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Cover calligraphy Yan Zhenqing 顏真卿, Tang calligrapher and statesman

Cover picture The walled city of Shanghai (*Shanghai xianzhi*, 1872)

# BROKEN JOURNEY: NHẤT LINH'S "GOING TO FRANCE"

 *Translated from the Vietnamese by Greg and Monique Lockhart, with an introduction and commentary by Greg Lockhart*

## INTRODUCTION: Nhất Linh's *Going to France*

### I

Nhất Linh was the pen name of Nguyễn Tường Tam, the Vietnamese writer, who was born in Cẩm Giàng district, Hải Dương province, in 1906. *Đi Tây* (Going to France) is a humorous, semi-fictional account of a trip which he made to study journalism and take a science degree between 1927 and 1930. First serialised in Hanoi between August 1935 and April 1936 in the popular journal *Pbong Hóa* (Customs), it has become the best known travel story in modern Vietnamese literature. Most recently, editions have come from Sống Mới, the Vietnamese émigré publishing house in Arizona, which still advertises the work as an 'interesting' one from before the World War II.

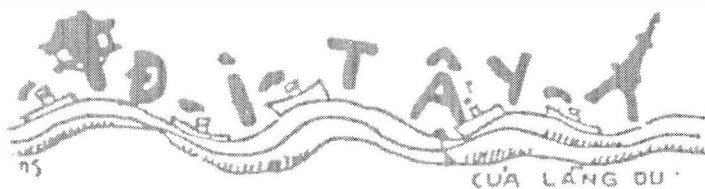
But the 'interest' of *Going to France* does not only lie in its status as a travel story. It is also a satire, and as such it stands out as a new kind of work in early modern Vietnamese literature.

Each week, as the instalments appeared in *Customs*, the letters of the Vietnamese title *Đ I T Ấ Y* floated up and down over three wavy lines which headed the story (see Figure 1). These represented the sea upon which ocean liners were sailing. On one side of the sea was a stylised drawing of the Single Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi, and on the other was the Eiffel Tower. Just below the waves we learn that the story is by 'Lãng Du', an amusing pen-name which Nhất Linh adopts as the first-person traveller-narrator. This name conveys the idea of an aimless, light-headed wanderer. Furthermore, since the Vietnam-

Our gratitude is due to Jim Gordon, who first suggested that the translation be published; to David Marr, Đỗ Thiện, and Alexander Woodside, who read an early draft of the work and kindly offered valuable comments; to Virginia Hooker, who read the same draft and provided some valuable theoretical insights; to Christopher Goscha, who kindly produced a copy of the official transcript of notes that the French Secret Police made on Nhất Linh, and also the last photo of him. Furthermore, we would like to thank Gail Abbot for her helpful reading of the manuscript.

### Figure 1

*Thematic title of the weekly instalments in Customs of Lãng Du's Going to France*



<sup>1</sup> I have in mind here Bakhtin's classification of such picaresque novels as *Histoire de Gil Blas de Santillane* (1714, 1724, 1735) by Lesage, and *Moll Flanders* (1722) by Daniel Defoe. See M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech genres and other late essays*, transl. Vern W. McGee (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1986), p.10.

<sup>2</sup> See my introduction to *The light of the capital: three modern Vietnamese classics*, translated by Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1995).

ese transliteration of the word 'romantic' is *lãng mạn*, two syllables which can convey the idea of waves washing over an embankment, the association between the wavy lines and the name 'Lãng Du' does something else. It strengthens a note of self-satire with which the author doubles the satire of the romance of the journey which he made across the sea.

*Going to France* is not, then, the standard kind of travel story in which the hero is a point moving in space.<sup>1</sup> Even though Lãng Du's travels reveal the spatial diversity of the world—as he is drawn into the old imperial shipping route through Singapore, Colombo, Suez, and the Mediterranean to France—it is just as much a case of the world revealing him. Coming from a poor, subject colony, Lãng Du's responses to the vast impersonal forces of the modern world outside Vietnam often make him seem naïve. This is a part of his appeal. At the same time, however, there are many jokes in *Going to France* about hunger, inferiority, alienation, and French girls which spring from the acute awareness which Lãng Du has of his Vietnamese 'naïvety' and 'backwardness'. In these jokes he is managing great self-doubt, mostly by using irony to turn it into light, satirical laughter. But the main issue here is that, as the new world reveals him, Lãng Du's construction of his journey has become reflexively enmeshed with his ironic construction of himself.

From this perspective it is possible to relate *Going to France* to other kinds of 'I' narrative that suddenly appear in Vietnam in the 1930s, most notably first-person reportage (*phóng sự*). Indeed, the Sống Mới edition describes the work well as a "*tiểu thuyết phóng sự trào phúng*," a 'satirical reportage novel', which indicates that as a semi-fictional work, it is strongly grounded in a non-fictional journey. There are, however, two reasons why I want to stress in this essay the satirical rather than the documentary aspect of the work. One is that I have discussed the rise of first-person reportage elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The other is that it is primarily the satirical nature of the work that sets it apart from other works of reportage and reportage novels in the period, as well as from other travelogues that were usually written in the *nhật ký* (diary) form.

Even though Lãng Du describes *Going to France* as a "diary," this is not necessarily what we get. The work is a personalised narrative; but while the chapters and sections of the story follow the stages of Lãng Du's journey to France and back, they are given undated subject-headings: "Waiting," "A Lucky Scheme," "Philosophy," "Recognition." The point is that such headings do not necessarily bind the text to the same sense of either a travel schedule or an imperial project as the dated entries of most other travelogues from the period do—Phạm Quỳnh's 1922 "Diary of a Journey to France,"<sup>3</sup> for instance. Part of the reason for this may be that Nhất Linh's *Going to France* was not written until well after his journey, which included a long, three-year stay in France. However, this, plus the fact that it is partly fiction, only reinforces the sense that *Going to France* was written with a particular literary agenda in mind, one that floats free of conventional travel-writing.

A salient feature of all the other works of travel I am aware of in early

A salient feature of all the other works of travel I am aware of in early modern Vietnamese literature is that they were written by high officials or people who had been empowered by the colonial regime. Nhất Linh was also a relatively privileged student, whose trip to France was funded by the colonial authorities. To this extent his journey was an 'imperial' one too. Yet he was young and powerless then, and it is well known that he never felt comfortable with his privilege. Moreover, a few examples of official travel-writing will permit us to highlight an important point: Lãng Du's travel story has certain political implications that are rooted in its satire of his own partly 'imperial' journey and, by extension, in its satire of those by high officials.

There is certainly no room for self-ridicule in what may be the first modern Vietnamese travelogue. This is Trương Vĩnh Ký's *Voyage to Tonkin in the Year Ất Hợi (1876)*<sup>4</sup> which, given the links between imperial conquest, knowledge, and travel, appropriately had its genesis in a work of espionage. The text of *Voyage*, which may not itself have been part of the actual spy report arising from Trương Vĩnh Ký's trip, was not published in Saigon until 1881 in a limited edition. However, the dated entries of its political, cultural, and demographic survey of Tonkin was commissioned by Duperré, the Admiral Governor of Cochinchina, at a time when the French, who had conquered that region in 1859, were thinking about the annexation of Annam and Tonkin, that was to follow by 1884.

A more congenial, quasi-official work is Nguyễn Trọng Hiệp's little-known *Paris, Capital of France* (1897).<sup>5</sup> A rare work of travel to appear with undated entries, it reflects the kind of literary response to beautiful scenery which Confucian gentleman had penned for centuries in classical poetry. Something new, however, was that Hiệp, a colonial education official on a fact-finding mission in the metropole, now wrote his poems in French, rather than in Chinese or Vietnamese. His account of Paris thus consists of thirty-six French quatrains which were printed in a lavish edition with erudite notes in French and Chinese. Few Vietnamese could have read this edition even if they could have found and afforded it, but others may well have been taken by its views of the *belle époque*:

The waters are blue and the vegetation pink;  
The evening sweet to behold;  
People are out walking. Great ladies promenade;  
and behind them walk the small ladies.<sup>6</sup>

Less poetic, but still reflecting the style of Paris in the 1890s is the title of a third example, *Strolling Around the Globe*, by Bùi Thanh Vân, published with dated entries in a little-known edition in 1929.<sup>7</sup> Bùi Thanh Vân was a retired court interpreter who, after seeing a panisphere in Saigon, bought a bank-draft with his pension and set sail on a Japanese steamer in March 1929 for twenty-five world ports before returning home. His travelogue, which is similar to a number of others written in the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>8</sup> consists of a

<sup>4</sup> See edition translated and edited by P. J. Honey (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1982). This is a bilingual edition.

<sup>5</sup> Nguyễn Trọng Hiệp, *Paris, capitale de la France: recueil de vers* (Hanoi: F. H. Schneider, 1897). Other nineteenth-century travel accounts are Trương Minh Ký, *De Saigon à Paris* (Saigon: Reget Curiol, 1889); Trần Đình Bảo, *Relations d'un voyage diplomatique en 1873 [de] Phan Thanh Giản* (Saigon: Huỳnh Kim Danh, 1916).

<sup>6</sup> This is quatrain XXV. I have selected it for quotation because it is such a fine poem, and because Walter Benjamin actually uses it at the beginning of his well-known essay, "Paris, capital of the nineteenth century." See Walter Benjamin, *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp.146–62. The English translation here is that which appears in this source.

<sup>7</sup> Bùi Thanh Vân, *Đạo khắp hoàn cầu* (Huế: Đắc Lập, 1929).

<sup>8</sup> Phạm Quỳnh, "Pháp du hành trình nhật ký" [Diary of a journey to France], *Nam Phong* 58 (April 1922), following. Trần Quang Huyền, "Ai Lao hành trình" [Journey to Laos], *Nam Phong* 57 (March 1922). Lê Văn Đức, *Tây hành lược ký* [A short account of a trip to France], translated from Hán-Việt by Đinh Văn Sắt (Qui Nhơn, 1923), 39 pp. Lê Văn Đức also wrote two works called *Du lịch Xiêm* [Touring Siam], and *Đông phương du lịch* [Touring the East]. Phạm Quỳnh, *Ba tháng ở Paris* [Three months in Paris] (Hanoi: NXB Đông Kinh Ân Quan, 1927). Trần Bá Vinh, *Pháp du ký sự* [Story of a trip to France] (Chân Tin, 1932). For travel within Vietnam see also Phạm Quỳnh, "Mười Ngày ở Huế" [Ten days in Huế], *Nam Phong* 10 (1918); "Một Tháng ở Nam Kỳ" [A month in Southern Vietnam], *Nam Phong* 17 (1920). Hereafter the journal *Nam Phong* is noted as *NP*.

detailed account of his itinerary, as well as reflections on how Vietnamese affairs compare with those of other countries. The Maugham-like ease with which Bùi Thanh Vân completed his voyage gives his account a certain charm: dinner with the Captain; a chat with the French Consul in Buenos Aires.

It is against such a backdrop that the political significance of Lãng Du's account may thus be seen. As he travelled 'deck class' and had his story widely disseminated in *Customs*, his view is much more shaky than that of the high officials. But it is also more democratic, and as this important difference is formulated in the laughter of self-doubt, Nhất Linh is establishing an alternative to the confident perspective of the elite texts. We are thus dealing in Lãng Du's text with the development of a political tension between the prevailing imperial culture and a seminal, independent national one. The national view, however, is not sharply focussed in the work. There is no manifesto, if only because colonial censorship of the press was quite strict in the 1930s and would have made such a statement impossible. Yet, as the only modern alternative to colonial culture, this independent national view is incipient in many features of the story.

A number of these will be revealed in the commentary to the translation. There, by contrasting *Going to France* with certain other travel texts, most notably by the high mandarin Phạm Quỳnh, I illustrate the kind of political conflict that existed in colonial culture. However, as it bears on the emergence of the nation, the central feature of the story is its status as a satire. For arising as it does from Lãng Du's doubts about the world, it offers an essentially destabilising critique of the colonial order he leaves and then looks back on with some detachment from France.

As we will see, this retrospective view is expressed in many ways: in the new sense of society that is implicit in Lãng Du's radical use of humour; in the romantic individualism and humanism he assumes in his construction of the story; and in the ironic play he often makes on the rhetoric of 'civilisation' and the social reality of 'backwardness'. Moreover it comes out in the consciously didactic, and therefore transforming, purpose for which Nhất Linh wrote his satire for *Customs*.

*Customs*, which Nhất Linh began to edit in 1932, was the first satirical journal in Vietnam. As such, it was partly modelled on the French journal *Le Rire*, and soon blossomed in the contradictory climate of French colonial policy. On the one hand, the colonial regime stimulated the idea of modern progress in Vietnam as it developed cities with modern features and permitted students to study in the metropole. On the other hand, it is well known that the new regime still sought to maintain traditional customs in the perceived interests of political and social stability. By launching satirical attacks on old customs, Nhất Linh's journal of the same name managed to circumvent censorship and make an oblique attack on the colonial regime—until it was closed down in 1936. A seditious, transforming agenda thus



combined with satirical impulses to create the ethos of *Going to France*, and the cultural nationalism inherent in this approach does much to explain why Nhất Linh's travelogue has survived others from the colonial era despite the vicissitudes of war.

None of Nhất Linh's works were actually reprinted in northern Vietnam after 1954 when the defeat of French colonialism and the division of the country led to the ascendancy of socialist realism in literature and art. For many years Marxist critics deplored his 'romantic individualism', if only because he was a prominent member of the nationalist Đại Việt Party, which had opposed the rise of Communism in the 1940s. However, along with his many novels, Nhất Linh's *Going to France* continued to be well known in the south where interest in Western-style liberalism remained strong. The critic Võ Phiến has suggested that it was a model for the humorous works that emanated from the south by such authors as Hoàng Hải Thủy and Lê Tất Điều.<sup>9</sup> Those who went West in search of 'freedom' after the fall of Saigon and the political reunification of the country in 1975 would then re-affirm Nhất Linh's travelogue along with many other pre-1945 works in their liberal, as opposed to the (other) socialist, discourse.

Recently, with the end of the Cold War, moves towards a market economy and rapid urban development in Vietnam, this stand-off between the South and North has fallen away. Since the mid-1980s, critics in Hanoi have mellowed in their approach to Nhất Linh's work, as they have in their approach to other so-called 'romantics' of the pre-World War II period. The eight-volume 'renovation' compilation, *Vietnamese Romantic Prose, 1930-1945*, published in Hanoi in 1989, reprinted Nhất Linh's major social novels of the 1930s: *Autumn Sun* (1934), *The Breaking of Ties* (1934), *Indifference* (1936), and *Two Friends* (1937), which all place stress on the freedom of the individual.<sup>10</sup> This did not mean that there was space to reprint a humorous travelogue like *Going to France*. Nevertheless, the compilation did note the existence of the work, and its introductory essay sought to rehabilitate other writers whose literary individualism had been shaped in the 1930s by 'Western studies'.<sup>11</sup>

In his introductory essay to *Vietnamese Romantic Prose*, Nguyễn Hoàn Khung explains that the Western-style individualism which attracted these writers was not simply a romantic indulgence. Rather, it was an aspect of a cultural movement which was inseparable from 'humanism', and thus a very new approach to the political and social problems of the world; it was an element of the 'weapon'<sup>12</sup> that modern literature was forging in the struggle against old values on many fronts. Insofar as it tends automatically to focus on the idea of the modern nation in a direct encounter with the 'West', Nhất Linh's travelogue is worth reading as it epitomises an important but neglected aspect of early modern Vietnamese literature: the rise of comic satire written in an ironic mode.

<sup>9</sup> Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954-1975*, translated by Võ Đình Mai (Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1992), p.163.

<sup>10</sup> *Văn xuôi lãng mạn Việt Nam* [Vietnamese romantic prose], 8 vols. (Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1989). The Vietnamese titles of the novels mentioned are: *Nắng thu* (1934), *Đoan tuyệt* (1934), *Lạnh lùng* (1936), *Đôi bạn* (1937).

<sup>11</sup> *Văn xuôi lãng mạn*, vol.1, pp.18-19.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Details of Nhất Linh's biography come from Nhật Thịnh, *Chân dung Nhất Linh* [A portrait of Nhất Linh] (Saigon, 1971; reprint ed., Glendale, Calif.: Đại Nam, n.d.); Tú Mỡ, "Trong bếp núc Tự Lực Văn Đoàn" [In the kitchen of the Self Reliance Literary Group], *Tạp chí văn học* [Literary Studies] 1988.5-6: 99-110; 1989.1: 72-82; Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), Index; S. D. O'Harrow, "The growth of modern Vietnamese prose fiction, with special reference to the role of Nhất Linh in the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn," MA diss. (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1965).

<sup>14</sup> Two of these, Nguyễn Tường Long (Hoàng Đạo) and Nguyễn Tường Vinh (Thạch Lam), would also become prominent writers in the 1930s.

<sup>15</sup> Another work Nhất Linh had in preparation around the time he was writing *Going to France* also expressed the deep anguish he felt for the poverty of Vietnamese peasants. See "Hai vé đẹp" [Two aspects of beauty], in *Tối tăm* [Darkness] (Hanoi: Đời Nay, 1936), especially p.51: "Throughout the day [the peasants] bend their backs in mud and stagnant water, and at night, with their heads down, they steal into their dark dwellings, with stinking sleeping mats and dirty beds." For more information on this work see Nhật Thịnh, *Portrait*, p.109.

<sup>16</sup> Significantly, its author, Nguyễn Du, who had been forced to serve new masters in middle age, was haunted by the absence of an "orthodox succession" of emperors after the fall of the Lê Dynasty and the rise of the Tây Sơn in 1788. See Nguyễn Du, *The tale of Kiều*, a bilingual edition, translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông with "An historical background" by Alexander Woodside (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> Nhật Thịnh, *Portrait*, p.21.

## II

In *Going to France*, Lãng Du quips that as his ship left Saigon and approached the first foreign port, Singapore, he found it "incredibly easy to breathe." Since all of Nhất Linh's major novels were serious ones born of the deep conflicts in modern Vietnamese society, this indicates that he often felt stifled at home. And there are many ways in which his life and work reflects this.<sup>13</sup>

His father had been a dissatisfied mandarin, a Confucian scholar of some literary ability who reluctantly served the French colonial administration in order to support his family. During the course of this service he had been moved from his home region in Quảng Nam, Central Vietnam, to the northern province of Hải Dương. He was thus the District Chief at Cẩm Giàng when, twenty-two years after the French Protectorate Government was established in Tonkin, Nhất Linh was born, the third son in a family of seven children.<sup>14</sup>

Cẩm Giàng was a very poor district along the road between Hanoi and Haiphong, and it was where Nhất Linh spent his early years, living in close proximity to peasants whose poverty haunted him for the rest of his life. Much later, in *Going to France*, his early observations of peasant life were echoed in Lãng Du's remark that the "filth" and "pitiful suffering" of the people at Djibouti made him 'homesick'.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, as Nhất Linh grew up, his early education in Chinese (and Vietnamese) characters was conducted in local schools by displaced Confucian scholars. These included Bùi Đình Ta and Đào Trinh Nhất who refused to work for the French. He also learned *quốc ngữ*, the romanised 'national' script for writing Vietnamese which the French authorities were keen to encourage. Although the family moved around and its fortunes seem to have been in decline, Nhất Linh made rapid progress in his studies and, like his father, read assiduously *The Tale of Kiều*, a nineteenth-century classic about a beautiful girl whose cruel destiny was to become a prostitute.<sup>16</sup>

When his father died after the administration posted him to Laos in 1918, Nhất Linh left school to help his family as it fell on hard times.<sup>17</sup> However, in 1920, help from relatives and a scholarship enabled him to study at the prestigious Protectorate School at Bưởi village on Hanoi's Western Lake. He was now immersed in the modern education which the French offered to only a few people. This limited Western education replaced the old Confucian system that had come to an end when the last civil examinations were held in Chinese in 1918. He passed his exams with high marks, and revealed a gift for drawing—especially satirical caricatures of people who taunted him for his awkward country ways. He left school in 1923 and became a clerk in the Bureau of Finance in Hanoi, where he met Tú Mỡ (Hồ Trọng Hiếu), the satirical poet and close friend with whom he later worked on *Customs*.

While at the Bureau of Finance Nhất Linh published a few poems and an essay on the *Tale of Kiều*. In 1925 he published his first novel, *Nho Phong*

(Confucian Customs), a love story with an uncontroversial treatment of old values. During this period Tú Mỡ says that Nhất Linh spoke often about “writing to live, and living to write,”<sup>18</sup> a preoccupation that reflected both his distaste for the colonial bureaucracy and a desire that was common among city dwellers at the time: to have a profession that would give them the freedom to make their own lives. However, when he left the bureaucracy in 1925, Nhất Linh first studied briefly in a disused railway workshop which housed the Indochina Arts Institute, run by the colonial idealist Victor Tardieu.<sup>19</sup> Then, in 1926, he began to wander: to Cochinchina where he became marginally involved in radical nationalist political activities before escaping official notice by fleeing to Cambodia and Laos. There he survived by drawing the portraits of local mandarins and painting scenery for a travelling theatrical troupe.

An important part of Nhất Linh’s motivation for this bout of travel—and others later—may be discerned in “A Dream of Từ Lâm,” an earnest short story which he published in his *Silk Spinner* anthology of 1927,<sup>20</sup> just before he left for France. This story first reveals his passion to find a lost Utopia. Its narrator, who laments his wasted life in the bureaucracy, receives a visit one day from an old friend from his student days named Trần Lưu. The narrator recalls how Trần Lưu had decided, upon the death of both his parents, to abandon his career in law and set out in search of the paradise he had dreamt of. On the day the two friends parted, Trần Lưu had said:

I am now a lonely shadow returning home to visit my parents’ tomb. After that I’ll be a wanderer. I’ll roam all over the country, traversing the mountains and rivers. I’ll no longer have a home . . . I intend to find work as I mix with people on the way. That will give me the opportunity both to study and to teach and to examine human nature. Wearing rough peasant clothes, a torn hat, and going bare-foot, I’ll make my living as I go.<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately, Nhất Linh would learn to write less stiffly than this. But I have attempted to maintain in translation the strange stilted quality of this passage because of the sense of dislocation it conveys—one which suggests the self-doubt of a generation born under foreign rule, which reflects the stylistic wrench involved as Nhất Linh struggled with the rhythms of his early education in classical poetry to become a modern prose writer;<sup>22</sup> and which had led him by 1926 into a restless life of writing, travel and political activism.

As it turned out, Trần Lưu found his Utopian dream at the remote village of Từ Lâm. But this only increased the narrator’s dissatisfaction with his own “insipid” petty-bourgeois life in the city, and prepares us for the long procession of “wanderers” and “vagabonds” in the mature social novels Nhất Linh would write after his return from France—where Lãng Du describes his life as a “vagabond.” In these novels there would almost always be something of a homeless ‘shadow’ haunting the ancestral tomb; something of the uprooted wanderer who feels he can only seek a living among ordinary people *as he goes*. If Nhất Linh “wrote to live and lived to write,” this was

<sup>18</sup> This is Tú Mỡ’s fair paraphrase of a more complex utterance made by Nhất Linh at the time. See Tú Mỡ, *Kitchen*, pp.99, 106.

<sup>19</sup> O’Harrow, *Modern Vietnamese prose fiction*, p.55, uses the term ‘colonial idealist’ to describe Tardieu.

<sup>20</sup> Nhất Linh, “Giấc mộng Từ Lâm” [A dream of Từ Lâm], in *Người quay tơ* [The silk spinner] (Hanoi, 1927; reprint ed., Sống Mới, n.d. [1980?]), pp.23–42.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.24. It is likely that, as David Marr suggested to me, Nhất Linh’s construction of Trần Lưu’s wanderings has been influenced by a famous event in Russian history: the 1872–74 crusade of the Narodniki, the educated people who went into the villages to help enlighten the masses. In fact, along with “A dream of Từ Lâm,” *The silk spinner* contains a ten-page piece entitled “Sự thật ở miệng trẻ” [Truth from the mouths of the young]. This consists of four very short scenes from a play by Leo Tolstoy, which Nhất Linh translated into Vietnamese from a French translation of the original Russian. Tanya Filimonova tells me that this is the earliest clear evidence she knows of Russian influence in modern Vietnamese writing. In any case, Nhất Linh’s selection of a short ten-page work for translation presumably rests on a wider knowledge of Russian literature (in French) than just the selection itself, and both the humble setting and simple moral of Tolstoy’s scenes seem consistent with “the going to the people” of the Narodniki.

<sup>22</sup> It has been said, perhaps first by Lê Hữu Mục, that Nhất Linh’s prose style was deeply affected by his immersion in Nguyễn Du’s classic, *The tale of Kiều*, at an early age. This seems right to me.

<sup>23</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, *Đời viết văn của tôi* [My life as a waiter] (Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1971), p.153.

<sup>24</sup> Nguyễn Duy Diễm in Nhật Thịnh, *Portrait*, p.33. See also Tú Mỡ, *Kitchen*, p.102.

<sup>25</sup> Nhật Thịnh, *Portrait*, pp.30–1.

<sup>26</sup> The group consisted mainly of his brothers Hoàng Đạo (Nguyễn Tường Long) and Nguyễn Tường Vinh or Lân (Thạch Lam), and friends Tú Mỡ (Hồ Trọng Hiều), Thế Lữ (Nguyễn Thế Lữ) and Khái Hưng (Trần Khánh Giu).

<sup>27</sup> Nguyễn Công Hoan, *My life*, p.153, also says that Nhất Linh was regarded by Vũ Liên, a friend of Trịnh Văn Phú's, as "a person with conviction" (*người có tâm huyết*). A short news item published in *Customs*, No.2, 23 June 1932, entitled "After returning from France," hints at Nhất Linh's unhappiness at how the colonial regime treated its returned students. It tells of one, Đỗ Đình Thiện, who had been fined and imprisoned for four months in France after distributing radical pamphlets. On repatriation he was again imprisoned in Vietnam for not paying his fine in France.

because neither his Utopian dream nor the harsh reality of the modern world would go away.

Nguyễn Công Hoan, who knew him before he left for France, says he did not seem to know what he wanted to do there. Apparently he joked about studying naval or electrical engineering, and even invented special signatures for these contingencies: one in which he drew his name so that it looked like smoke coming out of a ship's funnel, another so that it looked like a coil of telegraph wire.<sup>23</sup> But while this shows his interest in helping to modernise his country, those who knew him best say that "his main aim was to study journalism and tasks that were related to it."<sup>24</sup> With a scholarship (which Victor Tardieu may have helped him gain) from the Overseas Study Association (Hội Du Học) run by high mandarins in Huế, Nhất Linh thus went to France and spent three very active years there.

The science degree he took at Montpellier was designed to deepen his knowledge of modern civilisation and give him teaching qualifications if journalism failed. According to his biographer Nhật Thịnh, he also spent much time exploring various facets of French culture: politics, literature, art, and, of course, journalism and the publishing industry.<sup>25</sup> This is not something that the self-deprecating humour of *Going to France* would suggest. But, then, this is a comic satire with at least one other twist: the unexpected, sombre ending in which Lãng Du thinks of death.

It must be remembered that, for some reason, Nhất Linh did not write *Going to France* until 1935–36, five years after he returned home on board the *Compiègne*. Perhaps he was initially too busy trying to establish himself to think about recording his experiences. Immediately after his return he was, in fact, keen to set up a radically new kind of journal which he wanted to call *Tiếng Cười* (Laughter), after *Le Rire*. It would give opportunities to unknown writers and publish jokes, humorous prose, satirical poetry, and cartoons, interspersed with serious romantic stories. Furthermore, he hoped, it would be the nucleus of a new literary initiative stressing 'individual freedom' in Vietnam—which eventually did flower in his famous 'Self Reliance Literary Group' (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn) of the 1930s.<sup>26</sup> But the government turned down his application to publish *Laughter*, and it was not until June 1932 that he finally had the opportunity to take control of an existing publication. This was *Customs*, a struggling educational journal.

Early hints of what would eventually be *Going to France* appeared within the first year or so of this journal's transformation. The first was in the form of a cartoon in August 1932, which satirised the return of the French-speaking sophisticate from the metropole (see Figure 2). Next, on 21 July 1933, Nhất Linh published a half-page report he had written about a train trip to Lạng Sơn entitled "Tourism: a Humorous Report on the Mountain Minority People," which cleverly lets the reader decide whether or not the worldly Vietnamese reporter is laughing at the minority people or vice versa. So while Nhất Linh was very busy with other matters, he seems to have formulated a

plan to write a work like *Going to France* well before he did so. And one effect of the slow gestation of the story is that it reflects the change of mood that came over Vietnam from around the time of his return.

There is a famous passage in the second chapter of *Going to France* which explains how the farther away from Vietnam Lãng Du travels the more decent French people seem to be. However, this shift in perspective makes him fret about his eventual return. In fact, the bloody French colonial repression of the nationalist uprisings at Yên Bái in 1930 and the Soviet movement in Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, on top of the economic strictures of the Great Depression, had created a fearfully pessimistic atmosphere in the country. The last section of *Going to France*, melodramatically entitled “Not Dead Yet, But ...”, is thus preceded by some (still humorous) references to Lãng Du’s inadvertent association with radical Vietnamese students in France and his deportation from the country. This corresponds in real life to the deportation of some thirty Vietnamese students from France in the round-ups that followed the uprisings of 1930, at least one of whom—Trịnh Văn Phú—Nhất Linh knew personally.<sup>27</sup>

By the middle of the decade there was also widespread press criticism of the Court in Huế, and of Phạm Quỳnh, the French puppet-Director of Emperor Bảo Đại’s Cabinet and the Minister for National Education. This criticism followed the disappointment of nationalist hopes that, with the rise of the young French-educated emperor to the throne in 1932, a programme of modern reform would establish a ‘Chambre des Représentants du Peuple’. The restoration of some measure of indigenous control over basic economic, defence, and foreign policy matters had also been anticipated. However, when Bảo Đại’s cabinet reshuffle of May 1933 failed to produce the desired reforms, it was again clear that the French had no intention of permitting substantial change.<sup>28</sup> *Going to France* thus brings Lãng Du back from his journey with a heightened sense of the gulf between modernity and the pre-modern power of ancient customs, which the colonial regime was determined to maintain in Vietnam.

In the major novels Nhất Linh wrote around the time he was working on *Going to France*, the clash between ‘old and new’ develops into full-blooded social conflicts that are never effectively resolved.

<sup>28</sup> See William J. Duiker, *The rise of nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp.174–6; Bruce McFarland Lockhart, *The end of the Vietnamese monarchy*, Council on Southeast Asian Studies, Lạc Việt series, no.15 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), ch.5.

### Figure 2

“The return of the sophisticate” (Phong Hôa, 18 August 1932)

The caption read:

Mother: My dear son, while you've been away studying for four years overseas, your father has died. I've been alone here dreaming all the time of your return.

Son: Chère Maman, chère Maman, réjouis-toi, me voici arrivé.

Mother: Oh dear God! Has my son gone mad? Poor boy! This is your mother!



<sup>29</sup> Nhất Linh, *Đoạn tuyệt* [The breaking of ties] (Hanoi: NXB Đại Học Văn Giáo Dục Chuyên Nghiệp, 1988), p.190.

<sup>30</sup> See n.10.

<sup>31</sup> This is before the climax of the novel where a court finds that Loan only accidentally killed her boorish husband when, in the course of a quarrel, he fell on a paper-knife that she happened to have in her hand after slicing open the pages of a book. It may be added that the book is a symbol of exactly the kind of disruptive modern education that the colonial regime feared.

<sup>32</sup> This does not necessarily link Nhất Linh with the philosophic proponents of the French school of the absurd such as Jarry, because there is a complicated dichotomy in Gide's thinking between the 'authentic' and the 'absurd', which means that his absurd satires can be interpreted as a play on unauthentic living, the negation of his philosophy of the individual personality. In other words, it would also be misleading to ally Gide with the philosophical exponents of the French cult of the absurd.

In these works, torrid family crises precipitated by the desire of young, modern, educated women (and men) to avoid arranged marriages and to marry those they love usually result in the failure of the family to have its way. Yet Nhất Linh could also see that, in Vietnam's feudal society, the 'emancipated' young had nowhere to go. His liberated heroines and heroes of the mid 1930s thus drift around aimlessly, enlivened in a weak *Autumn Sun* (1934) or enclashed in unsatisfactory platonic relationships as in *The Breaking of Ties* (1934)<sup>29</sup> and *Indifference* (1937).<sup>30</sup> Lacking an effective ending as they do, what these novels all leave behind is, as I have indicated, a sense of restless movement tinged with intimations of 'death': "I cannot stop; I must move, always move on to find strange new scenes," says Dũng, the shadowy wanderer in *The Breaking of Ties*, who then narrowly avoids killing himself and his girlfriend, Loan, in a speeding car.<sup>31</sup>

Instead of the thin veil of happiness which is draped over the end of this tempestuous novel, it might also have been concluded with a chapter entitled "Not Dead Yet, But . . ." The reason why *The Breaking of Ties* was one of the most popular books of the decade, however, is the same reason why *Going to France* is the best-known modern Vietnamese travelogue: both works were rooted in a modern vision of society that encompasses the romance of individual freedom.

Here, Nhất Linh's interest in French literature, especially in the writing of André Gide with its humanist and often self-conscious commitment to the individual, is of importance. For instance, Nhất Linh's *Autumn Sun* is in some conspicuous ways a transposition into Vietnamese culture of Gide's *La Symphonie pastorale* (1919). Although it bears no superficial resemblance to *Going to France*, a work like *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914), Gide's satirical farce about a plot to kidnap the Pope, could only have helped to develop Nhất Linh's taste for the absurd.<sup>32</sup> But whatever the structural or thematic influence of French models, the transposition that takes place in Vietnamese is culturally specific. In a social novel like *The Breaking of Ties*, or even in a less independent work like *Autumn Sun*, ideas of individual freedom, though partly inspired by French writers, always play on a semantic field that is very remote from theirs.

In Nhất Linh's modern writing, individual freedom still means liberation from the ancient restrictions of Confucian family values. In the travel satire it still means liberation from poverty and backwardness. In both cases the mode of expression is ironic, because the semantic field is *still* so specific and the modernising impulse is *now* so strong. From this perspective, the strength of the modern Vietnamese romance, both serious and satirical, lies in its new capacity to contest, if not yet overcome, deeply entrenched ways of thinking about the ancient customs that buttressed the colonial regime.

## III

The Vietnamese term for 'satire', *trào phúng*, is not used in pre-modern texts and probably did not stabilise in modern usage until the 1920s and 1930s. When Nhất Linh became editor of *Customs* he associated the idea of *trào phúng* with "using laughter as a weapon" (*tiếng cười làm vũ khí*). He was also concerned to represent various kinds of 'special' Vietnamese humour: 'mischievous', 'refined', 'bitter', 'intelligently mocking'.<sup>33</sup> Such categories—and others, including 'coarse' and 'sarcastic', which did not suit Nhất Linh's educated taste—were clearly very old. But the twentieth-century construction of *trào phúng* suggests strongly that they were being reorganised and politically focussed in ways that were new.

One way to approach this change is to compare the declared method of Nhất Linh's satire with the declamation of a pre-modern comedy such as that at the end of *The Quarrel of the Six Beasts*, a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century work which uses animal allegory as a means of political comment.<sup>34</sup> The subtitle of *Going to France* describes it as a "Diary of a Journey Abroad (using laughter to cover the truth)," and the last lines of the allegory may be translated:

A tale at leisure is penned  
to confirm the facts of life.  
But still all this is said in jest—  
please read it if you wish, for fun and laughs.<sup>35</sup>

By declaiming and covering the truth, both works are attempting to soften their impact so as not to be too disturbing. But what is the difference? The difference is that while the 'truth' and 'the facts of life' are implicitly the same in the pre-modern declamation, they are implicitly separated in Nhất Linh's subtitle.

Notice how the pre-modern comedy confirms 'the facts of life' (*sự đời*) at the same time as it disclaims its tale of them. Because the real story is one of a brutal injustice it would be dangerous to tell, unless it were transformed into an allegory that, moreover, is told 'in jest'. We may say, therefore, that the comedy functions by disclaiming what it assumes and allegorically confirms: the essential truth of 'the facts of life'—which is close enough to saying 'customs'.

Meanwhile, Nhất Linh's satire says he is actually using humour *to cover* 'the truth' (*sự thực*). For him 'the truth' and 'the facts of life' are neither the embodiment of each other nor the same. Nor is 'the truth' something to be confirmed—at least by 'the facts of life'. This does not necessarily mean that Nhất Linh's satire differs from all pre-modern comedy in this way. Yet there is much evidence that by the 1920s and 1930s a certain separation of 'truth' and 'customs' coincided with a loss of confidence that was qualitatively different from anything Vietnamese writers had grappled with before.

<sup>33</sup> Tú Mỡ, *Kitchen*, pp.105, 106.

<sup>34</sup> See *Lục súc tranh công—The quarrel of the six beasts*, a bilingual edition introduced by Nguyễn Ngọc Huy, translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông, Lạc Việt Series, no.4 (Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1987). In this work the animals, who are generally thought to correspond with the six ministries in the old government, clash violently but then calm down and finally accept their lot. As the pig who has his flesh torn up at village feasts finally opines: "The Master thereupon decides the case, with utmost sense and sentiment" (pp.52–3).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.54–5. I have changed Huỳnh Sanh Thông's English translation.

<sup>36</sup> “Đèo Ba dôi” [The Ba Dôi Pass], and “Hang Cốc Cờ” [Cốc Cờ Grotto] are two such poems. Both offer vivid descriptions of geographical features, which strongly suggest erotic themes. They are somewhat like Browning’s “Meeting at Night,” which can be read simultaneously as a journey across a sea-scented beach and some fields or a description of sexual intercourse. However, Hồ Xuân Hương uses more vulgar language than Browning. For Hồ Xuân Hương’s poems and commentary see Nguyễn Lộc, *Hồ Xuân Hương: thơ* [Hồ Xuân Hương: poetry] (Hanoi: Trường Đại Học Tổng Hợp, 1986), pp.25, 31. There is arguably some irony in these. For a helpful French edition with Nôm texts see Maurice Durand, *L’oeuvre de la poétesse vietnamienne Hồ Xuân Hương* (Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1968).

<sup>37</sup> Phan Khôi, “Cái cười của con rồng cháu tiên: một cái cảm tưởng trong khi đọc *Cây dướng mùi dơ*” [The laughter of the dragon and the immortal: a thought while reading *The Bitterness of Life*], *Phụ nữ tân văn* [Women’s Journal] 84, 28 May 1931, pp.5–8.

<sup>38</sup> This claim was dealt with by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, in “Gì cũng cười” [Laughing at anything], *Đông dương tạp chí* [Indochina Review], which appeared in May 1913 and continued to 1918. The article appears in no.22 and is reprinted in Dương Quảng Hàm, *Việt Nam thi văn hợp tuyển* [Selected Vietnamese poetry and literature] (Hanoi, 1951), pp.185–6.

Sometimes, in novels like Nguyễn Dữ’s sixteenth-century *Collection of Supernatural Tales*, it is possible to find traces of sarcasm that may be touched with irony. Also, harsh parody and mocking laughter that involved political-communal criticism was certainly common in pre-modern folk literature, as it was in the poetry of a figure like Hồ Xuân Hương, the famous nineteenth-century court concubine. Yet a basic feature of this mockery is its directness, which suggests confidence that the institutions being mocked are stronger than the mocking scorn and that, therefore, the mockery will not rebound. This further suggests that the pre-modern mockers who lived in close proximity to their audiences could calculate the degree of tolerance permitted, and then declaim or use figural restraints so as not to be too disturbing—as I would argue Hồ Xuân Hương does. If this is so, then, it is reasonable to suggest that, even when it is making a pointed communal commentary, pre-modern mockery and laughter, and even theatre, can be conceived as a political device for the venting of spleen and the release of communal tensions—at the same time, of course, as entertaining.

In Hồ Xuân Hương’s case, the beauty of much of her less scandalous (erotic) works also conveys the sense that, for all its imperfections, life is not entirely black.<sup>36</sup> But because she offers no practical alternative to the objects of her ridicule, she in no way contests ‘the facts of life’. In any case, I have seen no evidence of anything like Nhất Linh’s ironic indirectness in pre-modern texts, which suggests profound, perplexing doubts about the very structure of the universe and, I think, points to a fundamental shift in the function of laughter in literature.

The works of many writers—possibly beginning with those of Trần Tế Xương (1870–1907)—could be taken to plot the change in humorous sensibility. But one whose work takes us to the heart of the matter is Phan Khôi. In 1931 he published an essay about laughter that was a common topic of discussion in colonial Vietnam.<sup>37</sup> Prompted to some extent by irritated French observations, many were asking why Vietnamese seemed to laugh at anything, no matter how grave or inappropriate the situation appeared to be, and what this might mean. Was it, as many claimed, because Vietnamese were such ‘gentle’ people?<sup>38</sup> Or was it, as others said, because laughter was the first thing to distinguish humans from animals?

Without bothering with the first proposition, Phan Khôi’s essay countered the second one by saying that if people laughed when it was inappropriate to do so, then this was the laughter of “ghosts and spirits,” and that, to this extent the animal–human distinction was diminished. The essay then focussed especially on how the writer Hồ Biểu Chánh (1885–1958) had dealt with laughter in *The Bitterness of Life* (1922), his tragic novel about an orphan boy. This work is partly modelled on Hector Mallot’s *Sans Famille* (in two volumes, 1915–17). However, the scenes from *The Bitterness of Life* to which Phan Khôi draws attention have no real parallel in the more sentimental French work.



These scenes include one where a doctor laughs his head off when he learns that the boy has no home; one where the boy and a friend clap their hands and laugh wildly to terrorise a pig; and one where the boy laughs loudly at the stuttering speech defects of his friend. After reviewing these scenes, Phan Khôi concluded that, yes, Vietnamese did laugh when it was inappropriate, but that, sadly, all this revealed was cruelty and stupidity and the low level of civilisation of the people. Of overriding importance in Phan Khôi's view, however, was another question about Hồ Biểu Chánh's descriptions of all the cruel laughter: were they "intentional or unintentional?"

Phan Khôi could not conclude that the descriptions were unintentional, because this would have assumed a virtually impossible lapse in literary convention and taste. He thus replied that Hồ Biểu Chánh's descriptions were "intentional," because, as a "realist writer," he was concerned to show what the lives of humble people were like. Reflected in both the question and the answer, therefore, is a clear awareness that as literature *intentionally* recorded the disturbing laughter of the masses, something new was happening. Basically, this laughter, which had always existed but had been sanctioned—in ways that Phan Khôi's essay mentions—was now being harnessed by modern literature. And for this to happen it is necessary to be aware that a large part of what made literature modern was its new capacity to represent an equal, wide view of what, from only around 1900, came to be called 'society' (*xã hội*).

Part of the tremendous importance of this new construction is that the writer's point of view can no longer be anchored securely in 'the facts of life' or in the 'customs' it viewed. Shaken by the conquest and the sense of historical contingency it generated, the old idea of family and village 'customs', which emphasised the hierarchical nature of human relationships within those relatively narrow communal categories, was itself in crisis. In fact, the crisis was such that a new notion of 'society' was now crystallising. This expanded social vision emphasised democratic, lateral linkages *between* people beyond the old communal categories.<sup>39</sup> It is one that produced new ideas of the 'individual', 'individual freedom', and much else, including free-floating points of view. Because of the resulting wide range of vision, my argument is, then, that the full force of absurdity and black farce could now be employed in writing. From around 1930 Vietnamese literature was ready for the emergence of 'satires', which probably reach their most brilliant, if bizarre, height in Vũ Trọng Phụng's novel, *A Fortunate Life* (1936).<sup>40</sup>

It does not require an analysis of this very black satire to sense the irony in its title. Moreover, it is important to note that, while Nhất Linh's *Going to France* was more elegantly bourgeois than Vũ Trọng Phụng's ruthless comedy about a low-class vagrant, the writing of both these important satirists shared a quality that was commonly found intermingled with irony at the time: acute self-consciousness.

<sup>39</sup> I will be dealing with this in another work.

<sup>40</sup> Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Số đũa* [A fortunate life] (1936; reprint ed., Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1988).

<sup>41</sup> Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and revolution in modern Vietnam* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p.79.

<sup>42</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the origins of the Vietnamese revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.173.

<sup>43</sup> Nhất Linh's idea of turning satire into a "weapon" was not unprecedented, in the sense that many of the old literati had sought to turn their writing brushes into 'weapons' as soon as the French invaded. But their project was one of defence and conservation. They did not mean to release laughter, especially that of the people, which was consciously used by Nhất Linh to foster modern political and social change.

<sup>44</sup> Marshall Berman, *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity* (New York, 1982; reprint ed., Penguin Books, 1988), p.157.

Individualism is, as Alexander Woodside suggests in his discussion of mandarin poetry clubs,<sup>41</sup> very old in Vietnamese literature. However, my sense of this kind of individualism is that, by contrast with the modern kind, it was more introspective. Ancient texts could circulate to some extent, but the mandarin poets primarily wrote for themselves, or for their fellows who were unlikely to challenge their authority. In modern times, writers such as those in Nhất Linh's Self-Reliance Literary Group continued to work in small clubs. However, the nature of these clubs had changed in at least one crucial respect: they no longer tended to provide the readers as well as the writers of the texts that that were produced by them. As modern printing and communication technology permitted the wide dissemination of texts, society as a whole provided the readership for their writings. As the writer's relationship with his readers underwent this social transformation it was inevitable that the writer's sense of himself was also bound to change.

As he sought to voice the mocking sentiments of the masses in his expanded view of society, the satirist as much as the serious writer was now forced to expose himself to the social change—and historical contingency—that produced the modern urban setting and its free-floating readership outside the club. In one way, this is the source of the freedom which permitted the 'self-expression' that modern radicals often found so exhilarating.<sup>42</sup> In other ways, however, it usually means that the writer no longer wrote for the state or for the sake of custom. This usually made him poor and confronted him with an impersonal audience whose responses he could not predict. Ripped from the cocoon of communal contemplation, the writer's self-consciousness was turned inside out by his wide vision and alien audience: it became *externalised* in the new social consciousness itself. Furthermore, as he now faced society or the world alone as an individual, his construction of it tended to become self-reflexive. As with Lãng Du, the world revealed him as much as he revealed it. In sum, he became an uncertain individual in an impersonal world, but one who now had the capacity to defend himself with irony, an essentially reflexive trope.

Nhất Linh's "truth" in *Going to France* could not, then, have been "the facts of life": it had to be an individual construction of them, one, in his case, of comic absurdity. Even more, his or Lãng Du's "truth" actually revolves around the dangerous denial of the customary "facts of life," and this is such a disturbing revolution that it had to be masked by the relatively dainty, but still potent, educated categories of "humour" he was concerned to use in *Customs*: "mischievous," "refined," "bitter," "intelligently mocking." Yet the irony here is that the defensive repertoire is also a revolutionary "weapon."<sup>43</sup> Nhất Linh's comic satire was, in Berman's words, about the modern slapstick of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, about the need to "mask the seriousness of the unmasking that is going on."<sup>44</sup>

Lãng Du's narrative of the wavy lines thus masks a deeply divided, ironic commitment to the 'miracles' of modern science and, by extension, to historical progress which perceives of the individual—or in other kinds of

modern texts, the ‘class’—as the main agent of change. As Lãng Du waves his girlfriend goodbye, he imagines he is on a mission to France which is “vital to the destiny of our country.” But he then finds that his dreams are deflated by the lonely experience and the unpredictable outcome of the voyage. Historical contingency and the externalised, self-reflexive consciousness of the individual are fused in the text, and this is what marks the fundamental shift in the position of laughter in literature: comic ‘satire’ itself is being conceived primarily as an agent of political and social change.

#### IV

As such, *Going to France* is a didactic, transforming text, and the question about it becomes one of the grip it has on the process of change. We will thus see how the use of comic irony in satire to educate people in the contradictions of colonial rule is what gives it a hold on the modern world. But, given the parochial pre-modernism and repressive press censorship of the colonial regime, it is first necessary to define the political context in which irony could effectively come into play.

Basically, because he has gone to France, Lãng Du is able to look back on the colony and see its feudal restrictions and poverty from the modern, international perspective of political and social change. Without being able for political reasons to define the liberal nationalism that is incipient in his view, Lãng Du is thus still able to formulate a range of modern social issues in terms that tend to undermine the feudal, colonial order: mainly those of progress and the universal “*mission civilisatrice*” which the regime so fulsomely espoused, but failed to realise. As I will stress, the transforming nature of the satire is then set in the ironic and, often, absurdist interplay of notions of universal “civilisation” (*văn minh*) and local ‘backwardness’ (*lạc hậu*).

However, as regards both the international influences at work in the satire and their political impact, it is also important to be aware of another element in Lãng Du’s international view: his humanism. Since the “*mission civilisatrice*” was a part of the modern humanist project, we must link Lãng Du’s irony to his underlying humanism. Only then is it possible to demonstrate fully his didactic play on the irony of what in Vietnam might be described as the backwardness of civilisation.

Quoting Northrop Frye, Hayden White says that “irony stresses the ‘human, all too human’ aspect of what was formerly seen as heroic, and the destructive aspect of all seemingly epic encounters.”<sup>45</sup> In these terms, Vietnamese humanism and irony are certainly well-matched in the ‘realistic’ sense of the darkness and self-doubt that overcomes a writer like Nhất Linh in the wake of the colonial conquest. As already indicated, it is most significant that he is not like Hồ Xuân Hương and the pre-modern mockers who present themselves as strong winners and who want with some degree of

<sup>45</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p.232.

<sup>46</sup> Phạm Văn Khoa, *Sác-li Sa-Plin* [Charlie Chaplin] (Hanoi: NXB Văn Hóa, 1984), p.108.

<sup>47</sup> Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Kỹ nghệ lấy Tây – Cơm thấy cơm có* [The business of marrying Westerners – servitude] (Hanoi: NXB Hanoi, 1989), p.134.

<sup>48</sup> Phạm Văn Khoa, *Charlie Chaplin*, p.108. Of course, Chaplin's influence in Vietnam does not end in the 1930s. His major films, "Modern times," "The great dictator," "City lights," were often shown in northern Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1986 the Youth Theatre Company (Nhà Hát Tuổi Trẻ) in Hanoi devised a mime for deaf children based on the blind girl flower-seller scene in "City lights." It is still being performed around the country today. Charlie Chaplin also makes frequent appearances in Vietnamese poetry. See for example "Hiều đút em," written in Saigon in 1989 and published in *Hợp Lưu* [Confluence] (Garden Grove, Calif.) 16:197. Part of the reason for Chaplin's continuing high prestige in Vietnam flows from his public support of the Viet Minh in the 1950s.

figurative restraint to fling scorn in the face of anyone who happens to be near. At least in the guise of Lãng Du he is much more diffident than this. His modern travels give him pleasure and so most of his laughter is genuinely light. Yet it also wavers under the weight of his alienation.

In Marseilles, he burns with self-consciousness as he tries to laugh about an incident in which he is chased down the street by an old French colonial. There is sadness in the slapstick episodes in the Botanical Gardens where Lãng Du learns of the death of a friend's wife. He is a prowler in the Paris Métro, looking at French girls to appease his hunger. He is equally a voyeur at the window of a bread shop, not long before he is deported from France. At such times the shabbiness of Lãng Du's behaviour can be rescued by his naivety, and sometimes his laughter is poignant. Generally, however, the quality of Lãng Du's humour is close to that of an important foreign influence on the development of comic satire in Vietnam.

In 1984, with no apparent reference to Nhất Linh's work, Phạm Văn Khoa, Charlie Chaplin's Vietnamese biographer, described Chaplin's world-famous film "City Lights" (1931) as imbued with "humanism," with "many poetic, comic, tragic, and romantic elements."<sup>46</sup> As it was, Charlie Chaplin's films were very popular in Vietnam; Vũ Trọng Phụng, for instance, who gave a chapter of one of his works the heading "The Light of the Capital," tells how he and his friends "split their sides" laughing at them.<sup>47</sup> I have no evidence that Nhất Linh did too. But incidents of comic slapstick in *Going to France*, such as where Lãng Du trains himself to be a tray-carrying waiter on an ocean liner, and where he jumps and gesticulates idiotically in the Singapore traffic, might easily have been scripted by Chaplin. Many Chaplin films have slapstick traffic scenes, and "City Lights" actually has a scene where a tray-carrying waiter falls, breaking all his dishes. Then, as Charlie walks dejectedly down a dark alley with the dazzle of electric lights all around, Chaplin prepares us for exactly the same metaphysical pitfalls as Lãng Du in Paris, the "ville de lumière": ones that disappear into absurd, ironic darkness at the unhappy end of *Going to France*. As Phạm Văn Khoa has also explained, "each ill-fated person, each victim on this earth, could equally see the shadow of his own image in 'City Lights'."<sup>48</sup>

With Chaplin-like empathy for the plight of the 'little man', Lãng Du is thus providing his readers with a sense that their experience of the modern world connects them with the "all too human" human race. His diffidence and self-deprecating antics give people a tragi-comic awareness of their own poverty, weakness, and humiliation. But it is the humanism of this awareness that also gives them an ironic sense of their own self-worth. In other words, as it makes people imagine the possibility of an alternative to the poverty and humiliation in which they live, the self-reflexive irony of Lãng Du's humanism undermines the authority of colonial culture.

To show how the humour in *Going to France* was integrated didactically with the wider agenda of the journal *Customs* and with the world at large, it may be noted that from November 1932, *Customs* also inaugurated a

“Joking Competition” which encouraged popular participation in the merriment by offering prizes for the best jokes. Thousands of readers submitted entries such as:

<sup>49</sup> *Phong Hoa*, 18 Nov. 1932, p.12; 25 Nov. 1932, p.6; 21 July 1933, p.18; 27 Mar. 1936, [n.p.].

Teacher: What is an example of a domestic animal?

Pupil: A dog.

Teacher: Another?

Pupil: Another dog?

...

Man in a barber's chair: Don't tell me more stories about murders and people hanging themselves; it makes my hair stand on end.

Barber: That's why I'm telling you.

...

A boy has fallen into a river and been saved by a passer-by.

Boy's father (rushing up to the man who had saved his son): Were you the one who saved my son?

Man: Yes, that's right.

Boy's father (glaring at the man): Well what are you waiting for? Why don't you jump back in and get his hat as well?

...

An American millionaire is strolling past a shop with his private secretary, when he notices a beautiful sales-girl in the shop and immediately goes into it.

Millionaire: Can I buy a kiss?

Sales-girl (startled, but still smiling and composed): Yes Sir, it'll cost 1,000 francs.

Millionaire: OK, here's the money. Now let me have the goods.

Sales-girl (turning to an ugly old woman with a pock-marked face): OK, give him the goods.

Millionaire (calmly turning to his secretary): Come here and collect the goods.

...

A joke entitled “Mutual Help,” about two men on a train:

A: Damn it! I've got my cigarettes, but I've forgotten my matches.

B: That's great! I've got matches, but I've left my cigarettes at home. We can help each other out on this trip.

...

First thief: You've just stolen a very nice hat.

Second thief: No, I bought it for two piastres.

First thief: Where did you get the two piastres?

Second thief: I stole them.<sup>49</sup>

While Nhất Linh was aware of Gide's satiric farces, the French school of the absurd, *Le Rire*, and Charlie Chaplin films as he edited *Customs*, we know that French *Fou Rire* comedy records were also reasonably well-known in

**Figure 3**

"Xã Xê: Hey Lý, what are those signs on the wall?  
 Lý Toét (knowingly): They're French parallel sentences."  
 (Phong Hóa, 8 August 1936)



<sup>50</sup> See *Phong Hóa*, 31 Jan. 1936, p.7, and 29 May 1936, p.4, for some pointed examples of this. The term *oái oăm*, which was commonly used, can be rendered as 'to be complicated', 'intricate', 'strange', 'cruel', 'ironical'. *Mĩa mai*, which was also used, can be rendered as 'to ridicule', 'to be bitter', 'sarcastic', 'ironical'. For an example of the use of the term 'ironical' (*mĩa mai*) in *Going to France* see the joke Lãng Du makes in Colombo about the statue of the reclining white Buddha.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, a very clever joke entitled "Tứ Tử" [Four Sons] in *Phong Hóa* 8 (Aug. 1932), p.5.

<sup>52</sup> I am not aware that it features in the literature on Chaplin himself either, although there is such a mass of work on Chaplin it may well do so.

Vietnamese towns and cities. In any case, we have come to the important point about the grip that a satire like Lãng Du's had on modern political and social change. By encouraging laughter through publishing their own jokes and humorous stories, journalists at *Customs* were consciously educating people in the new concept of 'irony'.<sup>50</sup> And this education could not be divorced from either the presence of the colonial regime or its corruption.

Many jokes in *Going to France* about modern 'civilisation' resonate with other examples published in the pages of *Customs* where irony relates Vietnamese 'backwardness' to colonial (mal)administration. In both the travelogue and the journal, many jokes show that slow public clocks and trains,<sup>51</sup> unhygienic living conditions, and even 'cannibalism' were common sources of humour. There was also widespread comic interest in the question of where people with no toilets were supposed to urinate and defecate in the hygienic modern world. An excellent example of such irony may then be focussed in the image of 'Lý Toét', a highly popular *Customs* cartoon character whom Lãng Du mentions in passing in *Going to France*.

The reference is a relatively simple one in which Lãng Du compares himself to the *Customs* cartoon character of a scrawny peasant who, around November 1932, comes to

town armed with a modern umbrella (from which he sometimes hangs his shoes to save the leather on them). But Vietnamese readers would also have known that before long Lý Toét had a rotund offside in *Customs* cartoons. This was Xã Xê, the butt of many slapstick jokes. Furthermore, they would have known that the models for Lý Toét and Xã Xê, who became central symbols of urban humour for the next thirty years, were Laurel and Hardy. A clever cartoon of 1936, which plays on the emptiness of recurring colonial hygiene-office campaigns to improve local conditions, is thus based on the transposition of these international comic characters into Vietnamese colonial culture (see Figure 3).

In the cartoon, Xã Xê asks Lý Toét what the signs are on a wall in front of them. Blithely assuming that French culture is just like Vietnamese, Lý Toét replies that they are "French parallel sentences." Since Vietnamese parallel sentences were usually displayed on festive occasions and bore auspicious messages in Chinese characters, the array of ironic switches which the cartoon makes shows how absurdly off-beam Lý Toét is—even as he highlights a central issue. The left-hand sign prohibits the posting of signs on the wall, thereby contradicting itself; the other prohibits urinating against the wall, thereby offering a gloss on the absurdity of official regulations as they apply to backward Vietnamese conditions where sanitation was unusual. This was all the more telling as the reader of the cartoon realises something

the uneducated Lý Toét and Xâ Xê do not: that the Vietnamese translations of the French signs are round the wrong way!

As attitudes to colonial rule were being moulded in Lý Toét's image, it is clear that the notions of 'civilisation' and 'backwardness' are interdependent in the colonial discourse. However, the key point for satire is that it is this interdependence which produces the ironic, absurdist view, because of what might be described as the suppressed development the jokes highlight. The command that a *Customs*-style education gave 'ordinary people' of the universal language of 'civilisation' and the local one of 'backwardness' thus suggests the need for radical change in the irony that is set up in the interplay of the two.

By way of further example, this was never more so than when, for a few days in 1936, Charlie Chaplin actually visited Vietnam. To my knowledge, Chaplin's visit to Hanoi and Saigon during one of his trips to the Far East in April 1936 is not so far registered in Western writing on Vietnam.<sup>52</sup> There seems to be no record of his reception in Saigon. But in Hanoi, where he stayed for a few days, cheering crowds gathered to watch him have a drink at the Taverne Royale: "There's Charlie!," "There's Charlie!," cried many, while others commented on how different he looked from his image on the screen. But *Customs* knew its man, (even though it was not aware of the troubles that Chaplin's proletarian sympathies had so recently caused him in America). It celebrated the occasion with the publication of a front-page cartoon. Tú Mỡ produced a poem, "Charlie, King of Clowns," and Nhất Linh's younger brother, Thạch Lam, rushed to the Metropolitan Hotel to interview him for the paper.<sup>53</sup>

Like Uzbek in Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1758), Charlie appears in the cartoon (see Figure 4) to show how irrational local customs seem to a total outsider. What is also striking about the drawing is its (Montesquieu-like) representation of different points of view. The joke about "cannibalism"—similar to one in *Going to France*—thus offers a modern perspective of the ancient custom of holding funeral feasts which produces self-conscious associations of poverty and barbarism.<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, Thạch Lam's interview used Chaplin's film "Modern Times" (1936)—in which Charlie is a nut-tightener in a factory—to make a droll comment on another concern among Vietnamese that under colonialism they had become "slaves to machines." It also took Chaplin's recent marriage to Paulette Goddard in China as an opportunity to make some silly jokes about the modern problem of romantic love. However, the interview did not get off to a good start. As Thạch Lam wrote:

There was only one problem: Chaplin was an Englishman and did not know French, while our journalists could only speak French, and did not know English. This was troublesome.

<sup>53</sup> The cartoon and interview are in *Phong Hóa*, 1 May 1936, front page and pp.7-8. The poem and another report by Thạch Lam appeared the following week on 8 May 1936, pp.3, 8.

<sup>54</sup> At the same time, it may have been originally suggested by Chaplin's film "Gold Rush" (1925), because Chaplin had a story of cannibalism in the Sierra Nevada in mind when he made the film, and represented it in scenes where the starving gold-diggers, Charlie and Jim, cook a boot and eat it. At one point Charlie also puts his foot in the oven. At another, Charlie hallucinates and sees Jim as a huge chicken. It is difficult to say what came first—Charlie's boot supper or the Vietnamese cannibal jokes, at least those of the 1930s. But it does not matter; the two are perfectly matched. See John McCabe, *Charlie Chaplin* (London: Robson, 1978), pp.144, 147.

#### Figure 4

"In the eyes of tourist Charlie" (*Phong Hóa*, 1 May 1936). The caption reads:

Guide: The village chief has just died. Everyone has come along for the funeral feast.

Charlie (astonished): Are they cannibals?



<sup>55</sup> *Phong Hóa*, 8 May 1936, p.8.

<sup>56</sup> Phạm Văn Khoa, *Charlie Chaplin*, pp. 133–4.

There was only one way: force Charlie to study French. But after seeing that this method was taking too long, our journalists came up with another answer: bring in an interpreter. This is probably the first time Charlie has been interviewed like that.<sup>55</sup>

But the joke did not end there. As Phạm Văn Khoa recounted it in 1984, it was not easy to find an English interpreter in Hanoi in 1936. Eventually, someone found an urbane, well-dressed-looking “professor” who was said to be Chinese. But now a new problem arose: Chaplin could not understand the fellow’s English. This difficulty was finally overcome when Paulette Goddard told him not to worry: she could speak French. But after the interview, the “professor’s” prestige still rode high in Hanoi, as advertisements for his English school appeared in the papers: “Understand quickly! Exact pronunciation!”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Phạm Quỳnh, *Three months in Paris*. See also idem, “Diary of a journey to France,” because it is clear that Nhất Linh had this work in mind when he wrote at least the section on Djibouti in *Going to France*.

<sup>58</sup> Phạm Quỳnh, *Three months in Paris*, p.9.

## V

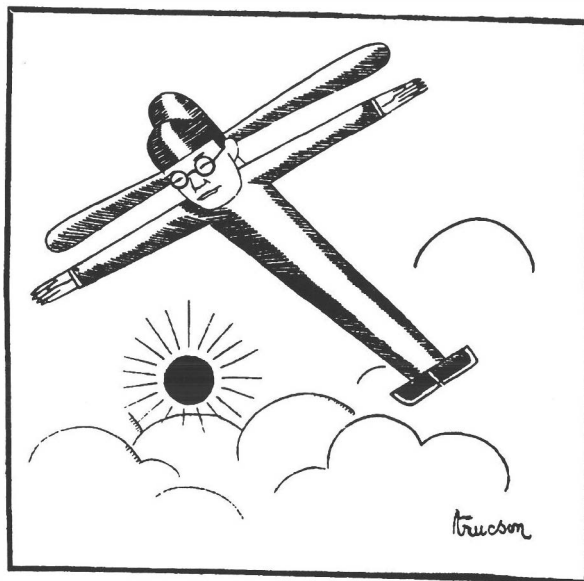
Not long after Nhất Linh transformed *Customs* in 1932, Phạm Quỳnh, Bảo Đại’s Chief of Cabinet and Minister of Education, keen to neutralise the journal’s potentially disruptive influence, offered Nhất Linh the head-

mastership of a prestigious school in Huế. This did not work and, what is more, Phạm Quỳnh and other members of the mandarin class were singled out by *Customs* cartoonists on many occasions (see Figure 5). Partly as a result of this, publication of the journal was forcibly suspended as a warning for a few months in early 1935. Then, just after it reappeared, the May issue of *Customs* announced that *Going to France* would soon be serialised in its pages. When the story first appeared in August it was clear that Nhất Linh had two works of Phạm Quỳnh’s in mind when he wrote the first instalment. These were Phạm Quỳnh’s quite well-known travel notes, “Diary of a Journey to France” (1922), and, based on these notes, his more considered travelogue, *Three Months in Paris* (1927).<sup>57</sup>

Dedicated to the proposition that Paris was “the brain of the civilised world,”<sup>58</sup> these writings offered an account of a trip which Phạm Quỳnh made in 1922 at a time when the French were eager to restore their prestige in the colonies after the shattering experience of World War I. Phạm Quỳnh noted in his 1927 publication that when he initially propagandised the trip at a well-attended lecture at the Hanoi Opera House on 15 October 1922, he had used a French saying as an opening gambit: “After returning from afar, one is free to boast.” Nhất Linh took this quotation out of context from the 1927 publication and

### Figure 5

The cartoon depicts Phạm Quỳnh in the ‘dragonfly bar’ of a big mandarin and in the form of an aeroplane. The Vietnamese caption reads: “An aeroplane with four wings that holds the speed record for flying from Hanoi to Hue.” The imperial court was in Hue, and so the caption implies that Phạm Quỳnh is the court’s trusted informer on literary affairs in Hanoi (*Phong Hóa*, 1 November 1935)





attributed it directly to Phạm Quỳnh in *Going to France*,<sup>59</sup> thus using a barbed irony unintended by Phạm Quỳnh. Since Phạm Quỳnh's writings presented a highbrow account of French culture, which could not have been more remote from Lãng Du's, it was possible to read *Going to France* as a parody of them.

Although the subtitle of Lãng Du's work, *Diary of a Journey Abroad (using laughter to cover the truth)*, strongly suggests that it was a parody of imperial culture, direct evidence that Nhất Linh had Phạm Quỳnh's *Diary* of 1922 and travelogue of 1927 specifically in mind does not extend much beyond the opening remark referred to in the above. However, neither the status of *Going to France* as a parody of Phạm Quỳnh's official travel-writing, nor the political significance of it, necessarily stands on a conscious construction. What is most interesting and important about the relationship between the texts of the two authors is that, while each was well aware of the other's work, their texts represent opposite poles in the colonial discourse of 'civilisation' and 'backwardness'. With no references to French art, Rodin's nudes, architecture, Napoleon's tomb—or to President Gambetta's pickled heart in the Pantheon—it is quite possible that Lãng Du's story actually irritated Phạm Quỳnh, as it consistently presented images that countered his own. But even if Phạm Quỳnh was not sensitive to the irony of this opposition, the wider political point was that the opposition existed—in the colonial culture.

As indicated earlier, this is best demonstrated in an intertextual reading, such as the one I have developed in the commentary to the translation. What I want to show in this commentary, which runs as a second text along the side, is how Lãng Du's text can be read within a linear series of other texts whose political implications are either sympathetically interwoven or antagonistically interlocked with it. Indeed, an intertextual reading of the two authors will show what a separate reading of their texts cannot: that they are structurally, if not consciously, interconnected in relationship to the contradictions of the culture.

Certain historical events also confirm this. As *Customs'* cartoons and articles continued to lampoon important people, Nhất Linh was well aware that official vexation with all the laughter might erupt at any time. Thus in 1935 he founded *Ngày Nay* (Today), a gentle journal partly modelled on *Paris Match*, and ran it in side by side with *Customs* for a few months so that the Self Reliance Literary Group would have a fall-back position if *Customs* were suddenly closed down. Because of its high running costs, *Today* had soon to suspend its own operations. However, the initiative had been a wise one, because it was not difficult to revive when, in June 1936, *Customs* was, as Nhất Linh's French Secret Police dossier of 1947 puts it, "*définitivement interdite*."<sup>60</sup> It is generally explained that the immediate cause for the closure was an article in which Hoàng Đạo sharply ridiculed the mandarin, and this could well be true. But it is also worth remembering that as *Customs* was such an effective agent of a modern national, social transformation, its closure occurred about six weeks after the last instalment of Nhất Linh's *Going to France*.

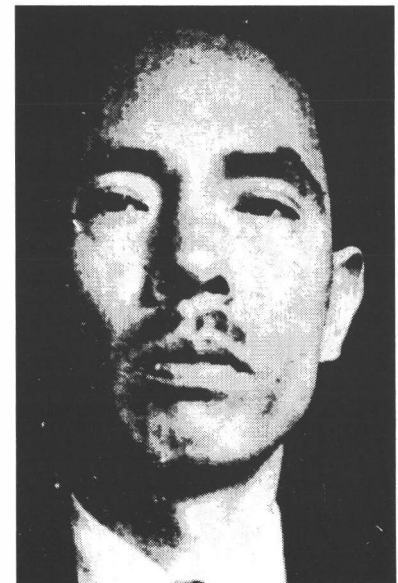
<sup>59</sup> The saying appears in *ibid.*, p.5. Nhất Linh's quotation is given just below the title in the first instalment of *Going to France*.

<sup>60</sup> Haute Commissaire de France pour L'IC, Dr. de la police et de la Sur, Saigon, le 5 Juin 1947, no 64/60/sg1, Note à M. HC, CP, BD et CD, Saigon. *Archives Nationales de France, Section Outre Mer*, Paris. Conseiller Politique, Carton 23, Dossier: Partis politiques annamites: VNQDD. It is not clear if the French police kept a dossier on Nhất Linh in the 1930s, but because of his prominence and the French interest in anything 'unconventional' it is virtually certain that earlier police sources feed this 1947 one.

<sup>61</sup> Nhật Thịnh, *Portrait*, p.41; Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p.158. Tú Mỡ, *Kitchen*, p.73, seems to mix political events surrounding the closure in 1936 with some that actually took place in 1939.

### Figure 6

*Nhất Linh at the age of about forty (note his Charlie Chaplin cum Adolph Hitler-style moustache)*



<sup>62</sup> *Đôi bạn, Hai buổi chiều vàng, Bướm trắng.*

<sup>63</sup> See n.60.

<sup>64</sup> *Giòng sông Thanh Thủy.*

<sup>65</sup> *Time Magazine*, 19 July 1963, pp.32–3; *Newsweek*, July 22, 1963, pp.43–4. For an account of events surrounding the suicide see Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, p.242.

### Figure 7

Extract from the article that appeared in *Time Magazine* on 19 July 1963 (reprinted with permission)

## SOUTH VIET NAM

### Suicide in Many Forms

A South Vietnamese novelist and politician named Nguyen Tuong Tam sent his sons out to buy a bottle of whisky one night last week. For a while he sat drinking with them at his home in Saigon. "My sons, I feel very happy tonight," he said. "I am going to die very soon." Suddenly he keeled over, was rushed to a hospital where he died next morning. In his glass was found a lethal dose of cyanide.

Novelist Tam, 58, was a revolutionary leader in Indo-China's war against the French. But after independence in 1954, he grew increasingly disenchanted with the authoritarian rule of South Viet Nam's President Ngo Dinh Diem. Fortnight ago, Diem's government charged Tam and 34 others with treason by conspiring to overthrow the President in an abortive coup attempt in November 1960. It was just two days before the scheduled trial that Tam committed suicide, and he explained why in a note he left behind. "The arrest and trial of all nationalist opponents of the regime is a crime that will force the nation into the hands of the Communists," he wrote. "I oppose this crime, and I kill myself as a warning to those people who are trampling on our freedoms."

**Dragging Feet.** Diem's government moved quickly to head off demonstrations over Tam's death, posthumously acquitted him of all conspiracy charges at the Saigon treason trial. At the same [...]

## Postscript

In the late 1930s Nhất Linh went on editing *Today* and began to drink whisky to stave off a creeping opium addiction. He wrote more novels: *Two Friends* (1937), *Two Golden Afternoons* (1937), and *White Butterfly* (1939).<sup>62</sup> At least the first of these suggests a degree of resolution that was absent from his earlier works, and this may be seen to prefigure his involvement in nationalist politics during and just after the Second World War. His taste for dressing up like Adolph Hitler in the early 1940s may be seen to do this too.

His Secret Police dossier of 1947 is a clumsy document, which contains errors and unconfirmed assertions.<sup>63</sup> But it does note accurately that on one of his political missions to China, before the August 1945 Revolution, Nhất Linh "accompanied Hồ Chí Minh" to Kunming earlier the same year. He later served for several months in 1946 as foreign minister in Hồ Chí Minh's united front government. However, he broke with the communists just before he was scheduled to lead a Việt Minh diplomatic delegation to France, and left again for China.

Still with no sympathy for the French colonialists, he sat out much of the 1946–54 Franco-Vietnamese war in Hanoi, reissuing the 1930s novels of the Self Reliance Literary Group. In 1954 he went south to live largely in isolation and grow orchids on the banks of the Đa Me river at Dalat. He continued to write, producing, among other things, a three-volume *roman à fleuve* based on his revolutionary activities along the Sino-Vietnamese border in 1945: *Along the Thanh Thủy River* (1961).<sup>64</sup> It contains quite a lot about spies. In the early 1960s he became involved in a failed coup against Ngô Đình Diệm in Saigon. This was because he thought Diệm's repression of political activities would lead to a communist victory.

Then, before being brought to court for his role in the coup, he drank a strong admixture of whisky and veronal and took his own life on Sunday 7 July 1963. Thousands in Saigon knew of his suicide within two days, even though no newspaper dared to run the story. His children rushed copies of his suicide note to American journalists in the city, and extracts of it soon appeared in *Time* and *Newsweek*: "I kill myself as a warning to those people who are trampling on our freedoms."<sup>65</sup> (See Figure 7.)

## Note on the Translation and Original Texts

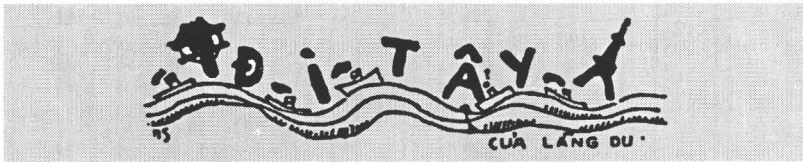
The following translation has been made very largely from the original version serialised in the weekly *Phong Hóa* (Customs) held in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and on a microfilm copy in the Menzies Library, Australian National University. The series containing *Going to France* runs from *Phong Hóa* no.151 (31 August 1935) to no.180 (27 March 1936). However, there is a gap in the series in early 1936: nos 171 to 176 (17 January–28 February) are missing. To fill this gap the translation has been made from the 1981(?) *Sống Mới* edition.

One other gap exists, because the last two episodes which appear in the *Sống Mới* edition are also missing from the original *Phong Hóa* text. These are the episodes which tell of Lãng Du's deportation from France and his unhappy return home. It is therefore possible that they were censored and only published in later editions, especially since this was getting close to the time *Phong Hóa* was closed down in June 1936. However, it may just be that the available *Phong Hóa* series is incomplete. If so, the last two instalments which appear in the *Sống Mới* edition would originally have appeared in April, as the Introduction states above.

In any case, twenty-three of the seeming thirty-one original episodes are available, and so it has been generally possible to compare the original *Phong Hóa* and the later *Sống Mới* editions. This later version sometimes provides variant readings, and in some cases these variants have been followed here when they represent clear editorial improvements on the original text, which Nhất Linh wrote under the constraints of deadlines. In addition, while aiming for accuracy in the translation, we have nevertheless edited out some three per cent of the original text, so as, in our view, to enhance rather than unnecessarily detract from its readability. Omissions are marked by three ellipsis points in square brackets: [...]. Original line drawings that accompanied the instalments are reproduced in the corresponding place in the translation.

Greg Lockhart

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## GOING TO FRANCE

### —Diary of a journey abroad (using laughter to cover the truth)

After returning from afar, one is free to boast

—*Phạm Quỳnh*

It is only when we've gone that we know it

—*The very deep thought of Lãng Du, the main character in this story*

## I. BEFORE MY DEPARTURE

### *Waiting*

I had sought official permission to go abroad for over three months, but had still not received a reply. I spent my days pacing around the house, bored and frustrated. Every five minutes I would look out the window and watch the street vendors passing by. I chanted: “The country awaits the heel of the wanderer.”\*

\* Lãng Du's chant is the fifth line of a poem by the prominent romantic poet, Thế Lữ, entitled “Moments of stirred emotion” [*Giây phút chạnh lòng*]. The poem was dedicated to Nhất Linh as author of *The breaking of ties* (1934), and the poet uses the term ‘lãng du’ to convey the idea of the ‘wanderer’. Beginning with a line that may be translated “You go your way, and I’ll go mine,” its evocation of parting and what might remain after it is moving and yet so lightly suspended in the upheaval of the times that it fades with fitting romance into the naïve, Chaplinesque style of Lãng Du’s comic preparations for his voyage across the waves to France.

I went on chanting this line until a friend of mine told me with gentle sarcasm that the poet, *Thế Lữ*, hadn't written it yet. This made me shut up and recite no more.

\* Other props which *Lãng Du* uses to get his story going are the modern ideas of the 'boy' and the 'girlfriend'. Although of a different order, both these constructs surfaced in the rapid social change that followed the conquest of Vietnam. The 'boy' emerged as a member of a new servant class which early French administrators needed for a range of domestic, interpreting, and other tasks. The 'girlfriend' was a sign that, in the new society, it was possible for young men and women to be friends and not only husbands and wives as before.



### *Practising to be a Waiter*

After that I had a great idea: I would apply to work as a boy on board a ship. Being a boy certainly wouldn't be difficult, and, rather than losing money on the fare, I would make some as I worked my passage to France. Therefore, I told my girlfriend to lend me a brass tray and two glasses so that I could train myself to become a waiter.\*

I put two glasses full of water on the tray and ran around the house with it from dawn to dusk, imagining that I was serving on an ocean liner. From time to time, I tilted the tray as though I were standing on a ship that was rolling on the waves. After practising for a few days, not only was I far from expert, I also had to drink the water to quench my thirst. Then, I discovered that waiters never serve passengers fresh water, and immediately told my girlfriend to make two glasses of iced coffee so that my practice would be more authentic.

But my taste for iced coffee only made me more thirsty and, from then on, I had to carry four glasses.

Finding that I also got sick of coffee, I soon replaced it with wine. An advantage of using wine was that many times I felt myself swaying as though the ship was in a storm, and this had the additional virtue of preparing me to deal later with sea sickness.

I have said that by becoming a 'boy' I would not lose money on the passage. However, given that my method of training had already cost me some money, it was not long before I realised that I would soon spend all I had saved for my trip to France. Consequently, I gave up all hope of becoming a 'boy': it was all a matter of destiny; but so too, from that time, was the fact that I took a liking to drink.

### *A Lucky Scheme*

Meanwhile, I had sent ten travel applications to the authorities, but hadn't received a word in reply.† I thought that was possibly because I had said in my applications that I wanted to go to France to absorb Western culture—to study the miracles of French science, and to research astronomy, geography and philosophy. Perhaps, they thought I was a boastful, mixed-up sort of fellow. Then, one day, my girlfriend asked me to go and have a photograph taken for a souvenir, and I had an idea.

I filled in an application form and addressed it to the Province Chief, rather than to the *Résident Supérieur* as before. I put on a set of Vietnamese clothes and a white hat and, carrying the application form, I went to the provincial administrative building. I entered the secretary's office obsequiously and said that I sought permission to go to France.

† *Lãng Du* was aware that not all departures were as difficult as his. As indicated in the Introduction, he had read *Phạm Quỳnh's* accounts of the imperial mission he made to France in 1922. If the comic complications of *Lãng Du's* account of his departure are thus read in tandem with the comforting assurances of *Phạm Quỳnh's*, we begin to see that *Lãng Du's* text can be fruitfully interpreted as a parody of the imperial view of the kind projected by *Phạm Quỳnh*. Although it is complicated in certain ways, *Phạm Quỳnh's* account is prosaic and seriously content that, in the reign of "Great France," the only documents needed to visit the imperial heartland were "a passport," "a travel requisition," and "an identity card," and "that was all" (*NP* 58, p.254).

I attempted to speak rough pidgin French. The Province Chief looked at me as if he were thinking of a French saying: “*My dear Sir*, you want to go to France, but you speak French like a Spanish cow.”

I went on: “I would like to go to France to study photography.”

The Province Chief emitted one sound: “A!”

This meant he was probably thinking: “That sounds OK.”

He asked: “But why must you go all the way to France to study photography?”

I gave a risky reply: “Sir, because the majority of my customers are French, I thought I should go to France to study and fully acquaint myself with the trade.”

This made no sense at all. But the Province Chief listened to what I said, and immediately signed the necessary papers for me to go. After practicing to be a ‘boy’, it now turned out that I had suddenly become a real photographer.<sup>‡</sup>

### *The Farewell Party*

With approval to go to France, a sad parting was now unavoidable.<sup>§</sup> Such partings are usually celebrated with parties to drown our sorrows, and this immediately made me move on two fronts: I wrote a note to my girlfriend, and I went out and bought four bottles of champagne. So, that day we drank champagne and swallowed our tears, although we drank more than we swallowed. Little by little we finished the first bottle.

My girlfriend (who has a great capacity for alcohol) sobbed: “The more I cry, the more I want to drink champagne.”

I said: “Me too.”

So we cried together as we finished the second bottle.

I looked up at the cupboard to where two unopened bottles stood, and felt a little worried. I said suavely: “Perhaps we shouldn’t make ourselves any sadder; sadness is very damaging.”

My girlfriend put her finger to her lips and, as if suddenly woken from a dream, burst out: “How about not going to France. What’s the use of going?”

“You might be right.”

My girlfriend laughed: “You staying here, that really would be something for me to celebrate! Let me drink some more to celebrate the fact that you are staying.”

We finished the third bottle.

But once we had drunk the third bottle, I realised that I wouldn’t be able to stay. I would have to go whatever happened. I had obtained permission, all my friends had heard the news that I was going; there was no way I could change my mind now. My girlfriend knew this too. Our happiness turned to sadness. She began to cry again, and the fourth bottle was drained like the three before it.

With the four bottles finished we felt that our sadness had temporarily subsided.

<sup>‡</sup> Whatever the difficulties of the departure, Lãng Du’s quest for a modern career was nothing new. As early as 1865 students from Cochinchina had been studying at Catholic schools in southern France. From 1900 many others had gone abroad to seek modern knowledge in France, China, Japan, and, later, the Soviet Union. Like Lãng Du, the most famous of these émigrés, Hồ Chí Minh, had worked in photography too. Also, 1927 was a good year for Nhất Linh to go to France. For decades, French colonial policy regarding student trips to the metropole had shifted erratically between fostering pride in French culture and fear of the disruptive consequences of over-educating the natives. But as a flush of national pride informed policy in the period between 1925 and 1930, the main restrictions on students travelling to France were that they should have a suitable education and a rich family to pay the expenses. These naturally excluded most people, but, then again, Nhất Linh, whose family was not rich, received a scholarship to go. On Vietnamese students in France see Scott McConnell, *Leftward journey: the education of Vietnamese students in France, 1919–1939* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989).

<sup>§</sup> The ‘farewell’ clearly had a pointed literary significance in Vietnam’s unsettled colonial social history. At the same time, those privileged middle-class sons who never left home often emerge from novels of the time as dissolute rakes who hang around dimly lit champagne parties. Nhất Linh knew this life well, and always liked to parody what sickened him most. It might also be mentioned here that when he left, Phạm Quỳnh had a “very happy” farewell party at the Haiphong Hotel de la Marine, which was conducted more in the old-fashioned style with ‘singing girls’ rather than ‘girlfriends’ present.

\* Besides the farewells, dance halls, night-clubs, and hotels such as the Mikado in Hanoi and the Splendid at Haiphong, were another sign of emerging modernity. This was even connected with a little tourism, as Nguyễn Bá Chính's first modern Vietnamese *Guide to Hanoi* of 1923 indicated in its descriptions of hotels and scenic places. So too did the rise of the 'suitcase' as a conspicuous literary motif by the 1930s. In 1941, Nguyễn Tuân even published a story called "The new suitcase" (Cái va-ly mới), which confirms the importance of this middle-class possession. At the same time, however, that story conveys deep inklings of the restless movements of the age, ones that, though not explicit in the narrative, were mostly generated by the migration of poor people who carried miserable bundles to the south, a shifting population of landless peasants who slept on the side of the road, itinerant semi-slave-labour gangs who built railways and roads and worked plantations till they dropped. In fact, the rise of the suitcase as an emblem of the middle-class was dependent on all this modern movement.



† Just as the 'suitcase' and the 'girlfriend' became romantic institutions in the novels of the 1920s and 1930s, so too did a number of pleasant places where lovers met. The Cổ Ngự Road and the beach at Đồ Sơn were two of these. However, the one where Lãng Du chose to say goodbye to his girlfriend, the Thiên Lô Road, had a reputation for being the most deserted road in Haiphong, at least after Thế Lữ popularised it in his book *Along the Thiên Lô Road*. With the soft sheen of French impressionist painting in the background, one can imagine the falling leaves. Since Thế Lữ's book was published in 1936, Nhất Linh must have read an earlier version, unless he was instrumental in popularising the romantic advantages of this avenue too.

## *The Ship Weighs Anchor*

After drinking the champagne bottles dry and shedding all our tears, I was resolved to say goodbye to my girlfriend so that I could devote myself to my other friends. For three days I went out with them everywhere, from Khâm Thiên to Đông Hưng Viên, then from Đông Hưng Viên to the Splendid Hotel.\* If my trip to France was going to be anything like that round of merry-making, it would be very easy to take. Sadly, the day had come when I had to go down to Haiphong to catch the ship, and a big crowd of friends came to see me off. My girlfriend and I had to escape from them by sitting in the Haiphong Zoo and wandering along the deserted Thiên Lô road where we cried one last time to our hearts' content.†

At 4 pm the ship pulled in the gangplank and weighed anchor. White handkerchiefs fluttered in the breeze. I imagined that I was an envoy going to France with petitions to the French Government that were vital to the destiny of our country. Before I could adopt a less haughty persona, I had to remind myself that I was a simple tradesman going to France to study photography.

As the ship gradually pulled away from the wharf, I forgot all about my friends and fixed my eyes on my girlfriend who was standing there gazing back at me. As the ship moved farther away, she became smaller and smaller, until she looked no larger than a child, a vase, a cake, and then completely vanished. When I could no longer see her, I began to feel hungry.

## *Dejection*

Of course, I was travelling 'deck class', and this was not what I imagined.‡ On an ocean liner, the area that doesn't have cabins, dining rooms, and lounges is the deck. Travelling on deck means travelling with the sky above your head and wood beneath your feet. The sky is the curtain, and a deck chair the sleeping mat. To forget my cares and wait for dinner time, I pulled up a deck chair and watched the clouds that trailed across the sky. Really, those who travelled 'deck class' also had cabins and bunks, but it would have been better to jump into the ocean than go down to them. Feeling thirsty, I went to a water pump and, putting my mouth beneath the spout, gulped

‡ After the farewell, the departure was probably never as one imagined it would be. When he left in a troop-ship for France in 1917, Corporal Nguyễn Văn Ba, the fictional author of a well-known collection of semi-fictional war letters, described how "perhaps a thousand men" were crammed into a steel ship where each had a bunk and bedding that was "full of bugs and fleas." There were two meals of beef and rice each day, and frequent complaints about how the French cooks did the rice! [Jean Marquet, *Lettres d'Annamites* (Hanoi, 1929), pp. 12–13].

/After his farewell party with singing girls in 1922, Phạm Quỳnh, although a mandarin, travelled with three people who had come from Hong Kong and two missionaries in a second-class cabin with six bunks. This was on the *Armand Bêbic*, a middle-range Messageries Maritimes vessel that, though not entirely satisfactory, was still not "small and narrow like many other ships" [NP58, p.254]. As Lãng Du's story about travelling on deck suggests how bad it was below, his accommodation was probably somewhere between the two.

down some fresh water. That reminded me of the flood of tears I shed with my girlfriend a few nights before, and the four bottles of champagne. I chanted: "Alas, the glorious times are over."

At dinner time, I went down to the galley, and, after asking for a plate and some food, I sat in a corner. There I counted the pieces of grit in the rice as I ate it, and I felt anew the bitterness of that chant as I forced my way through the beef.

One evening, I had eaten and gone back out on deck. I leaned on the ship's railing and looked out over the water so that the waves could carry my soul back to my girlfriend and my tears would fall into the sea. I was particularly sad when I thought that, by now, my girlfriend would be sitting with some other man and sipping champagne, trying to forget me. Beside me, a soldier from Huế stood at the railing, and, like me, he was probably thinking of his girlfriend, because his face looked as though it had been bitten by an insect. Every now and then he would let out a heavy sigh, and murmur softly a line from a tune with a Nam Binh accent: "The anchor is up, and the ship is sailing."

I noticed that every five minutes the soldier sighed again and sang the same refrain: "The anchor is up and the ship is sailing."

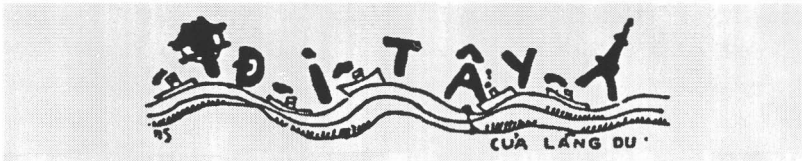
Every evening it was the same, and the tune went on for about an hour. I was already in a sad mood, and this irritated me. One evening, I couldn't stand it any longer and, stopping beside him, I said: "Don't you see, Sir, the ship is already sailing." But he was determined not to understand.

Fortunately, after we stopped at Saigon, that man was no longer anywhere to be seen when the ship set sail for Singapore.<sup>§</sup>

With the ship soon to arrive at the first foreign port, I began to record some strange stories in my notebook. And one strange thing that no one else seemed to feel was that I found it incredibly easy to breathe. I don't know whether this was because we were in the open sea, or whether it was because the air I now breathed was different from that which I had breathed for so long.



<sup>§</sup> According to Phạm Quỳnh's account, the voyage from Haiphong to Saigon took "three nights and two days." The voyage from Saigon to Singapore took "two whole days."



## II. ABROAD

### *Singapore*

Before we had dropped anchor at Singapore, one of the ship's boys gave me some advice: "Be careful if you go into 'Sinh ra bò', or you'll be hit by a car." #

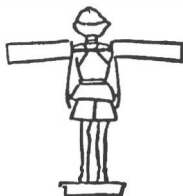
His advice was unexceptional. It was like that which a mother gives a child when it goes out in the street to play, or that which a peasant woman

# Vietnamese had been travelling to Singapore since the 1820s. Vietnamese sailors had been working the French imperial shipping routes since the 1860s and, as their linguistic games imply, they had these well worked out: Lăng Du's "Sinh ra bò," or "Giving birth to a cow," is a conuption of "Sinh ga bò," which is merely a transliteration of the English name. Puns on other place names in this text are produced by tonal plays within similar transliterations.



*Wharf scene, Singapore*  
(E. J. Brady Collection, National  
Library of Australia—reproduced  
with permission)

\* Vietnamese travellers have usually been impressed with Singapore. Phạm Quỳnh's first view of the harbour, at sunrise, took his breath away: "No scene was more beautiful; it was like a watercolour." Its size made any thought of Haiphong or Saigon harbours "very far away." The English permitted a bustling "free trade"; official buildings were not the only huge ones, as they tended to be in French colonies; the service at the Shanghai Hotel was "much" superior to anything in Chợ Lớn; and the traffic in the wide streets had to be seen to be believed: "Cars in Singapore run in really countless numbers, some private, some hired, criss-crossing all day long" [NP 58, pp.257-9]. Phạm Quỳnh did not mention the "very fast" electric trams that "run along the street on rubber tyres, and very easily avoid obstacles" as Bùi Thanh Văn does before Lăng Du (*Strolling around the globe*, p.12). Nevertheless, Phạm Quỳnh still foreshadows the intermittent interest which Saigon city planners still have in Singapore today.



might give in one of our cartoons to the famous yokel, Lý Toét, when he goes to the province capital. But what struck me as strange was the name which the 'boy' gave to Singapore.

I asked: "What did you call Singapore?"

"Sinh ra bò" (giving birth to a cow).

"That's very strange."

"You shouldn't be surprised, Sir. We give our own names to every port of call; for example, we call Colombo 'Cô lông bông' ('Miss Vagabond'), Djibouti 'Di bú tí' ('go and have a little suck'), Port Said 'Sà-ích' ('horse-cart driver')."

"What about Aden?"

"Aden, we give it two names according to the intonations we can put on it in our language. One is 'À-đen' ('black girl') because the port has many black girls, and the other is 'À-đến' ('ah! we have arrived'), to express our happiness at arriving after six or seven days drifting on the ocean."

\*\*\*

I went down to the wharf. Looking around, I found myself quietly admiring the British talent for organisation.\* It was only when I went out into the street that I realised what the boy had said about the traffic was right. Whenever a car horn made me jump to one side, I found that the car was heading in that direction too. After this, I had to step on to the footpath where I stopped and thought. Then I remembered that the English drove on the left-hand side of the road. Once I had worked this out, I was very pleased with myself. One annoying thing, however, was that I still had to think hard for a minute before I could take evasive action. When a car came, I first raised my right hand and told myself: "In Hanoi I would move in this direction. Here, I must move in the opposite one; I must move in that direction there." After I had summed up the situation carefully and was sure I could not make a mistake, I crossed to the other side of the street.

Having taught myself how to avoid the traffic, I turned around and, smiling, felt very proud of how clever I was. However, a number of drivers did not seem to appreciate this when, instead of avoiding them, they saw me standing with my hand pointing first in one direction, then another, and nodding and mumbling to myself. They hooted their horns and abused me. One good thing was that they cursed me in English or Indian, languages I couldn't understand, and so it did not really matter.

As I came to each crossroad, I saw a man wearing short trousers, a short-sleeved shirt, and a yellow hat with a large pair of wings attached to his shoulders. These looked like dragon-fly wings, and as he turned around on the spot they indicated the direction in which the traffic could pass. This made me think of the policemen at home who had the dragon-fly wings attached



to their hats. Here they used the wings to direct the automobile traffic; at home they used them to direct people; that was the difference.<sup>†</sup>

Suddenly, I saw an automobile and a tram that seemed to be on a collision course, but, then, as the automobile shot straight ahead, the tram slipped elegantly out of its way. I thought this was terrific and, wanting to see it happen again, stood there waiting for the next tram. One came along and, sure enough, just as I feigned to approach it, it slithered off to one side. I looked down as it did, and saw that the tram ran on rubber wheels.

Before reboarding the ship, I went into an Indian shop to buy a pair of pyjamas. [...] I indicated what I wanted by pointing to a pair. When the shop owner showed them to me, I shook my head and pointed to some others. He then showed me a pair with stripes: the horizontal stripes were purple, and the vertical ones were green. After all the pointing and gesticulating, he said: "Sir, this is a very good pair."

This surprised me.

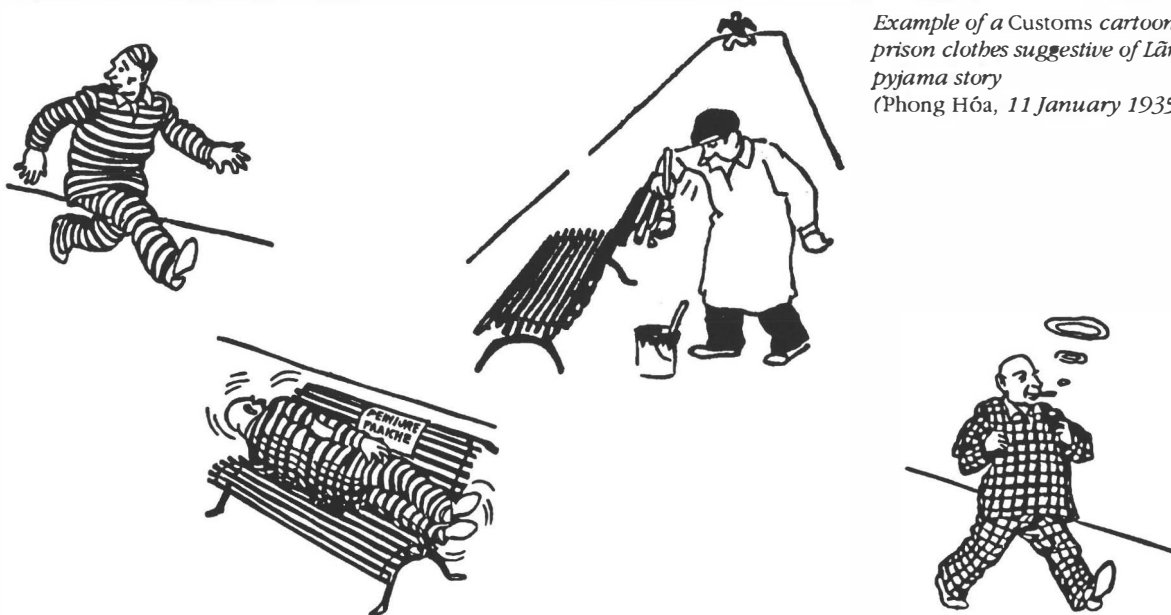
I said: "You can speak Annamese?"

"Certainly. I lived in Hanoi for fifteen years."

So, with big smiles on our faces, the two of us shook hands. The Indian man was very attentive to me, remembering Hanoi with affection and showing great pleasure at having met an Annamese. The result: he demanded \$12 for a pair of pyjamas worth \$5, and I would later find out how good they were. By the time I got to Colombo the vertical stripes had completely faded, leaving the purple horizontal ones to suggest a set of prison clothes.<sup>‡</sup> By the time I reached Aden the horizontal stripes had also completely disappeared. My pyjamas had turned white. The good thing about this was that they could not fade any more.

<sup>†</sup> The dragon-fly hat was, of course, the head-dress of high mandarins such as Pham Quỳnh (see Figure 5, Introduction). The joke therefore suggests the backwardness that went with the imposition of the colonial police state in Vietnam.

<sup>‡</sup> In one of Chaplin's films, Charlie is imprisoned in Sing Sing. But this only added to the abundant store of prison jokes and stories that circulated throughout the French empire at a time when Devil's Island stories were in wide circulation. Meanwhile, Con Son Prison Island (or Puolo Condore), which Lăng Du mentions towards the end of his story, lay at the heart of the vast imperial penal establishment in Vietnam. This was partly the inspiration for one of Nhật Linh's first stories, "The silk spinner" (1926), in the anthology of the same name, as well as for a myriad stories, jokes, and cartoons by others. A good discussion of prison literature can be found in David Marr, *Vietnamese tradition on trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1981).



*Example of a Customs cartoon about prison clothes suggestive of Lăng Du's pyjama story*  
(Phong Hôa, 11 January 1935)

\* As the metaphor of the “mosquito-carrying malaria germs” immediately suggests a modern scientific rationale at work, the demystification of illusions which modern travel meant for Lãng Du was bound to have implications that extended well beyond the Singapore traffic. Summing up, as it does, the way his relations with French people changed according to the distance he was from French colonial Vietnam, the central importance of Lãng Du’s “Philosophy” paragraph has indeed been noticed by Alexander Woodside in *Communism and revolution in modern Vietnam*, p.4:

Nhật Linh’s statement is a clear revelation of the importance of the discovery, by intellectuals of his generation, that the inequities and the reciprocal social and ethnic antagonisms of colonial Vietnam were associated with the idiosyncratic conventions and laws of one specific setting, not with any universal determinisms ... that could never be challenged.

Put another way, Lãng Du was learning on his voyage that the colonial experience could be looked at ironically and self-reflexively from different points of view.



† The passage from Singapore to Colombo took about four days, and seems often to have been a rough one. Phạm Quỳnh (whose route took him out of the way from Singapore to Penang to Colombo in March 1922) spent much of the Indian Ocean crossing confined to his cabin as the ship rolled in high winds and big seas which sailors called the ‘casserole’. These saucepan conditions are partly created in areas of the Indian Ocean where huge waves surge to the surface from deep ocean currents that strike submerged mountains and continental shelves.

## Philosophy

The farther the ship sailed from Vietnam and the closer it got to France, my experience was that the more decent people on board were. In the China Sea, they did not want to look in my direction. In the Gulf of Siam, they looked at me with disdain, as though I were a mosquito carrying malaria germs to Europe. When we entered the Indian Ocean, their eyes started to become infected with gentleness and compassion, and they began to recognise that I was a human being with a few brains. Crossing the Mediterranean they suddenly regarded me as someone who was as civilised as them and began to have some respect for me. When I reached France itself, I had the impression that I could bully them. At that stage I was very happy. But I was still worried about the return trip! \*

## Two Friends

After ‘Sinh ra bò’, I saw on the deck—which was my private territory—another two Indians. I wanted to make friends with them, but was unable to. From the time they came on board they did not stop talking to each other, and so I could not get a word in. They were sitting beside the deck chair on which I reclined, and from one day to the next they sat there facing each other, talking.

One of them would begin: “A-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra.”

I did not know what that meant, but that is what I heard. When he felt he had talked for long enough, the one who began stopped cleanly, and it was the second one’s turn to continue: “A-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra, a-ra.”

The second man spoke for a long time then stopped, when the first one had his turn again. They went on like that all the time.

As their talk sent me a little crazy, I compared the sound of it with the gurgling sound of an upended a bottle of water.

They talked as intensely as that. But when twilight approached, they fell silent and turned together to face the same direction: that of the setting sun. Then, they bowed their heads onto the wooden deck, murmuring as they performed their ritual. At these times, I thought that perhaps they were talking to the sun.

## Colombo

After riding out a storm for a few days, the ship reached Colombo.† I left the ship to visit the city, because I had heard that they made very good hot curries.

I went into town with another Annamese student, determined to find one of these famous dishes. After we went a few streets we came to a house with a sign outside the door, written in an Indian script which I did not understand.

Painted on the sign was a rooster, standing in a dazzling red sun, flapping his wings, and crowing with his beak wide open. Looking into the house, I saw a small table and a few stools.

We entered, hung our hats on a peg, and sat down feeling pleased with ourselves. A boy came up to us, and, in a natural tone of voice which suggested I had passed through Colombo many times, I said confidently: "curry cay."

Perhaps the waiter was a little deaf, because I saw him tilt his head as though he had not understood. I said again more loudly: "Cur-ry."

The waiter repeated what I had said: "Cur-ry?"

From the look of him, it seemed that he did not know what curry was. I explained in French, my friend explained in English, and he still shook his head.

I suddenly felt silly: curry! But what kind of curry? You can't eat curry by itself, and the word 'cay' is a Chinese word for 'chicken',<sup>‡</sup> not an Indian word. Perhaps, seeing two customers come in and ask for curry, the boy stood staring at us, trying to think what country people with such strange tastes had come from.

I called the boy a second time, raised my arms, and, crowing, flapped them like a rooster: "cock-a-doodle-doo."

The boy just stood there with his eyes widening. I'm sure he thought that we were completely mad.

This left me feeling perplexed. Perhaps roosters in India don't crow, or crow differently from those in Annam. I then changed to a turkey's call: "Co-co-ri-co."

The boy repeated: "Co-co-ri-co."

Pleased with this reply, I continued: "Co-co-ri-co, cur-ry co-co-ri-co!"

That was very clear, explicit; no matter how stupid he was he would understand that I meant 'hot chicken curry'. But the boy still refused to understand. He smiled, raised his arms and flapped them as he said: "Cur-ry co-co-ri-co." Then, he shook his head. We shook our heads too, and being resigned to not tasting that famous chicken curry, we stood up, took our hats, and left.

Once out the door, we ran into an English policeman whom my friend asked in English: "Could you tell us where we can find chicken curry?"

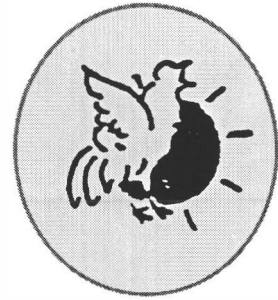
"Everywhere."

"Then why didn't they understand what we wanted when we went in there and asked for it?"

The policeman looked up at the sign of the rooster, then looked at us with a smile on his face: "Did you go in there?"

"Yes. Why are you surprised?"

[. . .] The policeman had a good laugh and told us: "This is not a curry house, it is a soccer club!"



<sup>‡</sup> In the original text, Lāng Du says "the word 'cay' is a Chinese word for 'hot'." However, 'cay' seems closer to the Cantonese word 'gài' 雞, which means 'chicken', not 'hot'. Perhaps he had the idea of ordering a 'hot chicken curry' in mind, and in his eagerness to do this mixed up the Chinese terms.



\* When Phạm Quỳnh saw Colombo he remarked that a 'strange' difference between Colombo and Penang or Singapore was that there were no foreign shops there. The vast majority of commerce was run by the indigenous people themselves (*NP* 59, p.333). When he was there in 1929, Bùi Thanh Vân made a similar observation (*Strolling around the globe*, p.18). Meanwhile, like Lãng Du, Phạm Quỳnh and his five cabin mates visited a Buddhist temple. They hired a car from the Colombo Tourist Office for thirty-six rupees (over twenty Vietnamese piastres). After touring the city, they went up to a hotel on Mount Livina to cool off and visited a "big" statue of the Buddha entering Nirvana nearby. However, the account makes no mention of Lãng Du's "white lady," the long reclining statue of the Buddha he mentions in female form.

Lãng Du's anecdote about the "white lady" was probably inspired by a visit to or a story he heard about a famous eight-metre-long reclining Buddha in the ancient Kelaniya Temple, only ten kilometres from central Colombo. However, this Buddha is not in female form.

† In contrast to Phạm Quỳnh's account of his visit to a Buddhist temple, Lãng Du's joke about the lady Buddha is loaded with irony. Buddhists may also feel it is an example of bad taste. In any case, the play on the ideas of a lonely white lady in a country of black people, and a lonely black man in Vietnam, only scratches the surface of the irony. Lãng Du's exclamation: "Marry the lady of the white statue to the black man," is an allusion to Tấn Đà's poem "Con cá vàng" [The goldfish], first published in *Công Dân* 7 (6 Nov. 1935). Vietnamese who recognised the allusion would have known that the poem is a criticism of Vietnamese women who marry for money 'black Westerners', a term which Tấn Đà meant to include not only Indians and Africans. Lãng Du's joke is thus one about the state of affairs in which money and Western rule were often thought to be the root of all evil in colonial Vietnam, while on yet another level, he himself is self-consciously going West. The irony plays on many points of view in this complex joke.

After that we relied on the policeman to show us a curry house, and this time we were able to eat. Once we had finished our hot curry, we looked around the town and noticed houses that were bigger and much more imposing than those in Saigon and Hanoi.\*

Someone advised us to visit a giant statue of the Buddha. We went to see it, and it really was gigantic, although its form was not unusual: that of a lady reclining with her head resting on one hand. [...] The guide told us that this was the longest reclining statue of the Buddha in the world, but, for all its length, we believed neither this nor the tall stories he told.

Seeing that the guide had a talent for exaggeration, I called out to him and asked him in English: "I also heard that sometimes during the night this statue sits up, stretches itself and yawns a few times then lies down quietly. Is that true?"

The guide answered without batting an eye: "That's right, but only occasionally."

The white statue of the lady stretched out in the afternoon shade had a rather lively expression that filled me with admiration. Yet I could not help feeling pity for her lying there as though she was waiting for someone. I wished someone could bring the black statue from the Chấn Vũ Temple here to keep her company. "Marry the statue of the white lady to the black man."†

How ironical! The lady of the white statue lying in a country of black people, while the black Chấn Vũ statue sits by White Bamboo Lake.

### *Aden*

I was about to get down into the barge that would take us from the ship to the wharf when an Arab constable, looking carefully at my face, came towards me and raised his hand in a military salute. I returned the salute and intended to ask him what he wanted when he spoke first: "Are you Mr Lãng Su?"

"That's right?"

"Do you want to disembark?"

"Yes! I want to disembark."

He brought his legs together, held his body upright, then said in a relaxed voice: "I have an order from the government of Arabia not to let you disembark."

I was astonished: "What is the reason for that?"

"Because you wrote a book denigrating Arab people."

I couldn't believe my ears. I had never spoken ill of Arabs, and I had never written a book. However, I remained calm, because it is rare that one is honoured with the distinction of being barred from getting off a ship. The other people on the ship looked past me with respect and envy. I was very pleased. Much later, I learnt they mistook my name, Lãng Du, for a certain Lang Su.

But all this was only a dream. When I woke up, I realised that, yesterday, I had read a book by a man named Monfried whom the Arabs had banned from landing at Port Said, and it gave me such a nightmare that I was too afraid to disembark at Aden.<sup>‡</sup>

## *Djibouti*

Djibouti has two main features: 1. heat; 2. bright light.

It was so hot that not a single tree grew there.<sup>§</sup> Before we got off the ship people said: in order to have shade on either side of the street, they had to plant imitation trees that were made of tin and painted green. And when you went into a restaurant and ordered beefsteak, they brought it out with a plate of salad made of thin strips of pastry-coloured green. I knew these stories were exaggerated, but they certainly suggested how hot it was at Djibouti.

As for the light it was so bright that short-sighted people getting off the boat no longer needed their glasses, and people with normal sight had to wear glasses to see. On cloudless days, one could see clearly people collecting firewood on a mountainside 100 kilometres away. No one said if they could hear those people laughing and talking as well

For me, the bright light also illuminated the filth in which the people lived. As I passed through the market, I could see sweets and cakes covered by clouds of black flies. I could also smell the stench coming from the shacks that people lived in on either side of the road. This made me homesick. The comparison I had in mind was with the country markets in Vietnam where, not forgetting the buzz of bluebottle flies, flat baskets of noodles and cakes, pots of prawn paste, and baskets of jack fruit gave off a strong, stinking smell which spread in the air and mingled with the stench of sweat from unwashed clothes. I also saw an emaciated beggar dragging a walking stick and begging in such a pitiful voice that you could never forget it once you'd heard it. I can say that all of these things at Djibouti had the familiar smell of my country. Therefore, please allow me to change the line of poetry which says: "Human feelings are the same everywhere" to "Such pitiful suffering is the same all over the world."

## *A Bamboo Fan*

When I left Djibouti to return to the ship, some children followed us with fans for sale. I bought one made of bamboo splints coloured green and red. A European came up to me and praised the fan, saying it was beautiful. I looked at it and said indifferently: "I suppose so, but it's a primitive, naïve kind of beauty."

The European then said in a serious tone of voice: "But this fan comes from Indochina."

<sup>‡</sup> Unlike the original published version, the *Sống Mới* edition has Lãng Du disembarking for two hours at Aden and includes an unflattering paragraph on that port, which Nhất Linh may have edited into the text at some stage himself: "All I remember of Aden was a huge rock that gave off steam; the roads were made of rock, the houses were made of rock, and if there was any vegetation it was also made of rock." In any case, the multiple points of view, which produce much of the irony in the story, can also produce the palpable sense of disorientation that recurs in Nhất Linh's writings at times when a complexity of perspectives bewilders him. Hence Lãng Du's Aden nightmare, and the strange sense of perplexity that later arises when he talks to himself in the cafeteria in Paris.

<sup>§</sup> The voyage from Colombo to Aden took about a week, and from Aden to Djibouti about two days. At Djibouti Lãng Du, like other Vietnamese travel writers, becomes involved in a narrative of the founding of the French colony there. His account of the heat, for example, may be read as a continuation of Phạm Quỳnh's observation in 1922 that the place "is all desert, and the climate is as hot as flames." Also Lãng Du's tin trees are prefigured in Phạm Quỳnh's reference to steel ones.

Yet Phạm Quỳnh gives a stronger sense than Lãng Du of participation in a French empire story: "People say that twenty years ago, when Djibouti already had roads and houses, there was not a tree in the entire town. All that there was planted in the Governor's Palace: a tea tree made out of steel and painted green to give the impression that it was real!" [*NP* 59, p.337]. One senses the slightly vicarious pleasure in his recounting how, in their belated scramble for colonies, the French clung sardonically to the horn of Africa. It could also have been a relief to find a poorer French colony than Vietnam, although Lãng Du did not feel this way.

\* Bùi Thanh Vân had noticed in Colombo "a few northern Vietnamese pedlars selling northern products" (*Strolling around the globe*, p.18). Some may have made it to Djibouti too.

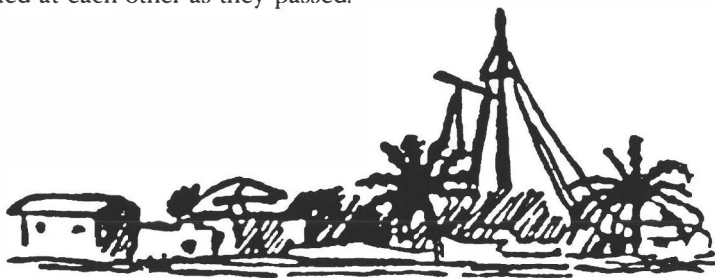
I looked carefully and saw that the fan really had come from my country. At that moment, there was no doubt that my face had a primitive, naïve kind of beauty.\*

And so I left Djibouti with that peaceful memory.

### *The Suez Canal*

After Djibouti the ship began to enter the Red Sea. It was so hot I couldn't record anything in my diary. Nor could I when we entered the Suez Canal, because I was so busy looking.

Leaving the open sea and entering the canal, the ship seemed to become agitated as it continuously blew its siren. A short distance into the Canal, it blew its siren louder when it came up to a dredge scraping out the bottom. At nightfall, when another vessel came from the opposite direction, my ship was all aflutter with signals. Lights flashed on and off as if the two ships were winking at each other. It was as though they were courting and would come together in an embrace at any moment. Fortunately, when the two ships came close together it was clear they were in different channels, and they just blinked at each other as they passed.



### *Two Flags*

Port Said: I paid special attention to the Egyptian flag. It flew everywhere over the port as though the Egyptians wanted to show off the fact that their country had just become independent and definitely had a flag. Standing at the railing of the ship beside an Egyptian who had already been to France a few times to study, I asked naïvely: "Is that the Egyptian flag?"

"That's correct."

I praised it: "It's very beautiful, but the three stars which appear in the crescent seem a little funny. Even though only half the moon appears, the other half is there, so you can't see the stars in that position."

The Egyptian turned around and looked at me as though what I said was right, but very simple-minded. He thought for a moment then suddenly asked me: "What does your country's flag look like?"

I replied: "It is a yellow flag with a horizontal red band."<sup>†</sup>

"A Red band?"

"Yes."

"A Red band like that on the Russian flag?"

The two of us blinked as though we understood each other well. But, actually, we didn't.

"And what about the yellow on your flag? Presumably it's because people in your country have yellow skin."

I replied: "No, yellow is the colour we sometimes give to the sky."

The Egyptian was astonished: "The sky over your country is yellow?"

"No. The sky over my country is blue, just as it is here. But we call the sky yellow because of its association with our word for 'heaven', *Hoàng thiên*. *Hoàng* means 'yellow', *thiên* means 'sky'."

The Egyptian replied: "A yellow sky! That's very funny."

He had taken his revenge. Tit for tat.

But I didn't give up: "Yellow sky might be funny. But why is your Red Sea blue?"

\*\*\*

The ship left Port Said and was about to enter the Mediterranean, and we passed the statue of the man who had built the Suez Canal, Mr de Lesseps. [...] In the Mediterranean it turned cold, but I now felt more civilised.

I remember the night we passed the Stromboli volcano. I shivered so much I wanted it to erupt and warm me up.

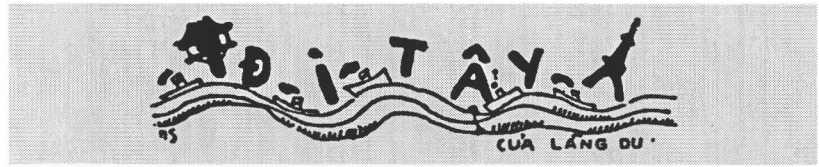


Because I hadn't brought a blanket, I had to bear the weather for a few days.

Then, one morning, with the sun rising, I saw standing on the horizon the cathedral of Notre Dame de la Garde, and the Suspension Bridge of the city of Marseilles.

I had arrived in France.

<sup>†</sup> I am unaware of the existence of a yellow flag with a red band in Vietnam. There may be some symbolic significance and irony in the colour scheme that related to contemporary politics; gold was the emperor's colour and red had a number of associations, including that with the Soviet Union. In any case, Lãng Du uses the flag story to raise the kind of national as opposed to imperial ideal that his visit to countries like Egypt encouraged.



### III. IN FRANCE

#### *Marseilles*

\* Governor-General Sarraut's 1917 Code of Public Instruction ensured that educated Vietnamese had read and heard much about France. Some had even dreamt about it. Phạm Quỳnh said his landing at Marseilles was the realisation of "a longstanding yearning" to see the "spectacle of the civilisation of the mother country (*quí quốc*)."

Meanwhile, a trickle of Vietnamese travellers had been visiting France since at least 1725. In this year a Vietnamese Chinese French-speaking 'Tonkinese' convert of the Augustinian missionary, Roberto Barrozi, is known to have acted as interpreter at a Paris lunatic asylum for a Chinese inmate who had not heard his language spoken for over two years (Jonathan D. Spence, *The question of Hu* [London: Knopf, 1988, pp. 119–20]). Over the next two centuries there were a few official diplomatic exchanges between Vietnam and France. Scholarly exchanges began in 1860 when the scholar-mandarin Nguyễn Trường Tộ reached France with the help of a Catholic Bishop. After the Suez Canal opened in 1869, numerous Vietnamese students were educated in Algiers as well as in Catholic schools in the south of France.

Yet the development of a sizeable Vietnamese colony in France does not pre-date World War I when some 100,000 Vietnamese draftees passed through Marseilles, some to fight at the front but most to work in ammunition factories and be used in early experiments in 'Taylorism', or assembly-line manufacturing techniques. Today, in Marseilles, Vietnamese is spoken as freely as Arabic in the streets around the fish markets, and there is a concentration of Vietnamese restaurants in rue Halles Delacroix. There is, of course, a large Vietnamese community in various parts of Paris, while the total number of Vietnamese in France is around 250,000.

When I landed on French soil and looked around at the scenery, I didn't see anything strange at all. The vegetation, houses, objects, people: it was as though I had seen them all before; seen them in a former life. This made me think that "I had been a European." I don't say this boastfully, because, according to the doctrine of reincarnation, I must have been doomed by my sins as a European to rebirth as a lowly Annamese photographer who travelled on the deck of an ocean liner. Perhaps when I was in hell, my keeper had forgotten his duty to make me eat the special rice gruel that would erase my memory. But after thinking about it carefully, I knew this was not the reason why France was so familiar to me. I had read many books about France and seen many paintings of it.\*

When I arrived, the first thing I did was to find a room and have a sleep. The second thing was to find a restaurant where I could not only eat *bouillabaisse*, the most famous soup on earth, but also eat it at Marseilles, its home region.

As soon as I sat down in a restaurant, a waiter (a French one, of course) whose dress was more distinguished than mine, came towards me. I gave a start, but then controlled myself. I knew that people from Marseilles were famous for their big talk, and so I decided to get in first:

"I'll have a bowl of *bouillabaisse*. I have come all the way from Indochina to eat that soup. I am just off the boat, and I would be grateful if you could ask the chef to prepare it quickly so that I will have time to finish it and get back on board before the ship ups anchor and sails back to Indochina this afternoon."

† The Mistral is the cold north-west wind that blows off the southern French Alps and across the Mediterranean provinces of France in winter. If, unfortunately, it was not blowing for Lăng Du when he ate his *bouillabaisse*, he would have been one of the few Vietnamese ever to miss it. But then, he was being more ironical than a fictional character like Corporal Nguyễn Văn Ba who landed in Marseilles in the autumn of 1917 with other problems:

/"They took us straight to the old citadel where there were many nasty rats. Here the rice is also badly cooked by the occidental cooks" (*Lettres*, p.21.) Phạm Quỳnh arrived in the spring of 1922 without either irony or complaints. He simply took a tram to the "average, but clean" Saint Louis Hotel, and went out to eat at a nearby restaurant run by a retired French colonial who had built roads in Cochinchina (*NP* 63, pp.226–7).



The waiter showed great respect for me: You are right, Sir. I'm sure you have *bouillabaisse* in your country, but you must eat it in its home region to appreciate how delicious it really is. We have a saying; "If you eat *bouillabaisse* without the Mistral blowing, there is something missing."

And that is what I found that day: the weather was very calm, without a wisp of wind. So, after tasting the *bouillabaisse*, I looked at the waiter and said jokingly: "Please bring me a bowl of Mistral."<sup>†</sup>

### Recognition

After a good night's sleep and an excellent meal, I went out to look around the streets. From time to time I saw a person with yellow skin, but I didn't know if they were Chinese, Japanese, or Annamese. So I worked out a trick which I thought was clever. Whenever I saw a yellow-skinned person in front of me, I would quicken my pace until I came up to him, then look up into the sky and say to myself: "What a stupid bastard."<sup>‡</sup>

A Japanese or a Chinese would not have understood what I said. But an Annamese would have turned around immediately. Moreover, that person would have had no reason to be angry with me, because I was calling myself a "stupid bastard." My method really was effective. One day, I came across ten people with yellow skin, and two of them turned around when they heard me say "stupid bastard." This meant they were Annamese. Both of them were students, and were not angry with me, because they also used similar 'passwords' to distinguish Annamese from Chinese. And they thought my password was quite refined.

Despite the lovely name I had called them when we met, these two students later became very close friends of mine.

### My Friend at Marseilles

I soon went out to see one of them, Mr M. He lived a very high life, judging from the number of steps it took to reach his lodging. From the street to the place where he lived, I counted exactly 125 steps. He stood on the fourth floor of the building looking down, smiling, and waving me up. When I got to the top he shook my hand and apologised: "I wanted to meet you at the bottom of the stairs, but I'm sure you see why I didn't. This morning, I had a croissant for breakfast, and if I had gone down the steps, I would have had to eat a second breakfast when I got back up to the top."

Hearing that Mr M had picked up the local penchant for big talk, I was sure that he had lived in Marseilles for a long time.

His room had a window in the roof of the house, because he lived very high up there in an attic. The walls were covered with wallpaper that had a floral design. I asked him what flowers they were, and he replied without thinking: "They are like the ephemeral *phù dung* flowers we have in Vietnam.



<sup>†</sup> The basic difference between Lãng Du's and Phạm Quỳnh's description of Marseilles, is that Lãng Du's is a much more tightly structured and intimately focussed piece of writing. One reason for this is that Phạm Quỳnh, who makes no pretence at writing 'literature', finds the stimuli of the city so difficult to manage that he asks his readers to regard his account as nothing more than (copious) notes from which he would later extract a proper book: *Three months in Paris* (1927). Another reason, however, is that Phạm Quỳnh's notes reflect the official purpose of his visit, which was to enhance the prestige of "Great France" in the eyes of Vietnamese readers.

With his "reliable" *Du chemin* tourist-guide for reference, Phạm Quỳnh is interested in classifying the streets and noting marvels both ancient and modern. At the site of the 1922 Colonial Exposition which he had come to visit, he recorded some imperial progress: "In 1906, the area of the Exposition was twenty-three hectares. This year it is more than thirty-six hectares." After visiting the office of the Ministry of Colonies and some African pavilions at the Expos- /OVER



/ition, he saw the Indochina display which featured a "splendid" replica of Angkor Wat, reconstructions of a Hanoi Street, and the Single Pillar Pagoda in that city. He was slightly concerned by the huge amount of money spent on all this, and noted the complaints of the Indochinese artisans who had been brought to France to build the display about their "temporary" accommodation [NP 63].

Phạm Quỳnh's account is then filled out with descriptions of various stimuli: "Notre Dame de la Garde," a public lecture that dealt with women's rights and abortion, the theatre, a horse race, a meeting with Governor-General Saurraut. There were also literary-historical touches, such as an account of a tour of Château d'If, in which he tells his readers of the dungeons where Alexandre Dumas had imprisoned the Count of Monte Cristo [NP 65, 66].



Phạm Quỳnh in Marseilles, 1922

The only thing is that real *phù dung* change colour during the day. They are white in the morning and red in the afternoon, whereas these ones used to be red, but have now turned white."

I turned my eyes to the bed and noticed that there seemed to be something wrong with it. Mr M laughed and sang some lines from a folksong:

It's really a pity, really a pity,  
Break one leg on a bed and you've still got three.

He then said sadly: "One hundred and fifty francs! Fifteen banknotes! I wanted to find a cheaper room, but there weren't any. There are no rooms that have beds with two legs."

I asked: "How cold is it in winter here?"

"Fairly cold. If you carelessly spilt boiling water on your hand, it'd only feel cool. Exercise for a while and work up a sweat; if you don't wipe it straight off, it'll turn to ice. Many days are so cold they make you homesick, but you can't cry, because the tears turn immediately to ice in the corners of your eyes."

I asked another naïve question: "So it's very difficult to go out, is it?"

He clicked his tongue: "Please forgive me for giving you a vulgar example: when you've had a piss, you have to give your dick a good slap to shake off the icicles. And if there's a policeman around, then there's every chance you'll be fined for a petty offence, because the frozen stream will surely stand up as evidence."

Mr M stopped for a moment to see if I thought this was strange or not. I stood there poker-faced, listening attentively to what he was saying.

He continued: "I often go off to class at 7 am. The blood in my ears stops circulating and they become stiff. If I try to bend them, I find they feel as brittle as a rice-wafer. Fortunately, the classroom is heated and so my ears soften up again.

"I knew an Annamese tradesman who was driven so mad with hunger that he snapped off his ears and ate them. He said they were as crisp and tasty as biscuits. The next day he intended to dine the same way until he realised he had no ears left."

I laughed: "He was a cannibal!"

Mr M also laughed: "Speaking of cannibals, I remember the Annamese soldiers who came here during the last War. Because of them, people here said that Annamese had black teeth because they ate so much human flesh. They did not know that our country has been civilised for a thousand years."

This story suddenly made me remember that I'd come to invite Mr M out to eat French food. I would let him choose the restaurant, because I had only just arrived.

He said straight back: "Alright, it is Sunday today, and so the best thing we can do is go to the country and find some inn where we can eat cheaply and enjoy the scenery."

[...]

## The Country

Sunday. Most people from the city take themselves out into the fields. I saw a motorbike speed past carrying a man, two children, and a woman who was as big as the other three put together. Mr M said: "The whole family. Before long they'll be on a grassy river bank, the husband fishing, the wife sitting watching the float, and the children calling out happily when their father catches a fish."\*

As we crossed a park, I stopped and looked at a scene on a wooden bench which was even more strange than the motorbike. On the bench, an old woman with silver hair and an old man with a grey beard sat leaning back to back, asleep with their mouths open.

Mr M said: "While the girls and boys slip into the forest with their lovers, the old people parade in their best clothes remembering their youth, and when they are tired they sit on a park bench and have a nap before they go home in the afternoon. In France people have almost abandoned private family entertainment, and are all happy to go out in society. Only sick people stay at home."

There are a number of ways in which the French countryside is different from ours:

1. In France, country girls don't blacken their teeth. They have white teeth just like Vietnamese prostitutes.
2. There are no low, damp, thatched houses.
3. There are no children with swollen stomachs running after Frenchmen and begging for a sou.
4. There are no beggars with scabies lying around on the ground.
5. You can sit anywhere, because there is no mud and stagnant water to deter you.
6. In Annam, you avoid places where there is paper lying around; in France, those places are ones where people have been sitting down or eating, indicating that they are very clean.

Those are the things it is easy to recognise immediately, while it takes time and careful observation to get to know the spirit of the people: the respect for law and order and social hierarchy in which those who are worthy of eating the pope's nose or the pig's head eat the pope's nose or the pig's head. Anyway, at first glance, you can see that, in general, respect for these things in France is far inferior to what it is in our country.

## What Race?

We went into a clean inn. The table we sat at was beneath a pergola overhung with young grape vines. On it was a white table cloth, and a bottle of red wine just taken from the cellar.

A waitress with red hair, blue eyes, white skin, and pink cheeks served



\* Lãng Du's description of French social life would have been too close to comfort for Phạm Quỳnh, but like most Vietnamese, Phạm Quỳnh was impressed and, even, moved by the sense of public culture and civil society he encountered in France. The waiters who serve him are often "courteous" (*lịch sự*), and when he slips out of Marseilles on an excursion to Lyon the simple pleasures of the promenade come alive in Phạm Quỳnh's narrative.

After strolling through "wide," "clean" streets and parks and "public places" (*công trường*, a new term in Vietnamese), he returned to his hotel in Lyon, and there he could still recall most vividly "the expressions on people's faces" and hear them "laughing as they talked" [NP 68, pp.101-2]. Yet the humane sense of liberation this expressiveness conveyed to many Vietnamese is something that Phạm Quỳnh had great difficulty with. He loved it, but could not see how it could flower in Vietnam except possibly under protracted French tutelage, as he indicated in his 1923 study of Pierre Loti [NP 72], for example. Though well camouflaged, the ambiguity of Phạm Quỳnh's writing is thus as great as Lãng Du's, with the major difference being the point of balance. Lãng Du is ambiguous about French colonial culture in Vietnam; Phạm Quỳnh is ambiguous about Vietnamese culture there. This is the key to understanding Lãng Du's unambiguous parody of Vietnamese culture: he wants a modern cultural transformation without the French colonial presence. And this sets the framework for the colonial discourse in which *Going to France* may be read as a parody of Phạm Quỳnh's writing itself.



\* Unlike Lãng Du and many other Vietnamese men in France, Phạm Quỳnh does not seem from his writing to have been interested in French women. During World War I, many letters written home by Vietnamese workers and soldiers were censored for various reasons, as shown by a file at the Colonial Archives at Aix en Provence (D1885). Some said the Germans would win the war, others exaggerated the casualties. However, just as many were censored for their stories about 'French women' which the authorities often described as *très indécent* or worse. In fact this rampant interest led to numerous marriages between Vietnamese soldiers and French girls who worked in the ammunition factories while all the Frenchmen had the 'honour' of being at the front. Mireille Favre (in her "Un milieu porteur de modernisation: travailleurs et tirailleurs Vietnamiens en France pendant la première guerre mondiale," PhD diss. [University of Paris, 1986], pt 3, pp.306-10), has also explained how disturbing these marriages were to the colonial authorities: Vietnamese soldiers would proudly send the wedding photographs home, the families would proudly display them on the family altar, and everyone could see that colonial gender relations had been dangerously inverted. Given the official displeasure with this side-effect of World War I in Vietnam, Phạm Quỳnh's close relationship with the colonial regime might help to explain his apparent lack of interest in French women.

us. She wore a sky blue blouse and a white apron. As I sipped my wine and turned my gaze on to the pretty waitress,\* I thought of the inns in our country, of the flies buzzing around the baskets of noodles and rice cakes, of the waitresses black with dirt, wiping their noses with their sleeves and using their fingers to fill a customer's bowl with noodles.

The waitress also looked at us, and she seemed a little surprised. She put a plate of fried eggs on the table and asked: "Are you Chinese?"

Mr M shook his head vigorously as though he was offended; as though he thought Chinese were worthless. The waitress tried again: "If you aren't Chinese, then you must be Japanese?"

I intended to reply, but Mr M shook his head and said: "We are Annamese."

The waitress looked a little hesitant, as though she did not know what race that was. She said: "You must have come here a long time ago; you speak French very fluently."

It made us very happy to hear this, and Mr M responded: "I came here three years ago."

The waitress looked at me and inquired: "And you, Sir, you must have been here five or six years?"

The girl was hinting that I spoke better French than Mr M, and so, wanting to gain even more of her respect, I quickly said: "I just arrived in France two days ago."

"Two days. How odd. Surely you must be a diplomat who has had a lot to do with French people."

I replied: "I'm not a diplomat. But I've had a lot to do with French people."

The waitress asked naïvely: "Are there many French people living in your country, Sir? Do you mix with them often?"

I answered playfully: "I mix with them from time to time. French people are so nice; that is why I do."

Mr M looked at me as if to say: "You're pretty good, and you've only been in Marseilles for two days!"

### *A Bitter Thought*

After we had eaten well, drunk enough wine, and given the inn keeper twenty francs, I pressed a five-franc note into the hand of the waitress so that she would have a little something to remind her of a 'diplomat' who had fallen for her blue eyes.

Outside I said to Mr M: "So they don't care much about us!"

"Why would they care for us? In fact, they don't even know our country. And it's not only a country girl like that who doesn't know. So many others are the same. Don't think that any of them are interested in your ups and downs."

### *A Frightening Incident*

After going a few kilometres, we went through a gate and came across a man with greying hair. He looked at us for a moment, then yelled in Annamese: "Get going, you bastards."

Mr M said quietly to me, "A colonial." Then, out loud, he said, "Mizuta, Ourichi Yama." He wanted to convey the impression that we were Japanese, and that he shouldn't trouble us.

But we were not feeling very confident. We put our heads down and took off running.

### *Leaving Marseilles*

I eventually left Mr M to go to another province. When I went to the station I intended to buy a fourth-class ticket. The ticket-seller put both his hands to his ears and asked again very politely: "What was that, Sir, I didn't hear clearly."

"I said I wanted a fourth-class ticket for X province."

"I'm sorry, Sir, there is no fourth class, only third."

"Whatever is the lowest class, it's the one I want."

I was so used to travelling fourth class with pigs and chickens in Vietnam, but here I had to go third class, that is to say, the lowest class, in which the seats were as soft as those of second-class ones in our country. I said to Mr M: "We want to rent rooms with wooden beds and buy tickets for wooden seats on the train, but they don't exist. We want to be miserable and uncomfortable, but the French government won't let us. It's the opposite at home."

Mr M consoled me: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do. Don't let the contrast cause you useless discomfort."

Mr M shook my hand very strongly and said: "OK then, goodbye and good luck."

He then explained his action: "I have to say goodbye now before the train departs, because once it starts, it leaves the station so quickly that my voice won't reach you."

As expected, when the train pulled out, I could see Mr M's mouth wide open, and couldn't hear a sound coming out of it. But he had just opened his mouth and actually didn't say anything.

The speed of the train reminded me of the trains we had at home, that always chugged along at a leisurely pace like an old Confucian scholar.

\*\*\*

There was only one woman sitting in the same compartment as me. She was chewing something. I quickly pulled my legs in fearing that she would spit betel juice on my trousers.



Looking out of the windows on both sides of the train, I saw grassy fields filled with red, white, and yellow flowers, and they reminded me of an essay I wrote in first grade in which I described some fields full of gaudy flowers.

When I had had enough of the scenery, I started up a conversation with the woman. On learning that I was Annamese, she was very pleased and excited: "Oh, how interesting! I have a son in your country."

I quickly replied: "Yes, very interesting. In our country, your son is a valued official."

The woman clasped her hands in front of her chest, and raised her eyes to heaven: "And you live in the same city as my son, in *Hanoi*? What a great coincidence. He's only been there for two months and I'm very worried about him. Every day, I have been praying to God to protect him. Since I've met you here, let me write to him and tell him to visit your house, so that your parents can help to look after him."

The woman was so touched she cried.

I was also very touched, looking for words to console the poor mother.

"Please don't worry, Madame. People in our country are very obliging with foreigners. Wherever your son goes he'll always find people to help him. Don't worry, Madame."

I knew that I was exaggerating, but in this case it was necessary. The woman wiped her tears, smiled, and thanked me: "Hearing you say that is reassuring. My son will have people looking after him wherever he goes, will he?"

### *Arriving at the Student Association*

\* The Student Association was probably at Toulouse or Montpellier where Nhật Linh studied. What comes out in Lãng Du's account of it is a (comic) sense of how the hierarchical assumptions of Vietnamese society are modified by the youthful egalitarianism of its members, intensified in modern France. Lãng Du's introduction to student life includes stress on sharing the work of cooking and washing-up, on walking instead of taking a taxi, and on the freedom to sing dirty poems in the street. However, forms of address still show considerable stress being placed on the academic status of various students. It is also clear from the narrative that many of them were privileged members of Vietnamese society, because they depended on financial support from rich families back home. Nhật Linh was exceptional in this respect.

I reached X Province some time after 4 pm, hired a horse-drawn cab, and told the driver to take me to the Annamese Student Association. In a city twice the size of Hanoi, finding an Annamese Association was just as difficult as trying to find an African Friendship Society in Hanoi or Saigon.\*

The Association was in a small street. After crossing a dark alley and climbing up a set of stairs to the second floor, I saw a door with a sign on it which said: "Annamese Student Friendship Association."

I knocked on the door. Inside, there was laughter and the smell of food being cooked.

"Come in."

I pushed the door open, went in, and put my suitcase down. Someone called out: "Ah, it looks like we've got a new recruit."

I felt happy, because I was no longer isolated and all alone. I asked calmly: "Who is the Generalissimo?"

"He's out at lectures."

I sat down and introduced myself: "My name is Nguyễn Văn Lãng Du. I am twenty-two. I am not married yet, but have a girlfriend. I have come here

to study photography so that I can return home and take photographs of French people.”

As I explained myself, I listened carefully to the sound of voices in another room: “Oh dear, the rice is spoiled. It’s uncooked on top, burnt underneath, completely ruined.”

Someone said in a grumpy voice: “Where’s the caramelised water so that I can cook the meat?”

“Two spoons is enough or it will be too salty.”

“Chinese vegetable soup with ginger is delicious.”

I sat there with my mouth watering. Quang, the Association’s secretary, the one who had just asked me who I was, asked: “Lãng Du, can you cook?”

“No.”

“That’s a pity. Before you study photography, you’ll have to learn to cook. It’s more important.”

Seeing me drooling, Quang took pity on me.

“How about eating a frugal meal with us today? Tomorrow it will be your responsibility to slice the meat and to wash up.”

I was going to object.

“It’s useless to object. That’s the task of any new recruit. Furthermore, you need the practice to get used to domestic chores.”

I accepted the order and asked if I could visit the kitchen. The kitchen had gas fittings, and so it was clean.

Everyone in the kitchen wore a white apron: one stirred the rice on the stove, one had taken the lid off a saucepan and was testing the meat to see if it was cooked; one was breaking eggs into a frying pan as skilfully as a high-class young lady from Huế.

In one corner of the kitchen, a man was sitting with tears streaming from his eyes. Feeling very moved, I said to Quang: “I suppose my arrival has made him feel homesick.”

Quang said drily: “No, he’s been cutting onions.”

He laughed and continued: “That’s Thái, he’s studying chemistry. Next year he’ll sit for his final examinations. He sniffs every kind of poison in the laboratory, but as soon as he touches an onion he has red eyes and a running nose. That’s why we give him that job.”

Quang pointed to a fat fellow slicing beef and said to me: “Let me introduce Huy who is studying medicine. He’s dissected many corpses, but doesn’t like cutting beef. He always says touching beef reminds him of touching human flesh. Fortunately, when he sits at the table he enjoys eating meat. He’s someone you shouldn’t sit next to; he eats very fast.”

After introducing the people, Quang introduced the dishes: “This is braised fish with dry mushrooms; this is pickled cabbage with lemon juice; this is fried Chinese sausage, this is caramelised pork which you can only get in France.”

I asked how they kept the dry Chinese sausage from becoming mouldy,



and how they cooked the pork without fish sauce. Quang replied: "You'll find out after you have been here for a while. When we receive the Chinese sausages from home we soak them in oil to stop the mould. We learnt that from Minh who is a Bachelor of Science."

I was impressed.

Quang went on: "That's the custom here. During the cold winter months we get together on Sundays to cook Annamese food. If you want to have friends, you'd better write to your family and tell them to send fragrant rice, Chinese sausages, dried pork strands, condiments, pickles, and fish sauce, etc.

I replied sadly: "But I haven't got a family. And I'm sure that my girlfriend will occupy herself with more interesting things than sending fish sauce to me."

"Well, I'm sad to hear that. That means you won't have any friends, or, if you do, you'll have to wash up for the rest of your life."

I still wasn't sure about the method of cooking the pork. Quang guessed this and explained: "Here, if we don't have fish sauce, then we use condensed chicken stock or beef stock in cubes. It tastes like fish sauce. The person who discovered that is our patron."

"Who is that?"

"I don't know his name, but I've heard that he was an Annamese waiter. We're still searching for more details of him so that we can make a commemorative statue of him; our ancestors have taught us that "when we eat fruit we should remember the person who planted the tree," and so we should remember the man who invented the beef cube."

\*\*\*

When we had lunch, they let me sit in the middle, the place reserved for the guest of honour. Unfortunately, the food was placed at either end of the table.

"Please pick up your chopsticks, and be quiet."

Because they ate so fast, I imagined that I was sitting in the communal house in the village. After eating for a while, each person put their chopsticks down and cried out how hot they were.

"It's very hot in this colony. We'll have to go home to feel the cool again. Lãng Du, do you feel hot?"

I still felt a little chilly. I thought they were pretending. But the strangest thing was that, after I looked, I saw sweat streaming off them, soaking their shirts.

While I was eating, I noticed a skinny man sitting at one end of the table. He looked as though he enjoyed the food very much; each time he put something into his mouth his eyes always blinked.

As I was looking at him, Quang told me about him: "I forgot to introduce you to Tich, the poet amongst us, who doesn't have much money and never receives anything from home. This is why he does not have any close friends."

Then Quang whispered in my ear: "Tich doesn't have enough money to





eat French food. He has to buy rice to cook to save money. After he bought rice this morning, the bag unfortunately broke and the rice spilled into the street. He was too embarrassed to pick it up, and so he came straight here and asked to do the washing up.”

Quang stopped for a moment before he continued: “But I’ll do the washing up for Tich today.”

Perhaps Quang thought that if he told a student from a well-to-do family to wash up it was alright, but to ask a poor person was ungentlemanly.

Tich blushed as Quang told me what a famous poet he was. He lowered his head, but he didn’t forget to pick up a big piece of meat to put in his mouth. I could see that he chewed it with more pleasure than before, and was blinking twice as much as before.

I also noticed that after he had swallowed something he licked his lips as if to confirm that the food had really gone to the pit of his stomach.

Somebody asked: “Where do we go after lunch?”

Quang said: “We’ll go to the coffee shop so that the uncivilised one can see for himself the civilised scenery.”

The uncivilised one was me.

### *In the Coffee Shop*

They took me to the largest coffee shop in the city, the place they called the “Headquarters” of the Generalissimo, Hy, and when I met him I told my personal history a second time.\* He clapped his hands and called the waiter: “Eight glasses of wine! Today we have a guest of honour who has just arrived from home.”

I gave Quang a haughty look: “Do you still say I’m a barbarian?”

Quang leant over and whispered something very softly in my ear which made me cold all over: “Whenever someone new arrives, the custom is that he shouts a round of drinks for everyone. Eight glasses of wine is not so much, only about twenty-four francs. That’s why he called you the guest of honour.”

I looked at the eight glasses and only counted seven of us sitting around the table, including myself. As I glanced around, I said vaguely: “It seems that someone is missing, or, more to the point, that we’ve got one glass too many.”

Hy replied immediately: “Not at all. The custom is that the Head of the Association always drinks two glasses.”

After that I decided that I would try to become the Head of the Association.

\*\*\*

The friends sitting around lecturing me at that time were involved in a number of activities: playing cards, smoking, talking, and enjoying the wine I had bought them. There were also the sounds of music, and after each song, they didn’t forget to clap enthusiastically. [...]

\* The ‘Generalissimo’s’ interest in Lãng Du’s personal history was natural enough. But it was also an aspect of the politicisation of Vietnamese student life in France by the late 1920s, of which Lãng Du gives very little sense before the end of his story.

Associations with various agendas had existed since at least 1922, because Phạm Quỳnh mentioned receiving representations from one in Marseilles. But by 1930 a colonial official like him might not have received that many, as the nationalist spirit had come into myriad small power struggles in the associations in Paris and the south of France. “Just about everywhere, the disruptive Indo-chinese elements are gaining ground,” was the assessment of a Ministry of Colonies spy in late 1926. By 1927 the Parti Annamite de l’Indépendance was revived from an earlier organisation by the Trotskyite, Tạ Thu Thâu. With support from students and skilled workers it became the most significant Vietnamese political grouping in France before it was banned in 1929 and, then, took different forms. By 1929 the Association Générale des Etudiants Indochinois had also become so radicalised that its leader, Trần Văn Đốc, was forced out of his position for speaking of France’s “genius” at a ceremony at Indochina House at the Cité Universitaire in Paris. Such radical victories in Paris were multiplied in similar developments in Marseilles, Toulouse, Aix and other cities where there were now hundreds of Vietnamese students (McConnell, *Leftward journey*, pp.70–1).



Actually, this made me feel uneasy, especially seeing that all the wine glasses were over half empty. But Quang still insisted on giving me some long-winded tips on how to order food and drink: "There, you see, you need to know all this. I've told you to keep your eyes wide open."

[...]

Hearing him talk about opening my eyes again, made me think about closing them.

"By the way, Quang, I haven't got a place to sleep tonight."

"Don't worry, you can sleep at my place. I don't have classes tomorrow, and so I'll be able to take you to look for a room and teach you the ropes."

I guessed that he would add "to open your eyes," but he didn't. Perhaps he was sleepy and drunk by then, because he looked drowsy and his eyes were half-closed. Mine were too.

\* \* \*

On the way back to Quang's place I was already feeling tired when he said there was still a long way to go

He walked very fast as he sang happily. I said: "Wouldn't it be better for us to take a taxi."

Quang replied as though he despised the idea: "In France you have to practise walking to keep fit. You can't spoil yourself as you can at home, where even the cook jumps into a rickshaw when he wants to go to the market. Here there is no race of horse-people you can hire cheaply to pull you in a rickshaw. There are only real horses and horse-power. And both are expensive."

Suddenly, I saw two Annamese coming towards us, loudly singing a dirty song which would have embarrassed a 'good-time girl'. When they came up to us, Quang introduced them: "This is Trạch, who has a bachelor's degree in philosophy, and you've met Tịch, the poet."

I found it hard to believe that one who was singing those crude songs was the shy poet I'd met at lunch. Perhaps now that he'd had enough to eat, he felt brighter.

Hinting at my surprise, I said: "It seems the poet is reciting some poetry."

Tịch replied: "Yes, some very good poetry. It comes from a book; if you don't believe me, stop by the Association and have a look at the collection of popular folk songs by Nguyễn Văn Ngọc and you'll see. There are very many others like that one. You should try and learn them by heart."

"What for?"

"To sing like us. Just think, back in the home country we only recite distinguished verses; in all our lives, a rough line never passes our lips. Over here, you can sing loudly to yourself in the middle of the street; sing to your heart's content. So we should be grateful to Mr Ngọc for recording those interesting verses for us."

We parted company, and could still hear Tịch's singing well after we went on our way. I was impressed by the way he was able to remember so many coarse songs.

Quang told me: "I think Tich has probably come out without eating this afternoon. He's so unruly! So unruly! You see, last month he had bad news from home, then ran out of money. We all put in ten francs each so that he would have enough to buy some food. That night, he also borrowed my overcoat, and we found him lying slumped on a bench in the park the next morning, holding a burnt-out cigar and smelling of champagne."

"What does he do for a living?"

"He works in advertising for a company that makes medicine to cure indigestion. He wants to help others digest their food and relieve their full stomachs, but his stomach is not often full. There are even times when he hasn't got a single grain of rice to digest."

We could still hear the sound of Tich's songs, echoing from afar: "If you love me no more, so be it ..."

The song was really rough, but I wondered why it still filled me with sorrow.

\*\*\*

We stopped in front of a coffee shop. Quang went up to a newspaper stand outside the door and took a paper, put one franc in a box and, as a matter of course, took seven and a half sous change.

"But no one is selling the papers?"

"There doesn't have to be."

I pressed Quang's arm: "But you could put one franc in the box and take out two, couldn't you?"

"Of course you could. When you're short of money, you could come here and take a paper to read as I have, then also take a few francs to spend. I only fear that if you do that you'll sell your honour."

\*\*\*

Quang rented a room for me in the house where he lived. When everything was in order he said: "From now on you'll be like us, living a temporary sort of life for a few years. Even though you've got a room to live in, it's still as though you are without a dwelling, wandering here and there."

I added: "A vagabond."

"Something like that. Over here, don't expect that you'll have the comfort of a family. Your room is only for sleeping and studying. And you must always live outside in society: in restaurants, coffee shops, dance halls.\* That's the kind of life you'll have to get used to. So now I'll leave you free to have a look around town. And me, I've got to stay in for a week to study for an exam."

I replied: "I'd like very much to have a look around the streets. But I haven't got an identity card yet, and I'd run the danger of being picked up by the police."

"Don't worry about that. Over here there are no identity cards." [...]



\* Here, as in the passage about the newspaper stand, Lãng Du is learning about the kinds of adjustments a Vietnamese had to make in a community with a strong sense of civil society.

### *An Instant Graduate*

At examination time, the Association's headquarters became a centre for collecting news from various places. Hy, the Generalissimo, was always there to take care of his officers as they returned from battle. I saw a big chart hanging on the wall:

Association Contributions:  
 Graduate Engineers,  
     Bachelor's and Doctors . . . . 50 francs  
 Passing University entrance,  
     or going up a year . . . . . 50 francs  
 Baccalaureate . . . . . 20 francs  
 Passing Entrance Exams  
     for any school . . . . . 15 francs

As soon as he received news that someone had passed an examination, Hy immediately entered their names on the chart.

I asked him: "And what about you?"

He answered cheerfully: "I failed this year."

Then, suddenly, as though he had just remembered something, he looked at me inquisitively: "And you?"

I knew that, no matter what, Hy would have remembered the 'Import Tax' I had not yet paid, and so I said quickly: "I wanted to talk to you about the entrance contribution of 50 francs. But seeing that you were so busy around examination time, I didn't want to bother you. Now that you're recording the names of those who have passed on the chart, please let me offer 50 francs. That would be the most convenient way to go about it. I'm really quite happy to give you the money now."

Hy took my money.

The following names appeared on the chart beneath the heading 'Graduate Engineers, Bachelors and Doctors':

Nguyễn Văn H . . . . . 50 francs  
 Trần Đình Q . . . . . 50 francs  
 Đào Văn Ph . . . . . 50 francs

Hy then added:

Nguyễn Văn Lăng Du . . . . . 50 francs

I had just arrived and immediately passed my examinations.

Hy told me: "From now on you can consider yourself a 'graduate', but before you do you'll have to shout us another round of drinks."



### *The Angel*

I got up early the next morning to accompany Quang to the examinations. When I returned home I was about to open my door when I heard something inside. I stopped. It was the sound of a French woman singing in a crystal-clear voice. I can roughly translate the song as follows:

I dream a fairy's dream  
 I dream that I go away with someone, away from everyone  
 And there are no other lovers who could enjoy the lovely evenings we did.

I knocked. From inside, a young lady asked: "Who is there?" [...]
 I turned the door knob and went in. [...]

A young woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and red cheeks held a long-handled broom as she greeted me. I knew straight away that it was Miss Lina, our room maid, whom Quang had told me about the other day.

"Hullo, Miss Lina."

She opened her eyes wide: "How do you know my name, Mr Nguyễn Văn ...?"

It was my turn to show surprise: "How do you know my name?"

"I don't. I'm just guessing. Nine out of ten Annamite names are Nguyễn Văn ... Văn Ty, Văn Ta, Văn Tô."

Then Lina told me a story about Annam as she made the bed: "I was working at a guest house in the mountains of Savoy. One day, I received a letter from two people asking to reserve two rooms for them. A few days later two people with yellow skin arrived to take the rooms, but I refused them because I thought the two who wrote the letter were Dutch, one person named Van Hot, and the other named Van Lan. The Dutch couldn't have yellow skin. I invited them to take some other rooms, and later they had to show me their identity papers to convince me. But I still thought it was strange that there were Dutch people with yellow skin and flat noses. I suspected some secret plot, and I couldn't sleep all night."

As I listened to the story, I looked at Miss Lina and was thinking of the 'level of civilisation' of that class of people who worked as waiters and maids. Just talking to her, I could see that she had an elementary education, but that like everybody else she read books and newspapers and was aware of what was happening in the country. Although her job was considered to be a low one in Vietnam, I had to treat her as an equal and, when I talked to her, I felt I had to be polite to her and treat her as a lady.

She finished sweeping and tidying up, said goodbye to me, and left the room. A little later I could hear her singing in the next room: "I dream a fairy's dream . . ."\*

### *Living like a King*

Since my arrival in this town, I had still not thought about studying. Every day I went to sit on the long benches in the University courtyard waiting for my friends who were sitting their exams, then we went from one coffee shop to another tasting the wines bought by those who had passed their exams. This was a pleasant introduction to my studies in France.

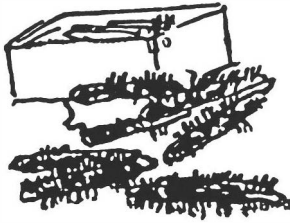
I went with Quang to visit Minh, a Bachelor of Science, to congratulate him on the success of his younger brother who had just passed his exams.

\* Lãng Du's interest in girls is more pronounced than his interest in student politics. However, his comments about Miss Lina's "level of civilisation" further reflect a genuine interest that Nhất Linh had in studying the differences between French and Vietnamese conditions and, by extension, their political cultures. In 1992 I met in Brussels Mr Nguyễn Kim Trường, a former Vietnamese student at Montpellier who had known Nhất Linh there in 1928. He said that Nhất Linh used to help newly arrived students and lived in a very spartan room in the poorest part of the town. He also had much to do with the people there, going out, for example, to cut and collect firewood with them. This would seem to reflect the Utopianism which Nhất Linh first wrote about in "A Dream of Tu Lam" (see Introduction) and which has had a much bigger impact on modern Vietnamese political thinking than is generally realised.

All I knew was that Minh was the person who had worked out how to preserve Chinese sausage, but I hadn't met him. His house was on the outskirts of the city, at the end of a long road with fields of maize on both sides of it.

When we entered people were sitting quietly as if they were waiting for something very important to happen. This was the opening of a tin of Chinese sausages from home, and this was the main course for today's party. His family had sent the sausages according to his instructions. Everyone was looking at the tin with their mouths watering as Minh opened it.

After he pulled out a couple of sausages with a fork, we realised that there had been a catastrophe. Minh looked sad as he shook his head with disappointment. I looked at the sausages on the plate and cried out: "They've got beards!"



Something had gone wrong with the preservative, and the sausages were covered in a furry fungus. Everyone burst out laughing, but our laughter sounded like crying.

Hy said: "Then let's give them a shave."

But the more we shaved them, the thinner they became. Finally, Quang suggested that we wash them and put them on a plate in the middle of the table "to look at." We agreed that, while we were having a bite on something else, we could look at the sausages.

Without the Chinese sausages we still enjoyed the other dishes. But from that day we didn't trust Minh's scientific training.

And he was sad for months.

### *Summer Holidays*

I noticed that the club was deserted every day. I couldn't go visiting friends, because they had gone to other towns on holiday. Some had gone to the seaside, others to the mountains. If you met an Annamese student, before you started a conversation they would ask you straight away: "Haven't you gone yet? I'm going to Annecy tomorrow."

Meeting the next student, it would be the same story: "Haven't you gone yet? I'm going to Luçon tomorrow."

I thought they were all mad. The weather was still cool; why did they want to go on holidays? Later when I met people I knew, I asked them the same question straight away to save them from asking me: "Haven't you gone yet? I'm going to Vichy tomorrow."

I decided that each time I met someone, I'd give them the name of a different town, and always choose an expensive one. Most people thought: "You are the lucky one."

But gradually I felt irritated that I was staying, and I too wanted to go away. The 'summer holiday' disease is very contagious.

I wanted to go to Paris. The only thing that worried me was that I had no money. I noticed that when my friends had sent telegrams home with good

news of their examination results they received money the next day, and I wanted to be like them; but unfortunately I had not passed any exam. So I thought up a wonderful scheme, and quickly sent a telegram which said: "A friend of mine has passed his bachelor's degree. Please send 5,000 francs immediately."

I was sure that my family would find it strange that I asked for money when it was my friend and not me who had passed the exam, but they might still meet my request. Unfortunately, my scheme did not work, and it cost me 100 francs to send the telegram.

So every day, to kill time, I went to the Botanical Gardens to look at the plants.

Here, I was able to study a strange phenomenon: a number of plants and shrubs that we called 'Western' in our country seemed to be a precious as gold to people here: they were planted in glass-houses and looked after like we look after the tombs of our ancestors. If people in our country devote their lives to maintaining and studying tombs, then there should also be people who spend their lives maintaining and studying those plants—poplars and wild daisies.

From time to time I came across a sign on a tree: "arbre indigène." This startled me and made me think that the tree had come from Annam. But when I thought about it, I realised that the tree was grown right here. Nevertheless, because the trees were called 'native', I scorned them as miserable, withered specimens that were not worth looking at.

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In the garden there was a path called "Lovers' Lane." On either side of the path there were long wooden benches, and on each bench was a pair of lovers, kissing. At that time, I really felt like "a lonely shadow in a foreign land." Feeling sorry for myself, I went to another place and consoled myself by reciting a line from *The Tale of Kiều*: "Abstinence is happiness, love is suffering."

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I don't know why seeing the lovers kissing made me think of my studies. I still didn't know what I'd come to study, and it hadn't been until now that I began to think about this. So I sat down on a park bench, rubbed my forehead, and asked myself: "Now, what are you going to study?"

I immediately thought of dancing. That was the course of study which I thought would be the most difficult, and, in my free time, I could study mechanics as a distraction. This brainwave made me feel very pleased with myself.

I stood up and danced along the path to the rhythm of some imaginary music that played in my mind.\* I came to an imposing building which bore the sign "Botanical Institute." This gave me the idea that I should study botany. Seeing an announcement posted on the wall near the entrance, I satisfied my curiosity when I went up to it and read:

\* Lãng Du's interest in dancing parallels the modern dancing craze which swept Vietnamese towns and scandalised conservatives in the 1920s and 1930s. A great satire on dancing is contained in Tú Mỡ's poem "Chương Trình của Tú Mỡ" [Tú Mỡ's programme] in *Giòng nước ngược* [Against the stream], 3 vols (Hanoi: Đời Nay, 1934-45), 1: 130-2. An excellent description of a refined dancing party with "tea and biscuits" may be found near the beginning of Part III of Khái Hưng's novel *Gia đình* [Family] (1936). Phạm Quỳnh also gives a sense of the importance which some placed on dancing in a slightly disdainful account of a conversation he had with a Vietnamese student in Paris. The man said:

I have studied hard for a number of years, and now that I've passed my exams I want to relax a bit. I intend to marry a French woman, so now I want to study the various ways of 'dancing' here, the modern styles like the Shimmy, the Tango, the Foxtrot, so that when I return home and have a position and attend parties at the Deputy Commander's or Commander's Palace, I'll know how to dance correctly, and let the French there know that I am familiar with the sophisticated ways of Paris (*Ba Tháng*, p.14).

Phạm Quỳnh may have been right to note that it was "a pity" the country had placed "too much hope" in people like him. But, still, it is against his stuffy attitude that Lãng Du's little dance may be read as a modern counterpoint. Meanwhile, Lãng Du's general interest in the Botanical Gardens reminds us of their establishment by Europeans throughout the colonial world: Singapore, Batavia, Hanoi, and many other places. There, as in France, England, or Holland, they were the scientific centres of the agricultural transformations that linked the colonies to international markets. Hence Lãng Du's dreams of a Doctorate in Botany. Some say that Nhật Linh studied that subject at the Institut de la Botanique in Montpellier as part of his science degree.

20 July

Mr Paul X will report on his Doctoral dissertation in Natural Science: "A Further Inquiry into Research on the Shell of the Black Bean."

Seeing such a topic made me want to study botany all the more, and I imagined that in a few years, when I had finished my Bachelor's Degree, I would be able to carry out research like Mr Paul X, and that there would be a poster right there making the following announcement:

15 June

Mr Nguyễn Văn Lăng Du will report on his Doctoral dissertation in Natural Science: "A Further Inquiry into Research on the Shell of the White Bean."

I thought that if Mr Paul X is able to carry out additional research into the Shell of the Black Bean, then the shell of the White Bean must also have intricate research possibilities that would allow me to obtain my Doctorate.

When I returned home, I would be able to carry out more research into String Beans, Soybeans, Green Peas, Broad Beans. There were innumerable beans I could research. Then there were all the different ways of cooking them: frying, steaming, stewing them, and making them into a paste. And researching all these beans, you'd never have to worry about going hungry.

\* \* \*

Sitting on the edge of a pond planted with lotus, I saw an Annamese student sitting with his back to me and his head bent over a book he was reading. I thought it would be someone I knew and called out so he would turn around. I recognised Thái, the person who had tears streaming from his eyes when he cut the onions. I looked at him carefully, and saw that his eyes were still wet with tears. I asked with surprise: "Are you cutting onions?"

Thái answered: "No, what would I be doing cutting onions here. I'm studying."

I laughed: "So studying also brings tears to your eyes."

He gave a forced laugh, closed the book and said: "Yes, I suppose so."

Suddenly, I just caught a glimpse of the edge of a blue telegram sticking out from the pages of the book. I understood that something was wrong, quickly put my hand on his shoulder, and asked: "Do you have some bad news?"

Not wanting to answer, he gave me the telegram which carried news that his wife had died at home a few days before. I stopped smiling and lowered my head, thinking of the sad destinies which had left us lost in a strange land. Right beside me, a small withered lotus fell from its stem. I looked at Thái, then looked at the lotus flowers that, in France, one could only find in Botanical Gardens. I surmised that he had come here because it reminded him of home. However, he said: "I came here to study so that it would make me forget, but it didn't."

The fading scent of the withered lotus was borne on a wisp of wind.

\* \* \*



To console him, I said we should go to Paris for a holiday.

“I haven’t got the money,” he replied.

“I suppose I haven’t either,” I said.

So not being able to go to Paris, I invited him to a coffee shop to cheer him up.

Before we went into the shop, I again counted the money I had in my pocket and found I had exactly four francs.

Thái said “Don’t worry, I’ll only drink enough to drown my sadness.”

This made me think suddenly of my girlfriend, and I hoped Thái would not drink as much as her.

At the coffee shop we both felt happier, as we sat and talked about how we would go to Paris when we had the money.

During this discussion I saw Tích, the poet, come in. He came up to us and said: “What luck! I was feeling sad.”

This made me worried. I again counted the money in my pocket, and I still only had four francs.

I asked Tích: “Do you also need to drown your sadness? Have you got the money to do that?”

Tích replied with a poker face: “Who cares! Waiter! Bring three glasses of Porto.”

I felt so worried. I squeezed Tích’s arm, but he wouldn’t listen. I was taken aback by his determination. A moment later, when three glasses of bright red wine appeared in front of the three of us, and as he put his glass to his lips, Tích said: “Brother Lãng Du has received some registered mail. Go to the Association and pick it up.”

This meant that my family had sent me some money. I was very pleased: “But where am I going to dig up two francs to give the postman now. I’ve only got four francs to pay for the wine.”

Tích said: “If you’ve still got four francs, then give him the lot.”

So saying, he put the glass of wine to his lips, took a sip, blinked thoughtfully, and nodded.

I went to the Association and waited for a while before someone brought the mail as expected and gave me a registered letter. I signed the register, then, in a carefree mood, I gave him the four francs I had in my pocket.

I opened the envelope, but strangely there was no ‘money order’ in it. Then, looking at the letter, I realised that it was from my girlfriend asking how I was. Basically, it said:

I’m writing to see how you are. Since you left there has not been a day when I haven’t cried, and even now, as I write this letter, I can not hold back my tears. Look carefully at the words “I’m writing”; the reason they are smudged is that my tears have fallen on them.

Despite my great exasperation, I adopted the air of a detective and examined those smeared words. I said to myself: “One of those words is smudged because my girlfriend wet her finger with saliva and rubbed it, the

\* Reflecting the institution of the Post Office, the epistolary device is common in early modern Vietnamese literature. But the examination of the alleged tear drop and the projected chemical analysis of it is an allusion to the Vietnamese Sherlock Holmes stories which *Thế Lữ* wrote in the 1930s. In these stories, the investigations of the detective *Lê Phong* are driven to comical extremes by the modern scientific rationalism that he demands of himself in a largely pre-scientific society. The question is whether, as Woodside has argued, “literature like this was too superorganic and unreal” (*Community and revolution*, p.89) to have a significant impact on the development of a modern political consciousness, or whether *Thế Lữ* thought he was writing comic satires which were aligned with the *Customs* project. If so, the stories would have been significant contributions to the radical middle-class agenda of the era. In any case, the stories were very popular among urban readers for whom *Lê Phong*, like *Lý Tóét*, enjoyed something of a cult following into the 1960s.

other has been smudged with champagne. If they had been smudged with tears she would not have told me that. I’ll ask my friend Kim, the chemist, to help me analyse it.\*

Thinking of *Tích* and *Thái* who were sitting with their wine waiting for me to come back with the money to pay the waiter, I wanted to cry like my girlfriend. I wanted to run after the postman and get my money back, but he had already disappeared.

I had to run around hurriedly and borrow money from various people. By the time I had returned to the coffee shop with the money, *Tích* and *Thái* were onto their third glass! *Thái* seemed to be very drunk and both his eyes were wet with tears. Drinking what was left in his glass, he told *Tích* in a drawling voice: “Oh, how I hate cutting onions.”

To distract him from the sad news of his wife, *Tích* put his arms around *Thái* and rocked him backwards and forwards like a baby, quietly singing a lullaby of crude verses, as usual.

[...]

I left the two of them that way and asked the waiter to bring me a piece of paper so that I could write a few words to my girlfriend. When I finished writing I put my finger in the wine and smudged a few words. Then I wrote at the bottom of the letter: “When I was writing to you, my tears were falling like showers.”

[...]



#### IV. PARIS

##### *On the Train*

† On 16 May 1922, *Phạm Quỳnh* had already taken an express train from Lyon to Paris. He arrived at La Gare de Lyon at 3 pm, after an eight-and-a-half-hour journey—today the TGV takes two hours—and made the following notes in the Latin Quarter the next morning:

How long had I thirsted to be in Paris, and there, all of a sudden, is where I find myself. When I was still dreaming of Paris, I thought that to be able to see it would be a cause for great exultation. But now that I am here, I feel as unruffled as though I weren't, or as though I have been here

A few days later I received another registered letter from home. I was only worried that my girlfriend had thought of me again! But fortunately for me, the letter did not contain any smudged words, but a cheque for 1,500 francs.

I ran quickly to *Thái*'s house to boast. He had also received a letter which his wife had sent before she died. This letter made him cry until his whole face was swollen, and many of the words in the letter were blurred by his falling tears. More happily for him, however, he had also received a cheque for 1,000 francs from his wife. He looked at the cheque, and half laughing, half crying he said to me: “I don't want to cash the cheque, I want to keep it as a souvenir.”

This concerned me sufficiently to offer some advice: “It would be enough to keep the letter.”

The next day we departed for Paris, leaving Quang sadly alone. When he saw us off at the station, he said mockingly: "In the summer holidays, country yokels go to Paris, because it is as hot as Saigon. But you are going to see the '*ville de lumière*' to brighten yourselves up."<sup>†</sup>

Quang was teasing us with the suggestion that we were countrified.

When the train whistle blew, Quang, who was waving his handkerchief, suddenly lowered his head, and used his handkerchief to wipe his eyes. Thái laughed: "Quang must have got some coal dust in his eye."

The train had exacted our revenge.

Whenever I got on a train in France, I always thought of the trains at home. I recall reading a poem in a book: "The trains in Indochina are always eager to run, but when they do they are as slow as a turtle." First-class carriages in Indochina are equal to third-class in France and Japan, and third-class in Indochina is equal to I don't know what.<sup>‡</sup>

Feeling the softness beneath both buttocks, I started thinking philosophically about progress. In France, if a bus owner were to use seats without cushions, the passengers would complain loudly and refuse to sit down. The next day the owner would have to install seats with cushions.

In our country, the first time we sit on a hard seat and our buttocks hurt, we console ourselves: it hurts a little, but won't kill us, it'll be alright. After that we don't feel any more discomfort, and by the third time it even feels quite smooth. So our buttocks make progress in becoming used to pain, but we make no progress at all.

### The Métro

When we were on the train we asked a passenger what we should see in Paris. He told us: "There are three things: the Eiffel Tower, the smile of President Doumergue, and the beautiful legs of the actress, Miss Mistinguett."<sup>§</sup>

We arrived in Paris at 8 pm. As soon as we got out of the station we went underground to explore the Métro<sup>#</sup> before we went to see the legs of Miss Mistinguett.

/many years already. On waking this morning, I opened my room window and looked out into the street. I dreamt I was still at home, then, suddenly, I remembered that here I was in the first city in the world. [NP 70, p.272].

It would be unwise to laugh: Paris was a great and powerful city, which cast its spell over many of its colonial subjects. [See, for example, Nguyễn Trọng Hiệp's sumptuous quatrains in his *Paris, capitale de la France: recueil de vers*, cited in n.5 to the Introduction above]. However, the extent to which Phạm

/Quỳnh was prepared to carry his imperial love fantasy into the repression of Vietnamese nationalism in his implication in the closure of *Customs*, for instance, is what led to his execution by the Việt Minh in 1945. In this context, Phạm Quỳnh's travelogue represents the real romance while Lãng Du's strips Paris of all its grandeur.

<sup>‡</sup> One thing Lãng Du shares with Phạm Quỳnh is a fascination for trains. This is not surprising when French literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Vietnamese literature a little later is full of this fascination

/too. Also, Paul Doumer, Governor-General of Indochina from 1897 to 1902 and President of the French Republic for a period in 1931–32, was the son of a railway worker.

<sup>§</sup> Miss Mistinguett (originally Miss Tinguette) was, in Roger Shattuck's words, one of those "vivacious brassy entertainers who worked themselves to the point of exhaustion in the *fin de siècle* era of music-hall and *café chantant* in Paris (*The banquet years* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1968, p.8]). She was still working in 1927 when the English writer Graham Greene saw her in Paris. Vietnamese children sometimes sang her songs as late as the 1940s. We will come to the Eiffel Tower. Gaston Doumergue, President of the French Republic from 1924 to 1931, was very popular with the masses because of his humble origins, southerner's geniality, political tact and skills. With these attributes, he was said to have been able to intervene in French politics more than almost any other President.

<sup>#</sup> Moving from Phạm Quỳnh's *Nam Phong* notes to *Three months in Paris*, he also describes the Paris Métro. It comes in a discussion of the city's transport system, which tells how the traffic, the bus system, and taximetres work, and how French policemen are "courteous" and do not treat people like "rubbish" as in Vietnam. His interest in the Métro then produces one of the longer sentences in modern Vietnamese literature:

The Métro line is dug under the city of Paris like a spider's web, some lines running the length of the city, others the width, some running up, others down, and others running around in circles, while there are branches with lines that run under the river and then half way under the sky depending on whether the terrain is high or low, and that many lines, all some streets apart, meet each other interlaced and crisscrossed at stops in the streets which each have steps and a beautiful wide door to allow passengers to go up and down who only need a thirty-centime ticket to go to the end of the line or to wherever they want provided only that they do not come up to the surface of the ground, because if they do that then they must buy another ticket to go down again [*Ba Tháng ở Paris*, p.22]

There are some less challenging sentences on the Métro in NP 70, p.273.

After going down thirty steps, I saw a train arriving. Thrilled by this sight, I ran towards the platform when a steel door suddenly blocked my way, as though the wind had slammed it shut.

I pushed on the door as hard as I could, but this had no effect.

When I looked up, I saw a sign: "Do not push this door. It is operated automatically by electricity."

We were left standing there looking at the sign and cursing the door. It was as if we were being told that: "If you run onto the platform and jump into the train, you could break your leg. To prevent accidents we have to inconvenience you slightly."

The steel door then opened slowly, inviting us to go onto the platform: "The train has now left, please come in and wait for the next one."

To go underground by Métro gives you the impression that you are travelling in hell which is lit up with electric lights. But going down is cheap, and, for those in search of lost family souls, there is no need for magic charms to make the descent.

You just pay seven *sous* and go down. If you stick your head up you make a mistake, because you have to pay another seven *sous* to go down again.

This is why people only stick their heads up out of the ground when they reach their destination. But even when miserly people reach their destination and stick their heads up they still look as if they regret their arrival. I was the same. There were days when I only had a franc in my pocket and bought a ticket to go down and spent hours looking around to allay my hunger. Of course, all the scenery was in the carriage, as it was dark outside in the tunnel. The best time to do this was when the workers were going home, especially the female ones. I was free to choose. If I saw an attractive female worker, I would follow her even though I was hungry. But when she left the Métro I had to make a decision: lose her or the ticket. I decided to go back down, and travel around aimlessly, looking for another pretty sight to distract me from my hunger.

Many stations have very interesting names: for example, La Muette (meaning 'mute'), La Bastille (the name of the prison), La Gare de Lyon (meaning 'lion'). Before you go down to catch the Métro you have to look at the map in the station: the map is as tangled as a spider's web after a shower of rain. You have to run your finger along the direction you want to go like a fortune-teller reading a horoscope. It was most exciting if a pretty girl stood beside me and ran her finger along the same line as me. I would start a conversation with a few vague words. If she didn't answer and looked haughty, I could take revenge by pointing at La Muette and saying the name loudly, and she would get the message. Because of my witty revenge, some girls would smile and start a conversation to prove that they were not mute. Others would find a wittier reply: pointing their fingers at La Bastille, and saying that name loudly.

I would then get the message and hurry off to get a ticket to descend into the underground.

[...]

### *Chinese Restaurants*

After descending into hell, we ascended into heaven. Heaven here was in the Chinese restaurants.\* There was nothing more pleasant than enjoying a Chinese restaurant in the middle of France; nothing more blissful or mouth-watering than being able to put your chopsticks into a bowl with a plate of roasted pork lined with delicious white fat in front of you. Lying very neatly beside the pork dish there would be a few pickled Chinese leeks, and around it, various braised dishes (beef braised with dry mushrooms, chicken braised with almonds, bamboo shoots and bean sprouts), plates of fried fish with sweet and sour sauce, and bowls of soup, all competing to give off their fragrant steam. With such food before them, the customers would think they were lost in paradise with clouds flying in the sky.

The only trouble is that when you are in hell it only costs seven *sous*, but when you ascend into heaven it costs twenty or thirty francs. Because of that we rarely went to heaven, even though we prayed day and night and always meditated on those glorious dishes.

In Paris there were six Chinese restaurants, some good, some mediocre.† But something worth noting about them is that they were all clean; there were no bones and no dirty pieces of paper on the floor, there were no men sitting down with their shorts rolled up to their crotches, scratching themselves, clearing their throats and spitting on the ground. The Chinese people who have come to France have caught the ‘clean disease’ from the Europeans. However, because of that some say the food is not as tasty as it should be and has lost its distinctive flavour.

One strange thing was that both when we were rich and when we were poor we were able to eat Chinese food. When we had some money we ate many wonderful dishes, and when we had very little money we asked for salty dishes and a bowl of soup which we pushed down our throats, for there was no charge for the rice and you could eat as much of it as you liked.

On leaving those Chinese restaurants, I must say we often had pangs of guilt. Looking at our good clothes and feeling our stomachs stretched full, we could really feel we belonged to that group of useless gluttons who are parasites on society. Somebody said that before there was a rule that people had to climb onto a scale before and after they eat and pay according to the difference in their weight. But that rule had to be abolished. Many people stayed and digested their food before they left.

I shouldn't forget to mention that there were angels in those heavens. These were the French girls who befriended oriental students, and others who liked to taste something different. Many of the girls ate with spoons

\* The large amount of detail about food in *Going to France* is fairly typical of modern Vietnamese literature, as it reflects a great deal of hunger and poverty.

† Phạm Quỳnh took a room in rue Bertholet in the Latin Quarter from where he did a lot of walking, especially to Bouillon Duval, the restaurant where he ate on Bvd St Michel. He explained that this restaurant was part of a chain of some forty others around Paris which a man named Duval had built up from nothing. Some meals cost him “forty or fifty francs”; others, presumably in other places, “two or three.”

Meanwhile Phạm Quỳnh's restaurant guide is quite different from Lãng Du's. In fact, his account of the “six Chinese restaurants, some good, some mediocre” could be read as a deconstruction of Phạm Quỳnh's more imposing Duval chain. Yet around this antagonism the narratives also have some culturally determined similarities. There is a common deep interest in the cost of the restaurants. The kind of detail Phạm Quỳnh noticed about student life is also close to that which Lãng Du recorded in the coffee shop with his friends from the Student Association. Phạm Quỳnh observed in the Bvd St Michel: “The coffee shops and wine bars on either side of the road are overcrowded with seated people, most of whom are students whiling away their time, smoking cigarettes and drinking glasses of water.” The point of shared interest is the functioning of civil society (*Three months in Paris*, pp.15–18).



because they didn't know how to use chopsticks; they took the food, added soy sauce, mixed it completely with the rice, then looked as though they were enjoying the food as they sat there chewing it. But quite a few used chopsticks skilfully as they picked up the food, dipped it in the sauce, put it in their bowls to eat with rice, and bit the bean sprouts as delicately as well-mannered Vietnamese girls do.

The sounds of people talking, mingled with the sounds of chopsticks clicking against the China bowls, created the illusion that we were at a banquet that included French men as well as women.

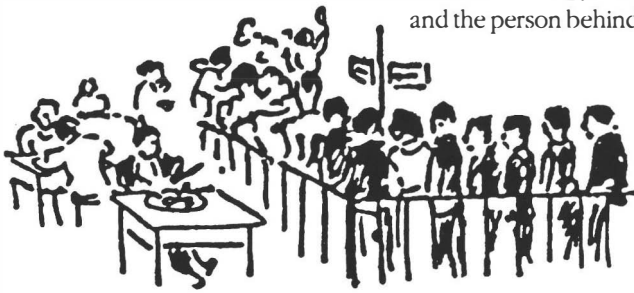
### *The Cafeteria*

[...]

According to the custom in France, when you go to a restaurant, you have to pay ten per cent of the price of what you have eaten. This is called a 'tip'. If a meal costs fifty *sous*, you have to pay fifty-five; if it costs fifty-three, you have to pay sixty as a rounded figure. That seven-*sou* tip could have bought bread for dinner, and because of the custom of paying tips you have to drink water that night while the waiter drinks wine.

But in the common cafeteria it's not like that. Here, you have to serve yourself. It's in the 'student quarter' of the city and is reserved for students. However, many people who like exotic experiences, such as American millionaires and we ourselves, go in there too.

Once inside, you have to stand in a queue. In front you see someone's back and the person behind you sees yours. The more the back of the person in front moves forward the closer you get to the bay where the food is displayed. Before you get to the bay, you have to take a tray, a knife, a fork, and a spoon. When you go past the food, you have to glance at all of the dishes quickly and, selecting what you like and have enough money to pay for, point at it. A very pretty girl will put that plate on your tray and smile as if to say: "You have chosen well."



You don't know whether you are smart for selecting that dish or gazing at her. After taking the food, you carry the tray across a passage to where a woman sits waiting. She tells you to stop, then, running her eyes over the tray, adds up the cost. For example, you take a plate of beef for one franc fifteen, a plate of cabbage for fifteen *sous*, a bowl of soup for fifteen *sous*, a bread roll for ten *sous*, and the woman announces that the total is three francs fifteen (there are twenty *sous* in a franc). Mathematics students from the university are not as clever as she at the addition. She takes a ticket from you with various prices from one to ten francs printed in squares on it. Then, holding a punch, she punches holes in the squares which add up to three francs fifteen *sous*. With your destiny decided, there is no way to escape or erase it. We called her the woman who decided our fortunes. Once she'd punched

out three francs fifteen, you would, as expected, have to pay exactly three francs fifteen to be released from your debt.

Leaving the passage, you carry the tray to a table then eat as you please until you've finished everything. Often you have a dish you find you don't like, and, if you see that the tray of the person beside you still has an untouched plate on it, you can sometimes arrange a swap. When at the food bay and carrying the tray, I was of course my own waiter making me reflect that the training I had at home had finally come in handy. When I put the tray on the table, I felt like saying politely to myself: "Please eat, Sir."

As I sat down, I'm sure I mumbled to myself: "Now you can go out to the kitchen." This must have satisfied the snobbish inclinations I had often indulged at home.

When I'd finished eating, I called out: "Waiter, take this tray away." Thereupon, I stood up and took the tray to the counter. Wanting to leave, I gave the ticket with holes punched in it to the cashier and paid. The cashier gave me a piece of paper which allowed me to leave.

### *Hard Up*

Both Thái and I stayed in one room, one very good room in a hotel in the Latin Quarter.

Previously, we had thought that the Latin Quarter was a special area surrounded by a wall, and that, being constructed according to an ancient Roman design, the houses in it would be completely different from the rest of those in Paris. However, we found out later that we had already passed the Latin Quarter without knowing that was what it was.

Our life in Paris really was a calm and leisurely one; the only thing that occupied us was looking around. In the morning, after spending a lot of time in a number of coffee shops, we strolled along the banks of the Seine, bought books, and crossed the bridges to look at various museums. After lunch at a Chinese restaurant, we went in to the Luxembourg Gardens (to which we gave the Chinese name "Tim Sam Pao") and looked at the "leaves falling one by one on to the bare shoulders of the statues," as Anatole France had written. The trouble with going into the gardens at that time, however, was that it was summer and the leaves were not falling. Disappointed, we consoled ourselves by looking at the bare shoulders and powdered faces of the moving statues. At night, we went to see the famous legs that were on view in the music-halls and picture theatres.

While we were living this very full life, we met a friend who brought us misfortune. We were sitting in the Luxembourg Gardens one morning, yawning and watching a group of young children playing, when Trách, a fellow student from X Province, appeared before our eyes. At that time, we were just pleased to see a friend, and had no idea of what would happen after this meeting.



Trạch told us that he had come here because he needed some rare books for his research. We nodded, thinking that was alright and invited him to a Chinese restaurant. He also nodded, making us think that that was alright and accepted straight away. That evening he nodded again and accepted another meal, and that night he nodded yet again and accepted the offer to sleep in our room. The next morning, Trạch departed, and, as he did, he did not forget to borrow 200 francs from us.

I grumbled to Thái: "What are we going to live on?"

He replied with a laugh: "I'll be getting some more money from home tomorrow."

The next day there was nothing, and the day after that there still wasn't anything. Thái started to worry; I did too. Three days later we went into the Luxembourg Gardens again. Well after our lunch hour we still hadn't budgeted. Thái yawned until tears came to his eyes, then smiled: "Count what we've got."

I counted the money and counted it again: only fifteen *sous*. Thái suddenly gave me a strong slap on the shoulder, making me hungrier than ever.

"I know someone at Mont Rouge."

"Oh, that's good! But Mont Rouge is six kilometres from here. How are you going to get there?"

"I'll have to go by the Métro."

Two hours later, I saw him come up from the underground: "My good friend is the same as us. But he's a little richer, and so he loaned me twenty *sous*. Spend fifteen *sous* on the train, but borrow twenty, we are still five better off with twenty *sous*. Therefore, we can buy some bread."

Reaching a bread shop, we took forever to make our selection with our eyes. There was one big French loaf that weighed about a kilogram and looked very good, but I can't remember if it was twenty or twenty-one *sous*. To ask the price of that big loaf and not buy it would have been very embarrassing, and so we decided to buy a small roll. After we knew that the price of a small roll was exactly six *sous*, and after we had carefully multiplied three by six, we dared to ask for three rolls.

We hurried back to our room, our stately room, to enjoy those precious three rolls. On the way back, I was worried about how we were going to divide the third roll equally.

We didn't realise that this 'French dinner' would be our last one in Paris.

We had never eaten a meal that was as good as that. Each of us went to the tap and filled a glass with fresh water. We purposely put the glasses right up under the tap so that the water would bubble and foam. Pretending that the glasses were full of champagne, we clinked them happily in a salute to each other.

Feeling a little light-headed, we encouraged ourselves to go out to get over the wine. Even though our stomachs were stretched full, the bread alone was not substantial enough to give us strength.



Seeing the Eiffel Tower at that time, it looked thin and shaky, not the towering structure it usually was.\*

When we got home, we lay on the bed fully dressed. Before he closed his eyes, Thái kept repeating the same sentence: "I'll receive some money tomorrow."

I told Thái: "Let's go to sleep. The postman will wake us up at 9 tomorrow morning. If he doesn't and we sleep in 'till 11, we'll have no hope."

As expected, someone knocked on the door at 9 and woke us up.

Thái was excited: "Please, let me sign."

I rubbed my eyes and asked myself: "But why are there two postmen?"

As they came into focus, it turned out that they were two gendarmes. I said to Thái: "The gendarmes have brought your letter. Important, isn't it?"

The two gendarmes did not pay any attention to my joke. They gave us a paper to look at and said: "In accordance with an order of the Interior Minister, you are to be deported from France; please pack your bags and come with us to the station."

Thái said: "This is pretty funny, isn't it?"

I answered: "Quite exciting."

We knew that it was no use explaining to these gendarmes, because they were only following orders. As we packed our clothes in our suitcases, we made some jokes to keep up our spirits.

I laughed: "At least they'll feed us at the police station."

"That's for sure."

"So what are we waiting for?"

Suddenly, Thái had a bright idea: "Let's take advantage of the situation to get a free trip home."

I replied: "But once I go back, I won't be able to come here again. How am I going to study photography?"

"But they've made a mistake about us, so why won't we be able to come back later?"

When we reached the police station we were given the role of two dangerous rebels. Aside from us, there were around ten others who had been arrested. They said we were members of a group from X Province who had come to Paris to cause trouble.

The Police officer said: "Mr Trách has been in contact with you, you agreed in the Luxembourg Gardens to eat in a Chinese restaurant, and when Mr Trách left you, you did not forget to lend him some money. Isn't that so? What do you have to say for yourselves?"

I intended to reply: "It's because we lent him the money that we are hungry."

However, Thái answered calmly before I could speak: "There is no need for you to ask complicated questions. You already know the answers, so there is no point in wasting time."

I noticed that Thái had an unusually firm expression on his face, even

\* Phạm Quỳnh's experience of the Eiffel Tower was quite different from Iãng Du's. On 26 May 1922 Phạm Quỳnh paid five francs to take the lift to the top of the Tower. After lunch at the Tower restaurant, where the waiters were once again "courteous," the view inspired a postcard home. Above the message on the back of the card he inscribed the words "Written from 300 metres above Paris." Because his children knew nothing about elevators, this was realization he thought would startle them: "how very tiring and dangerous they would think the climb to that height had been." He also notes with pride, which might be tinged with self-consciousness, that the Woolworth tower in New York was only 299 metres high (*NP* 75, p.196). Though still very rare, such a heady view of the world was not necessarily unique in Vietnam by the 1920s. For example, Quatrain XXIII in Nguyễn Trọng Hiệp's *Paris, capitale de la France: recueil de vers* of 1897 [cited in n.5 to the Introduction above], provides a description of the Eiffel Tower itself. However, unlike Phạm Quỳnh's account, it does not actually offer a view from the top.

\* Phạm Quỳnh's travelogue *Three months in Paris* ends, interestingly, with a short narrative which is separated from the main body of the work and which records a trip to World War I battlefields with Governor-General Albert Sarraut. At Verdun, where Vietnamese soldiers had fought for France, the colonial delegation was met by a local band, the mayor gave a speech, and among other things Phạm Quỳnh noticed that a specialty of the region was confectionary cooked in the shape of rifles. In any case, Phạm Quỳnh's visit was a symbolic gesture of Franco-Annamite unity, which shows that homage to France and the imperial order thus lay at the heart of his travel writing, while a new national consciousness lay at the heart of Lãng Du's. This is crucial to the interlocking of their opposed natures and endings.

† What sensitized Lãng Du to the "special beauty" of women picking each other's head-lice was almost certainly Nhất Linh's reading of André Gide's novels. In *L'immoraliste* (1902), for example, the narrator says:

A land free from works of art, I despise those who cannot recognize beauty until it has been transcribed and interpreted. The Arabs have this admirable quality, that they live their art, sing it, dissipate it from day to day ...

Such an idea of "lived art" or "living beauty" is then dramatized in the next paragraph where, referring to his actions in an Algerian town, Gide's narrator foreshadows Lãng Du's interest in what the two Vietnamese women were doing in the street:

As I was going back to sleep at the hotel, I remembered a group of Arabs I had seen lying out of doors on mats, outside a little cafe. I went and lay down to sleep beside them. I came away covered with vermin.

(Gide, *The immoralist*, trans. Dorothy Bussy [Harmondsworth, Mddlx.: Penguin Books, 1970], p.148.)

though he was starving. Later, I realised that it was better to be determined, because explanations were no use whatsoever.

The next morning we reached Marseilles, and when our ship passed Con Son Prison Island off the coast of Cochinchina, we prayed that it would stay a long way from it.

### *Not Dead Yet, But ...\**

The other day Thái came to see me and asked me to take a photo of him to send back to his friends in France. We looked at each other and felt sad. "It all seems so long ago."

Even though they were dry, Thái wiped his eyes with a handkerchief as he spoke. He said: "Since we returned home, I haven't shed a tear."

I laughed: "I suppose that's because you haven't had the chance to cut any onions."

I invited him to come in and have something to eat which we cooked ourselves. After we finished eating we decided to go out imagining that we were still in France. When we went out into the street we immediately saw two women sitting on the footpath picking each other's head-lice. I said: "That's our beloved country!"

Thái replied naturally: "After a while you get used to anything. I now see a special beauty in that scene."<sup>†</sup>

After stopping for a moment, he continued sadly: "Moreover, all my classmates are the same. We have changed. We have outgrown our earlier impetuosity. We are sinking, sinking slowly."

He gave a long sigh: "That's life!"

I said a little differently: "The situation!"

As we passed a bookshop, Thái seemed to have a strong recollection of something: "Do you know, I recently saw in the paper that Tích died."

"Who?"

"Tích, that poet we knew in France. He died of tuberculosis."

I felt a stab of pain: "Is that so?"

I saw his face appear very clearly in front of me: that shy but disorderly poet who liked eating and drinking and writing poetry as well as singing crude verse. And it was the way he blinked when he was able to swallow a piece of good meat to appease his hunger that especially made me miss him.

"Is he really dead?"

Thái did not answer as we walked on slowly together in a melancholy mood.

A little later Thái sighed then said very softly: "And we might not be dead yet, but ... "