

2015

HARVARD-YENCHING  
INSTITUTE WORKING  
PAPER SERIES

URBAN WOMEN: EDUCATION, HYGIENE,  
FEMININE HYGIENE PRODUCTS AND  
THE EMERGING COMMODITY MARKET IN EARLY  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY TONKIN

Tran Thi Phuong Hoa | Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences

**Urban Women: education, hygiene, feminine hygiene products  
and the Emerging Commodity Market  
in Early Twentieth-Century Tonkin\***

Tran Thi Phuong Hoa

Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences

HYI Visiting Scholar 2014-2015

tranphhoa@yahoo.com

\*The paper was presented at AAS, Chicago March 2015. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Hue Tam Ho Tai, chair of my panel, for her preliminary review and kind advice. All opinions and errors are my own.

This version maintains the format of the conference paper . It would be developed in full article in the future.

Abstract. This paper will examine the intersection of feminine identities and consumerism, focusing on the growing use of feminine hygiene products in colonial urban Tonkin. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Tonkinese women experienced changes in their daily life: the market for western products expanded, advertisements targeted at women grew, schools delivered hygiene lessons, household incomes increased, and urban homes provided sanitation facilities and private space for women. When feminine hygiene products such as soap, cosmetics became popular by mid 1930s, manufactured feminine hygiene napkins were hardly accessible to local women. In traditional Vietnamese society, women typically dealt with menstruation through confinement and isolation, which was still observed in the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing on interviews and a few publications, I try to look at the feminine consuming behaviors from the socio-cultural and historical perspectives, which I use as the main approach to present the relationship of women and consumption in colonial Tonkin.

In 1907, Nguyen Van Vinh, the editor in chief of *Dang co tung bao*, the first quoc ngu (Romanized Vietnamese) newspaper in Tonkin, happily informed readers about the first two female subscribers, which he marked as an extraordinary event in the reading habits of Tonkinese society. But this phenomenon was not simply indicative of Tonkinese women's reading and intellectual activities. These subscriptions also indicated new way of purchasing newspapers and reveal much about women's consumption behaviors, which were accompanied by a series of new factors. New products, advertisements, more free time, and more available cash, for instance, produced an impulse to propel Vietnamese society to a new stage of economic and cultural development, one in which women had opportunities to choose commodities and to find new ways to purchase them. My paper will explore the expansion of commodity market in Hanoi and focus on the growing use of hygiene products in urban Tonkin: clean water, soap, cosmetics and especially feminine sanitary pads. I am also interested in the changes of sanitation habits through education, living facilities which influenced the way women consumed for their health, family and home.

### **Revisiting an urban commercial space- a case of Hanoi**

In 1929, Andre Masson, an archivist, provided a comprehensive description of Hanoi during the period between 1874-1888, focusing on the most important changes from a medieval center of artisanship into modern commercial city. The demolition of gates separating Hanoi's streets would be the first action to open up a commercial space of Hanoi. Keep in mind that the first and foremost motivation of the French attack on Tonkin was to open commercial routes between Tonkin and China and other areas in the region. In 1884, when doctor Hocquard first came to Hanoi with the troops, he saw the city full of European products. "In the street of Silk we buy mosquito net, cushion, matrass, cotton or feather blanket, which come from Britain or Germany"<sup>1</sup>. The richness of commodities was noted "One can find any commodity in Hanoi, like in any other European cities"<sup>2</sup>. As results of the treaty of 1874 between the French and Nguyen Court, which allowed foreign traders to establish commercial units in big cities in Tonkin, British and German merchants quickly found the way to penetrate the Tonkinese market<sup>3</sup>

As all other migrate communities, the French population in Hanoi needed their own food, drinks, services. Masson quoted a demand of the French in 1885 "The French residents in

---

<sup>1</sup> James George Scott estimated that only 4 percent of products came from France, the rest mostly originated from Britain, see 1885, *France and Tonking- A narrative of the campaign of 1884 and the occupation of further India*, London, Fisher Unwin, 215

<sup>2</sup> Hocquard, dd, 59

<sup>3</sup> About the competition of French, British and Chinese merchants, see de Lanessan, Jean Marie Antoine, 1889, *L'Indo-Chine Francais- Étude politique, Économique et administrative sur la Cochinchine, le Cambodge, l'Annam et le Tonkin*, Paris, Ancienne librairie Germer Baillièrre et Cie; Brunat, Paul, 1885, *Exploration commercial du Tonkin*/ Lyon Imprimerie Commerciale Pirat Ainé.

Hanoi demand: a Butcher shop, a French laundry; a tailor; a shoemaker; billiard tables”<sup>4</sup>. To serve about 10, 000 French in Tonkin, of which about less than 4,000 in Hanoi and 1,500 in Haiphong, the shopping mall in the French quarter was established prior to the creation of the French civil administration. The house of Debeaux brothers, founded in Hanoi in 1885 was initially to supply commodities to the troops, that offered a wonderful choice of all sorts of items: from household supplies, perfume to weapons, harness for horses<sup>5</sup>. The stores for general products such as Pharmacy Blanc, the oldest pharmacy in Hanoi, founded in May 1886; or the Godard, opened early 1900s, then in 1921 developed into one of the biggest department stores in Indochina under the name Grands Magasins Reunis and many other shops brought a luxurious look to the French quarter.

Local artisans found the way to gain new customers. British explorer James Scotts wrote about how Hanoi painters changed the pictures contents from traditional subjects to depicting battlefields in Tonkin during the French attack to serve the taste of French settlers. Dr. Hocquard discovered that the local painters and broiderers were encouraged to develop their full talent when the French settlers preferred local paintings and broidered tissues with French images. Prior to that, the local masters had not wanted to show their ability for the fear of being forced to work for the Royal court.

In 1900, Hanoi presented a modern face as Robert Dubois described:

“Hanoi city, the most important industrial and commercial centre, is divided into eight quarters with a hundred and eighty streets. The center is lightened by street lamps and provided with water drainage system and fresh water pipes, which have public fountains arranged every a hundred meters”<sup>6</sup>. The statistics gave an optimistic perspective on commercial development when in 1901 Hanoi had more than 100 French stores providing nearly 70 types of goods and services, with increasing commodities for women in response to the rise of the number of female Europeans, from 219 to 1000 between the period 1900-1931<sup>7</sup>. From 1901 to 1908, the number of boutiques selling *corset* in Hanoi increased from 1 to 8<sup>8</sup>, and clothes shops sprang up in both new and old quarters. In 1908, Paul Bert street (nowadays Trang Tien)- a 540-meter mall- was lined with the biggest

---

<sup>4</sup> Andre Masson, 1929, *Hanoi pendant la period héroique (1873-1888)*, Paris, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner. The quotation was from the English translation Jack Yaeger, *The Transformation of Hanoi, 1873-1888*, second printing, University of Wisconsin Madison, 1987, p80

<sup>5</sup> Dubois, Robert, 1900, *Le Tonkin en 1900*, Paris, Societe francaise d’editions d’art, 252

<sup>6</sup> Dubois, Robert, 1900, 228-229. According to report of the Hanoi Municipality in 1905, the number of public fountains was 87. There were also private metered fountains, including 29 in private civil homes, the other came to military and office service.

<sup>7</sup> In 1900, there were about 219 female European in Hanoi, in 1931, the number was around 1000, *Annuaire General de l’Indochine*, 1901, and *Annuaire statistique de l’Indochine*, 1931; the total number of female French in Tonkin in 1922 was 3,092; in 1937 was 5,896, *Annuaire statistique de l’Indochine*

<sup>8</sup> *Annuaire general de l’Indochine*, 1901, 1322; 1908, 673

general stores, pharmacies and about 80 boutiques. At the other side of the Hoan Kiem lake, Street of Cotton, 625 meters long, accommodated about 200 shops, mostly owned by the Vietnamese<sup>9</sup>. More than half of the shop owners were female, who invested heavily on their business. Duong Van Mai's grandmother used to put a starting investment of 20,000 piastre to her silk shop in Hang Gai street, a huge amount of money in 1910, equal to the expenses to buy four houses in Hanoi center<sup>10</sup>.

Advertisements also indicated a tendency of consumption growth. *L'Avenir du Tonkin* (the Future of Tonkin), the first newspaper published in Tonkin, since 1884, provided four of its twelve pages for advertisements.

Vietnamese language newspapers also delivered ads. *Dang Co tung bao* (Old lantern miscellany), gave the first advertisements of stationary Ich Ky on its first issue, 28 March 1907, The ads laid out in a form of plain text, including the shop's address, detailed price of each item and highlighted the low price and Vietnamese ownership "This shop is owned by the Vietnamese, not Chinese...items are cheap, and no overcharging". In spite of the simplicity of the first ads, it reflected the growing importance of advertisement, as writer Vu Trong Phung commented "This century was an era of advertisement, who he is not aware of that will be out of the game, however talented or educated he is"<sup>11</sup>. Vu Trong Phung well deserves the title of "the urban writer" when foresaw a commercialization tendency, in which advertisement was crucial.

In the 1920s, 1930s advertisements became popular as a result of a press blooming. Examining commercial pages in press in colonial Vietnam, George Dutton emphasizes the politicization of advertisements through their illustrations, pictures and messages focusing on modernity and national identity<sup>12</sup>. Female body became an attractive visual object in press supported by more advanced technology of photography and paintings by mid 1930s. The pictures of young girls in swimming clothes or sport wear swept newspapers pages. The author of Lemur dress, artist Cat Tuong encouraged women to wear his new body-fitting aodai by urging them to take more exercise to keep the body slender and well built. A combination of sexy dress and fitness exercise inspired a wave

---

<sup>9</sup> *Annuaire General de l'Indochine*, 1908, p. 691

<sup>10</sup> Duong Van Mai, 1999, *The Sacred Willow- Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*, Oxford University Press, 55-56

<sup>11</sup> "Vu Trong Phung v i tôi" by Nguyen Tri Lu t, published in collection *Vu Trong Phung con ng i và tác ph m*, [Vu Trong Phung- personality and works], collected and compiled by Nguyen Hoành Khung, L i Nguyên Ân, H i Nhà v n [Association of Writers publisher], 1994, 52

<sup>12</sup> George Dutton, 2013, "Advertising, Modernity, and Consumer Culture in Colonial Vietnam", in *Reinvention of Distinction- Modernity and the Middle Class in Urban Vietnam*, eds. Van Nguyen Marshall, Lisa b. Welch Drummond, Danièle Bélanger, 21-42

of “happy and young” women (vui v tr trung) who were not afraid to show body in public affairs and sport activities.

### **Education, hygiene and feminine hygiene products**

Education was the most important channel to introduce hygiene to women. For educated women, hygiene was part of their knowledge and high lifestyle when the use of hygiene products reflected the social status. The first lesson of mother to her daughter emphasized the importance of hygiene, which would be put in higher priority than beauty as Dan ba newspaper pointed out “We need to teach our daughter how to make up. The first and foremost cosmetics is soap and water. Teach her to keep clean, then she will know how to make up”<sup>13</sup>. The use of white trousers among female students and teachers and then expanded to other high class women showed their exclusive cleanliness, to distinguish themselves from labor class who wore dark brown or black clothes. At the beginning of the twentieth century, only rich families in Hanoi could get access to private water. Duong Van Mai tells a story about how her grandmother opened her purse to pay for water installation in their home, which cost a treasure in 1910. By early 1930s, the presence of a washstand was popular in the middle class household, which could be seen in Vu Trong Phung description of a bedroom of a doctor’s wife in his play “Bên góc gi ng” [By the bed], written in 1931:

“The bedroom is set up in the manner of modern and classic combination. On the Western-style bed, there is a single pillow on the white sheet and a blue mosquito net. The washstand is on another corner of the room with a basin, a mirror, a bottle of powder, cream, perfume, nail files, scissors. At the center of the room stands a small table with flowers, tea cups, a box of cigarettes, some newspapers- Phu nu tan van, Ngo bao, Dong Tay”

In this scene of the play, Vu Trong Phung wanted to focus on the middle class identity of the landlady, who was educated, modern in her interior setting with hygienic items, cosmetics, feminine journal.

In other perspective, *Phong hoa* tried to figure out the backwardness of the “old” civilization and the advantage of the “new”. In 1934, this newspaper definitely identified the sanitation with civilization “S ch s là v n minh” [cleanliness is civilization]<sup>14</sup>. In this short article, Phong hoa criticized thousands-year civilization that badly influenced the Vietnamese “Whatever they say, a nation without hygiene is not considered civilized...”.

---

<sup>13</sup> “Trang i m cho con” [Make up for daughters], àn bà, 1Aug 1939, p5

<sup>14</sup> Nh Linh, 1935, “S ch s là v n minh” [Cleanliness is Civilization], Phong hóa, No146, 26April 1935, 1

“they” implied the Chinese who imposed profound influence on Vietnamese literati in the intellectual shaping as well as in the living formation “they told our literati that the most important virtue was clean soul and spirit, and never mind the body, clothes, home. But you are not self-esteem if you leave your body, clothes, home unclean.. The self-respect nation is always clean”

In contrast to Confucian- formulated lifestyle, hygiene was a huge social and educational plan that was highly politicized in French colonial practice<sup>15</sup>. Doumer decided to establish a Medical School in Hanoi in 1902. Sanitation was also emphasized in Beau’s policy. Several management medical institutions were established during Beau’s office period, including the Indochinese Department of Medical Assistance (1905), a Superior Council of Public Hygiene (1906). They functioned in planning and controlling the medical care to the European and native population, executing measures to monitor animal health, epidemics, public hygiene. In 1907, Paul Beau highly encouraged the propaganda of hygiene through education. With the assistance of the Director of Public Instruction, native teachers collaborated with physicians to disseminate the concepts and practice of hygiene<sup>16</sup>. Albert Sarraut attached great importance of hygiene to schools when his Code of education made hygiene a compulsory subject, starting from the third grade (*cours elementaire*)<sup>17</sup>, when the child was 9 years old, but Department of education in Annam and Tonkin required that hygiene was given from the earliest grade (*cours enfantin*), when the child was 7<sup>18</sup>. From the *cours supérieur* (equal to grade four, when the child was 11), female students and male students had different hygiene lessons. Female students learnt about the body hygiene and home sanitation, the role of lingerie and clothes, the importance of soap and other bleaching materials. At the secondary schools, hygiene was integrated with physiology and taught at the last class of the four-year primary superior cycle (when the student was 15years old)<sup>19</sup>. In the school glossary for the Tonkinese primary teachers, teaching hygiene to girls was defined as “practical concentration on housework, furniture, kitchen utensils, interior arrangement, choice and preparation of

---

<sup>15</sup> In the program of moral conquest of the indigenous, the focus was on human development through three main channels: 1) strengthening a hygiene program that promotes health of the indigenous people; 2) improving justice and juristic system; 3) developing education to adapt indigenous mentality to the new way of thinkings and build up a generation of francophilic educated people. See Albert Sarraut, 1925, “La mission civilisatrice de la France, [Civilizing mission of France]”, Conférence donnée à l’École des Hautes Études sociales, *Nam Phong*, French Supplement, 48

<sup>16</sup> Beau, Paul, 1908, *Situation de l’Indo-Chine de 1902 à 1907*, Saigon: Imprimerie Commerciale Marcelin Rey, 87

<sup>17</sup> See, *Règlement Général de l’Instruction publique en Indochine*, 1917, 61

<sup>18</sup> Inspection- conseil de l’enseignement, 1917, *Plan d’études et programmes des écoles franco-indigènes de l’Annam*, Hanoi-Haiphong, Imprimerie d’Extreme-Orient.

<sup>19</sup> *Règlement Général*, 116

food. Female teacher give the first notions of childcare (looking after toddlers, food, cleanliness)<sup>20</sup>

In practice, urban schools provided standard hygiene facilities, including restroom, water, soap, cleaning. Not only official schools but the private had to comply with the sanitation rules. According to the new law on Private education in 1925 all schools should have a clean toilet, floor should be cleaned every week with detergent, and walls be painted every two years. The school teachers were instructed to practice hygiene class everyday “The teacher ask students to prepare two or three basins of water, he himself bring two or three bars of soap, or some australian locust (b k p), soapberry (b hòn), three to four clean and dry towels. Then the teacher call some students, anyone, not the dirtiest, or do not show pretension to call the dirtiest, check their finger nails, then instruct them to wash their hands with water and soap. After they finish washing, the teacher ask them to show their hands to all classmates. This practice should be exercised everyday. Then the teacher give instruction how to wash face, check their clothing to make sure everything is clean”<sup>21</sup>

The use of soap and clean water became popular in urban setting by 1920s . A survey of Consuming Price Index in Hanoi in 1923 revealed information about the consumption basket of working class and middle class<sup>22</sup>. Among the most prominent 44 items in the middle class consumed basket<sup>23</sup>, and 30 items in the working class’ basket, soap and water were used by the both groups. Soap accounted for 0.9percent of expenses of the middle class, and 0.3percent of the working class, water accounted for 0.7 and 0.4 respectively. It can be seen from the survey that soap was possibly an item of the mass use in Hanoi, that was facilitated by the local production and importation. Soap “Co Ba”, produced by the Vietnamese enterprise Truong Van Ben was sold in Hanoi market early 1920s, as shown on *Trung bac tan van* commercial page in 1922. It is now recognized to be the first Vietnamese brand to use the real woman image in advertisement with the slogan “the Vietnamese use Vietnamese products”. The brands of Chinese, French,

---

<sup>20</sup> *Vade-Mecum de l'instituteur au Tonkin*, Edition de la societe de patronage des ecoles publiques, Nam Dinh, 1925, 132

<sup>21</sup> Hygiene scolaire”, *H c báo*, 1937, 301-316

<sup>22</sup> their identity was based on monthly income, according to which the working class’ monthly income ranged from 6\$ to 15\$, much less compared to that of the middle class (from 15\$ to 200\$). The middle class in Hanoi was described in the survey as “an educated part of the population, whose needs should be explored. They mostly consume local products but gradually absorb European merchandize”. See “Note sur deux indices du cout de la vie pour les indigenes a Hanoi”, *Bulletin economique de l'Indochine*, 11-12/1922,547.

<sup>23</sup> The 44 items were classified into five groups: food and foodstuff (rice of different kinds, vegetables, rice noodles, bean, chicken eggs, duck eggs, meat including beef, pork, poultry, greese, fish and shrimp, fish sauce, field crab, sugar); drinks (tea, rice liquor, wine, ice), accommodation (rent, fresh water, wood, oil, electricity); clothes and accessories; daily (soap, laundry, barber’s, doctor, medicine); others (going to the traditional theatre, going to the cinema, cigarette, journal/newspapers, rickshaw, 4<sup>th</sup> class train)



manufactured in Tonkin or imported from France made this product competitive in price and therefore available widely among population.

In contrast to soap and other cosmetics, feminine sanitary pads experienced unfortunate destiny. Menstruation was a taboo in Tonkinese social life and rarely mentioned publicly. Traditional books such as *Hu n n di n ca* [Verse for girl's instruction], *Giáo hu n ca* [Educating in verse], *Hu n n t ca* [Verse for teaching girls], *Gia hu n ca* [Family instruction in verse], *Ph n cách ngôn di n ca..* [New verse for women], which conventionally gave ethic and etiquette disciplines to girls, also provided some instructions on individual and public sanitation. But the direct use of word "menstruation" was avoided. There would be an exception from a publication in Saigon in 1911 that provided an exclusive case when showing the negative attitude toward this shameful issue "Nguy t kinh huy t s n tanh d /Ch u ngâm tay gi t b y gi cho xong/Ch em xu ng dòng sông/T i này s n ó có hòng kh i sao?"<sup>24</sup>[menstruation and maternity blood is dirty/use basins to wash/do not pour the waste into river/it is a sin]. Although the social attitude toward individual feminine hygienic issue was not to extent of total isolation of women in their period or maternity from society, menstruation, which make women different from men, was seen as something disgusting or even guilty. The obnoxious feeling toward feminine period contextualized insufficient sex education and scientific explanation. Another interpretation came from the perceptions nurtured in the patriarchal society that encouraged women to hide their feminity, anything different from dominated masculinity. At time, many foreigners commented on the similarity of Vietnamese male and female clothing, which made them confused to distinguish the two genders through their outfit<sup>25</sup>. Trying to hide menstruation was also an act to blur the sex difference.

The question of menstruation was not introduced better even in books of popular science such as *Tân Nam l ch* [New Vietnamese Annual Book] or Women's journals *Ph n tân v n* [New literature for Women], *Ph n th i àm* [Contemporary Women Talks], *àn bà* [Women]. Those publications introduced translations of original French texts on hygiene, health, childcare, etc. but menstruation and relating issues were not touched. Meantime, Chinese medical books and ads for Chinese medicine stressed the importance of menstruation for women's reproductive health when the interpretation of menstruation was in tight connection with women's fertility. In addition to the promise to improve women's reproductive capability, Chinese ads also committed to provide treatment for all

---

<sup>24</sup> See *Ph n cách ngôn di n ca*, Nguy n V n Tr Saigon, Imprimerie Saigonnaise Royer&C, 1911, 25

<sup>25</sup> See Hocquard, Masson, Norman

gynecological diseases at reasonable price. Those explained why Chinese medicine occupied a lion share in Tonkinese medical market.

Although Tonkin was in its process of Westernization, and its population got adapted to many Western commodities, a reserved attitude toward feminine hygiene products still remained. No advertisement, no instructions, no pictures or images. The scarcity of materials on what kinds of manufactured sanitary napkins the Hanoi women purchased and used made the question unanswered. A brochure of the Grands Magasins Reunis [often called Godar] in Hanoi in 1928 provided information about price of several kinds of sanitary pads, whose first target users were about 1,000 female European residents in Hanoi and another 2,000 in Tonkin<sup>26</sup>. A comparison of prices of sanitary pads with other commodities was shown in table 1, according to which buying manufactured sanitary napkins was not unaffordable for Hanoi middle class women. When they could spend six to seven piaster on a pair of sock or a pot of cream<sup>27</sup>, they did not thinking of spending one piaster on a box of 12 compressed menstrual pads<sup>28</sup>

Table 1: Price of some selected commodities in Tonkin (1928) (piastre)

Items	Price
a box of 12 sanitary pads	1.1
a shirt made in France	2.5
a Peugeot bicycle	74
an ordinary meal of 5 dishes	0.35
100 kg rice 1st class	12.7
Exchange rate of franc-piastre	12.77:1

In the context of separation of Vietnamese and French shopping quarters, the Vietnamese tended to keep shopping regularity in their place, where they would buy almost everything, including foreign products, at negotiable price or on credit. But sanitary napkins was not in their shopping list. The visualization of the menstrual hygiene napkins used by Tonkinese women in the first half of the twentieth century would be based on recent interviews.

<sup>26</sup> According to the *Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine*, in 1931, the European female population in Tonkin was 3,203, male population was 3,825, the European residents in Hanoi only was more than 3,000

<sup>27</sup> *Phu nu thoi dam* newspaper complained “[some female teachers] change fashion everyday.. if there is any new model, they buy immediately. Some spent seven or eight piaster on 1 pair of socks, a small pot of cream..”, see “Ph n v à t i n b c” [Women and money], *Ph n th i à m*, 15 March 1931

<sup>28</sup> “A box of 6 sanitary pads and a belt-17fr.50; A box of 12 compressed menstrual pads- 13fr.50; A box of 6 sanitary pads and a belt- 29fr” “A box of 6 sanitary pads and a belt-17fr.50; A box of 12 compressed menstrual pads- 13fr.50; A box of 6 sanitary pads and a belt- 29fr”

Mrs. T., born in 1940, “We lived in Hanoi suburb. When I had my first period, I used the cheesecloth to make pads. Cheesecloth was distributed among female cadres through stamps...Concerning my mother, I remember she made pads herself. She fold cloth (often old rag) tightly, which looked like a roll, then bound it to a string around her belly. The rag was then washed, dried and reused. Women used water from wells, or from ponds to wash the pads. I remember some women put ash into a cloth pad to absorb blood”

Mrs. N., (born in 1922), “I studied in Dong Khanh college, from 1935-1939, the only lower secondary school for girls in Hanoi at that time,. We wore white trousers and color tunic (ao dai). I used towel to make sanitary pads. Some of my friends used soft paper. My home had private bathroom and had water pipe and fountains inside. Sometimes I went to Godard (Grands Magasins Reunis) but just for fun. I bought stuff, both imported and local made products, in Vietnamese-run shops. At school we learnt to do domestic work, childcare, cooking, sewing. Etc.. but the lessons did not go deep into question of women body or individual feminine hygiene”

Mrs. C., 72, “We lived in a village in Nghe An province. I rarely saw my mother with menstruation. She gave birth to nine children, so it might be a reason why she did not have periods regularly. But there was a special chair, where my aunt sat when she had period. The chair was passed from my grandmother, or even earlier ancestors, to her daughters. I saw some women that let free bleeding when they were doing farming on wet paddy-field. They cleaned that with their thick skirt. The dark color of the skirt hid the stain. When they wanted to wash that skirt, they should go far to a small stream at the end of the village, which they called “C ng R c” [Drainage]”.

Mrs. T., 70 “We lived in Thai Binh village. My mother is now nearly 100 years old. She is not very well now. I remember she often use old rags to make hygiene pads.. Yes, rags, because we did not have flannel or towel. We just made pads from worn out clothes”

The interviews indicate that the urban middle class women had opportunities to reach out to the modern menstrual hygiene technology. However, the self-made hygiene pads were common. It not only indicates the separation of the Vietnamese and French market space but also reflect indifferent attitude of educators, producers, family and women themselves toward feminine hygiene and health. A story told by Hue Tam Ho Tai about a father who bought sanitary pads for his beloved daughter in Cochinchina not only reveals the advancement of the market, which was likely enhanced by a rather open and liberal society, but also indicates a message about an affectionate father-daughter relationship

and care<sup>29</sup>. The Western experiences prove that to promote hygiene products among population, the producers tried to convince that those products were to strengthen women's health and enhance their beauty, while the factories facilitated the use of sanitary napkins among female workers to endure their working hours<sup>30</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

The colonial context of Hanoi was an example of urbanization followed by the expansion of the commercial space and the flow of imported merchandize, which accelerated the consuming activities among population, especially girls and women. When hygiene education and hygiene products such as soap and bleaching materials were highly encouraged, women's access to new feminine sanitary products was limited. Although a variety of products, including cigarettes, medicine for treating venereal diseases (gonorrhoea, syphilis) were widely advertised in journals, newspapers, the lack of commercial campaigns for feminine sanitary napkins was obvious. There are some reasons for the inaccessibility of women to their hygiene products. First it had roots in the alien social attitude toward feminine menstrual hygiene. Second, it reflected a segmentation of consuming space, which was intensified by the traditional entrenchments and social separation in the colonial context.

---

<sup>29</sup> In Tai, Hue Tam Ho, 2010, *Passion, Betray and Revolution in Colonial Saigon*, University of California Press, on page 19, there is a story about a gift the father gave to his beloved daughter, which was a sanitary napkin. This would not be happen in Tonkin when mother even did not talk with daughters about her own hygiene issue.

<sup>30</sup> Sharra L. Vostral, 2008, *Under Wraps- A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology*, Lexington Books, 7