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Luci Xi: Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi

Vu Trong Phung

Translated, with an introduction, by Shaun Kingsley Malarney

University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2011, pp.176

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Vu Trong Phung's *Luci Xi: Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi* falls under a kind of writing called *reportage*. *Reportage* is form of investigative journalism made popular in Vietnam in the 1930s. This kind writing assumed different variants "such as travelogues from locales across Vietnam, reflective pieces on social and cultural life, or descriptions of contemporary events such as village life or festivals" (p.3). Tam Lang's landmark work, *Toi Keo Xe* is regarded as a major benchmark for that kind of literature. Lang, in *Ti Keo Xe*, was interested in knowing and portraying the daily experiences of rickshaw pullers and this particular angle caused a stir within the reading public. It wasn't common to align with the societal underdog or project his/her perspective as something worth of recognition or attention. *Reportage* tended to align with the sociopolitical perspectives of the underclass in that it portrayed the plight of "the marginal, disenfranchised, dispossessed, unseen, or even exploited members of Vietnamese society" (p.3). For instance, Vu Trong Phung, in earlier works, explored the unsavory effects of gambling on social cohesion. He had also focused on the relations between French soldiers and Vietnamese women. In these works and others of a similar nature, Phung usually employed the first-person perspective giving his writings an immediacy and poignancy.

Luci Xi was serialized in Hanoi newspaper *Tuong Lai* (The Future) and came out in eleven installments in 1937. Phung's treatise unveils the human dimensions of prostitution, that is, the real face of the sex trade is uncovered and not the abstract disquisitions of medical practitioners or the fustiness of moralists. For instance, Huyen, a prostitute is lured into the sex trade by "romanticism, materialism, the relaxation of the rules regarding male-female interaction, the absence of sexual education, the prohibition marriage among lineage mates, arranged marriage, and the inequalities and denial of human feeling" (p.5).

However, unchecked prostitution comes with enormous social and health costs: the spread of deadly venereal diseases such as syphilis. In order to curb the transmission of venereal infections, the colonial authorities established dispensaries in which infected women were kept incarcerated pending the period in which they regained good health.

Phung dwells on the perplexities, shame and helplessness of the inmates of the dispensaries. Of course, there were also grave economic consequences for spells of incarceration and this often led infected women to avoid medical treatment for venereal diseases as it meant an inevitable loss of income.

As Shaun Kingsley Malarney writes, "for Vu Trong Phung, the complex reality of prostitution and venereal disease was the source and focus of a number of profound anxieties about the sociopolitical status in colonial Hanoi. As he clearly recognized, Vietnam's colonial encounter with French culture and civilization was couched in the

rhetoric of “progress”(p.3). Vu Trong Phung questioned the veracity of this so-called rhetoric of progress as he clearly observed that it went with an underside of societal decay and hypocrisy. His consistent interrogation of the frayed seams of colonial Vietnamese society no sooner led him to be crowned the “Northern King of *Reportage*”. He however led a tragically short life dying of tuberculosis and opium addiction at the age of twenty-seven in 1939. Before his demise, Vu Trong Phung managed to produce a remarkable body of work that included “at least eight novels, seven plays, five book-length works of non-fiction reportage, several dozen short stories, articles and editorials” (Zinoman 2002, cited by Malarney, p.3). In many quarters of Vietnamese society, he is regarded as perhaps the most accomplished author to have emerged from the country in the twentieth century.

One impressive quality about *Luci Xi* is that Vu Trong Phung is not merely concerned with depicting the underbelly of colonial Hanoi society with voyeuristic intent. His ideological sympathies are quite obvious in revealing the far-reaching effects caused by French colonial policies in controlling the Vietnamese social body; assigning social strata for various classes and races, vilifying morally reprehensible women and also incarcerating them when they became victims of disease. Women seemed to bear the brunt of colonial mechanisms of control and chastisement in term of being quarantined, stigmatized and subjected to all manner of abuse. Both the colonial discourse and institution sought to undermine the agency of women and the kind of writing Phung engaged in- *reportage*- sought to expose this form of violence.

Luci Xi further resonates in the contemporary age of HIV/Aids and global capitalism. The penetration of Vietnamese society by agents of colonialism led to a radical form of liberation that overturned indigenous Vietnamese mores. The same is certainly true of present age of globalization and this makes Vu Trong Phung’s book a remarkable work of cultural history sexology, anthropology, colonial dynamics and of course globalization studies. The book once again demonstrates the scarifications inflicted by colonialism; cultural, political psychological and sexual. There are many other nuances to found in this revealing book. First, it reveals the robustness of a particular form of writing: *reportage*. Also, it casts an unflinching gaze at a colonial sex trade and its accompanying moral despair and panics. The powerful vision of the author, Vu Trong Phung must also be mentioned as his topic and tradition of writing seemed especially suited to him. As mentioned earlier, Phung wrote in various genres and this merely attests to his virtuosity and versatility. Indeed we are fortunate to have a first-hand account of the conflicting impact of French colonialism in its glory days.

