TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC SƯ PHẠM TP HỒ CHÍ MINH
TẠP CHÍ KHOA HỌC
KHOA HỌC XÃ HỘI VÀ NHÂN VĂN
ISSN: 1859-3100 Tập 16, Số 7 (2019): 53-63
HO CHI MINH CITY UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION
JOURNAL OF SCIENCE
SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES
Vol. 16, No. 7 (2019): 53-63
Email: tapchikhoahoc@hcmue.edu.vn; Website: http://tckh.hcmue.edu.vn

Research Article

DUMB LUCK BY VU TRONG PHUNG AS A COLONIAL URBAN NARRATIVE

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Received: March 08, 2019; Revised: April 10, 2019; Accepted: May 15, 2019

ABSTRACT

Employing Bakhtin's concept of chronotope, this article examines the narrative construction of settings in the novel Dumb Luck by Vu Trong Phung. Identifying the core chronotope in Dumb Luck – the colonial city of Hanoi – as the juxtaposition, bifurcation and interference between two sub-chronotopes – the sidewalk and the French residence, with cultural behaviors that epitomize a rural world in disintegration and a urban world in emergence, respectively, I suggest that Dumb Luck marks not only the first appearance of a purely urban space in Vietnamese literature, but also the first appearance of a truly urban narrative which presents a comprehensive cultural consciousness of urban life. This narrative structure and cultural consciousness characterize the disturbing transformation and modernization of the Eastern world under the brutal imposition of Western culture in the first half of the 20th century.

Keywords: chronotope, Bakhtin, urbanism, colonialism, postcolonialism, Vu Trong Phung, *Dumb Luck*, narratology, cultural studies.

"Alas for our people! Civilization ruined!"
Dumb Luck – Vu Trong Phung

1. The urban city as a narrative chronotope

The Russian theorist Mikhain Bakhtin coined the term *chronotope*, which he describes as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, p.84). The narrative text is constructed not only by the three-dimensional structure of spaces or the chronological structure of temporal actions, but most of all, by the fictional world model fundamental to the text in particular and the genre in general – a particular overarching *chronotope*.

> The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic. (Bakhtin, p.84-85).

Cite this article as: Pham Ngoc Lan (2019). *Dumb Luck* by Vu Trong Phung as a colonial urban narrative. *Ho Chi Minh City University of Education Journal of Science, 16*(7), 53-63.

Through employing this theoretical concept, I discuss the rise of urban cities as well as urban narratives in the early 20th century Vietnam through the case of Vu Trong Phung's novel *Dumb Luck*. The transmutation from the traditional countryside/ feudal citadels to the Western-style modern cities is never a linear process: it is full of twists and breakages, articulated by literary urban narratives that emerge in accordance to the authors' transforming cultural consciousness. Prof. Do Duc Hieu has mentioned this literary urbanism in his discussion on *Dumb Luck*'s heteroglossia: "*Dumb Luck* is one hundred per cent an urban narrative, that of a doomed urban city in its doomed urbanization process in a particular colonized country full of variegated and miscellaneous feudal customs" (p.181). This article attempts to shed light into another aspect of this urbanism: not only the idea of the city in narratives, but also city-style narrative ideation.

The existence of the city dates back to thousands of years in human history. However, for many social and historical reasons, modern cities - particularly in the period of late 19th and early 20th century - have shifts onto another cultural significance: no longer merely a large population gathering center, or a political capital of a nation, but rather, a metropolis where social and economical relationships develop beyond those of cities and nations to be international, regional and global. In the early phase of modernization, this development has much to do with the formation of capitalism and the high accumulation of wealth and power in political and economic capitals of the West. In the extreme phase, it involves the process of colonization and reconstruction of the entire cultural structure in countries outside the whirlpool of capitalism, or in other words, the process of reconstructing the world in a standardized format called Civilization. In that context, all objects, people and social relations will be redefined. The city then becomes a reference system.

In literary terms, the greatness, unconventionality, and flexibility of urban forms of life in the 19th and 20th century, in one hand, demands to be negotiated in literature, and in the other, creates new opportunities for artists and intellectuals to make sense and represent novel patterns of personal, social, and artistic practices. As observed by Malcolm Bradbury, "Nor is it any accident that the growth of cities as vast agglomerations in widely contrasted roles and situations, and hence as places of friction, change and new consciousness, coincides with a desire extreme cultural novelty and with a feeling of crisis in value and expression which particularly touched the art" (Bradbury, p.98).

From this perspective, *Dumb Luck* by Vu Trong Phung needs to be explored not simply as the first appearance of a purely urban space in Vietnamese novelistic history, but rather, as the first appearance of a truly urban narrative, which encapsulates an exhaustive cultural experience of urban life, together with an internally "unfinalizable" consciousness of language that characterizes the genre of novel (in Bakhtin's terms). In that urban narrative, the whole system of characters, plot, and techniques is permeated by a particularly urban narrative strategy - that of a typical colonial urban city full of irreconcilable, critical cultural conflicts.

2. The colonized urban city with its internal paradigmatic conflicts

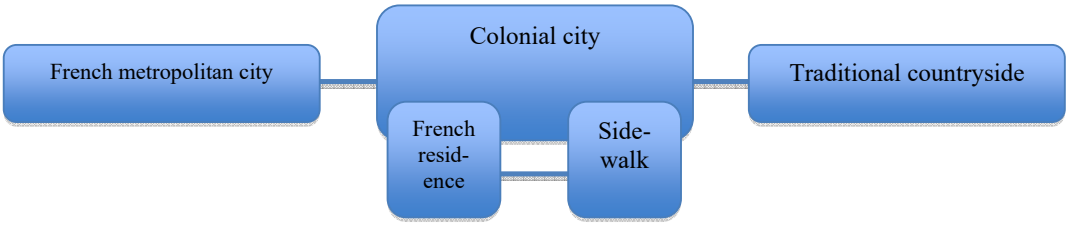
Vu Trong Phung's urban city of Hanoi is that of a colonized country in its early days of development. New paradigms are not generated by cultural and epistemological conditions appropriated by pervasive internal economical and social capitalization, but rather imposed by an external force upon cultural and epistemological conditions with persistent remains of traditionally Eastern feudal economic and social structure. The process of urbanization began with severe conflicts between the two cultural paradigms – traditional and modern, rural and urban.

In his classic *The Wretched of the Earth*, wrote the postcolonialist philosopher Frantz Fanon:

> The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression. [...] The zone where the natives live is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settlers. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of a higher unity. Obedient to the rules of pure Aristotelian logic, they both follow the principle of reciprocal exclusivity. No conciliation is possible, for of the two terms, one is superfluous. (Fanon, p.37-39)

Frantz Fanon describes the contradictory essence of colonial cities with an impressive metaphor: it is a world cut in halves, a city upon which a Western urban model is violently imposed onto the void created by marginalization of traditional ways of life. In the case of *Dumb Luck*, the urban chronotope is constructed as a dynamic intersectional zone between the metropolitan urban world and local rural one, which are epitomized by two *sub-chronotopes* – the French residence and the sidewalk, respectively, as demonstrated by this Chart 1:

Chart 1. *The colonial city as the core chronotope in* Dumb Luck*, as a dynamic intersectional zone between two cultural spaces*



Red-Haired Xuan's journey takes place in the colonial city of Hanoi, moving from its sidewalks to its French residences and finally making its way upclose to the French metropolitan world. The colonial urban space of Hanoi in *Dumb Luck* is constructed as the dynamic contact area between Western modern world and Vietnamese traditional world, between magnificent Paris and age-old Vietnamese countryside. In that in-between space, the West with its superficial expressions becomes an ideal model.

Let's firstly mention the sidewalk chronotope, the starting point of Xuan's adventure.

The sidewalk chronotope is characterized by its spatial dimension of fringe areas, the meeting place of marginal people of rural backgrounds moving to urban areas to serve the

needs of wealthy people living in French residences and to do the jobs unwanted by those in that neighborhood. It is the world of peddlers, rickshaw pullers, kitchen helpers, beggars, and maids. In this sidewalk world, everything remains the same track of a rural-style sloppy lifestyle, the fortune-teller "ground a bit of powder from his ink stick, and spit purposefully into a small ink pot" (p.34), Red-Haired Xuan "chomped noisily on his stalk", "sucked the sweet juice and spit out the leftover shards in the direction of a nearby electrical pole" (p.34), the maids, beggars, and peddlers "pissing in the gutters or fighting in the street" (p.40)... However, unlike the open but isolated space of poverty-stricken rural empty huts in Ngo Tat To's novels or Nam Cao's short stories, Vu Trong Phung's urban sidewalk is a suffocating and overcrowded open space, where many pauperized little people are jammed and cramped together. They spend their days and nights quarrelling, trading gossip, flirting, haggling over petty prices, speaking ill of their masters as the only way possible for them to survive the harshness, emptiness, and meaninglessness of their impoverished life.

The sidewalk chronotope has its typical temporal dimension, quite close to the tempo of rural life: that of slowness and stagnation. On the sidewalk, where Xuan starts his adventure, the lemonade vendors spend their whole afternoon "squat[ting] against the handles of his cart", the fortune-teller "yawned, taking the expression of a true philosopher", and the sugarcane girl remarks, "Nothing's moving today" (p.33). Every day comes in and out in an endless cycle of physical and spiritual poverty, without any hopes of change or any efforts of escape.

Those of the sidewalk chronotope converge in a distinctively "city periphery" space – the police station jail: "Inside was a beggar together with his wife and child, a vagabond, and a female peddler with two baskets of stale noodles and rancid barbecue pork" (p.43) then joined by the fortune-teller and Red-Haired Xuan. The rhythm of time dominating such an in-between space is still a stagnant, uneventful, and tiresome one that characterizes the chronotope of sidewalk, the tempo that refuses changes, as embraced by the vagabond: "First, they interrupt my sleep to bring me to jail, and now they wake me up again to release me. What a pain!" (p.45). Marginalized people and lives, despised and excluded by the city, yet still persist hopelessly and stubbornly, like gloomy shadows of the city.

The kernel *sub-chronotope* of the colonial city – French residence – parallels that of the sidewalk: "The sixteen streets under its jurisdiction were located in a French neighborhood that was so peaceful and secure that violations of the law were as rare as winning lottery tickets" (p.43).

The spatial dimension of French residence chronotope is established by a series of villas, restaurants, tailors, and hotels. Those closed, flashy, and staggering spaces are constructed in a particularly Western model, not only copying their appearance but also the way they function. The Europeanization Tailor Shop displays behind its glass windows three mannequins "made to *resemble beautiful European women*" (p.56, emphasis mine). The Fairyland Hotel "contained sixty rooms and dozens of young female love peddlers (also known as top-grade quality hens), *following a system innovated in more civilized*

countries" (p.97). In this space, everything struggles with itself, bending itself to a Western standard that is distorted, hybridized, and deformed.

The so-called "Western neighborhood", ironically, is inhabited by no Westerners except a French captain at the police station and a few French tennis players at the tennis stadium, who all make momentary appearance in the course of the novel. This world of *Dumb Luck* consisted mainly of wealthy Vietnamese people vaguely related with the real metropolitan France, yet always desperately struggling to redefine themselves to those vague relations. Those are the elites and upper portion of the city: Mr. Civilization (who used to be an international student in Paris) and his rich wife, Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer (a widow of a French official), Grandpa Hong (a retired senior clerk with ridiculous respect and fear to his "Europeanized" son), the royalist politician Joseph Thiet (who dreams of "starting up a royalist newspaper, not for the imperial court in Hue but for Mr. Leon Daudet and the Orleans family in France" (p.80))... They share common uncritical admiration of the remote Western world of metropolitan France and undiscerning disdain to their traditional Vietnamese legacy. Mr. Civilization claims to had grown close "to numerous well-known authors and statesmen–vice ministers and prime ministers–some so famous that their names had appeared in the Vietnamese press" (p.38). Mr. ILL generalizes with contemptuousness "My God! The Vietnamese common people are so backward, artistically speaking" (p.58)" while craving to be thrown to jail just like abstract artists in Italy and Germany. The 'horned' senior clerk is pleased to be compared by his wife's lover to the talented and handsome Napoleon, who also "sprouted horns" (p.108). In the space of French residence, people look up to and worship the imperial mother country of France with crazy and unreasonable passions, focusing on its most breathtaking and cliché-ish aura without understanding the modern cultural values of individualism and democracy underlying it, while contemptuously looking down to the Vietnamese 'common' world, without understanding the traditional cultural values of family bonding underlying it neither. Xuan's traditionally genteel greetings and addressing ("Good afternoon, Grandmother" (p.38)) disgusts Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer: "The Annamese are so stupid." – as if her niece, her nephew-in-law and herself were not some of those "Annamese".

The space of *Dumb Luck* is filled by bastard, distorted, and extravagant counterfeits of those prototypes in the overseas Western world. All characters imagine that Western world with absurd smattering and falsification – "Like many old and stupid people, Grandpa Hong did not allow his utter ignorance of civilization to prevent him from supporting its merits wholeheartedly. Just as he was faithful to Great France, Grandpa Hong was fiercely loyal to his son, a fidelity he demonstrated by adopting all of his son's many foreign affectations, such as using the pronouns toa [*toi*] and moa [*moi*]" (p.76). French cultural values, contorted by the simpleminded slavery thinking and understanding, turn out to be ridiculous ideals – ranging from left-wing democracy, Freud's psychoanalytical theory, to modern fashion, sport, and law: the Popular Movement loses its essential egalitarianism to be a childish fashion of empty slogans: "The aristocracy and the

bourgeois are out nowadays, and the common people are in" (p.73-4); the psychoanalytical theory loses its essential personality structure and personality development dynamics to be a half-baked hypothesis of sexuality; and even the Rule of Law principle is turned into governmental commercial dealings: "Our concern is tickets, not laws!" (p.155).

The paradox underlying the Janus-faced colonized city most visibly establishes itself in the police's difficult search for some chances of tickets and fines. In spite of the Vietnamese police officers' complain, "The newspapers have civilized everyone. There's no one left to fine" (p.43), they never fathom the fact that the "civilization" they despises has never reach "everyone": The French captain worriedly observes that "only the lowliest Annamese servants, cooks, rickshaw coolies, and street singers – were ticketed in his precinct. How could the station collect 5,000 piasters from such a pathetic collectivity?" And the narrator with his journalist vision sharply observes that "On those rare occasions when a peddler, a household servant, a cook, a rickshaw coolie, or a beggar did break a law – typically by pissing in the gutters or fighting in the streets – the patrolmen were never around" (p.43). This suggests that there still exists the harsh boundary between the two worlds, one of the "civilized" and "peaceful" French residence of those Westerners or high-class people, and the other of the bustling sidewalk occupied by those servants, coolies, or beggars, while the bureaucratic red-tape police, who embodies urban security, fails to perceive the situation of security in the other half of the precinct for which they are responsible. This further deepens the irreconcilable gap between the two chronotopes.

The temporal dimension of the French residence is represented by its dramatic rapidity and unpredictability that characterize the rhythm of urban life. Mrs. Civilization, in one morning, is found swiftly selling garments to a customer, arguing with a journalist, negotiating with Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer, training Xuan for garment vending. They work speedily, enjoy their lives hurriedly, and argue hastily. Their lives are filled by sharp turning points, instantaneous attempts, sudden conspiracy, and unexpected reactions: "Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer asked with sudden interest" (p.77), "Suddenly, [Miss Snow] heard the sound of a female voice singing from the adjacent room" (p.100) "Suddenly, [Mrs. Civilization] heard footsteps out in the hall approaching his room" (p.118), "tennis champion Hai yelled out suddenly" (p.172). In spite of slight nuances of agitation and anxiety that indicates such society that has just left its age-old agricultural life behind but has not yet fully developed another way of life, the overall rapidity of temporal patterns still suggests some sense of the essentially unpredictable and contingent nature of modern urban life.

Xuan serves as the most dynamic factor in the sidewalk world, and therefore the most urban-oriented: He "sold roasted peanuts and newspapers on streetcorners, ran errands for a theater troupe, and hawked Tiger Balm aboard the trains" (p.36) before securing a job as a ball boy at the tennis stadium, which implies continuous movements and actions. He is at first the living manifest of the sidewalk chronotope, whose vagrant life on the street leaves ineradicable traces in his ongoing vulgar utterances of "Damn it!" or "God damn my mother's milk!", earning him respect and trust from Mrs. Deputy

Customs Officer's servants: “They liked the fact that he was unpretentious and spoke the language of the common people”. Nevertheless, Xuan breaks away from that chronotope in his French-style dressing of “shorts, tennis shoes, and a sleeveless undershirt” that distinguishes him from other people in the police station's jail (p.45). And most significantly, unlike those 'common people' in passive and hopeless stagnancy, he actively “designs” his own future, or in other words, rather than depending on “dumb luck” to change his fate, he energetically seeks for new directions for upcoming movements and gets prepared for them: “His game improved, and he dreamed of one day becoming as famous as superstars like Chim or Giao, if only fate would dispatch a talent scout to discover his genius. Now, however, he accepted his lot as a simple ball boy. Although the job was a lowly one, it held out a shred of hope for future advancement. He saw no future in old-fashioned professions such as peanut vending, fruit picking, fishing, or running errands for actors” (p.37). From the beginning of the story, Xuan has been seen moving back and forth ceaselessly on the border between the two worlds: from the tennis stadium exclusively built for high-class Westerners, he crosses the tree-lined gate going to the sidewalk to flirt with the sugarcane girl and get his fortune told, then go back in to play tennis with Mrs. Civilization. In Chapter 2, Xuan is detained in the police station of a French neighborhood (which, according to Fanon, symbolizes the boundary between two oppositional areas of the colonial city). In chapter 3, Xuan gets into the villa of a Frenchman's wife and back to the sidewalk. In chapter 4, he walks into the luxurious Europeanization Tailor Shop from the sidewalk. He is always in constant shifting and moving between the sidewalk and the French residence; the spatial stretches that belong to him and contribute greatly to his success are the dimming intermediate spaces between oppositional worlds.

After his initial perplexed steps into the French residence world, “remain[ing] in his seat” (p.55), or “dar[ing] not enter immediately” (p.56), Xuan quickly catches up with the whirlwind of time which is typical of urban life, and energetically insinuates himself into high-class people of French residence, just like Mr. Civilization's remark: “He is well spoken and quick on his feet, too” (p.73). Discussing Mrs. ILL's clothes, “Red-Haired Xuan's speaking machine was shifting into high gear” (p.68). Discussing Great Grandpa's sickness, Xuan “rattled on like a well-oiled diagnostic machine” (p.78). Before that, while entering Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer's “huge Western-style villa”, Xuan quickly recognized the new opportunities opening up in his life together with the new space he is gaining access to: “He sensed the beginning of a new chapter of his life” (p.48). Through the space of French residences, Xuan's final destination of will be in front of “a uniformed Frenchman”, a huge car bearing the French tricolored flag, and a dinner with “director of the Indochinese Political Bureau” (p.185) – that is, onto the border of the real French metropolitan world.

This makes evident that Red-Haired Xuan's success is not simply due to his “dumb luck”. It comes from his urban intuition that endows him a unique ability to quickly immerse himself into an urban chronotope that is being Europeanized in a hasty and

irrational way. However, it also comes from his nature of 'commonness' that he acquires in his sidewalk life – the practicality and rationality of 'outsiders' in witnessing the social comedies played by those high-class 'insiders'. He sneered at Mt. ILL's fashion creations in sidewalk-style language and awareness: "God-damn these clothes!" (p.66), but is prepared to change to highclass-style tone to praise the very clothes: "Clothing should embellish one's natural beauty, not cover it up..." (p.68). He approves the comments made Mrs. Deputy Customs Officer's servants on Master Blessing's sickness, using his own vulgar language: "That's what I call a God-damned gift from Heaven!" (p.126), yet he is also prepared to turn those sidewalk-style comments to highclass-style eloquent arguments: "In spite of the fact that he is clearly a gift sent from Heaven and Buddha, he is as susceptible to lust as any normal person. He may even be more lustful!" (p.128). Xuan is therefore a typical product of the sidewalk chronotope, but does not totally belong to the sidewalk; he becomes a part of the French residence and yet never totally belongs to the French residence. His vacillation between two worlds is apparently manifested by his symbolic red hair, "streaky red, as red as the hair of a Westerner" (p.37) which is very "fashionable" and "elegant" as remarked by high-class guests at Fairyland Hotel, and yet it is an distinctive indication of Xuan's vagabond childhood on the sidewalk. He is the convergent magnet of both the sanity of the sidewalk and the acumen of the French residence, which enables him to escape his situation as a passive object in the game of the Civilization couple, and actively construct a game of his own, turning Mr. Civilization into his puppet ("You will ride my coattails to fame and success just like the managers of Chim and Giao before you! Thanks to me, you will also become a household name" (p.153)).

During the course of the novel, the sidewalk world and the French residence world are in continuous clashes, interference and intertwinement, generating humorous parodies. Xuan's sidewalk-style language are praised and revered, even included in the Vietnamese dictionary edited by the Association of Spiritual and Ethical Development, that is, elevated to the cultural top of the French residence world. The Westernized high-class language was reinterpreted according to the "popular" thinking of the sidewalk, so the word 'tennis court' that belongs to the high-class people is construed by low-class ones as 'drying yard for pants', involuntarily making "a great moment for sports in this country and for the future of women" (p.114). *Dumb Luck* contains all the intense and reeling hybridism of a miserable and delusional colonization process, in which the traditional cultural space was turned upside-down, brutally revealing its backwardness, the modern cultural space was distorted and shattered with crazy imitations. Different from rural or outskirt spaces constructed by Nam Cao or Ngo Tat To's narratives – fragmentary and gloomy spatial fragments in its stagnation and inability of transformation, Vu Trong Phung's urban space is dynamic and motional in the whirlwind of intense changes. What the narrator has to tell about the White Bamboo Lake, "little more than a contemporary barometer of tragic conflict between the Old and the New, the Individual and the Family, Self-Sacrifice and Political Awakening, and Oppression and Liberation" (p.96), could be applied to Hanoi city as a whole.

3. The colonial city of art and the art of colonial city

A dense urban space, a typical urban narrative, *Dumb Luck* nevertheless finds its position within a particularly Eastern version of literary pastoral tradition. The classic one in the West begins in ancient Greece and flourishes in nineteenth century romanticism in an inextricable correlation to the process of urbanization:

> The emergence of the bucolic idyll correlates closely with large-scale urbanisation in the Hellenic period. There are two key contrasts from this period that run through the pastoral tradition: the spatial distinction of town (frenetic, corrupt, impersonal) and country (peaceful, abundant), and the temporal distinction of past (idyllic) and present ('fallen').
>
> (Garrand, 2004, p.35).

In the environment of traditional Vietnamese culture, this universal pastoral idealism is rooted in Confucianist-Taoist ideology of seclusionism, which embraces dignity and decency in poverty and shuns urban prosperity – "I search for solitude as a fool, they search for rushing towns as sages" (Nguyen Binh Khiem). The nostalgia of the ideal idyllic beauty lost in crazy urbanization still persists in the first Vietnamese urban narratives (*Consumed with Living* by Nam Cao, *Dumb Luck* by Vu Trong Phung or some satirical short stories by Nguyen Cong Hoan, for instances).

Xuan's complete opposite, or perhaps negative version is Mr. Hong's younger brother Two. Whereas Xuan embodies urban dynamism, Mr. Two is the tranquility of the countryside that remains outside the vortex of Europeanization. Xuan actively participates in the intense transformation of the Europeanization, remolds himself to its irrational patterns, while Mr. Two silently stays outside, devotedly fulfilling his filial duty, refusing with his uncommunicativeness to take part in the minimized urban Europeanized society – that is, his brother's family.

> Although Mr. Two was Grandpa Hong's younger brother, he lived in the countryside and, as a result, garnered little respect within the family. [...] Upon receiving the news that Great-Grandpa was ill, he rushed to his bedside in the city, where he remained day and night. He helped his father sit up and lie down, emptied his spittoon, and spoon-fed him porridge. He did not begrudge his older brother, Grandpa Hong, for lying in bed and smoking opium all day or his nephews and nieces for ignoring the old man. In his mind their neglect of his father, simply afforded enhanced opportunities for him to fulfill his own filial duty. (p.83)

The brief appearance of Mr. Two represents the gradual decay of traditional cultural space. Those in his brother's Westernized family were to him "aliens from another world" and himself "an old-fashioned country bumpkin" (p.83). Mr. Two's gentleness, devotedness and weakness signify the unavoidable collapse of his traditional countryside world in the process of Westernization.

What distinguishes Vu Trong Phung from the poets Nguyen Binh Khiem, Nguyen Cong Tru or Tan Da is his lack of such calm serenity that only comes from a self-esteemed outsider. His is the attitude of a confused insider, who is not only a witness but also part of that world of "rushing towns" (as described by Nguyen Binh Khiem), though still frightened and disinclined by it.

Vu Trong Phung's narrative politics is itself a part of the city. His character world is reeling in a dizzying pace of urban rhythm. His discourse contains opposing and clashing strata of language from various social classes. Hanoi in *Dumb Luck* is the crowded, jostling population of opposing social groups. The narrator mischievously and sharply observes, categorizes and labels people in a uniquely journalist technique – journalism itself is an essential product of the city, the intersection point of various urban awareness ("an enthusiasm characteristic of numerous skinny and sickly men who celebrate the merits of sports without ever actually playing them" (p.38), "the stupidity of the people of Annam for failing to knock before entering a room" (p.118). That is the technique of observation and description conveyed by Balzacian realism, but the labels are permeated by colonial urbanism, focusing on the monstrous paradoxes of an absurd colonial society. In terms of his social vision, Vu Trong Phung could be considered a Balzac of the colonial city.

The value crisis in the writer's colonial city derives from the process of turbulent transformation from a rural-like feudal citadel to a modernized city. The value crisis in the colonial city's writer partly derives from the fact that Vu Trong Phung himself still embraces traditionally Confucian moralism covered by his Western education and behaviors. Regarding his biography, it is impossible to expect from him the fearlessness and enthusiasm of social Westernization shown by Nhat Linh, who has spent years of direct access to Western society, while bearing not so harsh family responsibility. It is also impossible to expect from him the arrogant calmness shown by Tan Da, who enjoys extensive Sinological academic education in an influential feudal mandarin family. Vu Trong Phung enjoys French colonial education from Primary to Secondary, which means a not too strong educational background in comparison to many other writers of the time, plus wretchedly harsh family conditions that weigh down on him heavy traditional responsibilities as the only bread-winner. He is immersed in a cultural vacuum created by the inevitable collapse of a cultural paradigm and the magnetic yet unsteady emergence of another one. From the cultural void worsened by the intense accumulation of contrasting people and lifestyles in the modern urban center, he examines the current society with self-destructive distress and wrath: "Darkness, yes! Because I am always a pessimist. Resentment, also yes, because I believe that if anyone finds the current society of our country not worthy of resentment, but of happy, hearty, bourgeois, and fashionable living, dressing, dancing, etc. just the way you are now advocating, then that one does not truly desire social reform in the one hand, and is despicably selfish in the other" (Vu Trong Phung, "In response to *Today News*: Bawdy or not bawdy?", my translation).

Placing *Dumb Luck* in the chaotic context of the early twentieth century colonial urbanization and modernization, it becomes evident that an utter nihilism is distilled within the emergence process of a "civilized" capitalist world. Vu Trong Phung's laughter is the ultimate of that nihilism, a laughter that has lost its Bakhtinian code of rebirth and renewal, a laughter that belongs to a literary talent in his trauma of conflicting and disintegrated cultural value systems. Far from Ho Xuan Huong or Nguyen Khuyen's sense of humor, which characterizes the traditional culture of rural villages or feudal citadels, based on a

solid eternalist value system that could be obscured but not be demolished, Vu Trong Phung's is close to Tu Xuong's – the cynical and defeatist laughter that characterizes the urban city which is emerging upon the ashes of old-aged value platforms.

What differentiates between the latter two writers might lies in the fact that the laughter of the Baccalaureate of Nam Dinh city is somewhat sorrowful and helpless, while that of the journalist of Hanoi city has left all the sorrow and helplessness behind to reach the depressive rage that encapsulate the spirit of nihilism, which is bred by the chaotic modern urban life and thinking.

Vu Trong Phung's writing, after all, is the comic-tragic coda of the traditional cultural environment that has completely collapsed.

❖ ***Conflict of Interest:*** *Author have no conflict of interest to declare.*

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SỐ ĐỎ (VŨ TRỌNG PHỤNG) NHƯ MỘT TỰ SỰ CỦA ĐÔ THỊ THUỘC ĐỊA

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Ngày nhận bài: 08-3-2019; ngày nhận bài sửa: 10-4-2019; ngày duyệt đăng: 15-5-2019

TÓM TẮT

Bài viết vận dụng khái niệm chronotope *của Bakhtin để khảo sát thi pháp kiến tạo không gian và thời gian tự sự trong tiểu thuyết* Số đỏ *của Vũ Trọng Phụng. Xác định* chronotope *chính trong* Số đỏ *– đô thị thuộc địa Hà Nội – là sự tồn tại song song, va đập và chồng lấn giữa hai* chronotope *nhỏ – vỉa hè và phố Tây, với hai ý thức văn hóa đặc trưng cho một nông thôn đang tan rã và một thành thị đang hình thành, chúng tôi khẳng định* Số đỏ *không đơn thuần chỉ là sự xuất hiện lần đầu tiên của không gian đô thị thuần túy trong tiểu thuyết Việt Nam, mà đúng hơn, là sự xuất hiện lần đầu tiên của một tự sự đô thị thực thụ, trong đó trình bày một ý thức văn hóa hoàn chỉnh về đời sống kiểu đô thị. Cấu trúc tự sự và ý thức văn hóa này đặc trưng cho quá trình chuyển hóa đau đớn của thế giới phương Đông trong cuộc xâm thực tàn khốc của văn hóa phương Tây nửa đầu thế kỉ XX.*

Từ khóa: chronotope, Bakhtin, đô thị, thuộc địa, hậu thuộc địa, Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Số đỏ*, tự sự học, văn hóa học.