

History of the Vietnamese Press in the First Half of the Twentieth Century: Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo and Economic and Literary Issues in Vietnam in the Early Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo (NKKTB: The Cochinchina Economic Newspaper) to determine its publication history, organisational structure, operating principles, and role in the development of the Vietnamese press in the early twentieth century. By comparing bibliographic records with surviving newspaper issues preserved on microfilm, the study corrects several inconsistencies regarding the date of the first issue, changes in editorship, and issue-numbering practices. The results show that NKKTB disseminated knowledge of agriculture, industry, and commerce while also combining news, current affairs, and literature to broaden its readership. This combination reflects the professionalization of journalism and, at the same time, reveals the relationship between the dissemination of economic knowledge and the formation of a reading market in Southern Vietnam in the early twentieth century.

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Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the history of the Vietnamese press underwent many changes: some materials no longer survive, while some information has not been verified in practice. For this reason, we survey Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo. This newspaper specialized in economics, but it also paid attention to the development of literature. Evidence of this is that the newspaper devoted approximately 25% of its space to poetry, novels, and short stories (two of eight pages) in order to attract readers.

In general, NKKTB has received little attention, perhaps because the newspaper had not yet created a distinctive voice and perhaps also because its period of existence was short (nearly four years). Nevertheless, several works have mentioned NKKTB or its authors.

The works that may be mentioned include Lê Ngọc Trự (1966), who referred to Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo in four lines (p. 8), giving its place of publication, weekly frequency, printer, 'imp. Saigonnaise,' and a total of 133 issues. Đỗ Quang Hưng (editor), Nguyễn Thành, and Dương Trung Quốc (2000) merely listed the newspaper's title and its dates of publication and cessation (p. 288), but some of this information is inaccurate (as discussed below). Huỳnh Văn Tòng (2000) introduced the newspaper more fully. In addition to such principal information as its dates of publication and

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cessation, proprietor, and editor, the author also discussed the newspaper's program and objectives.

In addition, studies of authors whose works were published in NKKTB have also mentioned the newspaper. The article *Bửu Đình* by Từ Quyên Đăng Việt Nam (1959) mentions NKKTB. However, the author was mistaken in claiming that Bửu Đình 'personally established another newspaper called Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo' (p. 47). In fact, Bửu Đình was only a very active contributor to this periodical. In some issues, he published two works at the same time: from issue 15/1, published on 15 November 1923, to issue 15/4, dated 06-17-1923, Bửu Đình published the short story *Gái đầu có gái lạ lòng* (it mean: What a Strange Girl!) and the novel *Nghĩa tình khắng khái* (Noble Loyalty and Righteousness). This novel unfinished. Trần Hữu Tá (2000) also mentioned NKKTB: 'Bửu Đình's novels were published in NKKTB, Tân thể kỷ...'.

In summary, the role of the newspaper as an economic newspaper for French Indochina has not yet been thoroughly examined, and it is hoped that this matter will be investigated in another study. This article approaches the issue in order to correct some inaccurate information concerning the newspaper's establishment, cessation, proprietor, and editor. Furthermore, we are interested in the literary works published by the newspaper and their contributions to the modernization of the nation's literature.

Research Methods

The article employs close reading of primary materials, including microfilm copies held at the General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City. It also compares other secondary sources concerning the origins, operating principles, and objectives of NKKTB. In addition, the article uses analytical and synthetic methods to develop the issues under investigation.

Research Content

Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo and economic issues

Correcting Some Information about the Establishment of Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo

In the Vietnamese Press Bibliography section of *History of the Vietnamese Press, 1865-1945*, Đỗ Quang Hưng, Nguyễn Thành, & Dương Trung Quốc (2000) provides the following information about this newspaper:

'NAM KỲ KINH TẾ BÁO

Published in Saigon

Issue no. 1, June 1919; final issue, 21 February 1924

Published weekly, economic information

Printed by Imprimemerie Moderne (p. 288).

According to Huỳnh Văn Tòng (2000), NKKTB's 'first issue appeared on 27 October 1910' (p. 181).

However, when we examined NKKTB on microfilm reels B265-B266, preserved at the General Sciences Library of Ho Chi Minh City, we found that the newspaper's first issue was

published on 27 October 1920 and its final issue, no. 15/14, was published on 21 February 1924. Thus, the newspaper existed for nearly four years.

When examining the newspaper's cover page, we observed that, in addition to the title NKKTB placed diagonally across the page, there was a small line in French, L'INFORMATION ÉCONOMIQUE DE COCHINCHINE (provisionally translated as Economic Information of Cochinchina), beside which appeared a handwritten Chinese rendering of the title Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo. The cover also featured a drawing of the globe bearing the words 'Europe-Asie' and two bundles of rice, together with the words "Mạnh vì gạo, bạo vì tiền". It means "Strength comes from rice, and boldness comes from money". This shows that journalists at the time had, to a certain extent, recognized the power of economics in social life and understood the role of journalism in promoting economic development so that their compatriots could strive together (see Figure 1. Cover page of Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo, issue no. 101, 2 December 1922).



Figure 1. Cover page of Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo, issue no. 101, 2 December 1922

The cover page of issue no. 101 (Figure 1), published on 2 December 1922, clearly listed contents focused on economic matters. The issue contained eight items, two of which concerned economics, accounting for 25%, and perhaps even more: *Agriculture and Our People* (nghề nông với dân ta), *The Problem of Breaking Free from Economic Dependence* (Vấn đề thoát ly ách kinh tế). Other sections, such as Saigon Current Affairs (Saigon thời sự) and The Situation in Southern Vietnam during the First Six Months of the Year. They are certainly also discussed economics. This shows that the newspaper focused on developing and addressing local economic issues.

The newspaper's prices were divided into two regions: French Indochina and foreign countries. The subscription price in French Indochina was lower, while the price abroad was nearly

twice as high. For example, an annual subscription cost readers in French Indochina only five VNĐ, compared with nine VNĐ abroad. The retail price of one issue was one *cắc* (one-tenth of a VNĐ) (see Figure 1). The expansion of the target readership to French Indochina and foreign countries shows that readership was also a concern of journalists at the time.

The newspaper's editorial office was located at 81 rue d'Espagne, Saigon (now Lê Thánh Tôn Street, Sài Gòn Ward, Ho Chi Minh City).

The Newspaper's Program and Objectives

NKTTB was a newspaper specializing in economics. In its first issue, the article *Opening Preface* (Lời tựa đầu) (NKTTB, 27 October 1920) set out the newspaper's program and objectives. With the goal of contributing so that 'the livelihood of the nation might develop rapidly,' the newspaper would focus on discussing issues of 'agriculture, industry, and commerce.' Moreover, it would discuss the advantages and disadvantages involved in economic activity. At the same time, the newspaper encouraged economic actors throughout the country to find ways to 'become prosperous, first benefiting the family and then the nation.' This shows that journalists at the time clearly recognized the close relationship between economic matters and the position of the nation and country in the modern age.

The newspaper was published once a week on Wednesdays, later on Saturdays (see Figure 1), and finally every Thursday until it ceased publication. It was a large-format newspaper, with approximately eight pages per issue, including the following sections: 'a section of essays discussing matters of general concern relating to livelihood'; government circulars and decrees and international news relating to economics; a 'miscellaneous' section publishing 'scholarly observations and maxims,' advertisements, and rice prices; and a section publishing short stories, novels, and poetry (NKTTB, 27 October 1920) to attract readers. Attracting readers to the newspaper was also a matter of concern. If the newspaper had many readers, its principles and objectives would also receive greater attention. Therefore, Nguyễn Hữu Thế (1920) argued that writers should 'adapt to the people's level of understanding, avoid an overly elaborate style, and make their articles fairly entertaining; only ensure that each issue has one essay that does not depart from economics, while for the rest, please join hands in sugar-coating the pill for the benefit of everyone, and then surely the Journal of Economy will have many readers' (Nguyễn Hữu Thế, 1920, p. 5).

Huỳnh Văn Tòng (2000) stated: "In summary, Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo was one of the first specialist periodicals whose purpose was to clarify economic questions—that is, matters that were still very vague and unfamiliar to the Vietnamese people at the time" (p. 181).

As a newspaper specializing in economics, it provided weekly updates on the European economy, banking, rice prices, and rubber. It also paid attention to news and current affairs relating to Indochina and foreign countries, especially France. In addition, the newspaper published novels, short stories, and literary columns for entertainment.

The Newspaper's Proprietor and Editors

The proprietor of NKTTB was Mrs. Rose Quaintene, its general manager was Nguyễn Văn Thượng, and its editors were as follows: Lê Thạch Lân (from issue no. 1, published on 27 October 1920, to issue no. 29, published on 8 June 1921), with Lê Minh and Nguyễn Khắc Cần as assistant editors. Issues 30–32 of NKTTB are absent from the surviving microfilm, so the editor during this period is unknown. By issue no. 33, published on 6 July 1921, the newspaper's editor was Nguyễn Thành Úc (from issue no. 80, published on 21 June 1922, to issue no. 97, published on 28 October 1922); Cao Chánh served from issue no. 109, published on 13 January 1923, to issue no. 19,

published on 3 October 1923. During Cao Chánh's tenure, the assistant editors were, successively, Cao Văn Trục, Phú Tuấn Năng, and Trần Kinh Thăng.

From issue 15/1, dated 15 November 1923, the newspaper passed into the hands of another general manager who also served as editor, Nguyễn Háo Vĩnh, styled Hốt Tất Liệt (formerly editor of *Công luận báo*), while its manager was Đặng Trung Chử. From this point, the newspaper changed its issue-numbering system to begin with issue 15/1 and its publication day from Wednesday to Thursday. The last issue preserved on microfilm was no. 15/14, dated 21 February 1924.

The transfer of management was announced in the column *Kinh cáo đồng bang* (issue 15/1, published on 15 November 1923) as follows:

'This is to announce that *Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo* has passed into the hands of Nguyễn Háo Vĩnh, styled Hốt Tất Liệt, editor of *Công luận báo*.

Kinh tế báo has changed its manager, general manager, and editor; therefore, *Kinh tế báo* today will differ from *Kinh tế báo* in the past.'

... *Kinh tế báo* is now fully able to publish articles that please our compatriots, engaging novels to offer our compatriots relief from melancholy, short stories for our compatriots to read, and foreign news for our compatriots to learn...

... We are determined to fulfill our duties; we shall write about unusual news and changes in all nations, study literature and history, and provide the biographies and talents of renowned Vietnamese figures.

Thus, while remaining in one place, our compatriots can learn news from thousands of miles away; while remaining in one place, they can understand current affairs, know old tales and stories of the past, and know contemporary changes. Then please purchase *Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo*.

Our compatriots may read in *Kinh tế báo* moral novels suitable for women to read and thereby cultivate their character; in this way, *Kinh tế báo* will be of great benefit to our people...' (*Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo*, 15 November 1923).

Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo and Literary Issues

Although it was a newspaper specializing in economics, our survey shows that literature occupied one quarter of the total number of pages (approximately two of eight pages). This demonstrates that the newspaper's management also recognized the attractiveness of literature to readers.

In terms of literature, almost every issue publishes either novels (translated or original), short stories, or literary criticism. The literary works published in the newspaper mainly raised issues arising in life.

In the early period, the novels published in the newspaper were mostly translations, apart from the novel *Trương Xuyên Bích* by Lê Minh (1920). After the newspaper passed into the hands of Nguyễn Háo Vĩnh, two distinctive novels by Hà Trì (*Bửu Đình*) were published: *Nghĩa tình khắng khái* and *Cười ra nước mắt*. Unfortunately, both feuilleton novels were unfinished, even though they stopped at compelling points.

Short stories, meanwhile, often criticized the ungrateful and disloyal ways of life of people in the new society, in which money was used to judge human beings and moral conduct. There were stories in which a wife, because she was greedy for riches and prestige, abandoned her husband and children. There were stories in which a husband, infatuated with a female singer, abandoned and scorned his wife and children, eventually falling into ruin. There were also stories

in which an engagement was broken because the two families were no longer of equal social standing. Most of these stories were openly moralistic.

There were stories praising chivalrous and righteous people. A robber who lived righteously and humanely was praised, as in the case of Miêu Hỉ Phụng (in the short story *Ăn Trộm nghĩa hiệp* (The Chivalrous Thief, 1921). Miêu Hỉ Phụng embodied the heroic spirit of Lục Vân Tiên: ‘To see righteousness and fail to act is cowardice.’ There were stories praising people who strove to overcome themselves and ultimately achieve success, such as the character Trương Xuyên Bích in the work of the same name by Lê Minh (1920). Xuyên Bích was idle, unruly, and involved in theft, belonging to a local group considered difficult to reform; but after falling in love, he also strove to prove himself and become useful to society in order to be worthy of the person he loved. There were stories praising those who, in all circumstances, whether favorable or adverse, remained steadfastly loyal and faithful, lived with affection and righteousness, and acted with due consideration, never forsaking poverty for wealth, such as Hương Nhi in her relationship with Lê Sanh in *Giọt lệ tiếng cười* by Nguyễn Khắc Cần (1921). There were stories praising women who knew how to preserve their reputation and skillfully manage their families and households; when their husbands died, they took their husbands’ place in raising their children and caring for their parents, such as Huỳnh Hương in *Câu chuyện người chinh phụ* by Nguyễn Khắc Hải (1922).

The authors were also aware that there were two kinds of literature. The first was valuable literature that helped to enrich knowledge and taught people to live with kindness and humanity, understand moral principles, and fulfill their responsibilities toward family and society. The second was the worthless literature of pretentious writers, which harmed society. Cao Chánh (1923) wrote:

“Has the fortunate day for Southern Vietnamese literature arrived—the day when pretentious writers who write madly and wildly and speak carelessly in the press must step aside and yield their place to those capable of writing clearly?” (p. 3).

Because its purpose was to revitalize the economy, the newspaper’s editorial board rarely published literary criticism or advertisements for novels. When it did, the notices were only cursory, giving the title of the work being advertised, the author’s name, the price, and the place of sale.

Conclusion

Alongside *Nông cổ mín đàm* (1901), *Nam Kỳ kinh tế báo* may also be regarded as one of the first economic newspapers in Vietnam in the first half of the twentieth century. However, the newspaper operated for only a short period (nearly four years, from October 1920 until its cessation in February 1924); perhaps for this reason, the issues it raised and its economic resonance were less extensive than those of other contemporary newspapers. It was also a newspaper that played an important role in introducing literary works in order to attract readers. However, its literary section has not yet been studied carefully.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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