

DUMB LUCK

A Novel by Vũ Trọng Phụng

Peter Zinoman, Editor



Translated by
Nguyễn Nguyệt Cầm and Peter Zinoman,
with an Introduction by Peter Zinoman

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Introduction

Vũ Trọng Phụng's *Dumb Luck* and the Nature of Vietnamese Modernism

Peter Zinoman

During the late-colonial decade of the 1930s Vũ Trọng Phụng produced a body of writing that stands today as the single most remarkable individual achievement in modern Vietnamese literature. In a graveside eulogy to the writer delivered in Hanoi on 15 October 1939, the celebrated “new poet” Lưu Trọng Lư likened his late friend’s significance within the literary life of his day to Balzac’s role in nineteenth-century France. “Vũ Trọng Phụng’s work exposes and condemns all that is ugly, corrupt, and grotesque about humankind during our era,” Lư declared. “Vũ Trọng Phụng is to Vũ Trọng Phụng’s era what Balzac was to Balzac’s era.”¹ Lư’s analogy pointed to obvious affinities between the remarkably panoramic account of interwar Vietnamese society depicted in Phụng’s oeuvre and *The Human Comedy*’s comprehensive collective portrait of nineteenth-century France. It also conveyed something of Phụng’s extraordinary productivity. At the time of his death Phụng had completed at least eight novels, seven plays, five book-length works of nonfiction reportage, several dozen short stories, a handful of lengthy literary translations, and hundreds of reviews, essays, articles, and editorials.² If this inventory of output appears less than Balzacian, it must be recalled that, when he died from the combined effects of tuberculosis

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and opium addiction, Vũ Trọng Phụng was one week shy of his twenty-seventh birthday.

Phụng's acknowledged satirical masterpiece, *Dumb Luck*, was published first in serial form in the *Hanoi Newspaper* (*Hà Nội Báo*) starting on 7 October 1936, five months after the Popular Front took power in France. The electoral victory of the new government—formed through an alliance of Communists, Socialists, and Radicals—abruptly transformed the political climate of French Indochina.³ Not only were the Socialists and Communists traditional opponents of colonial policy, but the platform of the new government called for a “parliamentary commission to investigate the political, economic, and moral situation in the overseas French territories.”⁴ Prime Minister Léon Blum placed the Ministry of Colonies in the hands of Marius Moutet, a well-known critic of colonial abuses and advocate of “colonisation altruiste.”⁵ Hopes for a significant liberalization of colonial policy soared as the newly appointed governor-general, Jules Brévié, promulgated Indochina's first labor code, amnestied thousands of political prisoners, and relaxed censorship. Toward the end of the year scores of strikes broke out involving tens of thousands of workers, and breathless appeals for fundamental political reforms rang out from a newly energized press.⁶

As with all novels, *Dumb Luck* embodies something of the particular time and place in which it was produced. The sunny optimism of its madcap narrative reflects the euphoria with which many Vietnamese greeted the Popular Front victory. Recurring references to “progress” (tiến bộ), “science” (khoa học), “social reform” (cải cách xã hội), “womens' rights” (nữ quyền), “the sporting movement” (phong trào thể thao), “civilization” (văn minh), “modernity” (tân thời), and “Europeanization” (Âu hóa) recall the progressive language and modernizing ethos that dominated public discourse during the era. A widespread obsession with the “common people” (bình dân) and the “popular movement” (phong trào bình dân) illustrate the growth in Indochina of a newly fashionable populist sensibility. *Dumb Luck's* remarkably diverse cast of characters (roughly thirty in all) reflects the rise during the late colonial era of a colorful array of new social types: the urban vagrant, the professional athlete, the fashion designer, the medical specialist, the avant-garde artist, the foreign-educated student, the crusading journalist, and the “new” woman.

Moreover, *Dumb Luck's* preoccupation with market relations re-

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flects the acceleration of capitalist development in Indochina during the interwar years. The profit motive animates nearly every character in the novel from the lowliest vagabond to the most idealistic social reformer. The emergence of a predatory business class is dramatized in the character of Victor Ban, with his diversified holdings in brothels, hotels, pharmaceuticals, and venereal disease clinics. Economic metaphors saturate the text as in the depiction of police officers yawning “like merchants during a recession” and greeting a repeat offender “like a regular customer of a family business.” Not even religion is exempt from the entrepreneurial spirit of the age as exemplified by the Buddhist monk Tǎng Phú’s crass efforts to enhance recruitment and donations for his order.

Dumb Luck also reveals an array of quasi-universal sensations—an urban sensibility, a cosmopolitan orientation, a growing skepticism about the transparency and reliability of language, and heightened feelings of irony and impotence—connected to the rapid, unexpected changes that characterize the modern age more generally.⁷ While such changes were highlighted during the dramatic early months of the Popular Front era, many Vietnamese had come to perceive them as elements of a permanent existential condition that began with the colonial conquest in the mid-nineteenth century and intensified as a result of tumultuous economic and political transformations during the two decades following World War I. In 1930 a decade-long postwar boom abruptly gave way to violent political confrontations between the colonial state and an array of anti-colonial forces followed by intense state repression and punishing years of economic stagnation and decline.⁸ For many Vietnamese who lived through these turbulent years, the Popular Front victory was viewed less as a single moment of radical break than as another episode within a new historical trajectory marked by constant rupture and transition—a trajectory that even the colonial state was powerless to control.

Although thoughtful Vietnamese observers were not unaware of the powerful global forces altering their corner of the world during the era, it is not surprising that traditional conceptions of change continued to shape their apprehensions of these modern transformations. Indeed, *Dumb Luck* owes its title to one such conception—the astrological notion of *số* (fate)—which had long provided a framework for most Vietnamese to cope with ordinary and unexpected

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fluctuations in their lives.⁹ *Dumb Luck's* preoccupation with *số*—embodied in the recurring appearance throughout the narrative of fortune-tellers, omens, and prophesies—suggests an effort to mine Vietnamese tradition for a means to domesticate and make sense of the essentially unpredictable and accidental character of modern life. Indeed, the distinctive character of Vietnamese modernism—defined as the cultural expression of a critical and self-reflexive attitude toward social, political, and economic modernization—may be found in the incongruity of the historical coexistence of traditional epistemologies and modernizing development and by the efforts of Vietnamese intellectuals to discover a suitable aesthetic form to express their subjective experience of this incongruity.

As a pioneering Vietnamese modernist, it is no coincidence that Vũ Trọng Phụng's brief life dovetailed with colonial Indochina's most intense period of social, economic, and political modernization. In addition to having lived through the war, the boom years, the rising tide of anticolonial violence, the Depression, and the victory of the Popular Front, Phụng experienced the radical linguistic and educational changes of the early 1920s, the rapid growth of print capitalism, and the massive influx into Vietnamese society of Western mores and customs. Nor is it surprising that he produced his remarkable body of work from within the heart of Hanoi, the ancient cradle of Vietnamese civilization, which capitalism and the colonial administration were rapidly transforming into a bustling metropolis. Indeed, the turbulent ebb and flow of Phụng's fleeting life, unstable times, and transitory environment provide a revealing window into the origins of *Dumb Luck's* innovative modernist sensibility.



Vũ Trọng Phụng was born in Hanoi on 20 October 1912, the only child of working-class parents.¹⁰ His father, Vũ Văn Lân, was the son of a landless village official from the Mỹ Hòa district of what was then Hưng Yên Province. As a young man, Phụng's father migrated several hundred kilometers northeast to Hanoi, where he found work as an electrician at the Charles Boillot Garage.¹¹ Phụng's mother, Phạm Thị Khách, worked as a seamstress after moving to Hanoi from Hoài Đức, a western suburb of the capital located in Hà Đông Province.¹² Like many new rural migrants to the city, Phụng's parents rented a tiny apartment in the 36 Streets, Hanoi's densely

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populated commercial quarter. Seven months after Phụng's birth his father died from tuberculosis, leaving his mother a widow at the tender age of twenty-one.¹³

In an idiosyncratic study of the writer—part psychobiography, part personal memoir—published in 1941, two years after he died, his close friend Lan Khai suggested that the most influential person in Phụng's life was his mother, who raised and supported him single-handedly following the death of her husband.¹⁴ According to Khai, his mother's selfless devotion to Phụng saved him from a life of "hunger and vagabondage," a comment reflecting traditional Vietnamese anxieties about the likely plight of fatherless boys.¹⁵ As Phụng's medical condition worsened during the late 1930s, visitors to his apartment on Hàng Bạc (Silver) Street observed that it was his mother, and not his wife, who sat at his bedside fanning him late into the evening. "Everyone who visited Phụng's house was struck by the extraordinary love of the widow for her son," Khai remarked, "a love that was both intense and tender."¹⁶ He also praised Phụng's mother for refusing to remarry despite her youth. It is tempting to locate the origins of Phụng's well-known reservations about the "new Vietnamese woman" and conservative fondness for Confucian morality in the traditional model of female virtue provided by his mother. Indeed, his mother's fidelity to her deceased husband stands in sharp contrast to the serial infidelity of the twice-widowed Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer—arguably the most sustained object of ridicule in *Dumb Luck*.

While Phụng's traditional moralism may or may not be connected to the influence of his mother, there is no question that his famously urban literary sensibility grew out of his lifelong residence in the 36 Streets.¹⁷ An indigenous mixed-use urban agglomeration, the 36 Streets comprised a tangle of narrow winding lanes, each named after the single specialized item—sugar, silver, silk, traditional medicine, or votive paper, for example—sold or produced there. Honeycombed behind rows of shop house facades lining the streets were clusters of residential units, storage spaces, workshops, and courtyards for light and ventilation. Broad paved sidewalks separated the streets from the facades and provided the setting for much of the district's spirited social and commercial life. In addition to the bustle of everyday commerce, life on the sidewalk was animated by the daily influx into the 36 Streets of itinerant peddlers, porters, rickshaw pullers, shoe shine

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boys, pickpockets, prostitutes, policemen, beggars, buskers, tourists, and *flaneurs*. Residential units tended to be small and overcrowded, and hence all manner of private, even intimate, activities took place on the sidewalk in full public view.

Since Phụng lived most of his life in cramped quarters within the 36 Streets, it is not surprising that sidewalk scenes figure prominently in many of his writings; one critic has even referred to *Dumb Luck* as a “sidewalk novel.”¹⁸ Indeed, its opening chapter portrays the motley denizens of one stretch of pavement—a fortune-teller, a sugarcane vendor, the owner of a lemonade stand, and Xuân the ball boy—trading gossip, flirting, exchanging headlines, and haggling over prices. Above the din may be heard “the patter of tennis balls and a scorekeeper’s voice” ringing out from a nearby tennis club. Not only does the juxtaposition of sidewalk chatter with the sounds of the club embody the dissonant cacophony of city life, but it reflects the promiscuous jumble of social classes that endowed daily life in the 36 Streets with the democratic ambience of urban modernity.

The high profile of poor and underworld elements in the 36 Streets parallels the preoccupation with marginal social groups found in Phụng’s nonfiction reportage—prostitutes in *V.D. Clinic* (Lục Xì), gamblers and con-men in *The Man Trap* (Cạm Bẫy Người), domestic workers in *Household Servants* (Cơm Thầy Cơm Cô), and actors in *Clown Make-Up* (Vẽ Nhọ Bôi Hề). The 36 Streets also provided an excellent vantage point to observe the lifestyles and public behavior of rich and famous residents of the city, many of whom served as models for Phụng’s fictional characters, including some of the major figures in *Dumb Luck*.¹⁹ Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer, for example, was probably based on Madame Bé Tý, the widow of a French official whose opulent villa—replete with gold statues, rare birds, and monkey cages—was located down the block from Phụng’s apartment on Hàng Bạc Street. Victor Ban conjures images of the self-promoting pharmaceutical giant Hồng Khê, while the entrepreneurial monk Tăng Phú resembles Nguyễn Năng Quốc, the founding editor of the glossy Buddhist newspaper the *Torch of Wisdom* (Đuốc Tuệ).

The urban sensibility of *Dumb Luck* also comes across in the way its frenetic narrative and chaotic language embody the pace and feel of city life. Red-Haired Xuân’s improbable social ascent in the novel—from ball boy to salesman to doctor to social reformer to tennis cham-

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pion to politician to national hero—takes place in a mere five months. According to the critic Đỗ Đức Hiểu, *Dumb Luck* conveys the “random and unstable spirit of the city” through the “atonal” cadences of its dialogue, the “abrupt broken rhythms” of its structure, and the repeated use of mood-shifting words and phrases such as *suddenly* (*chợt* and *bỗng*), *accidentally* (*tình cờ*), *at that moment* (*vừa lúc ấy*), and *abruptly* (*đột ngột*).²⁰ “Vũ Trọng Phụng is Vietnam’s most urban writer,” Hiểu concludes, “and *Dumb Luck* is a one-hundred percent urban novel.”²¹

Phụng’s fixation with the urban environment reflects the rapid, metastasizing growth of his native Hanoi during the early twentieth century.²² Over the course of several decades the colonial state transformed the city from a regional administrative center linked to a small commercial town into an important industrial zone, a commercial hub for Tonkin’s abundant mineral wealth, and the political capital of French Indochina. The Bureau of Public Works filled in hundreds of malarial ponds and swamps, destroyed the imperial citadel, laid out a residential French Quarter, built a monumental complex of government buildings, paved and widened the 36 Streets, and introduced electric street-lights and a modern sewage system. It also promoted the circulation of traffic through the city by tearing down the gates fronting each of the 36 Streets, demolishing the Vauban-style fortifications that separated the citadel from the town, and introducing bicycles, trams, automobiles, and rickshaws. During Phụng’s childhood and teenage years the sensation of urban transition was intensified by the postwar boom. Economic growth reached record levels in the 1920s, driven by high prices for Indochinese export commodities and a rapid increase in capital investment.²³ With industrial expansion and the growth of an urban service sector, the population of Hanoi almost doubled, from 75,000 in 1921 to 128,000 in 1931.²⁴ The economy collapsed with the onset of the Depression, but Hanoi’s population continued to swell as deteriorating conditions in the countryside forced cultivators off their land. By 1937 over 154,000 people were crammed into the city, including a large floating population of destitute rural migrants.²⁵ Given these demographic realities, Phụng’s characterization of the vagabond Red-Haired Xuân suggests a journalistic representation of a common sociological type as much as a fanciful work of literary imagination.

If Phụng’s residence in the rapidly changing heart of the city

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determined the tone and subject matter of much of his work, his brief educational career was no less important to his development as a writer. Along with his future colleague and fellow writer Vũ Bằng, Phụng studied at the Hàng Vôi lower primary school (grades 4–6) during the early 1920s.²⁶ Yet, while Bằng continued into upper primary school (grades 7–9) and eventually attended the prestigious Lycée Albert Sarraut later in the decade, Phụng failed his matriculation exams and left school for good around the age of fourteen. Although little is known about Phụng’s experience as a student, there is no doubt that it shaped the trajectory of his life and work. Lan Khai claimed that Phụng was unhappy at school, and that bitterness from the experience infected his writings.²⁷ Fatherless, sickly, and impoverished, Phụng was ill equipped for the modern school culture that emerged in Indochina during the interwar years in which male students vied for status and the affections of their female classmates through displays of wealth and athletic prowess. For Khai, Phụng’s well-documented contempt for the preoccupations of Vietnamese youth—sports, romantic love, money, and Western fashions—derived from his failure to fit in socially at school.²⁸ Moreover, the fact that he left school early distinguished Phụng from his bitterest literary rivals—the members of the Self-Strength Literary Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn)—many of whom had earned post-graduate degrees or studied in France. Phụng’s disdain for his more highly educated competitors is revealed in *Dumb Luck*’s absurd depiction of “High School Graduate Tân” and Mr. Civilization (Văn Minh), who “displayed a contempt for foreign diplomas common among Vietnamese students who had returned from six or seven years in France without ever actually earning one.”

What limited education Phụng did receive was shaped by the fact that he entered school shortly after Governor-General Albert Sarraut introduced radical educational reforms into Indochina in 1918.²⁹ Most important, Phụng benefited from a new policy that waived tuition for public schooling during the first six years of instruction. Had he been born into similar social and economic circumstances a decade earlier, Phụng likely would have remained illiterate or at best functionally literate in Chinese characters. Instead, he was among the first generation of northern Vietnamese students to receive primary instruction exclusively in French and in the recently adopted romanized Vietnamese script known as *quốc ngữ*. As a consequence,

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Phụng and his peers acquired a cultural orientation radically different from that of every previous generation of northern Vietnamese intellectuals.

Prior to the French conquest of Indochina, most Vietnamese writing, including all government documents, was composed in classical Chinese.³⁰ To render the native tongue in written form, primarily for expressive and literary purposes, the Vietnamese employed another character-based writing system known as *chữ nôm*. The fact that facility with *chữ nôm* was predicated on a prior knowledge of Chinese ensured that large segments of the Vietnamese elite were fluent in Chinese and culturally sinocentric. This orientation was intensified through the gradual adoption by the precolonial elite of key elements of Chinese bureaucratic government—the civil service examinations most significantly, along with a parallel educational curriculum structured around the study of classical Chinese texts. Given their educational backgrounds and language capabilities, it is not surprising that early anticolonial Vietnamese intellectuals sought escape from the colonial predicament in easy-to-access Chinese and Japanese models of cultural self-strengthening.³¹ French cognizance of this fact, combined with a widespread perception that ideographic writing systems prevented economic and scientific development, provided the main impetus for the colonial state to substitute instruction in French and *quốc ngữ* for the traditional curriculum in characters.³²

The radical nature of colonial language policy nourished at least three characteristically modernist orientations within important segments of the Vietnamese elite and emergent intelligentsia. The first was a historicist feeling of living in totally novel times—a feeling that originated with colonialism and the early effects of capitalist development but that was intensified significantly by the abrupt linguistic transformation.³³ In “An Era of Poetry” (*Một Thời Đại Trong Thi Ca*), published during 1941, the talented brothers Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân examined the emergence of this historicist sensation and underlined its relation to literary production during the colonial period.³⁴ In this important essay they suggested that the “form and spirit” of Vietnamese society had remained fundamentally unchanged during the thousand years prior to the mid-nineteenth century. With the colonial conquest, however, Vietnamese history had experienced a dramatic break, the extent of which was as sweeping as its encounter

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with China at the start of the first millennium. “It feels as if fifty centuries of change have occurred in fifty years,” the authors wrote. “We now live in western houses, sport western hats, walk in western shoes, and wear western clothes. We use electric lights, clocks, cars, trains, and bicycles.”³⁵ Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân then linked these changes in material life (“how we live”) to changes in ideology (“how we think”). As families vied to enroll their children in the new colonial schools, characters gave way to *quốc ngữ*, and Montesquieu and Voltaire replaced Confucius. Finally, the authors described transformations in emotional life (“how we feel”)—changes that, as they put it, “penetrated into the deepest part of our souls.” The remainder of the essay addressed this third kind of change—what Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân called a “new rhythm of emotion”—and its literary manifestation in the “new poetry” movement.³⁶

In *Dumb Luck* recurring references to the conflict over “the old” and “the new” reflect the historicist preoccupation with the radical novelty of the present that saturated Vietnamese society during the interwar years. In the opening chapter Red-Haired Xuân expresses disdain for “old-fashioned professions such as peanut vending, fruit picking, or running errands for actors.” Officers at the police station complain that the recent modernization of Vietnamese domestic life is depressing their arrest records. Discussions over the funeral of Grandpa Hồng’s father reveal divided opinions about the contemporary relevance of “traditional and modern rites.” The frequency of suicide attempts at White Bamboo Lake is depicted as a “contemporary barometer of the tragic conflict between the Old and the New.” Likewise, the narrator describes an argument between Mr. Civilization and his mother as “another episode in the never-ending conflict that split all families down the middle: the clash between the Old and the New.” In these examples the modernism of Phụng’s recurring invocation of the historicist theme is reinforced by the self-reflexive cynicism that he adopts toward his society’s obsession with historicism.

Colonial language policy also functioned to endow the new Vietnamese elite with a Eurocentric cosmopolitanism. Within a single generation not only were most educated Vietnamese unable to read Chinese or Japanese, but they were incapable of reading anything that any Vietnamese had written during the previous two millennia (with the exception of a select handful of works laboriously trans-

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lated into French or *quốc ngữ*). Also important was the fact that this first generation of Vietnamese educated in *quốc ngữ* was necessarily faced with the absence of a textual tradition in the romanized script. Coupled with their inability to read characters, intellectually ambitious members of the interwar elite were left with little choice but to immerse themselves in the literary traditions of France and its European neighbors.

Phụng was no exception. In newspaper articles he cited Zola, Hugo, Malraux, Dostoyevsky, and Gorky as major influences.³⁷ At nineteen he prefaced his first major published work, the play *No Echo*, with an epigraph from Zola.³⁸ During his early twenties he completed translations of Victor Hugo's *Lucrecia Borgia* and *The Last Days of a Condemned Man*. Later in the decade he likened accusations that his work was pornographic to historical controversies over the writing of Flaubert, Baudelaire, Colette, and Victor Marguerite.³⁹ His newspaper columns include casual references to the homosexuality of Gide and Verlaine, to formal differences between French and Russian social realism, and to fashionable metropolitan literary journals such as *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*. Phụng's cosmopolitanism may also be located in his engagement with Freudian psychology. Although *Dumb Luck* mocks the Vietnamese elite's superficial understanding of the great Viennese modernist, Phụng was fascinated by Freudian character analysis and attempted to employ it in several of his works.⁴⁰ "No one in our group followed international developments as closely as Vũ Trọng Phụng," remarked Vũ Bằng, "or tried as hard to understand the obscure terms that we read in *Le Canard Enchaîné*."⁴¹

Critics have suggested a variety of Western models for the distinctive style and structure of *Dumb Luck*. In the early 1940s Vũ Ngọc Phan argued that its mode of broad comedy recalled the slapstick humor of Charlie Chaplin, a suggestive analogy, since Red-Haired Xuân is hired to impersonate the silent screen star in one of the novel's flashbacks.⁴² During the 1950s both Thiều Quang and Nguyễn Mạnh Tường likened *Dumb Luck* to the farcical comedies of Molière, many of which had been translated into Vietnamese and staged in Indochina during the 1920s and 1930s.⁴³ Most recently, Hoàng Thiếu Sơn has compared the lighthearted tone and looping trajectory of the novel to the picaresque narratives of Cervantes, Rabelais, Dickens, and Gogol, writers with whom Phụng was certainly familiar.⁴⁴ Structural

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comparisons may also be made to Balzac's *Illusions perdues*, the story of a provincial boy's abrupt ascent through the social hierarchy of nineteenth-century Paris.⁴⁵

An intriguing nonliterary point of reference is *Le roi des resquilleurs* (The King of the Wanglers), a popular French film released in 1930 that dramatized the adventures of a street-smart urban trickster named Bouboule, who "rises to success through a series of uncanny strokes of luck and wiliness."⁴⁶ Reflecting a preoccupation with the figure of the "little guy" in French popular culture after World War I, Bouboule was an "irrepressible, mocking, slang-speaking, rebellious Parisian" who exhibits a kind of craftiness based on "showing up the ineffectiveness of authorities and systems of control."⁴⁷ As in *Dumb Luck*, many of the film's key events take place at sporting events such as bicycle races and boxing matches. In a final scene, strikingly reminiscent of the penultimate chapter of *Dumb Luck*, Bouboule becomes the unwitting hero of a France-England rugby match, is hailed as a national savior, and marries the woman of his dreams. Red-Haired Xuân, of course, enjoys an identical fate after his performance in the Indochina-Siam tennis tournament.

Le roi des resquilleurs spawned successful sequels in 1931, 1933, and 1938 and some or all of them may well have been shown in Indochina. If *Dumb Luck* was indeed a novelization of the film adapted to the Indochinese environment, it is tempting to consider what there was about it that made Phụng imagine that it might appeal to his Vietnamese audience. Perhaps he recognized the potential of the film's madcap absurdism to strike a chord with an urban population undergoing rapid, unpredictable modernization. Alternatively, he may have sensed that the image of the little guy who triumphs through craftiness and good fortune resonated with a sympathy for feisty underdogs felt by a Vietnamese elite whose own cultural identity had been shaped by a long history of struggle against a hegemonic China.⁴⁸ The enduring affection of Vietnamese readers for *Dumb Luck* may also be linked to Charles Rearick's argument that the French found the "fast-paced buffoonery" of the *Le roi des resquilleurs* "a welcome antidote to the worries of the emergent Depression."⁴⁹ Following its publication in 1936, *Dumb Luck*'s unflagging popularity throughout seventy-five subsequent years of anti-colonial struggle, world war, civil war, and social revolution may

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reflect its escapist appeal for a demoralized and deeply insecure population.

In contrast to interpretations of the novel that emphasize its relationship to Western models, the critic Văn Tâm has highlighted *Dumb Luck*'s debt to influences from indigenous popular culture.⁵⁰ He argues, for example, that the novel's reliance on punning, double entendre, and a form of humorous, mutually misunderstood conversation known as "he says chicken she says duck" (*ông nói gà, bà nói vịt*) recall common conventions of traditional *chèo* opera.⁵¹ Moreover, Tâm identifies a host of compelling similarities between Red-Haired Xuân and Master Pig (*Trang Lợn*), a fortunate dunce whose bawdy misadventures feature prominently in a popular collection of Vietnamese folktales. It is no coincidence that Tâm's effort to locate *Dumb Luck* within a tradition of indigenous folk culture occurred in northern Vietnam during the late 1950s, a period in which Party critics were compelled to denigrate works exhibiting excessive foreign influence. As a minor participant in the Vietnamese Hundred Flowers Movement that agitated against government censorship during the era, Tâm's effort to link *Dumb Luck* to indigenous traditions may have been part of an ultimately unsuccessful gambit to prevent the banning of the novel. Nevertheless, the similarities he highlights between *Dumb Luck* and traditional narratives are suggestive and recall that, while colonial language policy worked to sever interwar writers from their own high cultural canon, it did not prevent their continued engagement with a traditional popular culture that was primarily oral in nature. It was this ongoing engagement with premodern traditions and the local environment, together with the penetration of modernizing, global forces into Indochina, that gave Vietnamese modernism its distinctive character.

In addition to engendering historicism and cosmopolitanism, another effect of the linguistic transformation in Indochina was to generate anxiety about the reliability of language in general and the unstable relationship between language and power. Because the pre-colonial system created a homology between the acquisition of power and fluency in Chinese, the abrupt abandonment of characters raised troubling questions about how power in colonial society might be attained. This anxiety was intensified by the rapid influx of unfamiliar discourses into Indochina, each promising to replace the Chinese

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classics as guides for the achievement of power and prosperity: the discourses of social reform and mass politics, the discourses of science and medicine, the discourses of modern love and romance, and the new literary, philosophical, and poetic discourses. Much of the humor in *Dumb Luck* comes from Red-Haired Xuân's uncomprehending initial reaction to these modern discourses followed by his unexpected public demonstration of mastery over them. While Xuân's capacity to impersonate a doctor, a fashion designer, a politician, a professional athlete, a journalist, and a poet points to the Vietnamese elite's weak grasp of the languages spoken by these modern figures, it also reveals the inability of these new, unfamiliar languages to provide an accurate indicator of social standing.

Xuân's success in the novel is also a product of his genuine mastery over an additional modern discourse: the discourse of advertising. Xuân's checkered employment history included jobs as a peanut vendor, newspaper hawker, and broadcaster of commercials for venereal disease treatment. When, in the course of the narrative, he is subsequently forced to demonstrate command over an unfamiliar modern discourse—such as medicine, new poetry, or politics—Xuân meets the challenge by employing skills and experience that he acquired during his career in advertising. For example, he steels his nerves prior to delivering a virtuoso speech at the opening of the new tennis court by reminding himself that he “had always been effective using his voice to conquer, oppress, and move the hearts of the masses—whether selling peanuts, working as an advertising boy at the theater, or making loudspeaker announcements for the King of Cochinchinese Venereal Disease Treatment.” At the Fairyland Hotel, Xuân defeats his rival in an impromptu poetry contest by modifying the “jingles that he had recited flawlessly by heart in the past, back when he chanted advertisements over a loudspeaker for Victor Ban.” Xuân's advertising skills also come in handy when he tries to calm the angry crowd after the tennis tournament: “Using talents he had developed advertising venereal disease medicine,” the narrator explains, “Red-Haired Xuân won over the public just like a skillful French politician.”

These episodes point to Phụng's belief that the supra-discourse of modern advertising had replaced the wisdom of the ancients as a kind of skeleton key to success and happiness in the modern world. “This is the era of advertising,” he once told his close friend Nguyễn

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Triệu Luật. “Anyone who ignores this will be eliminated even if they have talent and training.”⁵² In *Dumb Luck* the power of advertising is underscored by its broad utility in all conceivable circumstances—economic, social, political, artistic, romantic, and scientific—and by its apparent substructural relationship to every other form of modern discourse. Reference to the hegemony of advertising may even be seen located in the novel’s unusual sloganeering chapter headings, which the critic Võ Thị Quỳnh likens to a form of “publicity used to attract customers.”⁵³ Coupled with the inherent untrustworthiness of advertising as a mode of communication, its insidious proliferation throughout society signaled the growing unreliability of language in general during the interwar years.



After leaving school, Phụng worked briefly as a clerk at the Godart Department Store before landing a secretarial position with the Imprimerie D’Extrême Orient (IDEO), his first job in the publishing industry.⁵⁴ According to Vũ Bằng, whose uncle also worked at the IDEO, Phụng was a quiet employee who spent his idle time writing or reading French newspapers such as *Le Monde* or *Le Canard Enchaîné*.⁵⁵ Although his uncle claimed that Phụng was eventually fired for writing on the sly during working hours, Bằng believed that Phụng quit to protest the obsequious behavior of his coworkers toward their French superiors. Both stories may be apocryphal. As Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh points out, Phụng probably lost his job at the start of 1930 during a wave of white-collar layoffs triggered by the onset of the Great Depression.⁵⁶

The claim that Phụng had already started writing while employed at the IDEO finds support in a memoir by Tam Lang, who was then working on the editorial board of *Hà Thành Ngộ Báo* (Capital Daily News), a Hanoi daily published by Bùi Xuân Học.⁵⁷ Sometime around 1930 Tam Lang received an unsolicited short story from Phụng that centered around a melancholy conversation between a childless couple. Tam Lang was impressed with the story and published it in the following issue. Thereafter he received several more stories from Phụng but was discouraged from printing them owing to their prurient subject matter. Weeks later Phụng called upon Tam Lang at the newspaper office, told him that he was dissatisfied with his job at the IDEO, and expressed a desire to apply for an editorial

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position at *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*. Since none were available, he hired Phụng as a clerk-typist but was forced to let him go soon after for chronic lateness. Nevertheless, Phụng remained loosely connected to the newspaper, publishing a handful of additional short stories there in 1931 and 1932.⁵⁸

Hà Thành Ngọ Báo was a heady place to work during the early 1930s. Under the guidance of Hoàng Tích Chu and Đỗ Văn—francophone intellectuals who had studied in Paris during the mid-1920s—*Hà Thành Ngọ Báo* was the first *quốc ngữ* daily in Tonkin to follow journalistic practices and maintain production qualities consistent with metropolitan standards.⁵⁹ As its editor-in-chief, Hoàng Tích Chu placed the coverage and presentation of hard news at the core of the newspaper's journalistic mission.⁶⁰ This contrasted with its major northern rivals—*Thực Nghiệp* (Commerce and Industry), *Khai Hóa* (Enlightenment Daily), *Trung Bắc* (North-Central Review), and *Nam Phong* (Southern Wind)—which were dominated by didactic essays, translations of Western literature, and reprints from southern publications. Another modern innovation of Chu was to promote coverage of what Phụng referred to as “the seamy side of life.”⁶¹ To this end he spearheaded what became an influential journalistic movement of first-person realist reportage by commissioning and publishing Tam Lang's brilliant *I Pulled a Rickshaw* (*Tôi Kéo Xe*) in early 1932. Chu was also the first editor from the north to promote writing that eschewed the stilted conventions of traditional prose such as parallel sentences, flowery metaphors, and the excessive use of Sino-Vietnamese words. Instead, he advocated a spare and straightforward style that quickly became something of a standard for the northern Vietnamese press.⁶² Due to the influence of Đỗ Văn, who had apprenticed as a printer in Paris, the newspaper was among the first in Tonkin to be laid out in a Western style, with narrow, vertical rectangular columns beneath eye-catching headlines. Recalling the novelty of the newspaper decades later, Vũ Bằng explained that he “only began to enjoy newspapers around the time that Hoàng Tích Chu and Đỗ Văn . . . first wrote for *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*.”⁶³

Phụng's experience at *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo* was instrumental to his development as a writer. Not only did its editors publish his first short stories, but they provided a model of urban living, cosmopolitanism and modern journalistic practice to which Phụng remained committed for the remainder of his career. According to Vũ Bằng, Hoàng Tích

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Chu and Đỗ Văn impressed the young writers at *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo* as embodiments of “the movements for new living, new thinking, new eating and drinking, and new forms of struggle.”⁶⁴ Phụng’s famously succinct and earthy writing style and his much vaunted preoccupation with the urban underclass may also be traced to the influence of Hoàng Tích Chu. After observing up close the commotion generated by Tam Lang’s reportage during the early 1930s, Phụng devoted considerable energy to the genre throughout his career, eventually earning the nickname “the King of Reportage.” In a brief article about *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo* published in 1935, Phụng described his time at the paper as the “glorious days when Hoàng Tích Chu was still there” and “readers anticipated the noon-time publication of the paper like lovers waiting for each other in the park.”⁶⁵

Equally important were the connections that Phụng made at *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo* with fellow journalists—connections that helped him find work at dozens of newspapers throughout the decade and that gradually coalesced into a far-flung community of friends and colleagues.⁶⁶ The fluid trajectory of Phụng’s career reflects the explosive growth of Indochinese journalism during the 1930s. While only thirty periodicals in *quốc ngữ* came out during the first sixty years of French rule (1862–1918), Sarraut’s language reforms created a robust market for *quốc ngữ* publications, especially newspapers.⁶⁷ Indeed, the French sociologist André Dumarest identified a taste for newspapers as a defining cultural feature of the new elite that emerged in Indochinese cities during the interwar years.⁶⁸ To meet the surging demand, publishers founded over forty *quốc ngữ* periodicals between 1926 and 1930 and another four hundred during the 1930s.⁶⁹ These included general interest newspapers as well as specialized publications focusing on literature, science, sports, cinema, women’s issues, and fashion. This growth in publishing generated demand for written material, which facilitated the transformation of writing into a profession. Editors during this period paid as much as five piasters for an essay or short story, enough for productive and popular writers to make a modest living.⁷⁰

The fact that Phụng began his career as a writer during a period marked by the commercialization of the Indochinese press contributed to the modern sensibility of his work. The logic of the market encouraged a modernist emphasis on originality and innovation. But it also subjected Phụng to the tyranny of public opinion and

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middle-class tastes, which in turn provoked expressions of cynicism, persecution, and impotence—attitudes characteristic of an embattled avant-garde.⁷¹ Through recurring references to the business side of journalism and the arts, *Dumb Luck* highlighted the commodification and alienation of writers, artists, and intellectuals in Indochina during the era. For example, the wickedly satirical conversation between Mr. ILL and an unnamed journalist outside the European Tailor Shop calls attention to the tendency of capitalism to create a gulf between self-important cultural producers and a faceless public. The gist of their exchange is a shared expression of contempt for the low level of their audience. “It is simply a waste of breath to talk about art with the people,” the journalist complains. In the next scene the journalist’s pathetic attempt to sell advertising space to Mrs. Civilization underscores his own subordination to market forces. Moreover, the journalist’s argument that attacks on his paper by conservative forces are enhancing its commercial appeal highlights the remarkable capacity of colonial capitalism to transform even political controversy into a kind of commodity. As with Phụng’s historicist sensibility, his clear-eyed recognition that intellectual and artistic life was being commodified by colonial capitalism is less striking than his mocking characterization of the self-righteous contempt of artists and intellectuals like himself toward their own commodified condition.

Dumb Luck’s concern with the emergence of modernity in Indochina extends to its assault on the Self-Strength Literary Group and the project of cultural modernization that it promoted. Founded in 1932 by Nhất Linh—a former employee of the Bureau of Finance who dabbled in drawing at the Indochinese Fine Arts Institute and studied chemistry and physics at Montpellier—the Self-Strength Group emerged as the most influential commercial publishing venture in Tonkin throughout the 1930s.⁷² In addition to its two weeklies—*Phong Hóa* (Mores) and *Ngày Nay* (These Days)—the group founded the Đời Nay Publishing House, which reprinted the novels, poetry, and reportage first published in the journals. Other core members included the novelist Khái Hưng, the fashion designer Lemur, and the new poets Thế Lữ, Xuân Diệu, and Huy Cận. Linh’s talented younger brothers, Thạch Lam and Hoàng Đạo, helped run the journals and wrote much of the literature and criticism that appeared in their pages.

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The original mission of the group was defined in contradistinction to the conservative cultural project of *Nam Phong*, a journal funded by the state between 1917 and 1934 and edited by the prominent neotraditionalist Phạm Quỳnh.⁷³ It advocated the creation of a new Vietnamese culture through the selective adoption of Western values combined with the preservation of a “natural essence,” closely linked in the mind of Phạm Quỳnh to the Sino-Vietnamese Confucian tradition. Dismissing Phạm Quỳnh’s vision as unrealistic and old-fashioned, the youthful, French-educated, and largely middle-class leaders of the Self-Strength Group promoted a radical, unattenuated Westernization of Vietnamese society. Their program was expressed obliquely in their fiction and poetry and advanced directly in a succinct manifesto written by Hoàng Đạo entitled *Ten Points to Bear in Mind* (*Mười điều tâm niệm*).

(1) Modernize completely, without hesitation, and modernization means Westernization; (2) Have faith in progress, believe that things can get better; (3) Live according to ideals; (4) Work for the good of society; (5) Train your character; (6) Encourage women to go out in the world; (7) Acquire a scientific mind; (8) Value real achievement, not careerism; (9) Exercise and strengthen your body; (10) Learn to organize your work methodically.⁷⁴

Many of the characters in *Dumb Luck* can be read as caricatures of the leaders of the Self-Strength Group or of the “modern” individuals whom they celebrated in their work. Mr. ILL bears an obvious resemblance to Nguyễn Cát Tường (aka Lemur), the designer who invented the modern *áo dài* and wrote a trend-setting fashion column for *Phong Hóa*. With his useless French education and fainthearted desire to “reform society within the prevailing legal framework,” Mr. Civilization recalls Nhất Linh and his brothers. The character of Miss Snow lampoons the frivolous “modern woman,” addicted to dancing and romantic love, who dominated the novels and advice columns published by the group. Her unrequited suitor—the “short young man with glassy eyes, an emaciated body, and the gaunt face of a poet”—represents a parody of the avant-gardist new poets. Nguyễn Thành Thi has identified the maudlin quatrain that he offers to Snow at the Fairyland Hotel as a direct satire of Thái Can’s *Chiều Thu* (Autumn Afternoon), first published in *Phong Hóa* during 1935.⁷⁵

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Moreover, *Dumb Luck* offers a point-by-point refutation of Hoàng Đạo's manifesto. It ridicules the obsessive invocation of modernization, Europeanization, and progress by members of the Self-Strength Group. It suggests that their do-gooding idealism frequently masked commercial motives. It exposes the prurient self-interest animating their promotion of women's liberation. It mocks their shallow understanding of science and fashionable preoccupation with sports. It pokes fun at their ingrained elitism and underscores the opportunism of their newfound support for the "people."

Phụng's ideological opposition to the Self-Strength Group was reinforced by commercial rivalry and class resentment. Given his hard-won, autodidactic knowledge of metropolitan life, it is no surprise that Phụng resented Nhất Linh's effortless cosmopolitanism, born of elite schooling and firsthand experience in France. The Self-Strength Literary Group invited this resentment by affecting a flamboyant snobbery exemplified in a catty column in *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* that combed rival newspapers for factual mistakes, grammatical errors, and opinions considered erroneous or old-fashioned. The longevity, excellent production qualities, and cool sophistication of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay* contrasted with many of the feisty, fly-by-night journals with which Phụng was associated and must have fed his bitterness. When several journals belonging to Vũ Đình Long's *Tân Dân* Publishing House emerged to challenge the commercial hegemony of the Self-Strength Literary Group during the late 1930s, Phụng went to work for them and eventually came to be considered a member of the *Tân Dân* Group.⁷⁶ In 1937 he engaged in a spirited "pen war" with *Ngày Nay* columnist Nhất Chi Mai over the latter's charges that *V.D. Clinic*, *Household Servants*, and *The Storm* were pornographic.⁷⁷ Indeed, *Ngày Nay's* attack on Phụng may have been triggered by *Dumb Luck's* mocking portrayal of the Self-Strength Group during the previous year.

Although Phụng's hostility to the Self-Strength Group helps explain *Dumb Luck's* bitter attack on modernizing and Westernizing reformism, it does not permit a neat characterization of his ideological proclivities or political sympathies. On one hand, his reservations about rapid Westernization have led to charges of cultural conservatism. In 1942 the budding Marxist Vũ Ngọc Phan labeled him a "reactionary" for "dismissing all progressive movements without offering alternatives."⁷⁸ Likewise, Trương Tửu argued that *Dumb Luck's* attack

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on frivolous “romantic” fads such as dancing, fashion, and free love represented a conservative attempt to protect “morality, justice and culture” and to save those “tricked into crime, gambling and debauchery.”⁷⁹ Yet, *Dumb Luck*’s ridiculous description of the monarchist Joseph Thiết, the neotraditionalist Society for Spiritual and Ethical Development (Hội Khai Trí Tiến Đức), and colonial officialdom disclosed little sympathy for conservative political alternatives. Moreover, the explicit sexuality and preoccupation with the underclass found in his work contrasted with the prudishness and elitism of existing conservative projects. Phụng was also skeptical about unorthodox forms of traditionalism linked to organized religion or Eastern spiritualism, as evidenced by his caustic portrayals of the monk Tăng Phú, the fortune-teller, and the two battling herbalists.

Phụng’s relation to the Left was equally problematic. He shared the Indochinese Communist Party’s (ICP) anticolonialism, contempt for the nouveau riche, and commitment to “realism,” but he showed little admiration for the Communists and never joined the Party. Adopting a position borrowed from the European left, Trương Tửu compared Phụng—with his cultural conservatism, hostility to the bourgeoisie, and outraged social conscience—to Balzac, whose Catholicism and Monarchism did not hinder his capacity to portray society “realistically.”⁸⁰ But Phụng’s understanding of “realist” literature—work based on “what the eye sees and the ear hears” coupled with a vague sense of concern with the poor and downtrodden—contrasted with Communist definitions of the concept especially in the Party’s later Stalinist incarnations. Phụng’s preoccupation with social outcasts and the criminal underclass, instead of workers or peasants, for example, disappointed Communist critics, as did his frequent use of infantile sexuality rather than class struggle as a device to motivate characters. Following the Moscow show trials, Phụng denounced Stalinism in print and belittled orthodox Vietnamese Communists whose fidelity to Moscow he likened to the Self-Strength Group’s faddish devotion to foreign movements.⁸¹ While this suggests the possibility that Phụng’s primary political commitments were nationalist, he expressed no interest in any of the nationalist parties of the 1930s such as the Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng or the Constitutionals.

On the other hand, Lan Khai argued that his friend was fundamentally apolitical and nonideological. What drove Phụng, Khai claimed,

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was an angry nihilistic pessimism, a psychological consequence of his poverty and illness.⁸² In the final analysis Phụng's skepticism toward government, politics, and religion and his refusal to identify clearly with any particular partisan group suggests the jaded cynicism of the modern journalist.



Fifteen years after his death, in the wake of the Geneva Accords (1954), Phụng's work emerged almost immediately within the newly established Communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam as an object of intense public scrutiny. This renewed attention was occasioned by the promotion of his work by the founders of *Nhân Văn* (Humanities) and *Giai Phẩm* (Literary Selections), journals associated with a short-lived domestic movement for enhanced democracy and artistic freedom—a kind of northern Vietnamese Hundred Flowers Movement—that the Party tolerated briefly before suppressing in 1958.⁸³ Not only did the leaders of the movement reprint several of Vũ Trọng Phụng's novels, but in 1956 they published a short collection of testimonials suggestively entitled *Vũ Trọng Phụng Is With Us* (*Vũ Trọng Phụng với chúng ta*).⁸⁴

In June 1960, two years after the suppression of *Nhân Văn /Giai Phẩm* by the Party, politburo member Hoàng Văn Hoan—one of the twelve most powerful men in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—submitted to the journal *Literary Research* (Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Văn Học) a twenty-page essay entitled “Thoughts on the Problem of Vũ Trọng Phụng within Vietnamese Literature” (*Một Vài Ý Kiến Về Tác Phẩm Vũ Trọng Phụng Trong Văn Học Việt Nam*).⁸⁵ The essay dismissed the literary significance of Vũ Trọng Phụng's three most popular novels—*The Storm* (Giông Tố), *Dumb Luck*, and *The Dike Breaks* (Vỡ Đê)—and raised suspicions about his political orientation by calling derisive attention to the fact that his novels had been promoted publicly by the “*Nhân Văn /Giai Phẩm* Clique.”

The *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* Clique bypassed the controls of our cultural institutions to republish thousands of copies of Vũ Trọng Phụng's novels, distribute them widely among the population and use them as teaching material in school literature departments. The purpose of this effort was to prove that only pre-revolutionary literature had value and that after the revolution, under the leadership of the Party,

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writers were forced to serve politics . . . Hence, writers lost their freedom and literature lost its soul. They argued that a genius like Vũ Trọng Phụng needed neither the revolution nor the leadership of the Party to produce great work. They claimed that Vũ Trọng Phụng was our most brilliant realist writer, that he died with the era but that his work will live forever in the history of our literature. They said that Vũ Trọng Phụng was a master of the literary world and that he was even more revolutionary than the Party.⁸⁶

Hoan's essay—charging guilt by association—circulated widely among cultural officials and sealed Phụng's reputation as a writer with dangerous counterrevolutionary tendencies. As a result, Phụng's work was banned in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) during the following twenty-five years and throughout the unified Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) from 1975 until the onset of the liberal Renovation (Đổi Mới) policy in the mid-1980s.

Although Phụng's precocious brilliance is widely recognized today, his controversial political reputation has delayed the development of critical interpretations of his work. Even in the non-communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN), where Phụng continued to be read between 1954 and 1975, critics devoted little sustained attention to his cultural or political significance. Since the Renovation policy lifted the ban on Phụng in 1986, critics in Vietnam have carried out a major reappraisal of his work. Because it remains preoccupied with the recent suppression of his writing, however, much of the new criticism has focused on exonerating Phụng by highlighting affinities between his work and the historical project of the Communist Party.

This essay seeks to take the recent reappraisal of Phụng in a different direction by suggesting that his significance lies in a radically modernist sensibility found in his work—a sensibility most clearly illustrated in the novel *Dumb Luck*. Just as certain formal features and thematic preoccupations of *Dumb Luck* support this characterization, the Vietnamese Communist Party's suppression of the novel strengthens the case for a modernist reading. Like their counterparts in China and the Soviet Union, Communist Vietnamese literary officials have always dismissed aesthetic modernism as a uniquely Western form of cultural decadence. In the cultural manifesto entitled "Marxism and Vietnamese Culture" (1948) Trường

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Chinh described modernist movements such as “cubism, impressionism, surrealism and dadaism” as “gaudy mushrooms” that “sprout from the rotten wood of imperialist culture.”⁸⁷ Of course, the fact that the Party suppressed Phụng for over twenty-five years does not automatically make him a modernist, for it also attacked the works of writers considered to be neotraditionalists, bourgeois reformists, nationalists, and Trotskyists. It is easy to imagine, however, how *Dumb Luck*’s radical and indiscriminate “attitude of questioning the present”—a fundamental element of modernism, according to Dilip Gaonkar—might be read as subversive by a Communist political system that has always treated literature as a morale-building instrument of state policy.⁸⁸ Although *Dumb Luck* was banned because literary dissidents promoted it for their own ends during the late 1950s, its irreverent modernist critique of all established institutions and authorities prefigured its dramatic fall from official favor. Unfortunately, the continuing hostility of Communist cultural orthodoxy toward aesthetic modernism has discouraged northern Vietnamese literary criticism from considering its relation to the novel, and debates about Phụng’s work today rarely stray from assessments of the relative prominence of (positive) “critical realist” and (pejorative) “romantic” or “naturalistic” impulses in his writings. This essay has suggested, however, that the capacious category of modernism is better able to capture the countervailing elements found in his huge, diverse body of work and, in particular, the remarkable tone, thematic preoccupations, and formal innovations of *Dumb Luck*.

NOTES

1. The eulogy was printed in *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* (Saturday novel), no. 284 (11 November 1939): 7–10.

2. A bibliography of Phụng’s work may be found in Trần Hữu Tá, ed., *Nhà Văn Vũ Trọng Phụng Với Chúng Ta* (The writer Vũ Trọng Phụng is with us), (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, 1999), 8–10. Twenty-five newly discovered pieces by Vũ Trọng Phụng (including plays, short stories, reportage, articles, and editorials) have been published in Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Vẽ Nhọ Bôi Hề: Những Tác Phẩm Mới Tìm Thấy Năm 2000* (Clown makeup: works newly found in the year 2000), comp. Peter Zinoman, annotated by Lại Nguyên Ân (Hanoi: Hội Nhà Văn, 2000). An additional dozen short stories were rediscovered in October 2000 by Lại Nguyên Ân.

3. For the Popular Front’s colonial policy, see W. B. Cohen, “The Colonial Policy of the Popular Front,” *French Historical Studies* 7, 3 (1972): 368–93.

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4. Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 209.
5. Panivong Norindr, “The Popular Front’s Colonial Policies in Indochina: Reassessing the Popular Front’s ‘Colonisation Altruiste,’” in *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion*, ed. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (London: Macmillan, 1999), 231.
6. Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism*, 205–18.
7. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts in Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).
8. For a survey of these events, see William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900–1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).
9. The timing and nature of mundane episodes of the life cycle—birth, marriage, and death, for example—are manifestations of *số* as are the onset of unexpected tragedies such as illness or crop failure.
10. According to his birth certificate, Phụng was born in 1913, but Văn Tâm suggests that his parents changed the date in order to get him into school. This is probably correct, since Phụng’s childhood nickname, Tý, indicates that he was born during the Year of the Rat in 1912. Văn Tâm, *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Nhà Văn Hiện Thực* (Vũ Trọng Phụng: realist writer) (Hanoi: Kim Đức, 1957), 61. Greg Lockhart mistakenly states that he was born in December. Greg Lockhart, ed., *The Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 121.
11. Ngô Tất Tố claims that Phụng’s grandfather was once the village mayor (*lý trưởng*) but that his father was a simple villager. Ngô Tất Tố, “Gia Thế Ông Vũ Trọng Phụng” (Vũ Trọng Phụng’s family situation), *Tao Đàn: Số Đặc Biệt Về Vũ Trọng Phụng* (Special number on Vũ Trọng Phụng), no. 1 (December 1939): 25.
12. Văn Tâm, *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Nhà Văn Hiện Thực*, 60–61.
13. Thiết Can claimed that Phụng’s father died when he was three. Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy: Hồi Ký* (Those months and years: a memoir) (Westminster: Hồng Lĩnh, 1993), 299.
14. Lan Khai, *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Mớ Tài Liệu Cho Văn Sử Việt Nam* (Vũ Trọng Phụng: documenting a Vietnamese literary history) (Hanoi: Minh Phụng, 1941).
15. *Ibid.*, 3.
16. *Ibid.*, 4.
17. For recent discussions of the history of the 36 Streets, see William Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); and Mark Sidel, *Old Hanoi* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1–30. See also Christian Pedelahore, “Constituent Elements of Hanoi City,” *Vietnamese Studies* 12 (1982): 105–59; and William Logan, “Hanoi Townscape: Symbolic Imagery in Vietnam’s Capital,” in *Cultural Identity and Urban Change in Southeast Asia*, ed. M. Askew and William Logan (Melbourne: Deakin University Press, 1994), 43–69.
18. Sidewalk scenes recur throughout the novel, such as Great-Grandpa’s funeral, the parade for the Siamese king, and the encounter between Mr. ILL and his workers outside of the Europeanization Tailor Shop. Đỗ Đức Hiểu, “Những Lớp Sóng Ngôn Từ Trong ‘Số Đố’ Của Vũ Trọng Phụng” (Waves of Language in Vũ Trọng Phụng’s “Dumb Luck”), in Trần Hữu Tá, *Nhà Văn Vũ Trọng Phụng Với Chúng Ta*, 417.
19. Suggestions of real-life models for many of *Dumb Luck*’s characters may be found in Hoài Anh, “Vũ Trọng Phụng, Nhà Hóa Học Của Những Tính Cách” (Vũ

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Trọng Phụng, chemist of character), in *Vũ Trọng Phụng—Tài Năng Và Sự Thật* (Vũ Trọng Phụng, genius and truth), ed. Lại Nguyên Ân (Hanoi: Văn Học, 1997), 145–54.

20. Đỗ Đức Hiếu, “Những Lớp Sóng Ngôn Từ Trong ‘Số Đố’ Của Vũ Trọng Phụng,” 421.

21. *Ibid.*, 417.

22. Prior to the French conquest, Hanoi consisted of two lightly populated and relatively unintegrated components: a citadel containing administrative offices and residences for imperial troops and officials and the 36 Streets, which functioned as a market town that served the population of the citadel and nearby villages. Circulation throughout the city was restricted by Vaubaun-style fortifications segregating the citadel from the town and by gates that divided each of the thirty-six streets from another. For the colonial transformation of Hanoi, see Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 161–234.

23. Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), 158–67.

24. Ng Shui Meng, *The Population of Indochina: Some Preliminary Observations* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Field Report Series no. 7, 1974), 41.

25. Claudius Madrolle, *Indochine du Nord: Tonkin, Annam, Laos*, vol. 1 (Paris: Hachette, 1923).

26. Vũ Bằng, “Cái Tài Cái Tật của Vũ Trọng Phụng” (The talents and failings of Vũ Trọng Phụng), in *Văn Học* (Saigon), no. 114 (1970): 31.

27. Lan Khai, *Vũ Trọng Phụng*, 14.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Gail P. Kelly, *Franco-Vietnamese Schools, 1918–1938: Regional Development and Implications for National Integration* (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Wisconsin Papers on Southeast Asia no. 6, 1982).

30. The precolonial educational and writing systems are discussed in Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 169–233.

31. David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

32. Colonial language policy is discussed extensively in John DeFrancis, *Colonialism and Language Policy in Viet Nam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977); and Milton Osborne, *The French Presence in Cochinchina and Cambodia: Rule and Response, 1859–1905* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

33. On the relationship between modernism and historicism, see Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, “The Name and Nature of Modernism,” *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 22.

34. Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, “Một Thời Đại Trong Thi Ca,” in *Thi Nhân Việt Nam, 1932–1941* (Vietnamese poets) (1942; rpt., Hanoi: Văn Học, 1999), 15–47.

35. *Ibid.*, 16.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Vũ Trọng Phụng, “Để Đáp Lại Báo Ngày Nay: Dâm Hay Không Dâm” (A response to Ngày Nay Newspaper: pornographic or not), *Báo Tương Lai*, 25 March 1937.

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38. The epigraph read: “Planter enfin le veritable drame humain au milieu des mensonges ridicules.” See *Không Một Tiếng Vang* in *Tuyển Tập Vũ Trọng Phụng* (Collected works of Vũ Trọng Phụng), ed. Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, (Hanoi: NXB Văn Học, 1987), 1:63.
39. Vũ Trọng Phụng, “Chung Quanh Thiên Phóng Sự Lục Sĩ” (Around the reportage V. D. clinic), *Báo Tương Lai*, 11 March 1937.
40. See Phụng’s *Làm Đĩ* (To be a whore) (1936; rpt., Hanoi: Văn Học, 1996). Phụng’s interest in Freud is discussed in Hoàng Thiếu Sơn’s introduction to the new edition of the novel entitled “*Làm Đĩ: Cuốn Sách Có Trách Nhiệm Và Đầy Nhân Đạo*” (“To Be a Whore”: A responsible book full of humanity).
41. Vũ Bằng: “Cái Tài, Cái Tật Của Vũ Trọng Phụng,” 38.
42. Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại: Phê Bình Văn Học* (Modern writers: literary criticism) (1942; rpt., Ho Chi Minh City: Văn Học, 1994), 1:530.
43. Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, “Nhớ Vũ Trọng Phụng” (Remembering Vũ Trọng Phụng), *Vũ Trọng Phụng Với Chúng Ta* (Vũ Trọng Phụng is with us) (Hanoi: Minh Đức, 1956), 5; and Thiều Quang, “Chút Ít Tài Liệu Về Vũ Trọng Phụng” (A few documents on Vũ Trọng Phụng), *Tạp San Phê Bình: Số Đặc Biệt Về Vũ Trọng Phụng, Đời Sống và Con Người*, no. 5 (1957): 3.
44. Hoàng Thiếu Sơn, “Số Đổ: Cuốn ‘Truyện Bọm’ Kỳ Tài” (Dumb Luck, an extraordinary “story of cunning”), in *Nhà Văn Vũ Trọng Phụng Với Chúng Ta*, ed. Trần Hữu Tá. (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House, 1999), 393.
45. I am indebted to Basil Guy for bringing this to my attention.
46. Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War: Popular Culture in the Era of the World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 139.
47. *Ibid.*, 141.
48. Truong Buu Lam, *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention: 1858–1900* (New Haven: Southeast Asian Studies, Yale University, 1967).
49. Rearick, *French in Love and War*, 141.
50. This was first put forward in Văn Tâm, *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Nhà Văn Hiện Thực*, 97.
51. Văn Tâm, “Vũ Trọng Phụng Trong Rừng Cười Nhiệt Đới” (Vũ Trọng Phụng in the tropical jungle of laughter), in Trần Hữu Tá, *Nhà Văn Vũ Trọng Phụng Với Chúng Ta*, 375.
52. Nguyễn Triệu Luật, “Vũ Trọng Phụng Với Tôi” (Vũ Trọng Phụng with Me), *Tao Đàn: Số Đặc Biệt Về Vũ Trọng Phụng*, no. 1 (December 1939): 39.
53. Võ Thị Quỳnh, “Số Đổ Và Sự Phá Sản Của Ngôn Ngữ” (Dumb luck and the bankruptcy of language), in Lại Nguyên Ân, *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Tài Năng Và Sự Thật*, 131.
54. Lan Khai, *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Mớ Tài Liệu Cho Văn Sử Việt Nam*, 5.
55. Vũ Bằng, “Cái Tài Cái Tật của Vũ Trọng Phụng,” 31.
56. Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, “Tiểu Sử Vũ Trọng Phụng” (short biography of Vũ Trọng Phụng) in Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, *Tuyển Tập Vũ Trọng Phụng, Tập 1*, 10.
57. Tam Lang, “Vài Kỷ Niệm Về Vũ Trọng Phụng” (Memories of Vũ Trọng Phụng), *Tao Đàn: Số Đặc Biệt Về Vũ Trọng Phụng*, no. 1 (December 1999): 54–61.
58. For a discussion of the *Ngo Báo* stories, see Lại Nguyên Ân, “Những phát hiện mới về tác phẩm của Vũ Trọng Phụng” (New discoveries of work by Vũ Trọng Phụng), *Tạp Chí Nhà Văn*, February 2001.
59. Nguyễn Công Hoan, *Đời Viết Văn Của Tôi* (My life as a writer) (Hanoi: Văn Học, 1971), 94; Thiều Quang, “Chút Ít Tài Liệu Về Vũ Trọng Phụng,” 10.

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60. For more on Hoàng Tích Chu, see “Hoàng Tích Chu và Lối Văn Học Của Anh” (Hoàng Tích Chu and his succinct writing style), in Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Những Năm Tháng Ấy: Hồi Ký*, 236–46.

61. Phụng mentions Hoàng Tích Chu’s fascination with the “seamy side of life” at the end of *Household Servants*. See the Greg Lockhart translation in *The Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press), 156.

62. According to his friend Đào Trinh Nhất, Chu’s efforts to introduce modern journalism into Tonkin grew out of an intense admiration for the French press: “While studying with him in Paris during 1927, I observed that Hoàng Tích Chu was obsessed with the *Quotidien*, one of the most attractive and well-written newspapers in the French capital. Even when he was short of money for food, Chu always managed to scrounge up five sou for the *Quotidien*. He admired the popular daily column of Pierre Bertrand, whose writing he found skillful, clear and full of ideas. He also liked the fact that Bertrand’s sentences ran for only one or two lines and that his longest articles never covered more than half a column. Hoàng used to say to me: ‘When we return home, we must strive to revolutionize our prose in this way.’” *Một Khuê, Ba Mươi Năm Văn Học* (Thirty years of literature) (Hanoi: Tân Việt, 1941), 18.

63. Vũ Bằng, *Bốn Mươi Năm Nói Láo* (Saigon: Phạm-Quang-Khải, 1969), 22.

64. *Ibid.*, 28.

65. Vũ Trọng Phụng, “Phê-Bình Báo-Chí: *Ngọ-Báo*” (Criticizing newspapers: *Ngọ Báo*), *Tiến Hóa*, no. 3 (7 December 1935).

66. After falling out with Bùi Xuân Học late in 1932, Hoàng Tích Chu and Đỗ Văn eventually moved to a journal named *Nhật Tân* (New Day), where they were joined by much of their old staff from *Hà Thành Ngọ Báo*: Tam Lang, Phùng Tất Đắc, Tạ Đình Bích, Phùng Bảo Thạch, and Vũ Trọng Phụng. The prolific novelist Nguyễn Công Hoan worked there as well. Following a brief stint at Vũ Liên’s *Nông Công Thương* (Agriculture, Industry, Commerce), Phụng returned in 1934 to work for his old boss, Bùi Xuân Học, on an irreverent new weekly named *Loa* (Trumpet). There he again worked alongside Tam Lang and the critic and theorist Trương Tửu, who became a close friend and great admirer of his work. While writing for *Loa*, he published occasional pieces in *Phụ Nữ Thời Đàm* (Current Women’s Talk), a women’s newspaper edited by the brilliant man of letters Phan Khôi. Later that year he moved to the port city of Hải Phòng, where he joined forces again with Phùng Bảo Thạch to run *Hải Phòng Tuần Báo* (Haiphong Weekly). Returning to Hanoi in early 1935, Phụng teamed up once more with Vũ Bằng, Vũ Liên, and Phùng Bảo Thạch to found a short-lived paper named *Công Dân* (Citizen). They added Ngô Tất Tố and Nguyễn Triệu Luật before the venture folded at the end of the year. Phụng moved to Lê Cường’s *Hà Nội Báo* (Hanoi Newspaper) in 1936, where he published *The Storm* (*Giông Tố*) and *Dumb Luck* in rapid succession. He was joined there by old comrades—Phan Khôi, Nguyễn Công Hoan, and Trương Tửu—and a host of talented new colleagues including Lưu Trọng Lư and Lê Tràn Kiều. That same year Phụng published major works in *Tương Lai* (The Future)—a newspaper run by his old friends Phùng Bảo Thạch, Ngô Tất Tố, and Vũ Bằng—and occasional pieces in *Ích Hữu* (Useful Friend), a new journal founded by the publishing magnate Vũ Đình Long that included Nguyễn Công Hoan on its staff. Phụng spent much of 1937 working for two papers—*Đông Dương Tạp Chí* (Indochina Times) and *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Năm* (Thursday Novel)—

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which were owned by his old boss from *Hà Nội Báo*, Lê Cường. During the last year of his life he wrote primarily for Vũ Đình Long's *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* (Saturday Novel) and *Tao Đàn* (Literary Circle). At the time of his death in 1939, Phụng was poised to embark on a new journalistic venture—a *quốc ngữ* humor magazine under the editorship of Vũ Bằng.

67. DeFrancis, *Colonialism and Language Policy in Viet Nam*, 213.
68. Shawn McHale, "Printing and Power: Vietnamese Debates over Women's Place in Society, 1918–1934," in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, ed. Keith Taylor and John Whitmore (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1995), 177.
69. De Francis, *Colonialism and Language Policy in Vietnam*, 217.
70. Interview with Professor Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, Hanoi, 21 December 1996.
71. See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: A Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 37–42.
72. For background on Nhất Linh and the Self-Strength Group, consult the following: Stephen O'Harrow, "Some Background Notes on Nhat Linh (Nguyen Tuong Tam)," *France-Asie/Asia* 22, no. 2 (2e trimestre 1968): 205–20; Greg Lockhart, "Broken Journey: Nhat Linh's *Going to France*," *East Asian History* 8 (1994): 73–95; and Nhật Thịnh, *Chân Dung Nhất Linh* (Portrait of Nhất Linh) (Saigon: Sống Mới, 1971).
73. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 46–52.
74. Huynh Sanh Thong, "Main Trends of Vietnamese Literature between the Two World Wars," *Vietnam Forum* 3 (Winter–Spring 1984): 113.
75. Nguyễn Thành Thi, "Thơ 'Thật,' Thơ 'Giả' và . . . Cái Nhếch Mép Của Họ Vũ" (Real poem, fake poem, and the smile of Mr. Vũ), in Lại Nguyên Ân, *Vũ Trọng Phụng—Tài Năng và Sự Thật*, 141–42.
76. Ngọc Giao, "Chủ Nhà In, Nhà Xuất Bản Tân Dân, Ông Vũ Đình Long" (Chief of the Tân Dân publishing house, Mr. Vũ Đình Long), *Tạp Chí Văn Học*, no. 1, 247, January 1991, 58–61.
77. The exchange has been reprinted in Lại Nguyên Ân, *Vũ Trọng Phụng—Tài Năng và Sự Thật*, 205–31.
78. Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại*, 533.
79. Trương Tửu, "Địa Vị Của Vũ Trọng Phụng Trong Văn Học Việt Nam Cận Đại" (Position of Vũ Trọng Phụng in modern Vietnamese literature), in *Tao Đàn: Số Đặc Biệt Về Vũ Trọng Phụng*, no. 1 (December 1939): 6.
80. *Ibid.*, 7.
81. Một Tay Cách Mệnh Cộng Sản (pseud., Vũ Trọng Phụng), "Lời Hiệu-Triệu Của Một Tay Sặt-Ta-Li-Nít: Đả Đảo Tên Tờ-rốt-kýt Huỳnh Văn Phương," *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Năm*, no. 13, 14 August 1938, 5. Vũ Trọng Phụng, "Nhân Sự Chia Rẽ Đệ Tam và Đệ Tứ," *Đông Dương Tạp Chí*, no. 20, 21 September–October 1937.
82. Lan Khai, *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Mớ Tài Liệu Cho Văn Sử Việt Nam*, 12–24.
83. See Georges Boudarel, *Cent fleurs ecloses dans la nuit du Vietnam: communisme et dissidence, 1954–56* (Paris: Jacques Bertoin, 1991).
84. Đào Duy Anh, Hoàng Cầm, Phan Khôi, Sỹ Ngọc, Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, Văn Tâm, and Trương Tửu, *Vũ Trọng Phụng Với Chúng Ta*, (Hanoi: NXB Minh Đức, 1956).
85. The essay was first published in 1994 in *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Con Người Và Tác Phẩm* (Vũ Trọng Phụng: life and work), ed. Nguyễn Hoàn Khung and Lại Nguyên Ân (Hanoi: NXB Hội Nhà Văn, 1994), 219–45.

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86. Hoàng Văn Hoan, 220–21.
87. Trường Chinh, *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), 225.
88. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities," *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 13.