

Wearing Modernity: the Press, Fashion, and the Origins” of the Vietnamese National Costume, 1932-1937

Martina Nguyen

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This seminar will focus on the rise of modern fashion in late colonial Vietnam. I will examine the tunic designed by Lemur Nguyễn Cát Tường—most often cited as the precursor to the modern *áo dài*—as a physical entity and as a historical and abstract symbol of modernity. My argument is twofold: first, that Lemur was the first modern Vietnamese designer, evidenced by his engagement in two modern fashion practices: the establishment an institutionalized system and his proposal for a Vietnamese national costume. Second, I argue that despite protestations of its insignificance, dress served as a ground on which weighty social and cultural battles—such as gender, class, national identity, aesthetics, and modernity itself—were fought.

Martina T. Nguyen is an Assistant Professor of History at Baruch College. She is currently revising a book manuscript entitled “Colonial Modernism in Vietnam: The Self-Reliant Literary Group and Urban Intellectual Life, 1932-1945.”

An historian of modern Southeast Asia, her research focuses on colonialism, intellectual life and social and political reform in twentieth century Vietnam. Her current project, provisionally entitled *The Self-Reliant Literary Group (Tu Luc Văn Đoàn): Colonial Modernism in Vietnam, 1932-1941*, examines the historical landscape of 1930s French-occupied Vietnam, arguably the country’s most dynamic intellectual and cultural period, as a lens for examining the relationship between cultures of the metropole and colonized societies. She teaches a variety of classes on modern Asia, world history and colonialism, including classes on the Vietnam War, empire and decolonization, women and gender, and fashion. Professor Nguyen received her Ph.D. in 2012 from the University of California, Berkeley. She is also a graduate of Northwestern University, where she earned a B.A. in history and political science.

Wednesday, March 9

12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue