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On Our Own Strength: The Self-Reliant Literary Group and Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Late Colonial Vietnam.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021. 278 pages. \$68.00 (hardcover), \$28.00 (paperback), \$24.99 (e-book).

The place of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn, or the Self-Reliant Literary Group, in historiography is paradoxical. A cornerstone of twentieth-century Vietnamese cultural history, this group has been much written about but in the end remains poorly known. The studies devoted to it are mostly centered on its literary contributions or dominated by Marxist historiography that depicts the group's members as petty bourgeois who collaborated with the colonial power or, at best, as apolitical writers. By considering its members as both aesthetic commentators and influential actors in Vietnamese political life of the 1930s, Martina Thucnhi Nguyen's book fills this gap. One of the great qualities of the book is that it considers the Self-Reliant Literary Group as a cohesive enterprise whose ideas were never separated from their material aspects. At the heart of the group's philosophy was the belief that concrete actions in all areas of life were inseparable from large-scale changes that would lead to the emergence of a Vietnamese nation.

The first part of the book is devoted to the years 1932–1936, when the Self-Reliant Literary Group developed the principles of social and cultural reform aimed at forming independent citizens. While the group is known to have pioneered the development of new Vietnamese literary genres, the founding of This Life Publishing House (chapter 1) not only launched the first Vietnamese paperbacks and created a literary collection for children, but it also developed an original cooperative economic model that allowed greater freedom and greater respect for authors. Humor, developed in many

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 17, Issue 4, pps. 134–136. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738.
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forms (irony, jokes, and cartoons), was a hallmark of the Self-Reliant Literary Group (chapter 2). *Phong hóa* and *Ngày nay*, the two newspapers that the group successively published, adopted a light tone to both seduce a large readership and evade colonial censors. More significantly, “humor was not merely the vehicle of the message, it *was* the message” (76). In other words, humor afforded critical distancing that the group agreed should be the quality of any future modern citizen.

Taking as a starting point the clothing creations of the designer Le Mur (alias for Nguyễn Cát Tường), chapter 3 analyzes the famous tunic considered to be the ancestor of the *áo dài* as an implementation of national cosmopolitanism, the concept at the heart of the Self-Reliant Literary Group’s philosophy. Positing the hybrid character of Vietnamese culture, the “new woman” had to, through her dress and body, embody the ideal of beauty rooted in global modernization, while also being localized. This position aroused among critics of the group the fear of a dilution of Vietnamese culture in the face of Western influences. It caused gender anxieties as well: the assertion of women’s individuality through clothing was seen as a threat to masculinity. The author demonstrates, however, that this liberation of women from the shackles of tradition by the Self-Reliant Literary Group remained a man’s affair, which imposed a new form of control over women and their appearance.

The second part of the book focuses on the group’s political activism from 1936 to 1941. Chapters 4 and 5 examine how the Self-Reliant Literary Group went from observer to actor in the political arena. Composed of convinced republicans who rejected any idea of a monarchy, the Self-Reliant Literary Group officially supported the SFIO (Section française de l’Internationale ouvrière) candidate in the Hà Nội City Council elections of 1938. The SFIO embodied both progressivism and moderation, which the Self-Reliant Literary Group believed would allow Vietnamese to learn democracy. If Hoàng Đạo, the group’s ideologist, held Marxist sympathies, his rejection of any idea of revolution distanced him from communism. But above all, the Self-Reliant Literary Group and the Communist Party fought over the issue of colonialism. The group believed that the people and the country were not ready for independence, hence its name and the idea that Vietnamese first had to “strengthen” themselves. Thanks to Nguyen’s

exceptionally meticulous exploration of the press, she is able to redraw in a more detailed way the political landscape of the time. She demonstrates the still limited influence of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and shows, on the contrary, the importance of moderate movements. This analysis, one of the most important contributions of the book, also reveals the inability of moderates to unite.

Moderation was not synonymous with wait-and-see, as the last chapter demonstrates. The final chapter describes the work of Ánh Sáng [the League of Light], a project led by Nhất Linh and several members of the Self-Reliant Literary Group. Ánh Sáng was created in 1937 and dedicated to the fight against unsanitary housing. Nguyen rightly emphasizes the importance of this group and its pioneering character: it was the first collective grassroots organization to bring together thousands of members from all political stripes. Presented by Nguyen as the culmination of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's political program, Ánh Sáng also shows, in my opinion, the limits of the group's political project. In fact, Ánh Sáng houses were constructed in Hà Nội. The archives hold records of complaints from residents evicted from the renovated neighborhood. The project did not build enough houses for the relocated inhabitants, and houses had to be awarded by lottery.

While these failures can in part be attributed to the French colonial power that authorized and supported this project, they also point to broader questions about the viability of the Self-Reliant Literary Group's political project. This book leaves no doubt that the members of the group took their political task seriously and drew up a truly comprehensive long-term plan for Vietnamese liberation. But what was the possible effectiveness of this plan? Essentialist and moralistic when talking about the poorer classes, how much was this group able to reach Vietnamese beyond the urban middle class? Such questions would have further situated the Self-Reliant Literary Group in the political landscape of the 1930s beyond Indochina and contributed to understanding why many moderate groups failed to lead the independence movements against colonial powers. Despite this minor remark, Nguyen's work provides an essential contribution to the history of modern Vietnam.

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