

Notes on Vietnamese Humour

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I allow myself to begin with some theoretical considerations about comedy and humour.

The view of comedy in man is a view about man from two aspects of dissension and incompatibility: body and soul, instinct and intellect, saying and doing, how man actually lives and how man should live. When the serious incompatibility reaches the extremity, when the distance between the two aspects reaches the limitation, comedy approaches tragedy.

Humour is the reaction (usually mild, sometimes severe) to what are objectionable deeds, those that are not correct, disagreeable, improper, odd, pointless, self-indulgent, slipshod.....in short, for all thugs against the common sense of human beings. It is necessary to see that in the common sense of human beings, there are everlasting, popular elements and there are also changes that follow the era and the cultural space. Therefore, humour also changes according to the era and cultural space.

Humour is the manifestation of a controlling intelligence (with different levels), at least in the effort to dominate our direct emotional reactions in order to express them in an indirect way, by beating around the bush, double-talk, speaking in an ironical voice..., no matter how humour is expressed it also exhibits the participation of sharp intelligence, creates humorous effects, makes those who are criticized also laugh in spite of being annoyed, and laughter proves that the one who uses humour and the one who is criticized have the same language: the language of intelligence. Speaking sharply is the manifestation of a sharp intelligence but also the manifestation of bad temper. The French have a proverb: "bons mots, mauvais caractere" (meaning "using sharp words sometimes reveal a bad temper"). Especially the young sometimes use a sharp sentence to show off their sharpness, enjoy the laughter from people around responding to their sayings; they don't care about their victims that are hurt by their sayings. So, mild indulgence is desirable in humour.

Let us analyze some funny situations, funny stories, humorous sentences and jokes in order to recognize the nature and structure of humour and witty sayings.

One speaker stands up to deliver a speech, talking about unattainable, profound things making the surrounding audience express its admiration. His friend sitting beside him pulls his chair backward while the speaker is passionately delivering the speech. After finishing his speech, the speaker goes to sit down, trips and falls to the ground. The audience bursts out laughing. Why did the audience laugh? When the speaker fell to the ground, at the same time, in the mind of the audience, the speaker is judged from two aspects, more exactly, two "frames of reference", two "associated contexts" (the terminology of Arthur Koestler, the author "The Act of Creation" (1964), a work about the collective theory of laughter). When the speaker delivers his speech, he is judged by the frame of reference "spirit" with

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the most unattainable, transcendent manifestation of knowledge and intelligence; but when he takes a false step and falls to the ground, the attendants think that the speaker has fallen into the frame of "material", he is only a block of material and like other materials such as a rock, a brick falls to the ground because of its weight, inertia and the force of gravity. Noticeably, these two frames of reference (material and spirit) are disharmonious. Experiencing people, situations and things in two disharmonious frames of reference at the same time is considered by A. Koestler as the structure of intelligence of all forms of humour, witty sayings and other kinds of jokes. This is just the basic aspect of humour. Another aspect -no less important- is kindling to create the emotional motivation of humour. The kindling is the visceral penchant to tease, to sneer, the stings of criticism and slyness. In the case of the falling speaker, his friend who secretly pulled the chair backwards more or less must have sly sneering "visceral penchant" to make people laugh. From now it is clear to see that in humour, the visceral penchant of sneering has different levels: the light level is a lovely joke, funny joke, playful..., the higher level is teasing, sneering..., strong and severe levels are satiric criticism,... sly thoughts also have many different nuances: sometimes ill will be expressed overtly, libellously, insultingly.....offending brutally those who are laughed at....., some ill will make people think about dirty tricks and sometimes ill will vaguely and lightly mix with good sentiments such as sympathy and friendliness.....in not all the cases of humour "the visceral penchant to tease, to sneer, the impulses of slyness are clear and visible. If this visceral penchant to tease, to sneer is the salt of humour, it is desirable that we taste that saltiness as if we taste dishes which are so well seasoned that we don't feel the saltiness, just not thinking about salt.

Humour usually directs itself towards the laughed at object, aiming at the weakness of this object. If the author of humour has a mild indulgence towards the object, the laughter will contain warm human culture. The mild spirit can soften the penchant to tease, to sneer, the sly temper but this will not make the laughter of humor become boring. The warmth or boring nature is due to the wit and profound intelligence of the author of humour.

Coming back to the case of the speaker having pranks played on him by his friend. If he fell down with a serious injury to his head and was bleeding...the audiences would not laugh. The audiences would be emotional and compassionate: in laughter, humour fears compassion for the laughed at object, and laughter also fears emotion.

In the funny story about a mean man "it is better to die!", laughter arises from the struggle between two logics: the friend behaves in accordance with common sense: he must save the friend's life but the mean man consistently follows his mean logic: money is all to him, more precious than his life. One interesting thing is that the friend makes concessions: from five quan (old Vietnamese currency) to three quan while the mean man remains consistent to his mean logic. There is a contradiction between the flexibility and rigidity. This funny story finishes without a clear resolution whether the mean man is dead or saved. The saying "three quan is still expensive, it is better to die!" ends the story but it doesn't lead to any particular solution, it just perfects his meanness, his mean logic, and highlights the contradiction between the two aspects of reference: the logic of common sense and the logic of the mean man. Supposing that the story finished with the death of the mean man, there wouldn't be any humorous effect; the readers would feel pity for him and as we know, laughter fears emotion.

In the funny stories of Trang Quynh he entertains his lords to a "Mam Da feast", the laughter is maintained because there are changes from this pair of contrast aspect of reference to another one. The lord waits to enjoy "mam da"- a "rare" and "wonderful" dish but in reality, it is just rice, and "water morning glory" dipped into sauce "dai phong" (the aspect of waiting and aspect of reality). The lord thinks that the sauce "dai phong" is a "rare" dish but it is just soy sauce (aspect of belief and aspect of reality). Above all is the contradiction between the prosperous life of the lord (also has its own misery) and the ordinary, simple-mannered life (also has its own happiness). In the first frame of reference, the lord likes the delicacy but it doesn't feel delicious; in the second frame of reference, when the lord is hungry and "water morning glory" is dipped into soy sauce, the lord "feel delicious, and asks Trang Quynh to get him rice constantly". Talking about this story, it is easy to recognize Trang Quynh's sense of teasing and slyness towards the lord: at last, the lord is swindled. His clear mind can't be seen in the story, and it turns out that the lord is naïve, half-witted, his high rank disappears, like other normal people. When he is hungry, whatever he eats is delicious.

Analyzing the funny story "marriage pig, new shirt" as follow:

There is a man who likes to boast of his property. One day, after getting a new shirt, he immediately wears it and stands at his front gate to wait for someone to praise him. From morning until afternoon, no one praises him, so he feels very angry.

While he is very angry, he sees another boastful man running towards him who asks loudly:

-Did you see my marriage pig running across here?

-That man immediately raises his coat-tails and says:

-Since I began wearing this new shirt, I haven't seen any pigs running across here!

Vietnamese funny folk tale (Literature Press-1964)

Boasting is also a habit of human beings. A boastful person has the need to boast. This need expressed purely and directly makes people feel uncomfortable. But if this need connects with actions and other sayings which distract attention it will create a humorous effect. Connecting strayly, impudently and unreasonably is more ridiculous. Sayings in this kind of story perform the role of informing the contents needed to be asked and answered. In the question of the one who finds his marriage pig, the need to boast is expressed in one word: marriage (in marriage pig). The answer from the one who like to boast about his shirt is expressed in his action (showing his coat-tails) and the whole clause (since I began wearing this new shirt) overshadows the content needed to be answered. And in the context, the audience may think that this guy only thinks about showing off his shirt and can't know whether a pig runs across or not. The art of humour here is rather profound. The question (in which the need to boast is only expressed a little bit) makes people smile, it is this smile that prepares and starts a big laugh after listening to the answer (in which the need to boast is expressed). Supposing that the one finding his pig only uses a normal question (there will be no need for the interjected boast) will make the humorous effect weaken. Also in the story of a mean man "it is better to die!", the character emerges twice. The first time, he emerges with the sentence: "five quan is too expensive!", the second time with the sentence: "three quan is still expensive, it is better to die!" creates strong effect.

The funny story "marriage pig, new shirt" has basic elements of humour:

- The frame of reference "the need to boast" rushes violently and distracts attention the frame of reference "the content of informed sayings"
- Implying to sneer boastful habit
- The art of humour: first create "smile" in order to prepare and start a "bursting out of laughing"

The funny story "Prostrating Uncle De!" is a good story. The ending is about the sudden, odd clash of two associated contexts. The mother's behaviour "furiously, turning up her dress [skirt?]" and what the child sees create an associated context with a termagant, obscenity and untidiness. And the behaviour of the child "putting his hands together, politeness: - prostrating himself before Uncle De! creates an associated context differently, that is polite, stately (side-whiskers), respect ("Uncle De" double respect: age and fame)....the behaviour of the child is also expressed in another funny thing: it turns out that the child only sees his side-whiskers so far, nothing similar to what the child see when the mother turns up her dress, except his side-whiskers. From here, one funny thing can be recognized: the uncle is greatly mistaken in being satisfied with the child's greetings which he thinks are the sign of respect. In reality, that is just the stunned child's mechanical behaviour towards his side-whiskers. In the humorous art of the story, it also creates "smile" to prepare for the "bursting out of laughter" which ends the story. The mother asks her child three times to check his study result. The humour in the conversation makes us smile due to the dissension of logic which is summed up in Vietnamese idioms: head in Ngo, body in So, the husband says chicken, the wife says duck, one man's beard pitches on another woman, husband ties, wife unties....the stunned child names the simplest items incorrectly three times: he calls the pipe spittoon, he calls tea-pot portable earthen stove....here either have the preparation for the mother's anger or for the action of bursting out laughing: "prostrating uncle De!". In the treasure of Vietnamese funny stories, the contrary motif between the hair around the mouth and "hair" in the vulva is repeated in many stories. In the story "the hair dye" (see the treasure of Vietnamese funny stories compiled by Nguyen Cu - Phan Trong Thuong, literature press, 1996, pages 313) the servant is young, the old host dyes his beard black to lure the servant. The servant disagrees. The host threatens to rape her "until your hair is grey, then let you get married" the servant curls up her lips: - I don't need! I have the hair dye! In the story "similar to your beard" (cited book, p. 154), one mandarin of district has to work far away from home while his wife is going to give birth at home. He asks one child to go home to see whether his wife has given birth already or not. The stunned child afraid of the pregnant woman doesn't dare to enter the house and just stands outside the fence to observe. Suddenly, the pregnant woman goes into the garden and lifts up her dress to pass water. The stunned child retells how the mandarin what he saw...the following is the conversation ends:

"After listening, he felt happy and asked:

Is it a boy or a girl?

I don't know whether it is a boy or a girl, but I saw it is like you.

Look like me about what?

Look like your beard!"

In the story "man without a mouth", one man with too much beard covering all his mouth is teased by the kids "man without mouth", furiously, while uncovering his beard to show his mouth, he scolds the kids: - if it is not my mouth, is it your mama's

vulva? Vietnamese has the idiom "thick beard, deep eyes" to show the outward look of a sensual man. Does "beard" contrast with "hair" to create laugh in order to ridicule the men who have "lewdness", "lustful habit"? To play on words, "to speak back-slang" is usually used to create a humorous effect in the funny folk tale and daily sayings. In the humorous folk-song "an old woman goes shopping at Cau Dong market", the word *loi* in sentence 2 is understood with the meaning "benefits" in the neutral announcement of the old woman would like to get married. In sentence 4 (finish) the meaning of the word *loi* changes into a different meaning connected to "gum", return the old woman to the actual situation of her old age. Funny and witty word-play is usually based on two completely different meanings of a word, more exactly, of two homonymous words, the two meanings of two frames of reference don't harmonize each other, the sneering element is always associated with the second meaning. There is also the case of word-play basing on the literal and figurative meanings of a word. The plot of Trang Quynh story creates "this man, that woman" from figurative to literal meanings of the group of word "this man, that woman". When Trang Quynh talks to those who are greedy for position and fame in the village: "...if you want to be this man, that woman, I will help you", the word group "this man, that woman" means position, fame and social status figuratively. But when Trang Quynh plays tricks on them, "this man, that woman" means "this man" has sexual intercourse with "that woman" literally (that is another man's wife). The plot "there are no teeth to chew" is based on the figurative and literal meaning of the word group "clench teeth". One mother in law and her daughter in law are widows. The mother in law warns her daughter in law: "our fates are unlucky, so we have to clench our teeth to accept it!" the word group is understood figuratively. But when the mother in law has a love affair, the daughter in law recalls her warnings and she uses literal meaning of the word group to justify herself: "I only warn you, for me I don't have any more teeth to chew".

"To speak back-slang" is a kind of popular word-play in Vietnamese funny stories and in the daily sayings of ordinary people. "The back-slang phrase" doesn't appear in texts or spoken words; it is inferred by speakers or listeners from "normal word phrase" existing in texts or sayings. For example, in the story Trang Quynh "kick water-fern", "kick water-fern" is a "normal spoken phrase". Readers or listeners must infer the back-slang phrase "having sex with a woman" from "kick water-fern". In funny stories, using back-slang must create the context for readers (listeners) to catch "normal spoken phrase" to change to back-slang.

Superior to humorous word-play is the humorous one in thought. The latter humour also has the partitions of different aspects, inharmonious, sometimes totally strange. It is called word-play in thought because it has the aspect of profound thought, and requires high analyzed thought to catch the ideas arising from the partition of two aspects. In the story "the complaint from Ms Trung Trac of Nguyen Ai Quoc, there is a change and contradiction from the frame of reference of eastern space and time (three drum sounds mark the watch Tung!Tung!Tung! to the frame of reference Western abstract time :...multiplied by 5 make 15, that is your three hours!.....then change to a philosophical frame of reference (number 3, the most miserable one in the lots of Dzuong Cuu and finally.....about the frame of reference

concerning life of king and mandarins of southern court ("hunching back three times" of the eunuch informs An Nam king that the sky is bright). It is hard to analyze the humour by the contradictory cross of frames of reference, but [here and there appear hints of smiles, vague and secret. Especially the voice of the story teller is profound, mixed with a lot of nuances. "The night-watch has just marked three times, Tung, Tung, Tung! You are Westerners, how do you understand?" this is the scolding voice, but pretended voice, also the same as flattering a child, we pretend to scold an adult for his [unforgiveable ignorance: how smart, how wise is the childand so for Western readers this world seems to be so far, so dark and mysterious.....it turns out that this world is not mysterious. In front of the readers is the scene of reality and vileness: that is "hunching back three times" of the eunuch, whose " shrill Woman voice" reports to "His Excellency Duoi" "there was an order to start away from the court handed down. This frame of reference evokes the slipshod, vile life of the king and mandarins of southern court, the previous philosophical frame of reference gives it the depressiveness of historical fate. Vu Trong Phung's literature has extraordinarily humorous and intellectual sentences which prove that the author has a sharp, flexible intelligence, changes from this channel to another one, cross- partition of different waves and wavelength, of distant frames of reference provoke the arising the sudden meanings. In the essay " Industry of getting married to Westerners" of Vu Trong Phung, when the author compares "the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman" with "the police's club", and "the hammer of the blacksmith", "the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman"-only a tool for daily life is put into the category "means of production" (in the period of Vu Trong Phung, knowing this category and parodying it is a proof of superb intelligence, and when the author compares it with "the neck of Vietnamese deputy", this "neck" is put into the category of means of production, this time not the Vietnamese woman married to Frenchman but "nodding deputy" is ridiculed and this time also has the change of different frame of reference, the neck is the organic part of the alive body is now compared with inorganic things: bed, club, hammer.....deputy as social office requires the participation of the whole personality of human beings to work and fulfil their duties. In Vu Trong Phung's ways of comparison, the activities of this office are finally brought together in the neck and the neck of the "nodding deputy" only plays the role of nodding, all the mechanical, simple movements like the club in police's hand, the hammer in the hand of the blacksmith. The humoristic image of the deputy's neck identified as inorganic tool with mechanical movements provoke laugh and here the laugh is the reaction against the materialization of human beings, the mechanization of the liveliness (once again can't but remember the theory of Bergson about laugh). So, in the space of Vu Trong Phung's humorous sentences we have crossing of contrasty plans, another contrast to be mentioned is the contrast between the static state (the bed of a Vietnamese woman married to a Frenchman belongs to static *in*) and the dynamic state (club, hammer, neck of police, blacksmith, deputy belong to dynamic *yang*). We once again meet the partition between the man's plan and thing's plan in a sentence describing Madam Doan' which doesn't have any humorous elements: "Madam Doan with Japanese umbrella, leather purse, and dog steps down" (*So do*, literature press, 1998, page 26). In this sentence, "Japanese umbrella" and "leather purse" are nouns indicating the objects used as adjectives playing the role of a predicate to specify the characteristics of Madam Doan. Therefore, objects become the characteristics of human beings (humorous effect). In this sentence, the noun dog can be understood as the subject of the verb "step down". It can be understood as a predicate playing the role like "Japanese umbrella", or "leather purse" specifying the

characteristics of Madam Doan (with this version of interpretation, the humorous effect is stronger).

To speak back-slang is a phenomenon particular to Vietnamese. Foreigners may not enjoy the humour of speaking back-slang when their language doesn't have this phenomenon. Humour originates from climate, indigenous lifestyle, language, psychology and logic of indigenous people. It can be mentioned about the national nuance of humour. Humorous style is also related to the psychology of age groups. Children's jests are usually related to shit, wind, making water, defecating....young people are eager for the jests about sex. In an investigation about the laughter of American children carried out in 1961, the researchers concluded: at this age, youths can laugh when others feel embarrassed, annoyed or have tricks played on them :this age has no pity . Michelet). At the beginning of cultural communities which have a childish psychology, the humour, laughter and ways of jesting are somewhat like children.