


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 *Phong 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 *ĐI TÂY* 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-

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Figure 1

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



¹ 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.

² 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.¹ 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.² 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,"³ 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.

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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)*⁴ 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).⁵ 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.⁶

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 1929.⁷ 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,⁸ consists of a

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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).

⁶ 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.

⁷ Bùi Thanh Vân, *Đạo khắp toàn cầu* (Huế: Đắc Lập, 1929).

⁸ 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 An 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 élite 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹

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'¹² 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.

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

¹⁰ *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), *Đoạn tuyệt* (1934), *Lạnh lùng* (1936), *Đôi bạn* (1937).

¹¹ *Văn xuôi lãng mạn*, vol.1, pp.18-19.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.19.

¹³ 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).

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

¹⁵ 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 vẻ 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.

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ 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.¹³

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.¹⁴

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'.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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, *Nhỏ 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,"¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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 1927,²⁰ 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.²¹

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;²² 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

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ O'Harrow, *Modern Vietnamese prose fiction*, p.55, uses the term 'colonial idealist' to describe Tardieu.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.

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

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

²⁵ Nhật Thịnh, *Portrait*, pp.30–1.

²⁶ 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 Hiếu), Thế Lữ (Nguyễn Thế Lữ) and Khái Hưng (Trần Khánh Giư).

²⁷ 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.²³ 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."²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸ *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.

²⁸ 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 Hóa, 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!



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

³⁰ See n.10.

³¹ 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.

³² 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)²⁹ and *Indifference* (1937).³⁰ 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.³¹

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.³² 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'.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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.

³³ Tú Mỡ, *Kitchen*, pp.105, 106.

³⁴ 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).

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

³⁶ "Đèo Ba dột" [The Ba Dột 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).

³⁷ Phan Khôi, "Cái cười của con rồng cháu tiên: một cái cảm tưởng trong khi đọc *Cay đắng mùi đời*" [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.

³⁸ 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 học 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ 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?³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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).⁴⁰

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.

³⁹ I will be dealing with this in another work.

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

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

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

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ 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,⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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."⁴³ 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."⁴⁴

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."⁴⁵ 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

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

⁴⁶ Phạm Văn Khoa, *Sắc-Li Sa-Plin* [Charlie Chaplin] (Hanoi: NXB Văn Hóa, 1984), p.108.

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

⁴⁸ 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 "Hiếu được 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 naïvety, 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."⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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'."⁴⁸

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:

⁴⁹ *Phong Hóa*, 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.⁴⁹

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



⁵⁰ 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.

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

⁵² 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'.⁵⁰ 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,⁵¹ 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 offsider in *Customs* cartoons. This was Xã Xệ, the butt of many slapstick jokes. Furthermore, they would have known that the models for Lý Toét and Xã Xệ, 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 Xệ 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 Xã Xệ 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.⁵² 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.⁵³

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.⁵⁴ 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.

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ 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?



⁵⁵ Phong Hóa, 8 May 1936, p.8.

⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁵

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 Paullette 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!”⁵⁶

⁵⁷ 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*.

⁵⁸ Phạm Quỳnh, *Three months in Paris*, p.9.

V

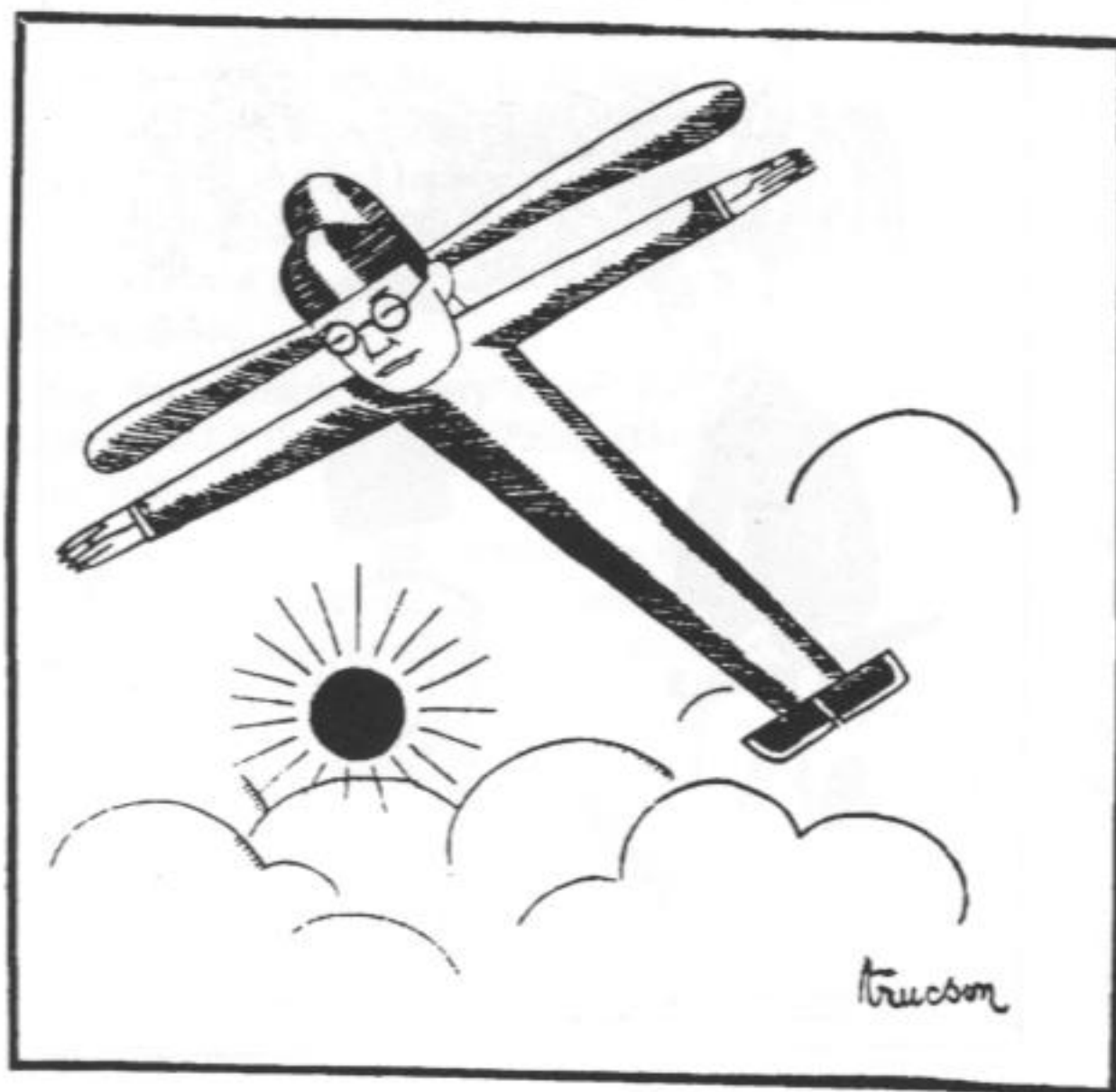
Not long after Nhất Linh transformed *Customs* in 1932, Phạm Quỳnh, Bảo Đại’s Chief of Cabinet and Minister of Education, keen to neutralise the journal’s potentially disruptive influence, offered Nhất Linh the head-

mastership of a prestigious school in Huế. This did not work and, what is more, Phạm Quỳnh and other members of the mandarin 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).⁵⁷

Dedicated to the proposition that Paris was “the brain of the civilised world,”⁵⁸ 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 bat’ of a high 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*,⁵⁹ 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*."⁶⁰ It is generally explained that the immediate cause for the closure was an article in which Hoàng Đạo sharply ridiculed the mandarin, ⁶¹ 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*.

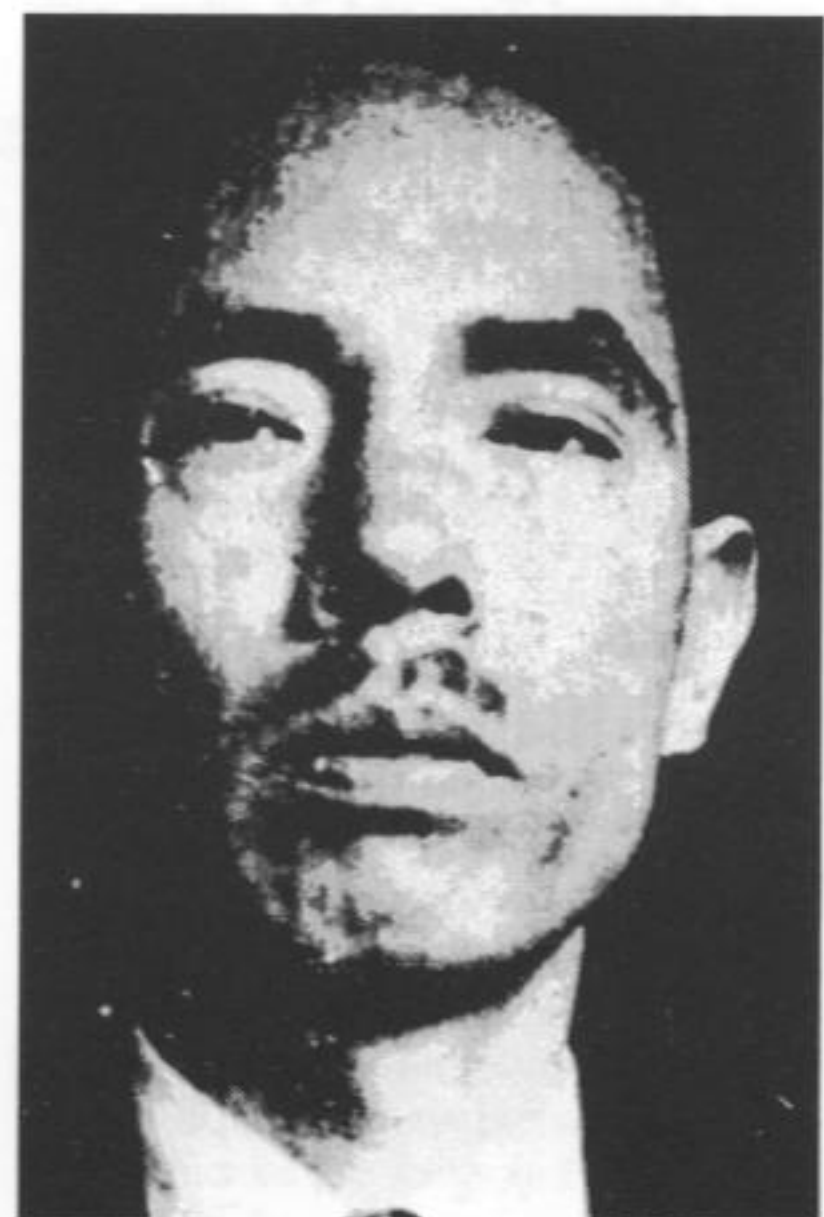
⁵⁹ The saying appears in *ibid.*, p.5. Nhất Linh's quotation is given just below the title in the first instalment of *Going to France*.

⁶⁰ 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.

⁶¹ 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)



⁶² *Đôi bạn, Hai buổi chiều vàng, Bướm trắng.*

⁶³ See n.60.

⁶⁴ *Giòng sông Thanh Thủy.*

⁶⁵ *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).⁶² 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.⁶³ 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).⁶⁴ 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."⁶⁵ (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.

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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.



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