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Quang-Anh Tran, Richard

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Sex in the City: The Descent from Human to Animal in Two Vietnamese Classics of Urban Reportage

Richard Quang-Anh Tran

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between urban space, normative sexuality and animal metaphors in two Vietnamese classics of modern reportage, namely Tam Lang's "I Pulled a Rickshaw" (1932) and Vu Trong Phung's "Household Servants" (1936). Both reportages are set in colonial Hanoi, and both provide a glimpse of the explosive growth of urban space and its perceived effects on the city's inhabitants. While scholars examining early twentieth-century Vietnamese urban reportages have tended to focus on their historical and ethnographic value, the article pays special attention to a key dimension that defines the genre: their figurative language. The article demonstrates that the distinction between human and animal is intertwined with each author's critique of colonial modernity. For both Lang and Phung, urban space represents a postlapsarian descent of the human to the animal level. Far from embodying liberation, urban space metaphorically figures as a disruption of certain ideals of human sociality founded on a moral regime, whereby the category of the "human" is distinguished from the animal by norms of self-regulation and self-moderation. Insofar as it is founded on such a regime, normative sexuality and urban space embody antinomies of each other.

Keywords: Hanoi, Tam Lang, Vu Trong Phung, reportage, moral regime, sexuality, urban space

Introduction

In the 1930s in French colonial Vietnam, the new genre of urban reportage burst into the public sphere. As a form of investigative journalism, the genre enabled Vietnamese writers to undertake the task of interrogating social problems and critiquing them. In investigating society, many Vietnamese writers such as Tam Lang and Vu Trong Phung depicted diverse characters that populated the urban world of the time, characters that included opium addicts, prostitutes, rickshaw pullers, household servants and more. These are the characters that Shaun K. Malarney has called the "disenfranchised, dispossessed, unseen" members of society (Malarney 2011: 3), those whose predicaments the

Richard Quang-Anh Tran, Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University, Italy; rqrtran@unive.it. Due to publication constraints, Vietnamese diacritics have been removed.

two writers sought to illuminate, thereby spurring some measure of social reform. Through their depictions of Vietnam's rapidly modernising urban space, the reportages are valuable in furnishing rare and often rich documentary evidence of the lives of those who are less likely to appear in official records.

Scholars, as a result, have relied on the reportages for their historical and ethnographic value. Those researching the social history of urban prostitution, for instance, have used these texts as primary sources to examine the phenomenon in question (Malarney 2011, Tracol-Huynh 2013, Firpo 2016). Others have exploited them as biographical windows into the political visions of their respective authors (Zinoman 2014). Still, others, such as Ben Tran, have looked at the ways in which writers like Vu Trong Phung incorporated the reportage's empirical depictions into their fictional works to contribute to the democratisation of Vietnamese aesthetic and political representation (Tran 2017).

Few scholars, however, have focused on the poetic qualities of the urban reportages. If by "poetics" we understand the term to mean broadly the literary and rhetorical practices, forms and techniques of discourse (Genette 1972), then scholars have yet to examine the poetics of these texts more carefully. Whether due to disciplinary training or methodological preferences, the overall tendency is to exploit the urban reportages for their empirical value.¹ Yet, while such an approach is warranted in certain contexts, it nevertheless misses the crucial other feature that defines the reportage genre. Reportages differ from their premodern predecessor, the genre of "chronicle writing" (*ky su*), by blending journalistic practices with what the critic Vu Ngoc Phan calls their "literary character" (*chat van si*, Phan 1960: 558). Indeed, urban reportage is distinctive, according to Phan Trong Thuong, precisely because of this "fusion" (*tin h luong hop*) of the empirical with the "literary", or what I refer to as poetics, more generally (Thuong 2000: 5). If "chronicle writing" was marked by dispassionate objectivity, urban reportage foregrounded not only the journalist's subjectivity, capturing the empirical world through his/her "eyes and ears", but also demanded a poetic sensibility to dramatise effectively a critique of society (Phan 1960: 557). Hence, the "poetics" of urban reportage represents, in fact, a critical feature of the genre; any analysis of these texts would be incomplete without due attention to this feature.

In this article, I focus on the poetics of two Vietnamese classics of modern reportage, namely Tam Lang's "I Pulled a Rickshaw" (1932) and Vu Trong Phung's "Household Servants" (1936), to examine their depictions of the relationship between urban space, normative sexuality, and conceptions of the human/animal. Both reportages take place in colonial Hanoi, and both pro-

1 Ben Tran maintains, for instance, that some of the reportage authors in no way intended to use metaphor or other abstract rhetorical symbols in their depictions of sex and sexuality but conceived of the latter as grounded in "material reality" (Tran 2017: 43). For the criticisms of metaphorical readings, see Zinoman 2014, and Tran 2017.

vide a glimpse of the explosive growth of urban space and its effects on its residents. Lang's reportage recounts the experience of an undercover journalist who dons working clothes and becomes a rickshaw puller to describe the lives of the people in this trade. Phung's reportage retells the stories of servants and their masters whom the narrator encounters in Hanoi. I will suggest that the question of what it means to be human is intertwined with each author's critique of colonial modernity. For both Lang and Phung, urban space represents a postlapsarian descent of the human to the animal level. Far from embodying liberation, urban space figures as a disruption of certain ideals of human sociality founded on a moral regime, whereby the category of the "human" is distinguished from the animal by norms of self-regulation and self-moderation. Insofar as human sociality is founded on such a regime, normative sexuality and urban space embody antinomies of each other.

"Sexuality" is here understood to be the effect of a complex array of discursive and institutional forces arising out of certain times and places. In this view, sexuality is not limited to the biological meaning but encompasses the complex "ensemble" of acts, expectations, pleasures, identity formations and knowledges formed at different social locations (Butler 1990: 92, Corber / Valocchi 2003: 14). Likewise, I understand "space" in the concept of "urban space" in the more capacious sense to include not only physical space, but also the imaginative space arising out of literary and artistic representation. Such a literary approach need not be antithetical to the so-called empirical-based methodologies. To the extent that one maintains a distinction between them at all, an attention to the poetics of urban reportage can complement the former approach by distilling the frames of reference of a culture, what Charles A. Laughlin calls the "literary construction of social space" (Laughlin 2002: 29). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's concepts of space, Laughlin maintains that the characteristic "moods, rhetoric, and narrative situations" that appear in news reportage simultaneously capture the dialectic between the writer's physical environment and perception of it, on the one hand, and, on the other, the production of social space through literary and artistic representation (Laughlin 2002: 29–30). In this regard, I treat Vietnamese urban reportages as not only rhetorical artefacts, but also active agents in the empirical *production* of cultural space itself.

An analysis of the human/animal distinction has profound social and political implications. To be classified as "human" confers not only societal recognition, but all sorts of legal and political rights. To be classified as "animal", on the other hand, is to be sub-human, potentially outside the purview of the human and, therefore, politically disenfranchised and disempowered. Yet, the division between the two is not self-evident. Rather, it is culturally and historically specific (Butler 2004: 1–17, Feher et al. 1989). An analysis of such a question has scholarly implications not only for Asian studies specialists, but

also queer studies scholars for whom the conceptual and historical relation between social norms and sexual personhood remains an abiding preoccupation (Davidson 2001, Corber / Valocchi 2003). By examining the representation of this dyad through two colonial-era reportages, this study is a preliminary inquiry into understanding this division in early twentieth-century Vietnamese urban society.

The article in no way intends to be comprehensive. For practical reasons, it limits its analysis to the two Vietnamese reportages mentioned above. The study acknowledges that there are other texts that could have been examined.² Still, there are reasons why the study focuses on Lang's "I Pulled a Rickshaw" and Phung's "Household Servants". First, critics consider Lang's piece as the seminal reportage that would come to define the genre in this period (Thuong 2000, Malarney 2011). In fact, Phung was inspired to write "Household Servants" – arguably considered as one of his best pieces – due in no small part to Tam Lang's classic (Lockhart 1996: 121). Second, by examining reportages by two different authors, the article aims to show how the moral regime that distinguishes the human from the animal cuts across different evidentiary sources and is not reducible to a biographical reflection of any one author's worldview. Finally, since the two reportages have already been translated into English, a broader audience can readily engage with them, with the hope that they will someday do so in the original Vietnamese. In this article, unless otherwise noted, I rely on Greg and Monique Lockhart's translations with reference to the original Vietnamese sources.³

The article will be divided into two main parts. First, I survey some of the historical tropes associated with the rural and urban, especially in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Vietnam, to provide a broader context for the argument. Then, the article turns to an analysis of the reportages to demonstrate how the growth of urban space has led to a moral crisis, and hence, a dissolution of the normative category of the "human".

The historical context: Tropes of the rural and urban

There have been contrasting views of the urban in history. On the one hand, the view of the urban as a space of moral crisis is associated with the idea that the city is an embodiment of depravity while the rural is a frontier of pastoral innocence. Yet, this view is neither self-evident nor timeless. The countervail-

2 Some reportages for future inquiry could be Vu Trong Phung's "To Be a Prostitute" (*Lam Di*, 1936) and his "Municipal Dispensary" (*Luc Xi*, 1937).

3 Greg Lockhart / Monique Lockhart (translators): *The Light of the Capital*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. The Vietnamese versions are accessible online: for Tam Lang's "I Pulled a Rickshaw", see <https://vietmessenger.com/books/?title=toi%20keo%20xe>; for Vu Trong Phung's "Household Servants", see <https://www.sachhayonline.com/tua-sach/com-thay-com-co/mo-dau/678> (accessed 17 December 2019).

ing view is to envisage the urban as a symbol of cosmopolitan sophistication, as evidenced, for instance, in the relatively positive connotations associated with the word “urbane” – people who display elegance and refinement in manners – in contrast to the rural provincialism of a country “bumpkin”.⁴

Both contrasting views of the urban, in fact, represent stages in the historical evolution of the development of capitalism. In his classic study of this issue in English literature, Raymond Williams (1973) delineates at least three historical stages. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the city is associated with money and law; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with wealth and luxury; in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with mobility and isolation. In short, the idea of the urban is in no way a static phenomenon but has shifted over time in response to larger structural forces.

In the context of Vietnam, we can delineate two historical periods relevant to this study, namely the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, during the reign of the Nguyen kings, the idea of the urban was associated with the “imperial city”. Located in Hue, the “imperial city” was modelled after Beijing and aimed to emulate the latter’s symbolic grandeur. Alexander Woodside explains:

Although its [Hue] imitations of Chinese-style grandeur are its principal concern to this study, it must be remembered that these imitations were never enjoyed or greatly understood by its non-bureaucratic population. Nguyen court records document episodes in which the people of Hue interfered with imperial processions through the streets, offered little respect to officials in sedan chairs, and indulged in hooliganism. Hue in the early 1800’s was renowned for its discordantly noisy food peddlers, whom a desperate Minh-mang tried to license. The Sino-Vietnamese imperial dream coexisted uneasily with Southeast Asian market town. (Woodside 1971: 127)

The imperial city populated by the scholar elites symbolised the “Great Tradition”. In such a tradition, the Nguyen elites constructed an orderly, homogeneous, hierarchical and tightly organised society. At each ascending level was the replication of the same ritual patterns that mandated the use of Chinese as the official language, as well as the adoption of legal codes that placed women in subordinate positions, restricted Buddhism and promulgated Neo-Confucian doctrines. Such a society sought to socialise officials and villagers alike to behave in orthodox ways and to inculcate in them social solidarity (Jamieson 1995: 38). This “Great Tradition” towered above the smaller traditions that lay behind the “bamboo walls of the villages”.

In the villages, Vietnamese society at the time was also hierarchically organised. At the helm was the village chief under whom were the community and the family, communal entities that subordinated the individual to the interest of the collective. The idea of “individual liberty” was minimal and, to

4 See the second entry [for “urbane”] in the Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/220387?redirectedFrom=urbane#eid> (accessed 25 July 2019).

the degree that one identified with the collective, life in such a system could be deeply meaningful. Like the king and the administrators of the “imperial city”, the village chief exerted influence by virtue of his example and ensured harmony and prosperity for the collective. A separate space was made available for an outdoor market (Jamieson 1995, Papin 2002). Thus, in the nineteenth century, whereas the imperial city embodied the solemn space of law, architecture and learning, the space beyond the imperial walls comprised the life of the villagers and the values of the boisterous market.

By the early twentieth century, many of these divisions would collapse and new ones would emerge. The division between the solemn space of law and the market would no longer hold. The urban space of colonial Hanoi would be an amalgamation of both, as well as many other things but, most importantly, a sign of modernity. Modernity in the Vietnamese context was marked by rapid social, cultural and economic modernisation, a profound departure from traditional practices, beliefs and epistemologies. The most notable conditions were a relative openness to the market economy, and hence to the global circulation and exchanges of products, commodities, ideas, trends and fashions; a booming printing press; and, most important, a heightened sense of collective anxiety about the uncertainties of the modern era (Zinoman 2002).

As a vivid illustration of these uncertainties, Vietnamese newspapers published the urban adventures of a popular cartoon character, Ly Toet, a country bumpkin. In his study of this character, George Dutton states that “Ly Toet’s encounters with city life revealed the ambivalences of this new modernity, including its physical dangers and its often abrupt departures from long-established patterns of daily life” (Dutton 2007: 81). Through the character, the cartoon revealed what Dutton calls a dual notion of modernity. On the one hand, urban colonial Hanoi would embody the temporal-spatial horizon of the modern present. On the other hand, the countryside – represented in the figure of country bumpkin – symbolised the spatial-temporal horizon *before* the modern. Indeed, in many parts of Southeast Asia, the division between the countryside and the city accelerated by the early twentieth century. As the cities began to boom, many country folks migrated to the urban centres in search of better living conditions and work opportunities. But as Milton Osborne (2016) notes, such aspirations quickly dissipated in the face of harsh labour conditions, rising unemployment, overcrowding and poor public services.

The human vs the animal: An analysis of a moral regime

I Pulled a Rickshaw

Scholars studying Tam Lang's "I Pulled a Rickshaw" agree that the reportage is not merely reporting for the sake of doing so but aims to advance a message to bring about societal change. In depicting the rickshaw puller's deplorable working conditions, the author uses the pen to bring about what he perceives as necessary social reforms in the rickshaw trade. The Vietnamese literary critic Vu Ngoc Phan has remarked that "there is no other genre that has helped officials, law-makers, and sociologists reform society more than that of reportage" (Phan 1960: 558). Situating Tam Lang's reportage in the Vietnamese new discourse of "civilization", Mark P. Bradley has argued that it represents "radical conceptions" of the individual and society insofar as it articulates aspirations for social transformation (Bradley 2004: 80). In this regard, as Bradley notes, the Vietnamese reportage genre is akin to the American progressive tradition of muckraking journalism, such as Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle", which exposed the unsanitary conditions of Chicago's meatpacking industry; or to Weimar Germany's *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement, which sought to raise critical awareness of objective reality, as exemplified in the works of Bertolt Brecht, Otto Dix and Heinrich Mann. While acknowledging the presence of this modern radical vision of the "self" in the Vietnamese reportage, the following analysis uncovers other intellectual strands that have been under-examined in Tam Lang's work, namely a critique of the colonial discourse of developmental "progress" and the moral Confucian regime according to which the "animal" is hierarchically inferior to the "human". The analysis will focus on two central questions. First, with what is the human associated? How is the "human" defined? Second, how are notions of sex and sexuality related to this paradigm of the "human"?

To answer these questions, let us first look at how the reportage describes the conditions of the "human", particularly through the lives of rickshaw pullers. The most conspicuous clue as to how the reportage defines the human appears towards the conclusion. The narrator steps out of the diegesis and addresses his audience ("Dear Readers"). He continues by asking them what has led the rickshaw pullers to be treated with such "contempt" (*khinh bi*) and locates the cause in "society" (*xa hoi*), which he defines as "all of the people who come from the same origins [*coi re*] and who all live together under the same system, and that includes you and me" (p. 113⁵). The narrator calls on his readers to show more sympathy for the workers of this trade and insists

5 Throughout this section, unless otherwise noted, the page numbers refer to Lockhart's translation of "I Pulled a Rickshaw".

on the abolishment of the rickshaw. The rickshaw trade, according to the narrator, is the epitome of inhumane treatment in turning men into “horses”:

To lower a powerless person from his status as a human being to that of a horse [*con ngua*], to give him two wooden shafts and say, “I will sit up here while you pull me” is the same as saying “**You are not a human being**” [*May khong phai la nguoi*] (p. 113, my emphasis).

The rhetoric of the human (*con nguoi*) is not some incidental, isolated word choice on the narrator’s part. Rather, it pervades the narrator’s call for societal reform. He writes that society robs rickshaw pullers of their “human dignity” (*nhan pham*) yet accuses them of committing “undignified” acts (*khong co nhan cach*) (ibid.: 113). Earlier in the reportage, when he first describes his experience as a rickshaw puller, the narrator also uses the same rhetoric. He states, “breathing through my mouth, my nose and, also, my ears with sweat streaming off me, I no longer felt like a **human being** [*nguoi*]” (ibid.: 60, my emphasis). Instead, as the quoted passage suggests, the rickshaw puller has been reduced to the level of a horse. Implicit in this claim is a hierarchy whereby the category of the animal is inferior to that of the human. The narrator’s justification for abolishing the rickshaw, after all, is *not* because of the flagrant exploitive acts by other humans – the supervisors who abuse, the middlemen who swindle, the clients who refuse to pay for services. Rather, the narrator’s key argument is that the rickshaw as a mode of transportation symbolically drags the workers to a lower level within some broader cosmology, namely the animal level.

Indeed, this human/animal dichotomy is ubiquitous throughout the reportage. In the opening scene, when the narrator first tries to pull a rickshaw, he believes that he is “panting like a cow” (*tho hoi hong hoc nhu bo*, p. 55); his stomach dangles like a “pig’s belly” (*bung lon*) (p. 60). The rickshaw uniform smells like something out of a “stable” (*mui chuong ngua*) (p. 56). When a supervisor abuses a coolie for failing to repay the cost of the rickshaw rental, the latter is portrayed as a “trembling dog” (*run len nhu cay say*, p. 67). The area in which the rickshaw pullers rest for the night is compared to a “rat’s hole” (*cai hang chuot*, p. 67). In each of these examples, the narrator’s descent to the animal world implies a kind of moral degradation, a profound sense of shame.

But there is more. The reportage also depicts urban colonial Hanoi as a postlapsarian space into which humans are tempted to slip. At one point, the narrator refers to Hanoi as a “jungle” (*hang rung*) (p. 94). In such a descent, humans lose their moral values and become transformed into animals. Two examples help to illustrate this point. First, halfway through the reportage, the main narrator meets a former rickshaw coolie, brother Tu, who recounts his life. Jaded by the exploitation and deplorable working conditions, he decides instead to become a “pimp” (*ma co*). In this urban space, he explains, to

live an “honest life” is to make oneself into a laughingstock for “city people” (*ke thi thanh*) (p. 97). As a result, brother Tu states that he “began to take the tortuous path, the dirty, dark one of an animal” (*con duong ban thiu toi tam cua mot phuong trau cho*) (p. 97). It is significant that the chapter narrating his entry into the sex industry is titled “A Fox in Coolie’s Clothing” (*Con cao ao xanh*). The image of the “fox” (*con cao*) is deployed to describe the “many devices, many tricks” (*nhieu cach, nhieu khoe*) the animal uses to lure all sorts of girls, including “country girls” (*con gai nha que*), into the life of prostitution (p. 103). To survive in this urban space, according to brother Tu, one must abandon all moral values. “Life is money,” he explains, “virginity [*trinh tiet*] and humaneness [*nhan nghia*] are nothing” (p. 108). Hence, the story of brother Tu allegorises the human descent to the animal world. Second, like brother Tu who slipped into the animal’s “dark, dirty” path, the reportage also depicts the ease with which city girls slip into the sex industry. Brother Tu explains:

After the first step comes the second. The first step is difficult, the second easier, the third ... if you make one small slip, it’s fatal. It’s not difficult ... [to] go past the limit, part the hair on one side, put on a flashy smile, draw on a pair of eyebrows, paint on a beauty spot, put on a corset, and you’re gone: you’ve become a prostitute. (p. 107)

If Hanoi is, metaphorically, a “jungle” and if brother Tu is the “fox”, it follows that the girls that he turns into prostitutes represent a species below the human. In these examples, the distinctive quality of the human, as opposed to the animal, appears to be an embrace of certain moral values, the loss of which leads to one’s descent into the animal kingdom. In all cases, the reportage presupposes a moral hierarchy according to which the animal is inferior to the human.

Yet, such a connotation of the animal is neither inevitable nor necessary. Writers can use animals to symbolise human vice or virtue, even the supra-human, in cases where the animal stands in for the holy. And one must not forget that animals can also be pets, thereby serving, in some contexts, as people’s “best friend” (Lee 2014). The question, then, is the following: what is the origin of this moral regime in Lang’s reportage?

The notion of the animal’s inferiority has its roots in different cultural and intellectual traditions. Scholars of the Western tradition, for instance, have studied different paradigms that demarcate the line between the human and animal. The classical and Cartesian paradigms saw the nonhuman animal as belonging to nature’s mechanistic universe devoid of subjectivity, and hence inferior to the human. Kant extended this line of reasoning by showing that, since animals are a means to an end, they lack the powers of self-purposiveness that is a condition of human freedom.⁶ This lack of autonomy explains why, in addition to the bevy of animal metaphors, the narrator also compares him-

6 For a philosophical genealogy, see Cavalieri / Woollard 2001, Peterson 2017.

self to machines. As the narrator explains, “I no longer felt like a human being, but like a steam engine [*cai noi sot-de*]” (p. 60). Elsewhere, the narrator observes: “As far as I’m concerned, to be a rickshaw coolie you must bow to the command of two wooden shafts [*hai canh tay go*]!” (p. 60). The distinctive quality of the human, in other words, depends on the causal source: not from external natural laws but from within – through the powers of self-regulation. But while Western ideas, including those of Descartes and Kant, did make their way into Vietnam in the early twentieth century (Marr 1981: 118), it is unlikely that these ideas played a significant role in influencing Tam Lang and his reportage.

A more likely source of this moral hierarchy between the human and animal is a certain developmental discourse that was pervasive in many parts of Asia and the world during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This developmental discourse derived from a fusion of ideas emanating from the natural sciences and the imperialist project, a combination of evolutionary thinking and a colonialist imperative to divide the world based on its moral and intellectual progress (Baker 1998, Bennet 2004, Jones 2011). In the context of Lang’s reportage, this developmental discourse is exemplified in the association of the “animal” with Vietnamese ethnic minorities, the highlanders. In one of the scenes in which the narrator describes his rickshaw-pulling experience, the narrator states that he felt like an “animal or someone from the mountain tribes” (*mot con vat hay mot nguoi Moi*) (p. 89). The association of the animal with Vietnam’s ethnic minorities provides a clue as to the inferior status of the animal figure.⁷

During this period, the prevailing colonial discourse saw the mountainous minorities as “savages”, an ambivalent connotation depending on the ideology of the beholder. The highlanders could be perceived as either “heathens”, “noble” or “underdeveloped” within a Social Darwinist framework (Salemink 2003, Jennings 2011). While the highlanders were useful to the dominant ethnic Vietnamese for the purposes of trade and labour, Osborne explains that the terms used to describe them throughout Southeast Asia mark an “absolute social division” between the upland minorities and lowland majorities. “Without exception,” Osborne further explains, “the words are pejorative, laden with disdain” (Osborne 2016: 63). To counteract this prevailing local perception, James C. Scott has argued in the *Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) that the highlanders embody not so much “barbarism” as an attempt to escape the clutches of the modern state and its seemingly relentless forms of control. In all

7 One might argue that the inference is the other way around: by comparing the mountain tribes to animals, the narrator is lowering the former’s status. Such an inference, however, already presupposes the animal’s inferiority. Yet, as I have noted earlier, depending on the context, the animal figure could embody vice, virtue or even the sacred. So the question at issue is precisely to discern the animal’s symbolism – which, in this context, is linked to that of the mountain tribes.

cases, within the Vietnamese imaginary, the highlanders, like the figure of the animal, signify the limits of modern civilisation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the reportage depicts the rickshaw puller's living quarters as dark spaces where "[t]here was no ray of light". The narrator continues: "Here, the light of civilisation [*anh sang van minh*] is blocked by a wall of dirt; the wheel of progress [*banh xe tien hoa*] is stopped by a long stretch of dike" (p. 70). Just as the "light of civilisation" cannot reach the natural world of the animal, so too does the narrator feel that he has slowly descended into the animal level.

The metaphor of the "light of civilisation" functions as Lang's ironic critique of colonial modernity. The promise of the French civilising mission was, ideally, to help modernise the peoples of the colonies culturally and materially (Lam 2000, Brocheux / Hemery 2011, Jennings 2011). In the metaphor, however, the "light of civilisation" fails to extend to the living quarters of the rickshaw coolies and all those whose lives are what Malarney calls the "disenfranchised, dispossessed, unseen" members of colonial society (Malarney 2011: 3). These marginal characters, many of whom migrated to Hanoi from the countryside, are ironically associated with the very rural animals that they have left behind – pigs, cows, dogs, horses. By depicting the descent of the human to the animal level, the reportage shows how the natural environment of the countryside has ironically inscribed itself onto the urban space of colonial Hanoi. The French civilising mission, according to the reportage, appears to have been a developmental failure.

Another source for this hierarchical distinction between the human/animal comes from the Confucian moral tradition, however. In *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination*, Haiyan Lee (2014) explains that Confucianism sees animals as belonging to a certain cosmological order. She explains:

Much of what goes on in these venues of animal suffering is tolerated by many [in the Confucian society] who consider themselves upstanding, responsible citizens, usually on the grounds of the proper order of things, albeit articulated in more or less anthropocentric or utilitarian terms. (Lee 2014: 74)

She further explains that Confucianism urges that animal butchery and other unsightly activities ought to be removed from sight as a "form of *moral self-discipline, of cultivating an understanding of the proper order of things*" (ibid.: 74, my emphasis). In the Confucian tradition, therefore, the animal is hierarchically inferior to the human who, in turn, can exploit it for various utilitarian ends. This tradition, as Lee notes, is profoundly different from the Buddhist doctrine of the equality of all sentient beings: humans and animals alike are subject to the endless cycle of transmigration.

Evidence of the influence of this premodern Confucian idea of the human is illustrated in the vocabulary the narrator uses in his appeal to reform the rick-

shaw trade. Let us circle back to the paradigmatic scene that I introduced in the analysis, wherein the narrator insists that society has robbed the rickshaw pullers of their “human dignity” (*nhan pham*) (p. 113). The conceptual origins of the idea of “human dignity” suggest two different intellectual strands in Tam Lang’s text. On the one hand, notions of equality and human rights were reinvented premodern concepts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, created to serve, among other purposes, the translation of Western political theory. Certain modern abstract terms such as “public”, “society” and “democracy” entered Vietnam by way of the complex process of translation and modernisation (Liu 1995, Heinrich forthcoming). It is no coincidence that the narrator invokes the French League for the Rights of Man in his exhortation for better working conditions for the rickshaw puller. He states, “if it [the rickshaw trade] hadn’t been regarded as a shame, the League for the Rights of Man would not have intervened in the rickshaw issue” (p. 114). On the other hand, the notion of “human dignity” clearly has premodern roots, not least of which is a Confucian ethical cosmology.

The Vietnamese word for “dignity” (*nhan pham*) is revealing here: it is comprised of two Sino-Vietnamese characters, “human” (*nhan*; 人) and “trait” (*pham*; 品), and predates Vietnam’s modernity in the early twentieth century. The word, in fact, can be traced as far back as the 14th-century Sino-Vietnamese text *An Nam Chi Luoc* (“Abbreviated Records of An Nam”).⁸ As Tai Van Ta has demonstrated in *The Vietnamese Tradition of Human Rights* (1989), premodern Vietnam under the emperors exhibited a complex notion of “human rights”, arguably stronger in some cases than modern international covenants today.

This premodern Confucian tradition is very likely a contributory source of Tam Lang’s human/animal dichotomy. Tam Lang himself was known to have been raised in a family of Confucian scholars and, long before he entered the French-Vietnamese secondary school system, learned Chinese characters at the age of five (Lockhart 1996: 51). Apart from biographical context, the reportage itself also lends further weight to this interpretation. As Ben Tran has noted, approximately half of the reportage – ten of the twenty chapters – is an encounter with a rickshaw puller, “brother Tu,” who apparently used to be a mandarin scholar and teacher (Tran 2017: 27). Let us circle back to brother Tu’s story. As noted earlier, the degrading urban environment led him to opt to be a pimp. He explains:

From that day on, I regarded everyone around me as **snakes** [*loai ran*] and **centipedes** [*loai ret*]. I committed a serious crime, I worked as a **pimp** [*ma co*], I became addicted to opium, I spoke obscenely, I opened my trousers and urinated in the street without blushing, farted without embarrassment as I pulled the rickshaw. In sum, I was in a

8 The following useful search engine is a compilation of Sino-Nom print sources published since 1942 and points to the term’s usage dating to the 14th-century text *An Nam Chi Luoc*: <https://hvdic.thivien.net/>.

state where I didn't pay attention to anyone, like the louts who shit shamelessly in the fields with the dogs [*cai Vang cai Ven*] standing around them, waiting. [...] Benevolence, virtues, rites – I tossed them all away [*nhan, duc, le, nghia...vut di het*]. (p. 102, my emphases)

This passage is significant in providing to the Vietnamese readers a model of what not to emulate. After all, recall that Tam Lang's narrator addresses the readers throughout the reportage and, as Bradley explains, aims to instil in them an altered consciousness to reform society. The moral values against which brother Tu compares himself are clearly based on Confucian notions: "benevolence, virtues, rites". But urban life has led this mandarin scholar, once guided by these Confucian values, to descend to the animal level. At this level, according to the passage, there are no social rules of decorum and propriety, no question of ethics, no consideration of others, no regime of sexual restraint or self-regulation. Like the dogs who stand waiting, the narrator inhabits a "shameless" world of pure biology and animality. He urinates, farts and shits. Everyone else, too, has transformed into some of the lowest species in the animal kingdom – "snakes and centipedes". In this urban space, the light of civilisation has been snuffed out, replaced by an unruly world in which the hierarchy between the human and animal has collapsed.

Household Servants

As the title implies, Vu Trong Phung's "Household Servants" is a reportage about the everyday lives of servants in Hanoi. Like Tam Lang's "I Pulled a Rickshaw", the reportage is filtered through the lens of a narrator. Hence, as some literary critics have noted, these reportages cannot be taken as unadulterated "objective" mirrors of Hanoi urban life. Scholar Ben Tran, for instance, has questioned the access and privilege of the indigenous heterosexual male voice in these works. For him, these works establish their authority by constructing a Self through an Other, namely a female prostitute. He explains, "I am interested in how these works illuminate the ways that culture forms through asymmetry and difference, in this case through the native, male auto-ethnographic voice" (Tran 2017: 25). By showing the exclusionary mechanisms by which the authors construct their narratives, Tran is able to problematise the articulation of a "totalized ethnic and national culture" (*ibid.*).

Building on this scholarship, the following analysis seeks to reconstruct another facet of Vu Trong Phung's narrative strategy. I suggest that, even more fundamental than the female prostitute, the "animal" is in fact the Other of Phung's conception of the "human". In particular, for Phung, the erosion of sexual norms in this new urban space symptomises the human descent to the animal level. Throughout the reportage, Phung depicts the urban as a space that attracts those from the countryside only to lead to their dehumanisation.

In a paradigmatic scene, the narrator describes a group of thirteen servants who migrated from the countryside to the city in search of work. Explaining their predicament, the narrator states:

Based on their appearances and clothes, these thirteen people were not from the city [*de do*]. They came from the country [*thon que*] because they couldn't find enough work there to have two meals a day. The capital [*kinh thanh*] attracts [*cat tieng*] and corrupts [*cam do*] them. When they left the country, they did not realise that they would find themselves in such a plight. (p. 143⁹, my emphases)

The urban space is depicted as a place of false hope. Those from the countryside live in wretched conditions and look to the city as a place where they can improve their lives. But once drawn to it, they realise too late that their lives are no better, if not worse, than the ones they once endured before. In his translation, Lockhart uses the word “corrupts” for the Vietnamese word *cam do*, which can also be translated as “to seduce” in a pejorative sense. Later in the same chapter, the narrator contends that those from the countryside are “dazzled” (*bi quang mat*) by the “light of the capital” (*anh sang cua kinh thanh*) (p. 144). They are drawn to its allure, to the potential opportunities that it can provide, only to end up like “moths to a flame” (*con thieu than bay vao dong lua*) (p. 144). Like the moths who meet their own destruction, those drawn to the city also experience a form of loss. This loss, however, is not so much their own mortality as their own morality. The city morally corrupts all those who inhabit it. As the narrator further explains:

The city lures [*cat tieng goi*] people from the countryside [*que*] who leave dry fields and dead grass, and who starve a second time after they have abandoned their homes. It reduces people to the level of animals [*ngang hang voi gia loai vat*]: it often drives young men into prison and young women into prostitution. (p. 130, my emphases)

In the passage, prostitution is associated with animal behaviour, here characterised by that which is located beneath the human. The city, after all, reduces people to the animal level, and it is at this level where people presumably lose their humanity. Indeed, animal metaphors are ubiquitous in the reportage. The workers at the eating houses lie around “like pigs” (*nhu lon*) (p. 125). The servants looking for work are like “flies attracted by the smell of honey” (*ruoi thay mui mat vay*) (p. 129). These servants live the lives of “bees and ants” (*hang con ong cai kien*) (p.151). They move to the city from the countryside only to find themselves inhabiting squalid conditions, huddled in courtyards filled with “chicken shit and human shit” (*cut ga va cut nguoi*) (p. 144).

The rhetorical figure of “shit” is non-trivial. It is not merely evidence of the city’s unsanitary conditions. Rather, it suggests that the moral codes and regulations that govern human conduct have broken down. Observing the mistreatment of servants, the narrator notes that a person’s value can be even

9 Unless noted otherwise, page numbers in this section refer to Lockhart’s translation of “Household Servants”.

“lower than an animal’s” (*khong bang gia suc vat*) (p. 130). But this animal imagery extends beyond the lower classes. As the narrator points out, the richer people are, the “meaner” they are, and the more they behave “like dogs” (*cho deu*) (p. 138). For Vu Trong Phung, therefore, urban life seems to have corrupted a huge swathe of people, stripping them of their humanity and thrusting them to the level of animals, if not lower.

But if the human is defined as that domain which is not yet corrupted, that which has not yet fallen to the animal level, then it seems that the human is characterised by a certain moral regime. It is not always clear what this moral regime consists of. Phung’s narrator invokes the figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau towards the end of the reportage. He states, “I can tell you that before he became a great thinker, a great writer, and a great man, Jean Jacques Rousseau had lived the life of a humble servant” (p. 154). Rousseau is notable, among other things, for his notion in the *Discourse on Inequality* that civilisation corrupts man’s natural happiness and freedom by artificially multiplying social inequality.

Likewise, for Phung, the urban space of colonial Hanoi appears to have multiplied inequality while morally corrupting its residents in the process. But Rousseau’s ideas only go so far in helping us to understand Phung’s moral discourse. For, if Rousseau idealised an imaginary state of nature (Sorenson 1990, Klausen 2014), Phung conceives of the animal world as a level beneath the human. Hence, there seems to be something else about Phung’s moral regime that distinguishes it from Rousseau’s so-called state of nature.

Moreover, this moral regime is not necessarily the same as a legal one. During the French colonial period, the authorities tolerated prostitution and sought to manage it through regulatory measures, however ineffective the latter ultimately were. In fact, countryside people were increasingly drawn to the city precisely because, as scholar Tracol-Huynh notes, “working as a prostitute appeared to be more lucrative than staying and working in the rice paddies” (Tracol-Huynh 2013: 178). So, however deplorable Phung may have deemed it, the practice was not in itself illegal. Society’s laws and their interdictions could intersect with Phung’s moral regime, as when the narrator states that urban life “drives young men into prison” (*Dan ong se di den Hinh phat*) (p. 130). That is, urban life is so morally corrupting that it can lead young men to engage in unlawful acts that lead to imprisonment. But since prostitution was not illegal, it is clear that Phung’s moral regime is not necessarily the same as a legal one.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that a bourgeois sensibility is the source of this moral regime. Scholars have shown that the rise of the bourgeoisie coincided with a certain subjectivity that embraced refinement and delicacy, banishing all that which is deemed vulgar (see, for instance, Mosse 1985). The bourgeois

subject, according to Stallybrass and White, defines itself through the “exclusion of what it marked out as low – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating” (Kipnis 2003: 106). The removal of the distasteful from the field of vision parallels the course of the civilising process. This process, as Norbert Elias argues, includes people’s propensity to “suppress in themselves every characteristic they feel to be *animal*” (ibid., my emphasis).

Yet, there are at least two problems in ascribing a bourgeois sensibility to Phung. First, unlike Tam Lang, Phung came from a relatively poor class background and continued to live modestly for most of his life. He was also quick to criticise bourgeois morality (Zinoman 2014: 14–15). Second, rather than remove from sight themes that the bourgeois world would consider distasteful, Phung foregrounded them in his works. Not shy to depict conditions of human abjection, he more than any of his contemporaries used the reportage genre to disclose what he considered as profound societal problems. As a result, he earned the label “Northern King of Reportage” (*Ong Vua Phong Su Dat Bac*) (Thuong 2000, Malarney 2011). Hence, it is unlikely that Phung’s moral regime derives from a bourgeois sensibility.

There is, however, one aspect of this moral regime that we can deduce from the text. Although Phung never explicitly defines it, the moral regime can be discerned based on what it is not. For Phung, the characters who have descended to the animal level are those who seem to have lost touch with what Phung perceives as *normative* sexuality. Scholars have noted that Phung was fixated on sexuality and sexual deviance and often conflated class oppression with sexual immorality (Zinoman 2014: 132). In the context of this reportage, sexuality is portrayed as an unruly, destabilising and hence corrupting force. In the opening scene, the narrator notes that the woman in charge of the eating house occasionally “felt the need to pull her pants up to her crotch and, without any inhibitions [*cao hung*], scratch herself vigorously like a man” (p. 124). Women who are lured to the city “fall into the abyss of lust” (*di den Duc tinh*, p. 144). The young man who owned a “bag” of pornographic photographs went “crazy” (*nhu dien*) and “threw himself down on the bench” to have sex with the maid (p. 140).

By contrast, in a chapter not included in the Lockhart translation, the male narrator reflects on his ideal relationship with Miss Dui, a fallen woman who has turned to prostitution. The narrator observes: “I wanted to see in Miss Dui traces of the former country girl [*co gai nha que*], obedient and meek [*ngoan ngoan*].” He continues: “These are dreams that are simple [*binh di*] but pure [*trong sach*]” (Chapter 5, Vietnamese version).¹⁰ Normative sexuality, then, is that which is characterised by sexual propriety and self-restraint.

10 The chapter is available here: <https://www.sachhayonline.com/tua-sach/com-thay-com-co/chuong-5-suc-cam-do-voi-manh-hon-ngay-tho/683>.

And if normative sexuality is a component of Phung's moral regime, then so too are the qualities of sexual propriety and self-restraint.

This moral regime that Phung espouses seems to depart from other known paradigms. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1961) offered a less-than-optimistic view of civilisation. He asserted that it was the repression of humanity's fundamental drives, Eros and Thanatos, that led to civilisation's "discontents". Freudian notions did make their way to the colony during the interwar period, and so the invocation of Freud is not unwarranted. Few authors in colonial Hanoi, moreover, were as fascinated by Freud's theories as Vu Trong Phung (Zinoman 2002: 11). However, while Phung shares Freud's critical view of civilisation and its effects, he in no way believes that the liberation of human drives would be the antidote to the ills, both literal and metaphorical, that befell so many of the inhabitants of urban colonial Hanoi. On the contrary, as the prior examples already demonstrate, Phung would assert that, if anything, modern colonial Hanoi needed *more* regulatory norms. So, it seems that the key issue here is not the critique of civilisation per se, but the *kind* of civilisation to which one refers.

Indeed, it is very likely that one of the significant sources of Phung's moral discourse is Confucian ethics. This is not, however, a formally acquired notion of ethics. Unlike Tam Lang, Phung was not raised in a family of Confucian scholars. His father, an electrician, died seven months after Phung was born, and the author was raised by his widowed mother, who would never remarry. To Phung, his mother embodied the Confucian ideals of female virtue, and there may have been a connection between Phung's upbringing and what some critics call Phung's "conservative fondness" for Confucian morality and "traditional moralism" (Zinoman 2002: 5). In fact, the author's profound lack of ease with the rapid changes in sexual norms in urban colonial Hanoi led to charges of "cultural conservatism" (*ibid.*: 20).

The contention that traditional Confucian morality is the source of Phung's moral regime is further corroborated by the author's idealised view of Hanoi as an ancient civilisation. Let us circle back to the paradigmatic scene wherein thirteen household servants migrated to Hanoi from the countryside. In this scene, the narrator states: "Based on their appearances and clothes, these thirteen people were not from the city [*de do*]" (p. 143). The narrator's peculiar use of the word *de do* is revealing here. Whereas Lockhart translates the word to mean "city", it can also more accurately be translated to mean "imperial capital". The reference to Hanoi as an "imperial" city alludes to its ancient history and its location as the centre of numerous Vietnamese dynasties. Malarney has noted that Phung saw in Hanoi something potentially "noble, even grand" and made frequent references to the vernacular metaphor of Hanoi as city of a "thousand-year civilization" (*nghin nam van vat*). For Phung, according to

Malarney, this metaphor captures something of the “ideal of what the city should be and a standard against which to measure the contemporary city” (Malarney 2011: 17). Not surprisingly, then, towards the end of the section mentioned (Chapter 6), Phung’s narrator refers to Hanoi precisely as the location of a “thousand years of culture” (*noi nghin nam van vat*, p. 144), but also as an urban culture in which household servants live in squalid conditions next to “chicken shit and human shit” (p. 144). The passage’s irony stems, in part, from the yawning gap between ideal and reality: the ideal of Hanoi as a venerable city steeped in Neo-Confucian high culture and learning, on the one hand, and, on the other, the gritty realities of urban colonial modernity in which masses of people live in abject conditions that are no different from those of an animal.

Regardless of the sources of Phung’s moral regime, whether they come from a mix of Western ideas by Rousseau or Freud, whether they reflect his own psychobiography or a belief in traditional Confucian morality, my point is still the same: the human/animal dichotomy underwrites the author’s moral cosmology. Even more fundamental than the female prostitute, the figure of the animal is the Other of Phung’s conception of the human. It is the animal that is the symbol of moral degradation; it is the animal that no human ought to aspire to become. Yet, it is into animals that the urban space of colonial Hanoi, the “light of the capital” (*anh sang cua kinh thanh*), has ironically transformed all those who are drawn to it.

Conclusion

As I have suggested, the question of the human/animal is intertwined with Tam Lang’s and Vu Trong Phung’s critique of colonial modernity, and by extension, their conceptions of normative sexuality. In both Lang’s “I Pulled a Rickshaw” and Phung’s “Household Servants,” the urban space of late colonial Hanoi represents a dystopian descent from the human to the animal world. In the early twentieth century, as rural folks migrated to the city in search of a better life, these reportages problematised the division between the rural and urban. The contact between the urban and rural folks leads to a symbolic hierarchy whereby the latter become reduced to the very rural animals they have left behind.

Both reportages, therefore, presuppose a hierarchical moral regime whereby the human is superior to the animal in possessing the attributes of self-regulation and self-moderation. By contrast, the animal embodies that abject zone beyond normative codes of conduct. Faced with an increase in rural migrants,

the city thus becomes a symbol of moral decay and dissolution. In such a world, urban space and normative sexuality are antithetical to each other.

While this moral regime can certainly be ascribed to modern notions of equality emanating from Western political theory, the study has also suggested other sources, namely the Confucian moral tradition. For Tam Lang, the influence of this tradition partly derives from his own upbringing, raised as he was in a family of Confucian scholars. For Vu Trong Phung, the sources are less apparent; his life background, nevertheless, does shed some light on the roots of this traditional morality, the imprints of which are profoundly manifest in his attitudes towards sex and sexuality in the reportage. A study of the figure of the animal in early twentieth-century Vietnam has profound implications for understanding the histories of the “human” and its conceptual and cultural delimitations. By examining the various strands that constitute the human/animal hierarchy in two late colonial era reportages, this study serves as a preliminary effort towards such investigations.

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