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French Colonial State, Vietnamese Civil Society: The League of Light [Đoàn Ánh Sáng] and Housing Reform in Hà Nội, 1937–1941

... crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched, with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem to be too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud and threatening to fall into it - as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations, every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage...

—Charles Dickens, writing about Victorian London slums in *Oliver Twist*, 1838

*Damp, low-ceilinged, and barren, the houses in Vietnam are a pile of mud mixed with rubbish. They are disgusting. Puddles of water full of scum and trash make the ground perpetually damp and muddy. In hot weather, they give off a heavy odor. In winter, the moisture condenses into streams of smelly water. People and animals live and eat together, living in the same dark tight place...*¹

—Nhất Linh, writing about Hà Nội's shantytowns in *Ngày Nay*, 1936

After years of promoting social reform on the pages of their journals *Phong Hóa* [Mores] and *Ngày Nay* [These Days], Nhất Linh (the pen name of Nguyễn Tường Tam) and his Self-strength Literary Group [Tự Lực

Văn Đoàn] colleagues Khái Hưng, Thạch Lam, and Hoàng Đạo finally put their ideas into action in 1937. Arguably the most influential and celebrated intellectuals of the interwar period, the Self-strength Literary Group first came to public attention in 1932 with the launch of *Phong Hóa*, Vietnam's first satirical newspaper. The paper's humor was aimed at elements of Vietnamese society and culture that it saw as backward and in need of reform, covering a disparate range of issues such as art, fashion, local and national politics, urban and rural affairs, and women's issues. Despite its prolific journalistic output, the group was perhaps better known for its literature, which was serialized in *Phong Hóa* and its successor *Ngày Nay* and carried a reformist bent in both form and content. Using the modern literary form of novels and short stories, the group advocated cultural and moral change by attacking Confucianism and its stranglehold over Vietnamese family life. The group advanced a broad agenda of reform, championing Western values of individualism, romantic love, liberal democracy and scientific and technological progress. In both its literary and journalistic writings, the group sought to replace what it saw as outdated traditions with new foundations for a modern Vietnamese society.

As the culmination of this broad reform agenda, the group founded the League of Light [Hội Ánh Sáng or Đoàn Ánh Sáng] to combat unsanitary housing in urban and rural areas, working together with a number of Hà Nội's most well-known architects and intellectuals. This study traces the league's brief history, from its inception in December 1936 to its gradual demise sometime in the early 1940s. It explores the league's activities, philosophy and aims, and situates them within the wider contexts of housing reform and urban planning in late colonial Tonkin, as well as international progressive movements. As an in-depth study of one organization, this article argues that the leaders of the League of Light were interested in more than simply improving the living conditions of impoverished Vietnamese; they aspired to carve out a pluralistic public space for civic collective action where one had barely existed before. The league's goals were twofold: For the peasant masses, it wanted to change how they thought and behaved by manipulating the physical space in which they lived. For urban educated elites, their participation in the organization served to generate a modern sense of community, civic duty, and social responsibility.

Very little scholarship examines the League of Light in any depth; the league usually appears only in passing in more general discussions of the Self-strength Literary Group. In his important research article on urban associational life, Alexander Woodside cites the league as an example of a group founded by intellectuals seeking to “rectify the lack of social welfare organizations in the cities.”² Woodside argues that a number of factors contributed to the failure of such organizations, in particular the lack of technical specialization, enduring influence of traditional superior-subordinate relationships, and suspicion on the part of the colonial state. This article will reveal that such factors hardly existed for the league, and that external developments, rather than internal organizational defects, contributed to the league’s eventual end in the early 1940s. In *Understanding Vietnam*, Neil Jamieson suggests that members of the Self-strength Literary Group founded the League of Light to compensate for the waning fortunes of their newspapers. According to Jamieson, Nhất Linh and his associates turned to “direct social action” only when they had failed to recapture the élan of the *Phong Hóa-Ngày Nay* years.³ For Van Nguyen-Marshall, the league illustrated the paternalistic attitudes of its founders, which she described as a “reinstatement of Confucian social responsibility.”⁴ For Nguyen-Marshall, these reformers were elites removed from the plight of the poor. At the very least, they were misguided, no matter how sincere or heartfelt their compassion. In contrast to these impressionistic interpretations that depict the league as a failed organization, a response to an ailing publishing venture, or a conservative effort to promote tradition, this paper describes the league as the culmination of the Self-strength Literary Group’s unique modernist vision of social reform.

Similarly, Vietnamese Marxist scholars tend to view the members of the Self-strength Literary Group as little more than “bourgeois reformists.” In the dominant historiography, nationalism and patriotism have been defined mainly through protracted resistance and struggle against colonialism. This inflexible definition left little space for historical actors who were seen to have worked with colonial state in any capacity. For example, in the 1980s Nguyễn Trác and Đái Xuân Ninh belittled the reformist agenda of the League of Light as insufficiently revolutionary. For these hard-line scholars, the league was “a counter-revolutionary pole jammed into the wheel of

history that was surging forward.”⁵ Beginning in 1986, the relaxing of censorship and the shift towards market socialism under *đổi mới* [renovation] gradually opened up the historiographical space to speak objectively and even positively about “bourgeois” or “collaborationist” figures such as the Self-strength Literary Group. As Hà Minh Đức wrote in 2007:

Although the two newspapers [of the Self-strength Literary Group] had the intention of protecting national culture and literature and were moderately critical of colonial policies, they were fundamentally reformist and compromising in nature [tính chất cải lương thoả hiệp]. This is the case with permitted journals with reformist tendencies—in their activities, they cannot avoid instances and issues in which they must compromise with the state. The activities of the League of Light, although a good idea in its conception and newly put into action, could not avoid deficiencies because it lacked the capital to sustain itself and had to rely on government support.⁶

Although softer in tone than previous scholars, Hà Minh Đức’s assessment of the group and the League of Light still could not move past the entrenched view that any collaboration with the colonial state was a shortcoming, indicative of a lack of political principle and vision.

More recently, the work of Caroline Herbelin discusses the League of Light within the context of French colonial architecture. In her 2009 article “Des Habitations à Bon Marché au Việt Nam: La question du logement social en situation coloniale” [Public housing projects in Vietnam: The question of social housing in a colonial situation], the author places the league within the larger history of foundering public housing policies in Indochina. The author focuses on the often contentious relationship between the league and the colonial administration, and describes the apprehension on the part of colonial officials despite government support. Herbelin is hesitant about the political aims of the league, writing that “[the league] went beyond the scope of charity—they were concerned, if not with militant political activism, at least to propose concrete solutions to change society in depth.”⁷ Placing the league within the context of failed housing initiatives supported by French colonial officials detracts from its unique position as arguably the largest philanthropic grassroots organization founded by Vietnamese during the colonial period, as well as a significant attempt at establishing civil society institutions.

In keeping with the theme of this special issue, this study approaches the colonial state obliquely by examining its relationship to a burgeoning indigenous civil society. Scholarship on civil society—especially works focusing on 17th and 18th century Europe and the dismantling of the Soviet bloc in the late 20th century—suggests that such institutions emerged in response to crisis in the social and political order.⁸ Scholars working on the colonial and postcolonial world focus on how the idea of civil society, already checkered in its conceptualization and realization in the West, became unevenly localized within the context of colonial domination.⁹ In the case of French colonial Tonkin, non-clandestine nationalist politics was largely limited to groups of educated urban elites publicly establishing the institutions of a new civil society after being excluded from meaningful and substantive political activity by the colonial state. In the case of the League of Light, the emergent Vietnamese civil society exposed the inadequacies of colonial policy; it was the state that actively sought outside institutions to provide social services that it could not. In return, the league looked to the state for access to resources needed by any fledgling organization—mainly publicity and legitimacy, if not outright financial support. As a result, the colonial state and budding Vietnamese civil society can be seen to have enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship, but one that had its ebbs and flows. This description of state-civil society relations adds nuance to the emphasis on anticolonial patriotism dominant in Vietnamese official histories and the focus on the repressive apparatus of state power in French-language scholarship. Such collaboration did not necessarily entail unquestioning acceptance of the imperial project in Indochina; in fact, intellectuals such as the Self-strength Literary Group were critical of the colonial state's inability to live up to France's proclaimed standards of liberal republicanism. The League of Light's history reveals it was committed to the normative principles of modern associational public life and sought to inculcate civic values at the grassroots and elite levels.

This article will be arranged in a series of chronological themes: the first and second sections will discuss the international and local discourses that gave rise to the league. The third part will describe the formation of the League of Light and the colonial government's support of the league, which stemmed from its anxieties about overpopulation and urbanization. The

remaining sections will describe various aspects of the League of Light: its organizational structure, architecture, activities and culture, and finally, the factors that led to its demise.

International Contexts: Progressivism and the Emergent Welfare State

Given the timing of the organization's founding in 1937, it would be easy to attribute the League of Light to the populist euphoria following the election of the French Popular Front in May 1936. In Indochina, this translated into a more open (albeit short-lived) political atmosphere, which saw the amnesty of prominent political prisoners, the relaxing of press censorship, and the passing of Vietnam's first labor laws. While the overwhelming public response to the League of Light's reform message can be linked to this upsurge of populism, the league's sociopolitical and intellectual project is best seen as the product of two streams of social discourse, one international and the other local. First, the League of Light must be placed within the context of early twentieth century European and American urban reform movements, and by extension, in the larger thrust of early twentieth century social thought. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, an international reform movement emerged in the industrialized countries of Europe and North America, aimed at exposing and controlling the negative social consequences of capitalist development on daily lives.¹⁰ In the United States, this movement was manifest in the muckrakers and Progressive Era legislation; in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe, governments adopted a series of innovative social programs transforming such fields as education, labor relations, and women's rights. Within this international reform movement, unsanitary and/or inadequate housing was recognized as one of the many problems emerging from industrialization and the rapid growth of urban areas, and quickly became a pet issue with reformers.¹¹ Often in tandem with the modernization of other urban infrastructure like sanitation, transport and utilities, housing reform in Europe began as the enclave of middle-class philanthropy, in which "individual doctors and amateur philanthropists attempted to ameliorate conditions piecemeal through the documentation of ills and the construction of model housing projects."¹² The turn of the century marked a shift in this reform movement as a wave of

housing and urban planning laws passed throughout Europe: Britain (1890), France (1894), the Netherlands (1902), and Germany (1904). In other words, housing reform had passed from the realm of private charity into the formative stages of the public welfare state.

This European urban reform movement had its intellectual roots in the Enlightenment project for social amelioration, the contentious belief that through the use of reason, mankind can be emancipated from the strictures of oppressive regimes and society could be improved.¹³ The application of rationality and science to housing problems was manifest in the approach of reformers, architects, and urbanists towards physical and material space: the idea that the manipulation of the built environment would result in transforming human behavior, thereby imposing social and moral order. Paul Boyer described this approach as “positive environmentalism:”

The most promising long-range strategy of urban moral control was not repression, but a more subtle and complex process of influencing behavior and molding character through a transformed, consciously planned urban environment.¹⁴

Although the idea of “positive environmentalism” focused on the rational reordering of urban space, it is easy to see how Vietnamese reformers in the 1930s would appropriate and apply it to a variety of reforms.

The league’s intellectual debt to the Enlightenment went further than just the superficial evocation of light in its name; the influence of this particular kind of rational discourse is apparent in the League of Light’s social reform project. The league’s principal architects and president trained at the Indochinese Fine Arts University [*École de Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine* or *Trường Cao Đẳng Mỹ Thuật Đông Dương, EBAI for short*], which had profoundly influenced their approach to the built environment. The university’s architecture department was established by Ernest Hébrard, the *Beaux-Arts* trained urbanist hired in 1921 by then Governor-General Maurice Long to oversee Hà Nội’s urban development. Hébrard’s philosophy and approach to architecture reflected the intellectual climate of the times; he belonged to the school of thought that believed that “cultures remained stable precisely because they had a relatively high degree of technical mastery

over their environments, which in turn sustained a coherent social organization.”¹⁵ Central to Hébrard’s approach was his emphasis on climate. It was Hébrard’s belief that, while traditional cultures evolved more or less unconsciously in response to their climate and environment, “the independent spirit of creativity and associated with the modern West could combine continuity and innovation, avoiding the cultural inertia he associated with the Orient.”¹⁶ The result of Hébrard’s architectural approach was twofold: first, Hébrard defined a new “Indochinese” style by applying western rationality to local climes and their resulting stylistic forms.¹⁷ Despite its lofty goals, the reality of this new style was more pastiche than radical innovation. Second, Hébrard’s ambitions did not stop at aesthetic design of individual buildings—he was most passionate about city planning. He saw himself as a master urbanist and social engineer, responsible for “giving artistic form and efficient overview to the morphology of entire cities.”¹⁸ Hébrard’s extensive plans for Hà Nội utilized strict zoning laws that claimed to solve many of Hà Nội’s problems. *Le Plan Hébrard* attempted to impose order onto the Old Quarter by building a central marketplace (now the Đồng Xuân market), moving large industries from the city center to a designated zone, setting up a port across the Red River in Gia Lâm, carving out gardens and parks throughout the city, digging extensive canal systems, and building at least three grand boulevards radiating from the administrative center. Through the rational implementation of zoning laws, Hébrard sought to “order two forms of chaos—‘native’ life and industrial growth.”¹⁹ In other words, Hébrard’s plan aimed at controlling economic development and its negative effects on urban settings, which also had the added benefit of containing the threat of indigenous uprisings. While Hébrard did manage to complete some of his grand plan, the larger transformative aspects remained unfinished. Although Hébrard paid little or no heed to the housing of Vietnamese workers, he nevertheless still adhered to the Enlightenment principles that other progressive reformers followed at the time—that human behavior could be transformed through the technical manipulation of physical space. Before his departure in 1929, Hébrard taught in the Fine Arts University’s Architecture department he helped establish.²⁰

As 1932 graduates of Hébrard’s architecture department, the league’s chief architects Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Nhu Tiếp would surely have

been influenced by Hébrard and would have inherited some version of the environmental determinism and urban reform discourse described above. Nguyễn Cao Luyện completed his EBAI training course with studies of Auguste Perret and Le Corbusier, who deeply influenced his ideas on urban planning and modern design.²¹ As principal designers, Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp brought Hébrard's brand of architecture and urban planning to the houses built by the League of Light. Hébrard's influence can be seen in Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp's willingness to merge local styles with Western architectural principles, their emphasis on climate, and unfaltering belief in the potential of transforming human conditions through material environment.

Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp were not the only students at the Fine Arts school influenced by these ideas. Nhất Linh, Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, Tô Ngọc Vân and a number of others who collaborated with the Self-strength Literary Group also studied at the school.²² As a result, their respective reform projects espoused similar philosophies to Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp. It seems that these other reformers expanded the idea of positive environmentalism to encompass not just the built environment, but also consumable goods. A common thread runs through all the Self-strength Literary Group's reforms: the idea that the reforming of material conditions and objects would result in the transformation of human behaviors and attitudes. For example, Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường believed that changing what women wore and bought would lead to their embracing of the perpetual dynamism inherent in modern life.²³ Nhất Linh and his associates were convinced that if publishers reformed the superficial design and print quality of books, readers would eventually appreciate the knowledge contained within their pages. As the last in a series of reforms, the League of Light sought to civilize Vietnamese peasants by eradicating the darkness of their houses.

Local and National Contexts of League of Light

If the League of Light can be seen as a part of a larger international reform movement focusing on unsanitary housing, it was also the culmination of various threads of local discourse from within *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*. The league did not suddenly emerge fully formed in 1936; it was an idea that

had been percolating for years in the minds of its founders. The League of Light reflected and encompassed a number of the Self-strength Literary Group's most dominant social concerns, especially regarding women, youth, and the peasantry. Its discussions over the years reveal that Nhất Linh and his associates believed these three groups to be in most need of help, guidance and mobilization.

Of the three groups, *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*'s discourse on the peasantry was by far the most extensive and complicated, due to the fact that it was closely tied to the Group's vision of the nation. Although this vision ultimately remained on the pages of *Phong Hóa* and *Ngày Nay*, it nevertheless reveals the vital connection between sanitary housing and the Group's aspirations for a modern Vietnam. Both Nhất Linh and Nhị Linh (a pseudonym used by Self-strength member and League of Light co-founder Khải Hưng) first expressed interest in the peasantry as early as April 1933. In an extended series of articles, they argued that rural Vietnamese suffered from a number of shortcomings that kept them perpetually backward. Both writers lamented that entrenched traditions and religion caused rural Vietnamese to have misplaced priorities. Rather than spend their money on maintaining their homes, buying food and other necessities, or investing in their children's education and future, the peasantry would spend their money to buy a position on the council of village elders (evidence of their lust for prestige), set up altars and temples (superstition), or throw lavish feasts for funeral and death anniversaries (blind adherence to tradition). He believed that Vietnamese peasants have neglected their immediate physical well-being for the sake of following rituals and customs that have no foundation in reality. Nhất Linh wrote that they "pay too much on spiritual matters . . . we must now make them focus on the material . . ." ²⁴ In this context, the terms "spiritual" and "material" do not carry the same value judgments as their most common usage (i.e., the lofty and enduring "spiritual" world versus the base and transitory "material" world). For Nhất Linh, "spiritual" denoted the religious beliefs of Vietnamese peasants, a term which he uses to pejoratively describe what he viewed as superstitious and self-destructive practices that have no basis in observable phenomena. Conversely, he used the term "material" to refer to the observable world, that is, the physical realities in which people live. The group espoused

a secular materialist viewpoint of the world, and believed that rural Vietnamese must be taught to do the same. This emphasis on materialism not only informs the group's attitudes towards the peasantry, but also inspired the League of Light's mission of transforming human behavior through the rational manipulation of the material environment.

In its discussion on how to educate the peasantry, the group exhibited a deep distrust of the traditional village elders to enact reforms. Nhất Linh surmised that, while some elders may understand the desires and wishes of the peasantry, most use that understanding to exploit the peasantry for their own personal gain. *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay* often commented on the corruption in the villages, citing such practices as falsification of village accounts and misappropriation of public funds. Indeed, the group believed the elders of no use to the peasantry, spending their days "making up whiny and maudlin poems while reeking of alcohol."²⁵ The children of Confucian literati, who have received some Western learning, are just as ineffectual: "They haven't yet mastered *quốc ngữ* and have already left school. After that, they spend their days merrymaking, cockfighting, flying kites, and partaking in opium, songstresses and drinking to pass the days."²⁶ The group brutally satirized the backward behavior of the rural elite in cartoons featuring a country bumpkin named Lý Toét, who became *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*'s most famous character and a cultural icon. For the group, the village elders and mandarin class were part of the problem, not the solution.

Having dismissed the village elders, Nhất Linh argued that guidance must come from urban Western-educated elites. Unfortunately, he believed that they too were separated from their rural compatriots because "when the educated have the opportunity to interact with the peasantry, they never take the chance to listen, to open their eyes and carefully look at them, to observe their rustic and simple spirit."²⁷ Because Western-educated elites and the peasantry espoused completely different worldviews, Nhất Linh believed they were separated by a cultural gulf:

That is why reform in rural areas is often unsuccessful. Educated Vietnamese want to reform according to their wishes and the peasantry do not yet see the benefits. They only see that the intellectuals go against their set ways. For that reason, they do not cooperate and even try to find ways to sabotage reform."²⁸

In order for reform to be truly effective, Nhất Linh advised that “we must find ways to teach the peasantry to have the same viewpoints as we do, only then can we begin to reform.”²⁹ The intelligentsia must teach the peasantry to “eradicate and dismantle their superstitious and dull-witted viewpoints, and replace them with rational ones.”³⁰ The League of Light’s focus on clean housing illustrates the group’s materialist sensibility; by learning to live according to standards of cleanliness and hygiene, rural Vietnamese learn to reject superstition, focus on their physical well-being, and become contributing members of a new modern Vietnamese nation. For Nhất Linh, the connection between material needs, changing attitudes, and self-sufficiency is clear:

A clean, sanitary, bright house, two nutritious meals a day, warm clothing. Those are the peasant’s first needs in life. Only when the peasantry adopt a rational, material view they can turn their sights on the pressing issues of rural livelihood—the expansion of craft industries, formation of rural work associations. They would learn how to work systematically and be industrious and thrifty, all which are necessary to better their well-being. They would be able to help and understand the government on matters of livelihood.³¹

Once peasants learned to focus on the realities at hand, they could begin to work and eventually organize themselves into cottage industries and even guilds. Eventually, they would be able to contribute on a national level. For Nhất Linh, housing for peasants was the first step to their economic independence and ultimately to that of the entire nation. The League of Light was to help facilitate this first step by helping to educate the peasantry, and thus be seen as the culmination of ideas that had been developing in *Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay* for years.

Establishing the League

The League of Light first came to public attention in December 1936, in a three-page article in *Ngày Nay*. In the words quoted at the beginning of this article, it lamented the unsanitary housing conditions in Vietnam:

Damp, low-ceilinged, and barren, the houses in Vietnam are a pile of mud mixed with rubbish. They are disgusting. Puddles of water full of scum and trash make the ground perpetually damp and muddy. In hot weather, they give off a heavy odor. In winter, the moisture condenses into streams of smelly

water. People and animals live and eat together, living in the same dark tight place.³²

The authors pointed out that poverty was no excuse for living in squalor, for even in Japan the poor lived in modest yet clean homes. The problem with the Vietnamese, *Ngày Nay* argued, lay not in their poverty, but in their ignorance: “The people are poor and don’t understand their own lives. They pay little attention to material realities, and they pray for interventions from faraway spirits, beings that are supernatural and imaginary.” Such superstitious beliefs must be corrected, the article continued, and it is the responsibility of educated Vietnamese to guide the masses in this regard: “The masses are poor. We must help them. They do not know better. We must show them the light, we must bring them a bright future to replace their sad and dark existence.”³³ The Self-strength Literary Group called for the establishment of an association to eradicate “dirty, dark and cavernous rat’s nests unfit for human habitation.”³⁴ Because the league could not be officially founded until it was granted permission by the colonial administration, the article served to open a dialogue and to explore the public reception of such an organization. In the meantime, the league started campaigning for greater awareness against unsanitary housing by holding lectures and printing information about sanitary living and new innovations in architecture. The tone of the article was hopeful and determined:

For a long time, we have wished to eradicate cavernous and dark houses and replace them with high-ceilinged tidy houses. Now we are not wishing anymore. We want to make it so. We want to make it happen. Our desires must be turned into reality . . . In the process of reforming our desolate, stunted society, there are two things necessary for us to achieve our goal: faith and fervency. Fervency for our work and faith in a future better than the present.³⁵

The group appealed for experts to contribute their knowledge of architecture, advertising, law, and fundraising, and invited letters of opinion from readers. It had clearly intended the League of Light to be an inclusive project that called for the participation of all sectors of Vietnamese society. Towards this end, the group called for unity among rival newspapers:

We ask that newspapers not see that this as one person’s project. Please work to bring this to public consciousness, so that this idea will spread and be

realized. This effort must be collective. It should not belong to any party, faction, or religion . . . The motto of the League of Light is: Society—Humanity—Reform.”³⁶

Ngày Nay's call to action marked a change in the group's relations with other intellectuals and public figures. Although it had originally built its reputation on making fun of various personalities in Hà Nội society and waging pen wars, the group was now willing to put the past aside and work with its old rivals on social reform. Particularly striking was the league's collaboration with Francophone pro-government and royalist newspaper *La Patrie Annamite* [The Annamite Homeland] and its proprietor Phạm Lê Bồng, both having been lambasted by the group in the past. This did not escape the notice of the league's detractors. Rival newspaper *Tân Việt Nam* [New Việt Nam], whose editor Phan Trần Chúc was also a victim of *Phong Hoá*'s brutal satire, later commented that the league's inclusive nature was indeed a departure from the Self-Reliant Literary Group's previous tendencies:

Phong Hoá and its successor *Ngày Nay* have maintained a completely independent stance, in terms of the government as well as those with power in current society. Opening their hands and asking for government money, and running after *La Patrie Annamite*, *Ngày Nay* has broken with the *Phong Hoá* of the past.³⁷

In a front-page cartoon lambasting the group, the paper accused *Ngày Nay* of currying favor with the colonial government. It depicted a mandarin labeled “*Patrie*,” being followed by a parasol-carrying servant marked “*Ngày Nay*.”³⁸ *Ích Hữu* [Usefulness], a journal owned by the Group's biggest rival Vũ Đình Long, cynically accused the Self-Reliant Literary Group of starting the league to boost its public reputation. It remarked that the group was now working with “well-known” pro-government figures it had satirized in the past such as Phạm Lê Bồng and Tôn Thất Bình.³⁹ *Ngày Nay* did not respond to these comments; instead a rival journal, *Bắc Hà* [Northern River], came to its defense. It chided other newspapers for accusing *Ngày Nay* of establishing the league to secure government money, and it asserted that such accusations were petty and unfounded. It also proposed that Hanoians should work for the greater collective good and not purposefully sabotage the philanthropic efforts of others. *Bắc Hà* called for other

newspapers to abandon the feuds that marred relations in the past: “If you want criticize the *Ngày Nay* Group, go ahead. If you want to hate Nguyễn Tường Tam, be my guest. But do not criticize an initiative that promises significant social and charitable benefits that has required a huge effort to establish.”⁴⁰ Because of their ties to the collaborationist journal *La Patrie Annamite*, the league and its project were viewed with suspicion by some nationalist intellectuals. In the postcolonial era, Marxist historians would view these links as evidence of the Self-strength Literary Group collaborationist activities.

The response to *Ngày Nay*'s appeal from the reading public was overwhelming. Over the next five months, *Ngày Nay* printed letters from over seventy readers supporting the group's agenda and offering opinions about how to execute it, a mere fraction of the thousands of letters the paper claimed to have received.⁴¹ The letters reflected a broad cross section of Vietnamese society; men and women of all ages, professions and classes wrote in to offer their opinions. The paper featured letters from all over the country, from places as far away as Huế, Qui Nhơn, Nha Trang, Sài Gòn and Cần Thơ. These letters suggest that while the league remained primarily a Hà Nội /Tonkin-based organization, its mission of charity and compassion was widely welcomed by the reading public across Indochina. The outpouring of support for the league was so strong that the Group had to remind its readers on multiple occasions that it could neither accept money nor register members until the league had received official government permission.⁴² To mobilize support for the league, a provisional committee was formed and a meeting held at the Hà Nội Opera House on the evening of August 16, 1937 to attract members and inform the public of its goals. Over two thousand people attended, twice the number of available seats in the auditorium (Figure 1). The audience heard a number of speakers covering various topics: Tôn Thất Bình and Phạm Văn Bình explained the league's program and aims. Hoàng Như Tiếp described the league's architectural principles. A Miss Thanh Quý discussed the importance of women to the league. Finally, founder Nhất Linh gave his speech on the social meaning and mission statement of the league.

While waiting for official permission, the provisional committee solicited and secured the support of colonial officials. Members of the committee met



FIGURE 1: Main stage at *Ánh Sáng* event. From *Ngày Nay* no. 73, Aug. 22, 1937, p. 664.

with Dr. Pierre Hermant, the Health Inspector-General of Indochina, who gave his full support to the project, and Yves Châtel, the Resident Superior of Tonkin, who agreed to serve as honorary president.⁴³ Colonial officials seemed to enthusiastically welcome the League of Light, especially since its aims seemed to offer solutions to two longstanding French concerns: 1) overpopulation in the rural areas of the Red River Delta, and 2) unrest among urban laborers.⁴⁴ As Andrew Hardy pointed out in *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam*, French concern about “overpopulation” was a euphemistic way of discussing immiseration.⁴⁵ What really lay behind the problem of “overpopulation” were not demographic or economic concerns, but political fears of uprisings by the impoverished masses. In urban areas, the metastasizing growth of Hà Nội presented a housing and policing problem in the form of shantytowns outside city limits and on the banks of the Red River.⁴⁶

In particular, French officials did little to hide their anxieties about the conditions of the working class, even though the urban proletariat in Vietnam remained relatively small compared to the peasantry. During a meeting with league leaders, Châtel suggested that “The first task of an organization

like the League of Light is to immediately build a workers' community where the laboring classes can rent cheaply, so they can enjoy the light of sanitary, well-lit housing." Dr. Hermant also tried to persuade the league to focus its efforts on the plight of urban workers. Just as "overpopulation" became a euphemism for "insurrection caused by immiseration," "urban laborers" became code in the lexicon of French officials for "potential communists." Later, Châtel was more explicit, announcing in a speech that "if everyone had a house and a small garden then there will be no more communists." For the colonial state, the league served two clear purposes: to alleviate the problem of overcrowding and poverty as well as to control potentially threatening and seditious elements in Vietnamese society. In return, the league gained public support and possible resources for its fledgling civil society organization. Thus, the colonial state and Vietnamese civil society came to a mutually beneficial relationship that advanced their often conflicting goals.

As a civil society institution, the league often encountered pushback from the state. Although the league was supported by the colonial state at the protectorate and municipal level, it often faced resistance in the provinces. For example, in 1938 the league tried to acquire land in Hà Đông for its first housing development. Yves Châtel tried to encourage the resident of Hà Đông to donate land to the league, but this request was refused, with the local authorities instead offering to rent the necessary acreage for the project.⁴⁷ Even at the municipal level, where the league worked closest with colonial officials, the state did not agree to all the league's demands for support. In some cases, it even hindered the league's fundraising activities. In April 1938, Hà Nội mayor Henri Virgitti revoked permission for the league to stage a performance Vi Huyền Đắc's *Kim Tiền* [Metallic Money], a play previously performed in Hải Phòng. Despite initially allowing the production, the secret police refused to issue the necessary clearances, citing the play's final scene in which striking coal workers brutally kill a cruel mine owner. In addition, requests to hang league banners around Hà Nội without paying the requisite tax were rejected on the grounds that the city needed the funds.⁴⁸ Thus, the fact that the Resident Superior served as patron to the League did not mean that it received preferential treatment; colonial officials often had to maintain their authority by pushing back on some of the

leagues' demands. This often cagey relationship suggests that the state viewed civil society institutions with some suspicion, especially since they encroached on the government's role as providers of social services.

Organizational Structure and Culture

After the league spent almost a year organizing and mobilizing public support, the colonial government officially sanctioned the formation of the League of Light on October 14, 1937.⁴⁹ According to the league's mission statement, the organization pursued four aims:

1. To fight against unsanitary housing.
2. To encourage and envision, with the help of the administration and individuals, the construction of sanitary developments and housing in populous centers, the digging of wells, the building of roads, the management of sewage, and the establishment of modern hamlets in villages.
3. To boost the beneficial effects of sanitary housing by morally and materially encouraging the upkeep of houses and apartments, through the development of education for women to better maintain the family household and the application of essential home economic principles.
4. To come to the aide of as many as possible cases and in appropriate form, the families fallen victim to unsanitary housing, and placing at their disposal, in the form of renting or selling, clean and inexpensive housing that the league will construct.⁵⁰

As evidenced by its goals, the league worked towards a more comprehensive view of housing reform than originally intended. It was not enough to provide clean houses; the league addressed the village as a whole. This meant laying the infrastructure for sanitary living such as roads, sewers, and ditches, as well as educating villagers on how to maintain their healthy new surroundings.

Because financial support was critical to the operation of the league, fundraising quickly became its foremost activity. Even before receiving official permission, the league organized numerous fundraising events, all

widely advertised on the pages of *Ngày Nay* and other local newspapers. For example, the league hosted an evening cabaret by a travelling troupe of Chinese performers called the May Blossom Revue in August 1937. This event raises 518.65 piastres after expenses.⁵¹ Later, the league organized a performance by the famous *cải lương* [renovation theatre] singer Phùng Há to support the building of its first housing development. In addition to cultural shows, the league sponsored a two-day fundraising sporting event held at the Mangin Stadium, presided over by Châtel. Once a month, the Majestic Cinema held a “League of Light” benefit on a Friday night, screening the latest films such as *Abused Confidence* starring Danielle Darrieux and *Mayerling* with Charles Boyer. One such film night raised over 330 piastres.⁵² In addition to fund-raising activities, the league also hosted recruitment drives. One such event, dubbed the Day of Light, was designed to raise awareness of the league’s social project and to induct new members. The Day of Light was a huge success. The teams recruited 2,352 new members and collected dues totaling 1,221.09 piastres.⁵³ In the first two months of existence, the league recruited 4,052 new members, mostly Hà Nội residents. A similar recruitment drive held in Hải Phòng yielded 592 new members paying a total of 481.80 piastres in fees.⁵⁴ These fundraising and recruitment activities were highly successful; in 1937–1938, the League of Light’s revenue totaled 11,212.89 piastres.

These figures, as well as archival documents, suggest that the league did not accept any money from the colonial state. As previously mentioned, this accusation was a common one among the league’s rivals as well as subsequent Marxist historians. For the former, accepting government money was a sign of the group’s greed and venality; for the latter, it branded the league as collaborationists. However, no evidence exists that any such transactions ever took place. In December 1938, the league’s financial inspection committee submitted its annual report to the Resident Superior of Tonkin. This document gives a detailed listing of the league’s monetary intake and expenditures from 1937 to 1938, and does not list any financial support from the colonial government.⁵⁵ On the other hand, archival evidence reveals that the government provided non-monetary help for the league, such as allowing it to use the Hà Nội Opera House for free, granting permission to post league banners and flyers around the city, and to list high

officials as honorary members of the organization.⁵⁶ This suggests that the league was entirely self-funded.

Rather, archival documents reveal that the colonial state often reached out to nationalist civil society institutions in times of disaster. In 1938, Resident of Kiến An André Berjoan wrote to Châtel about a fire in the mining quarters in his province. He outlined the damage caused by the fire, which left 300 people without homes and caused over five thousand piastres in damage. Berjoan implored the Resident Superior to help to the league with reconstruction efforts: "I would be happy on this occasion that you would intervene with the League of Light, whose beneficial activity is trying to build one or two model homes in this area. These houses would be examples for the owners and would be excellent propaganda."⁵⁷ Châtel personally wrote to the league's president, expressing his great interest that the league "manifest in a tangible way its existence on this occasion and that the buildings that you will undertake are realized in the least possible delay."⁵⁸ However, he did not offer any financial support to finish the model houses, which were inaugurated in April 1938.⁵⁹

Institutionally, the League of Light followed a form similar to the nineteenth and early twentieth century European middle-class philanthropic societies that the British historian R.J. Morris termed a "subscriber democracy."⁶⁰ In this form of associationism, members paid a yearly subscription fee and were organized into an elaborate hierarchy. Dues funded most of the organization's activities. The administration was led by a committee elected by subscribers, which Morris described as "rule by an oligarchy selected from higher status members of the society."⁶¹ In a subscriber democracy, the practices of procedural democratic politics were translated into the everyday administration of a volunteer organization. Such organizations were structured to secure trust as well as active participation from its membership.

As voracious readers of metropolitan newspapers, members of the Self-strength Literary Group would have been very familiar with urban associations and philanthropic organizations in Europe and most likely would have modeled the league on their Western counterparts. The league's statutes suggest that it exhibited the characteristics of a subscriber democracy. It established a finely graded organizational hierarchy for its members that

included five categories based on subscription fees. “Honorary” membership was offered to patrons who rendered symbolic service to the league. These included government figures such as Châtel and Madame Jules Brévié, wife of the Governor General of Indochina. “Beneficiary” members contributed 100 piastres or more, while “donating” members paid 50 piastres. “Active” members paid an annual fee of one piaster and had to be least 21 years of age. Students, laborers, and rural folk paid a concessionary fee of 20 cents a year, and were accorded the status of “league” members. To leave the league, members offered a simple letter of resignation, or they could be struck off the roster for not paying dues for two consecutive years.⁶² Morris described the hierarchical membership of such subscription democracies as “the perfect compromise between the middle class striving for self-respect and independence and the reality of hierarchical society with its massive inequalities of wealth and power . . .”⁶³ In other words, such hierarchies simultaneously proclaimed the equal status of their members, while affirming differences in social status between them, in a kind of registry of social class. It is no coincidence that subscriber democracies mirrored the form of the joint-stock company—such new associational culture reflected the burgeoning power of an emergent middle class. One’s power and influence within the organization was directly proportional to the subscription fee paid. The league’s statutes did not describe the privileges and benefits assigned to various levels of membership, which suggests that the league’s hierarchy seemed less an uncomfortable tension between democratic ideals and class realities than an inclusionary attempt to open the league’s membership to a wider public. In other words, the league’s hierarchy of membership was designed to encourage all sectors of Vietnamese society to participate in civil society.

The league maintained a branch in Hải Phòng, but its headquarters remained in Hà Nội, run by an administrative council composed of twenty-one elected officers that met once a month. To aid its work, the administrative council established six main committees, each charged with a specific task: purchases, festivals, publicity, housing inspection, women and technical matters. Other than the members of the Self-strength Literary Group, some of the administrative committee members were among the most well-known figures in Hà Nội society. They hailed from various

professions and political leanings, and some would go on to have illustrious careers. For example, the non-communist Vũ Đình Hoè would go on to found the influential journal *Thanh Nghị*, then become Vietnam's first Minister of Education in Hồ Chí Minh's provisional government. The league's third president, Tôn Thất Bình, worked as editor-in-chief of *La Patrie Annamite*, was the principal of the École Thăng Long [Thăng Long School], and enjoyed social status as the son-in-law of the prominent intellectual Phạm Quỳnh. One of the Indochina Fine Arts School's most famous graduates, painter Tô Ngọc Vân would later join the Việt Minh, establish a revolutionary art school in the Việt Bắc, and be named a revolutionary hero after his death in the battle of Điện Biên Phủ. Physician Phạm Hữu Chương would also join the Việt Minh and serve as Hồ Chí Minh's Director of Public Health Services until 1951. He later defected to the South, where President Ngô Đình Diệm promoted him to Minister of Health and Social Welfare; in the 1950s and 1960s a hospital in Chợ Lớn would bear his name. Lastly, Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp would also become members of the Việt Minh and operate in the Việt Bắc interzone, where some of the bamboo construction techniques promoted by the League of Light were used with success in the First Indochina War.⁶⁴ Even while active with the League of Light, Nguyễn Cao Luyện had already attracted suspicion for allegedly distributing communist tracts around the School of Public Works.⁶⁵ This collection of individuals reveals that the League of Light had somehow assembled a group of intellectuals that would otherwise have little in common. Artists worked together with physicians; journalists and writers collaborated with engineers and merchants. Educated women such as pharmacist Madame Nguyễn Đình Hoàng and schoolmistress Trịnh Thục Oanh cooperated with various male counterparts on social reform projects.⁶⁶ Curiously, the league also brought together people from various political persuasions, from monarchists to budding revolutionaries. The presence of such figures on the league's administrative council not only illustrates the widespread appeal of the league's social reform message, but also the league's desire to bring conflicting sectors into a cohesive civil society institution.

In keeping with its progressive project, the League of Light actively cultivated an inclusive and dynamic group culture. The league maintained an

optimistic and proactive tone calling for its members to show “faith and fervency” to achieve their goals: “Fervency towards our work and faith in a future better than the present.”⁶⁷ Such progressive, future-minded rhetoric was coupled with statements of inclusion and cooperation: “This effort is a collective one, not belonging to any party and must be a collective one, not belonging to any party, faction, or religion.”⁶⁸ Its founders intended the league to be a nonpartisan, nonreligious social organization, and encouraged mass participation. The reduced membership fees for students and workers, for example, were designed to facilitate membership of all classes and ages. While the exact number of league members remains unclear, newspaper and archival evidence suggest that membership numbered in the low thousands. As mentioned previously, recruitment drives in 1937 yielded over four-thousand members, although secret police reports in 1940 placed league membership around three-thousand.⁶⁹

In particular, the league made the recruitment of female members a high priority. Before the league received official permission, women responded enthusiastically to its call for reform; women of different ages and occupations wrote opinion letters supporting the league, donated money, or promised to join. Phạm Văn Bình, treasurer of the Provisional Committee, commented that the female response “is something worth celebrating—women have now enthusiastically turned to charitable social works.”⁷⁰ The league prominently featured female members at its first meeting at the Hà Nội opera house, in a speech given by a Miss Thanh Quý titled, “Women and the League.”⁷¹ The fact that league grouped women’s issues with other crucial topics, such as social aims and architecture, underscores the importance placed on the participation of women. It is no surprise that, in its statutes, the league established a committee on women’s issues as one of six main committees. The head of the Organization and Festival Committee was Trịnh Thục Oanh, the well-known headmistress of a francophone school in Hà Nội and archetypal “modern woman.”⁷²

Reflecting this new spirit of egalitarianism and inclusion, members of the League of Light followed the seemingly radical practice of foregoing all pronouns that denote hierarchical status or professional title (such as *ông* [Mr.], *bà* [Mrs.], *cô* [Ms.], *bác sĩ* [Doctor]). Instead, the members referred to one another by the respectful but equal pronouns of “older brother” [*anh*]

and “older sister” [*chị*], regardless of age, education, class or social standing.⁷³ This practice often produced moments of dissonance. In her memoirs, the poet Anh Thơ described such an occasion, which took place when she interviewed Nhất Linh’s wife at home:

There was a sound of a car horn, then a very elegant automobile parked in front of the house. A throng of young women, wearing Lemur tunics in vivid colors that made them look like fluttering butterflies, spilled into the house, calling loudly: “Older brother Nhất Linh, let’s go.” Nhất Linh’s wife looked at them disdainfully, and said, still smiling, “He left early this morning. If you go to the League of Light development site, you will find him there.” The girls replied, “Really? Thank you, bác [elder aunt]!” They called the husband “older brother,” but referred to his wife as “elder aunt?”⁷⁴

Although Anh Thơ used this episode to describe the life of an author’s wife, the incident reveals much about the particular culture within the League of Light. While the young women shared a seemingly casual and egalitarian relationship with other league members, they still observed traditional forms of address with outsiders.

The league’s statutes outlined strict procedures of governance to prevent mismanagement, especially in regard to finances. The treasurer had to submit monthly and yearly reports on the league’s finances, which had to be independently verified and published in *Ngày Nay*, *La Patrie Annamite*, and other newspapers. Once a year, the General Assembly convened in the last trimester. There, members listened to reports of the league’s accomplishments and finances, elected officers, and voted on new projects. The league’s founders hoped that such a process would contribute to building an informed trust between the directors and subscribers by establishing transparency and accountability.

The league’s organizational form suggests that the league encouraged cooperation, value consensus and collective action among its members. As described in scholarship on Europe and North America, urban voluntary associations can form the origins of modern civil society.⁷⁵ The league’s statutes show that, although the league’s administration was rather top-heavy and centralized, it aimed for maximum transparency and inclusiveness. Through the ritualized and symbolic elements of public culture, civic celebrations, and meetings, the league’s organizational form sought to cement collective

identities. The league's organizational structure encouraged the habits of associationism and can be seen as an expression of burgeoning democracy. Given the Self-strength Literary Group's fervent belief in French republican values, the league's organizational form served as a means of developing the values of enlightened citizenship in its members.

Ánh Sáng Architecture: Guidelines and Practice

As previously described, the league's founder Nhất Linh and its architects Nguyễn Văn Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp all studied at the Indochinese Fine Arts University, where they were influenced by early twentieth century European progressive ideas of positive environmentalism. This influence is most clear in the design of the league's housing developments. An examination of the blueprints of various *Ánh Sáng* projects reveals the league's philosophy of the built environment: unsanitary conditions can be controlled and reduced through the rational planning of space and the distribution and separation of everyday activities throughout the home.

In his speech at the Hà Nội Opera House in August 1936, architect Hoàng Như Tiếp outlined the guidelines of "*Ánh Sáng*" architecture.⁷⁶ He asserted that architecture should not serve only the wealthy, but also the poor. He rebutted the idea that architecture was merely a superficial practice used for ornamental and stylistic purposes, and argued instead that it represented "the scientific placement of living space, the application of sanitary conditions, and the pursuit of aesthetics." What characteristics, then, must a League of Light house have? What should it look like? Hoàng Như Tiếp answered: "To be an *Ánh Sáng* House, the first materials are light, sky, trees, cool breezes, and clean air." As he pointed out, such resources are free and they should be put to maximum use. However, the architect warned that the overuse of these natural resources could possibly lead to disease (perhaps through overheating or cold drafts); thus it was most important to regulate and control them. In addition to being sanitary, League of Light houses must also be economic; Hoàng Như Tiếp assured his audience that "*Ánh Sáng* houses will never be more expensive than current houses." To keep costs down, houses would use only readily available materials such as bamboo, and focus on scientific organization of living spaces. The league later intended to build "League of Light developments," which would serve

as models of community sanitation and planning. These developments would include communal laundry areas, water pipes and wells, as well as other community services such as a reading room, a first aid clinic, and a playground. As Hoàng Như Tiếp's speech makes clear, the League of Light house was not defined by a particular design or feature, but by a set of guidelines: 1) the control and utilization of natural climate to maximize sanitary living conditions; 2) the utilization of widely available materials to keep costs at a minimum; and 3) faith in the scientific placement of living space.⁷⁷ Such guidelines suggest that the league's architects were aware of the disciplinary and regulatory implications of their project.

How did these guidelines translate into practice? An examination of the League of Light's only settlement will illuminate how Nguyễn Văn Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp applied their theories. In July 1938, the league began construction of a housing development in Phúc Xá, a commune right outside of Hà Nội. The league named the settlement "Le Cité Madame Jules Brévié" [Madame Jules Brévié Village] after the league's benefactress and wife of the Popular Front Governor General. Phúc Xá, located on the banks of the Red River, was particularly susceptible to annual flooding, and posed a unique challenge for Nguyễn Văn Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp. The league chose the site for four reasons: 1) A number of its residents were left homeless after a recent fire. 2) The land already had schools, medical clinics, and wide roads. 3) The site's proximity to Hà Nội allowed faster and easier training of peasants in new ways of living, and 4) Phúc Xá's land was available immediately (the league's intended second project in Voi Phục was still awaiting official permission). In response to the problem of flooding, the league's solution was to anticipate the seasonal rise in water: build the foundation one meter high, and construct a wall about a half-meter tall on top of it. The architects estimated that one and a half meters would be enough to protect against most seasonal floods.

At the time of planning, the development at Phúc Xá was divided into four lots, each measuring about thirty-by-forty meters, and demarcated by roads all around. One lot was divided into six smaller single-family units; three lots contained four larger houses for two families each. With an estimated five to seven people per family, the entire development would have housed around thirty families, or 150 to 210 people.⁷⁸ As the league reported

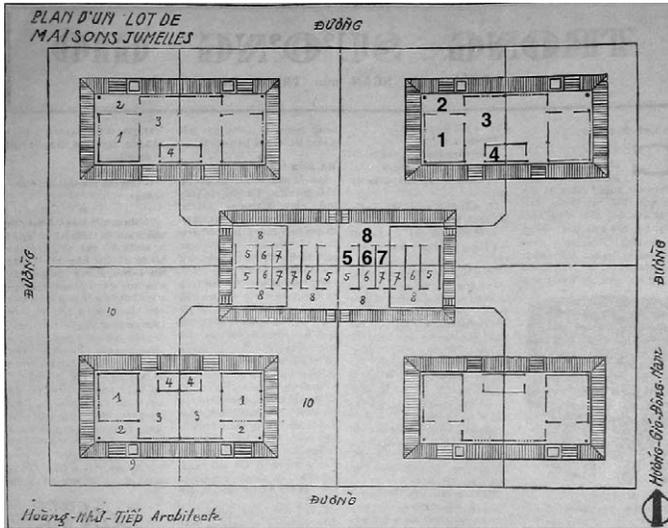


FIGURE 2: Blueprints for the league's development in Phúc Xá, in *Ngày Nay* no. 107; April 24, 1938, p. 18–19.

in 1941, the site itself actually comprised thirty-four houses: thirty-three were occupied by families and one was used as an assembly house and medical clinic.⁷⁹ The picture below [Figure 2] depicts one of the larger lots for eight families:

Each family had two living spaces (marked 1 and 3). A storage space for provisions (marked 4) was placed far back in the house. Each entrance faced southeast to best receive cool breezes and included a small veranda or patio that sheltered the interior from the sun. Shrubs or trees grown in the built-in planter by the side of the entrance would further shade the house and provide decorative greenery. Each house had its own kitchen, bathing room and outhouse (marked 5, 6, and 7 respectively), all kept separate from the main living spaces and grouped together for economy, sanitation, and fire safety. The floor spaces in front of the kitchens (marked 8) were paved or tiled, which provided fire protection and allowed kitchen activities to be spread out. For the sake of sanitation, the outhouse was placed downwind, with the bathroom between it and the kitchen.⁸⁰

An examination of the Phúc Xá development reveals how the architects applied the League of Light building guidelines. The League's belief in the

scientific organization of living space can be seen in the placement of the outhouse and patio, where natural climate was used to create sanitary living conditions. The houses were built from widely available materials: bamboo, thatch, and a little wood for the doorframes. Only the kitchen was built of brick to provide greater fire protection. This design cost little to build; the league spent 3,837.35 piastres to build the entire development, or 112.86 piastres per house. In line with its belief to educate the peasantry, the league intended Le Cité Madame Jules Brévié to not only be a housing development, but an entire master-planned rural community. Phúc Xá boasted a clinic where a league doctor provided medical care free of charge. An appointed director managed the day-to-day operations and maintenance of the development. One of the houses was used as a community meeting house and, as of 1941, the construction of a children's school was underway.⁸¹

During its four-year existence, the League of Light managed to build one housing development in Phúc Xá, on the banks of the Red River. In conjunction with its league branches in Sơn Tây and Hải Phòng, the league built a number of model homes in Bát Bạt and Kiến An, as well as a model village in Bắc Giang.⁸² Plans were underway for a second development in Voi Phục, where the league had acquired thirteen acres of land and drawn up a budget of 20,000 piastres.⁸³ Unfortunately, it is unclear whether this development was ever built. Scholars such as Paul Rabinow and Gwendolyn Wright have described French urban planning as a top-down phenomenon in which the colonies served as laboratories for modern methods of governance. Such a description suggests that French technocratic “scientists” were conducting social and governmental experiments on mostly passive and compliant colonized populations. However, as the League of Light's own architectural guidelines illustrate, Vietnamese were conducting experiments of their own, in the service of their own society.

The *Ánh Sáng* Fair: Beginning of the End

In January 1939, the league excitedly announced that it would host a fundraising fair on March 1–5, touting it as an “unprecedented event that will rouse and excite Hà Nội .” To inaugurate the fair, the Thê Lũ theater troupe performed a stage adaptation of Nhất Linh's *Đoạn Tuyệt* on the nights of March

1–2. The fair itself began on Friday, March 3 at the Parc Autos and included various carnival games, food and activities. In a separate event for members of Hà Nội's high society, the league hosted a garden party and ball at the mansion of the Resident Superior on the following evening. At Paul Bert Park, a float parade organized by Vũ Đình Hoè capped off the festivities on the last day.⁸⁴

At the Ánh Sáng Fair, the league announced its largest fundraising campaign to date, a raffle event called the *Tombola Ánh Sáng* [Light Lottery]. Tickets cost 0.30 piastres and entitled the holder a chance of winning the grand prize—a brick house worth 3,000 piastres within the Hà Nội city limits. According to the league, the house boasted three bedrooms, front and back yards, a kitchen, bathroom, and toilet. Designed by Nguyễn Văn Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp, the house had yet to be built, as the league was still negotiating with Mayor Virgitti for the land. The league enticed ticket buyers with fantasies of home ownership: “Everyone’s dream is to be the owner of a house in Hà Nội. A house that belongs only to you. The sooner you move in, the sooner you can raise your children there in peace, with no one bothering you.”⁸⁵ The league estimated that the thirty-thousand printed tickets would net about nine-thousand piastres. The house itself would cost three-thousand to build, the land and materials one-thousand, resulting in a profit of five-thousand piastres. With this sum, the league planned to build fifty *Ánh Sáng* houses for fifty poor families. Hopeful patrons were directed to purchase tickets at the *Ánh Sáng* headquarters on 28 Rue Richaud (now Phan Đình Phùng Street) or at various pharmacies around the city.⁸⁶

Unfortunately, not all members of Hà Nội's society were enchanted with the fair or the raffle. Immediately after the fair, what began as a series of snide comments from a rival journal snowballed into a barrage of criticism that ultimately damaged the league's reputation. The writers at *Vịt Đực* [The Drake], a newspaper famous for its vitriolic attacks on its rivals and high-profile members of Hà Nội society, commented that the league was more of a business than a charity. *Vịt Đực* accused the league of venal motives and of taking advantage of gambling addicts through the *Tombola Ánh Sáng*. The paper suggested that the league's purpose was to build houses for rental, which made it “not much different than a land developer.”⁸⁷ *Vịt Đực* accused the league of unabashedly using shame tactics: “The league uses them to avoid the arrows of public opinion. They use the name of charity to sell raffle

tickets at an expensive price.”⁸⁸ The paper complained that no one dared to criticize the League of Light because no one wanted to look unsympathetic to the poor, and that the league’s charity status was only an excuse to turn a profit. *Vật Đực* warned the league to stop using the guise of charity to swindle people, and advised it to “become like the Light,” because “we haven’t seen any light, only darkness.”⁸⁹ In what can be seen as a public relations mistake, the League of Light took the moral high road and ignored the accusations.

Emboldened by the league’s lack of response, the paper continued its barrage of attacks. It referred to two cases in which the league squandered its money. First, *Vật Đực* attacked Thế Lữ for receiving 350 piastres for two performances at the *Ánh Sáng* Fair, suggesting nepotism among the members of the Self-strength Literary Group.⁹⁰ Second, the paper repeated a rumor that while on official business in Hải Phòng, a number of members went on holiday to Đồ Sơn, then claimed the detour as a league expense.⁹¹ According to various accounts, these members misappropriated about one-hundred piastres. *Vật Đực* alleged that because of such rampant financial misspending, the league was suffering an internal crisis. It cited the departure of a number of high-profile members, including Trịnh Thục Oanh and Phùng Tất Đắc, as evidence.⁹² Tôn Thất Bình, one of the presidents of the league, supposedly called an emergency meeting to discuss the financial scandal.⁹³ The paper gleefully saw the defections as “an event worth celebrating since it shows that there are people of conscience among us.”⁹⁴

Still not directly addressing *Vật Đực*, the League of Light published a full itemization of the *Ánh Sáng* Fair’s expenses and revenues in *Ngày Nay* and *La Patrie Annamite*. For the entire fair, the league took in 6,958.31 and spent 5,189.54, making a profit of 1,768.77 piastres. The league explained that it was expensive to organize a large and visually spectacular fair and that most charity fairs barely made enough to cover costs. Profits tended to come from gambling or collections, and as the League of Light Fair had neither of these, the sum of 1,768.77 should be seen as a sizeable profit. The league concluded its report with a statement addressing the allegations: “We want to be clear: all these criticisms are ‘canards,’ completely made up and without any proof . . .”⁹⁵ The league acknowledged that organizing such a large event would naturally result in some minor mistakes, but it asserted that “we are

extremely clear and economical in regards to our finances.” The league maintained that the inspection committee was specifically designed to prevent embezzling or mispending. “Any member near or far,” the league announced, “can ask the administrative council to examine the ledgers. If you see or notice any discrepancy, please alert the league authorities.” Obliquely addressing *Vật Đực*, the league explained that “We do not want to answer a newspaper that isn’t open-minded to us, because we believe that one cannot reason with dishonest people . . . We will never be discouraged or frustrated by accusations made by those bent on publicly or secretly sabotaging our project.”⁹⁶

Unfounded or not, *Vật Đực*’s accusations and the uproar they caused took their toll on the League of Light. Shortly after the controversy died down, the league fell into rapid decline, and its numerous supporters began falling away. Although the league had often discussed starting its own journal or bulletin, it failed to materialize for lack of funding.⁹⁷ In light of the difficulty of sustaining a journal even as popular as *Ngày Nay* and the hardships faced by *Vật Đực*, a League of Light journal would almost surely not have been economically viable. The league’s last supporters were *Ngày Nay* and *La Patrie Annamite*, who continued publishing its announcements, but not much more than that. By June 1940, even *Ngày Nay* stopped publicizing the league.⁹⁸

There were signs that the league was waning even before the *Ánh Sáng* Fair controversy. On February 5, 1939, the league held another Day of Light recruitment drive, which pulled in 598.80 piastres, less than half the 1,221.09 of the first.⁹⁹ After *Vật Đực*’s attacks, the league seemed to not be able to recover from the bad publicity. The widely promoted *Tombola Ánh Sáng* had to postpone the date of its drawing, the first time due to the low number of ticket sales, and the second without explanation. The raffle was finally held on March 10, 1940, a year after its announcement, netting the league 4,596.54 piastres after expenses. The brick house at 154 Duvillier Street was not given away as a prize, but was rented at the rate of 20 piastres a month.¹⁰⁰ In the wake of all the fanfare, the *Tombola Ánh Sáng* ended up being an over-hyped lottery.

The last trace of the League of Light’s existence was a communiqué to the Resident Superior dated January 26, 1941. In it, the league outlined its past

achievements and activities since its founding. Among its accomplishments, the league listed the amounts of money given in natural disaster aid, the *Ánh Sáng* Fair, and its Phúc Xá development. Ironically, the report also listed the league's future plans: it still harbored hopes of building the second development in Voi Phục, which it intended on executing "as soon as the financial situation will allow."¹⁰¹ The very last statement in the report hinted at the league's descent into insignificance: "Currently, the league continues to provide free blueprints of clean housing to individuals and villages who request them."¹⁰²

Epilogue and Conclusion

The demise of the League of Light in 1939 coincided with rapid political developments on two fronts. In Asia, the ongoing second Sino-Japanese war and the beginning of World War II threatened to engulf Tonkin. As the entry point of Western aid and arms to the Chinese, northern Vietnam saw its position become increasingly precarious as the Japanese sought to stem the flow of supplies in the area. In Europe, the failure of appeasement, German occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the signing of various protection treaties brought the entire continent to the brink of war. The Vietnamese newspapers at the time, including *Ngày Nay*, commented on the unfolding events in Europe with fascination. By May of 1939, even architects Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp seemed to neglect the League of Light, penning articles for *Ngày Nay* about bombs and how to build an underground bunker. They wrote, "The current world situation right now is very tense. We should not be afraid of scaring others and not discuss the ways to protect ourselves in case of devastating attacks. We mention it so that people can prepare for it now, rather than when it is too late."¹⁰³ In such a tense political climate, it is no wonder that social reform was relegated to a secondary priority.

Nhất Linh certainly felt that way. Perhaps the most immediate factor that led to the league's abrupt demise was the sudden departure of its founder and co-president. Although a number of sources disagree about exactly when Nhất Linh left the league, they all agree that he abandoned writing and social reform for political activism. One source, Nhất Thịnh's biography of Nhất Linh, argued that he left writing for political activity on March 25,

1939. Within the League of Light's timeline, this departure occurred three weeks after the *Ánh Sáng* Fair and immediately after *Vật Đực* launched its attacks on the league. Memoirs written by family members suggest that the League of Light was a front for Nhất Linh's clandestine political activities. As his sister Nguyễn Thị Thế wrote in her memoirs,

After establishing the *Ánh Sáng* development in Phúc Xá on the banks of the river, Tam would often travel to Đồ Sơn, Thanh Hóa, Vinh Yên, Thái Bình. Sometimes he went to the family home at Cẩm Giàng, saying he needed peace to write. No one had suspected that he was founding a secret anti-French political party.¹⁰⁴

Other sources corroborate Nguyễn Thị Thế's description. Nhất Linh's youngest sibling, Nguyễn Tường Bách, wrote that his brother had founded the Đại Việt Dân Chính Party in 1938–1939. Francois Guillemot places the founding of the party in 1938, while Ralph Smith puts the founding date later, in 1940–1941. Despite the discrepancies, all these dates corroborate the claim that Nhất Linh was shifting his focus from social reform to political agitation while serving as the League of Light's president. This would suggest that the league served in a similar capacity as the later Việt Minh national salvation associations. The waning interest of its visionary founder, along with the financial controversy and tense political climate, would have dealt a blow to the league from which it could not recover.

Despite its brief history, the League of Light can be seen as a significant early attempt to establish civil society institutions in Vietnam. It stepped in and supplied social services to the populace that the colonial state could not (or would not) provide. The league affirmed the desire and potential of Vietnamese to define their own social and political goals and develop relatively autonomous terms of engagement with the state in pursuing them. The League of Light encouraged the Western-educated urban intelligentsia to intermingle and cooperate with other sectors of Vietnamese society. The institutional form of the league translated practices of procedural democratic politics to the everyday administration of an organization. The League of Light sought to educate the peasantry by applying science and rationality to the space in which they lived. For Nhất Linh and other league founders, the goal of the league was not just to help the impoverished, but to carve out an

inclusive space where Vietnamese could marshal collective action in achieving their desired political and social goals. The League of Light represented a grassroots movement mobilized by Vietnamese to construct a new social order—inclusive, internally spontaneous, progressive, self-regulating and compassionate.

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ABSTRACT

In 1937, leading members of the Self-Strength Literary Group [Tự Lực Văn Đoàn], together with a number of Hà Nội’s Western-educated architects and intellectuals, founded the League of Light [Hội Ánh Sáng or Đoàn Ánh Sáng] to combat unsanitary housing. This study traces the league’s brief history, from its inception in December 1936 to its gradual demise sometime in the early 1940s. It argues that the leaders of the League of Light were interested in more than simply improving the living conditions of impoverished Vietnamese; they aspired to carve out a pluralistic public space for civic collective action, where one had barely existed before. For the peasant masses, the league wanted to change how they thought and behaved by manipulating the physical space in which they lived. For educated urban elites, their participation in the organization served to generate modern ideas of community, civic duty, and social responsibility. Through the restructuring and regulation of everyday life, the league’s founders aspired to shape social order through the establishment of a Vietnamese civil society.

KEY WORDS: *Civil Society, Public Housing, Associationism, Philanthropy, Self-strength Literary Group, Architecture*

Notes

1. Announcement in *Ngày Nay* [*These Days*] (December 13, 1936), 537–539.
2. Alexander Woodside, Development of Social Organizations in Vietnamese Cities in the Late Colonial Period, *Pacific Affairs*, XLIV, no. 1 (Spring 1971), 39–64.
3. Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 158.
4. Van Nguyen-Marshall, “Poverty, Gender and Nation in Modern Vietnamese Literature during the French Colonial Period (1930s–1940s), in Farid Alatas, Srilata Ravi, Mario Rutten, and Beng-Lan Goh, eds. *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia* (Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies, 2004), 222.
5. Nguyễn Trác and Đái Xuân Ninh, *Về Tự lực văn đoàn* [*About the Self-strength Literary Group*] (HCMC: TP. Hồ Chí Minh, 1989), 95.
6. Hà Minh Đức, “Khảo luận về Tự Lực Văn Đoàn” [Treatise on the Self-strength Literary Group], *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn: Trào Lưu, Tác Giả* [The Self-strength Literary Group: the Movement and its Authors] (Hà Nội: Giáo Dục, 2007), 198.
7. Caroline Herbelin, “Des Habitations à Bon Marché au Việt Nam. La question du logement social en situation coloniale” [Public housing projects in Vietnam: The question of social housing in a colonial situation], *Moussons*, 2009, <http://moussons.revues.org/883> (accessed June 17, 2016).
8. Ernest Gellner. *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*. (New York, NY, USA: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1994); Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: Free Press, 1992); John K. Glenn, *Framing Democracy: Civil Society and Civic Movements In Eastern Europe* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001); Marc Morjé Howard. *The Weakness of Civil Society In Post-Communist Europe*. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
9. For Africa, see John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff. *Civil Society and the Political Imagination In Africa: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). For scholarship on the Indian subcontinent, see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), and Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, *Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
10. Anthony Sutcliffe discusses urban planning as part of a larger international progressive reform movement in *Towards the Planned City: Germany, Britain,*

- the United States, and France, 1780–1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981). See Chapter 6: Planning as an International Movement, 163–202.
11. Scholarship on housing reform during this period is particularly rich. See Brian Ladd, *Urban Planning and Civic Order in Germany, 1860–1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Nicholas Bullock and James Read, *The Movement for Housing Reform in Germany and France, 1840–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); and Nancy Stieber, *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam: Reconfiguring Urban Order and Identity, 1900–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City*.
 12. Stieber, 5.
 13. Ibid.
 14. Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 221. Boyer placed the ideological roots of “positive environment” with four American thinkers: Luther Lee Bernard, Charles Cooley, Edward Ross, and Simon Patten. However, this description seems too provincial in scope; surely the simultaneous occurrence of comparable reform movements in Europe and America at the turn of the century suggests some level of transatlantic cultural cross-pollination. For example, Daniel Rodgers described the European travels and influences of American progressive reformers in his book *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. In addition, Boyer's account of “positive environmentalism” should not be confused with the twenty-first century incarnation emerging from the context of global warming.
 15. Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 204.
 16. Ibid., 205
 17. Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 49–50. Catherine Noppe and Jean-François Hubert, *Art of Vietnam* (New York: Parkstone, 2003), 183.
 18. Wright, *The Politics of Design*, 217.
 19. Ibid., 215.
 20. William Stewart Logan, *Hà Nội, Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 126.
 21. Caroline Herbelin, “Les architectes de l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine et la recherche d'une architecture moderne à caractère national” [The Architects of the Indochina School of Fine Arts and the Search of a Modern Architecture with National Character], Réseau-Asie, 2007, http://www.reseau-asie.com/cgi-bin/prog/gateway.cgi?langue=fr&password=&email=&dir=myfile_colloque&type=jhg54gfd98gfd4fgd4gfdg&id=432&telecharge_now=1&file=a11_caroline_herbelin.pdf (Accessed 22 Feb 2012), 2.

22. According to Gareth Porter, Nguyễn Tường Tam had enjoyed a close relationship with his French professor at the School of Fine Arts. “Imperialism and Social Structure in Twentieth Century Vietnam” (PhD dissertation, Cornell University, 1978), 90.
23. Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường and his reform of women’s fashion is discussed in greater detail in Martina Thucnhi Nguyen, “Wearing Modernity: Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường, Fashion, and the “Origins” of the Vietnamese National Costume,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 76–128.
24. Nhất Linh, “Dân quê muốn gì? [What Does the Peasantry Want?]” *Phong Hóa*, (June 2, 1933), 1.
25. Nhị Linh “Các trình độ học thức [Various Levels of Learning]” *Phong Hóa* (August 4, 1933), 1.
26. Ibid.
27. Nhất Linh, “Dân quê muốn gì?” *Phong Hóa* (May 26, 1933), 1, and (June 2, 1933), 1.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Announcement in *Ngày Nay* (December 13, 1936), 537–539.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. “Ánh Sáng trong mộng [Light in a Dream],” *Tân Việt Nam* (September 11, 1937), 1, 6.
38. Ibid.
39. “Từ báo Phong Hóa đến Hội Ánh Sáng: hay là ‘Gỡ mặt nạ một bọn hoạt đầu’ [From Phong Hóa to the League of Light, or, ‘Stripping the Masks of Opportunists]” *Ích Hữu*, (March 23, 1938), 2–3.
40. Việt Thi, “Từ nụ cười đến giọt nước mắt [From Smiles to Tears],” *Bắc Hà*, (February 26, 1938), 6.
41. Phạm Văn Bình, “Ánh Sáng: Một giờ với Bác Sĩ Hermant,” [The League of Light: An Hour with Dr. Hermant], *Ngày Nay* (June 6, 1937), 409.
42. “Ánh Sáng: Cùng các anh đoàn trưởng và anh em hướng đạo sinh” [The League of Light: With the Scouts and their Leaders] *Ngày Nay* (July 25, 1937), 577.
43. *Ngày Nay* (June 6, 1937), 409; and *Ngày Nay* (June 13, 1937), 433.
44. Even today, the Red River Delta (which envelops Hà Nội) remains one of the most densely populated areas in the world.
45. Ibid.

46. Michael Vann, "White City on the Red River: Race, Power, and Culture in French Colonial Hà Nội, 1872–1954" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999), 106.
47. Letter from Gallois-Montbrun, Resident Superior of Hà Đông, to Yves Châtel, Resident Superior of Tonkin, dated April 11, 1938, Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, Nouveau Fonds 04872, Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France.
48. Dossier on the League of Light, Mairie de Hà Nội, D61.2650, Vietnam National Archives 1 (VNA-1), Hà Nội, 38–46; Letter from Henri Virgitti, Mayor of Hà Nội, to the President of the League of Light, dated January 23, 1939, Mairie de Hà Nội, D61.2650, Vietnam National Archives 1 (VNA-1), Hà Nội, 59.
49. Decision no. 4581 by the Resident Superior of Tonkin, October 14, 1937, Mairie de Hà Nội, 2858, VNA-1, Hà Nội.
50. "Ligue de Anh Sang: Projet de Statuts" [The League of Light: Draft Statutes], Résident Supérieure du Tonkin, D62.79250, VNA-1, Hà Nội, 62–75.
51. "Tùng tuần lễ một" [One week at a time], *Ngày Nay* (August 29, 1937), 688.
52. "Kỷ yếu Ánh Sáng" [League of Light Annual Report], *Ngày Nay* (May 29, 1938), 14.
53. "Kết quả một ngày Ánh Sáng ở Hà Nội" [Results of the Day of Light in Hà Nội], *Ngày Nay* (December 19, 1937), 6–7.
54. "Kỷ yếu Ánh Sáng" *Ngày Nay* (April 24, 1938), 19.
55. "Tờ Trình của Ban Kiểm Sát Đoàn Ánh Sáng" [Report of the Examination Committee of the League of Light], Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, D62.79250, VNA-1, Hà Nội, 55–58.
56. Dossier on the League of Light.
57. Letter from Andre Berjoan, Resident of Kiến An, to Yves Châtel, Resident Superior of Tonkin, dated January 13, 1938, Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, Nouveau Fonds 04872, Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France.
58. Letter from Yves Châtel, Resident Superior of Tonkin, to the President of the League of Light, dated February 9, 1939, Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, Nouveau Fonds 04872, Archives Nationales d'Outre Mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, France.
59. "Une interessante mise au point" [An interesting development], *L'Avenir du Tonkin* (June 26, 1939), 1.
60. R.J. Morris, "Clubs, Societies, and Associations" in F. M. L. Thompson, ed., *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 412.
61. Morris, 413.

62. “Ligue de Anh Sang: Projet de Statuts.”
63. Morris, 413.
64. Vũ Đình Hoè, *Hồi ký Vũ Đình Hoè* ([Hà Nội]: Văn hóa thông tin, 1994), IV-V.
65. “Note confidentielle no. 2724, 12 Mar 1935,” Mairie de Hà Nội, D611.2663, VNA-1, Hà Nội, 102.
66. Another member of the administrative council was engineer Nguyễn Duy Thanh, who would later serve as DRV Director General of Public Works and Minister of Planning and Reconstruction.
67. Announcement in *Ngày Nay* (December 13, 1936), 537–539.
68. Ibid.
69. Letter from the Surété to the Commisariat General, dated 9 August 1940, Mairie de Hà Nội D62.2858, VNA-1, Hà Nội.
70. “Ánh Sáng: Kỳ hội họp công khai Ánh Sáng sẽ có vào cuối tháng Juillet” [Official Meeting of the League of Light will be held at the end of July], *Ngày Nay* (July 18, 1937), 553.
71. “Công cuộc xã hội: đường lối đưa chị em đến sự giải phóng” [Social works: Bringing our sisters to independence], *Ngày Nay* (January 30, 1938), 6–7.
72. *Ngày Nay* (December 12, 1937), 6. Trịnh Thục Oanh was a prominent example of the emboldened “modern woman.” She was one of the first prominent Hà Nội figures to champion Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường’s tunic, and was interviewed about it in *Ngày Nay* in 1936. In 1939, she co-wrote a novel with Marguerite Triare, titled *En s’ecartant des ancetres* [*Departing from the Ancestors*], often cited by francophone scholars as the first Vietnamese novel written by a woman. Her embrace of progressive ideas and friendship with powerful officials made her widely reviled by her male counterparts, who saw her behavior as immoral and unsightly. Vũ Bằng, in his memoirs *Bốn mươi năm nói láo* [Forty Years of Lying], wrote that Trịnh Thục Oanh was “famous at one time for setting a bad example for young female students,” and made a point of publicly humiliating her in the journal *Vịt Đục* [*The Drake*]. Vũ Bằng, *Bốn mươi năm nói láo* (Hà Nội: Văn hóa thông tin, 1993), 130.
73. “Sau cuộc chợ phiên Ánh Sáng” [After the League of Light Fair], *Vịt Đục* (March 15, 1939), 1 and 2.
74. Anh Thơ, *Từ bến Sông Thương; Tiếng chim tu hú; Bên dòng chia cắt: hồi ký văn học* [*From the Banks of the Thương River; The Sound of the Cuckoo; Along the Fault Lines; Literary Memoirs*] (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Phụ nữ, 2002), 189–190.
75. Studies include: Graeme Morton, R. J. Morris, and B. M. A. de Vries, eds. *Civil Society, Associations, and Urban Places: Class, Nation, and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006); Don E. Eberly and Ryan Streeter, eds. *The Soul of Civil Society: Voluntary Associations*

- and the Public Value of Moral Habits*. (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2002); and Nancy Gina Bermeo and Philip G. Nord, eds. *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).
76. The collaboration between the Self-strength Literary Group, Nguyễn Cao Luyện and Hoàng Như Tiếp did not begin with the League of Light—the architects had honed their designs and ideas in the Group’s papers for years. Nguyễn Cao Luyện made his debut in *Phong Hóa* in July of 1934. The paper announced its collaboration with the architect, who the paper described as sharing similar “social values” [chí hướng xã hội]. *Phong Hóa* would go on to publish five designs by Nguyễn Cao Luyện (later joined by Hoàng Như Tiếp) between October 1934 and January 1936. These early housing designs can be seen as the first formulations of the “Ánh Sáng” style house.
 77. Hoàng Như Tiếp “Kiến trúc Ánh Sáng” [Architecture of the League of Light], *Ngày Nay* (September 19, 1937), 762.
 78. Hoàng Như Tiếp, “Trại Ánh Sáng Phúc Xá” [League of Light Development in Phúc Xá],
 79. “Notice Sommaire sur l’activité de la Ligue “Anh Sang” depuis sa fondation” [Summary Notice on the activities of the League of Light since its founding], Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, D62.79250, VNA-1, Hà Nội, 88–90.
 80. Hoàng Như Tiếp, “Trại Ánh Sáng Phúc Xá.”
 81. “Notice Sommaire sur l’activité de la Ligue “Anh Sang” depuis sa fondation”
 82. “Kỷ yếu Ánh Sáng,” *Ngày Nay* (March 6, 1938), 14; *Ngày Nay*, (February 27, 1938), 14 and 19.
 83. “Đoàn Ánh Sáng, 1939–1940” [The League of Light, 1939–1940], *Nước Nam* (January 21, 1939), 3.
 84. Advertisement for the League of Light Fair, *Ngày Nay* (February 25, 1939), 18; *Ngày Nay* (January 28, 1939), 3.
 85. Flyer for the League of Light Raffle, Mairie de Hà Nội, D62.2858, VNA-1, Hà Nội, 75.
 86. Ibid.
 87. “Đừng lợi dụng việc nghĩa nữa” [Stop exploiting charitable works], *Vật Đực* (March 15, 1939), 1–2.
 88. “Sau cuộc chợ phiên Ánh Sáng” *Vật Đực* (March 15, 1939), 1–2.
 89. Ibid.
 90. “Có hay không? Việc Ông Con Khi định đòi quyền xếp cảnh 350 đồng” [Yes or no? Mr. Ape Man plans to demand 350 piastres to stage a play], *Vật Đực* (March 15, 1939), 1.

91. “Ánh Sáng! Đề mà soi vào óc tối” [Light! To shine into dark minds], *Vật Đục* (24 May 1939), 1–2; “Ánh Sáng lục đục” [Murky Light], *Vật Đục* (May 24, 1939), 1 and 4; and *Nước Nam* (May 27, 1939), 2.
92. “Tiếp theo . . . và chưa hết” [Next . . . and yet], *Vật Đục* (March 26, 1939), 3.
93. “Hội Ánh Sáng lục đục” [The Murky League of Light], *Vật Đục* (May 31, 1939), 4.
94. “Ánh Sáng! Đề mà soi vào óc tối,” “Ánh Sáng lục đục.”
95. “Kết quả chợ phiên Ánh Sáng,” [Results of the Ánh Sáng Fair], *Ngày Nay* (April 29, 1939), 14 and 22.
96. *Ibid.* The controversy surrounding *Vật Đục*’s accusations suggests that the paper’s attacks had been disingenuous. Instead, they could be read as reflections of the papers’ respective financial situations or the result of petty intellectual rivalries. For example, criticism from *Vật Đục* seemed to focus specifically on Thế Lữ rather than the League of Light. Even before its attacks on the League, the writers at *Vật Đục* were locked in an ongoing feud with Thế Lữ, often denigrating the poet and actor as “Mr. Ape Man [*Ông con khỉ*].” Sources suggest that the paper’s attacks were made out of desperation, as the paper was in its death throes. As *Vật Đục* writer Vũ Bằng described in his memoirs *Bốn Mươi Năm Nói Láo [40 Years of Lying]*, the paper struggled almost from the very beginning. Although intended to be an organ for highbrow ironic humor, *Vật Đục* quickly became famous for its vicious and underhanded attacks and sensationalist stories. A little over a month after the accusations against the League, *Vật Đục* closed down after 53 issues under the weight of libel lawsuits and looming bankruptcy.
97. “Đoàn Ánh Sáng và báo L’Avenir du Tonkin” [The League of Light and the Journal *Future of Tonkin*] *Ngày Nay* (August 5, 1939), 20.
98. The last Ánh Sáng item in *Ngày Nay* appeared on June 8, 1940.
99. “Kết quả ngày Ánh Sáng [Results of the Day of Light],” *Ngày Nay* (March 25, 1939), 21.
100. “Notice Sommaire sur l’activité de la Ligue “Anh Sang” depuis sa fondation [Summary Notice of the Activities of the League of Light Since its Founding],” Résident Supérieure de Tonkin, D62.79250, VNA-1, Hà Nội, 88–90.
101. *Ibid.*
102. *Ibid.*
103. Luyện Tiếp, “Những cách để tránh bom,” [How to avoid bombings] *Ngày Nay* (May 27, 1939), 21.
104. Nguyễn Thị Thế, *Hồi ký về gia đình Nguyễn Tường: Nhất Linh, Hoàng Đạo, Thạch Lam [Memoirs of the Nguyễn Tường Family: Nhất Linh, Hoàng Đạo, Thạch Lam]*, (Saigon: Sóng, 1974), 95.