Ben Tran’s *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* is a fine analysis of some of the most controversial literary works written by a group of Hà Nội–based authors, set against the backdrop of the emergence of modernization in colonial Vietnam. These novelists were often viewed as holding opposing political ideologies: the romanticists of the Self-strength Literary Group [Tự Lực Văn Đoàn] such as Nhật Linh, Khái Hưng, and Thạch Lam on the one side, and the critical realist camp of Vũ Trọng Phụng, Tam Lang, and Nguyễn Công Hoan on the other. Tran shows how these male, French-educated Vietnamese intellectuals, while conflicted in their adoration and disdain for Western taste and ideals, transformed and gave rise to Vietnamese anticolonial literature. Tran extends Jacques Rancière’s theory of aesthetic modernity (*The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, by Jacques Rancière and Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum, 2014) into the Vietnamese context, arguing that in the case of Vietnam, prosaic representation embodies a blend of fictional realism and nonfictional reportage. In analyzing these works, their narrative modalities, and the language they employed, as well as by centering gender relations and sexuality dynamics as an impetus for societal transformation, Tran explores how Vietnamese aesthetic modernity emerged.

Tran sets the stage with the educational reform that took place in 1919, when the French called upon a new generation of Vietnamese elites to
abandon Vietnam’s thousand-year-old Chinese-modeled system of civil service examinations. The new generation of French-educated Vietnamese literati, the “post-mandarin,” a term aptly coined by Tran, would collaborate with the colonial government to help reform Vietnam’s educational system and guide the indigenous people toward modernization. This transitional moment took place when the Vietnamese romanized script, quốc ngữ, developed alongside the printing presses to increase readership, including Vietnamese women. As the post-mandarin authors navigated their European fields of knowledge, they depicted everyday colonial life and wrote about women. Through the way in which Vietnamese women were perceived in colonial society, including their desire to break with confining traditions and their views of their own sexuality, a fractured colonial administrative system was revealed.

The book is organized into five chapters, flanked by a well-organized introduction and a conclusion. In the first chapter, Tran looks at several works of reportage [phóng sự], including Tam Lang’s Tôi kéo xe [I Pull a Rickshaw] and Thạch Lam’s Hà Nội ban đêm [Hà Nội at Night], written under the pen name Việt Sinh. As a form of autoethnography, the writer of reportage is also a participant observer, who often narrates in the first-person voice. Tran asserts that not only did the post-mandarin author narrate, he also questioned his own identity, his masculinity, and his inadequacy as a modern man through his encounters with female sex workers. Tran is quite successful in demonstrating the physical limitations of the autoethnographer, forced to vacillate between being an insider and an outsider in his narrative, thus compromising his authoritative voice when he tries to document the women’s experiences: “[H]e cannot cross over into the European circles to which these women have access by way of their sexual relationships” (40).

In chapter 2, Tran turns to two of Vũ Trọng Phụng’s works, a reportage titled Làm dì [How to Be a Prostitute] and the novel Số đỏ [Dumb Luck]. Tran contends that it is Vũ Trọng Phụng’s ability to incorporate prosaic reportage into the novelistic form to create his own literary genre, the “reportage novel” (57) that blurs the boundary between nonfictional reportage and fictional realism, that characterizes the development of Vietnamese aesthetic modernity. Further, Tran demonstrates how the author employed
satire to underscore the realities of sexual violence in colonial Vietnam, which marks the turn of Vietnamese literature to the prosaic. Võ Trọng Phượng’s penchant for sexually explicit prose and his so-called “pornographic writing” were in fact his way of critiquing colonial modernity. The discussion of that author’s choice of prosaic subjects, characters often deemed wretched or marginalized, as “an act of political and social representation” (48) is much appreciated. Nonetheless, the book could have benefited from an exploration of Võ Trọng Phượng’s array of writings, including other reportage and short stories, to show how he fully used language and understood class and gender, especially in his treatment of the me tây (Vietnamese women who engaged in a relationship with a European or Westerner) characters as central figures of modernity, as Tran maintains.

In chapters 3 and 4, Tran shifts the focus to the Self-strength Literary Group, notably the writings of Nhật Linh and Khải Hùng. In analyzing Nhật Linh’s Đoạn tuyệt [Breaking Away] in chapter 3, Tran argues that the author applied a sociological approach to his novel as a tool to examine women’s social role, with the larger purpose of societal reform. Tran illustrates how Nhật Linh framed his female protagonist Loan to denounce the constraints that Confucian traditions had imposed on Vietnamese women and called upon the women to break away from the antiquated past. Tran further demonstrates how European modes of reflexive sociology were used in the novel as a vehicle of sociological critique that not only challenged the old but also evaluated the present and ushered the colonial society into the new.

In chapter 4, Tran turns to the sociolinguistic structure of the post-mandarin literary works to explore the incomplete process of transitioning to modernity. To illustrate his point, Tran focuses on the Vietnamese terms of address, especially the gender-neutral, first-person singular pronoun tôi in Khải Hùng’s novel Nứa chúng xuân [In the Midst of Spring]. As a non-kinship term of self-reference, “tôi” is regarded as modern and individualistic, and using this term signified a sociological shift from Vietnam’s collectivist toward individualism, often associated with Western ideals (87). However, unlike the French pronoun “je” or the English “I,” using the pronoun “tôi,” according to Tran, was still problematic for the female literary subjects due to Vietnam’s deeply ingrained Confucian social and cultural traditions, suggesting that Vietnamese men and women experienced modernity differently.
For example, throughout the novel, while the female protagonist Mai is able to manipulate various kinship terms to negotiate her social standing, she struggles to assert herself with the term “tôi” when dealing with an older male character, Mr. Thanh (98). The discussion of the terms of personal reference is fascinating, but the argument does not go beyond gender analysis, depriving the reader of a full appreciation of the complexity of the Vietnamese linguistic system of terms of address, which is marked by a hierarchical structure encompassing personal relationships, gender, and class.

Returning to the subject of post-mandarin male sexuality angst in chapter 5, Tran reexamines André Gide’s idea of individual and national particularity (“The Individual,” *Left Review* 1, no. 11 (1935):447–452), the notion that propels a contentious national art-versus-life debate between the “idealists,” post-mandarin intellectuals who advocated for art for art’s sake, and the “materialists,” who were the proponents of art for life’s sake. Tran is interested in how Gide’s sexual politics, articulated as “queer internationalism,” was manifested in the literature of both camps, allowing a post-mandarin masculinity anxiety that questioned the social order. Implicit homoeroticism or, to use Tran’s term, “unspoken queerness,” was the catalyst for the shift in Vietnam’s perspectives on sexual and gender roles, all the while permitting the emergence of a literary representation of socialist realism to flourish. Tran argues with the typical view of Vietnam’s communist literary history, which often characterizes romanticist literature as individualistic, amoral, and apolitical and is often contrasted with the more pragmatic and socially conscious works of the realist literature movement. Instead, he sees all genres of post-mandarin writings—romanticism, realism, and reportage—as not only interrelated but also not at the opposite end of the political spectrum from socialist realist literature. More importantly, in validating the contribution of the post-mandarin literary works to modern Vietnamese literature, Tran succeeds in challenging the claim that modern Vietnamese literature emerged in the 1940s through the rise of socialism and the influence of Marxism.

*Post-Mandarin* is an important academic work. The book is meticulously researched and well written, though because it is at times burdened with scholarly vernacular, it is not likely to be read by the general reading public. It nonetheless offers an invaluable and much-needed contribution for those
who are interested in literary theory, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and Vietnamese literature. Besides the thoughtful discussions and illuminating reassessment of modern Vietnamese literary genres, Tran cleverly crafts a book that serves as a good introduction to some of Vietnam’s most celebrated post-mandarin authors and their writings, many of which have not been translated into English. His book affords readers many good glimpses into a bygone era of a society in transition at the doorstep of modernization, teeming with all of the conflicts and uncertainties that ensue.

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