“If we are genuinely concerned about our society and our race, then we must honestly understand the causes of our fears and anxieties.” It was with these words that Vũ Trọng Phụng challenged his more timid readers at the end of the introductory chapter to his classic 1937 reportage on prostitution and venereal disease in colonial Hanoi, Lục Xì. Phụng did indeed have many worries and fears. By the late 1930s the city of Hanoi, which had by that point been under French colonial control for over fifty years, had a vast commercial sex industry. According to contemporary estimates, the city of some 180,000 people had 5,000 women working as prostitutes; to Phụng such a figure meant that one of every thirty-five residents was apparently ready and willing to spread venereal disease among the population. In the city center Hanoi had a secretive medical facility, known in French as the Dispensaire Municipal (Municipal Dispensary) and in Vietnamese as the Nhà Lục Xì (discussed below), where prostitutes were examined for venereal disease and, if infected, held until they were cured. Hanoi also had high rates of infection for venereal disease, which exacted a painful and sometimes deadly toll on men and women, young and old, European and Vietnamese. Ultimately, however, these realities led to a troubling question that animated Phụng’s thinking throughout Lục Xì: what did the existence of this enormous industry and its tragic consequences say about the state of Vietnamese society and culture in the late 1930s?

Prostitution, and the masses of women infected with sexually transmitted diseases that often accompany it, have in different societies and different historical moments become the foci for the articulation of broader social concerns, especially concerns about sociocultural breakdown or decay. As the French historian Alain Corbin wrote of nineteenth-century French prostitution, “What was written and said about prostitution was then a focus for collective delusions and a meeting point for all manner of anxieties” (quoted in Hershatter 1999, 5). In the French case those concerns were linked to
such issues as “immorality,” social revolution, and male mastery, yet in the case of Shanghai in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century cases analyzed by Gail Hershatter (1999, 4–7), the discourse surrounding prostitution at certain times elaborated on such concerns as moral danger, national decay, and gender relationships. Regarding venereal disease, Megan Vaughan (1991, 129–154) has compellingly described how in colonial Buganda a syphilis epidemic became a powerful metaphor for concerns about the loss of control over female sexuality, while Nguyễn-vô Thu-hương (2008) has demonstrated the ways in which discussions about HIV-AIDS in contemporary Vietnam articulate concerns about national decay and the consequences of economic liberalization.1

For Vũ Trọng Phụng, the complex reality of prostitution and venereal disease was the source and focus of a number of profound anxieties about the sociocultural status quo in colonial Hanoi. As he clearly recognized, Vietnam’s colonial encounter with French culture and civilization was couched in the rhetoric of “progress”: through their encounter with the allegedly superior French civilization, the ostensibly backward and inferior society and culture of the Vietnamese were to improve and progress. However, while five decades of colonial contact had certainly produced changes in Vietnamese society and culture, Phụng openly questioned the idea that they had been changes for the better or that they had come without a cost. As I shall argue in this introduction, in Lục Xì Phụng conducts a remarkable analysis of prostitution and venereal disease, but in doing so, he also compellingly makes the case that the social problems that they both represented and generated were themselves symptoms of much deeper problems that had been developing in colonial Vietnamese society and that challenged the notion that Vietnam was progressing under colonial rule.

VŨ TRỌNG PHỪNG AND THE BACKGROUND TO LỤC XỊ

Many Vietnamese regard Vũ Trọng Phụng as one of the most gifted writers of the twentieth century. Born in Hanoi in 1912, Phụng was an only child raised by his mother after his father died from tuberculosis seven months after his birth. Growing up in poverty, he completed primary school but was unable to continue formal schooling past the age of fourteen. In his late teens, he began publishing short fiction and soon after embarked upon a career as a journalist as well. By the time of his death from tuberculosis and opium addiction in 1939, just one week before his twenty-seventh birthday, Phụng had compiled
an impressive literary output that included “at least eight novels, seven plays, five book-length works of nonfiction reportage, several dozen short stories, a handful of lengthy literary translations, and hundreds of reviews, essays, articles, and editorials” (Zinoman 2002, 1).

Phụng’s fiction writings earned him tremendous acclaim, but he was equally renowned for his investigative journalism and would later be known as the “Northern King of Reportage” (Ông Vua Phóng Sự Đất Bắc). Reportage, which can be described as a form of social-realist investigative journalism, had become a popular form of journalistic writing in Vietnam in the 1930s. Inspired by writers in France and other nations, Vietnamese journalists began publishing reportages in the early 1930s. Over the following decade and a half reportage took a number of different forms, such as travelogues from locales across Vietnam, reflective pieces on social and cultural life, or descriptions of contemporary events such as village life or festivals, but it acquired its quintessential form and achieved tremendous popularity after the 1932 publication of Tâm Lang’s remarkable work, Tôi Kéo Xe (I Pulled a Rickshaw). Tôi Kéo Xe possessed many of the characteristics that came to define Vietnamese-language reportage in the 1930s. The story involved the author, a journalist for the Hanoi newspaper Hà Thành Ngộ Báo (Hanoi Midday News), working as a rickshaw puller in order to learn about and then describe to his readers the lives and experiences of the people in this occupation. Written in the first person, with direct quotations and rich descriptions of the difficult and sometimes brutal experiences that rickshaw pullers endured, the story caused an immediate sensation after its publication. Peter Zinoman (2002, 17) notes that it had a strong impact on Phụng’s later devotion to reportage.

Tôi Kéo Xe had several other characteristics that would come to characterize reportage and Phụng’s work. In terms of its subjects, reportage often focused on the marginal, disenfranchised, dispossessed, unseen, or even exploited members of Vietnamese society. A survey of the contents of the three-volume set Phóng Sự Việt Nam, 1931–1945 (Vietnamese Reportage, 1931–1945; see Phan Trọng Thường, Nguyễn Cử, and Nguyễn Hữu Sơn 2000) reveals pieces on such diverse individuals as herbal medicine doctors, farmers, prostitutes, taxi-girls, laborers, and criminals. In writing reportage, journalists often deliberately sought out groups or individuals that were outside society’s mainstream and were looked down upon by the elite. The latter point is significant because reportage writing tended to be sympathetic toward its subjects. Reportage writers were supposed to provide an accurate factual accounting of the groups or issues they investigated, but the tone was to be measured and not of a salacious or tabloid-type nature. Of course, this
was the ideal, and some writers, including Phụng himself and the author Việt Sinh (whom he mentions in the text), were accused of failing to live up to this ethic. Finally, reportages were also often linked to broader reform agendas. Many reportages attempted to objectively describe the problems colonial Vietnamese society faced and then accompanied these descriptions with suggestions about possible solutions. The emergence of this type of critical and advocacy-oriented journalism in the 1930s was truly innovative, but as Greg Lockhart (1996, 1) has noted, it fell out of favor with the authorities after the revolution in 1945.

Phụng published his first reportage in 1933. Entitled Cạm Bẫy Người (The Man Trap), it examined the infrastructure of and problems caused by gambling. In the following years he wrote several more, the most noteworthy being the 1934 Kỹ Nghệ Lấy Tẩy (The Industry of Marrying Europeans), which examined the complex relations between Vietnamese women and French men, particularly soldiers; Cóm Thầy Cóm Cô (Household Servants), a 1936 publication that discussed the lives of household servants in Hanoi; and Lục Xì in 1937. Stylistically, all of his works explore social problems or concerns, focus on the lives of the dispossessed or marginalized, collect material through firsthand reporting, and employ first-person commentary or quotations from interviewees to give a lived immediacy to the text. Phụng himself looms large in all his texts, yet his dry wit, keen sense of irony, and willingness to place himself in extraordinary circumstances—such as hiring himself out as a domestic worker in Cóm Thầy Cóm Cô or the remarkable evening he spent in a hotel room interviewing two prostitutes in Lục Xì—gave his reportage a unique flair.

Phụng published Lục Xì in eleven installments in the Hanoi newspaper Tương Lai (Future) from January through April 1937. His ability to gain entry into the Municipal Dispensary during early February of that year was due to the willingness of the Hanoi municipal government to grant journalists entry for the first time, but his interests in the Dispensary, prostitution, and the social problems they involved can be traced back further. To understand Phụng’s position, it is important to note that neither prostitution nor venereal disease were concealed topics in Hanoi in the late 1930s. As will be detailed below, there was a burgeoning commercial sex industry in the city at the time, the colonial and municipal governments had long focused on both subjects as areas of concern and policy reform, the popular press often featured discussions of them, and the city’s newspapers and public spaces had significant numbers of advertisements directing consumers to various establishments for venereal disease treatment. Phụng parodied the latter in his
renowned 1936 novel Số Đỏ (Dumb Luck), in which the protagonist, Red Haired Xuân, is temporarily employed to publicly advertise the medicaments of the “King of Cochinchenese Venereal Disease Treatment” through a loudspeaker (see Vũ Trọng Phụng 2002). Stated simply, prostitution and venereal disease were openly visible and engaged in the public sphere.

If one were to believe some of Phụng’s contemporary and later critics, his interest in these topics derived from a deeper interest in the lewd and pornographic, a trait they claimed was visible in his work (see Vũ Trọng Phụng 2000a, 275–298). This characterization, however, was a serious misrepresentation of his goals in publicly addressing these problems, a point most evident in the text that can be regarded as the fictional prelude to Lục Xì, the October 1936 novel Làm Đi (Prostitute). Similar to others of his novels, Làm Đi is a work of social-realist fiction set in Hanoi in the late 1930s. The novel’s protagonist is a woman named Huyền, and the novel addresses a question that Phụng explores in Lục Xì: how women became prostitutes. Huyền is the daughter of an elite family; despite all of the advantages of her birth, she experiences a series of events that lead her into prostitution. The text is centered around an encounter in an upscale brothel involving Huyền, the narrator, and his good friend Quý, all of whom have known each other since they were young students. After meeting her again as a prostitute in the beginning of the book, the narrator asks the following:

“But why was she corrupted?

“Why has the child of an upstanding family, who did not lack for education, come to be a prostitute?” (Vũ Trọng Phụng 2000a, 72)

The narrator presses Huyền on this question, and in the remainder of the narrative she answers it through a detailed recounting of her life that she has inscribed in a diary. As the story proceeds, it is clear that Phụng eschews a simplistic monocausal explanation and instead emphasizes a number of factors in her recruitment to prostitution, such as “romanticism,” materialism, the relaxation of rules regarding male-female interaction, the absence of sexual education, the prohibition of marriage among lineage mates, arranged marriage, and the inequalities and denial of human feeling the latter two practices could involve. The inclusion of these factors brings out a tension in Phụng’s approach to the issue in that it is simultaneously critical of preexisting practices (such as the last four factors noted) and recent social changes (such as the initial three factors). It also demonstrates that for Phụng, the path to
prostitution involves multiple factors; perhaps more important in Huyền’s case, it was a decision due to desperation and a lack of other feasible options. One can fairly argue that Huyền makes the choice to become a prostitute, and indeed she accepts prostitution as the only solution to the problem she faces near the narrative’s end, but Phụng’s construction of her biography in the novel quietly asserts that it was the broader array of sociological factors that placed her in the position in which prostitution was the only feasible option left to her. Society, at a significant level, shared some responsibility for her becoming a prostitute. Phụng’s tone in Làm Đĩ evinces a profound sympathy for Huyền. Indeed, there is a measure of similarity between her and Thúy Kiều, the heroine of Nguyễn Du’s classic nineteenth-century epic poem The Tale of Kiều, to which Phụng repeatedly refers in Lục Xì (see Nguyễn Du 1983). In both cases a beautiful, talented woman from an upstanding family endures a life of indignities and suffering, notably in the form of prostitution, due to forces beyond her control, and it is each woman’s status as a victim of outside forces that allows the reader to remain sympathetic to her because she is fundamentally blameless.

According to an account that Phụng published in May 1938, a combination of pressures at his newspaper to write a new reportage, his own desires to write a reportage that would have unassailable truths, and his editor’s recognition that a reportage with “that horrible name” Lục Xì would sell papers all provided a stimulus for embarking upon the writing of Lục Xì in the months after Làm Đĩ was published (Vũ Trọng Phụng 1938, 3). Nevertheless, it is clear that many of the thoughts he engaged in the earlier volume remained fresh in his mind. In turning to Lục Xì, however, Phụng moves out of the realm of fictional speculation and into the lives of real prostitutes. He also broadens his focus to include the human costs of prostitution, particularly the consequences of venereal disease in contemporary social life and the experiences of women in the Dispensary. In all of this, Phụng reveals deeper anxieties about the state of Vietnamese society. In order to fully explain those anxieties, more background to the Dispensary and the venereal disease problem is necessary.

THE DISPENSARY AND ITS ROLE IN COLONIAL HANOI

At the time of Lục Xì’s writing, the Municipal Dispensary sat at the corner of rue Rodier and boulevard Rollandes (today’s Yết Thị and Hai Bà Trưng) in central Hanoi. The building had opened in 1926, following a controversy
that Phụng describes, and was near the city’s courthouse, the Maison Centrale or Hòa Lô Prison, and the Hospital for the Indigenous Residents of the Protectorate (l’Hôpital Indigène du Protectorat; hereafter Hôpital Indigène). The existence of a Dispensary in Hanoi dates back to the earliest days of the French presence. The city of Hanoi was officially established as a municipality on July 19, 1888, and on December 21, 1888, the Hanoi Municipal Council passed legislation to regulate prostitution; it included a Dispensary as an integral part of the system (the coastal city of Haiphong had passed similar legislation in April 1886) (RST 73684). Hanoi’s first dispensary was constructed in early 1889 on the route de la Pagode du Grand Buddha (present-day Quan Thánh). This makeshift structure, made of thatch and bamboo, was destroyed in a typhoon in mid-July of that year. At this point, however, an unsettling association had already begun to develop between the Dispensary and holding facilities for female prisoners as the route de la Pagode du Grand Buddha site had housed both the Dispensary and the women’s prison.

At the time of the first dispensary’s destruction, city officials were considering a site on the rue des Balances for a more permanent structure (RST 73684), and at some point thereafter a new dispensary was constructed there. This facility was used until 1902, when another new structure was constructed on the route de Huế. This “decent and discreet” facility (Coppin 1930, 571) was closed in December 1915; apparently it was turned into a school, and for the next two years the Dispensary’s services were conducted at the Hôpital Indigène (MH 2585 and 2587). In 1918 the city relocated the Dispensary to a former shrine near the mayor’s office in the city’s center. This “old and insalubrious” facility (Ligue Prophylactique de la Ville de Hanoi 1937, 1) was then replaced with the dispensary constructed in 1926. Regardless of where the dispensaries were located, public health officials were never fully satisfied with them, and they faced a common set of problems. The facilities, for example, rarely had enough beds to accommodate the patients. Dr. H. Coppin (1930, 572) commented that the dispensary near the mayor’s office had space for fifty to sixty women but regularly held over one hundred. The 1926 dispensary would face the same problem. Internal amenities were also often lacking. When contemplating the construction of the 1926 facility, the Hanoi administration, then led by Mayor Louis Eckert, had concluded that the existing dispensary “was far from meeting the minimum conditions regarding hygiene and security” (RST 79235), a complaint that had been voiced regarding earlier facilities. Perhaps most troubling was the dispensary’s perceived carceral nature. Officials were very concerned about the seemingly widespread idea that the Dispensary was little more than a prison,
and some officials openly articulated that notion. Maurice Cognacq, a doctor who oversaw the Dispensary during his work as a doctor for the city from 1911 through 1916 (he later became lieutenant-governor of Cochinchina), held that for this and other reasons the Dispensary was a site that Vietnamese sought to avoid. He commented in March 1915, “Money is not the only reason that keeps sick women away from the Dispensary. This sanitary establishment is more like a prison; the unfortunates are interned behind solid iron grates as if they were wild animals. The duration of their detention is not compensated for by the treatment they receive, as the treatment of the sick, due to a lack of materials and personnel, is notoriously insufficient” (MH 2585).

Despite these deficiencies, the Dispensary remained a central component in the city’s effort to regulate prostitution. In order to understand its role, it is useful to describe the broader legal and administrative context of which it was part. When the Hanoi Municipal Council met on December 5 and 17, 1888, to develop the regulations for prostitution in the city, its deliberations, as would remain the case throughout the colonial period, were profoundly influenced by existing administrative practices in France and its territories. In the early 1800s, the French government had enacted a series of laws designed to create a legal space for the practice of certain types of prostitution. As the historian Jill Harsin has noted (1985, xvi), this legal framework basically accepted that prostitution was going to exist, while it attempted to channel it into particular directions so that its deleterious effects—notably the transmission of venereal diseases—could be reduced if not eliminated. A central component in this system was the officially licensed brothel, or what I will more simply refer to as the licensed brothel, which was known in official parlance as the maison de tolérance. (The name itself was revealing, as it indicated that in these houses prostitution was to be tolerated.) When the Hanoi Municipal Council promulgated its 1888 decree, prostitution was allowed to exist, but it could legally be practiced only in licensed brothels. (This law would change in 1891, when independent prostitutes [femmes isolées] received official permission to work alone at a locale of their choosing.)

Hanoi’s licensed brothels had a number of important features. Their establishment required permission from Hanoi’s mayor and the payment of an annual licensing fee (patente), decided upon by the city administration. The proprietors of licensed brothels were required to be female, a regulation that was implemented in order to prevent possible abuses of female prostitutes by male owners (The regulations indeed indicate that those working as prostitutes were expected to be female, but male prostitution did exist into
the 1920s and 1930s; see Coppin 1930, 583, and MH 2593). Following reg-
ulations issued in 1907, licensed brothels were forbidden to provide alcohol
or opium to staff or patrons and could not allow entrance or employment to
anyone under the age of eighteen. Of critical importance, women working in
licensed brothels were required to register as prostitutes and pay an associ-
ated fee at the Hanoi police station, where their names, ages, places of origin,
and places of work were recorded in a special register. This requirement was
significant because through it the women became classified in French dis-
course in three ways: *inscrites*, meaning that their names were inscribed in the
official register; *filles publiques*, meaning officially recognized prostitutes; or
the more commonly used *filles soumises*, which meant that they had submit-
ted to the regulatory regime. As Phụng describes in the text, Vietnamese dis-
course characterized these women as those who “had papers” (*có giấy*). Once
a woman registered, she received a “card” (*carte*) or the “papers” (*giấy*) that
allowed her to legally practice her trade.

The Dispensary’s primary roles in this system were to monitor the pros-
titute population for the presence of venereal diseases and then treat those
diagnosed with them. After receiving a card to legally practice prostitution,
each woman was required to visit the Dispensary once a week for what was
described as a “sanitary visit” (*visite sanitaire*). In the late 1930s, Tuesday and
Friday mornings were designated for sanitary visits (Charbonnier 1936, 41),
although Phụng claims Wednesdays and Fridays were the examination dates.
The examination session began around 8 a.m. and lasted for about three
hours. During these visits, which Phụng compellingly describes in the text,
women had to submit to a gynecological examination to check for visible
signs of infection. According to Roger Charbonnier (1936, 42), a French
doctor who conducted research on prostitution in Hanoi in the mid-1930s,
each examination lasted only a minute or so. If in the course of the exam a
woman was suspected of having syphilis, a bacteriological examination was
also conducted, though the results were not immediately available. If a wom-
an’s examination results were negative, the Dispensary staff wrote “healthy”
(*saine*) on her card, and she was free to leave and continue working as a pros-
titute until her next visit. The coercive nature of the Dispensary came into
play if a woman was suspected of having or was diagnosed with a venereal
disease. In the former case, the woman was obliged to remain in the Dispen-
sary until the results of her laboratory examinations were returned. If they
were negative, she was free to leave, but if a woman was diagnosed with a
venereal disease through either clinical observation or a positive bacteriologi-
cal examination, “unhealthy” (*malsaine*) was written on her card, and she was
required to remain in the Dispensary for treatment. This stipulation was first established in Hanoi’s 1888 regulations, which required women who were “unhealthy” to remain in the Dispensary until they had “a complete recovery” (Joyeux 1930, 616). A September 1933 report by Dr. Jules Theron, director of the Municipal Hygiene Service and the Dispensary, indicated that for each examination session only 3–5% of the women were required to remain for treatment (MH 2592), a figure that Dr. Bernard Joyeux, who served as Dispensary director for most of the 1930s, placed at approximately 5% the following year (Joyeux 1934b, 903), yet this small percentage had a larger cumulative effect. La Ligue Prophylactique de la Ville de Hanoi (the Prophylactic League of the City of Hanoi; hereafter Prophylactic League) commented in 1937 that the Dispensary often reached its maximum of some 150 patients (1937, 7). It is important to note, however, that the Dispensary’s maximum capacity was not reached exclusively with licensed prostitutes. As will be discussed below, Hanoi had a large population of women working as prostitutes illegally. Any woman arrested for illegally practicing prostitution was taken to the Dispensary for a medical examination and required to remain if she received a positive diagnosis for a venereal disease.

The execution of the Dispensary’s duties was handled by a staff of nine. The director was always a male European doctor who occupied the position by virtue of being the director of the Municipal Hygiene Service.8 He was assisted by two “Indochinese doctors” (médecins indochinois), both of whom were male and, as far as the evidence indicates, always Vietnamese.9 The senior of these two doctors was the director’s deputy, who conducted the gynecological examinations in the director’s absence. The junior doctor focused on managing the nursing staff, which was composed of two “indigenous nurses” (infirmières indigènes). Over the course of the Dispensary’s history all nurses appear to have been both female and Vietnamese. The Dispensary also had a full-time doorman, as well as a pool of guards. Perhaps the most important position for the everyday running of the Dispensary was the “chief supervisor” (surveillante en chef). French colonial medical facilities that had a carceral component, such as the dispensaries and leprosariums, usually appointed full-time European supervisors who lived at the facilities in order to manage them and monitor the patient population. The Dispensary’s chief supervisor had always been a European woman, though she was assisted by two female “indigenous supervisors” (surveillantes indigènes), who again appear to have always been Vietnamese. Prior to 1932, the supervisor had for several years been a nun who was a member of the Sisters of Saint Paul of Chartres (RST 78701). The Vietnamese supervisors were also nuns from this
order. After 1932, the city administration hired European civilians to serve as chief supervisors, though, as will be discussed below, their professional conduct was at times harmful to the city’s goals in operating the facility.

By late 1936 the city administration, working in consultation with such organizations as the Prophylactic League, had completed an ambitious set of reforms in order to improve the Dispensary’s physical structure as well as its reputation throughout the city. The admittance of Phụng and other journalists into the Dispensary was part of this agenda. City officials sought to create a new understanding about the Dispensary among city residents, particularly its prostitutes. From the officials’ perspective, the term used by Vietnamese to refer to the Dispensary, Lục Xì (or Nhà Lục Xì), had taken on an exclusively negative cast associated with fear, avoidance, and incarceration. Etymologically, the term itself is quite interesting given its obscure and recent origins in the Vietnamese language. The earliest reference to the term that I have located was in an anonymous letter to the Hanoi police written in Vietnamese and dated April 30, 1896; it contains a denunciation of two Vietnamese women who were allegedly working illegally as prostitutes. After denouncing the women, the writer demanded that they be taken to the lục sì for an examination (MH 2579). Given that the first dispensary was set up in 1889, the word was obviously introduced early on. The writings of French doctors in the Bulletin de la Société Médico-Chirurgicale de l’Indochine (the journal of a Hanoi-based medical society that had been established in 1907), notably Coppin’s 1925 article on prostitution in Hanoi, point to its continued usage, and in the text, Phụng declares to Dr. Joyeux that neither he nor other journalists have any idea about the term’s origin. Joyeux comments that it originated from the habit of a jovial French doctor who many years before had performed the medical examinations on Hanoi prostitutes and who at times liked to use English words. According to this explanation, lục xì came into use from the doctor asking the women to have a “look-see.” Though perhaps fanciful, this remains the most convincing explanation.

The term’s obscure etymology aside, by the time of Phụng’s writing, lục xì was part of the city’s everyday vernacular, although elderly Hanoi residents note that it was a coarse word with negative associations. Thao Thao, a journalist for the newspaper Việt Báo (Việt News) who visited the Dispensary on the same day as Phụng, commented in his reportage about prostitution and the Dispensary, “Lục-sì [sic]! What a horrible word!” (1937b, March 3, p. 1). City officials sought to transform people’s ideas about the Dispensary by emphasizing its humanitarian programs. Under the guidance of the Prophylactic League, a work room (ouvroir) was built at the end of 1935 wherein
prostitutes engaged in knitting, embroidery, and other sewing-related activities for the production of garments. Working in conjunction with the Red Cross, the women produced a large number of items that were donated to charity, particularly items for infants. This work routine helped fight the “harmful idleness” that the women had to deal with in the Dispensary while also teaching them a skill that could potentially help them avoid returning to prostitution (Ligue Prophylactique de la Ville de Hanoi 1937, 13). As described in Phụng’s text, women also received classes in sexual hygiene and reading. The significance of the latter requires mention because of the extremely high levels of illiteracy in colonial Vietnamese society, notably among women. Joyeux, writing for the Prophylactic League, commented that “nearly all” of the Dispensary women were illiterate when they entered (Ligue Prophylactique de la Ville de Hanoi 1937, 13). Finally, officials sought to emphasize that the Dispensary offered free health care and job training to women who sought it, regardless of whether they worked as prostitutes or not. Given these charitable dimensions, which genuinely were devoted to improving the lives of Hanoi’s prostitutes by treating their diseases and providing them a means to leave prostitution, Phụng in the original title and the text alternates between referring to the Dispensary as either Lục Xì or Nhà Lục Xì or the more positive term Nhà Phúc Đường, a generic term for a charitable establishment. As his comments reveal, however, he himself was unsure of which was the more accurate term.

THE SERVICE DES MOEURS AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF COMMERCIAL SEX IN COLONIAL HANOI

The regulatory regime established for prostitution in Hanoi gave the Municipal Dispensary the role of monitoring and treating diseases in the prostitute population through sanitary visits by registered prostitutes who worked in licensed brothels. Records from the city’s Bureau of Hygiene indicate that in most years Hanoi had approximately twenty licensed brothels, or “red-numbered” houses (other houses had numbers written in white on blue backgrounds). At the time of writing Lục Xì, Phụng claims that there were sixteen licensed brothels. For the most part, these establishments were located in the old part of the city north of Hoàn Kiếm Lake. Despite their official endorsement, licensed brothels usually did not have large numbers of registered prostitutes working in them. An 1896 police report indicates that there were on average less than 7 prostitutes in the city’s sixteen licensed brothels
while in 1930 the average had increased to only a little under 8
prostitutes in twenty licensed brothels (Joyeux 1930, 459). Data, unfortunately, are not available for the intervening years. In the aggregate, Hanoi also never had large numbers of registered prostitutes. According to data compiled annually by the city’s Bureau of Hygiene, they could be counted in the hundreds. The earliest number I was able to locate was for 1908, when there were 120 Vietnamese and 30 Japanese registered prostitutes in Hanoi (RST 71907). These numbers had increased to some 650 by the mid-1920s (see Coppin 1930, 568), but by 1936 Charbonnier (1936, 11) noted the number had declined to approximately 600. These figures, however, concealed a number of problems with the system. According to Cognacq, in 1915 there were over 2,000 women working as prostitutes, but only 137 were registered (6.9%) (MH 2585); then in 1936, when Mayor Edouard Henri Virgitti made the claim that Phụng quotes to begin Lục Xì, there were an estimated 5,000 women working as prostitutes, but only 600 were registered (12%). Equally compelling was the number of legal prostitutes who had “taken flight” (en fuite), meaning that they no longer reported for their weekly medical examination. Coppin (1930) reported that of the 650 women on the police register in 1925, some 450 (69.2%) no longer reported, and Charbonnier (1936, 11) reported that in 1936 approximately two-thirds did not. The effective regulation of prostitution simply did not work. The commercial sex industry existed largely outside of official control and was dominated by what French officials referred to as “clandestine prostitution” (prostitution clandestine) or what the Vietnamese perhaps more accurately referred to as “non-tax-paying” (lậu thuế) prostitution.

The existence of this enormous illicit sex trade placed a tremendous burden on a second organization that played an important role in the surveillance and regulation of prostitution, the Service des Moeurs. Similar to the Municipal Dispensary, Hanoi’s Service des Moeurs was modeled upon the system employed in France, and as Harsin (1985, xvii) has noted, it drew its name from its responsibilities to protect public “morality” (moeurs). Hanoi’s 1888 regulations had given the responsibility for the regulation of prostitution to the police commissioner, who in turn was assisted by one “morality agent” (agent des moeurs) (Joyeux 1930, 616). Regulations implemented in the spring of 1907 modified this system by transferring responsibilities to the police commission, as opposed to the commissioner alone, as well as by introducing a new Service des Moeurs (Joyeux 1930, 626). Under this system, the police commission was to appoint one or more “inspectors of morality” (inspecteurs des moeurs) from within the department’s ranks who would
be “specially charged” with the policing of the licensed prostitutes (Joyeux 1930, 626). Although it was not officially described in the regulations, the French inspector was assisted by Vietnamese police officers who numbered anywhere from one agent in 1910 (MH 2583) to three to five agents in 1917 (MH 2585) and thereafter. The minor modifications to the service that were carried out in 1915 notwithstanding, this structure was still largely in place at the time of Phụng’s writing. In order to avoid confusion, it should be noted that throughout the text Phụng refers to the service with its common vernacular equivalent, Police des Moeurs; thus that term is used in the translation.

The Vietnamese described the Service des Moeurs as the Cảnh Sát Xướng Kỹ, which Phụng in the text renders as the “Customs Police” (Cảnh Sát Phong Tục), but the original Vietnamese rendering is somewhat metaphorical, as “Xướng Kỹ” was the term for a woman who sang for money (Đào Duy Anh 1996, 588), itself a subtle reference to possible links to prostitution. In everyday parlance the men who dealt with the prostitutes were described as the Đội Con Gái or the “Girls’ Squad.” As the numbers indicated, the service was chronically understaffed, not to mention underfunded. A constant refrain in official and medical circles from the earliest years of the colonial presence through the time of Phụng’s writing was that the service was basically a useless and ineffective organization that was completely unprepared to handle the immense realities of prostitution in the city. Although such critiques were accurate, they had little effect, and the officers in the service were still required to carry out the business of policing the commercial sex trade. As Phụng describes in the text, one important responsibility of the inspector was to assist in the management of the sanitary visits at the Dispensary, though the 1907 regulations clearly prohibited him entry to the examination room unless it was requested by the examining doctor (see Joyeux 1930, 626). The primary responsibility of the Service des Moeurs, however, was the everyday surveillance of the sex industry; its staff members therefore patrolled the city’s streets at night, often riding around in rickshaws in order to ensure that the city’s regulations were being followed.

To appreciate just how unprepared the Service des Moeurs was to fulfill these responsibilities, it is useful to describe the administrative framework within which it worked, as well as the infrastructure of the illegal commercial sex industry. To begin with the former, the Service des Moeurs was part of the Hanoi municipal administration and therefore had jurisdiction only within the city’s borders. Vietnam is frequently referred to as a French colony, which is basically an accurate statement as the French did have ultimate authority. Within Vietnam, however, there were distinctions between areas classified
as “protectorates,” such as Tonkin in the north and Annam in the center, and those classified as “colonies,” such as Cochinchina in the south. The important distinction was legal in that in the protectorates, Vietnamese law prevailed, whereas in the colonies, French law prevailed. When the French and the Vietnamese monarchy negotiated the 1884 Patenôtre Treaty, which definitively recognized French control over the north, Tonkin was defined as a protectorate, but the city of Hanoi, which was recognized as the capital of Tonkin and all of Indochina, was classified as what Phụng refers to in his text as “colonial land” (đất thuộc địa). Within Hanoi proper, therefore, the French legal system prevailed, yet once one crossed into the adjacent provinces of Hà Đông or Bắc Ninh, Vietnamese law prevailed. In 1938, Mayor Virgitti and Dr. Joyeux commented that the consequence of such an arrangement was that “the limits of the city of Hanoi are not only municipal, but also and above all veritable national frontiers” (Virgitti and Joyeux 1938, 1). The implications of this system for prostitution were profound because it meant that municipal officials lacked the authority to intervene in prostitution-related matters in the city’s outskirts. As described by Phụng in the text, this had the practical consequence of ringing the city with numerous commercial sex establishments and creating a space where sex workers could go without fear of trouble from city officials.

Municipal regulations created another set of difficulties for the officers of the Service des Moeurs in that they were restricted in the locales that they could enter and inspect. From the earliest days of the French presence, authorities had sought to keep prostitution-related activities indoors and off the streets, but this was not formalized until the 1907 regulations that prohibited licensed prostitutes from solicitation in public areas (Joyeux 1930, 622). Despite possessing the authority to keep the streets free from solicitation, agents enjoyed only limited success in doing so. From the earliest years of the French military presence, prostitutes throughout Vietnam would gather after dark in the areas around garrisons. Prostitutes, male and female, gathered outside the Citadel, the primary garrison for French soldiers in Hanoi. This was as true in 1910 as it was in 1930 (MH 2583). Coppin (1930, 570) reported in 1925 that Hanoi’s prostitutes had even come up with the innovative method of traveling the city’s streets in rickshaws in search of customers. On the streets in which licensed brothels were located, prostitutes sometimes still called out to passersby, to the chagrin of the police.

Agents faced a greater problem with regard to entering and inspecting the sites in which prostitution was conducted. According to city regulations, agents were permitted to inspect only licensed brothels and were forbidden
from inspecting any locales in which clandestine prostitution was conducted. Unsurprisingly, the latter vastly outnumbered the legal sites and took a variety of different forms. At the most formal level, clandestine prostitution was conducted in clandestine brothels (*maisons clandestines* in French and *nhà thổ lậu* in Vietnamese). These were situated throughout the city, and although generally of a transient nature, their locations were often known to the agents of the Service des Moeurs, who monitored the sites and submitted reports on their activities. Another location for clandestine prostitution was in licensed brothels. It was relatively common for licensed brothels to have a mixture of women who were registered, “in flight,” and unregistered. In some circumstances, the clandestine prostitutes openly worked in the licensed brothel, at least until the Service des Moeurs agents arrived, whereupon, according to the complaints from the agents, they all fled. A more concealed method of operation was for the licensed brothels to have “annexes,” which were usually separate buildings within the brothel’s compound that clandestine prostitutes or women avoiding their sanitary visits used for their assignations. Charbonnier (1936, 23–24) reported in 1936 that the annexes were usually of the same dismal character as the main buildings. He also noted that many women working in the annexes were registered women in flight and that they were among those most heavily afflicted by venereal diseases.

A variety of other locales, generally referred to as *maisons de rendez-vous* (rendezvous houses), also served as places for clandestine prostitution. Hanoi featured a number of cafes, opium dens, dance halls, and other establishments that sometimes provided settings for meeting prostitutes and in some cases had rooms available for sexual encounters. As Phụng shows to great effect, many hotel “boys” (men who worked assisting customers in hotels) would also procure women for guests in their rooms. Perhaps the most infamous location for clandestine prostitution was a type of hotel that the French referred to as the *garni* and the Vietnamese described as the *nhà sâm*. The semantics of the *nhà sâm* are difficult. At the simplest level it was a hotel, but both the French and the Vietnamese distinguished it from a “real” hotel (*hôtel* or *khách sạn*), which had a more upscale and often more European clientele. Many of these, such as Hanoi’s famous Metropole Hotel, technically prohibited prostitutes on their premises. The *nhà sâm* was therefore a type of hotel that catered primarily to the Vietnamese, though mostly those from the lower segments of Vietnamese society. Charbonnier noted that “The patrons are often those of doubtful morals” and that in some cases the *nhà sâm* had arrangements with neighboring female venders to provide sexual services to their customers (1936, 24). The most common arrangement was for individ-
uals who had set up an arrangement with a prostitute to repair to the *nhà sâm* for their encounter. Charbonnier commented that these were establishments where “comfort and hygiene leave much to be desired” (1936, 24). They also constituted something of a morally dubious space, a point that Phụng supports by repeating Joyeux’s comment that a morally upstanding woman would never enter a *nhà sâm*. In the text Dr. Adrien Le Roy des Barres also noted that the clientele at the *nhà sâm* could pay by the hour or half day. Given all these facts, I have translated *nhà sâm* as “seedy hotel.”

**ABUSE AND THE IMMINENT DANGERS OF THE MUNICIPAL DISPENSARY AND THE SERVICE DES MOEURS**

As the discussion above indicates, by the time of *Lục Xì*’s writing, Hanoi’s commercial sex industry had grown into a large, multifaceted phenomenon. It not only had a complex infrastructure, but it also engaged thousands of people in a variety of ways, many of them less than savory. In order to begin to understand Phụng’s anxieties about the Municipal Dispensary and prostitution in Hanoi, the best starting point is to clarify his thinking about the city of Hanoi as the context for the changes that concerned him. Phụng had been born and raised in Hanoi, and in many of his writings, Hanoi is not simply a backdrop to the narrative but a central character in it. In his fiction and *reportages* he explored the city’s darker, seamier, or morally ambiguous sides, as many of the French writers he read, such as de Maupassant, Hugo, and Zola, had done for French cities. Nevertheless, Phụng saw in Hanoi something potentially noble or even grand. As he recognized, Hanoi was an ancient city. It had become the first capital of an independent Vietnamese kingdom in 1010 and had subsequently served, during various periods, as its capital for over five centuries. Beyond this political and administrative importance, the city was also one of Vietnam’s preeminent cultural centers, a point Phụng emphasizes throughout the text by repeatedly invoking the vernacular metaphor that described Hanoi as a city of “a thousand-year civilization” (*nghìn năm văn vật*). Indeed, this metaphor captures for Phụng a sense of the ideal of what the city should be and a standard against which to measure the contemporary city. Unlike the presumed inferiority of Vietnamese society and culture implied in colonial rhetoric, Phụng held that the Vietnamese had historically possessed standards and values of which they could be proud. While cataloging the numerous anxiety-generating problems discussed in the text, Phụng therefore repeatedly asks, “Is this worthy of a city of a ‘thousand-year civilization’?”
Against this conceptual backdrop one of Phụng’s most immediate and obvious sources of anxiety becomes evident: the possible abuses of women that occurred in the process of arresting them for transfer to the Dispensary, the gynecological exams to which they had to submit, the indeterminacy of their detention, and the sometimes brutal environment that existed within. As noted above, the Police des Moeurs was responsible for policing the commercial sex industry, yet both Phụng and a large number of French doctors agreed that the members of this organization, particularly its Vietnamese agents, were periodically guilty of significant abuses of their authority. Such abuses took the form of demanding bribes, making false arrests, inconsistency regarding who was arrested and who was not (the latter usually resulted from bribery), and, in one disturbing case described in the text, the attempted rape of an underaged girl. The problems with the service, however, ran deeper due to the nebulous and inequitable legal statutes that framed its activities. As Phụng mentions, the service’s authority was predicated upon two pieces of legislation passed in 1915 and 1921, the result of which was that a woman accused of prostitution was responsible for providing exculpatory evidence, a task that would be difficult indeed, especially given the illiteracy and lack of education of most prostitutes. The combination of abusive officers and an insufficient legal system created for Phụng such a lack of faith in the service that he concluded in the text, “The abuse of authority for dishonest advantage or the proper execution of one’s responsibilities becomes an issue of individual conscience.” Archival records indicate that abuses did occur, but as indicated in the text, there were also agents who carried out their duties appropriately.

Another source of concern emerged once women were inside the Dispensary’s walls. Hanoi residents regarded the Dispensary as a terrifying place. Located in the city center, it was a secretive structure to which access was severely restricted, a point that helps explain Phụng’s elation when he is granted access. It was also not a facility into which passersby could surreptitiously get a glimpse. Its front door was guarded, its windows were shuttered, and it was surrounded by high walls. These features accentuated what many regarded as its prison-like character. Inside one of the most difficult procedures to which women had to submit was the medical examination. It is important to note that the Western science of gynecology did not exist in Vietnam prior to its introduction in the colonial period. The gynecological examination was primarily a clinical examination in which a woman had to lie on her back and fully expose her genitalia for inspection by the medical staff, but its most difficult aspect was the use of the speculum, referred to in
Vietnamese as the “duck’s bill” (mỏ vịt), which was inserted inside the woman’s vagina to check for lesions or other signs of infection. This procedure was a tremendous challenge to the moral expectations regarding modesty and the privacy of a woman’s body. Dr. Piquemal, in a 1927 summary of the work of other doctors, tellingly stated of their work, “They note the elevated numbers of registered women in flight due to the revulsion that the sanitary measures inspire in them” (RST 78701). Joyeux, from a 1930s perspective, reiterates in the text women’s revulsion toward the procedure, particularly because it violated their sense of modesty. Phụng makes it clear that the speculum’s usage was troubling to him, the men who knew about it, and the women who were probed by it.

An examination that turned up problematic results and the subsequent order for a woman to remain in the Dispensary generated a new set of troubles. Detention had the obvious issues Phụng discusses, such as loss of income and possible separation from loved ones, but an added concern was the indeterminacy regarding the ultimate date of release. It is important to note that the most common sexually transmitted diseases from which prostitutes in Hanoi suffered, notably syphilis and gonorrhea, are bacterial infections that are readily treatable with modern antibiotics, but these pharmaceuticals were not available in 1937. As will be discussed below, the Dispensary medical staff therefore relied upon a variety of drugs of inferior effectiveness that produced inconsistent results, and some, such as the 914 that Phụng mentions in the text, were painful and sometimes even dangerous. Thus, women were sometimes held until they were asymptomatic, rather than actually cured, and the amount of time for treatment was completely unpredictable. No known records exist regarding women who were held and promptly released, but various cases indicate that some women were held for months or even years. An 1890 report on the Dispensary noted that in March of that year, a woman named Nguyễn Thị Thu [sic] had already been held at the Dispensary for over two years (MH 2575). In later years, Coppin (1930, 579) reported the case of a woman who was held for one year to treat her gonorrhea. Piquemal noted in 1927 that it was not rare for a woman to remain five to six months for treatment (RST 78701). Phụng also mentions the case of the prostitute he interviews who was held for six months while another was held for three months. Prior to the reforms mentioned in the text that allowed some women out for the Lunar New Year celebrations (Tết Nguyên Đán), women were not allowed to leave the Dispensary under any circumstances while recovering; thus it is easy to understand why the Dispensary’s regime was held by many to be similar to imprisonment, though with no clearly designated sentence.
Apart from a woman's being held against her will, with no recourse to leave, life inside the Dispensary could also be difficult or even brutal. At the simplest level, Dispensary life was highly regulated. Evidence does not exist regarding the extent of implementation, but internal regulations dictated that a woman's day inside the Dispensary was to begin at 6:00 a.m. During the day a variety of activities ensued, such as work, cleaning, medical care, or education, and then lights were to go out at 8:00 p.m. Such common diversions as gambling and opium smoking were forbidden; thus life inside the Dispensary was quite spartan, though the 1936 reforms attempted to make it less so. Another difficult dimension of Dispensary life, which at times drifted into brutality, was the relationship between the women and some of the staff members, notably the guards or supervisors. Dispensary women periodically submitted complaints to the city administration regarding staff behavior, such as a series of extortion complaints lodged against a Dispensary guardian in 1913 (MH 2584). One of the most spectacular cases involved Marguerite Frass, who worked as the chief supervisor from January 1932 until January 1935 (MH 824).

Frass's tenure at the Dispensary began well, but in February 1933, the mayor's office began receiving a series of complaints about her behavior. She was fired in 1935 for violating her contract, and a subsequent investigation revealed numerous cases of bribery, extortion, and brutality, as well as the seizure of the son of a prostitute who gave birth in the Dispensary (the child was returned to his mother after Frass's termination). One agent involved in the investigation commented that the women had "an intense fear of Madame Frass," while another concluded, "The women undergoing treatment in the Dispensary, as well as the proprietors [of the licensed brothels] literally lived in terror of this authoritarian woman who spared no blows" (MH 824).

Frass's behavior was likely an extreme case as there is no evidence of other supervisors being fired, though there were complaint letters about other staff. It is unclear how much Phụng knew about the behavior of other Dispensary employees and the existence or extent of internal abuses. However, his comments indicate that he was aware that staff behavior generated a certain amount of fear among patients. What Phụng was well aware of, and what he describes in detail in the text, were the sometimes brutal dynamics among Dispensary patients. As he graphically describes with the case of a woman who had worked for many years as a prostitute both legally and illegally, significant tensions existed between the licensed and clandestine prostitutes within the Dispensary. Such tensions sometimes erupted into open violence after the lights went out and in fact became so bad that a grate was installed
to separate the two populations. Even after the grate’s installation, however, registered prostitutes continued to issue threats and put tremendous pressure on clandestine prostitutes to register and join their brothels. When we look at the situation in the aggregate, a visible level of anxiety runs throughout Phụng’s text relating to the following question: if the Dispensary was indeed a humanitarian institution devoted to improving the lives and health of Hanoi’s prostitutes, why were so many abuses and inhumane activities associated with it?

**FILTH, MORAL FAILURE, AND THE SEX INDUSTRY**

Given the Dispensary’s periodic abuses and inhumanity, Phụng reflects in the text upon whether it is appropriate for a city of a “thousand-year civilization” to have such an establishment within its borders and whether its existence reflects Vietnam’s “progress” under French colonial rule. The Dispensary, however, was but one part in the total infrastructure of Hanoi’s commercial sex industry, and Phụng was equally concerned about other parts. To understand this point, it is worth describing the physical characteristics of the brothel world. When the French first arrived in Hanoi, prostitution was usually conducted in thatch buildings, referred to in French as *paillottes*. The scholar and educator Gustave Dumoutier complained in an 1893 letter to the mayor’s office that five or six such buildings served as brothels near the Direction de l’Enseignement (Teaching Directorate), where he worked. He described them as “squalid” (MH 2576). An 1896 police report on licensed brothels in Hanoi points to the continued presence of *paillottes*, though brick structures had also come into existence (MH 2580). Over time, the trend would be more toward brick structures, though *paillottes* in some outlying areas never completely disappeared. Regardless of what their construction, licensed brothels were regularly condemned for their lack of cleanliness. Dumoutier spoke of the “squalid *paillottes,***” while the officer in the 1896 report noted that some were “repugnant and poorly kept” while others were in “a dilapidated state” (MH 2580). Another officer in 1915 commented on the “repulsive dirtiness” of one licensed brothel (MH 2585). Joyeux (1930, 479) cautiously wrote, “It is preferable to not speak of the cleanliness of these dumps.” He thought that the European clients, both civil and military, often preferred to take women away from these establishments because they were “disgusted . . . by their dirtiness, their overcrowding, and their lack of comfort” (481). His comment on the “overcrowding,” or *promiscuité*, derived
from the fact that the standard setup within the licensed brothels was not for customers and clients to go off to private rooms for their assignations. Instead, the brothels usually had open rooms with bamboo lattice partitions (phen) that created what Joyeux referred to as “boxes d’amour” (love boxes) (1930, 479) in which the encounters took place. Such spaces obviously afforded little privacy. As Charbonnier noted, the clandestine annexes in the licensed brothels were usually of the same dismal character as the main building, though other places for clandestine prostitution were “very variable from the point of view of comfort and hygiene” (1936, 23–24). Wealthier clients could afford to have assignations in nice hotels, whereas those of lesser means had to make do with less salubrious conditions. Regardless of their level of filth, for Phụng all of these spaces had a morally suspect character.

Another troubling dimension was the sex industry’s sheer scale. At the time of Phụng’s writing, Hanoi had some sixteen licensed brothels, most of which had clandestine annexes. There were approximately sixty “seedy hotels,” the number of which apparently was continuing to grow (Charbonnier 1936, 24). There were the various rendezvous houses, such as opium dens and cafes, that had rooms that could be used for prostitution. There were also various secluded public spaces where trysts occurred. Once one crossed the city’s borders into the “suburban zone” (zone suburbaine or ngoại ô), a startling number of establishments could also be found, particularly in such areas as Khâm Thiền, Bạch Mai, Ngã Tư Sở, Vĩnh Hồ, and Gia Lâm, each of which sat directly on the city’s boundaries. According to figures compiled by Virgitti and Joyeux in 1937, there were 6 dance halls, whose “taxi-girls” sometimes worked as prostitutes, 8 seedy hotels, and approximately 250 “singers’ houses” (maisons chanteuses) in the suburban zone (Virgitti and Joyeux 1938, 26ff.). By the late 1930s, the latter establishments, known in Vietnamese as “ổ cô đâu nests” (ổ cô đâu), had become the primary locales for prostitution in the suburbs. Historically, these houses had featured a stylized form of singing known as ả đào, and the women who performed it were referred to as either cô đâu or ả đào. The singers played a castanet-type instrument and were accompanied by a type of woodwind and a drum. In the precolonial period, ả đào singing had a sophisticated style that required the mastery of linguistically complex texts that were usually poems written in Sino-Vietnamese. Ả đào singers sang in a variety of venues, such as during temple rites and in competitions, but they were renowned for their performances for educated men. Similar in a way to the geisha tradition in Japan, ả đào singing provided a type of high-status literate entertainment for Vietnam’s male elite.

Ả đào houses were present within the city limits prior to 1930, but the
explosion in their growth in the suburban zone occurred during the 1930s, with the houses of Khâm Thiên Street among the most well known. The diffusion of these houses, however, was not accompanied by a corresponding expansion of the singers’ professional training. Many French officials, such as Virgitti and Joyeux, felt that the women who worked in the ᐳ dào houses lacked any professional skills and that the houses were little more than glorified brothels. The houses’ clientele had also changed significantly as they had moved away from being the exclusive domain of the literate elite and had become “democratized” to include clerical workers, men engaged in commerce, students returned from France, and even European clients (Virgitti and Joyeux 1938, 6). Performance remained an important part of the experience, but in most houses commercial sexual encounters were also an expected feature.

In the aggregate, one can therefore argue that at the time of Lục Xì’s writing there were approximately 400 establishments in the greater Hanoi area that in some form or other had links to the commercial sex trade. As Virgitti comments in the beginning of the text, there were an estimated 5,000 women working as prostitutes in Hanoi, while Virgitti and Joyeux (1938, 27) concluded that there were some 1,500–2,000 women working in the sex industry in Hanoi’s suburban zone. In addition, there were thousands of male clients who purchased the women’s services. For a city of some 180,000 people, sex was obviously very big business.

Phương was aware of the scale of this industry, and its enormity and seediness were indeed troubling to him. As he notes in the beginning of the text, it entailed a large number of women who worked as prostitutes and spread diseases. Moreover, there were thousands of others—from the madams to the hotel boys to the city administration and ultimately to the clients—who either engaged with, depended upon, or profited from this vast industry. In acknowledging these troubling facts, however, Phương develops an interesting and subtle argument about the ways in which moral failure was an engine for both the maintenance and growth of this infrastructure. The argument has its obvious dimensions, such as Phương’s condemnation of those, both male and female, who thoughtlessly transmitted venereal diseases or those who preyed upon the vulnerable to lure them into the sex trade. It also has its surprising dimensions—for example, in the text Phương never articulates the expected argument that commercial sex is by definition immoral and therefore should be eliminated. On this point his position was obviously influenced by some of his French interlocutors, who held that there would always be a commercial sex industry, and thus the important question was how to limit its deleterious
consequences. Instead, his argument centers on the recognition that the sex industry at its most profound level represented a society in which too many people had lost the ability to restrain their desires. A useful way to understand this position is through his usage of the Vietnamese terms *ham* and *ham muốn*. These terms imply such obvious glosses as a fondness or desire for something, but at a deeper level they imply a strong desire, the satisfaction of which has the danger of escaping conventional moral boundaries into either amoral or immoral behavior. In the text, this overwhelming desire is focused primarily on three main targets: prestige objects, money, and romantic love.

To begin with the prestige objects, in *Lâm Đĩ* Phụng demonstrated a pronounced suspicion of materialism. To his mind, one of the negative consequences of Vietnam’s colonial encounter with France was a burgeoning devotion to material objects and the status competition it involved. In *Lâm Đĩ*, the heroine, Huyền, on a number of occasions speaks of her overwhelming desire to possess various prestige items, especially trendy fashion items and jewelry, which Phụng linked to her descent into prostitution. In *Lục Xì*, Phụng identifies a similar covetousness in contemporary Hanoi society, notably among prostitutes, some of whom he unflatteringly describes as overly desirous of the latest fashions, jewelry, makeup, or hairstyles. In constructing his text, Phụng also chose to invoke the argument earlier made by Dr. Coppin that the desire for status objects, notably jewelry, in some cases provided the impetus for some women to work as occasional prostitutes. As Phụng describes, there was a great deal of variation in the female prostitute population, with some working full time and others only periodically. In the latter case, women would turn to prostitution as a way to make quick money to pay off a debt or solve some other financial problem, but there were apparently others, particularly upper- or middle-class women married to men with small salaries, who worked periodically as prostitutes in order to pay off gambling debts or finance the purchase of prestige objects, especially jewelry. While sitting in the Dispensary, Phụng openly declares to the supervisor, “Madam, I tremble for all of the ‘romantic’ women who today are enamored of those modern things, yet in the future they will end up sitting in here.” She responds, “That’s it! That is the vicious circle. That is . . . what do you call it? . . . The cost of progress!”

The unrestrained desire for material objects was one of Phụng’s concerns, but the desire for money brought out a second moral failing of the commercial sex industry because it often engendered duplicity or outright dishonesty. As Phụng describes it, very little in or associated with the sex trade was what it pretended to be. The women working in the trade employed numer-
ous deceptions. These included the false words a prostitute spoke to clients to gain their business or perhaps find a husband, the dissimulation that she was a skilled musician or entertainer when she had no such skills, the elaborate dress and makeup that concealed a less savory reality beneath, the bogus protestations to the agents of the Police des Moeurs, the equivocations of the madams who ran the brothels, and the elaborate ruses used to conceal the symptoms of venereal disease in order to pass the sanitary visit. The men involved in the trade were no better. Phụng directly criticizes the men who, with sweet though false words, lured vulnerable young women into prostitution. His most critical gaze was reserved for the hotel boys. These men, of which there were apparently many, would approach guests in the hotels and then offer to find them a prostitute of their liking. In Phụng’s account of the evening he spent with two prostitutes in a seedy hotel room, the boys would demand money for a rickshaw to go pick up the “proper” girl, when in fact they would never leave the hotel. They would instead go relax and have a smoke and then bring in a woman already waiting in the hotel. If they felt they had not initially received enough money for the rickshaw, they would then “testily” demand more. The guest would have chosen from a series of different types of women described by the boys, such as “modern” women from reputable families or virgin girls recently in from the countryside. All of the women would be described as “certain” (chắc chắn), a vernacular expression for being free of venereal disease. Whatever the case, the hotel boys’ descriptions were lies or deceptions designed to increase their take, thus adding another layer to the deceit that permeated the industry.

The final type of unconstrained desire leading to moral failure that features in Phụng’s writing is evident in two descriptors he frequently employed: “corrupt” (hư or hư hỏng) and “depraved” or “debauched” (trụy lạc). These terms, it should be noted, were commonly used to describe people in the sex trade, especially women. The first installment of Thao Thao’s serialized reportage that appeared in Việt Báo just after Phụng’s was entitled Gái Lục Sì (Dispensary Girls), while all later installments were given the name Gái Trụy Lạc (Depraved Girls) (see Thao Thao 1937). For Phụng, the sex industry by definition involved corruption, depravity, and debauchery. However, Phụng’s usages of these terms have subtleties that merit further explication. Contemporary Vietnamese morality placed strong restrictions on female sexuality. Premarital and extramarital sex for women were condemned, and even widows were expected to remain “faithful” (chung thủy) to their deceased husbands and never remarry. Moreover, in the prerevolutionary period, virtually all marriages were arranged (see Malarney 2002, 149); thus men and women
had to submit to the choices made by their parents. This practice meant that there was no historical tradition of morally acceptable open courtship, and although there were notions similar to what can be described as “true love”—an idea best exemplified in The Tale of Kiều—the overriding expectations were that women were not to court; they were to submit to their parents’ demands, marry the individual the parents had chosen, and remain with him until death, regardless of personal feelings.

By the late 1930s, particularly in a large urban center such as Hanoi, Vietnam’s encounter with French colonial rule had led to a profound loosening of these strictures, a trend that Phụng, in line with the comments of several French observers, relates to the weakening of the father’s authority in the Vietnamese family. As a result of this weakening, young, unmarried women were allowed to circulate more freely in social life, so they came into contact with greater numbers of men. The danger here from Phụng’s perspective was that by this time Vietnam’s encounter with French culture had made many people, especially young women, “romantic” (lãng mạn). The central element in Phụng’s usage of the term was that “romantic” embraced the idea of romantic love, notably as exemplified in French literature. For Phụng, becoming “romantic” was dangerous as it created an overwhelming desire within an individual to be with another person, and the strength of this desire impaired a person’s judgment and greatly increased the likelihood of making a bad decision that could have damaging consequences. Being “romantic” prevented people from duly considering the potential consequences of the choices they were making, cultivated a dismissiveness toward the moral expectations incumbent upon them, and made the fulfillment of the strongly felt desire the paramount consideration. It was particularly dangerous for women as it made them susceptible to bad choices regarding men that could severely damage their moral standing, destroy their relations with family members, render them unmarried, lead to pregnancy outside of wedlock, infect them with a venereal disease, or (as in the case of Lâm Đì and Lục Xì) put them on a path that led to prostitution. In Phụng’s thinking, therefore, colonial social conditions had opened up a space in which women could become “romantic” and act on it, and this transition had created an environment in which women, due to the poorly considered choices they made, could more readily slide into the moral failure of becoming “corrupt” or “depraved.”

Phụng, in his treatment of individuals’ “becoming romantic,” is obviously critical of it, but there is an interesting nuance in his usage related to the question of agency. Women who became romantic and then descended into depravity had some measure of personal responsibility for their choices, but
society was also responsible because it tolerated the changes that had created the social opportunities for women to both experience and act upon these desires. More significant, Phụng repeatedly asserts that men also held an important measure of responsibility. The weakened father bore some responsibility, but as Phụng emphasizes throughout both Lăm Đĩ and Lục Xì, it was men, usually of a disreputable or predatory variety, who created the conditions for women to go down the path to ruin. Throughout these two texts one finds a variety of male characters—hotel boys, rickshaw drivers, soldiers, errant husbands, wealthy young cads on the prowl, corrupt police officers, and others—who maltreat women, often by taking advantage of their trust, poverty, and/or credulity. And, of course, there was no shortage of male clients from all levels of Vietnamese society who used women and kept them in lives of corruption and depravity. Thus while the descent into corruption and prostitution was indeed a type of moral failure for women, this failure was not confined to them alone, as it was the army of male enablers who often pulled them into the sex industry and kept them there. As Phụng argues in his critique of those he calls “misguided moralists” (bọn đạo đức “không phải đường”), who singled out women as morally corrupt, the moral failures of the commercial sex industry belonged to both women and men.

POVERTY AND PROSTITUTION IN COLONIAL HANOI

The anxieties Phụng articulates with regard to the deleterious consequences that emerged in the colonial period due to the loosening of restraints on desire all demonstrate that for Phụng such changes could not be regarded as progress. His engagement with this issue, however, while obviously critical, was related to a deeper question: why did women become prostitutes? The recruitment question featured prominently in Lăm Đĩ, and in the initial pages of Lục Xì Phụng reengages the issue when he raises the question of whether most of the women who become prostitutes do so because they enjoy it. In the early sections of the text Phụng seems intrigued by this argument, which places the blame squarely on the women involved, and his discussion of the avariciousness of some of the occasional prostitutes in earlier sections fits with this argument as well. However, an interesting point that emerges in the text, likely due to the fact that Lục Xì was written and published in serialized form over a three-month period, is that Phụng’s personal experiences appear to have served as a corrective, and as the text progresses, he moves away from this initial argument and advocates another that places the
responsibility for resorting to prostitution more squarely upon the socioeco-
nomic realities that many women faced in colonial Vietnam.

To appreciate this point, it will be useful to provide more detail on the
characteristics of prostitutes, which Phụng and his readers understood but
about which he provides limited information in the text. Systematic evidence
on such points as the average age of prostitutes or their places of origin over
time does not exist, though archival records and other sources give some
helpful glimpses. One of the most complete sources regarding age is a 1914
list compiled by the Service des Moeurs of the women held in the Munici-
pal Dispensary on the evening of February 17–18, 1914. Of the thirty-one
women, one was 45, four were in their thirties (with the oldest 38), one
was 29, another was 28, and the remaining twenty-four (77.4%) were aged
18–24. The average age of the last group was 20.2 years (MH 2584). Other
documents in the same file and others show a preponderance of women in
the 18–20–year range, though older women were involved as well. One par-
ticularly sad case was that of Nguyễn Thị Xuân, a 35-year-old from Thái Bình
Province who, according to a 1916 report, had been hospitalized eight times
for venereal disease. She had apparently left home at the age of 9 and was
considered no longer fit for prostitution (MH 2584). Equally shocking were
the cases of Nguyễn Thị Lai, 16 years of age, and her friend Nguyễn Thị Nhu,
14, both of whom were treated in the Dispensary in 1913. Nhu, in fact, was
treated for several months (MH 2584). Joyeux (1930, 460) noted that many
women started working as prostitutes at 12 or 13. Women were supposed to
be 18 to register as prostitutes, but younger women obviously entered the
trade, a trend likely influenced by the clients’ preference for virgins in order to
avoid infection with a venereal disease. Coppin (1930, 570) claimed in 1925
that the immense majority of prostitutes were older, though he never pro-
vided any numbers, and his comments appear to apply only to licensed broth-
els and registered prostitutes. Joyeux in 1930 said the majority were between
18 and 30, and later Charbonnier commented that almost all prostitutes were
in the 18–35–year range. He interestingly noted that the economic crises of
the 1930s had brought many younger women into prostitution (1936, 13).

The most comprehensive source for place of origin is again the 1914
list. Of those thirty-one women, nine came from Hà Đông Province (which
was adjacent to Hanoi on the east and southeast side) and seven came from
Hanoi, while others came from the city of Haiphong (two), and such Red
River delta provinces as Nam Định (five), Hà Nam (two), Thái Bình (two),
Hưng Yên (two), Phú Lý (one), and Kiến An (one) (MH 2584). In other
words, 71% of the women came from rural areas, a figure that, based upon
scattered evidence in other files, probably underrepresents the rural origins of most prostitutes, though that is conjecture. In the text Phụng makes a number of references to the putative places of origin of different prostitutes, all of which are in the countryside.

The predominance of rural areas as the places of origin points to both the primary cause for entry into prostitution and another source of Phụng’s anxieties regarding prostitution and venereal disease: poverty. It was true, as Phụng acknowledged, that various paths into prostitution existed—notably for the occasional prostitutes who worked only for immediate gains—but for the majority, prostitution represented the most compelling, if not the only, solution to poverty. Dr. Eugène Guillemet commented that the “frequent destitution” of local women made it easy for them to enter prostitution (quoted in Abadie-Bayro 1930, 552). According to Joyeux (1930, 460), most clandestine prostitutes came from poverty. Charbonnier perhaps summed this situation up best. When arguing for the introduction of a policy to warn off those who had just started to work as prostitutes, he countered his own argument by noting that “It can thus be said that the depraved are not very numerous; many among them have gone into prostitution because of poverty and the lack of work” (1936, 61).

The poverty of prostitutes was readily visible. Phụng comments on the ragged and threadbare clothing that many of them wore. Thao Thao described the prostitutes he encountered in the Dispensary as “coarse, dirty, languid” (February 16, 1937, 1). Culturally constructed ideas of filth were associated with prostitutes, and the need to eliminate its various forms was perhaps best exemplified in the slogan painted on the wall of the Dispensary’s classroom: “Nobody loves a dirty person” (Chẳng ai yêu người bẩn thỉu). Dirtiness aside, many prostitutes did not look healthy. French physicians confirmed their often poor physical condition, even excluding venereal disease. For example, Guillemet commented in 1915 about the women who loitered around a Hanoi garrison: “There are women there of all ages, dressed in rags that cover up vermin, and who carry on their faces or bodies the evident stigmata of syphilis” (quoted in Abadie-Bayro 1930, 544). Coppin commented of the population of Vietnamese prostitutes in 1925 that “this troop is composed of an immense majority of older women, repugnant and dirty, and very often riven with scabies” (1930, 570). Charbonnier later continued that “In effect, these women are far from being clean, often riven with scabies, because scabies are a rather widespread affliction among the poor class in Tonkin” (1936, 12). (Scabies is a skin infection caused by mites that burrow under the top layers of skin to lay eggs. Apart from causing severe itching, the condition
also produces bumps, blisters, or even a hard scaling of the skin. Given that it commonly affects such visible places as the areas between the fingers, wrists, and elbows, it was an easily identifiable symbol of poverty. Thao Thao (February 17, 1937, 3) noted that prostitutes used makeup to conceal the dark colored marks from scabies. For many prostitutes, their clothes and bodies openly displayed their poverty.

Another measure of the poverty of prostitutes was the fees they charged. Although there existed in the Hanoi prostitute population a few so-called “deluxe hens” (poules de luxe) who could charge higher fees, most prostitutes charged very little for their encounters. Charbonnier comments that fees were subject to variation, particularly according to the type of client. A coolie was charged 10–20 sous (1–2 hào), a soldier or laborer 25–30 sous (2.5–3 hào), a Vietnamese noncommissioned officer or European soldier 50 sous (5 hào), and a European 2–3 piasters (20–30 hào) (Charbonnier 1936, 17).16 It is worth noting that according to various newspaper advertisements in early 1937, it cost 3 sous to purchase one copy of Việt Báo, 60 sous for one dose of Thuốc Năm 1935 (a gonorrhea medication, with severe cases apparently requiring two doses), and 20 piasters for a high-quality satin top. The clientele of the prostitution industry was dominated by coolies, laborers, and soldiers; thus for the vast majority of prostitutes, encounters produced very little income. Phụng poignantly describes in the text how women, due to desperation, are forced engage in sex in empty areas in the city for just a few sous.

It is clear that Phụng was deeply troubled that prostitution, which in turn brought its own sources of suffering, was the only possible solution for the poverty and deprivation of many women. Thao Thao echoes this same sentiment in his reportage on the Dispensary. He tells the stories of Lan and Tuyệt, two women whose poverty drove them into prostitution and ultimately to the Dispensary, where he met them. Lan had been born into a poor family and dreamt of wealth. Although her entry into prostitution is unclear, one day a client took her to a seedy hotel with a promise to pay her five piasters. She fell asleep after their encounter, and the client slipped off with all her clothing and without paying the bill. In a cruel shakedown, Lan had to take out a debt to the hotel proprietress and sell herself to pay off the debt. She was later arrested by a Police des Moeurs officer one evening when leaving the hotel (Thao Thao, February 24, 1937, 2).

Tuyệt was also poor. In her mid-twenties in 1937, she had four years before been in love with a young student who was also poor but who received financial support from his relatives in southern Vietnam. A neighbor who was attracted to her decided to destroy their relationship by secretly inform-
ing his southern relatives about it. The latter stopped sending money and told
the student to return. He abandoned his studies, and the couple for a time
was forced to live on cod liver oil and quinine to stave off hunger. He later
returned to the south and died not long after. Tuyết had, however, become
pregnant and soon gave birth. In a bid to support herself and her child, she
became the minor wife of the interested neighbor (which was legal at that
time), but his first wife would not stand for it, so Tuyết fled to Hanoi's out-
skirts. There she set up a stand to sell drinks, but the venture soon failed,
and without any means, “she had to listen to the enticing words of the rick-
shaw drivers” and went into prostitution. She was picked up by the Police des
Moeurs, and without anyone to adequately care for it, her child became ill
and died (Thao Thao, February 24, 1937, 2).

Phùng tells the stories of two more prostitutes, Lành and Yên, two
women of similar backgrounds whose poverty drove them into prostitu-
tion. However, Phùng’s approach also quietly asserts that while poverty was
indeed a significant factor, a more profound issue was the social and eco-
nomic vulnerability of women, which opened them to sexual exploitation
by men. In colonial Vietnam, women had few options available to them to
independently earn an income, and those that they did have, such as Tuyết's
drink stand or Lành’s selling of assorted fruits, often generated little income.
Women were structurally vulnerable, particularly if they lacked familial sup-
port; thus when their limited options failed, prostitution became one of the
only viable options left to them. Phùng also highlights the fact that ultimately
it is usually men who take advantage of these vulnerable women and draw
them into prostitution. The attention that Phùng gives to Lành's life story
demonstrates this position. Lành's path to prostitution begins with her being
abandoned as an orphan when she was a young girl. Young, vulnerable, and
poor, she is enticed by a Vietnamese soldier into her first commercial sexual
encounter. Phùng indicates that there was a certain curiosity for her that led
her to agree to the request, but ultimately the choice was about survival. It is
significant that it is a man who is ready to exploit her vulnerability and lead
her into prostitution.

As noted above, as Lục Xì progresses, Phùng changes his tone regarding
the issue of why women enter prostitution. In the first chapter, he takes a
relatively hard line, in which he asserts that many women enter prostitution
not because of need but instead because of an “art for art’s sake” mentality
in which they do it for pleasure or other morally suspect reasons. However,
by the narrative’s end he has become much more openly sympathetic to the
women. He brings this point powerfully into focus in the description of the
evening he spends with Lành and Yến in the seedy hotel. Even though he finds Lành quite repellent, he is very sympathetic to her plight. The inclusion of these women’s stories is clearly part of an effort to humanize the women for his readers by describing their suffering and demonstrating male responsibility for prostitution. However, what he excludes here is equally significant. In his reportage on the Dispensary, Thao Thao’s presentation of the case of Lan is basically sympathetic, but he intimates that she is covetous and materialistic. He takes this point further in his description of a third woman named Sen, who is the wife of a government employee with a limited salary. Apparently most of the women in Sen’s circle of friends, Thao Thao asserts, played cards with their neighbors, and Sen turned to occasional clandestine prostitution to cover her gambling debts; she was ultimately caught and sent to the Dispensary. Thao Thao concludes: “Fond of the new, fond of partaking of the ‘new, strange’ pleasures of men who are not their husbands, thus many women have run from happiness into depravity” (February 24, 1937, 2). In constructing his narrative, Phụng acknowledges that some women were drawn into prostitution for such reasons, but he does not elaborate on any such cases. Instead, the overall point he wants to argue is that because of their poverty, for many women there is no other choice, and that makes them victims.

IGNORANCE AND THE PHYSICAL COSTS OF PROSTITUTION AND VENEREAL DISEASE

By the end of Lục Xì, Phụng emphasizes that poverty brought many women into prostitution and that compulsion forced them into lives of suffering and multiple indignities, a point he emphasizes by repeatedly stating that some women had to sell their bodies up to ten times a night. He also emphasizes other dangers prostitutes faced—notably the risk of nonconsensual sex or violence from drunken clients, especially soldiers. Prostitution also presented the women with another form of suffering in the extremely high likelihood that they would become infected with a venereal disease. The existence of these diseases relates to the last of his main anxieties about prostitution because the diseases represented a threat not only to the health of individuals, but to that of the Vietnamese people as a whole. Moreover, the existence of the diseases in part derived from widespread ignorance in the Vietnamese population, a level of ignorance that challenged the notion that Vietnam was in fact progressing. In order to understand this point, an examination of
the nature of venereal diseases and their consequences in colonial Hanoi is necessary.

The three main venereal diseases that afflicted Hanoi’s population were gonorrhea, syphilis (primary, secondary, and tertiary forms), and soft chancre or chancroids. Venereal lymphogranuloma, also known as Nicholas-Favre disease or climatic buboes, was also present, though on a small scale. It is difficult to make any definitive claims regarding the relative prevalence of the first three diseases because they varied both over time and within the Vietnamese population. Definitive numbers do not exist regarding their relative distribution among the male population, but an analysis of data collected by military doctors between 1914 and 1928 indicates that among the 10,682 cases of these diseases treated among Vietnamese soldiers, 44% were treated for gonorrhea, 35.7% for soft chancre, and 20.3% for syphilis (7.2% primary syphilis, 13.1% secondary and tertiary syphilis) (Joyeux 1930, 471). Military doctors and colonial officials were seriously concerned about venereal diseases because high rates among the soldiery diminished combat effectiveness. Statistics on men from the Venereology Service of the Hôpital Indigène in 1934 listed gonorrhea as the most common disease (39.8%), followed by syphilis (33.4%) (Grenierboley 1935, 53), though these numbers reflect only those who went to the hospital for treatment.

Data on the relative prevalence of the different diseases among the female population are also scarce. According to the 1934 Venereology Service data, 47.1% of women were treated for syphilis and 31.4% for gonorrhea (Grenierboley 1935, 53). With regard to the prostitute population, data are scarce, and the best information was provided by Joyeux in 1930. Based upon a study of registered and unregistered prostitutes at the Dispensary in early 1930, Joyeux calculated that among registered prostitutes, syphilis was the most common (62.5%), followed by soft chancre (26.5%) and gonorrhea (17.5%). Regarding clandestine prostitutes, however, among a group of forty-six who were arrested, 63% tested positive for syphilis, while among another group of fifty clandestine prostitutes, gonorrhea was most common (30%) (Joyeux 1930, 494). Theron, in his capacity as director of the Municipal Hygiene Service, estimated in 1933 that at any given time somewhere between one-third to two-thirds of the prostitutes in the Dispensary tested positive for syphilis (MH 2592). These numbers attest to the variability in infection rates while also seeming to indicate that syphilis afflicted the female population more heavily. Dr. Laurent Gaide and Dr. Campunaud concluded in 1930, citing earlier data from Dr. Le Roy des Barres, that venereal disease morbidity in Tonkin stood at approximately 4–10% for the countryside and 9–16% for
Hanoi, though Le Roy des Barres felt these numbers were below the reality (Gaide and Campunaud 1930, 19ff.). Although a precise figure cannot be extrapolated from the data, Dr. M. Riou noted that in 1936, 6,634 patients visited the Dermato-Venereological Clinic of Hanoi’s School of Medicine for venereal disease treatment, a figure that represented 64.5% of all patients. Gonorrhea was the most common disease (61.2%), followed by syphilis (28.3%) and chancroids (10.6%). Riou noted that most of the patients were coolies, “boys,” petty traders, and modest employees or functionaries. It is significant that prostitutes only rarely or never came. The 6,634 cases would represent roughly 3.7% of Hanoi’s population; thus, considering that these data came from only one medical facility, venereal disease morbidity in Hanoi was likely quite high (Riou 1937, 129–130).

In spite of the deficiencies in the data on relative levels of infection among prostitutes, several points can be confirmed regarding the women’s experiences with venereal diseases. To begin with, venereal diseases were a basic fact of life for prostitutes, and avoiding infection at some point was seemingly impossible. Evidence indicates that the overall rate of infection among registered and clandestine prostitutes was extremely high, although estimates vary. Le Roy des Barres (1930, 601, 612) asserted that between 1914 and 1926, 79% of clandestine prostitutes were infected, but that number concealed a disturbing trend in the period from 1921 to 1926, when the average jumped to 91.8%. Joyeux (1930, 495) determined that among 50 clandestine prostitutes examined at the Dispensary, 92% had venereal infections. Charbonnier (1936, 18) reported that approximately 96% of the clandestine prostitutes arrested by the Police des Moeurs were infected, though it is unclear how he arrived at that number. The situation for registered prostitutes was somewhat different. Examining the data for May 20, 1930, Joyeux (1930, 495) noted that 45% of the registered prostitutes had venereal diseases. These numbers, he argued, were a testament to the Dispensary’s utility. However, as Joyeux himself recognized, one day’s results concealed a more troubling, deeper reality. In a study of 182 registered prostitutes examined in the period between January 1 and June 1, 1930, Joyeux determined that 140 (76.9%) had a minimum of one positive bacteriological or serological exam, while another 35 (19.2%) were hospitalized for chancres or metritis, even though their laboratory tests were negative. That left a mere 3.9% who had managed to remain healthy over a five-month period (Joyeux 1930, 493). What should also be noted, however, is that while the majority of prostitutes suffered from only one infection at a time, some suffered from multiple infections. Concrete data are limited, though Joyeux’s data from 1930 had 9% of registered pros-
stitutes with multiple infections and 20% of clandestine prostitutes with multiple infections (494). The difference between the two groups was likely due to the increased medical surveillance of the registered prostitutes.

Given the high morbidity for venereal disease among prostitutes, women were regularly being infected and treated. Theron asserted in 1933 that there were many cases of women who experienced the repetitive cycle of infection, cure, and reinfection (MH 2592). The case of Lành, described by Phụng, as well as scattered archival cases, shows that many women experienced multiple infections over time, and recurrences led to multiple stays in the Dispensary. The highest number of recorded infections I encountered was the case of the woman with eight hospitalizations (mentioned above). Dr. Armand de Raymond asserted that the Vietnamese tended to use indigenous treatments first and turned to Western medical treatments only when the former failed (cited in Joyeux 1930, 467), a point that Riou (1937, 130) repeated, while adding that the failure to adequately treat diseases led to longer periods of contagiousness. Joyeux (1930, 496) provides a complete list of the preferred pharmaceuticals for French doctors, among them the widely used “914” for syphilis. The existence of a different pharmacopeia, however, did not necessarily entail any greater success in eliminating the infections. Syphilis, like soft chancre, could be treated effectively, but against gonorrhea, Theron concluded, “We are defenseless”; he further explained that a “misinformed public believes that the women who leave us are healthy and then get infected” (MH 2592). He also reckoned that at any given moment there were 200–300 women ready to transmit a venereal disease, though it is difficult to evaluate that number (MH 2592). Finally, given the limitations of the treatments, some women who were diagnosed with venereal disease were never cured, a point evident in the requirement that incurables were to be “decarded” (décarté) and removed from prostitution (MH 2587).

The main outlines of the data presented above were available to Phụng in the *Bulletin de la Société Médico-Chirurgicale de l’Indochine*, which he consulted and from which he extensively quotes in the text, as well as in the documents that Dr. Joyeux gives him in the text. One can therefore conclude that Phụng was well aware of the real dimensions of the venereal disease problem among the local population. However, in the text Phụng is clearly most troubled about the consequences of this situation and ultimately its causes. Phụng was obviously concerned about the level of suffering that venereal diseases caused for the population. For example, one tragic consequence of the presence of gonorrhea in the population was blindness. Gonorrhea is caused by bacteria that, if exposed to the eyes, can cause blind-
ness through gonococcal conjunctivitis. This disease, if left untreated, can completely destroy the cornea. At particular risk are infected pregnant mothers, who can pass it on to their newborns during childbirth. According to the physician Pierre Keller, whose work Phụng cites and who was the director of Hanoi Ophthalmological Institute in the late 1930s, in 1932 there were approximately 700,000 blind people in Tonkin. He estimated that 84% of them had become blind due to external causes and that most had been blinded by gonococcal infection (Keller 1937, 543). Phụng comments in the text, drawing on Keller’s and Joyeux’s work, that 70% of all blindness was cause by gonorrhea exposure. Keller (1937, 544) wrote that in 1936 he recorded 242 cases of gonococcal conjunctivitis at his institute and that in 1937 there were 312 cases, 194 of which were adults and 118 children. Given the absence of adequate social services, many blind individuals ended up trying to get by as beggars, street musicians, or even fortune tellers. Another problem related to the inability to adequately treat these diseases, or the fact that some Vietnamese apparently left their diseases untreated after the first symptoms disappeared, which left many people with lifelong chronic pain or disabilities. Le Roy des Barres (1931) also argued that chronic untreated venereal diseases were an important factor in the high rates of genital cancers among the Vietnamese, though I am uncertain whether Phụng read Le Roy des Barres’s research on this issue.

Yet another dimension of suffering caused by venereal diseases that concerned Phụng relates to the many innocents whose lives were damaged by infection. In the text Phụng repeatedly condemns men who are infected by prostitutes and then infect their unknowing wives. Children were also innocent victims, usually through infection from the mother, though some apparently were infected by wet nurses as well. As noted, some children became blind due to exposure to gonorrhea, but syphilis had its own negative consequences. Coppin noted in 1925 that syphilis and gastroenteritis were the two most devastating causes of the “horrifying infant mortality” among the indigenous population (1930, 586). Indeed, although the numbers had improved from a staggering 370 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1930, Hanoi’s infant mortality rate still stood at 210 per 1,000 live births in 1937 (see Malarney 2006). For those who were infected with syphilis but survived, the consequences were often severe. The 1934 data from the Venerology Service indicate that 42% of the 69 children treated there suffered from hereditary syphilis (Grenierboley 1935, 53), and as Coppin commented, these children could be afflicted with the “grave manifestations” of the disease (1930, 586), a point sadly evident in the severe deformations of faces, hands, feet, and teeth that
were recorded in a clinical handbook published for dermatology students in Hanoi in 1943 (Grenierboley and Nguyen Huu Phiem 1943).

Also troubling for Phụng was the fact that both gonorrhea and syphilis contributed to high rates of miscarriages, stillbirths, and infertility. Coppin commented in 1925 that “it is not very rare” to have a woman who had been pregnant twenty times but who had only 2–4 surviving children (1930, 586). Both diseases also caused infertility in men and women, though their rates were unclear (Coppin 1930, 586). The combination of all of these factors created for Phụng a strain of what can be described as racial anxiety that runs throughout the text. He makes regular allusions to the fact that venereal diseases were weakening the “race” (giống nòi) and that if they were left unchecked, they would undoubtedly leave the Vietnamese people permanently weakened and unable to develop as a society. Racial anxiety as a result of the deleterious impact of venereal diseases was not unique, a point evident in Vaughan’s (1991) writing on syphilis in British African colonies. French doctors and administrators expressed similar concerns, and it is interesting that Phụng clearly embraces the arguments advanced by these men. Coppin had written of the “serious repercussions” of these diseases for the Vietnamese race (1930, 584). He and others had written of the necessity to design and implement effective policies to control venereal disease in Tonkin in order to “preserve the race.” In constructing his own argument, Phụng does not distance himself from these colonial health officials but instead openly articulates and endorses their arguments.

Phụng’s descriptions in the text demonstrate a keen sense of concern and anxiety over the devastating impact of venereal diseases, both individual and collective. Given the reformist goals of Lược Xã, a question is raised regarding what he considers to be the primary cause of this constellation of negative phenomena. As Zinoman has noted, in Lược Xã Phụng lists over twenty different causes for the prostitution and venereal disease problems in colonial Hanoi, but he does not provide a definitive ranking that establishes which he regarded as the most compelling (personal communication). Nevertheless, when considering the continued propagation of venereal diseases exclusively, Phụng clearly emphasizes that their spread was due to one significant cause: ignorance. Because Vietnamese were ignorant about such issues as the causes, symptoms, prophylaxis, and treatment of venereal diseases, they continued to spread virtually unchecked throughout Vietnamese society. Ultimately, this ignorance was itself the result of an unacceptable hesitation to speak openly about sexual matters.

If one relied exclusively on French administrative reports and colonial
medical literature, one would get the impression that the Vietnamese did not attach a great deal of importance to the physical effects of venereal disease. Joyeux commented that “we know that for all the Annamites, venereal diseases are a normal problem, without great importance, and they treat them most often . . . with contempt” (1930, 466). Phụng’s commentary in Lục Xi is sympathetic to this line of argument, particularly the “contempt” with which the diseases were treated. People became infected, and that was part of the normal course of life; though the evidence indicates that they did treat them, an infection itself appears not to have prevented many people from continuing to have sexual relations. Coppin (1930, 585) recounts a story related to him by Le Roy des Barres of a family whose unmarried son was infected with syphilis. The family sought to arrange a marriage for him in spite of his infection and apparently successfully did so. Within the commercial sex industry, prostitutes regularly continued to work while infected, and their attempts to conceal their infections during the sanitary visits that Phụng describes in the text demonstrate a willful attempt to continue working when infected. It is also safe to conclude, based upon the high rates of infection within the prostitute population, that many male clients similarly engaged in sexual relations while infected.

Given these facts, it is easy to conclude that there was a high level of disregard for others or perhaps even malevolence among those who had sex while infected. Although in some circumstances that might have been the case, such a conclusion assumes that the individuals involved understood that they could transmit their infection to others during sexual relations. On this point, both French medical officials and Phụng argued that large numbers of people either lacked or had an imperfect understanding of the modes of transmission of different venereal diseases. It is important to note that in the late 1930s, knowledge of germ theory was unevenly distributed in Vietnamese society. The concept of the “germ” (vi trùng) started to gain currency in Vietnamese society only in the 1920s, and by 1936, the Hanoi-based doctor Bưu Hiệp published a study entitled La Médicine Française dans la Vie Annamite (French Medicine in Annamite Life), in which he argued that local understandings of germ theory were indeed incomplete (Bưu Hiệp 1936, 103). It should be noted, though, that in some cases European understandings were little better, a point Phụng emphasizes in his references to the large numbers of prostitutes with anal venereal infections, the result of the preference of European soldiers to engage in anal intercourse because they thought it reduced their chances of contracting venereal disease.

From Phụng’s perspective, therefore, one of the primary reasons for the
continued spread of venereal disease was simple ignorance. People did not understand the nature of their infections; thus they inadvertently contracted them and transmitted them to others. This argument had a long history in the French colonial medical literature, as well as in some parts of the Vietnamese intellectual community. Coppin (1930, 590–592) openly argued that ignorance propagated venereal diseases, as did Le Roy des Barres (1930, 609). Among the Vietnamese, beginning in the mid-1920s a series of texts was published in Vietnamese that focused on hygiene. This series included a short-lived journal entitled Vệ-Sinh Báo (Hygiene News), which ran from 1926 to 1929 and focused on the germ-based etiologies of common diseases and general hygiene issues; it also included a number of publications exclusively devoted to sexual hygiene for married couples, such as Nguyễn Văn Khai’s Nam Nữ Hôn-Nhân Vệ-Sinh (Male-Female Marital Hygiene, 1924), a translation of a Chinese text; Nguyễn Di Luân’s Nam Nữ Æ Tình (Male-Female Love, 1932); Nguyễn An Nhân and Lê Trúc Hiên’s Nam Nữ Bí Mật Chỉ Nam (Guide to Male-Female Secrets, 1933); and Tô Linh Thảo’s Nam-Nữ Phòng Trùng Bí-mật Tân Y Thuật (New Medical Secrets of Male-Female Sexual Relations, 1933). These volumes were distinctly pronatal and took the position that a healthy body, marriage, pregnancy, and successful childbirth all required a scientific understanding of human biology and sexuality. To that end, all discussed venereal diseases and their spread through sexual relations, while the later volumes gave detailed descriptions of their symptoms, and Nam Nữ Bí Mật Chỉ Nam featured images of the bacteria that caused various venereal diseases. The latter volume’s author even claimed that possessing this knowledge was part of being “civilized” (văn minh) (Nguyễn An Nhân and Lê Trúc Hiên 1933, 13).

All of these texts, as well as the Bulletin de la Société Médico-Chirurgicale de l’Indochine, were available in the National Library in Hanoi. Phụng had a library card and may well have consulted them there. One significant piece of supporting evidence for this conjecture is that in his novel Làm Đĩ, the main character, Huyền, asserts that one of the primary reasons for the chain of events that led her into prostitution was her ignorance regarding human sexuality. Làm Đĩ concludes with the narrator passionately calling for greater sexual education to end ignorance and its terrible consequences. French doctors such as Coppin had also argued for sexual education (Coppin 1930, 592), but an interesting point that indicates Phụng’s engagement with his compatriots’ work is his condemnation of masturbation throughout Làm Đĩ and at the end of Lục Xì. All of the above Vietnamese volumes addressed the alleged dangers of masturbation, but Phụng’s assertion of masturbation’s del-
eterious physical and mental consequences in *Lục Xì* is seemingly borrowed directly from Nguyễn Di Luân’s *Nam Nịt Ai Tinh* (1932, 25). Finally, these authors also argued that knowledge of sexual hygiene was vital to strengthening the race.

In *Lục Xì*, Phụng aggressively endorses the acquisition of sexual hygiene knowledge, particularly through the attention he gives to the School of Sexual Prophylaxis (École de Prophylaxie Sexuelle) and “The Ballad of Eros” (Phong Tình Ca Khúc). The establishment of the School of Sexual Prophylaxis was part of the 1936 Dispensary reforms. Situated within the Dispensary compound, its primary goal was to teach prostitutes how to successfully avoid becoming infected with venereal diseases. Phụng gives a full accounting of its staffing and operation, but suffice it to say here that it attempted to achieve these goals through instruction on basic hygienic practices and the symptoms of venereal disease. The school’s education had a practical, hands-on component that Phụng witnessed, but its defining component was “The Ballad of Eros,” a lengthy poem written by the Dispensary staff that describes venereal disease symptoms and prophylactic methods. In the text, Phụng receives a copy of the poem from Dr. Joyeux, who explains to him that colonial medical officials had decided that the most effective way to get the prostitutes to master such information was to put it in poem form. This was a sagacious observation given the widespread popularity of memorizing and reciting poetry in Vietnamese society. Every woman held in the Dispensary in the late 1930s was required to attend the school’s classes, and in order to ensure mastery of the poem’s content, a woman could not be released from the Dispensary until she could fully recite the ballad. If faithfully followed, the women undoubtedly would have benefited.

Phụng provided the text of “The Ballad of Eros” in one of the early sections in the serialization of *Lục Xì*, and he cleverly used the somewhat hysterical reactions to its content by some members of contemporary Vietnamese society to underscore his argument that while ignorance was a prime factor in the continued propagation of venereal disease, this ignorance itself derived from the stigmatization and avoidance of frank discussions about sexuality. Phụng criticizes the commonly held notion that these topics were morally suspect, an idea emphasized in the usage of the adjective *bẩn* in the discourse on sexuality. *Bẩn* in its simplest form can be rendered as “dirty,” but in the context of sexuality, it captures the English-language connotation of “dirty” as in a “dirty joke.” “Bẩn” topics were regarded as off limits, and discussion of them was to be avoided. Moreover, the designation of these topics as morally suspect was combined with what Phụng regarded as excessive modesty or
shyness, notably on the part of women. Throughout the text Phụng employs a variety of descriptors to connote this shyness, such as cả thẹn, hổ thẹn, and e thẹn. As he argues, this shyness, and a certain measure of shame that accompanied it, created a hesitance or unwillingness to openly try to understand the nature, causes, and prophylaxis of venereal disease, not to mention human sexuality in general. This reticence could have had a devastating impact on families when straying husbands brought diseases home to their wives, but in a rich irony that Phụng captures in his descriptions of the prostitutes’ reactions to their lessons in the School of Sexual Prophylaxis, it even engendered a reluctance on the part of prostitutes to learn about the diseases and actively engage their clients in order to avoid contracting the diseases. For Phụng, venereal diseases continued to exact their terrible toll on Vietnamese society because of an ignorance that ultimately derived from widely accepted cultural values. In this respect, therefore, Vietnamese society had yet to progress.

The French historian Alain Corbin commented of nineteenth-century French prostitutes that “The prostitute, in brief, did not write about herself” (1991, 107). There are no letters, journals, or manuscripts written by prostitutes that give us insights into their world, and even on something as basic as how they spoke, Corbin noted, “We know almost nothing of their language” (1991, 107). One of the remarkable contributions of Vũ Trọng Phụng’s Lục Xì is that it provides a unique glimpse into the lives and experiences of prostitutes in late 1930s Hanoi. As discussed in this introduction, the commercial sex industry was vast and constituted an important part of the city’s social reality. It was also a reality, however, that was rooted in poverty and suffering, and Phụng’s writing eloquently gives voice and humanity to those whose lives were most bitterly affected by it. It is equally significant that through the articulation of his anxieties related to prostitution and venereal disease, Phụng demonstrated that Vietnamese society was beset with serious problems, and these problems themselves demonstrated that Vietnam’s encounter with the allegedly superior French civilization had not brought progress. Instead, social and cultural life in late 1930s Hanoi was marked by the breakdown and collapse of significant components of precolonial life, and this loosening of important sociocultural moorings had left a trail of suffering, degradation, and what Phụng described as “spiritual squalor.” From Phụng’s perspective, Vietnamese society under colonial rule had become “vile and wretched in the extreme.” Prostitution, to use his own metaphor, was indeed a “muddy pool,” but by the late 1930s, Vietnam’s colonial encounter had made that pool more vile and fetid than ever, and its waters sickened all who came into contact with it.