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Advertising Modernity in the Vietnamese Colonial Newspaper

The advent of the newspaper during the French colonial period marked a new era in Vietnamese urban society. It has been argued that newspapers contributed to the emergence of a Vietnamese public sphere, and there is certainly little doubt that the new print media became a crucial marketplace of ideas. These newspapers were also a marketplace in a more literal sense, for while they introduced innovations of text, literary forms, images, and language, they also became a prominent commercial forum as revealed in the panoply of advertisements they contained. A survey of newspapers from the late 1910s to the mid-1930s reveals the powerful role that consumer advertising played in promoting modern, European goods – from clothing to cars, from radios to soap, and from baby formula to bicycles – and of course the lifestyle that went with them.

This paper will critically examine advertisements found in a cross-section of colonial-era journals, including two from Hà Nội, Phong Hóa, and Bào Đông Pháp, and three from Sài Gòn, Đông Pháp Thời Báo, Phụ Nữ Tân Văn, and La Tribune Indochinoise. The contents of these newspapers in both quốc ngữ and French, and representing different regions and formats, reveal the prominence of advertising in print journalism. Indeed, in some journals advertising constituted nearly half of any given issue. Given this, it is striking that there are no existing studies of advertising in Vietnamese print journalism. Even books that touch on colonial-era journalism, including Shawn McHale's *Print and Power* (2006), and David Marr's *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (1981), do not take up the question. This paper examines this neglected topic and suggests that the form and content of print advertisement offer considerable insight into the commercial dimension of the colonial project. In many ways, the appeals found in these advertisements are familiar ones, playing on peoples' desires to be fashionable, to be beautiful, to drive fast cars, and to have the latest and best products. At a fundamental level, virtually all of the advertisements were promoting new ways of being and living in the "modern" world. They also promoted a strong consciousness of status within the complex hierarchies of colonial urbanism. The colonial elites stood at the pinnacle of this urban society, and so inevitably advertising sought to promote products as stepping stones toward this social apex.

At the same time, the advertisements cannot be separated from the content of the newspapers in which they appeared. Ads were constantly juxtaposed with other elements of the printed page including literary essays, short stories, jokes, puzzles, illustrations, and commentary on issues of the day, both domestic and international. Perhaps inevitably, advertisements

became interconnected with the content of the newspaper. Thus, the text found in some of the wordier advertisements created the effect of blending in with surrounding content, often blurring the lines between product sales pitch and literary expression. Similarly, the imagery of advertisements also coincided with the increasing appearance of graphics and illustrations in newspapers of this period. In short, advertisements were an integral element of Vietnamese print journalism of the colonial era. This paper will explore the world of colonial-era print advertising for what it can tell us both about the emergent consumerism in urban Việt Nam, and for what it reveals about the dynamic between commercial and literary endeavors.

Existing histories of the colonial era in Việt Nam have largely ignored the world of print advertising and the consumer culture it encouraged. I believe that a closer examination of newspaper advertising can help shed light on social and cultural trends in colonial society. While advertisement in these journals might be viewed merely as a means to reinforce a French colonial order, constituting a kind of opiate of consumer goods, my sense is that the range of products, services, and shops being advertised complicates this view. The ways in which advertisements were juxtaposed with literary works, and were sometimes challenge or commented on by writers and illustrators, suggests that the modernizing project assumed to be found in print advertisements was not unambiguous. In addition, the complex gendered nature of many advertisements offers further insights into male-female dynamics in the transforming colonial society. Thus, my paper will hopefully enable the development of a more nuanced view of colonial consumer and print culture.