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Maria Strasakova, *Life and Writings of Nguyễn Tuong Tam*

Mme Maria Strasakova presents a PhD Dissertation entitled *Life and Writings of Nguyễn Tuong Tam* (alias Nhat Linh). This work, having 346 p., has an excellent appearance : typo and general aspect, interesting pictures illustrating some topics of the work. Besides the study itself, a precious appendix gives the synopsis of some of the most famous of Nhat Linh's stories and novels. The style and composition are also fluent, friendly for the reader who is easily captivated. Maria Strasakova's Dissertation may be considered as a very sensitive approach of the Nhat Linh's life, torments, contradictions, and she was really pertinent in establishing and studying the narrow interaction between the man, the writer, the militant, and his time, a dramatic turning period placed under the colonialist authority with more or less harsh reactions and fights against such a situation, extended by fights for power and fulfilment of a new Vietnamese society.

Some constataions justify the pertinence of the approach. Mainly, until very recently, priority was given to the « winners », that is to say to Communist movement and personalities - the Communist themselves being aware to block any discourse suggesting that they were not the own real freedom and nationalist fighters and, so, the own real representative voices of the Vietnamese people ; the issues of the French War of Indochina

and, after that, of the American Vietnam war, naturally focused the specialist's attention on the Communist Movement and, because the best researchers of the years 1950-1980 were themselves predominantly leftist, this focusing became a dominant, quasi exclusive, point of view. The researches about the non-Communist movements - complexified by the fact that these « movements », as shown by Mme Strasakova, were not well structured and not massive ones - were rare, more often exclusively tackled by the bias of colonial repression. Idem concerning the researches about Vietnamese literature in a non-Communist perspective, except the singular Georges Boudarel's works until the 1990s. Idem yet, for the knowledge of the period of the so-called « régime de Saïgon » and despite the singular and effervescent political and intellectual life in the South of Vietnam between 1954 and 1975.

So, M. Strasakova's work makes up a lack, while engaging herself in the very new trend of developing researches on Vietnam. Choosing to study Nhat Linh's life, she reveals an exemplary intellectual and political career - not so uncommon in reality as shown in some other recent studies - in a very dramatic and ambiguous period of the history of Vietnam. So, she reveals the tragic destiny of those people, generally being intellectual or semi-intellectual and dreaming to change in the same movement the social spirit, the intellectual trends, the political fate of their country - but, so attached to their own real liberty, that is individual liberty and struggle for thinking and speaking freely, that they were totally unable to subscribe to the Communist quasi religious engagement. Nhat Linh is a real representative of this Vietnamese « generation of contradictions », ie that generation born after 1900 and emerging to maturity after the failure of the first modernist movements of frontal resistance against the colonization in the years 1905-1915 (Phan Boi Chau/Cuong Dê), then after the great deception generated in the reformist milieu by the poor political results of the politics of collaboration initiated by Sarraut until the years 1924-1925. Nevertheless, this generation seems to have been, volens nolens, deeply impacted by the French influence and, so, by the singularity of such a window on the world, and equally by the absolute refusal of French domination : like Nhat Linh's, it moves in a characteristic but depressive relation of admiration and hatred. More than political, the projects of these men, most of them issued from a literati and urban society, is first to open a sort of « space of liberty » to fulfil their own and complex dream, ie : a personal accomplishment, and to be a journalist and a writer is probably, as shown by some recent thesis, one of the more exciting perspectives for young Vietnamese people in the years 1930 ; an aesthetic project, essentially in Literature - where French influence and Vietnamese culture created something like an osmosis - expressed by the formation and the activities of the « Self Strength Literary Group » ; in fine, a social change

by a moral and intellectual revolution, particularly by a breaking-off with Confucian formalism and other expressions of immobilism and sterility. The tragedy, as revealed by M. Stasakova, lies in the difficulty or the impossibility to transform such a aesthetic and moral enterprise in a political movement, with strong and simple ideas, with a strong and large mass organization, and also with a strong practice of clandestinity facing the political repression. The affinity between Nhat Linh and A. Gide is also interesting from this point of view : while socially and politically committed, A. Gide, with his exaltation of individual strength of will, was largely powerless facing the rise of totalitarisms. In Nhat Linh's case, the latter has been, in fact, totally overwhelmed by politics : the Dissertation confirms what is known by many recent studies, that in the 1930s the French repression undermined irreparably the Reformist groups, these ones being deprived of some « culture of clandestinity » ; and they were still obliged to assume the same handicap facing the Communist ambitions and organisation.

M. Stasakova's account is particularly poignant, because it is a rare one to show lively the complete and dramatic destiny of that « generation of contradictions », how it was unable to set a course and to seize firmly, in this way, all the opportunities ; how it was decimated by Communists, or easily marginalized by the Diêm's power, without transition from the French Sûreté to totalitarian "enfermements". Being upset, the reader understands why, like some other famous writers, Nhat Linh's chose to end his life.

By her intellectual and political Nhat Linh's biography, M. Stasakova therefore develops a lively and, also, an exact picture, from inside, of a life, of an exemplary intellectual movement - absolutely not marginal at all -, of a brief Vietnamese history but so rich and "long" in view of the complexity and the succession of events and radical changes (of course, M. Stasakova does not forget the Japanese intervention and its confused consequences).

But some regrets and critical remarks may be expressed here. The main one is related to bibliography and lack of archivist documentation. Essentially based on the Nhat Linh's family members and friends' testimonies, the account is at the same time relied on two types of sources : anglo-saxon books of the 1960s-1970s and very recent analysis found in the web. But the first, largely inspired by French colonial testimonies and studies and, equally, by the denunciation of French responsibilities in the sequence of events, seems now to be relatively out-of-date and proceeding with a Manichean approach. Concerning the web resources, they often are incompleted, narrow-minded, and their source and origin are not always really identifiable. Above all, we must realize that the original sources for the knowledge of the period are both in French and Vietnamese languages. Even in the perspective of a philosophical dissertation, it would have been interesting to consult some French archive

fonds (Police for instance for the Nhat Linh's stay and expulsion from France) or, about the French Protectorate in Tonkin, the n° 1 Center of Archives in Hanoi. The richness of archives in French and Vietnamese also arose great interest among young French researchers since the publishing of Hemery & Brocheux's masterbook (*Indochine, la colonisation ambiguë*), with a completely and solid renewed view on the period : French repression and colonial mode of governance (Patrice Morlat), Vietnamese society and modernity in the 1920s-1930 (Nguyễn Văn Kỳ, quoted by M. Strasakova), colonial education (Pascale Besançon), Sarraut's promises and their failure (Agathe Larcher), first conciliations and contradictions in the 1920s (Emmanuelle Affidi's study about Nguyễn Văn Vinh and his journal *Dong Duong Tap Chi*), explosion of journals and condition of journalism under the colonial power (Lê Thu Hang), struggle between Communists and Nationalists (François Guillemot)... these topics, central in M Strasakova's Dissertation, are now exhaustively studied in France in works "de référence". They offer a subtle analysis of the relations between French and Vietnamese : with many aspects of brutal domination but also of intelligent and comprehensive mutual approaches and exchanges... the latter rather increasing the depressive situation of contradiction in which many Vietnamese intellectuals (and some French people with them) were caught, Nhat Linh's life being a good illustration of that.

Concerning the content, I shall limit myself to two simple remarks.

First, I regret that the analysis about the « Self Strength Literary Group » is not achieved by a special inquiry about this group, which is studied more as a subsidiary aspect of Nhat Linh's life than as a consubstantial one. Often mentioned in the course of the work, its composition and project appears only after the p. 233. But M. Strasakova's discussion about this group is short enough : is the constitution of such a group a typically Vietnamese feature or a typical expression of these colonial times ? apart the ambition to renew the foundations of the Vietnamese literature and, doing that, to break with a frozen ethic, and apart familial and friendly ties, what was the degree of coherence of such a group, particularly when facing colonial and communist radical oppositions ? What was its future ?

Secondly, M. Strasakova's reflexion is focusing on Nhat Linh's singular anti-Confucianism... though singularly Confucian when considering the Woman's fate as expressed in his novels and his relation with his own wife... It seems to be an additional contradiction in Nhat Linh's life and thoughts, and it was. But dealing with Nhat Linh's case quasi exclusively as an individual one, M. Strasakova conceals some important debates. What were the complex, contradictory, multifaceted meanings of so-called Confucianism in the 1920-1930 colonial Vietnam (subsidiary : why the Weberian debate which begins to shake the

Chinese elite in the 1930s has no real impact in Vietnam ?) ? We guess that, in Vietnam, Confucianism has always at least two faces that people distinguish quasi instinctively even under an appearance of permanent confusion : Confucianism may represent the hypocrisy serving immobilism in social and familial relations and the perversion of bureaucrats - an old debate in Vietnam since the Wang Yangming's reaction, largely supported by Vietnamese elite, against the classical neo-Confucianism unsincerity (XVIth century) ; but in the same time, Confucianism represents always high and estimated values : Rigor and Reason, respect of "natural" familial ties, cultivation of a noble behaviour and heart (non only in appearance like "other" Confuceans), a simple daily life far from urban or dull daily commitments... Beyond the apparent contradiction quoted by M. Strasakova, Nhat Linh illustrates quasi perfectly the Vietnamese attachment to the positive face of Confucianism, for instance when he chose to live in Dalat. (We may also consider that many French High authorities in colonial Viêtnam were non religious and Freemason and share the same dual attitude - admiration for Confucean ethics and reason, detestation for people using Confucianism to oppress others, ie corrupted mandarins). Perhaps, also, Nhat Linh's example compels us to have a better view on the strength of traditional ethic systems in people's life...

So, Maria Strasakova's Dissertation is a very interesting one. Apart her relatively old-dated documentation on the society in the studied times (precisely on the Vietnamo-French intellectual relations - but I guess that it was not easy for her to have a real and permanent access to libraries and archive fonds), she offers, as I said, a very sensitive account about an exemplary life in difficult times. She deserves to be congratulated for her choice and her approach, in studying a forgotten, and yet not so uncommon, personal voyage, and for shedding thus a new light on the Vietnamese complex internal hopes, disappointments and contradictions. The Dissertation is also one of the first to approach from inside the history of the transition, from French colonial regime to the « independant » one in the South of Vietnam.