhood) are very different. While Phương uses her conclusion to encourage women in their roles as mothers, Schreiner's attitude is mixed.

Olive Schreiner's literary purpose was to draw attention to women who struggle with what appear to be contradictory feelings: those of resentment over the restrictions of Victorian

society, and the grave responsibility of motherhood that allows them to make the world in the image they choose. To Lyndall, as the voice of Schreiner, women do not perform this task well. While Đạm Phương has ostensibly read Schreiner's work, she does not present her readers with the same conundrum. Rather, she uses Lyndall's musings about young children's pliant nature to call for increased women's education and changing society for the better. This takes readers away from the idea of an individual's private struggle to a communal struggle to which all women can contribute. This interpretation is not about privately wrestling with substantial obligations to civilization. Phương communicates to women that they have a responsibility to society and she is enthusiastic about this responsibility. Rather than share in Lyndall's ideas that border on hopelessness, Đạm Phương turns the passage into something positive and hopeful, wherein women can contribute to the advancement of society.

Olive Schreiner was born in 1855 in South Africa's Cape Colony to a German father and English mother. Her parents had travelled to South Africa to become missionaries, which was a dangerous occupation that occasionally threatened the safety of their family.²⁹³ South Africa experienced rapid industrialization due to the discovery of diamonds in the 1860s, and the import of Britain's class conflicts, along with racial strife. These factors combined to influence Olive Schreiner and her writings. Additionally, her religious upbringing as the daughter of missionaries, as well as her position as a woman, contributed to an outlook that considered multifaceted forms of oppression. The complexities of her outlook are exhibited in her character, Lyndall, who resists traditional Victorian womanhood and has a child out of wedlock, all while desiring both love and freedom within heterosexual relationships.²⁹⁴ Like Đạm Phương and Phan

²⁹³ Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner* (Northcote House Publishers: British Council, 2013), p. 2.

²⁹⁴ Heidi Barends, "Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*: Lyndall as Transnational and Transracial Feminist" *English Academy Review* 32 (2015): p. 104.

Thị Bạch Vân, Schreiner came from a colonial context. As a white woman in the colony, Schreiner benefitted from greater mobility, better treatment, and more opportunities. Regardless of such privileges, her writings addressed colonial and racial inequities. Heidi Barends writes that Lyndall's, Schreiner's character in *The Story of an African Farm*, "views on love and marriage, motherhood, empire and attitude toward race can transcend the South African context."²⁹⁵ Lyndall's dissatisfaction with girls' finishing schools and her rejection of gender norms dictated throughout the British empire "may well be seen as Schreiner's means of attacking empire itself."²⁹⁶ This is a rejection of the traditional gender roles that British empire propagated and the inadequacy of women's education that women such as Đạm Phương and Phan Thị Bạch Vân could appreciate, even in their wildly different cultural upbringings and life circumstances. Also like Đạm Phương and Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Olive Schreiner was familiar with the works of Charles Darwin and the liberal English author (and supporter of women's suffrage), John Stuart Mill. These women, living in different empires, read and were familiar with the same authors of note in the nineteenth century. All three women wanted to provide other women with the means to study important figures and ideas from a young age and in school. These are all reasons why the content in *The Story of an African Farm* would intrigue Đạm Phương and lead her to read the novel, but the work was wildly popular from its first edition. Within months of the story's first publication, it had sold out and printers were preparing the second edition.²⁹⁷ While Schreiner first published *The Story of an African Farm* under a pseudonym, the public discovered her identity and she became "a literary celebrity."²⁹⁸ This

²⁹⁵ Heidi Barends, "Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*: Lyndall as Transnational and Transracial Feminist" *English Academy Review* 32 (2015): p. 102.

²⁹⁶ Heidi Barends, "Olive Schreiner's," p. 109.

²⁹⁷ Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner* (Northcote House Publishers: British Council, 2013), p. 1.

²⁹⁸ Carolyn Burdett, *Olive Schreiner*, p. 1.

happened in the 1880s, less than fifty years before Đạm Phương published her own writings. Therefore, Đạm Phương's interest in literature and women's issues, along with Schreiner's position as a well-known author, led to her familiarity with Olive Schreiner's work.

Next, I will show two short passages from Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *Văn Quốc ngữ* (1929).

“BÀI ĐỌC THỨ NĂM

Con gái biết đọc

Cô gái biết đọc biết viết rồi, phải xin cha mẹ ông bà lựa mua cho những sách hay truyện quý để xem cho biết những sự tích tốt đời xưa, những gương lành đáng học. – Đọc sách cho nhiều rồi tập suy nghĩ các việc hay người đã làm trước xưa, để sau này mình làm theo.

Trong sử ký nước nam ta, có biết bao nhiêu là chuyện, mà con gái bây giờ cần phải học đời.²⁹⁹

BÀI ĐỌC THỨ SÁU

Nữ-công

Con gái biết đọc biết viết nhiều rồi lại phải cần học nữ công. Nữ công là gì? Nữ công là: may, vá, khâu thùa, nấu nướng.

May vá khâu thùa trước, khâu thùa sẽ tập sau, nấu nướng học khi mười lăm mười sáu tuổi. – Con gái biết khâu thùa thì giúp đỡ cho cha mẹ nhiều.

²⁹⁹ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Văn Quốc ngữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư quán, 1929) p. 12.

Con gái không ham đọc sách, không biết nữ công, thì người đời hay khinh bạc.”³⁰⁰

“READING LESSON FIVE

Girls who know how to read

Girls who know how to read and write must ask their parents to select and buy books with good stories so that they will know these good stories of old, and good examples worth learning. –

Read lots of books and then practice thinking about the good things people did in the past, so that you can imitate them in the future.

There are so many matters from the history of our country which girls must learn.

READING LESSON SIX

Women’s work

Girls who know how to read and write must study women’s work. What is women’s work? It is: sewing, mending, embroidery, and cooking.

First you should learn to sew and mend, then embroidery, and learn how to cook once you are fifteen or sixteen years old. – Girls who know housework thoroughly should help their parents.

³⁰⁰ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Văn Quốc ngữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư quán, 1929) p. 13.

Girls who do not read eagerly, or don't know how to do housework, are dullards or thoughtless.”

These excerpts demonstrate varying lessons meant for young women, as dictated by Đạm Phương and Phan Thị Bạch Vân. Đạm Phương draws attention to the importance, for the good of society, of raising children well and educating future mothers to accomplish proper childrearing. In *Văn Quốc ngữ*, Bạch Vân draws our attention to the significance of literacy in shaping ideal girls and future mothers. She also focuses on examples of a mythologized past and thought towards the future, which is another strategy she employs to shape proper behavior in young women. Lastly, she emphasizes the need to excel in “women’s work” (*nữ công*) so that girls could contribute to the running of a household. Bạch Vân instructs young readers to ask their parents to buy books about the past, and to spend time thinking about that past and integrating it into their own lives. As we will see later in this chapter, Bạch Vân derived some of her lessons focusing on the past from standard Confucian books meant to shape women’s morality, such as *Biographies of Women* (*Lienü zhuan*), compiled during the Han dynasty. According to Bạch Vân, once these girls learned to sufficiently read and emulate the past, they had to take the time to learn homemaking. These considerations and skills, she believed, would adequately prepare them for a bright future. The emphasis placed on these ideas showed the vision Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her cohort had for young Vietnamese women. They placed importance on the idea of history, its place in current times, young women’s engagement in housework, and the future of the Vietnamese people.

In this chapter, I will primarily analyze Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *quốc ngữ* primer and Đạm Phương's book about family matters. Through analysis of these two works, as well as the many other works from which Phương derived influence, we will see that practical media geared towards young women sought to teach primary objectives of literacy and skilled homemaking through a mythicized past and an idealized view of the future. In short, Bạch Vân and Phương were outlining their formula and process for making the ideal, modern Vietnamese housewife who would raise ideal citizens. Other works I have discussed from Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán have dealt with prescriptions for young women through literature and biography, which are less specific and more open to interpretation. These two works by Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương are precise, defined, and aimed squarely at influencing a young woman's future and attitude towards family management. This push to publish about – as well as foster – young women's practical education was not simply to encourage the completion of housework; rather, practical education taught women about their place and functions within society. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương considered marriage and motherhood of the highest importance for Vietnamese women and Vietnamese society.

The Housewife, women's work, and the family

As women and women's issues came to be discussed more frequently in Vietnamese circles during the early-twentieth century, writers published books for teaching literacy and morals to support a growing cohort of women interested in reading and writing. David Marr writes that the first *quốc ngữ* textbook published for women was called *Nữ học luận lý tập đọc* (Reading lessons for women's moral conduct) and written by Phan Đình Giáp in Hanoi in 1918.³⁰¹ By 1930, over two-dozen more textbooks appeared for sale and were aimed at women,

³⁰¹ David Marr, "The 1920s Women's Rights Debates in Vietnam" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (1976): p. 378.

specifically; Marr argues that the predominant subject in these books was that of morality, for girls living in (what authors found to be) an increasingly-corrupt environment. These books, at times, possessed a patriotic bent that presented readers with lessons and figures worth emulating from a mythic past. As we will see in further discussion of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *quốc ngữ* book, she invoked the Trưng sisters as examples of exemplary women. She was not alone; one textbook by Trịnh Đình Rư, titled *Nữ sinh độc bản* (Reader for female students), mentioned the story of the Trưng sisters as part of the book's reading lessons.³⁰² These books praised a mythical past while instructing young women and girls to prepare for the future, where they would act as educated and well-equipped mothers to capable and intelligent children. This was part of a movement that did not only include Vietnam, but sought to prepare women and girls in other regions of the world for a modern motherhood regulated by textbooks and their educated authors.

As we will see in later sections of this chapter, Đạm Phương based some of her discussions of women's labor and their positions as wives and mothers on American and French literature of similar topics. As in other chapters, it is apparent here that Vietnamese women did not exist separately from developments abroad and were paying attention to the ideas, trends, and conversations happening in other countries. Here, I will briefly discuss the dialogue surrounding women, families, and housewifery in French, Vietnamese, and American contexts. This discussion also includes women's increasing association with modernity, as well as the idea of the family as a microcosm of the nation-state. This was a new way to view women and families; women (and their families) did not exist in isolation and the methods through which they raised, mothered, and educated their children did not end at the threshold of the family home. Rather, this new view of women and their families was that of an intimate connection between

³⁰² David Marr, "The 1920s Women's Rights Debates in Vietnam" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35 (1976): p. 380.

individuals and society at large. If the methods women chose to raise their children affected the collective, then the need to regulate and influence that method of mothering became of the highest importance for critics concerned with society and culture. Therefore, commentary on the status of women or the importance of women's work became related to the health of a particular culture, nation, or community. In France, specifically, what was known as *puériculture* was a commitment to rearing children scientifically and professionally in an attempt to strengthen the nation. Promoters of women's rights had succeeded in making women's issues synonymous with everyone else's issues. The connection between women and everyone else (i.e., men and children) would become stronger as the century continued to progress, but it had its beginnings in the Belle Époque and the rehabilitated image of the woman of letters.

As stated in the introduction of this dissertation, feminism of the Belle Époque in France influenced Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán. What did feminists of the Belle Époque write about women's work and practical skills for women? Contributors to *La Fronde* wrote columns such as "Women's Work," which discussed "the many difficulties women faced in industrial settings," or "Le Home," which detailed domestic issues.³⁰³ Also at this time, women began to attempt to move the idea of the woman writer away from a bluestockinged, *dangerously* intellectual persona to one of a "conventionally feminine ideal."³⁰⁴ This involved presenting the *femme de lettres* as the *femme moderne* who could skillfully balance tradition and modernity in order to model best practices at home and in her public life. Women did this in a variety of ways, such as using the phenomenon of "At Home" photography to their advantage; for example, one

³⁰³ Maggie Allison, "Marguerite Durand and *La Fronde*: Voicing Women of the Belle Époque" in *A Belle Époque? Women and Feminism in French Society and Culture 1890-1914* eds. Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr (Berghan Books, 2007), p. 40.

³⁰⁴ Rachel Mesch, "Beyond the Bluestocking: Images of Work-Life Balance in the Belle-Époque" in *Having It All in the Belle Époque* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 57.

article featured Dreyfusard Séverine seated in her dining room, very close to her fireplace, presenting herself as comfortable with domesticity.³⁰⁵ These women pointed out that, as writers, they could easily remain at home while engaging in their professional pursuits: they could write literature while contentedly overseeing their home. This presented proponents of the New Woman and feminists of the Belle Epoque with a complex balancing act – if these women wanted widespread support, then women of letters had to appeal to wider audiences, and convince them of women’s right to professions. They sought to accomplish this by melding the familiar with the new and radical. They would present society with women writers who happily engaged in professions while remaining within and overseeing their homes. This helped to reinforce the notion that women could professionally manage families, and later, manage both families and nations. Women became part of what people viewed as the modern world, without promoting the dangerous idea that women would abandon their homes and families and take the jobs of men.³⁰⁶ Yet their integration in this modern world primarily came from their ability to bear children and raise future citizens.

For French women, the need to blend traditional ideas of womanhood with newer notions of women’s place in society stemmed from popular Republican “familial feminism” which championed “equality in difference;” these advocates postulated that women could primarily find fulfillment through commitment to her husband and children – in her natural (and womanly) state.³⁰⁷ Authors such as Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and Octave Gréard (1828-1904), both of

³⁰⁵ Rachel Mesch, “Beyond the Bluestocking: Images of Work-Life Balance in the Belle-Epoque” in *Having It All in the Belle Epoque* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 59.

³⁰⁶ This was a fear discussed in French circles in the late-nineteenth century. Karen Offen, “Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France” *The American Historical Review* 89 (1984): p. 657.

³⁰⁷ Karen Offen contrasts this idea of familial feminism with individualist feminism, which she writes was not as popular by the end of the nineteenth century. Individualist feminism “sought equality of opportunity for the individual, irrespective of sex, familial considerations, or national concerns.” Karen Offen, “Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France” *The American Historical Review* 89 (1984): p. 654.

whom Đạm Phương quotes in her book, expressed beliefs that women were meant to be wives and mothers (with varying purpose, but the sentiment was the same).³⁰⁸ This idea contributed to the view of motherhood and homemaking as a natural state for all female creatures – human women included – in which women would find contentment in these natural roles. Following the publication of Charles Darwin’s work, a host of commentators began to draw comparisons between the natural world and the ways that humans structured their societies. This allowed those interested in the sciences, evolution, and nature to make political and philosophical statements through discussion of the animal and insect worlds. Scholar Marion Thomas argues that scientists such as Jean-Henri Fabre (1823-1915), Edmond Perrier (1844-1921), and Alfred Giard (1846-1908) linked their political ideologies to their studies of animals’ and insects’ maternal instincts in the natural world; Perrier specifically supported the Republican feminine ideal and endorsed an essential maternalism in women “by making maternal instinct a cornerstone of the survival and reproduction of Republican society.”³⁰⁹ This interlinking of science, politics, and philosophy as they related to essentialism and maternity additionally extended to discussions about birth and birth control.

Women’s ability to bear children placed them at the center of wider discussions about birth, birth science, and the best methods for rearing children. This was the case for French and Vietnamese women, and coincided with the development of *puériculture*, which was a French movement defined by Adolphe Pinard in 1896 as “research and application of knowledge useful to reproduction, preservation and improvement of the species.”³¹⁰ Puériculture was about the

³⁰⁸ Both men quoted in Marion Thomas, “Are Women Naturally Devoted Mothers?: Fabre, Perrier, and Giard on Maternal Instinct in France under the Third Republic” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 50 (2014): pp. 282 and 284.

³⁰⁹ Marion Thomas, “Are Women Naturally Devoted Mothers?: Fabre, Perrier, and Giard on Maternal Instinct in France under the Third Republic” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 50 (2014): pp. 293 & 298.

³¹⁰ Adolphe Pinard quoted in William H. Schneider, “Puericulture and the Style of French Eugenics” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 8 (1986): p. 265.

health of newborns and children and prompted discussions on how to best contribute to the human species through scientific practices. These discussions included whether or not one should seek to have children at all. If this calls eugenics to mind, that is because there were eugenicist aspects to the philosophy. The difference in France was that observers who worried over societal degradation viewed eugenics as a way to increase birthrate and thus reverse declines in the population, rather than promoting highly selective reproduction to garner a strong and intelligent population. It is important to note that, in interwar France, political discourse “was dominated by an overtly pro-natalist agenda linked to increased depopulation,” making maternity a significant topic around which French women organized and deliberated.³¹¹ The French viewed abortion and birth control as criminal while birthrates came to be associated with national health. Yet this was not exactly the case in the Vietnamese context. The French colonial government adopted the same policies touted in the Metropole, but an overpopulation crisis in Tonkin during the late-1920s and early-1930s, combined with the effects of the Great Depression, caused some Vietnamese writers to blame pro-natalism for “uncontrollable population growth and the looming racial degeneracy of the Viet people.”³¹² Overpopulation and Malthusian-inspired thinking led commentators to encourage reduced reproduction for the good of the race and nation. Yet this conversation applied most to the northern region of Vietnam, as Tonkin suffered the greatest after the economic collapse of the Great Depression, due to it being the largest industrial and rice-exporting center in Indochina.³¹³ Tonkin was also a site of overcrowding, with the largest population base existing around the Red River Delta.³¹⁴ The

³¹¹ Francesca Berry, “Housewife Writ Large: *Marie mécanique*, Paulette Bernège, and New Feminist Domesticity in Interwar France” *Oxford Art Journal* 40 (2017): p. 14

³¹² Thuy Linh Nguyen, “Overpopulation, Racial Degeneracy and Birth Control in French Colonial Vietnam” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 19 (2018): p. 1.

³¹³ Thuy Linh Nguyen, “Overpopulation, Racial Degeneracy and Birth Control in French Colonial Vietnam” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 19 (2018): p. 3.

³¹⁴ Thuy Linh Nguyen, “Overpopulation,” p. 3.

population around the Red River Delta was significantly larger than the population of Cochinchina, which was sparsely populated prior to the nineteenth century. Would Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương, living in the south and central regions, have held the same preoccupations with overpopulation? According to Thuy Linh Nguyen, Annam and Cochinchina's population growth was sluggish.³¹⁵ From my research into Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương's writings, birth control did not concern them so much as ensuring women reproduced once they were of an appropriate age and married to men of high moral and intellectual character. There was a concern over appropriate marriages and well-trained mothers who would raise good children. Opinions differed between different regions and between Vietnamese writers. The literary public sphere revealed a plurality of views over birth and population, but all writers, regardless of whether they were pro-natalist or whether they favored population control, freely referenced Social Darwinism, scientific mothering, and the health of the nation and race in their writings. Such discussion and such views were not exclusive to Vietnam, as they were also debated in France and in other countries, such as the United States.

Regardless of the circulation of opinions surrounding birth and population control, in Vietnam, France, or elsewhere, these cultures engaged in public discourses over how women should select their marriage partners and raise the children to whom they gave birth. Further, women's reproductive capabilities meant that they became responsible for family planning and responsible for any "blame" should the health and wellbeing of their children come into question. Motherhood became part of the discourse on national health and the future of the race; women were deemed essential to nation building and national preservation.

³¹⁵ Thuy Linh Nguyen, "Overpopulation," p. 4.

To briefly outline American discourse surrounding these topics, the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Progressive Era found women participating in discussions about women's suffrage, involvement in civic and social reforms, and hygiene. This included discussions about eugenics and human advancement, under the name of "social hygiene," where advocates sought to "cultivate the human being, particularly women. Perfection was measured by high intelligence, rationality and mechanistic practicality, rather than Victorian virtue."³¹⁶ Women were included in discussions about national and racial improvement, and their education became part of that path to improvement. In his writings, President Theodore Roosevelt combined "women's rights with the individual's national duty," tying the idea of heightened women's status with their commitment to democracy and civilization.³¹⁷ To Progressives concerned with women's part in reform and social hygiene, a woman's "highest duty is to cultivate herself so she can serve her country."³¹⁸ The above demonstrates ties between women, education, eugenics, and nationalism. As we have seen in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's writings in prior chapters, similar ties between women's advancement, their self-cultivation, and the good of the Vietnamese broadly factored into her vision for her readers. The similarities between women's roles in American Progressive social hygiene and Đạm Phương's opinions about women's familial roles will be elucidated later in this chapter. To American Progressives and the writers of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, control and participation in discourse over women's actions as individuals, wives, and mothers was essential in the cultivation of an advanced nation.

³¹⁶ Jessica Lee Mathiason, "From Sentimentality to Science: Social Utility, Feminist Eugenics, and the End of the Road in Progressive Era America" *Gender & History* 33 (2021): p. 153.

³¹⁷ Jessica Lee Mathiason, "From Sentimentality," p. 154.

³¹⁸ Jessica Lee Mathiason, "From Sentimentality," p. 154.

Calls for increased access to practical skills (newspapers) and women's elevated status

The ideologies swirling around the intellectual sphere in the Vietnamese, French, and American milieus led to material changes in the form of associations, groups, and meetings. In Vietnamese urban centers in the 1920s and early-1930s, there were increased calls to establish associations within which young women could learn housework and practical skills. These calls sought to secure and ensure the future of the Vietnamese with attention paid towards women as the bearers and distributors of culture and learning. These associations would cultivate women, so that they could (in turn) cultivate others. They also highlighted the women who founded and participated in these associations as women of high-society and high status in their communities. Through her publishing endeavors, Phan Thị Bạch Vân was capitalizing on the wave of interest in the education of young women. This was an interest that featured the substantial involvement of Đạm Phương, who established herself as a leader in facilitating associations, charitable work, and groups advocating further attention paid to women and their importance to the family. In this section, I will discuss articles from newspapers that demonstrate both the growing interest in these civil society groups concentrating on the connections between women, children, housework, and education, as well as elite women's participation in and support for these efforts.

Đạm Phương was not solely involved in *writing* about housewifery and women's involvement in familial duties; she sought to provide material support and contribute to civil society in a number of ways, along with her peers. Đạm Phương was president of the Women's Work Association in Huế, where she exercised most of her influence. In *Trung lập báo*, an author featured a photo of Đạm Phương, standing beside other women who were part of her association, whom the author referred to as its many "honorable" (*danh giá*) members.³¹⁹ Phương

³¹⁹ "Hội Nữ-Công ở Huế" *Trung lập báo* (4 May, 1928), p.1.

would use her influence to expand her involvement in the community. In an article from *Hà Thành ngo báo*, the author writes that Đạm Phương met with the wife of a government official with jurisdiction over the province of Thừa Thiên (the province encompassing Huế) and discussed the possibility of organizing an orphanage association (*một hội Dục-anh-đường*). This was to be a charitable institution that would help feed and care for orphaned children, and the author of the article wrote that Đạm Phương felt the endeavor was in-keeping with the purposes of her Women's Work Association. Additionally, the author "heard that many of the country's high-society women support" work such as this (*nghe ra có nhiều vị thượng-lưu nữ-giới trong nước tác-thành vào*).³²⁰ The author framed this participation in charitable endeavors as both feminine and of high status; the presence of children and their welfare, as well as Đạm Phương's leadership in the realm of housewifery, made the participation of elite women important and compulsory. Furthermore, their status as high-society women would provide these charitable endeavors with their sources of funding, and authors referred to elite women's support for women's rights more broadly when seeking to promote fundraisers, as seen in the next article I discuss.

One example of fundraising for the purposes of funding these endeavors comes from an article in *Hà Thành ngo báo* in 1927, in which the author called for readers to participate in a fundraiser for a soon-to-be-opened women's work association (*nữ công học hội*) in Hanoi, on Hàng Bạc street. The fundraiser involved the performance of a play, for which families could purchase tickets and support the new association. The author of the piece connected the establishment of an association dedicated to women's work to the advancement of women's rights (*Thiết tưởng hội Nữ-công thành lập thì con đường tiến-bộ của nữ-giới ta cũng đã tiến lên*

³²⁰ "Ở Huế sắp có hội nuôi con trẻ" *Hà Thành ngo báo* (26 March, 1929), p. 3.

được một bước) and asked women to lend a helping hand (*các bà thân-hào cũng nên mỗi tay giúp đỡ vào*).³²¹ This was an early example of an association dedicated to women's work, and the fundraising efforts driving its establishment. Other examples soon followed.

One woman named Đoàn Tâm Đan, a schoolteacher from Nam Định, wrote an open letter addressed to “the President of the Huế Women's Work Association” in which she expressed her happiness and support for the work Đạm Phương was undertaking. Đan wrote that she heard about the Association's plans to construct a meeting place and wanted to donate twenty *đồng* in order to support their efforts. She also wanted other women in Vietnam to bring their passion for humanity and philanthropy and help one another to establish a place where young women and children could study and practice housewifery.³²² She pointed to a future of “glorious” (*vẻ vang*) women. There is an addendum at the end of the piece, emphasizing the importance of raising money for Huế's Women's Work Association, and how it is “necessary for our women today” (*rất cần thiết của nữ giới ta ngày nay*).³²³ The author also praises Đoàn Tâm Đan for donating such a substantial sum to the Association and writes that she has “enthusiasm” *nhiệt thành đối* for the “future” *tiền đồ* of women.³²⁴ The author of the addendum connected Đan's noble concern for a bright future for Vietnamese women with her donation to Đạm Phương's homemaking association. We see in this article, amongst others, how women were connecting ideas of women's worth, prestige, and rights to their participation in (and fundraising for) women's groups. Yet these were not simple women's interest groups – these were associations dedicated to teaching other women and girls how to be effective housewives. In some ways,

³²¹ “Giúp hội Nữ-công học hội” *Hà Thành ngộ báo* (27 April, 1927) p.1.

³²² “Tôi cũng mong cả các chị em Nam việt kẻ ít người nhiều đem tâm tình bác ái mà giúp nhau cho hội quán chóng viên thành, để lấy chỗ cho các con em học tập nữ công...” from Đoàn Tâm Đan, “Một bức thư” *Hà Thành ngộ báo* (29 November, 1927), p. 1.

³²³ Đoàn Tâm Đan, “Một bức thư” *Hà Thành ngộ báo* (29 November, 1927), p. 1.

³²⁴ Đoàn Tâm Đan, “Một bức thư,” p. 1.

these women were reinforcing the status quo for some women while deriving prestige and admiration from their direction of civil society groups.

Scholars have studied the interest in civil society amongst intellectuals during the interwar years,³²⁵ but what makes this a distinct issue (though still connected) is the emphasis on women's participation. In none of the aforementioned articles are there specific calls for men to fundraise and donate to these causes. While the future of women and their children might affect the whole of society, the responsibility of uplifting and educating women in need lay on the shoulders of other women. These elite women wished to control the prescriptive literature, narratives, and associations they were creating. Through attention paid towards a feminine civil society, they could exert their own influence and create a vision for the future of Vietnamese women that increased their esteem in the eyes of the community.

Preparing the future through the past

Integral to Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương's work was a focus on the future and an education that paid heed to a politicized past. In the teaching of young women, Bạch Vân and Phương began the process of shaping the Vietnamese future and ensuring women's place in that future. Part of planning for the future involves a combination of optimism and fear: there must be a faith in the ability for people to organize and take action, combined with a fear of what may happen should people not organize effectively, or at all.

There was discussion of the future – through lenses of optimism and fear – throughout many parts of the world in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries; as we will see within this chapter, Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương read and were influenced by authors

³²⁵ See works by Van Nguyen-Marshall, *In Search of Moral Authority: the Discourse on Poverty, Poor Relief, and Charity in French colonial Vietnam* and Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, *On our own strength: the self-reliant literary group and cosmopolitan nationalism in late colonial Vietnam*, specifically chapter six "The League of Light."

similarly concerned with humanity's future and how women could ensure the success of future generations. The preoccupation with future children and how women were to cultivate themselves to become great mothers is similar to eugenics discourse in the early-twentieth century. Helpful here is to consider an idea from the President of the American Social Hygiene Association, Charles Eliot (1834-1926). Eliot termed two opposing notions of eugenics as "positive" eugenic practices and "negative" eugenic practices. Negative eugenics encompass the prohibitive practices (like abortion and sterilization) the Western world has come to associate with right-wing movements (such as in Nazi Germany). But to Eliot, "positive eugenics advocated the improvement of genetic traits by implementing educational and social programmes that promoted higher reproduction rates for those with desirable traits...which dovetailed with the concerns of first-wave white feminism, progressive economics and the welfare state."³²⁶ This is in-line with Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán's stated purpose and concern with the future of both Vietnamese women and the Vietnamese people.

At the same time as these women discussed the future of the Vietnamese—whom they wanted to be educated, literate, and passionate about the good of humanity—they also sought to "remind" their young readership of a past in which a person (or persons) had to surmount the chaos of the times through valuable character traits. This was a way that these women could secure the national future by warning young readers and encouraging them to emulate great deeds. Historian Ori Sela writes that in the first half of twentieth-century China, "links between history, national identity, education, and politics" came to be forged.³²⁷ In Vietnam, education (and education about certain histories) became an avenue through which scholars and writers

³²⁶ Jessica Lee Mathiason, "From Sentimentality to Science: Social Utility, Feminist Eugenics, and the End of the Road in Progressive Era America" *Gender & History* 33 (2021): p. 152.

³²⁷ Ori Sela, "To Feel at Home in the Wonderful World of Modern Science": New Chinese Historiography and Qing Intellectual History" *Science in Context* 30 (2017): p. 326.

could engage in the construction of a nascent national identity. Sometimes, this national identity could be forged and reinforced through historical education as well as practical education. As we will see in some of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's writings, history was never far from her mind when attempting to create a better future for Vietnamese women.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân: Literacy, morals, and history

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *quốc ngữ* primer begins with explanations of capital letters, lower-case letters, vowels, numbers, and roman numerals. She provides instruction as to the phonetics of the Romanized language and explains the diacritic marks differentiating the tones. She provides reading lessons which are meant to be read aloud so that the speaker may practice their pronunciation. As the lessons progress, we become privy to the wider-reaching lessons Bạch Vân wished to impart on young students. As the students advance in their literacy, the lessons become more sophisticated and tailored to a mature audience that will appreciate the lessons within.

Her first reading lesson with a substantive message is titled "girls who are still young" (*con gái còn nhỏ*) and instructs young girls to diligently study *quốc ngữ* in order to make others proud of their self-control and discipline. She warns them against thinking about playtime when they should be practicing and studying; she tells them not to suffer emotional outbursts, and to stay tidy. This, she writes will make "your parents happy, and strangers speak highly of you."³²⁸ Bạch Vân places importance on how others will perceive the readers and students being taught from this primer; she taught young women that the good perceptions of their community towards them is something to foster. To Bạch Vân, any negative outburst or hint of laziness might cause one's parents to become unhappy or bring the criticism of strangers upon them. A young girl not

³²⁸ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Văn Quốc ngữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư quán, 1929) p. 12.

only has a responsibility to learn how to read and write, but to do so in a way which will make the community proud of her.

The seventh reading lesson outlines a young woman's need to love her family and wider social community. First, from childhood, a girl must be able to love her father and mother, her siblings, her parents' siblings, and all of her kin (*thương cha mẹ anh em, cậu cô, chú bác thân tộc họ hàng*). Then, once she has grown, before she takes a husband, she must love her lot in life. After she has married, she must love her husband and children, if she has any (*phải thương chồng, có con rồi phải thương con*). Bạch Vân then shifts to instructing her readers to love people and society (*nhơn-quần xã-hội*) and their country (*đất nước non nhà*). She emphasizes that any particular girl "has many great responsibilities" towards her country (*có nhiều trách-nhiệm lớn*). The next lessons advance this emphasis on communal responsibility and the benefits of doing so.

Bạch Vân launches into a story about a girl who lived during the reign of Duke Mu of Lu, who ruled during the early Warring States period (475-221 BCE) in ancient China.³²⁹ She lived in a village and had yet to marry; she spent her days wailing and lamenting to herself. Passers-by heard her lament and felt pity for her. One afternoon a woman from the neighboring village came by and asked why the girl wailed and cried; the woman then deduced that the girl wanted a husband, and asked if she could act as a matchmaker? The girl was surprised and responded that she was actually worried about the Duke of Lu, who was old but had a still-young son. The

³²⁹ Bạch Vân knew of this story from the Chinese *Biographies of Women* (Lienü zhuan), which was compiled by Liu Xiang (77-6 BCE). This story is quoted and discussed in Joan Judge and Hu Ying, "Introduction," chapter in *Beyond Exemplar Tales: Women's Biography in Chinese History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), p. 1. The authors also mention that Qiu Jin, whom Bạch Vân wrote about, referenced this story in a poem about her worry over the state of affairs in her own times, how she could not participate in politics, or fix these issues.

visiting woman laughed and told the girl that those matters are for government officials to worry about. It later becomes clear that this type of thinking is a mistake.

The girl replied that was not true, and that individual people's actions have the potential to affect others negatively. She told the woman about times in which others had caused her misfortune, without meaning to. She then goes on to say that the Duke of Lu is now old and feeble (*già yếu*) and his heir is too young (*nhỏ dại*); this leaves the country at the mercy of evildoers. If something bad were to happen suddenly, the common folk would suffer. She worries that women will not be immune from the disorder.

The narrator writes, predictably, three years later the state of Lu was in disorder and the armies of the Qi and the Chu states went to war and attacked, forcing the men of the Lu to fight and the women to work. The narrator emphasizes that no woman could sit still (*không có một cô một bà được ngồi yên*) due to the circumstances. At the end of the lesson, the narrator writes that men of honor praised the unmarried girl from the village for her worrying in advance; the men used the word *thay* at the end of their statement, expressing the emotion and sorrow they felt after the girl's worries had come to pass.³³⁰

This was meant to emphasize young women's duty to others and the effects that individuals have on the collective; women would not be exempt from issues affecting their country, and their actions have the potential to shape the future of the country. As such, they should worry on their country's behalf. The people of Lu had not worried about seemingly-far-off problems that did not directly concern them. This story implies that, had they concerned

³³⁰ “Người quân tử sau khi người con gái làng Tắt-thắt rằng: Cái sự lo của con gái Tắt-thắt xa thay.” Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Văn Quốc ngữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư quán, 1929) p. 15. Though not commonly used this way, here the use of the word *thay* at the end of a sentence is an exclamation of guilt or sorrow.

themselves with issues of the state, they may have been able to help themselves before disaster struck.

The story juxtaposes petty interest in matchmaking and romance with noble concern for one's ruler and community. The visiting woman in the story hears the girl's wailing and automatically assumes this is due to her status as unmarried and alone; she offers to help find the girl a husband. The girl is surprised by what she perceives to be an inconsequential triviality; how could she be worried about finding a husband when the Duke of Lu might die without a suitable heir? How could one think about individual happiness when the state of Lu was at risk? The end of the story makes clear the admiration "men of honor" (*người quân tử*) and their regret that others had not shared this worry over future matters. Because the girl was alone in her worry, conflict with the Qi and Chu states touched the lives of all men and women of the Lu. Within this story, it is noble and good to worry over the wellbeing and future of the collective.

Next, and acting as the last lessons in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's *quốc ngữ* primer, were two lessons meant to be learned and repeated by heart (*bài học thuộc lòng*). Both dealt with the mythologized national heroines, the Trưng Sisters and Bà Triệu. Both lessons portrayed the women as heroic and martial, fighting in spite of – and during – times of hardship. Bạch Vân used words and phrases conveying chaos (*phong trần, cơn bão, cơ trời*) and bravery (*xông pha* and *anh hùng dạn mặt*).³³¹ The use of these women – their image and legend – as well as the language connoting martiality and strife, was a focus in this section for older girls who had mastered the prior lessons. This focus on ancient war and women's role within conflicts implies an identification between contemporary times and the past's feuds and periods of turmoil.

³³¹ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Văn Quốc ngữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thơ quán, 1929) pp. 15-16.

The use of historical myth and legend at the end of the primer demonstrates that Bạch Vân and her partners at the press thought drawing parallels between a far-off time and place might inspire young women of the contemporary period; these lessons presented readers with comparisons between their current time period and periods of disarray, war, and strife. Through these lessons, they illustrated the role of women as guardians of the empire in times of trouble. The first lesson conveyed through this imagery was about China's Warring States period. The second example used Vietnamese heroines to express the same sense of martiality to successfully complete a difficult task in times of societal disarray. This was not an uncommon practice – to adequately convey the needs of the present with the deeds of an historical period – and has parallels within Chinese history and Confucian classics, as well.

The use of folklore and stories with an historical quality (I use the word “quality,” as there was little factual historical support for these stories) found use for the Chinese during what became a tumultuous century: folklore and history at times melded together to serve emotional and national narrative-building purposes. In the aftermath of China's loss in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), intellectuals such as Liang Qichao saw history as “of utmost importance for nationalism, patriotism, and a sense of unity among the people.”³³² Because of this importance, intellectuals created a New Historiography which sought to define and solidify the (perceived and potential) Chinese nation; this historiography sought to employ modern research, focus on evolution of time, and center the nation state, rather than the imperial court.³³³ But history which serves to spark nationalist and patriotic needs is not always the most accurate history.

³³² Ori Sela, “‘To Feel at Home in the Wonderful World of Modern Science’: New Chinese Historiography and Qing Intellectual History,” *Science in Context* 30 (2017): p. 328.

³³³ Ori Sela, “‘To Feel at Home,’” pp. 327-328.

While I do not believe Phan Thị Bạch Vân sought to create a New *Vietnamese* Historiography with her girls' *quốc ngữ* textbook, I believe her inclusion of China's Warring States period was a comparison to the times in which she and her readership lived – chaotic times – and reflected a desire to motivate senses of civic responsibility and center a potential Vietnamese nation within young women's considerations. This motivation towards civic responsibility was central to including young women in efforts at building a modern nation state and national sensibility. Bạch Vân partially accomplished this through the re-telling of history. Re-tellings of history to convey a moral imperative, or stories with moral lessons, are not uncommon in a number of cultures and time periods (we have allegories, parables, and fables which accomplish this task). Comparison between ancient folklore and modern crisis signalled to the girls reading an aspect of urgency and duty to their country and community. This was a tale about another culture, centering around an ancient time of which little historical record could be reliably analyzed, but its message meant that young girls who read about it might take with them a sense of awe and respect that derives from the telling of ancient tales.

Chinese people during the late-Imperial and early-Republican eras found similar use for the story of King Goujian, a figure said to have ruled the kingdom of Yue at the end of the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BCE). The tale of King Goujian describes a ruler humiliated by defeat at the hands of a neighboring kingdom. Once Goujian has endured hardship, persevered, and renewed himself as a ruler, he successfully takes his revenge. This story became “a source of inspiration and encouragement” to “a broad spectrum of Chinese” in the twentieth century.³³⁴ John Gillis writes that China possessed a unique relationship with history, which meant intellectuals turned “to the historical record as a treasure trove of examples,” making

³³⁴ Paul Cohen, *Speaking to History: the Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. xviii.

mythic and ancient tales such as King Goujian's popular for a variety of people at a variety of different times, including the early-twentieth century.³³⁵ Like Bạch Vân's tale of a girl worrying over the future of her kingdom – for good reason – the tale of King Goujian could spur Chinese citizens to feel and act in accordance to a number of exigencies. The idea of history could motivate, especially when that history sparked an emotional response. This could be an effective tool through which authors of prescriptive literature could influence readers to action.

Bạch Vân did not only include Chinese heroines in her historical explorations, however, and her references to *Hai Bà Trưng* and *Bà Triệu* demonstrate an important thread linked between their myth and the myth of an early Vietnamese “nation.” The inclusion of the Trưng Sisters and Lady Triệu in Vietnamese media was a common occurrence during the interwar period, in which the spotty historical record pertaining to these heroines (*nữ anh hùng*) allowed for liberal use and embellishment of their martial accomplishments.³³⁶ This was another way that Bạch Vân could use the esteem implied by ancient history in order to bolster the need for responsibility in the present. These lessons highlighted the responsibility of girls and women to their communities – in the past, their kingdom and village – now, they had a duty to their nation and culture. The use of these legends additionally was exciting to young readers and ensured greater readership.

Bạch Vân placed an ad at the end of her lessons highlighting legendary women; the ad reads that she wishes young people to quickly become skilled and wise. She then writes that once children have finished the primer, they should be provided with another year's worth of books from *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*. She states that “the price is fifteen *đồng* which is not much,” and that

³³⁵ John Gillis, “Foreword” in Paul Cohen, *Speaking to History: the Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. xiii.

³³⁶ For discussion of this see chapter two of Madeleine Aitchison, “Who Holds the Mirror? The Creation of an Ideal Vietnamese Woman, 1918-1934” (MA thesis, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2018).

after they read from *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, they will become people of sufficient behavior and conduct.³³⁷ Phan Thị Bạch Vân could ensure the success of her women's press – as well as her vision for Vietnamese women – through a loyal customer base. To this customer base, she stressed the need for her lessons and sold an idea of a united, functional, and model young woman.

Bạch Vân brings readers back to the ultimate purpose for her primer and women's press, which is planning for the future (future women, future mothers, and their future children), even if she does so through the telling of fabled pasts. She ends the primer with a page – addressed to young women – stating that children these days are greedy and indulgent (*ham ăn ham chơi*) but that, in the future, they will become members of the nation and mothers of children. She writes that children will witness numerous forms of hardship and suffering, but humankind cannot avoid this. Before they experience that hardship, she writes, children should take care in cultivating their strength (*cái sức*) and their intelligence (*cái óc*) so that they will be able to resist hardship easily. She advises her readers that, “In regards to strength, you should frequently familiarize yourself with working very hard, and in regards to your intelligence, you should read books from *Nữ-lưu-thơ-Quán*.”³³⁸ She ends by describing the purpose of the book, which is meant for girls of the South (*vì con gái nước Nam*), so that they can write, be happy, and open their minds (*mở trí*). She believes that everyone should read their publishing house's material (*lớn nhỏ thấy đều nên đọc*), placing her outlook and the purpose of her press at the very top of a moral hierarchy meant to strengthen the future of the Vietnamese.

³³⁷ “Số bạc năm mươi đồng chẳng bao nhiêu” Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Văn Quốc ngữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thơ quán, 1929) p. 16.

³³⁸ Về cái sức thì các em hãy năng làm lụng cực nhọc cho quen, còn về cái óc thì các em hãy đua nhau đọc sách *Nữ-lưu-thơ-Quán*.” Phan Thị Bạch Vân, *Văn Quốc ngữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thơ quán, 1929) p. 17.

It is clear in Bạch Vân's writing, fictional and nonfictional, that she hopes to cultivate a responsible and civically-minded group of young women. In her primer – at first glance simply meant to teach literacy in *quốc ngữ* – she writes about the current state of children (that they are greedy and indulge in pleasure) and warns readers against this kind of behavior. She thinks about the region's future, in which these young women would grow to adulthood and teach their own children in the spirit of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán. Her reading primer is more than a resource through which one could teach literacy in *quốc ngữ*; she views the book as a practical method for encouraging literacy and encouraging young women's embrace of certain morals. Most important is fostering young women's sense of duty to their families and communities at-large. She wants young women to seek praise from their parents and strangers for their hard work and intelligence, rather than standing idly by or playing at the expense of being useful. She wants girls to think about and worry over the state of their community – even the welfare of those in government and politics, people whom these girls may never meet. She seeks to place these young women within a community; in this community, women would think about their obligations and the effect they had on others, even if those effects were not immediately visible or known. This is how, to Bạch Vân, readers could cultivate a just and functional society. Now, we will turn to Bạch Vân's partner in educating young women – Đạm Phương – and her book, *Gia-Đình Giáo-Dục*. First, we will discuss the introduction to the book, then we will analyze the varied references Phương makes within the work. Lastly, we will do our best to examine Phương's writing free from other influences, and piece together her vision for Vietnamese women and their participation in families.

Gia-Đình Giáo-Dục: Đạm Phương, Orison Swett Marden, Marie Dugard, Jules Michelet, and Charlotte Perkins-Gilman

In 1928, Phan Thị Bạch Vân published a textbook educating young women about family matters by Đạm Phương. Titled *Gia-Đình Giáo-Dục*, the table of contents showed a list of topics ranging from teaching children, avoiding bad habits, women's occupations, and marriage. The book specified that the tone of the instruction was meant to be conversational (*thường đàm*) and listed Đạm Phương's credentials as the head of the Huế Women's Work Association (*hội Nữ Công Huế* or *hội Nữ Công học*). Through the establishment of the book's conversational, casual nature – as well as Phương's expertise as a leader in women's issues – readers were meant to feel invited and compelled to read what she had to say.

The work reads as a collection of Đạm Phương's opinions concerning current affairs as they relate to women, children, marriage, and family relations. While there are references to other authors (which shows avid and varied reading on Phương's part), most of the evidence and discussion she provides stems from Phương's own experiences and views. As Phương promised, and in contrast to Bạch Vân's literacy primer, *Gia-Đình Giáo-Dục* is written in a conversational tone and gives the impression it was intended for a wider audience. Ultimately, we see that Đạm Phương was concerned with the future and wellbeing of "the race" (*chúng tộc*) and how women's betterment in status and life would benefit the entire Vietnamese population. Like Phan Thị Bạch Vân's work teaching literacy in *quốc ngữ*, Đạm Phương demonstrated a focus on the future and how women could contribute to a successful future. Yet Đạm Phương does not only address the young women meant to read the book; she often mentions what she sees as ills of current Vietnamese society and includes men in her recommendations and musings, as well.

The writer responsible for the book's forward similarly grapples with how those thinking about the future should function: what traditions should they preserve? What societal issues should they change? These questions are central to the teaching of young women and reforming how society views them. They are the practical questions which direct this attempt at guiding Vietnamese footing in this arena. *Gia-Đình Giáo-Dục* is a rich text; therefore, I will be splitting my analysis into multiple parts: a discussion of the foreword, Phuong's overarching goals as stated in the book, her influences, and what we may tease out about her own views. I will also discuss Phuong's topical engagement with issues specifically concerning women and young girls. There is not enough space in this chapter to completely cover the whole of Phuong's work, and some of her topics are outside the scope of this dissertation. The focus for this chapter will be on understanding Đạm Phuong's views on women's place in society, how education contributes to a better society, and how exactly her varied influences factor into these equations.

An author credited as *Tự-tư* begins her text (*lời mở đầu*) by writing "Lately, we in society have followed global trends: the rise of the question of women's liberation, making all families pay attention to matters of society," and absorbed in thoughts of this nature.³³⁹ The author goes on to reference someone else's belief that men and women suffer common plights (*cùng chung một cánh ngộ*), but that people only discuss matters of women's freedom and liberation. The author then writes that women's psychology and qualities are different from men, but particularly that their acceptance and endurance of the old culture (*văn-hóa cũ*) has been very different. The author states there is a "male conception of freedom" (*giải-phóng theo cái quan niệm nam-giới*) and argues that only some women have benefitted from the liberation they have already been granted. Because all women are still living within an old system (*chế độ cũ*), we

³³⁹ Tự tư quoted in Đạm Phuong, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), p. I.

cannot call this liberation. The author states that similar issues – in which women wish for liberation but suffer under a traditional, restrictive system – have affected other women around the world. The author writes that we (those living in society) want to liberate women but we do not care to reform the old culture that is currently controlling them (*ta không để tâm cải cách cái văn-hóa cũ hiện đương chi phối cho phụ-nữ ta đó*). The author emphasizes the need to reform (*cải cách đi*), but how to go about it? She points out “That is a very important and difficult question.”³⁴⁰

As for her ultimate argument, the author writes that not *all* of the old traditions and culture were wrong: old traditions taught some women economic independence, how to have satisfactory marriages, and peaceful family lives. Therefore, the author argues, women and girls who advocate for liberation must choose the essence of the old ways along with the new and meld them together in order to bring about women who are faithful to their obligations and have an understanding of their position in their family and society. The author advocates a combination of new trends and established traditions that will result in intelligent women who still fulfill a customary role within their families. She states that her education of women aims for this purpose, and that these ideas were the basis for this book. The author ends her introduction to Đạm Phương’s book by quoting from a 1915 book by the American self-help author, Orison Swett Marden (1848-1924), titled *Woman and Home*. She states that education should begin with basics and reflect what is real and practical in society and practical for people to understand.

We see here a commitment to what the author terms “women’s liberation,” (*phụ nữ giải phóng*) to the “new,” (*mới*) and the progression of society, all while acknowledging the hold

³⁴⁰ “Ấy là một câu hỏi rất hệ trọng rất khó khăn.” Tự tư quoted in Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), p. II.

which older traditions and outlooks have on women and girls. The author does not advocate a radical break from that which her readers are familiar; instead, the author aims to educate girls about their obligations to their families and society in a practical way. What this book and author seek to promote is the official inclusion of women and girls into society, as valuable members of society. Women's potential contributions to society do not exist despite their biological sex, but *because* of it. Their value to society stems from their positions as women who can bear children, raise them, and act as examples for other women.

I would like to discuss Đạm Phương's choice of references in this work, as this contributes to our understanding of her influences, interests, and shared ideas pertaining to the education of young women. Like Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Đạm Phương was incredibly well-read, and had knowledge of works of literature and philosophy well outside the *kỳ* of Indochina or the metropole, France. The author of the foreword for *Gia-Đình Giáo-Dục* mentions the American author Orison Swett Marden's book, *Woman and the Home* (1915). Đạm Phương begins her first section by quoting Marie Dugard's book *De l'éducation moderne des jeunes filles* (1900) and continues the same section with a reference to Jules Michelet (1798-1874) and ends it with a quote from Olive Schreiner, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. She also references Charlotte Perkins Gilman's (1860-1935) treatise, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898). All these works advocate the idea of the New Woman, as well as increased education for women and girls based on their connection to children and the rest of society.

Orison Swett Marden was a writer of popular self-help books in the early-twentieth century, and held the view that "The greatest discovery of the century is the discovery of women. We have emancipated her, and are opening countless opportunities for our girls outside of

marriage.”³⁴¹ Marden believed that women should enjoy participation in government and have the ability to vote. Like many early supporters of women’s rights, Marden viewed the elevation of women’s status as integral to the elevation of society. As Marden writes, “Woman has never taken a step forward that has not benefited the whole human race,” marking a connection between rights for women and the progression of the communities in which they lived.³⁴² Marden did not necessarily want women to exist outside the home; rather, he saw the nation as an extension of the home, where “the units of our national life [are] but the family” and “our national government [is] itself but an extension of home authority and guardianship.”³⁴³ In keeping with this line of thinking, New Women interested in public life would simply be existing in an extension of the home and tending to their household duties by observing their civic, economic, and social responsibilities. This way, women’s status would not radically change: women’s responsibilities simply expanded to retain and engage with the already-expanded responsibilities of a progressing society. This rhetoric prioritized the future of a community, nation, or race³⁴⁴, and presented women – mothers and housewives – as an essential aspect in assuring a bright future.

The first chapter of Đạm Phương’s book, entitled “On the matter of girls’ education,” begins with a quote from Marie Dugard’s (1862-1932) book, *De l’éducation moderne des jeunes filles* (1900), in which the author stresses the importance of the education of girls for the future

³⁴¹ Orison Swett Marden, quoted in Kate Ferris “‘Liberty’ or ‘License’? Images of Women in the United States and the ‘Woman Question’ in Spain” chapter in *Imagining ‘America’ in Late Nineteenth-Century Spain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 157.

³⁴² Orison Swett Marden, “Foreword,” in *Woman and Home* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company Publishers, 1915).

³⁴³ Orison Swett Marden, *Woman and Home*, p. 33.

³⁴⁴ Marden showed a distinct interest in the “best good of the race” through eugenics, as seen in his chapter titled “Purifying the Race Stream” in *Woman and Home*.

of society.³⁴⁵ Dugard points out that sons become what their mothers make them (*les fils étant ce que les font les mères*), and that prior education of young women was once narrow (*étroite*) and must now strive to include modern science and the laws of nature and hygiene. Dugard believes this knowledge essential so that women no longer become “victims of those errors by which women compromise their health and the strength of the race daily.”³⁴⁶ Additionally, Dugard speaks of “self-reliance,” and how this virtue will protect “us from a parasitic existence” (*nous gardant d'une existence parasite*). Further, a modern education for young women prioritizes the virtue of self-reliance because women give moral life (*la vie morale*) and to give moral life one must also possess it (*il faut la posséder*). Before publishing this work, Marie Dugard was known in France for another book detailing her impressions of America after a visit to the United States in 1893, titled *La Société américaine: mœurs et caractère, la famille, rôle de la femme, écoles et universités* (1896). She was a prolific writer, highly educated, and “sought to reconcile the Republican images of the *maîtresse de maison* and the *mère éducatrice* with her own efforts to develop an innovative curriculum that would prepare her female students for higher education and a liberal profession.”³⁴⁷ She supported the American New Woman and sought to relay her knowledge of changing gender norms in the New World to people in France. This mirrors Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương’s goals of fostering a robust class of educated and skilled Vietnamese women; yet the justification for this education typically derived from women’s reproductive capabilities – how else could one rationalize women’s participation in society, than

³⁴⁵ In Đạm Phương’s translation, “Giáo dục phụ nữ là một cái vấn đề rất quan-hệ cho một dân-tộc tương lai.” In Marie Dugard’s original work, “...l’éducation des femmes est pour l’avenir d’un peuple une question vitale.” Marie Dugard, *De L’Éducation Moderne des Jeunes Filles* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1900), pp. 1-2.

³⁴⁶ “...pour n’être plus victimes de ces erreurs par où les femmes compromettent journellement leur santé et les forces de la race...” Marie Dugard, *De L’Éducation Moderne des Jeunes Filles* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1900), p. 10.

³⁴⁷ Mary Beth Raycroft, “Marie Dugard Takes Notes: The Spirited Reaction to 1890s America in *La Société Américaine* (1896) by a Parisian Secondary School Teacher of Girls,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 51 (2015): p. 320.

as an enlightened mother? Another author whom Phương references, Jules Michelet, was concerned with ideas of enlightenment, as well.

Further into this section about the education of girls, Phương cites the renowned French Romantic and nationalist historian, Jules Michelet. Quoting an unnamed book of his (most likely his 1860 work, *La Femme*), Phương writes that Michelet complained about the customs and ideas of the time. She translates “These days, girls’ education has yet to set a standard so that future generations will know the way to behave” (*sự giáo dục của con gái ngày nay chưa có gì làm chuẩn đích, để cho họ sau ra với đời cho biết đạo xử thế*). Within Michelet’s book, *La Femme* (1860), under the section titled “The Frail and Sacred Child,” Michelet wrote that there is no particular or special form of education for girls, and that education is a “question of future development” and also that of “life and death”³⁴⁸ – I believe this is the passage to which Đạm Phương is referring. Michelet was of the opinion that women and girls were taught accomplishments of little value and longevity, and that they were not prepared for life. Michelet also stated that “Every woman is a school,” and future generations learn from their mothers, before and more profoundly than they learn from their fathers.³⁴⁹ Phương then writes that civilized countries in the world are concerned with education, and she reasons that life is a vast ocean, and people are boats on the surface of the water. She believes that education helps people effectively deal with life, and reach their goals. For young women, she writes that simply being in a kitchen or cooking rice will not prepare them to be a person living in the world.³⁵⁰ The choice to reference Michelet is telling, as Michelet found that “changing the fabric of society was to change Woman and create her in a new image. The ideal family described in *Love and Woman*

³⁴⁸ Jules Michelet, *Woman (La Femme)*, trans. J.W. Palmer (Rudd & Carleton, 1940), p. 68.

³⁴⁹ Jules Michelet, *Woman (La Femme)*, p. 107.

³⁵⁰ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), p. 3.

reproduces the structures of the ideal state.”³⁵¹ The connections between women and society, as well as family and the state are consistent with Đạm Phương and Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s own ideas; they wished to facilitate a society in which all women were schools for an educated society. In order to ensure a civilized future for the Vietnamese, women would have to possess a standardized, vigorous education that better facilitated their noble positions as enlightened mothers, mother-citizens, and teachers. Another author interested in the elevated status and education of housewives and educated mothers was Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

In a section of the book entitled “Women and professions,” Đạm Phương introduces the reader to Charlotte Perkins Gilman (*bà Gilman [Rin-mô]*) and “interesting” (*hay*) lessons from her book about the necessity of women’s economic independence in improving their relationships with marriage, motherhood, and the home. Đạm Phương paraphrases Gilman’s argument that, in contrast to animals, women are the only species that rely on men for their livelihood and survival; therefore, humans cannot live as freely as animals. She believes the source of this issue lies within women who do not have a definitive occupation and therefore cannot achieve economic independence.³⁵² She comments that this is roughly the same view that knowledgeable people have these days, and writes that Gilman has researched many interesting arguments that relate to dignity, education, and marriage. She adds that correspondingly, women must have professional knowledge (*có học vấn chuyên môn*) and a career through which they can apply that knowledge, “thus, women must have a career in order to have a full education.”³⁵³ She again pulls from Gilman’s arguments, writing that women are not too weak to have occupations, and further that women also work as mothers, and being a mother involves both caring for a

³⁵¹ Thérèse Moreau, “Revolting Women: History and Modernity in Jules Michelet” *Clio* 6 (1977): p. 168.

³⁵² Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), p. 40.

³⁵³ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục*, p. 40.

child and teaching them (*nuôi con không những biết cách nuôi, mà cần biết cách dạy hơn*).

Having a career is beneficial for this responsibility. She ends the section by calling for people to encourage and develop women's intelligence and careers, rather than shutting them out and confining them (*chớ nên đóng cửa mà giam hãm một hạng người*). Đạm Phương proposes a world in which women fully participate in economic life independently; yet this economic independence is very much tied to their relations with the rest of the populace, including their families. While both Gilman and Phương assert the need for women's independence in certain respects; for Phương, this independence is highly relational and contributes to their becoming more useful to their families and community. She is not encouraging independence for the sake of individual satisfaction and happiness, but for the continued development and betterment of society. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's ideas, though quite faithfully expressed within this textbook, were not *completely* in this vein. Her ideas oscillate between treating women as individuals and women as maternal citizens, inseparable from their reproductive capabilities.

Gilman's *Women and Economics* was well-received upon its release in 1898; through this discussion of women's need for participation and independence in the economic sphere, Charlotte Perkins Gilman became a leading figure in America's early New Woman movement. While Gilman did advocate the improvement of women's situation in order to improve the whole of society, there was still consideration towards personal happiness within her treatise. Gilman frequently cites women's dependence on men for food and survival. Citing other animals and pre-modern humans, Gilman takes an evolutionary angle into explaining the state of modern women. She writes that women have been "cut off from the direct action of natural selection" and – in a similar fashion to Marie Dugard – Gilman states women act as "parasites" due to their

reliance on men.³⁵⁴ According to Gilman, this inferior feminine position has crystallized and been handed down by countless generations of humans, and this has caused tension between the sexes, influencing people's "private health and happiness" as well as public.³⁵⁵ Though she may justify her discussion of feminine degradation with the idea of a functioning and helpful mother-citizen, Gilman speaks often of women as individuals who cannot help themselves, bringing attention to them, and not simply the offspring they may provide society. Yet it is undeniable that the idea of women as mothers, the producers of other, future participants in society, is Gilman's primary justification for their enfranchisement. This is additionally what interests Phuong.

As a clear inspiration for Phuong, Gilman's work emphasizes the importance of women's heightened status to the status of the collective. This is done with special attention paid to the idea of a mother-teacher and mother-citizen. Gilman writes in the preface of *Women and Economics* that she wishes to "urge upon them a new sense, not only of their social responsibility as individuals, but of their measureless racial importance as makers of men."³⁵⁶ Additionally, to Gilman, today "the basic condition of human life is union," meaning that in contemporary society, people must participate in social and economic exchange, and "the progress of society rests upon the increasing collectivity of human labor."³⁵⁷ This is a relational way of viewing the world, and predicates women's advancement – the betterment of their position – on their ability to reproduce, as well as the basic need of society being the participation of *all* its members. This is similar to Phuong's views, as expressed in her work, and solidifies Gilman as an influence for Phuong and *Gia-Đình Giáo-Dục*. Phuong points to Gilman's argument that women must care for

³⁵⁴ Charlotte Perkins Stetson, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1898), p. 62.

³⁵⁵ Charlotte Perkins Stetson, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1898), p. 99.

³⁵⁶ Charlotte Perkins Stetson, "Preface," in *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1898), p. vii.

³⁵⁷ Charlotte Perkins Stetson, "Preface," pp. 100-101.

and teach children; therefore, the enrichment of the teacher-mother constitutes the enrichment of the child. Gilman assures readers that the New Woman “will be, with it all, more feminine, in that she will develop far more efficient processes of caring for the young of the human race than our present wasteful and grievous method.”³⁵⁸ Thus, like Phuong, Gilman views women as intimately connected to their husbands and families, and able to meaningfully contribute to the advancement of society through the advancement of their education and rights.

Đạm Phương’s various influences presented the home as a microcosm of society and the mother as integral to fostering the wellbeing of that society. Should mothers be stifled in their pursuits of learning and higher education, they would be unable to educate their children and maintain a well-kept home. To authors such as Marden, Dugard, Michelet, and Gilman, a society that failed to realize the transformative potential of educated mothers would be doomed to stagnate in its progress. We see the same logic applied within the works of Đạm Phương and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán; women’s participation in society is predicated on their ability to educate society as mother-citizens and hard-working housewives. How did Phuong come by these works? Why did she see fit to explain and quote them in her work? Marie Dugard and Jules Michelet’s inclusions are not surprising, but one wonders if Phuong and the author of her textbook’s foreword could read English, or came to read Marden and Gilman in translation. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prominent writer in her lifetime, with her work appearing in translation and Gilman travelling to speak at conferences; it is likely Phuong read Gilman in French.³⁵⁹ These examples of influence lead us to take the time to consider Vietnamese women’s depth of

³⁵⁸ Charlotte Perkins Stetson, “Preface,” in *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1898), p. 160.

³⁵⁹ Jennifer Tuttle, “Recovering the Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman; or, Reading Gilman in Rome,” chapter 9 of *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and a Woman’s Place in America* (University of Alabama Press, 2017), pp. 200-201.

knowledge and access to geographically diverse works at this time; it is apparent that Đạm Phương and Phan Thị Bạch Vân possessed the ability and will to read widely and extensively.

In preparing young women for their own potential, they were to be educated in reading, writing, housework, and the philosophy behind *why* their participation in these matters was so meaningful. Women were not simply being educated; they were to be participants in a public sphere that made use of, and encouraged, the involvement of women. One of the most important decisions a young woman would make in her life would be the selection of a proper husband. According to Đạm Phương, this decision had the potential to affect the entire Vietnamese race.

What did Đạm Phương write about regarding marriage? Ultimately, she stressed the importance of selecting the right partner in marriage, and taking familial preferences into account. In the book's section, titled "The question of marriage," (*vấn đề hôn giá*), she writes that considerations for a marriage stem from love (*ái tình*) as well as the opinions of others (*theo công luận mới hợp-nghĩa*). She questions whether a couple who does not meet the approval of their parents and siblings would be able to find delight and comfort alone (*thì nào hai người từ hết thấy quyền thuộc, mà tìm riêng một cõi lạc thú được hay sao?*).³⁶⁰ This places emphasis on the family unit for support and approval, but Phương is also careful to connect the hypothetical family to the potential nation.

Đạm Phương also writes about the idea of "free marriage" (*tự-do kết hôn*), and warns her readers to not take marriage lightly. According to Phương, those who do not have much education and do not exhibit discernment when selecting a potential partner – and do not listen to their parents – might simply like a person and marry them, and when they hate one another, they will give up (*ưng nhau thì lấy, ghét nhau thời bỏ*).³⁶¹ In other words, they will abandon the

³⁶⁰ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), p. 41.

³⁶¹ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục*, p. 42.

marriage due to the ease of leaving someone, rather than attempting to make the arrangement work in a mutually (and societally) satisfactory manner. She believes these people do not respect the tradition of marriage or wait for their parents' instructions (*không trọng chữ hôn giá, không chờ lệnh cha mẹ*).³⁶² Phương acknowledges the recent difficulty for men and women in finding partners, and writes that this selection – that marriage – belongs “at the front of the Five Fundamental Bonds because it concerns the race, within the nation” (*để đứng trước hàng ngũ luân, bởi vì có quan hệ đến chủng tộc, trong một nước*).³⁶³ In a similar vein to those she cited earlier in her work (such as Orison Swett Marden), Đạm Phương connects the health of marriage and resulting family unit to the health of the nation at-large. This connection between the home and the nation-state necessitates the establishment of marriages between the right people; here, Phương emphasizes the need for education, discernment, and family involvement in the selection of a proper partner with whom one would be able to strengthen the nation.

Yet Đạm Phương does not support the early marriage of young women. She writes that early marriage for girls is “truly not a good thing” (*thực là một điều không hay*).³⁶⁴ She asks her readers to “consider the inexperience of a young girl, roughly of marriagable age” (*Ta thử suy xét cái tuổi non nớt của người con gái, mót chừng cập kê*).³⁶⁵ After listing some of the ways in which young girls are not knowledgeable, Phương concludes that “in sum, this girl does not yet have enough status to be mistress of a household” (*nói tóm lại, là người con gái ấy chưa có đủ tư cách làm một người chủ phụ tề gia*). The word *tư cách* could also be translated as “capacity,” or “conduct,” which still emphasizes the need for young women to receive proper training before they become housewives; therefore, women who were too young simply could not perform the

³⁶² Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), pp. 42-43.

³⁶³ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục*, p. 43.

³⁶⁴ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục*, p. 43.

³⁶⁵ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục*, p. 44.

functions of a housewife well. According to Phuong, they did not yet have the capacity. While this speaks to their capacity and status vis-à-vis their education and ability to manage the functions of a married home – a home including a husband and wife – Phuong also considered the physical bodies of these women, and whether they would be able to successfully bear a healthy child.

Phuong discusses the proper age at which to give birth, and writes that girls who are too young will give birth to thin (*gầy gò*) and unhealthy children. She believes encouraging girls to have children while still young “is very harmful to the life of the race” (*thì hại cho sự sinh hoạt của chủng tộc lắm*).³⁶⁶ This concern for the health of the race – the Vietnamese – demonstrates this warning against young girls giving birth was not necessarily for *their* health, but for the health of future Vietnamese children. The prospect of having a thin and unhealthy population was not viewed highly by Phuong, and she gives the age of prospective mothers heightened consideration. Within these views we see that Phuong provides attention to a host of facets concerning women and their abilities to fulfill multiple duties – their ability to lead as a mistress of their household, their physical ability to birth healthy children, and their ability to adequately teach those children, morally and academically.

According to Phuong, it is also worth considering that women who have children early cannot teach them well, as they have little educational and life experience. She finds that this is “harmful to [a child’s] educational path...[these mothers] only know how to feed them” (*hại về đường giáo dục... chỉ biết cho con ăn uống*).³⁶⁷ She compares the raising of children by uneducated, young mothers to raising chickens. She writes that children learn manners from their family as well as education; if parents possess neither manners nor education, their children will

³⁶⁶ Đạm Phuong, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), p. 44.

³⁶⁷ Đạm Phuong, *Gia-đình giáo-dục*, p. 45.

not possess them either, as a matter of course. She points out that men and women who have children early will additionally not have the time to establish successful careers, and that “everyone should have a profession held tightly in their hands” (*người nào cũng nên có một nghề nghiệp nắm chặt trong tay*).³⁶⁸ She hopes that this bad practice – of young people having children while they are still young themselves – will change and women will be able to acquire knowledge and have careers.

In the previous paragraphs, I have described Đạm Phương’s views about marriage, partnership, and birth. All Phương’s views pertaining to these matters are a manifestation of the scientific family planning, maternalism, and birth control debates tied to racial and national degeneracy which I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. As Thuy Linh Nguyen has argued in her work about Vietnamese attitudes towards birth control during the colonial period, advocates called for “stricter surveillance over procreative and sexual behaviors,” including behaviors pertaining to the selection of a marriage partner.³⁶⁹ The more careful, measured, planned, and professionally-overseen the steps towards family planning might be, the better the advancement of the Vietnamese race. While Phương’s were not explicit calls for preventing pregnancy and birth, she advocates selective marriages endorsed by both husband, wife, and their respective families, pregnancy once a woman has reached a certain age and education level, and consideration paid towards these ideas for the health of future children. Though her book meant to speak to women conversationally, she attempted to convince readers of the merit in educating mothers and wives, so that they could educate others.

³⁶⁸ Đạm Phương, *Gia-đình giáo-dục* (Hà Nội: Nữ lưu thư Quán, 1928), p. 45.

³⁶⁹ Thuy Linh Nguyen, “Overpopulation, Racial Degeneracy and Birth Control in French Colonial Vietnam” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 19 (2018): p. 9 and 11.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have mainly discussed two works by Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương and the various authors and intellectual trends that influenced them. Both authors employed their own thoughts and strategies for the cultivation of Vietnamese women, supported by foreign authors. In the Vietnamese milieu, these women were translating and disseminating conversations happening thousands of miles away. These conversations echoed the same anxieties for the future, and posited women's place in easing those anxieties.

Both women were well-read and used their knowledge of diverse, foreign works to support their ideas. In one paragraph towards the book's beginning, Phương mentions quotes from three different writers: Alexandre Vinet (1797-1847), Madame de Rémusat (1780-1821), and Octave Gréard (1828-1904), to whom Phương refers as “Ông Gréart (Gờ-rê-a).” Vinet was a Swiss literary critic and educator, who wrote a book about the role of education in families and society in 1855. Madame de Rémusat was a French woman intellectual – a *femme de lettres* – who wrote essays and memoirs speaking to the education of women, the education of her son, and other topics such as the life she lived as a member of Napoleon's court. Octave Gréard, mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, was a French academic known for his contributions to the strengthening of girls' education in France. One of his major works was titled, *L'Éducation des femmes par les femmes*, in which he provided an historical analysis of various figures (François Fénelon, Madame de Maintenon, Madame de Lambert, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Madame d'Épinay, Madame Necker, and Madame Roland) and their written works, memoirs, and letters. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Phương derived some of her ideas from other authors yet employed and translated those ideas to suit her own preferences, beliefs, and

those of the Vietnamese milieu. How important were these influences? Did they lend weight to Phương's words?

While we cannot know the precise answers to these questions, it is apparent that Đạm Phương believed the employment of these non-Vietnamese authors would lend weight in Vietnamese circles. Otherwise, why feature them so liberally in her book? Phương and Bạch Vân were attempting to convince others of the need for women's education and women's essential nature in the regulating and ordering of society. To these women, the current education of other women would ensure the future success and advancement of Vietnamese people.

Inherent in these discussions of women's education and their education of children was the role of feminine essentialism and a strain of eugenics rhetoric. To Phương and Bạch Vân, women's primary function in society was as wives and mothers. Their biological ability to bear children meant that they possessed a duty to provide children adequate morals, intelligence, and strength through education. Phương and Bạch Vân were reaching for a future of women with highly cultivated minds, better marriages, and the ability to bear healthier children. They did not write with a distinctly pro-natalist position, as would have been the case in France at the time, but they instead spoke to unique issues in Vietnamese populations and advocated selective marriages and better-planned births, in order to strengthen what they viewed as the Vietnamese race. These ideas were addressed to young women, conversationally and clearly.

In addition to emphasizing women's essential functions as wives and mothers, Phương and Bạch Vân stressed women's *duty* to society. For the health and good of future generations, women in the present had a responsibility to cultivate their minds and morals; through this cultivation, their future children would benefit. According to Phương, children's minds were malleable. With good, gentle, intelligent, and virtuous mothers, children would be brought up

well and therefore grow into virtuous adults. This was an ambition both women clearly communicated in these two books.

This chapter has been different from earlier chapters in its analysis of books which more explicitly outlined these women's plans for their female readers. While Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels and biographies about foreign women drew attention to feminine archetypes and paragons of virtue and bravery, these two works speak directly to young women and plainly instruct them in the proper way to behave and organize their futures. Through the organization of their present life and future, Phương and Bạch Vân believed they could better shape the future of Vietnamese children. These works – *Văn Quốc ngữ* and *Gia Đình Giáo Dục* – were essential parts of the overarching mandate and purpose of Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán.

CONCLUSION

WHAT EFFECT DID PHAN THỊ BẠCH VÂN AND NỮ LƯU THƠ QUẢN HAVE ON VIETNAMESE SOCIETY?

I would like to begin this conclusion with a discussion about two articles Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote in *Đồng Pháp thời báo* in 1928, published with just a week between them. Both articles focus on the need for Vietnamese girls to learn practical skills and for the state to support vocational training for young women. The articles feature similar sentiments reflected in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's novels, especially *Kiếp hoa thám sử* and *Nữ anh tài*. In the articles, Phan Thị Bạch Vân argues persuasively for education that will acknowledge current cultural realities amongst the Vietnamese. To Phan Thị Bạch Vân, this means the government should understand that many Vietnamese women get married at young ages and schools should thus prioritize skills that will be useful in their marriages.

In her first article, titled “Nam kỳ cần phải có trường nữ công,” or “The South must have a school for housework,” Phan Thị Bạch Vân writes that the government has worked to ensure girls across the region could study. She has seen that girls from the city and countryside have been able to receive a primary school education equivalent to the education boys receive.³⁷⁰ Therefore, boys and girls have studied the same subjects of literature, geography, and science. She points out, however, that many girls do not study past primary education. To Bạch Vân, this represents an issue and a gap in their education.

Bạch Vân acknowledges that many girls leave school early in order to get married. She writes that girls who do not leave school early may become teachers, but this is not a common trajectory for young women. To Bạch Vân, this has resulted in many “very clumsy girls” who

³⁷⁰ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Nam kỳ cần phải có trường nữ công,” *Đồng Pháp thời báo* (March 15, 1928).

only know enough about needlework to make socks and handkerchiefs.³⁷¹ She also believes that young women do not know how to cook well or cook enough dishes. According to Bạch Vân, as this is their main responsibility as wives who run a household, they should be able to cook a variety of dishes and take on larger sewing projects. Unfortunately, Bạch Vân believes girls do not have the knowledge and training to accomplish these tasks effectively.

Bạch Vân writes that sewing and cooking are common skills all wives should know, but she raises the possibility that a woman would marry a wealthy man and thus be responsible for managing a significant amount of household expenses. In Vietnamese culture, women have historically kept control of family finances. This continued into the twentieth century and was thus a consideration for young women and their families. Through this logic, if a young wife did not know how to spend her husband's salary wisely, or if she squandered it needlessly, that would greatly contribute to a family's problems and frustrations. In Phan Thị Bạch Vân's mind, the management of money was a woman's duty; in her article, she writes that women should find themselves prepared for that responsibility.

While Phan Thị Bạch Vân's title and opening lines call for the government to ensure young women have access to training in the domestic arts, she also calls upon the parents of girls to privately train their daughters for these tasks. Phan Thị Bạch Vân believes that women are intelligent, as evidenced by their (albeit at this time, meager) presence in the public sphere and workforce; therefore, they should be given the opportunity for training and fostering of their skills.

³⁷¹ “sẽ làm một đám con gái rất vụng về quá chúng” from Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Nam kỳ cần phải có trường nữ công,” *Đồng Pháp thời báo* (March 15, 1928).

Phan Thị Bạch Vân points out that women's associations and places for girls to learn household skills have been in place in Annam and Tonkin for a year at this point.³⁷² As mentioned in the previous chapter, Đạm Phương had opened an association for women's work in Huế a year before publication of this article. Bạch Vân uses this article to encourage readers to organize and ask for a school that focuses on women's skills and household work. She believes that this will ultimately result in a better society and women who are better able to care for themselves and their families.

Đồng Pháp thời báo published Phan Thị Bạch Vân's second article a week later, on March 22, 1928. This article was titled "Trường thương mại cho nữ lưu Việt Nam," or "Trade schools for Vietnamese girls." Phan Thị Bạch Vân reiterated her previous article's point that Vietnamese girls could be split into two groups: girls who continued their schooling after elementary education and became teachers, and girls who finished their education at the primary levels and went home to wait for marriage.³⁷³ During the interwar years, the latter group represented a larger portion of Vietnamese women; thus, according to Phan Thị Bạch Vân, these women needed to be accounted for and trained in relevant skills.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân references her previous article and stresses that girls must learn practical education and skills in order to succeed as wives and mothers. She believes this is for the good of the entire country and that, for the best economic future, Bạch Vân believes the Vietnamese need to have a trade school and allow women to attend (*xứ ta lại cũng cần phải có một trường thương mại và bút toán cho nữ lưu*).³⁷⁴ She believes that the current structure of schools that emphasize literacy, math, and more abstract subjects are a waste of resources and

³⁷² Phan Thị Bạch Vân, "Nam kỳ cần phải có trường nữ công," *Đồng Pháp thời báo* (March 15, 1928).

³⁷³ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, "Trường thương mại cho nữ lưu Việt Nam," *Đồng Pháp thời báo* (March 22, 1928).

³⁷⁴ Phan Thị Bạch Vân, "Trường thương."

not practical for girls who come from poorer families. Bạch Vân thinks that girls who do not wish to study further and become teachers will not pay attention in school, making the endeavor lack aspects of practicality.

Instead of focusing on academic subjects for girls who will not make use of them, Phan Thị Bạch Vân believes that women should have the option to learn about business. With knowledge about best business practices and what might contribute to a successful business, Vietnamese wives could better assist their husbands in their professions. Phan Thị Bạch Vân writes that “Vietnamese women have a reputation for patience and wisdom, which is very good for the subject of business.”³⁷⁵ With this appeal to Vietnamese women’s talents and reputations, Bạch Vân asks that readers consider the Vietnamese economy and ask the government to set up a school focusing on business and trade for Vietnamese girls.

These articles come from a sense of practicality and realism on Bạch Vân’s part. In contrast to her novels like *Nữ anh tài*, she acknowledges that Vietnamese girls, by and large, do not continue their schooling throughout their teen years. Instead, they must help their families with household tasks and chores and eventually get married. Once they are married, they are expected to help run a household. If they possess elementary school knowledge of science, math, literature, and geography, does this help them live their lives? According to Phan Thị Bạch Vân, this focus on academic subjects would be better redirected to a program that primes girls for their roles as wives and mothers.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân also points to aspects viewed as unique to Vietnamese culture, such as the expectation that wives will direct the bulk of their husbands’ salaries to various aspects of household maintenance. This was not only a reality within the Vietnamese cultural milieu, but

³⁷⁵ “Phụ nữ Việt Nam ta có tiếng kiên nhẫn, trí chí thì rất bạp cho môn thương mại quá chừng.” Phan Thị Bạch Vân, “Trường thương mại cho nữ lưu Việt Nam,” *Đồng Pháp thời báo* (March 22, 1928).

within Southeast Asia more generally. In her book about the historical roles and status of Southeast Asian women, Barbara Watson Andaya writes that observers have long “touted [the] authority of women in the household, their prominence in local marketing, and their acumen in business affairs.”³⁷⁶ While Southeast Asian women’s economic prowess and command began to wane as early as the fifteenth century, it has long persisted as a “truism” of women’s status in the region. This has extended to Vietnamese women. In her articles, Phan Thị Bạch Vân points to this truism as a reason for why Vietnamese women should be formally trained in business affairs and economics. Whether or not it is accurate to state that all Vietnamese women were expected to control their household finances, it is true that women’s positions within families (and, by extension, in wider social circles) would be elevated by economic confidence enriched by vocational, practical schooling and training.

These articles both point to what Phan Thị Bạch Vân perceived as Vietnamese cultural realities and how to expand women’s social roles outside the home. Because she believed Vietnamese women had a reputation for wisdom and potential business acumen, Phan Thị Bạch Vân thought that acknowledgement of that business potential, through formal education, would elevate Vietnamese women’s status in their own country. Additionally, women trained in knowledge of economic and trade matters would provide benefits to the Vietnamese more generally and help raise the country’s economic prospects.

These articles can be compared to the plots and characters in her novels, such as *Kiếp hoa thám sử* and *Nữ anh tài*. In these articles, Bạch Vân makes reference to girls who come from poorer families who would not be expected to continue with their education, in favor of staying home and getting married at a young age. Most of the main characters in her novels are young

³⁷⁶ Barbara Watson Andaya, *The Flaming Womb: Repositioning Women in Early Modern Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006) p. 104.

women who come from wealthy families. Yet in *Kiếp hoa thâm sử*, the main character, Như-hoa, becomes impoverished after her scheming stepmother inadvertently murders her siblings and forces Như-hoa to run away. Because she ran away out of fear of potentially being found guilty of the murders, Như-hoa thus forfeits any chances at wealth or inheritance from her deceased father. Her situation becomes more dire as the story progresses and she helps others dealing with personal tragedy, such as her school friend, Lang. When Lang is betrayed by her husband and goes insane, Như-hoa lives with Lang's mother and helps care for her young son.

In the novel, Phan Thị Bạch Vân describes Như-hoa's life while she attempts to provide and care for Lang's son with meager funds and resources. After Lang's mother, Bà Nhàn, passes away, she attempts to provide enough money and land to Như-hoa so that she can take care of Lang's stay in the insane asylum and provide for her son Đức. But Bà Nhàn's relatives pressure Như-hoa to give the inheritance to them, with assurance that they will pay for Lang's treatment and a monthly stipend for Đức. Như-hoa agrees, but she is soon alone with Đức and living in poverty, only able to buy shrimp and fish from local women who sold them at a low price.³⁷⁷ Như-hoa is able to make a little money through her skill at sewing and embroidery, which she takes on at a high volume to keep up with the costs of caring for Đức.

Như-hoa represents a girl who was raised in a wealthy home, able to receive an education, and waited to get married (her hesitance to marry young is contrasted with her friend, Lang's, quick marriage). Yet she is reduced to abject poverty and the task of raising a young child within a short period of time. In the face of these challenges, the only hope Như-hoa has is her ability to offer her needle work in exchange for money. The end of the novel presents her living as a seamstress and caring for two children through her employment. Had Như-hoa's

³⁷⁷ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, "Kiếp hoa thâm sử" in *Tinh thần phụ nữ* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu thơ quán, 1928-1929), p. 255.

training in needle work been neglected and relegated to socks or handkerchiefs, as Phan Thị Bạch Vân implies is the situation in the south, she would have been unable to survive without the support of her family or a husband. The moral of this story is consistent with the aim of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's articles in *Đồng Pháp thời báo*. For women to be truly useful in society and raise their own status, they should receive instruction in trades, homemaking, and business. To Phan Thị Bạch Vân, instruction in academics should be reserved for women who do not need to take on sole management of a household and who will go on to teach others. These are women of the upper classes; as acknowledged by Phan Thị Bạch Vân, they were a small percentage of Vietnamese women.

A woman who best represents this small proportion of girls hailing from a wealthy background, who could afford to continue her education, was Phan Thị Bạch Vân's character, Tú Anh, from *Nữ anh tài*. In the novel, Tú Anh grows up with wealthy parents, servants surrounding her, and the independence gained from being raised with money and privilege. While, early in the novel, Phan Thị Bạch Vân specifies that Tú Anh's family is not wealthy enough for her sweetheart, Hồng Minh's, family to honor their prior engagement (this is why Ngọc Liên becomes involved in the plot, as her family is even wealthier than Tú Anh's family), the fact remains that Tú Anh was wealthy and highly privileged for a girl growing up in Cochinchina in the early-twentieth century. Tú Anh as a character, and the novel *Nữ anh tài* more generally, together represent elements of fantasy; in this work Phan Thị Bạch Vân explores what could happen if a girl were provided the resources she needed to become exceptional. Further, if we look closely at the novel's title, it emphasizes Tú Anh's singularity as an individual in personality and temperament. *Nữ* is a Vietnamese word for "woman," while *anh tài* can be translated as an outstanding talent, great talent, or a luminary. A luminary is a person who

inspires others and is prominent in their social sphere as a leader. Luminary calls to mind the cover that Phan Thị Bạch Vân used to advertise *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, where a woman holds a torch and stands next to a globe. This imagery calling to mind illumination, exceptionalism, and enlightenment was rife within Phan Thị Bạch Vân's work. In the case of Tú Anh in *Nữ anh tài*, she was meant to represent the idea of a luminary who could guide the way for Vietnamese women and inspire them to accomplish great things.

There is also the case to be made that Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote Tú Anh as a self-representative character in a fictional setting. If we again consider Phan Thị Bạch Vân's articles in *Đồng Pháp thời báo*, we see that Phan Thị Bạch Vân was using her own position as an educated, multilingual, well-read, and wealthy woman to recommend a specific future and form of education for other Vietnamese women. While Phan Thị Bạch Vân may have known about business matters from her husband, who owned several businesses in Cochinchina, there is no indication that Bạch Vân attended a vocational school or an institution focusing on housewifery and useful trades. In much the same way that Tú Anh began a school for local girls that taught them needle work, basic literacy, and how to manage a raw silk business, in *Đồng Pháp thời báo* Phan Thị Bạch Vân was taking the role of the expert and endorsing schools for girls that focused more on training them for roles as wives than academic or intellectual pursuits. In *Nữ anh tài*, Bạch Vân describes Tú Anh's endeavor as charitable and beneficial to the young girls in the village. Tú Anh's ability to run a successful business, in part through the labor of these local girls, is also portrayed as a benefit to the general Vietnamese community. Observers view her school and the training she provides as allowing these girls to grow up as "loving wives and mothers who are role models for the future" (*lớn lên lại thành ra những bậc vợ hiền mẹ quý làm*

khuôn mẫu cho hậu lai).³⁷⁸ As discussed in the second chapter, she attracts shareholders in her business, as well as fame and renown across the other Vietnamese regions, beyond Cochinchina. What makes Tú Anh, and by extension, Phan Thị Bạch Vân, authorities on the subject of girls' education? Did they have credentials that gave them expertise in this area?

The answer is that both Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her character Tú Anh were simply educated in the subjects they did not view as suitable for other young women. Phan Thị Bạch Vân may have demonstrated an astute acknowledgement of Vietnamese cultural realities, i.e., the propensity for the majority of young women to finish primary education and leave academics in favor of marriage. She believed education should suit most Vietnamese people and facilitate the learning of useful skills in their daughters, rather than facilitate the learning of subjects they may not have use for as wives and mothers. Yet Bạch Vân was communicating the knowledge derived from higher learning *could* apply to some women. In effect, higher learning could be useful for women like her, or like her character Tú Anh. Therefore, while realistic and thoughtful in her consideration of cultural realities, she was, in a sense, further subsuming a large group of women underneath the status of a small and privileged majority. If her goals came to pass and most young women simply learned homemaking skills and a few business skills, a large gap would widen between women who were allowed to continue their education without worry over marriage and women who were encouraged to marry from young ages. Rather than ameliorating some young women's lack of access to education, this mindset would encourage early marriage after graduation from these trade schools. Rather than addressing some of the root causes of poverty, Bạch Vân's preferred solutions were addressing the symptoms of these inequalities.

³⁷⁸ Hoàng Thị Tuyết Hoa, *Nữ anh tài* (Gò Công: Nữ lưu Thơ quán, 1929), cuốn thứ nhất, p. 31.

As seen in *Kiếp hoa thám sử* and *Lâm Kiều Loan*, Phan Thị Bạch Vân did encourage young women to wait as long as possible before they married and ensure they were making a wise decision. Yet if she wanted Vietnamese girls to learn about business and homemaking rather than literature and science, how can we categorize her approach to women's education? Was she simply working within Vietnamese culture's realities in the twentieth century? Or was she seeking to place women of means even further above women who came from humble beginnings? I believe there might be elements of both outlooks to her approach. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and women within her milieu, such as Đạm Phương, did have a tendency to focus more on girls who came from relative wealth and prestige. They wrote about girls whose fathers were village notables, village chiefs, or mandarins. They wrote about girls with whom they could relate, about fictional girls whose experiences sometimes mirrored their own. When they included girls who came from poorer families, those girls either worked for the female protagonists as servants or were part of their businesses and acted as students in the schools they taught. They were not part of their women's associations; they were the recipients of their charity and good nature.

Therefore, Phan Thị Bạch Vân, Đạm Phương, and other writers involved in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* were ultimately targeting impoverished women with their outlooks, policies, and goals, but wanted to accomplish their goals *through* the perceived expertise of wealthy women. Much like the female figure on the cover of *Kiếp hoa thám sử*, the women who heeded *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s call and emulated their vision would act as bearers of the torch of civilization; they would lead other Vietnamese – Vietnamese who perhaps had not been subject to the same educational, familial, or economic backgrounds – and guide them, as if by light and fire, to a better society.

This Promethean vision made wealthy women of upper-class backgrounds the driving force behind societal change.

Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán promoted an overall message to women that they needed to develop themselves through academic and practical education in order to help advance society. The press also showed young women that they needed to take inspiration from around the world for a truly well-informed background that encouraged cosmopolitanism within the Vietnamese milieu. Authors for *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* hoped this self-development would blossom into the development of other women and, eventually, the next generation of Vietnamese who would take a more prominent role on the world stage. To Phan Thị Bạch Vân, prescriptive literature and translation was the most innovative method of controlling the outcome for Vietnamese society and women's place in that society. While these strategies were not new (as argued in Chapter Three about women's biography – it was in reality a tried-and-true form of feminine behavioral regulation), the use of the strategies from a woman, on a large scale, with the contributions of writers throughout the region, was ground-breaking. Additionally, the inclusion of such a wide variety of influences and aspirational figures was new for Vietnamese women and evidence of a changing intellectual culture that sought to include them through the Woman's Question. While women did not have much visibility in the intelligentsia, women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân ensured that women themselves would be able to contribute to the conversation. She provided the space for women to write and publish and sought to foster women's interest in literacy.

Through the creation of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, Phan Thị Bạch Vân expressed a desire to become part of a network of intellectuals concerned with the Woman's Question during the twentieth century. In Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “there is evidence in various places that women formed connections with members of their sex abroad. We find

women reading and translating the work of foreign women...It seems that many women did indeed feel empathy with each other due to their position as women.”³⁷⁹ Phan Thị Bạch Vân demonstrated the same empathy; due to her position as a woman, and as a colonized woman, she was unable to establish strong mutual connections between herself and women abroad. While she may have spoken with women from other countries, or facilitated correspondence with foreign women, there is no evidence that she travelled to the many women’s conferences and feminist meetings that were being held around the world during the interwar years.

There is evidence that her work was *spoken about* with French women, however. In *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, there was an article published in May of 1930 about a meeting between Vietnamese women and Camille Drevet in 1929. Camille Drevet worked as Secretary of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in the early-1930s. Drevet has been described as a peace leader interested in internationalism, a leading member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and someone who at one point identified as a socialist.³⁸⁰ The Vietnamese article published in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* states that Drevet was a teacher, but her husband’s death in the First World War prompted her to put her energy into campaigning for world peace and freedom.³⁸¹ Camille Drevet travelled to China and Indochina in 1929, sent by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, in order to survey labor conditions in both regions. While she was in Indochina, Drevet invited the article’s author, Thạch Lan, into a private home on Saint Georges Street in Saigon. They spoke about *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* and the work of some prominent women in the region, including Bạch Vân.³⁸² Thạch Lan went on to

³⁷⁹ Hilary Brown and Gillian Dow, “Introduction,” in *Readers, Writers, Salonnières: Female networks in Europe, 1700-1900* eds. Hilary Brown and Gillian Dow (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 3 & 4.

³⁸⁰ Leila Rupp, *Worlds of Women: the making of an international women’s movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 31.

³⁸¹ Thạch Lan, “Bà Camille Drevet” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* no. 51 (May 8, 1930).

³⁸² Thạch Lan also mentioned Nguyễn Như Mân, Trần Thị Hương, and Phạm Thị Ngà.

explain that Vietnamese women were moving slower than Chinese women – similarly to the feelings Bạch Vân expressed in *Nữ anh tài* – but that Vietnamese women were making great strides as a movement and within their writings. Thạch Lan related some stories about Vietnamese women’s accomplishments to Drevet, who requested that Lan transcribe their discussions and be on the lookout for articles about Drevet’s time in Indochina. Lan wrote that Drevet would one day make history.³⁸³

It is not certain if Phan Thị Bạch Vân was able to meet Camille Drevet or other foreign women interested in women’s movements. Yet the fact that a reporter spoke with Drevet about Bạch Vân is evidence that her desire for intranational intellectual networks bore fruit. As stated in the second chapter of this thesis, most Western feminists were not opposed to imperialism or colonization in the early-twentieth century. This made it difficult for women living in colonized cultures to participate in their organizing, as the most focus within these organizations went towards Euro-American women’s issues. And, “Where they did champion the rights and well-being of colonized women, they did so more often out of a sense of moral or maternal authority over the less fortunate than out of a feeling of shared subjugation to male authority.”³⁸⁴ Yet the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom “was among the first women’s organizations to formally condemn imperialism,” specifically in 1926.³⁸⁵ They organized a delegation that included Camille Drevet and Edith Pye; the purpose of their visit to Asia (which included China, Indochina, and Japan) was to gather information about conditions in Asia, educate Western women about Asia, and interest Asian women in the League’s purpose and

³⁸³ Thạch Lan, “Bà Camille Drevet” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* no. 51 (May 8, 1930).

³⁸⁴ Mona L. Siegel, “Western Feminism and Anti-Imperialism: The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom’s Anti-Opium Campaign” *Peace & Change* 36 (2011): p. 35.

³⁸⁵ Mona L. Siegel, “Western Feminism,” p. 34.

aims.³⁸⁶ This was the type of exchange about which women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote, yet it did not receive the attention one might expect. In this edition of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, it did not make the front page and the article's publication came at least a year after the meeting between Drevet and Lan occurred. Why was there an apparent lack of interest? Rather than *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*'s readers not expressing interest in Drevet's visit, in reality, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* did not exist when Drevet visited Indochina. While Thạch Lan writes in the article that their meeting had happened the year before (*Năm trước*), this delegation from the League "spanned a four-month period from the winter of 1927 to the spring of 1928," making the meeting likely to have occurred two years before publication of the article.³⁸⁷ And while Thạch Lan states that the two spoke about *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*, the newspaper did not exist until 1929. This meeting between Drevet and Vietnamese women was consequential, but the lack of women's newspapers and media in the year preceding the first publication of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* meant that there were few outlets through which people could generate interest. The League's delegation visit to Indochina was a testament to growing feminist networks throughout the world and Vietnamese women's inclusion in those networks. This idea of cultivating a network could also apply to connections between Vietnamese women and foreign individuals.

In 1934, Nguyễn Thị Kiêm interviewed Léa Lafugie (1890-1970) for *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*. Léa Lafugie was a French painter known for her travels across Southeast Asia, China, and Japan. She exhibited works in Batavia and Singapore and lived in Asia for over twenty years; she left to live in France after the Second World War. Kiêm's article was titled "Interview with Lafugie" (*Phỏng vấn bà Lafugie*) and Kiêm began her piece with a short introduction to the female

³⁸⁶ Mona L. Siegel, "Western Feminism and Anti-Imperialism: The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom's Anti-Opium Campaign" *Peace & Change* 36 (2011): p. 36.

³⁸⁷ Mona L. Siegel, "Western Feminism," p. 36.

painter. She called her “a courageous and talented French woman” who “was both an explorer and a famous painter.”³⁸⁸ Lafugie exhibited her paintings at a theater in Saigon and gave a speech about her time in India and Tibet. Kiêm specifies that she went to the theater to see Lafugie with a male colleague, with whom she “divided” (*tính chia*) the two most prominent aspects of Lafugie’s persona: Kiêm volunteered to interview Lafugie about her role as an explorer, while her male colleague took on her role as a painter.

Kiêm wrote that she quickly approached Lafugie, who was happy to speak and “always had a smile on her lips” (*bao giờ cũng có nụ cười trên môi*). Kiêm’s first question was about Lafugie’s impressions concerning Asian women (*cái cảm tưởng bao quát của bà về phụ nữ Đông Phương ra làm sao?*).³⁸⁹ Lafugie responded that she noticed a surging women’s movement across multiple Asian countries. She lists women in China, Japan, India, Siam, and Turkey as examples and states her belief that they have made great progress. Lafugie also tells Kiêm that “even the women of your country here are not willing to sit still” (*Ngay đến phụ nữ xứ cô đây thì có phải là chịu ngồi im đâu*). Here, Kiêm interjects with the statement “Mrs. Lafugie laughed and continued” (*Bà Lafugie cười mà tiếp*). Lafugie speaks on with a playful air, turning to Kiêm with the question, “Your grandmother wasn’t a female reporter, right?” (*Hỏi trước bà thân của cô có phải là nhà nữ phóng viên đâu, phải không cô?*).³⁹⁰

Next, Kiêm asks after Lafugie’s lecture about her travels to Tibet and her impressions of Tibetan women. She asks whether or not Lafugie thinks they have been able to socially progress and liberate themselves. Lafugie replies that Tibetan women have existed under a matriarchal system (*chế độ mẫu hệ*) for some time and that they have enough rights. Kiêm asks Lafugie

³⁸⁸ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, “Phỏng vấn bà Lafugie” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (April 26, 1934), p. 9.

³⁸⁹ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, “Phỏng vấn bà Lafugie,” p. 9.

³⁹⁰ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, “Phỏng vấn bà Lafugie,” p. 9.

about the many countries she has visited and what, through her observations, she has found to be common occupations among women. Lafugie replies that she has observed women able to accomplish any physical and laborous tasks as men (such as plowing), but that women within the intelligentsia of a particular country tend to work as teachers.

The two speak briefly about Siamese women, many of whom Lafugie noticed worked as teachers in Bangkok. She tells Kiêm she saw women in Bangkok had established a sporting club, which she found very civilized (*văn minh*). Kiêm asks Lafugie about feminism and how she feels about the idea that women should achieve liberation and equality with men in society and politics. Lafugie replies that she believes if women are required to work and participate in the economy, they should have the same rights as men.³⁹¹ In reply to Lafugie, Kiêm specifies that, if women work within the economy and have equal rights along with men, they should also worry over and participate in society like men as well. To this statement, Lafugie replies with a smile. Kiêm asks Lafugie about women in France and, specifically, Paris. She asks about women's organizations and newspapers that welcome women into their ranks. Lafugie replied that her travels and painting kept her from knowing much about women's situation in France.

Kiêm's interview with Lafugie is rare evidence of a direct exchange between a Vietnamese woman and a French woman during the interwar years. These women exhibited a comfortable air around one another; there are multiple points at which Lafugie laughs or smiles at something Kiêm says. This interview reads like an exchange between two women who respect one another and share similar ideas pertaining to women's rights. While Lafugie was primarily known for her occupation as a painter, Kiêm deliberately asked Lafugie questions about her travels and opinions pertaining to feminism. Kiêm assigned her colleague any questions relating

³⁹¹ Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, "Phỏng vấn bà Lafugie" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (April 26, 1934), p. 9.

to art and resolved to ask Lafugie about her life as an explorer and observer. Lafugie appeared happy to oblige. The rapport they develop reads as mutual and natural, with Lafugie gifting Kiêm a photo as a souvenir at the end of their exchange.³⁹² Their conversation is easy, with Kiêm becoming thoughtful at one point and musing aloud, asking if Lafugie ever regrets selling any of her paintings. Lafugie appears confused and amused, asking Kiêm where she would store the unsold paintings. Kiêm was interested in Lafugie's impressions of Asian women and her observations of women in specific countries like Siam and Tibet. She wanted to know if Lafugie found their "progress" swift or if they were lagging behind. She also asked Lafugie about a famous Vietnamese woman painter named Lê Thị Lựu, who was one of the only women who studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine in Hanoi. She was in the same cohort as famous painters like Lê Phổ and Mai Trung Thứ, some of whom worked with the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm writes that she showed Lafugie a photo of Lê Thị Lựu, along with covers from a Vietnamese periodical, which Lafugie praised.³⁹³ Their interaction is interactive and demonstrates a mutual interest in women's issues.

The uneven power dynamics of colonialism meant that Vietnamese and French women did not often have the opportunity to speak with one another in this way; here, they are engaged, mutually interested in hearing what the other has to say, and displaying similar attitudes and beliefs. As Lafugie wryly points out, there were not many Vietnamese women reporters before Kiêm's time; Kiêm herself was an anomaly. Through her interview with Lafugie, Kiêm is able to hear about women in multiple countries and ask a foreign woman about her impressions of both

³⁹² "Tiếp chuyện đã lâu tôi từ bà mà về, bà Lafugie tặng cho tôi một tấm hình làm kỷ niệm." Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, "Phỏng vấn bà Lafugie" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (April 26, 1934), p. 9.

³⁹³ "Tôi lấy mấy tờ báo Phụ Nữ của mình đem ra khoe một tấm hình của cô Lựu vẽ, nữ họa sĩ xứ mình. Tôi cũng khoe mấy tấm bìa số Xuân báo Phụ Nữ thì bà Lafugie tỏ dấu khen ngợi." Nguyễn Thị Kiêm, "Phỏng vấn bà Lafugie" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (April 26, 1934), p. 9.

French women and women from the many Asian countries to which she has travelled. Kiêm was able to promote the work of another Vietnamese woman and show Lafugie the art and graphic design Vietnamese newspapers were creating in the 1930s. While this was not a meeting between a Vietnamese woman and representatives from an international feminist organization, this brief conversation between two extraordinary women – one who travelled the world as an artist and one who distinguished herself as a writer – is a testament to the uniqueness of the late-colonial period and Vietnamese women's interest in both the rest of the world and their position within it. As we have seen in other articles from *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* and in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's writings, Vietnamese women were conscious of their place in the world and wanted to confidently place themselves on the world stage as capable, educated, and intelligent. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm's work as a reporter and interviewer continues this trend with the added distinction of making a connection with a foreign woman of repute and renown.

While these examples showcase ties between the Vietnamese and Europeans, there was profound interest amongst the Vietnamese in the efforts and movements in China and the rest of East Asia. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, Vietnamese women were not only interested in European intellectual movements, philosophy, or women. Vietnamese women like Nguyễn Thị Kiêm and Phan Thị Bạch Vân wanted to place themselves in a network of prominent women globally; many of their influences originated outside of the metropole. Much of the media they consumed and the news to which they were privy came from other parts of Asia. While France's cultural and intellectual influence as a colonial power was strong, Vietnamese women's commitment to international knowledge was stronger. They fostered this knowledge for their own benefit and the benefit of other Vietnamese women.

Considering Phan Thị Bạch Vân's goals to become part of a global intellectual network that included women, I have attempted to articulate two ideas, among others, within this thesis. One is more general: that the Vietnamese during the interwar years were more culturally connected to China and East Asia than has been previously argued in other studies of the time period. While their connections with Europe were strong, cultural connections between Vietnamese intellectuals and the writings of Europe have been acknowledged in scholarly studies. There have been analyses dealing with Vietnamese interest in European novels and reportage, as well as studies arguing for a uniquely Vietnamese, localized transformation of concepts that originated elsewhere. In short, I have shown that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the writers involved in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* were equally interested in, and connected to, the intellectual and cultural undertakings of East Asian and European thinkers.

The second idea is that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and those involved in her women's press (mostly women) were attempting to take hold of the Woman's Question and articulate idealized femininity for themselves. This idealized femininity was congruent with their own status and personal backgrounds; additionally, it was articulated through diverse examples of women they found impressive. They took inspiration for idealized femininity from a plethora of cultures, countries, and historical figures, making Phan Thị Bạch Vân's participation in the Woman's Question profoundly cosmopolitan. But much of that cosmopolitanism came from Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her cohort's familiarity with Chinese writings and histories, including the cultural connections they felt towards East Asian countries, such as Japan. *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* was a project intimately connected to Chinese reformist literature that inspired the New Culture Movement in China. This is shown in Phan Thị Bạch Vân's works and literature published in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, especially the biographies she chose to translate. Her translation of Madame

Roland's biography and her inclusion of Sophia Perovskaia's story in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* were directly linked to popular trends of female hagiography in China, Korea, and Japan. Her biography about Qiu Jin, as well, showed a desire to be part of an intellectual and reformist conversation happening in the Chinese context. Qiu Jin was a contemporary of Liang Qichao and, during her life and soon after her death, was compared to women like Roland and Perovskaia; her execution after a failed uprising made her a martyr, but the work she completed while she lived was congruent with Phan Thị Bạch Vân's goals through *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*. She, like Phan Thị Bạch Vân, wanted to see women become more independent, to not rely on men, and to foster their own knowledge of practical skills. This means that, while French and Euro-American influences were important, many Vietnamese authors were equally connected to an East Asian cultural sphere. In some instances, Vietnamese authors' introduction to Euro-American figures and concepts were through a Chinese translation. Many of these upper-class women, especially women of aristocratic backgrounds like Đạm Phương, were multi-lingual and counted Chinese amongst their written languages. This melding of influences coalesced into a complex amalgamation of cultural backgrounds and presents scholars with a Vietnamese cultural field during the interwar years that was even more cosmopolitan than prior studies have argued. Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the writers with whom she worked were just as interested in the antecedents to China's New Culture Movement as they were the Belle Époque feminists.

China's New Culture Movement occurred in the 1910s and 20s, focusing on cultural and intellectual iconoclasm, with roots in "a serious engagement with politics in the last decade of the Qing dynasty" amongst a community of like-minded figures in the mid-1910s.³⁹⁴ These figures engaged in journalistic endeavors that dealt with "the social and cultural values that

³⁹⁴ Timothy B. Weston, "The Formation and Positioning of the New Culture Community, 1913-1917" *Modern China* (24) 1998: p. 255.

underlie successful democracies, the relationship between the individual and the state, and the need for greater self-consciousness of political responsibility on the part of citizens.”³⁹⁵ The direct predecessors to the New Culture Movement were political moderates who possessed complex feelings about revolution (due to dissatisfaction with the effects of China’s 1911 revolution) and how best to enact political change. Importantly for the development of Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her press was the propensity for Chinese intellectuals in this period to translate foreign works for their Chinese audiences. With the first release of the journal *New Youth* (also called *La Jeunesse*) in Shanghai in 1915, “a large number of foreign literary works and humanistic ideas were translated into China.”³⁹⁶ Proponents of the New Culture Movement looked to Western countries for inspiration and methods through which China could modernize. In opposing what they viewed as outdated Confucian morality and Chinese methods of governance, translators brought interest in French, English, Russian, and other countries’ ideas into China and presented them in vernacular Chinese, another reform advanced during this period.

Translations that sparked the New Culture Movement were not simple linguistic transformations that made English, French, or Russian works comprehensible to Chinese readers, however. Translation is a complex process that involves more than words. As we saw in Chapter Three and Nữ Lữ Thơ Quán’s translations of biographies, the synthesis of foreign works and translation into another language necessarily involves cultural, social, and political issues as well. Phan Thị Bạch Vân chose to make Qiu Jin less of a martial figure and present her in a more reformist, intellectual light. In his biographical summary of Sophia Perovskaia, Trần Tuấn Khải

³⁹⁵ Timothy B. Weston, “The Formation and Positioning of the New Culture Community, 1913-1917” *Modern China* (24) 1998: p. 256.

³⁹⁶ Ning Wang, “The Historical Role of Translation in the New Culture Movement and Its Future Prospect” *Comparative Literature Studies* 57 (2020): p. 363.

purposefully gave Perovskaia a more significant and central part in her revolutionary activities. These authors brought their own backgrounds, biases, and cultural experiences to any translation they completed, as they “used a sort of cross-cultural interpretive translation rather than traditional word for word rendition.”³⁹⁷ This was so for Chinese intellectuals who sought new ideas from the West, and it was from these intellectuals that a massive interest in foreign historical figures became popular.

There was interest throughout Japan, Korea, and China in female revolutionaries, which was a trend Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her fellow writers followed in a Vietnamese context. As seen in the third chapter of this thesis, women like Madame Roland, Joan of Arc, and Sophia Perovskaia became subjects of biographies across the East Asian cultural world.³⁹⁸ This places the Vietnamese within a cultural sphere that included the Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese; in addition to this cultural influence, the Vietnamese were still profoundly influenced by French culture and colonization. Adherents to the New Culture Movement were themselves influenced by Western writings and filtered their interpretations of Western works into their own languages for an East Asian audience. This is the cultural field in which Phan Thị Bạch Vân and the Vietnamese intelligentsia found themselves during the late colonial period. It was dependent on a newly global Vietnamese mindset. Intellectuals who fostered this global outlook wished to bring the same views and mentalities to their audiences; in the case of Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán, that mentality needed to be transferred to young women who would help strengthen and modernize the Vietnamese for a bright future.

³⁹⁷ Ning Wang, “The Historical Role of Translation in the New Culture Movement and Its Future Prospect” *Comparative Literature Studies* 57 (2020): p. 365.

³⁹⁸ Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899-1918* (Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 10 or Ji Eun-Lee, *Women Pre-scripted: Forging Modern Roles through Korean Print* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015), p. 58.

The New Culture movement included discussions about women who were not historical figures. There was at least one woman who contributed to the famous New Culture journal, *New Youth*, named Chen Hengzhe (1890-1976). Chen Hengzhe was also the first woman faculty member of Beijing University. She participated in arguments for a political revolution that began in traditional family units; she, among a few other iconoclasts involved in the New Culture movement, “dared to break off arranged marriages and start new, ‘free love’ affairs.”³⁹⁹ Scholar Vera Schwarcz writes that men involved with the New Culture movement “had taken up the cause of women’s liberation as an institutional and social challenge...Once they identified with women, *New Tide* intellectuals were also able to use the voices of women to call attention to the more general predicament of youth... ‘Women’s liberation’ thus became for them a code word for the complex challenge that was their own self-becoming.”⁴⁰⁰ This is similar to how scholars of Vietnamese history have viewed the interwar intelligentsia’s dealings with women’s liberation and the Woman’s Question; to male champions of women’s rights, the subjugation of women was a metaphor for their own subjugation at the hands of their families, a stifling traditional culture, and the hegemony of Western cultural imperialism. Yet the fact that Chinese intellectuals were speaking about women’s issues – with the inclusion of a woman in their midst – demonstrates the interest someone like Phan Thị Bạch Vân may have had in the New Culture Movement’s principles, writings, and aims.

Yet as demonstrated by the beginning of this conclusion, the feminine archetype espoused by Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán and other women involved in the Woman’s Question was tied to French history and feminist movements. Like the proponents of the New Culture movement in

³⁹⁹ Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (University of California Press, 1986), p. 108.

⁴⁰⁰ Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment*, pp. 115 & 116.

China, the writers involved in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* were interested in Western philosophy, history, and figures. They paid attention to the developments concerning women from the metropole; they were familiar with popular newspapers, the arguments over feminism, and the most towering feminine figures. In *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* alone, writers frequently featured foreign women from Europe and profiled them as figures worth emulating. Perhaps not worthy of a full-length biography, these women in the pages of *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* were very often Euro-American and touted as the ultimate examples of civilized femininity. The convergence of these influences – Euro-American and East Asian – was at the heart of the Vietnamese intelligentsia in the 1920s and 30s. The women (and men) who engaged with the Woman's Question were consistent in their commitment to entertaining, deconstructing, and promoting a cosmopolitan outlook that entertained the histories and traditions of many cultures.

While I have discussed the antecedents and inspirations for *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s catalogue, what remains to be analyzed is the effects that Phan Thị Bạch Vân and *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* had on the Vietnamese populace. Any direct effects are difficult to ascertain, as their brief tenure and experiences with censorship meant that it was dangerous – if not simply difficult – to read and interact with their published media. However, *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* did have readers and admirers and they persisted after the press shut down. *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* did not have adequate time to build a large readership, but their influence continued into the 1930s. Certainly, the press was part of a fast-paced and ever-evolving movement that included more and more women as the years progressed.

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, years after *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* closed its doors, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* ran an article authored by Thiếu Sơn. In the article, he mentioned that he was able to find books published by *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* in the northern region of Vietnam, Tonkin.

He praised both Bạch Vân and Đạm Phương for their commitment to enlightening and propagandizing women into acting in their own interests.⁴⁰¹ To Thiều Sơn, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán represented women's first steps in offering a route of progress to other women. While he considered their works lost to time and censorship, Phan Thị Bạch Vân's initiative as a woman ready to lead other women commanded respect and attention amongst her male peers.

I have not found any references to Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán or Phan Thị Bạch Vân amongst the works of the Self-Reliant Literary Group, but that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. It would be enlightening to compare the two intellectual endeavors in more depth than I have been able to throughout these chapters. It is not certain that the Self-Reliant Literary Group's members read or had extensive knowledge of Phan Thị Bạch Vân's work, but it is certain that there were similar motivations behind both the founding of the Group and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán. Phan Thị Bạch Vân had her own views pertaining to the societal and cultural ills that plagued women. She believed that education – in both academics and practical matters relevant to the home – would allow women to achieve a respectable independence. She believed that women should act as the bearers of civilization which they could impart upon their children. She believed that women should not marry or have children too young and that they, along with their parents, should carefully consider the man to whom she would be engaged. Phan Thị Bạch Vân had many ideas about women and how society should change to improve their lives. She also had many ideas pertaining to how women could improve society. Many of these ideas critiqued aspects of traditionalism, but some did not challenge traditional modes of being a woman. Was this different than the way members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group wrote about women? In some ways, yes. There were differences. Members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group often wrote

⁴⁰¹ Thiều Sơn, “Nữ sĩ Việt Nam” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (January 4, 1934).

female characters who either attempted to break away from their traditional roles or instead accepted their fate as women, with varying levels of success. However, a major difference between writers like Nhất Linh and Phan Thị Bạch Vân was that, in my estimation, Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote female characters with richer inner lives and thoughts. This might have to do with Phan Thị Bạch Vân's position as a woman and the possibility that she represented her own experiences and feelings within her writing. Regardless, in this dissertation, I have proposed that women engaged with the Woman's Question differently than men.

How did women see the changes of the 1920s and 30s? How did they view the Woman's Question further into the 1930s? In 1932, the same year that Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote *Lâm Kiều Loan*, the writer and poet Nguyễn Thị Kiêm wrote an article in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* titled "Cô Nguyễn Thị Kiêm nói về vấn đề Nữ lưu và Văn học," or "Miss Nguyễn Thị Kiêm talks about the question of Women and Literature." Nguyễn thị Kiêm began her article as such:

"Thưa quý ông, quý bà,

Thưa các chị em,

Báo *Phụ Nữ Tân văn* trong số Mùa Xuân có dự thính làm ba việc:

- 1) Tiến hành công việc Hội Dục anh;
- 2) Tổ chức một cuộc Hội chợ phụ nữ;
- 3) Mở một Nữ lưu Học hội."

Which means:

“Dear ladies and gentlemen,

Dear young ladies,

In the Spring issue of *Phụ Nữ Tân văn* we anticipate doing three things:

- 1) Carrying out the work of an orphanage association;
- 2) Holding a women’s fair;
- 3) Opening a women’s study association.”⁴⁰²

Kiêm explained that the women’s fair would help raise funds to benefit the orphanage society. With respect to the women’s study association, Kiêm wrote that it was not only for the women involved with *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*; the association was meant for all women in southern Vietnam, and Kiêm believed it should be an opportunity for all women in the region to speak with one another and exchange ideas. She thought that it was important for women to be involved in literary pursuits; further, that discussing the presence of women in literature was useful to the entire country. In the article, Kiêm states that she wants to clarify the relationship between women and literature, past and present, and consider the role of femininity in humanity’s intellectual spirit. In her article, she addresses some common ideas pertaining to women’s participation in literature, and deftly refutes any arguments against women’s participation in intellectual pursuits.

Nguyễn thị Kiêm explains the difference between what she calls objective and subjective literature (*Phàm văn học nước nào cũng đều có thể chia ra làm hai phần, phần khách quan và phần chủ quan*). She writes that objective literature might encompass writings about science,

⁴⁰² Nguyễn thị Kiêm, “Cô Nguyễn Thị Kiêm nói về vấn đề Nữ lưu và Văn học,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (May 26, 1932), p. 32.

while subjective literature would include art and poetry. She writes that, physiologically speaking, women are very emotional but less inclined towards profound thoughts. According to Kiêm, women's emotions run deep but their thoughts are narrow and light (*Theo lẽ sanh lý, thì đàn bà thường nặng về phần hồn và nhẹ về phần tri, cảm tình thì sâu mà tư tưởng thì hẹp*).⁴⁰³ Therefore, when speaking about literature, she argues that they have a strong ability to depict scenes dealing with love, but not necessarily philosophical objectivity.

Kiêm asks women to consider a poem by Huyện Thanh Quan, a famous Vietnamese woman poet who lived in the nineteenth century. She quotes Huyện Thanh Quan's famous poem, "Qua đèo Ngang," or "Through Ngang pass." Huyện Thanh Quan composed this poem in as a tribute to her native land, as she travelled through an historical boundary (the mountain pass) between the north and the southern portions of Vietnam. She was known to voice "her sentimental feelings and concern about the social and political decline of her homeland in elegantly written verses."⁴⁰⁴ Nguyễn thị Kiêm writes:

"...thì ta phải công nhận là một bài thơ tả cảnh thiệt hay, phải có tinh thần mỹ thuật mới chụp được hết những cái cảnh sắc thiên nhiên, mà lại cũng phải có làm hồn thi sĩ mới cảm thấy được những mối kỳ tình cao tú."

Or:

⁴⁰³ Nguyễn thị Kiêm, "Cô Nguyễn Thị Kiêm nói về vấn đề Nữ lưu và Văn học," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (May 26, 1932), p. 32.

⁴⁰⁴ Tran My-Van, "'Come on, girls, let's go bail water': eroticism in Ho Xuan Huong's Vietnamese poetry" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33 (2002): p. 25.

“...We must admit this poem is very good, it takes an artistic spirit to be able to capture the natural scenery, but it also takes a poetic soul to feel these noble feelings of love.”⁴⁰⁵

Kiêm also asks readers to consider a piece written by a woman named Trương Phổ in the newspaper Nam Phong (Southern Wind). The poem was called “Giọt lệ thu,” or “Tears of Autumn.” She writes that some may find Trương Phổ’s poetry too sentimental and focused on love, with little use for the mind. But she asks, if people would compare the poems of the romantic poet, Alphonse de Lamartine, with Descartes’s philosophical writings? Or the poems of Alfred de Musset with the work of Voltaire? She concludes that no, we do not. She states that if we must concern ourselves with higher (objective, philosophical) thoughts, we must also spend time with art. She advocates for a cultivation of intellectualism combined with nourishment of our emotions. This is an endorsement of the feminine – of what Kiêm perceives as women’s strengths – in writing and literature. She believes that “if objective literature can make us wiser, then subjective literature can help us know ourselves better” (*Nếu văn học khách quan có thể làm cho ta khôn người ra thì cái văn học chủ quan lại khiến ta được biết mình hơn*).

With this assertion, she frames the “feminine” approach to literature as a good and necessary endeavor. She also writes that women have had profound influences on men who write literature, either as wives or as mistresses. According to Kiêm, women’s existence has been to men’s (and humanity’s benefit). Kiêm turns the idea that women do not contribute to cultural and literary history on its head, providing readers the argument and slowly refuting it with evidence of women as competent writers and effective analysts of human emotion. The Vietnamese may not have had many famous women writers in their history, but they did have some, and women

⁴⁰⁵ Nguyễn thị Kiêm, “Cô Nguyễn Thị Kiêm nói về vấn đề Nữ lưu và Văn học,” *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (May 26, 1932), p. 32.

poets and writers like Huyện Thanh Quan or Hồ Xuân Hương made significant contributions to art and language. Especially in the case of Hồ Xuân Hương, known for her poetic eroticism, she was able to contribute artistically *because* of her femininity, not despite it.

Kiêm ends her article by writing that women have spirits that can contribute to a serene family and a civilized country. She states that she wants to possess that spirit and, the more she desires that spirit, the more she wants to open the women's study association that she mentioned at the beginning of her article. She calls on her readers to join her in the classroom.⁴⁰⁶

There are some striking differences between the way Nguyễn Thị Kiêm writes about women's intellectual pursuits and strides towards cultural relevance in 1932, when compared to the material Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote in the newspaper *Đồng Pháp thời báo* in the year 1928. If we think back to the beginning of this chapter, we remember that Bạch Vân was encouraging the simple education of women in trades as well as academics. There are not many considerations, in Bạch Vân's mind, surrounding the ability for women to contribute to literature and the differences in how men and women might write. Bạch Vân was highly focused on the practical, at least in her articles for newspapers. While she did touch on more philosophical ideas in her novels, Phan Thị Bạch Vân by and large wanted to encourage the education and rights for women on a country-wide scale. Here, in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* about four years after Phan Thị Bạch Vân's article in *Đồng Pháp thời báo*, a young woman thoughtfully outlines the activities *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*'s editorial board has in mind for their spring issue, and how women are integral to the creation and consumption of literature. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm balances attention paid towards the practical with discussion of questions related to women's place in literary creation and practice. While Phan Thị Bạch Vân's presence in *Đồng Pháp thời báo* and the presence of her own

⁴⁰⁶ Nguyễn thị Kiêm, "Cô Nguyễn Thị Kiêm nói về vấn đề Nữ lưu và Văn học," *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (May 26, 1932), p. 32.

publishing house may lead us to believe that women's participation in the intelligentsia was common or accepted, Nguyễn Thị Kiêm engaged with common arguments in her *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* piece that point to Bạch Vân's singularity. In *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* in 1929, the writer Thế Phụng wrote that women were incapable of contributing great works of literature and that male writers should instead take on feminine personas in order to generate feelings of sympathy and pleasure in male readers.⁴⁰⁷ This is a stark contrast and demonstrates that women writers, even years after *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s closure, were not wholly accepted within the Vietnamese newspaper village. Nguyễn Thị Kiêm's article in *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* shows a growing confidence in women writers, as well as an intelligentsia more likely to support and encourage the presence of female writers. It certainly shows that Kiêm was willing to engage with dissenters and those who identified themselves as against women's participation in the literary world.

When Phan Thị Bạch Vân began *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*, the literary and journalistic environment for women was unfriendly and quite barren, if not slightly hostile. Within less than a decade, the Woman's Question exploded onto the scene and the Vietnamese newspaper village was a friendlier place for women writers. It was not without its hostilities, and women writers were still vastly in the minority. Yet this idea expressed in Nguyễn Thị Kiêm's article, that women could profoundly contribute to literature (especially with a woman as the author of the piece) was a radical change. Further, the establishment of an association where women would discuss ideas like the ones Kiêm wrote in her article was much like the French salons of old which the writers of *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* sought to replicate. The difference here was that women were not just gathering, or facilitating these gatherings, in order to uplift and bolster male intellectuals. The association Nguyễn Thị Kiêm promoted in her article for *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* was

⁴⁰⁷ Thế Phụng quoted in Quang-Anh Richard Tran, "From Red Lights to Red Flags: A History of Gender in Colonial and Contemporary Vietnam" (PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011) pp. 7 & 8.

meant to include all Vietnamese women and represent their academic interests. As the century progressed, no longer would Vietnamese women be viewed as “behind” women in other countries. In *Nữ anh tài*, Phan Thị Bạch Vân’s character, Tú Anh, spoke of Vietnamese women’s lack of progress and reticence to make strides when she met with the Chinese women’s association; there, Vietnamese women were upheld as a source of embarrassment when the Vietnamese spoke with foreign women of intelligence and status.

This attitude began to change swiftly and drastically into the 1930s, when women were gradually encouraged to participate in the public sphere, in writing, and in politics. In 1936, Nguyễn Thị Kiêm wrote an article in the periodical, *Đàn Bà Mới* (New Woman). In the article, she mentioned that “for the first time in Indochina, women in all three *kỳ* are able to meet in order to “make politics”⁴⁰⁸ For this event, these women organized in opposition to fascism; this was a women’s conference wherein women could “discuss women’s opinions” as “Women were considered a special political resource.”⁴⁰⁹ No longer were women only encouraged to stay home and facilitate their own greatness for the greatness of the nation, or the greatness of the future generation. Rather, organizers and political leaders began to view women as people who could participate in movements that would directly lead to great outcomes.

In this decade, women began to act as participants in political organizations, such as the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng (Vietnamese Nationalist Party), the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), or the Tân Việt cách mạng Đảng (New Vietnam Revolutionary Party), which impacted the Vietnamese public’s perception of women’s rights and contributed to a historiography focused on women’s political actions. While women were essential and active participants in these

⁴⁰⁸ “Lần thứ nhứt ở Đông-Đương, nữ-giới ba kỳ biết hội-hiệp để ‘làm chánh-trị’” của Nguyễn thị Kiêm *Đàn Bà Mới* 26 October, 1936.

⁴⁰⁹ Dang Thi Van Chi, “Vietnamese Women Intellectuals and Global Integration in the First Half of the 20th Century” *Journal of Mekong Societies* 11 (2015): p. 47.

political groups, their contributions were often overshadowed by state narratives. Additionally, some characterizations of their political participation gave a traditionalist outlook that traced their motivations back to Confucianist loyalties, which stemmed from loyalties to the men in their lives. This has made it difficult for historians to accurately define and characterize women's participation in political organizations, although existing literature about Vietnamese women tends to analyze women's political representation and participation. This has resulted in a historiography that points to women existing and working in political organizations during the 1930s, 40s, and beyond without presenting adequate critique surrounding their contemporary treatment or treatment as historical actors.

In the case of Nguyễn Thị Giang, her participation in the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng has been overshadowed by her suicide after the execution of her husband, Nguyễn Thái Học, by the French authorities. Yet for all the posthumous praise she received for fulfilling the Confucian ideal of a faithful widow, Nguyễn Thị Giang “was, by all accounts, an important and influential member of the VNQDD”; additionally, “her actions were not merely those of a lovelorn woman” who was lost after the execution of her husband.⁴¹⁰ Nguyễn Thị Giang worked to promote and publish propaganda for the VNQDD, recruit for their organization, and gather intelligence. We can see that her position as a woman, while it did not garner her credit after her death, did not detract from her ability to participate in activities for the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng. Sophie Quinn-Judge writes that women like Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, who was a member of the ICP, was “attracted to the communist revolution largely for nationalist reasons” but she “became caught up in the rapid changes in morality and views of women that were prevalent in China and

⁴¹⁰ Micheline Lessard, “‘I Die Because of My Circumstances’: Nguyen Thi Giang and the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang” chapter in *Women in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements* eds. Susan Blackburn and Helen Ting (Singapore: NUS Press, 2013), p. 52.

Vietnam in the 1920s.”⁴¹¹ While women in communist organizations were not treated the same way as men, owing to more traditionalist views surrounding women that affected communist movements in the late-1920s, they did make up a significant and important portion of their organizing in the 1930s and beyond. Historically, in Vietnam, the participation of women in revolutionary movements and political societies has been presented as part of a teleological nationalist narrative that achieved its zenith with the participation of women in the August Revolution of 1945. According to these sources, after this point, women achieved gender equality and were able to participate in the National Assembly. While the August Revolution did not solve all inequalities based on gender, women’s participation in the movements leading up to that point was a significant change from the decades prior.

The actions of women like Nguyễn Thị Giang and Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai often happened concurrently with the publication and writings put out by Phan Thị Bạch Vân and Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán. Some of the women who wrote for newspapers also participated in women’s sections, groups, and cells within political organizations. According to Dang Thi Van Chi, Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán “was widely known. Writers such as Mong Tuyet and Dong Ho admitted in their memoirs that they lasciviously read *Nu Luu Tung Thu* by Phan Thi Bach Van, along with other banned books.”⁴¹² Yet women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân, and the works written by women authors like her, have been characterized by those who subscribe to communist state narratives as bourgeois, middle-to-upper class, and transitional on the path to liberation from the French. These narratives have dismissed Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her cohort as reformists generally happy with the status quo and not radical enough to propel the Vietnamese to where they needed

⁴¹¹ Sophie Quinn-Judge, “Women in the early Vietnamese communist movement: sex, lies, and liberation” *South East Asia Research* 9 (2011): p. 246.

⁴¹² Dang Thi Van Chi, “Vietnamese Women Intellectuals and Global Integration in the First Half of the 20th Century” *Journal of Mekong Societies* 11 (2015): p. 43.

to be in order to achieve sovereignty. As we have seen in this dissertation, Phan Thị Bạch Vân and other authors for *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* professed ideas about women that did hinge on their biological capabilities, as well as their societal positions as mothers and wives. They did not discuss sex openly and could not be considered explicit or radical by contemporary standards, if we compare them to feminist figures of other countries in the 1920s and 30s. Yet Phan Thị Bạch Vân wrote novels that featured characters who cross-dressed, she referenced news stories about transgender men, and she depicted women who were unhappy in their marriages and left their husbands, instead of silently enduring the pain they experienced. She wanted women to have vocational training so that they could support themselves and not rely on their male family members. In some ways, this was a more significant break from tradition than that exhibited by communist movements in the 1920s. Most importantly, it is clear that women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân and her fellow women writers inspired other women and were not part of a transitional movement. Rather, they were part of a movement for women's rights that did not see widespread success or recognition. This does not mean that Phan Thị Bạch Vân's creation of *Nữ Lũu Thơ Quán* did not inspire women and lead to more substantial and sustained participation in public life on their part.

While it is unknown if Phan Thị Bạch Vân herself participated in any political groups or organizations, it is no stretch to say that her participation in the intellectual sphere inspired scores of other young women. These women, armed with literacy and an understanding of their worth in the world, went on to participate in political movements that only grew larger in Indochina after the 1930s. Phan Thị Bạch Vân's engagement with women's rights, cosmopolitan and bourgeois it might have been, was a call to other women that resulted in widespread support for women's enfranchisement and participation in the public sphere. Though her contributions to

women's movements may have been overlooked by scholars and historians after the 1940s, this dissertation has attempted to demonstrate Phan Thị Bạch Vân's influence and ties to other movements during the interwar years. Her perspective was unique, and her literary output creatively referenced international trends and developments. While her vision was Vietnamese, it bore resemblance to a host of other cultures and traditions.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's idealized woman did not necessarily become the norm for all Vietnamese women once her press was shut down. Not all Vietnamese women became well-travelled and well-read paragons of feminine virtue. It is difficult to assess exactly how we should view Phan Thị Bạch Vân's ultimate effects on her culture and time period. While we may not be able to offer a simple assessment pertaining to her success, we can be sure that the works in *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán* represented a specific and special moment within history.

Phan Thị Bạch Vân's and *Nữ Lưu Thơ Quán*'s vision of aspirational femininity was also not hers alone; we have seen through glimpses into concurrent explorations of the Woman's Question in other countries that this was a transnational movement. Some of these women were connected (in the case of international women's groups like the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) yet many, especially in the Global South, were not. We see that there were antecedents to, and potential for, a fully-fledged internationalist movement led by women in the small references Nguyễn Thị Kiêm made to Siam and Tibet, or when *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* published articles about women in India, Turkey, and Tunisia.⁴¹³ There was genuine admiration for women in other countries who were accomplishing great things. There was also a genuine desire to know more about them and impart that knowledge to other Vietnamese women. What

⁴¹³ Such as "Tấm gương cho chị em ta soi: Đàn Bà Ấn Độ" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (October 23, 1930), "Hoa Khôi" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (September 22, 1932), and "Phụ nữ nước người: một người đàn bà hồi giáo nói chuyện về phụ nữ bên xứ Tunisie" *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* (September 22, 1932).

would Vietnamese women benefit from knowing about Indian women's strides for education or how Muslim women lived in Tunisia? The answer is not straightforward, and it is better to ask what women like Phan Thị Bạch Vân or Nguyễn Thị Kiêm thought Vietnamese women might gain from this knowledge. They believed that women who were worldly, educated, and well-read would act as accomplished representatives of their culture and the knowledge they possessed would flow through them and to their children, beginning a chain of reference and knowledge that would ultimately strengthen the Vietnamese. This would have the effect of making the Vietnamese aware of great women in other countries and able to accomplish similar feats, resulting in a culture worthy of admiration and respect.

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