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Life's Many Sides

The meaning of yellow

By TON THAT THIEN

Yellow is a rather suspicious colour. If you are French and someone gives you a yellow tie, then you can assume safely that the man means to tell you to look in somebody else's bed to find your wife. Again if you are French and someone tells you a joke and you laugh in a certain way, he will know that your laugh is a 'rire jaune' that is unconvincing. If you are Napoleon or Emperor Wilhelm, you would tell the European nations – including Russia – to watch for the 'yellow danger' (which means not all the Asians but only the Chinese – the only Asians that count because they are countless)!

But if you are a Vietnamese editor, and especially of a certain kind of paper, yellow means that you have run out of newsprint, and have been unable to get the stuff in time, or at all, and in any case, at the normal price. But to think of it, the situation is rather paradoxical, here is a paper which refuses to go yellow, and for that precise reason, is all yellow! Try to make sense out of that! And everyone can see that the paper is yellow! There is no hiding it at all! What a real mess!

So what do we do? If people tell us to stop joking, we shall have to 'smile yellow' (rire jaune) because it is really a bad joke! And if people tell us to cry yellow, well, we are not prepared to do it, although if we cry our tears would not be yellow at all, but really white or red (in Vietnamese, one often says of a man who is really hurt that he has bloody tears).

If you really know Vietnamese history, especially Vietnamese social and cultural history, then you would be surprised that any paper dares appear in yellow at all, for yellow is the imperial colour, and in times when there was an absolute monarchy and no freedom for anyone except for the Emperor, anyone appearing in yellow would have his head cut off (this is no joke at all because of the existence of such a crime as 'lese majeste' whether the offense is intentional or not).

The people's colour, in Vietnamese humoristic language is black. Hence the phrase 'Dan Ngu Khu Den' (Ignorant people with black behinds), meaning that the people are all fools and cannot even have properly coloured behinds! So the Emperor and his family could trample as much as they liked on the people. But do you know how the people react to it? Simply by retiring into their villages because in Vietnamese fact – although not in law -- 'Lenh Vua Thua Le Lang' (Within the boundary of his village, a citizen spits on the King's writs). If you doubt the truth of this, do some thinking about the war, and if you know French, read a book by the French sociologist Paul Mus entitled 'Vietnam, Sociologie d'Une Guerre'.