

Sexuality as Translation. Locating the “Queer” in a 1920s Vietnamese Debate

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Abstract Transnational debates on LGBTQ identities have centred on the conflict between universalism and particularism. Do LGBTQ identities, which are presumptively ‘Western’ come to colonize other local cultures? Does the use of the idea of ‘queer’ constitute an infelicitous Western imposition onto other cultures? In this study, I challenge some of the nativist responses to these questions by problematizing territorial claims of ‘Asian values’ and so-called ‘Western’ queer sexualities by showing the cultural infelicities and hybrid moorings in both. The article does so by examining a public debate that exploded in the Vietnamese print media in the late 1920s over the phenomenon of amorous relations between primarily male youth in the then newly emerging French-Vietnamese secondary schools. Based on this archive, the study maintains that same-sex sexuality foregrounds the dynamic practices of cross-cultural translation from East Asia and France, reflecting both the anxieties and aspirations of the interlocutors. Belonging neither solely to Eastern nor Western cultures, the phenomenon reveals its fundamental cultural impurity. In so doing, the archive brings into high relief the constructed artifice of Vietnamese nationalist ‘tradition’ and the ‘foreignness’ of queer sexuality.

Keywords French Colonial Vietnam. Thu Xu. Homosexuality. Queer. Cultural translation. Transnational debates. LGBTQ.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Historical Context. The Cultural Milieu of Early 20th-Century Vietnam. – 3 Overview of Archival Sources. The Background on the *People's Voice* Newspaper. – 4 The Problem. What Is ‘Thù Xú’? – 5 Same-Sex Sexual Relations as a Projection of Anxieties about the Decline of ‘Traditional’ Vietnamese Culture. – 6 Same-Sex Sexuality as a Sign of Western Decadence? – 7 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Same-sex sexuality, what it is, its meaning, and its significance, remains a subject of scholarly dispute and interpretation. Historical scholarship informed by the constructionist approach begins with the premise that the subject of sexuality in no way exists prior to social structures, institutions, and discourses but is constituted through them (Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1993; Jackson 2000; Halperin 2004). Hence, the mere evidence of same-sex sexual relations is, in itself, insufficient in illuminating the historical meanings by which a culture understands such relations.¹ The rhetoric of the ‘closeted’ homosexual, for instance, can be traced to a specific context arising out of a 1960s North American discourse of minoritarian oppression and liberation movements (Corber, Valocchi 2003, 2-6). In no way does it embody all models of homosexuality and therefore ought not to be universalized without undue violence to the distinctiveness of other historical contexts (Jackson 2001; Blackwood, Johnson 2012; Chiang, Wong 2017). One purpose of queer historiography, then, is to reconstruct and interpret the meanings of same-sex sexuality in different times and places.

Scholarship on Southeast Asia, however, has yet to look at the historical question of same-sex sexuality in Vietnam. Few studies have been conducted, if any, on this question based on primary sources. Those that do emphasize the discourse of French colonialism (Proschan 2002), concentrate on contemporary accounts (Newton 2015; Nguyễn 2015; Horton 2019; Horton, Ryndstrom 2019), or touch on queer identities as they pertain to other practices, such as spirit mediumships (Fjelstad, Nguyễn 2006). While these studies remain important contributions to scholarship, an historical inquiry into the question of same-sex sexuality in Vietnam has yet to be undertaken. Without such an inquiry, knowledge would be incomplete concerning what is arguably a vital dimension of the Southeast Asian region (Ong, Peletz 1995; Loos 2009; Peletz 2009).

This study focusses on one meaning of same-sex sexual relations in the late 1920s in Vietnam. It analyzes a heretofore unexamined debate concerning the activity of amorous male-male relations taking place in the then emerging modern French-Vietnamese secondary schools. The debate was published in the *People’s Voice* (*Tiếng Dân*) (1927-43), the longest running newspaper in the romanized Vietnamese script during the interwar period. The paper catered to a readership primarily in the country’s central region near the former imperial capital of Huế (Pham 2002, 216). According to the newspaper

¹ I use the term ‘same-sex sexual relations’ instead of ‘homosexuality’ to distinguish the latter as an historical formation beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century in Europe that crystallized the binary pair homosexuality/heterosexuality (Halperin 2004, 106).

reports, the amorous relations were called *thủ xú*, an argot invented by outsiders to label the practice among the male youths. According to one observer, the literal meaning of the phrase is to “take in air”, referring to the male youth’s public displays of affection. Apart from the student missives quoted by their opponents, little evidence exists concerning how the participants understood or came to understand themselves in particular ways. Nevertheless, an examination of the response to this phenomenon yields insight into some of the prevailing discourses concerning same-sex sexual relations. How did this discourse portray such relations? What kinds of rhetoric did the interlocutors deploy? To what degree, if any, did Western notions of ‘homosexuality’ influence the terms of the debate?

I will argue that the meaning of same-sex sexuality was a complex *translation* of minimally two different cultural traditions: one emanating from East Asia, the other from the West. More concretely, as we shall see, the findings will suggest that the interlocutors in the debate conceived of same-sex sexuality as more akin to cultural ‘habits’ or ‘tastes’. In no way did they conceive of amorous male-male relations as a coherent identity. Furthermore, the findings will also demonstrate the agency of local actors: interlocutors in the debate strategically appropriated different cross-cultural elements in support of their own various contingent political ends. The evidence will problematize, then, the notion of a simple cultural transfer – either from a monolithic ‘West’ or ‘East’ – into Vietnamese culture. Instead, Vietnamese same-sex sexuality became a protean ‘queer’ figure in serving as a placeholder for the various anxieties and aspirations of the interlocutors in the debate. Hence, the study will call into question some of the dualistic assumptions in the conflict between ‘West’ and ‘East’, what queer translation studies scholar Brian J. Baer calls “Beyond Either/Or” (Baer 2018).

By ‘translation’ I do not refer to a simple process of communicative fidelity from one language to another or from original to copy. Rather, I refer to an epistemic struggle and negotiation in the production of meaning, and by extension, a site of cultural knowledge production (Spurlin 2014; Kedem 2019). By ‘sexuality’ I refer to the historical effect of an ensemble wrought by cultural narratives, norms, expectations, desires, fantasies, and institutions (Foucault 1990; Corber, Valocchi 2003). Finally, I deploy the idea of ‘queer’ to refer to gendered or sexual subjects that a society finds culturally illegible within its terms (Butler 1993; Corber, Valocchi 2003). To locate the ‘queer’, then, is to specify that cultural zone of illegibility and the terms by which a society finds some subjects ‘queer’ and some not.

An inquiry into the terms by which Vietnamese culture defined ‘queerness’ can help inform some of the problems in the study of sexuality. This article helps to inform two key problems. First, if scholars consider sexuality as historical – that is, a contingent form of erotic

subjectivity – then this article provides a glimpse of another historical modality of human subjectivation, what Halperin calls an exercise in historicizing the subject of desire (2004, 88). Second, the reconstruction of same-sex sexuality in a public debate during Vietnam’s late French colonial period, when the West arguably exerted significant cultural impact, furnishes historical and area specificity to the question of ‘foreign’ influence on notions of sexuality.

For this article, I limit the focus to data that I researched during the first six years of the *People’s Voice*. The relevant documents that I analyze, however, were all published in the late 1920s. The newspaper is archived in microfilm and available at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris. Also, while I will not analyze it here, I wish to acknowledge the existence of a creative adaptation of the *thủ xú* phenomenon. An eponymous short story written in 1936 by the male Vietnamese author Tchya (Đái Đức Tuấn) slightly alters the historical events by casting the main characters as two female lovers. This study provides the requisite historical reconstruction of this phenomenon for future research. Finally, the analysis of the newspaper is based on the assumptions of both rhetorical cluster analysis (Foss 2004) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003; Van Leeuwen 2008). Through such analytical tools, I determine whether the archive, unconsciously or not, prescribes to a particular social order and, by so doing, map the broader meanings of same-sex sexuality in Vietnamese culture. Finally, unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

The article will be organized into five sections. First, it provides the historical context of Vietnam’s late French colonial period. Second, it will describe an overview of the archival sources. Third, it will elaborate on the meaning and significance of the term *thủ xú*. Finally, in the fourth and fifth sections, the article engages in a close reading of the debate, reconstructing the interlocutors’ views concerning male-male sexual relations. Ultimately, the study reveals the cultural infelicities and hybrid moorings at the heart of Vietnamese ‘queer’ sexuality.

2 The Historical Context. The Cultural Milieu of Early 20th-Century Vietnam

In the 1920s and 1930s, Vietnam stood at the crossroads of two powerful civilizations. The East Asian civilization embodied by China left an indelible mark on the Nguyễn emperors who ruled the area throughout the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of a brutal civil war between the Le and Nguyễn Dynasties, the victorious Nguyễn emperor, Gia Long, relocated the capital from Hà Nội in the north to Huế in the central region. He and his heirs found solace, political

stability and imperial gravitas in emulating China, and so sought to turn Vietnam – its symbols, its customs, its rituals – into the image of the great northern neighbour. Several generations of Vietnamese mandarins were trained under the “Great Tradition” of Neo-Confucianism (Marr 1971, 44-76; Woodside 1988, 126-32).

When the French arrived in 1858, Vietnam faced another civilization. Like the changes that the Nguyễn emperors imposed on the country, the French dramatically altered Vietnam’s landscapes. By 1897 Paul Doumer, who served under the French Finance Ministry, channelled increased funding for infrastructure and public works projects to re-engineer and modernize much of Vietnam – its architecture, its towns, its cities, its roads – in the image of France (Jennings 2011; Goscha 2016).

In addition to infrastructural developments, the French also developed a parallel French-Vietnamese educational system. The French, in fact, channelled a relatively unusual amount of resources to its development. Between ten and twenty percent of government expenditures were allocated to this system, which served to compete with the existing traditional one (Kelly 1977). Between 1918 and 1938, the country saw a growth in French-Vietnamese schools that, by some estimates, annually enrolled more than one hundred thousand Vietnamese youths (Marr 1981, 35-44). Some of these schools and the accompanying dormitories were built in the central region near the former imperial capital of Huế and would serve as the *mise-en-scène* for the male-male amorous relations captured in the documents that this study will examine.

These schools also served to educate the populace in the modern vernacular, *quốc ngữ* (national language), a romanized script initially developed by seventeenth-century missionaries but popularized by the French to sever Vietnam from its East Asian classical past, thereby orienting its future towards France and the West. These conditions led to the eventual obsolescence of the Chinese script in the country. By 1919, the Mandarin examination system shuttered its doors.

One consequence of the explosive growth of *quốc ngữ* was the birth of a thriving print culture. This print culture, in turn, ushered in a lively period of public debate (Peycam 2012). A significant debate in early twentieth-century Vietnam was the question of the relationship between the country’s past and future. Despite the collapse of the mandarin system, several pressing issues preoccupied the minds of intellectuals. Should Vietnam continue to embrace Neo-Confucian tradition? What utility, if any, was left in preserving such a tradition amidst the onslaught of a rapidly modernizing country? Should Vietnam embrace, instead, Western modernization? Some supported restoring the classical culture inherited from the East Asian tradition. Others supported the embrace of France and its concomitant sym-

bolos of Western modernization. The conflicts over these and related questions raged in elite circles.

The conflict over existential questions concerning the status of Vietnam’s cultural past spilled over into literary debates that, in turn, led to tensions over the question of gender, sex and sexuality. One of the most ferocious of literary debates at the time centred on the value of Nguyễn Du’s *The Tale of Kiều*. In this epic, the eponymous heroine sells her body to pay for her father’s debts, acts inconsistent with the Confucian precept of female chastity. I will briefly elaborate on the controversy over this epic, because the figure of Kiều will serve as a key cultural reference when we examine the debate over male same-sex sexual relations.

Kiều is a Vietnamese incarnation of a character from a relatively obscure Qing-era novel.² Du purportedly read it while on a diplomatic sojourn to the Beijing court sometime between 1813 and 1814. The original novel is set during the Ming dynasty (Thông 1983, xx-xxi). Some critics believe that Du transformed the Chinese version into a new story with Vietnamese sensibilities in its use of rhythm, tone, sound and imagery. The modern critic Huỳnh Sanh Thông explains:

By triumphantly rescuing Vietnamese poetry from the stranglehold of classical Chinese, Nguyễn Du performed for the vernacular what Dante had once done for Italian, liberating it from its position of subservience to Latin. (Thông 1983, xxi)

Even though the *The Tale of Kiều* is now considered a national classic, Thông’s appraisal of the work on the basis of its formal literary qualities represents a relatively recent consensus. For heuristic purposes, let us call this the ‘modernist’ view, whose opponents by contrast held the ‘traditionalist’ view.

In the early twentieth century, *The Tale of Kiều*’s status as a national classic had not yet been solidified: fierce debates broke out over the epic. The modernist view in support of the epic’s formal qualities represented only one camp. On the one hand, Phạm Quỳnh, who was fully cognizant of both the Chinese and French traditions and who also believed in French political collaboration, sought to create a national identity in embracing the romanized transcription of Nguyễn Du’s epic. Quỳnh was famous for his proclamation that “If Kiều exists, our language exists, and our country exists” (Pham 2002, 230). The ‘language’ in question is the modern Vietnamese vernacular. Implicit, too, in this proposition is that Kiều is the embodiment of Vietnamese national identity. Belonging to a broadly similar modernist

² The novel on which *The Tale of Kiều* is based is *Jin Yun Qiao zhuan* 金雲翹傳 (The story of Jin, Yun, and Qiao) by Qingxin cairen 青心才人. See Zamperini 2010, 13-14.

camp, Phan Khôi, the father of the New Poetry Movement, advocated modernization and rejected the proposition of reviving Neo-Confucianism.

Opponents, on the other hand, insisted on the enduring value of traditional poetry. Scholar literati such as Ngô Đức Kế and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, the founder of the *People's Voice* newspaper, argued that poetry, traditionally conceived, ought to be grounded on moral principles that would edify its readers. Literary works such as the *Tale of Kiều* not only failed to be anchored to such morality, but also sought to corrupt readers with its ‘pornographic’ depictions of prostitution and brothels (Thanh-Lãng 1972; Marr 1981, 154-6; Jamieson 1995). If *Kiêu* is the embodiment of national identity, then the logical implication is that Vietnam was symbolically a *whore*. This inference was unacceptable to the Neo-Confucian traditionalists. The metaphor also had political implications insofar as it revealed undertones of one’s *unchaste* allegiance, thereby implicating oneself as a ‘prostitute’ to a foreign power. Nguyễn Du himself was originally a royalist to the Lê Dynasty but, due to political changes beyond his control, ultimately survived to serve the opposing and triumphant Nguyễn Dynasty. Hence, some critics believe *The Tale of Kiều* may have been a political allegory for Du’s own predicament (Woodside 1983). In the context of the early twentieth century, some Neo-Confucian critics insisted that the modernist camp were being “whores” to a foreign power, in this case, France (Marr 1981, 154-6).

The debate between the traditionalists and the modernists over the status of *The Tale of Kiều* represents only one example of the conflict over the proper (or improper) representation of gender, sex and sexuality. Similar controversies would later engulf, for instance, other colonial-era writers such as Vũ Trọng Phụng – renowned for his explicit depictions of sex, prostitution and venereal diseases. The controversy surrounding Phung has already been documented elsewhere (Malarney 2011; Zinoman 2014), and so the details of the debate will not detain us here. Finally, it is also worth noting that a younger generation of Vietnamese writers in this period was also questioning the norms of the traditional family, including ideas concerning arranged marriages and female chastity (Jamieson 1995, 117-59, Wilcox 2006).

The main point in citing the prior examples is to provide a context for the debate concerning male-male amorous relations by underscoring the vociferous conflicts among early twentieth-century Vietnamese intellectuals and youth over evolving conceptions of gender, sex and sexuality.

3 Overview of Archival Sources. The Background on the *People’s Voice* Newspaper

The *People’s Voice* on which this article’s analysis is based was published several times a week in the Vietnamese modern vernacular in Central Vietnam. The newspaper was founded and edited by the Neo-Confucian literati Huỳnh Thúc Kháng (1876-1947), who earned his doctorate, *tiến sĩ*, in 1904. He belonged to an anti-colonialist cohort that Marr has called the “reformist scholar-gentry,” a generation that witnessed the collapse of the nineteenth-century dynastic system and the early twentieth-century emergence of modern Asian states (1971, 105). Some scholars go even further in arguing that Kháng was, in fact, a nationalist (Zinoman 2001, 68-9). Of this generation, two of Kháng’s contemporaries are worth mentioning. The first is the figure of Phan Bội Châu who, supporting the Japanese imperial model, spearheaded radical militant resistance; the second figure, by contrast, is Phan Châu Trinh who advocated Franco-Vietnamese co-existence founded on French Republican values, values that supported notions such as the universal rights of man, mass education, and representative government (Marr 1971, 98-119; Goscha 2016, 98-105). It was Trinh who goaded Kháng to jumpstart the *People’s Voice* to educate the Vietnamese in democratic processes.

Despite the founder’s Neo-Confucian background, the *People’s Voice* was considered avant-garde for its time. Knowledgeable in French, Classical Chinese and modern Vietnamese, Kháng saw his newspaper as a means to educate his audience, many of whom were primarily from the countryside (Pham 2002, 216). The first issue printed the following mission statement:

Justice leads the way of *Tieng Dan*, and the goal of the newspaper is to serve the people. It will not be used by any party, nor publish evasive propaganda material...*Tieng Dan* will be, for our compatriots, a bitter drug,... and for the government an honest friend. (Kháng, cited in Pham 2002, 226)

Although the French authorities did enforce press censorship during this time, the mission statement reveals something of the newspaper’s idealistic and didactic orientation. The newspaper featured contemporary literature, Western political philosophy, current events, and trending fashions. It exhibited an eclectic quality that drew on cultural ideas extending from China, Japan, France, Italy, England to the United States. Emphasizing the psychological, political and cultural impact of the newspaper on Central Vietnam, Pham Thi Minh Le observes that “*Tieng Dan* [People’s Voice] introduced Vietnamese to gender equality, politics, economy, history, geography, humanities and sciences” (2002, 230). The newspaper’s coverage of such wide-

ranging scope and topics is consistent with Kháng’s belief in the value of universal education.

Still, many of the newspaper’s contributors were, like Kháng, trained in Neo-Confucian learning and the classics. It was not unusual to see articles on classical literature in the original Chinese with translations rendered into the Vietnamese modern vernacular. As for the interlocutors involved in the same-sex sexuality debate, there were three primary ones: the Vietnamese male youths, the newspaper’s editorial Board and Mr. Nguyễn Vỹ, the investigative reporter who first broke the news story. The identities of the students are not known. The editorial Board included Kháng, who apparently wrote many of the articles himself (Pham 2002, 227). As for Mr. Nguyễn Vỹ, sources suggest that he was raised in Central Vietnam in a Neo-Confucian family in an environment that allowed him to interact with renowned scholar-literati such as Phan Boi Chau (Nguyễn 1969, 14). Vỹ subsequently worked as a newspaper reporter and poet. He took on different pseudonyms, one of which was a female name: *cô Diệu Huyền* (Miss Dieu Huyen) (Tùng 1973, 213). The practice by which male writers assumed feminine *personae* was commonplace in Vietnam and East Asian cultures (Pastreich 2001, 1099; Song 2004, 61), a detail that will be relevant in the analysis to come.

With respect to the overall views of the different interlocutors, as we shall see, whereas Mr. Vỹ and the editorial Board both opposed the practice of male-male amorous relations, the Vietnamese youths supported and defended their actions. The perspective, however, of the Vietnamese youths appear only indirectly. The letters they wrote to the *People’s Voice* in response to the reportage about them were never published in their entirety. Rather, only excerpts are available and quoted by their opponents. Hence, while I may call this a ‘debate’ in the general sense of a disputation, it is one that is uneven in terms of balance of power and perspective. Unless new evidence emerges about this historical event, the contemporary reader’s access to it will only be partial. Nevertheless, this study strives to reconstruct a plausible interpretation based on the documents available in the *People’s Voice*.

Finally, one last detail about the newspaper merits attention. Even though it ran for sixteen years, the longest Vietnamese newspaper in the new romanized script during the interwar period, the *People’s Voice* shuttered its doors on 23 April 1943. The cause was due to a literary quarrel that was already brewing for several years, a quarrel over the status of Nguyễn Du’s *The Tale of Kiều*. The newspaper’s founder, Huỳnh Thúc Kháng, refused to have the French authorities censor his articles that were highly critical of the epic. As a result, they suspended his newspaper (Pham 2002, 230). This background story provides some indication of how explosive – and materially consequential – the conflict over *The Tale of Kiều* was during this period,

a literary work that will play a meaningful role in the discussion that follows when I examine the issue of male-male amorous relations.

Thus far, I have described the newspaper – its founder, its mission, its coverage, its didactic orientation, its general contributors – to provide something of the overall character of the *People’s Voice* as a forum for debate concerning male-male amorous relations. On the basis of this context, it is not readily obvious how or why the newspaper would oppose such relations. Still, one thing is certain: the *People’s Voice* was a historically, socially, and culturally significant newspaper.

4 The Problem. What Is ‘Thủ Xú’?

In a reportage first published in the *People’s Voice*, Mr. Nguyễn Vỹ explains that one day he ventured out to visit the former imperial capital of Huế to check on the status of today’s youth. The tone is one of eager anticipation: he is eager to observe the progress and intellectual formation of the next generation in the modern French-Vietnamese secondary schools, a generation that would embody Vietnam’s future. To his apparent shock, however, he observes instead the seemingly widespread phenomenon of male homoerotic relations.

According to Mr. Vỹ, this phenomenon is called *thủ xú*, a denomination invented by outsiders to label the practice they observed in the secondary schools. The phrase is composed of a coupling of two Sino-Vietnamese characters: 取醜 *qu chou* (or in simplified form 取丑). In his reportage, Mr. Vỹ explains that the literal meaning of the phrase is to “take in air” in reference to the participants’ public displays of affection. In a footnote, he explains:

The original meaning of “*thu xu*” is to take in air; this term was coined by indifferent onlookers who saw the group [of male students] who had a tendency to kiss each other, and so invented the term to **tease them**. It’s not a term the group [of students] coined themselves. (Nguyễn 1928, 3; emphasis added)

The fact that outsiders invented the term *thủ xú* is no trivial point. In the history of LGBTQ studies, the act of being labelled, usually in a derogatory manner, has played no small part in contributing to social stigma, the formation of sexual subcultures and, paradoxically, the creation of resistance movements. In fact, prior to its designation as a disciplinary field of inquiry, the term ‘queer’ was an insult lodged against gender or sexually variant subjects. Because such subjects differed from prevailing norms, society considered them ‘strange’ – in short, a deviation from societal standards of gender or sexual propriety. In other words, ‘queer’ names that which is, in some sense,

a failure – a failure to conform to social norms in specific times and places (Eribon 2004; Halberstam 2005).

As the prior passage indicates, the term *thủ xú*, like the original meaning of ‘queer’, was invented to “tease”, and so could function as a taunting insult. Indeed, the second character in the couplet, *xú*, typically means ‘ugly behavior’. In his Sino-Vietnamese dictionary, Đào Duy Anh lists the first definition of the character to mean the following: “Ugly activity – ugly scar – ugly face – ugly belongings – the opposite of aesthetic beauty [美]” (1932, 579). Among the other definitions listed, the second one is related to “air”: the term *xú mùi* 取臭 *qu chou* denotes that which exhibits a ‘foul smell’. In both cases, the character *xú* can have pejorative connotations. I say ‘can’ and not ‘always’ because the label *thủ xú* appears to be a pun. It refers simultaneously to ‘taking in air’ and ‘behaving in an ugly, non-aesthetic manner’. Depending on which meaning is construed, the term could simply be a description or an insult. To understand the pun, however, demands linguistic and cultural translation – in this case, from the East Asian discourse.

Moreover, the question at issue here is not simply about a play on words. Rather, the labelling of the same-sex acts also raises another important matter, namely the relationship between discourse and violence. Outsiders do not know what to call this seemingly strange practice, and so attempt to name it and, thereby, classify it, organize it, and make sense of it within their own cosmology. The rhetorical term for such an act is catachresis. The equivalent Latin is *abusio* to refer, in traditional rhetoric, to the misuse of figural language, such as referring to a mouth as ‘blind’. Quintilian defined the term more precisely as the “practice of adapting the nearest available term to describe something for which no actual term exists” (Quinn 1982, 55-6; Parker 1990, 60). Whereas metaphor exemplifies the operation of a ‘successful’ translation, the comparison of two dissimilar objects whereby the familiar helps to illuminate the unfamiliar, catachresis embodies the quintessential figure of failure. It is a failure due, in part, to language’s inability to capture an existential referent. For this reason, Derrida associates catachresis with violence. In his explanation, albeit in a different context, Derrida states that “the term is the use of a sign by violence, force, or abuse, with the **imposition of a sign** on a sense not yet having a proper sign in language”. He continues:

And so there is no substitution here, no transfer of proper signs, but an **irruptive extension** of a sign proper to one idea to a sense without a signifier. (Derrida, Moore 1974, 57; emphasis added)

Postcolonial scholars have productively taken up the concept to describe a tactical reversal that the colonized deploys to re-code, and

thereby enlarge, the meanings of European enlightenment concepts, such as sovereignty, self-determination, nationhood, and citizenship. As such, for some postcolonial theorists, the idea of catachresis can lead to emergent, hybrid and complex postcolonial identities (Spivak 1993, 64-5; Bhabha 1994, 236).

In the context of this archive, both senses of catachresis will be in operation in the documents that follow. The definition advanced by Derrida more aptly fits the strategy deployed by the opponents of male-male amorous relations, who use the invented *thủ xú* term to label what they perceive as a strange practice. By contrast, as we shall see, the Vietnamese male youths will utilise the second postcolonial meaning of catachresis: a redeployment of Western culture in support of locally contingent political ends.

5 Same-Sex Sexual Relations as a Projection of Anxieties about the Decline of ‘Traditional’ Vietnamese Culture

One prominent understanding of the *thủ xú* phenomenon is the belief that it symptomizes the decline of ‘traditional’ Vietnamese culture. During this period, as discussed previously, many Vietnamese intellectuals fought over the status of Nguyễn Du’s epic *The Tale of Kiều*. Recall that in the battle over this literary work, some Neo-Confucians insisted that the epic was a danger to society in representing pernicious ‘modern’ values. In the context of the *thủ xú* phenomenon, some observers drew an analogy between Du’s eponymous heroine and the Vietnamese male youths. In his explanation, for example, the reporter Mr. Vỹ makes clear to his readers that the male-male relations are not simply a platonic “friendship” (*tình bằng hữu*). Rather, they are more akin to what he calls amorous “male and female” relations. He explains:

Thủ xú (let us abbreviate as T.X.) means something similar to “**male and female**” relations, but the *thủ xú* practice of these young fellows is an attached form of sentiment [*tình mật-thiết*] that requires a lad to **love** another one, who may be studying in the same school, just as a **male would love a female**. This relationship is not simply one of friendship. It is a love relationship arising from **carnal desire** [*vật dục*]. (Nguyễn 1928, 2; emphasis added)

By “male and female” love relations, Mr. Vỹ presupposes a specific gendered regime, according to which the woman is the effeminate and weaker sex in the relationship. In comparing the prior male-male sexual relationship to this heterosexual model, the speaker simultaneously maps this gendered regime onto the former. Significantly, he compares the young men to Du’s eponymous heroine: they walked and

stood in a “graceful” (*yếu điệu*) manner and strove to display countenances that were as “beautiful” (*đẹp-xinh*) and “fair” (*trắng trẻo*) “like **Kiều**” (Nguyễn 1928, 2; emphasis added). In the cultural context of the times, the comparison of the male youths to Kiêu is a culturally fraught reference. It is hardly clarifying because the heroine herself is a contested sign. In making this comparison, on which side of the debate does Mr. Vỹ belong? Does he believe that Kiêu ought to be a symbol of national modernity? Or does he believe that she is a symbol of moral debauchery?

Evidence suggests the latter interpretation. Even though Mr. Vỹ seems to believe that male same-sex sexual relations are “no different” from male-female ones, he nevertheless denigrates the former by calling it morally debased. He considers some of the male youth as *feminine* – just “like Kiêu” – and then labels them as a “bunch of prostitutes” (*dàng điếm*). According to Mr. Vỹ, the male youths engage in relations based on “carnal desire” (*vật dục*) and practice “habits” (*thói*) that are “ignominious” (*sĩ-nhục*) and “abject” (*đê tiện*). All of these practices are antithetical to what the reporter believes constitutes true male “friendship”.

Here two key issues stand out regarding Mr. Vỹ’s response. First, despite his disapproval of the male youths, the language he employs to describe their supposed moral failings suggests that the male-male amorous relations in no way index a stable sexual identity. Instead, Mr. Vỹ considers them practices – “habits” (*thói*) – albeit ones that are laden with opprobrium. This conception of male-male amorous relations is different from the modern dyadic notion of homosexuality/heterosexuality, according to which ‘sexuality’ is a fixed identity that defines who one is and limits what one can become. Halperin explains:

Homosexuality is the specification of same-sex sexual object-choice in and of itself as an **overriding principle** of sexual and social difference. Homosexuality is part of a new system of sexuality, which functions as a means of **personal individuation**: it assigns to each individual a sexual orientation and a **sexual identity**. (Halperin 2004, 134; emphasis added)

By contrast, it is clear that Mr. Vỹ does not believe that the Vietnamese male youths are ‘homosexuals’. Neither does the editorial Board. In its public letter, the Board describes the male-male amorous relations as unusual cultural practices. The Board states the following: “Have you ever seen our **culture and customs** [*phong tục ta*] exhibiting this bad **habit** [*thói*] before?” (Nguyễn 1928, 3; emphasis added). Neither Mr. Vỹ nor the Board ever use the modern term ‘homosexual’. In other words, in these documents, same-sex sexual relations are not perceived as an ‘essence’, but contingent practices

of cultural difference – one that the interlocutors nevertheless oppose. Had the modern concept of ‘homosexuality’ penetrated the local culture, one would expect it to enter into the debate. But it does not. Lacking a term to describe what they see, the interlocutors employ the invented Sino-Vietnamese term – *thủ xú* – to label the practice, consistent with the Derridean notion of catachresis: the imposition of a sign lacking an existing one in language.

Second, if the *thủ xú* phenomenon is different from the modern conception of ‘homosexuality’, then a corollary question is, what cultural assumptions seem to be driving the opposition to the Vietnamese male youths’ amorous “habits”? After all, it is apparent that the youths did not see their activities in such a negative light. According to Mr. Vỹ, they not only engaged in competitive love games, but also exchanged love letters with each other (*Lại cũng có thơ tình qua lại cùng nhau*). By comparing them to the figure of Kiều, Mr. Vỹ impugns the youths’ character – rhetorically associating them with the moral depravity of female prostitution. Yet, any objective observer ought to conclude that their conduct – the exchange of love letters and public displays of affection – would hardly seem to fit the standard definition of ‘prostitution’. Nowhere does the reportage indicate that the youths, unlike Kiều, sold their bodies in exchange for money. Moreover, if male-male amorous relations are analogous to male-female ones, according to Mr. Vỹ, why does he disapprove of the former? Why does the idea that ‘love is love’ – one of today’s slogans in the global LGBTQ movement – fail to register cultural traction? Before we jump to the conclusion that homophobia is the reason for Mr. Vỹ’s response, I suggest that we exercise caution and try, patiently, to understand the sociohistorical context. As Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Susan Brownell point out, researchers must be prepared to ask:

Whose femininity and masculinity are being produced and displayed, and by whom? And whose [italics in the original] purposes are served by this production and display? (2002, 34)

Even though their focus is on the Chinese context, I believe Wasserstrom and Brownell’s critical questions are relevant to the present case study.

To grasp the full significance of Mr. Vỹ’s response, a brief digression is necessary to explain certain cultural notions about gender and sexuality. In particular, two key terms – ‘male friendships’ and ‘femininity’ – merit further explanation. Now, recall that Du’s *The Tale of Kiều* was adapted from a Qing-era novel involving characters who historically lived during the Ming Dynasty. To the extent that one can map Ming and Qing era gender and sexual norms onto the Vietnamese case, a more historically contextualized understanding of the response to the *thủ xú* phenomenon may be possible.

Scholarship on masculinity in late imperial China has mapped gendered and sexual configurations different from the modern paradigm of homosexuality/heterosexuality. The context of the times was different. In a world in which social mobility, prestige and power centred on preparing for and passing the androcentric civil service examination and later serving in the equally male world of politics and business, elite Chinese men for most of their professional lives interacted with other men. Hence, male-male friendships were the norm in this Neo-Confucian world and, arguably, even reached a “golden age” by the late Ming Dynasty (Huang 2007, 17). In such a world, male-male friendships could be a springboard for same-sex erotic relations (Vitiello 2011, 54-9). Moreover, the culture generally conceived of such erotic relations as akin to those of a “husband and wife” – thereby, replicating the gender inequality in heterosexual relations (Kutcher 2000, 1623-4; Huang 2007, 25). For many Chinese authors, these relations in no way posed a threat to the social order. So long as male-male sexual relations did not subvert the prevailing Confucian hierarchy, Chinese culture perceived them as part of everyday social relationships (Kutcher 2000). Unlike the modern paradigm of homosexuality, therefore, male-male sexual relations during the Ming and Qing were not a sign of a fixed identity.

In the context of the Vietnamese case, the newspaper reporter appears to converge in some respects with the prior cultural notions. Like the Neo-Confucian world of the Ming and Qing, Mr. Vỹ does not see in the Vietnamese youths and their behaviour signs of a ‘homosexual’ essence. Rather, as already noted, he sees their amorous relations as akin to cultural “habits”. Furthermore, just as Chinese authors conceived of male homoerotic relations like those of a ‘husband and wife’, so too does Mr. Vỹ compare the Vietnamese male amorous relations to a “male and female” one. Finally, like those living during the Ming and Qing periods, Mr. Vỹ seems to embrace a certain model of male friendship. However, the Vietnamese youths’ behaviour appears to have deviated from this model, thereby leading to moral censure. We will need to analyze further the specific character of this model if we are to understand more precisely the reasoning of the moral censure.

Towards that end, let us now historicize the second key term: ‘femininity’. The modern homosexual/heterosexual paradigm has created a binary gendered division, according to which masculinity is a male heterosexual preserve and, conversely, homosexuality is defined by overt forms of femininity (Halperin 2004, 110). In such a paradigm, the ‘heterosexual’ male is the marker of masculine plenitude, devoid of any traces of femininity.

Yet, such a rigid distinction between femininity and masculinity lacks a cultural analogue in the East Asian context, especially during the Ming and Qing periods. As Paul Rouzer (2001) and Martin W.

Huang (2006) have each demonstrated in their respective studies, elite men of imperial China engaged in practices in which they presented themselves as ‘women’. Examples of such practices include male literati assuming the literary figure of the courtesan or masculine men striving to appear as ‘feminine’ as possible. While potentially strange to some modern readers today, these practices were once considered the norm. Indeed, based on the modern homosexual/heterosexual paradigm, one might deduce – erroneously – that these practices are all signs of ‘homosexuality’. However, recall that Mr. Vỹ himself once assumed a feminine penname, a common practice by male Vietnamese writers of the time. In the case of female impersonation, Rouzer explains that the act represents a complex cultural performance – what he coins “articulated ladies” – that enable male literati to create cultural “fantasies of power and victory” or “laments of failure” before the emperor, court ladies and fellow officials (Rouzer 2001, 6).

Likewise, Huang explains that in Ming and Qing literature, the idea of masculinity is intertwined with cultural notions of femininity. Signs of femininity in no way detracted from a man’s ‘masculinity’. Huang draws a distinction between “femininity” and “effeminacy.” Whereas the former could culturally enhance a man’s erotic appeal, the latter diminished it. Huang demonstrates that this culturally gendered notion of beauty – the attractiveness of the feminine man – was widespread and not limited to scholar literati.³ Rather, the idea encompassed other professions typically considered ‘masculine’ by modern standards, such as martial warriors. “Even in the few scholar-beauty novels that emphasize the martial prowess of the male protagonist”, Huang explains, “the **men’s feminine beauty is presented as a masculinity** to be celebrated with great enthusiasm” (2006, 138; emphasis added). One implication of this gendered cultural system is that, unlike the modern paradigm, same-sex eroticism is neither the cause nor the effect of feminine behaviour, and vice versa. Rather, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the ‘feminine’ and the ‘masculine’ were not absolute opposites, but components of a gendered continuum.

In light of this contextualized notion of ‘femininity’, one now has a partly better understanding of the reception of the *thủ xú* phenomenon. Within the East Asian context, the feminine acts by the Vietnamese male youths do not necessarily signify same-sex erotic object choice, and vice versa. This partly explains why the modern

3 There is a Western analogue to this idea of male femininity. Halperin notes that the idea that men must display *feminine* qualities to appear more attractive to women has a cultural parallel in Greek and Roman civilizations. Given the cross-cultural parallels, it is the *modern* paradigm whereby a man’s masculinity is devoid of any feminine trace that ought to appear “strange” (Halperin 2004, 111).

vocabulary of ‘homosexuality’ failed to register any cultural traction in the reportage. At the same time, Mr. Vỹ’s response departs in some ways from the prior East Asian cultural notions of gender. For, if femininity and masculinity are not opposed concepts, then Mr. Vỹ ought to have relished the *feminine* beauty of the Vietnamese male youths who behaved just “like Kiếu”. Yet, neither Mr. Vỹ nor the editorial Board registered any appreciation for the Vietnamese youths’ gendered performance.

Here, it is important to remember that Mr. Vỹ’s moral censure of the male youths is based on a metaphorical comparison *to* Kiếu. So the critique cuts both ways: he disapproves of the male youths at least as much as he does Kiếu. Recall that the controversy with Kiếu is not simply the fact that she engages in prostitution, arguably one of the world’s oldest professions; rather, the problem resides in what she *symbolizes*. Just as some Neo-Confucians insisted that Kiếu symbolized abhorrent modern values – the absence of chastity and, by metaphorical extension, loyalty to a given political dispensation – so too do the male youths and their behaviour signify a sign of the *modern*. For the Neo-Confucians, the male youths and their behaviour represent a historical rupture from what purportedly constitutes Vietnamese ‘tradition’.

Indeed, towards the conclusion, the reportage raises the thematic conflict between tradition and the modern. Mr. Vỹ insists that the male youths, in practicing *thủ xú*, have “cheapened” (*bán rẻ*) their “dignity” (*phẩm giá*) and that of Vietnamese tradition. Explaining the reasons for his objection, Mr. Vỹ states:

What will happen to the **nation’s customs and traditions** [*phong hóa của nước nhà*] [...]. If you all are like this, you will cheapen [*bán rẻ*] your dignity and make light of your responsibility towards the **preservation of culture** [*bảo toàn phong hóa*] [...] why not focus on your studies, build your character and sense of ethics so that you will someday bear the **awesome responsibility of leading the nation** [*gánh vác việc xã hội quốc gia*]? (Nguyễn 1928, 3)

The Vietnamese word he employs for “cheapened” (*bán rẻ*) also has connotations meaning ‘to prostitute oneself’. The Vietnamese male youths, of course, have not literally sold their bodies. But in embracing these supposedly new practices, according to Mr. Vỹ, they have in effect **exchanged** this imagined ‘traditional’ Vietnamese culture for a modern one – as did Kiếu. One implication, then, is that the Neo-Confucians in this debate opposed the *thủ xú* phenomenon not so much because they were homophobic but saw in these practices the sign of the *modern*.

It is possible that in the early twentieth century a cultural paradigm shift occurred among some Vietnamese Neo-Confucians in

the way they perceived of female prostitution. Scholars studying the phenomenon in Shanghai, for example, have suggested a historical shift in the cultural perception of this female figure (Henriot 1994, 33; Hershatter 1999, 9). Prior to the middle of the twentieth century, the female prostitute was associated with high culture and pleasure, embodied in the figure of the exquisite courtesan. At a certain point, however, as Shanghai and other urban centres were modernizing, the prostitute became associated with what Hershatter has described were “themes of victimization and sexual danger” (1999a, 9). Among the reasons for this shift is that modern reformers began to see in female prostitution a symbol of China’s “national shame” (Hershatter 1999, 9).

A parallel argument can be made in the case of the *thủ xú* phenomenon. It is plausible that Mr. Vỹ and other Neo-Confucians saw in the female prostitute – and by extension, the Vietnamese male youths – a sign of modern national depravity. Vietnam, like China, also experienced larger structural changes in the early twentieth century, namely the collapse of the premodern dynastic system and rise of the modern state. These dramatic changes led many Vietnamese intellectuals to be intensely preoccupied over their country’s predicament. Recall that Mr. Vỹ’s initial purpose in visiting the French-Vietnamese schools was to check on the “intellectual formation” of the Vietnam’s next generation. In the passage that I cited above Mr. Vỹ is concerned, among other issues, with the “awesome responsibility” of the Vietnamese youths to someday lead the “nation”.

The preoccupation with political leadership is connected to another archetype of East Asian masculinity, namely the one premised on sexual abstinence. This is the “hero” whose political career or military ambitions depends on his ability to maintain proper distance from sexual desire and their perceived detriments (Huang 2006, 107). It is also this heroic model that Mr. Vỹ appears to promulgate. He maintains that the youths’ “love games” can lead only to pernicious consequences. He states:

From this carnal desire are sprung many foibles [*tính xấu-xa*]: deception, sulkiness, jealousy, hatred, ridicule; the loss of precious study time and a waste of money that parents have sent to nourish an ignoble carnal desire [*cái dục tình đê tiện*]. (Nguyễn 1928, 3)

This passage suggests that the youths’ amorous relations will only lead to a range of negative passions and material losses, including time and money. For this reason, the male youths ought to be focused on more serious pursuits, such as the development of their “character” and “sense of ethics”. These are the pursuits that, as the prior quoted passage suggests, will equip the male youths in the solemn task of leading the Vietnamese nation.

It is significant that the thematic opposition between the dangers of the libido and the ascetic activity of nation-building parallels the anxieties of early twentieth-century modern reformers in Shanghai. In other words, to the extent that modern urban changes in China are comparable to those in Vietnam, one reason for the *People's Voice's* opposition to the *thủ xú* phenomenon derives from an anxiety over the perceived decline of ‘traditional’ Vietnamese culture in the context of modern nation-building. Finally, it is noteworthy that Mr. Vỹ only selectively translated certain East Asian models of masculinity. In no way was there a monolithic transfer of all elements of the East Asian cultural tradition, and certainly not the one that prized female prostitutes as exquisite courtesans.

6 Same-Sex Sexuality as a Sign of Western Decadence?

Besides considering the *thủ xú* phenomenon as a symptom of modernization – and by extension, the perceived decline of ‘tradition’ – the evidence also suggests that same-sex sexuality represents a practice reflective of Western culture. The interlocutors in the debate, however, exhibited differing attitudes towards Western culture. On the one hand, the Neo-Confucian traditionalist considered the practice as a sign of Western decadence unbefitting of Vietnamese civilization. On the other hand, the youths believed the opposite: namely, that same-sex sexual practices embody a fashionable Western cultural trend. Let us look at examples of each point in turn.

Evidence for the belief that same-sex sexual practices is a sign of Western decadence is most clear in the vocabulary deployed to characterize this phenomenon. Mr. Vỹ, for instance, repeatedly calls it “uncivilized” (*dã man*). In his address to the Vietnamese male youth, Mr. Vỹ states:

Now, to all of you young students! What kind of **race** [giống] have you become, certainly not that of Viet-Nam! I have never heard of teenagers of any of our **Asian nations** who have behaved like you before! Very **unseemly** [*chướng lẫm*]! Such an **uncivilized** practice [*thói dã man*] [...]. You must have learned this from the **new educational system**, is that right? Why do you not know how to keep your own sense of **dignity** [*phẩm giá*]? (Nguyễn 1928, 3; emphasis added)

The passage stages a key dichotomy between civilization and barbarism. The fact that the speaker speculates that the practice may have derived from modern Western educational system creates a division between the prestige of an ancient Asian civilization and the barbarism of a modern Western one. He calls the *thủ xú* practice “unseem-

ly”, “uncivilized” and unbecoming of the Vietnamese “race”. He worries that the practice will inflict damage on the prestige of the nation’s “cultural mores”. As already noted, in the early twentieth century, the conflict between preserving tradition and embracing modernization raged among Vietnamese intellectuals. Under the shadows of French imperial prestige, the younger generation tended to reject what they perceived as embarrassingly backward ‘tradition’ and sought for ways to modernize their country. In the prior passage, however, the speaker appears to belong to an older generation that considered Vietnam an inheritor of the prestige of the Great Neo-Confucian tradition. He speculates that the Vietnamese youth may have acquired this “bad habit” from the “new educational system”, namely the modern French-Vietnamese schools that now dominated the country.

Moreover, the opposition between civilization and barbarism is further heightened by the vocabulary concerning race. Mr. Vỹ compares Vietnam to other “Asian nations” and asks the Vietnamese youth to what “race” [*giống*] they have become. ‘Race’ in this context seems to correspond to something akin to ethnic origins. Scholars studying this period have noted a prevailing cultural dichotomy between the ethnic Vietnamese majority, the *Kinh*, and the mountainous highlanders. Both the prevailing French colonial discourse and the Vietnamese majority perceived the highlanders as ‘savages’ beyond the limits of modern civilization (Saleminck 2003; Jennings 2011). By labelling the *thủ xú* phenomenon as “barbaric”, then, the speaker simultaneously implies that it lies outside the limits of Vietnamese civilization proper.

Yet, if some of the Neo-Confucian literati conceived of same-sex sexuality as a sign of Western decadence, the male youths who participated in the activity believed otherwise. For them, the activity appears to be a fashionable Western trend. We do not have direct evidence from the youth. But we do have quotations provided by their opponents, from which we can draw inferences. In its criticism of this phenomenon, the editorial Board of the *People’s Voice* attempts to refute the claims of the Vietnamese youth. The Board writes:

You male youths claim that “our neighbours may see this but probably won’t find it too strange” and you point to the story of *Poil de Carotte* in which a proctor **enacted** “*thu xu*” on a pupil and the case of Mr. Rousseau on whom two Moors attempted to **enact** “*thu xu*”. In this regard, you male youths are mistaken. Have you ever seen our **culture and customs** [*phong tục ta*] exhibiting this bad **habit** [*thói*] before? If not, then why would you think our neighbours would not find it strange? What you say is enough evidence to show that this social vice is a “foreign import” which you have enthusiastically rushed to imitate and embrace. (Editorial Board [Toà Soạn], 1928, 3)

This passage foregrounds at least two key points. First, like Mr. Vỹ in the earlier passage, it is clear that the editorial Board does not see this phenomenon as evidence of some form of innate gender or sexuality. Instead, much like dietary preferences, sports, smoking or drinking, same-sex sexuality is something akin to a practice. In response to this phenomenon, the editorial board of the *People's Voice* repeatedly refer to *thủ xú* as a kind of “custom” (*lệ*), “cultural practice” (*cái tục*) or “habit” (*thói*), but one that is simultaneously “bad” (*xấu xa*), “vile” (*đê mạt*) or “strange” (*quái vật*). The editors explain by posing the following question: “Have you ever seen this *thủ xú* custom in our culture before?” (*Các cậu đã thấy trong phong tục ta xưa nay có cái thói ‘thủ xú’ ấy chưa?*). They continue: “If not, then how could folks not consider this as something strange?” (*Nếu chưa thì làm sao bà con nghe đến lại không lấy làm quay gở?*). In other words, the so-called *queerness* of this practice derives not from some innate psycho-biological etiology, as some scholars have demonstrated with the dominance of sexology (Tran 2014). Rather, same-sex sexuality is “strange” to the Board only because, at least to them, it appears to have no precedent in Vietnamese culture.

Second, this so-called “custom”, according to the prior passage, appears to be a Western “foreign import”. The French texts are references to Jules Renard’s novella *Poil de Carotte* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*. In the former, Renard depicts a scene in which a proctor appears to have intimate relations with one of the boarding school pupils. In the latter, Rousseau recounts a homoerotic experience with some Moors during a visit to the city of Turin.

In invoking these Western texts, the Vietnamese youths, I suggest, are *translating* them in the service of their own contingent political ends. They are enacting the postcolonial meaning of catachresis: the redeployment of Western cultural concepts to other contexts. In this case, the male youths capitalize on the French prestige of the aforementioned texts in their defence of same-sex amorous relations. In response, the editorial Board likewise invokes the same texts as negative examples of what not to emulate. Since same-sex sexuality, according to the editors, derived not from Vietnamese but French culture, it follows that this “bad habit” is something that need not be preserved – at least not for the various visions of nationhood to which the editors subscribed – and therefore can be stopped. Chastising the Vietnamese male youths, the Editorial Board concludes:

[Y]ou [...] misunderstand that just because there exists this **cultural practice** [*tục ấy*] in the West in no way implies that you should try to imitate it; you male youths are mistaken when you take this vile **habit** [*thói*] to be synonymous with the **noble ideals of male friendship...**” (Editorial Board [Toà Soạn], 1928, 4)

Regardless of whether this “custom” or “habit” derived from the French or not, my point is that this archive dramatizes how different actors drew on French culture and translated it to serve their various local claims in the debate over the meaning of same-sex sexual practices. Ultimately, the case study brings into relief how the meaning of sexuality is located in the cross-cultural translation process, where ‘translation’ is understood to be an epistemic struggle in the negotiation and production of meaning, and by extension, a site of cultural knowledge production.

7 Conclusion

The article has analyzed one meaning of same-sex sexual relations in the late 1920s in Vietnam based on a debate in the *People’s Voice* (*Tiếng Dân*), a prominent newspaper during the interwar period. The paper published an investigative story about a phenomenon called *thủ xú*, a local argot to refer to male-male amorous relations taking place in the then newly emerging French-Vietnamese secondary schools. Based on an examination of the newspaper, this study has argued that the meaning of same-sex sexual relations is a cultural translation of East Asian and Western traditions. Indeed, to grasp the meaning of *thủ xú* is already to enter into the complex process of linguistic and cultural translation.

The research suggests two key conclusions concerning the character of Vietnamese same-sex sexuality. First, the interlocutors conceived of sexuality less as a coherent and stable identity in the image of the modern homosexual paradigm. Rather, caught in the traffic of both Eastern and Western discourses, Vietnamese same-sex sexuality signified contingent practices of cultural difference. Put another way, it was a protean ‘queer’ figure – a cathectic object onto which different interlocutors projected both their anxieties and aspirations. For the Neo-Confucians, male-male amorous relations represented ‘modern’ Western habits that threatened what they perceived as ‘traditional’ Vietnamese culture. By contrast, the Vietnamese male youths conceived of their amorous relations as a fashionable practice of Western modernity and civilization. In no way did either party conceive of the amorous relations as an essence that defined who the participants were and what they could be.

Finally, the *thủ xú* phenomenon problematizes some of the dualisms in the debates in sexuality studies. According to one such dualism, the West imposes its universal identity constructs onto other local cultures. This archive, however, complicates this narrative in two ways. First, the study challenges the notion of a monolithic transfer of external cultural influence. Local actors were not passive receptacles. Rather, they dynamically translated and appropriated ‘for-

eign’ cultural ideas in the service of their contingent political ends. Second, the meaning of Vietnamese same-sex sexuality derived from multiple cultural sources. Belonging exclusively to none, the *thủ xú* phenomenon – and by extension, Vietnamese same-sex sexuality – reveals its hybrid moorings and fundamental cultural impurity. While the *thủ xú* phenomenon appears to have been a fleeting moment in Vietnamese cultural history, it provides one indication of the rich and complex meanings of variant genders and sexualities yet to be further excavated.

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