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An Anatomy of Satirical Cartoons in Contemporary Vietnam: Political Communication and Representations of Systemic Corruption in a One-party State

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ABSTRACT

Satirical cartooning in Vietnam is subject to a complex dynamic: an increasingly liberalised and internationalised economy, and the rise of social media in a one-party state. This article examines what state-sanctioned satirical cartoons can reveal about the representation and management of political criticism in such a context. We find a growing trend of depicting corruption as a systemic problem, which is present in 45 per cent of the sample and in 70 per cent of the 20 most-viral cartoons in one of Vietnam's most popular magazines, *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* (*Youth Humour*). This trend can be interpreted as a change in the sensibility of audiences and a shift toward a more tolerant media landscape. The trend, however, may also be a worrying sign of the dual dangers of cynicism in Vietnamese politics: the development of apathy among audiences and the cynical use of art by authorities. Despite these concerns, we argue, political cartoons in Vietnam provide an important public avenue for collective political reflection and everyday social solidarity.

KEYWORDS

Corruption; discursive pre-emption; mass media; political communication; political satire; cartoons; social media; Vietnam

Introduction

The explosion in social media usage has changed politics and global media landscapes. The new ability for instant mass communication, and the flux and uncertainty of multiple narrative flows, have presented new challenges for political communication and sense-making in democracies as well as authoritarian societies. Vietnam's one party-state is no exception to the global trend of what Nilsson refers to as "citizen witnessing" (2020). As noted by T.-G. Nguyen (2018, p. 895), for many sensitive political events, pervasive censorship in traditional media no longer prevents Vietnamese citizens from knowing about current affairs, and "political disruptions in Vietnam [are] literally a few clicks away".

In recent years, scholars of Vietnamese politics and media have focussed on topics such as the meaning of political participation in the age of social networks (Bui, 2017; Vu, 2017), the implications for the media of the new Cybersecurity Law (T.-G. Nguyen, 2018), the emergence of a meme-making culture (Sharbaugh & Nguyen, 2014), and the influence of social media on elite politics (Bui, 2016). However, much less is understood about political communication and rhetoric in Vietnam. Even less is known about the use

of political cartoons and satire in the Vietnamese context, although cartoons about the negative aspects of politics are published every day in the mainstream state-controlled media.

Figure 1, for example, illustrates how rampant nepotism and incompetent governance are satirised in the Vietnamese media. Figure 1a, which attracted more than 23,065 reactions (including likes, shares and comments) was the most viral cartoon in the random sample used as the evidence base for this article (see details of methodology, below). In Figure 1b, the competency of a government body is questioned, and the artist refers to Klaus Schwab's Industrial Revolution 4.0 (Schwab, 2017), which has become a buzzword in Vietnam's official political discourse since 2017. Playing on the "4.0" meme, the cartoon states that, for a government body in Vietnam, 4.0 means zero listening, zero seeing, zero knowing and zero inspecting.

Vietnam has a rich tradition of satire, influenced by Confucianism, the period of French colonialism, and its close ties with the Soviet bloc. Furthermore, the party-state has recently sought legitimacy by developing the concept of a law-based socialist state (Bui, 2018), which means that it needs to signal its credibility and build trust with the public. For these reasons, it is important to understand how political criticism is managed and represented within Vietnam's one-party state. This article uses state-sanctioned cartoons published on the Facebook site of one of Vietnam's most popular magazines, *Tuoi Tre Cui* (*Youth Humour*), as a resource for learning more about the management and representation of political criticism in an authoritarian society. These cartoons reflect the influence of social media and Vietnam's political economy in a one-party state pursuing post-socialist governance of a globalised and increasingly digital economy (Bui, 2018; Vuong, 2019b). The article begins by introducing the context of Vietnamese digital media and cyber-activism.



Figure 1. (a) An entire family serve as government officials in a town (*Tuoi Tre Cui* Facebook page, 24 June 2018).¹ (b) Vietnamese government and Industry 4.0: Zero listening, zero seeing, zero knowing and zero inspecting (*Tuoi Tre Cui* Facebook page, 25 September 2018).

Digital Media Landscape, Cyber-activism and Government Responses

The remarkable growth of the Internet and social media has altered Vietnam's information and media landscape in just a few decades. In 2017, it was reported that between 54 per cent and 60 per cent of Vietnam's population of 90 million was online (Abuza, 2015; Dien-Luong, 2017; Hayton, 2010; Nhan-Dan, 2017). Despite living under single-party rule, Vietnamese people can access all major social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Weibo, none of which is currently blocked in the country. In terms of sheer numbers, Vietnam is a "Facebook nation", with 64 million accounts (67 per cent of the population), putting the country 7th in the world (Ha, 2017). The government has its own social media handles on Facebook and Twitter; during the COVID-19 pandemic, these channels proved especially powerful in communicating the government's policies and battling misinformation to contain the spread of the coronavirus (La et al., 2020; Nguyen & Ho, 2020). On average, Vietnamese people spend two hours and 39 minutes on social media daily (Nhan Dan, 2017), and nearly half of the population gets their daily news from social media (Minh, 2018). It is also relatively easy to gain access to blocked websites, by changing IP addresses or using VPN services or TOR. These blocked webpages are generally produced by Vietnamese diaspora communities, which propagate anti-state views and often oppose the Communist party (Labbé, 2015).

Social media and the Internet have therefore given the Vietnamese people unprecedented access to various sources of information and narratives, which in turn have fostered greater freedom of political expression and engagement. Nguyen and Vuong (2016) argue that in Vietnam digitising is democratising. In certain areas, many online protests were successful in pressuring the government to change its policies, or at least to have more dialogue with its citizens (Bui, 2016; Dien, 2017; Vi, 2018; Vu, 2017). Some protests turned into riots, such as that against the Special Economic Zone Law in Binh Thuan Province in June 2018 (T.-G. Nguyen, 2018). That said, it is important to recognise the extent to which the Vietnamese party-state has sought to control and direct such unprecedented forms of political expression and engagement. There exists a complex web of tactics: the establishment in 2018 of new legal frameworks such as the new Cybersecurity Law (T.-G. Nguyen, 2018), the prosecution of bloggers and journalists, and the (temporary or permanent) closure of websites or blogs (Bui, 2016; Sharbaugh & Nguyen, 2014).

These "hard tactics" are relatively well documented (Abuza, 2015). However, what might be called the "soft tactics" of political communication and rhetoric in the one-party state are less well understood. Given the interest of the party-state in justifying its legitimacy through communicating the rhetoric of socialism under the rule of law (Bui, 2018), and its struggle to control social media (T.-G. Nguyen, 2018), one can argue that the "soft authoritarian tool kit" (Schatz, 2009) approach has gained more prominence. Moreover, this becomes more relevant in the age of mediatisation, where the ability for instant mass communication and the ease of citizen witnessing (Nilsson, 2020) force all institutions to adapt their media tactics to increases in speed, connectivity and uncertainty of communication in the new media ecology (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2015).

In this context, exploring how political criticism is managed and represented within Vietnam's one-party state can yield important insights. Here, state-sanctioned satirical cartoons published on Facebook offer fertile ground for research. Next, the article turns to the history of satire in Vietnam.

A Brief History of Political Satire in Vietnam

*Trăm năm bia đá cũng mòn
Ngàn năm bia miệng vẫn còn trơ trơ
Stone-inscribed texts could be eroded in just over a hundred years
Yet, word of mouth would still be alive after thousands of years.
– Vietnamese proverb*

A rich tradition of satire in Vietnam can be found in folk culture as well as classical poetry and literature. Pre-modern satire targeted the Confucian power structure, social injustices and hypocrisy, and gave voice to the suffering masses. The earliest evidence of satire in Vietnam can be found in woodblock reproductions of traditional drawings dating back to the late 11th or early 12th century (Phan, 2003). All Vietnamese children grow up reading Trang Quỳnh's tales, which are about how this folk hero uses his wit to make fun of the powerful: the King, the mandarins, the wealthy and the pseudo-intellectuals (Nguyen, 2013). The proverb cited at the start of this section expresses the sentiment that being the butt of a joke can be a severe form of social punishment in Vietnamese culture. In the pantheon of Vietnamese nationalist heroes, there is Hồ Xuân Hương – also known as “The queen of Nôm poetry” (1772–1822) – whose satirical poetry deals with the low status of women in society, as well as many of the political and religious hypocrisies of her time (Tran, 2002; Wilcox, 2005). She was followed by Nguyễn Khuyến (1835–1909) and Tú Xương (1870–1907), two satirical poets whose works are fuelled by the social and political chaos at the beginning of the French colonisation of Vietnam (Ngo, 2013).

By the 1930s, the use of jokes, cartoons and humorous stories had become established practice, driven by the desire to increase newspaper sales. The subjects of these jokes included outdated social and religious practices, and of course, the colonial rulers and their puppets in the royal court (Lent, 2014; Phan, 2003). A few well-defined tropes are identifiable. It was common for greedy corrupt mandarin officials to be represented as big, fat people in Vietnamese culture, while backward and ignorant peasants were often depicted as rats (Phan, 2003).

As the French government began to crack down on satirists and intensify censorship in Vietnam, explicit caricatures gave way to more symbolic representations; artists turned to symbols rooted in folk songs, verses and literature. During the three decades of war (1945–1975), cartooning in North Vietnam prioritised the war effort (Le, 2011; Lent, 2014). In the South, the practice continued to flourish with the success of one of Vietnam's most famous satirical artists, Nguyen Hai Chi, whose works were featured in the *New York Times*, *Asahi Shinbun* and *Newsweek* (Lent, 2014; Phan, 2003). After unification in 1975, political satire in the form of cartoons did not fare well until Vietnam opened to the world in 1986. Lent (2014) suggests that the combination of the political environment and the harsh economic reality of the time may have been the reason for this lack of development of satirical cartooning.

Since 1986, the gradual economic reforms and open-door policy have led to consistent rapid economic growth (Vuong, 2014; 2019a; 2019b). Their newfound prosperity has given Vietnamese people more time to catch up with the daily news, including trending satirical content, which is now published regularly by most newspapers and magazines.

Scholars and politicians have recognised the vast potential of satirical cartoons to raise awareness of critical socio-political issues, but understand that this form of art is underdeveloped in Vietnam. They note that the late president Ho Chi Minh was known to have published satirical cartoons in *Le Paria* when he started his political and revolutionary career in France (Birchall, 2015; Ha, 2019).

Since 2008, there have been more public attempts to revive and develop the practice of political cartooning. For example, the Press Awards for Satirical Cartoons have been held annually (Ha, 2019; Khanh-Huyen, 2018; Ly, 2008), and in 2018, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism organised a special competition and exhibition for satirical cartoons targeting corruption (K. Nguyen, 2018). Yet, in terms of cultural impact, these competitions cannot compare with *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* (*Youth Humour*), a magazine that has been published since 1975, and *Year End Meeting* (*Tao Quan*), a show produced by Vietnam Television since 2003. These two media outlets were the most important avenues for the production and consumption of popular satire prior to the age of social media (Lent, 2014; McAllister & Luckman, 2015; Phan, 2003). Using satire and parody, they have continued to tackle controversial issues such as corruption, social trends, and political and economic events in the social media age.

There are few studies, however, of these satirical shows and their political impact. According to Phan (2003), in *Youth Humour's* cartoons, corruption tends to be depicted as the problem of only a few “bad apples”, which is consistent with the official party line since the early 2000s, and there has been a taboo on representing politicians too realistically. Keenan (1997, cited in Lent, 2014) suggested that *Youth Humour* was setting the agenda for modern satire in Vietnam. McAllister and Luckman (2015) view the political humour used in *Year End Meeting* not only as entertainment but also as a critical reflection on political life in Vietnam. It is well known that all of the jokes in the show must be approved before publication, which gives rise to complaints that they avoid important issues or even, ironically, lack humour. Yet, their popularity speaks to the hunger of the Vietnamese people for a channel to reflect political life. With the recent rise of interactive multimedia on the Internet, Sharbaugh and Nguyen (2014) show that the emergence of a meme-making culture in Vietnam's digital space helps netizens to express an unprecedented level of criticism toward government policies.

There is therefore ample evidence of the rich tradition of satire and its relationship with politics in Vietnam. The lack of research on this subject is unfortunate, and is a problem this study rectifies. To make sense of the Vietnamese case, we next review the literature on political satire in non-democratic regimes.

Political Satire in Non-democratic Regimes

It goes without saying that making political jokes in authoritarian societies is risky: a joke that goes wrong can cost someone their career or even result in imprisonment. Yet, people have produced satirical materials even in the most repressive times and places (Oring, 2004). By analysing jokes and cartoons in non-democratic settings, one can unveil the emotional underpinnings of these regimes (Krstić et al., 2020), and detect subtle changes in the political environment, which can be difficult to gauge compared to democratic countries (Pearce & Hajizada, 2014). This section summarises the major findings of previous studies from China, the post-Soviet states and several Middle Eastern

countries. The findings can be understood along four dimensions of political satire: activism, social solidarity, affect and learning (see [Figure 2](#)).

First, the literature highlights the constant struggle of satirists, both online and in print, to find a balance between truth and their ability to maintain political views while surviving the market and the government. Many studies underline the use of ambiguity to evade government censorship and prosecution as well as to reach a wider audience (Yang & Jiang, 2015). For example, one Turkish study demonstrates how ambiguous jokes are used to solve the dilemma of many satirical magazines: their existence depends on meeting market demands and avoiding government prosecution while maintaining a coherent political ideology (Enis, 2012). Similarly, a Kuwaiti study shows how satirical magazines circumvented legal restrictions on political commentary when creating cartoons about the controversial aspects of the Arab Spring (Alkazemi & Wanta, 2015). Studies in China show the ambivalent and playful use of words, phonetics and pictures to lampoon official political

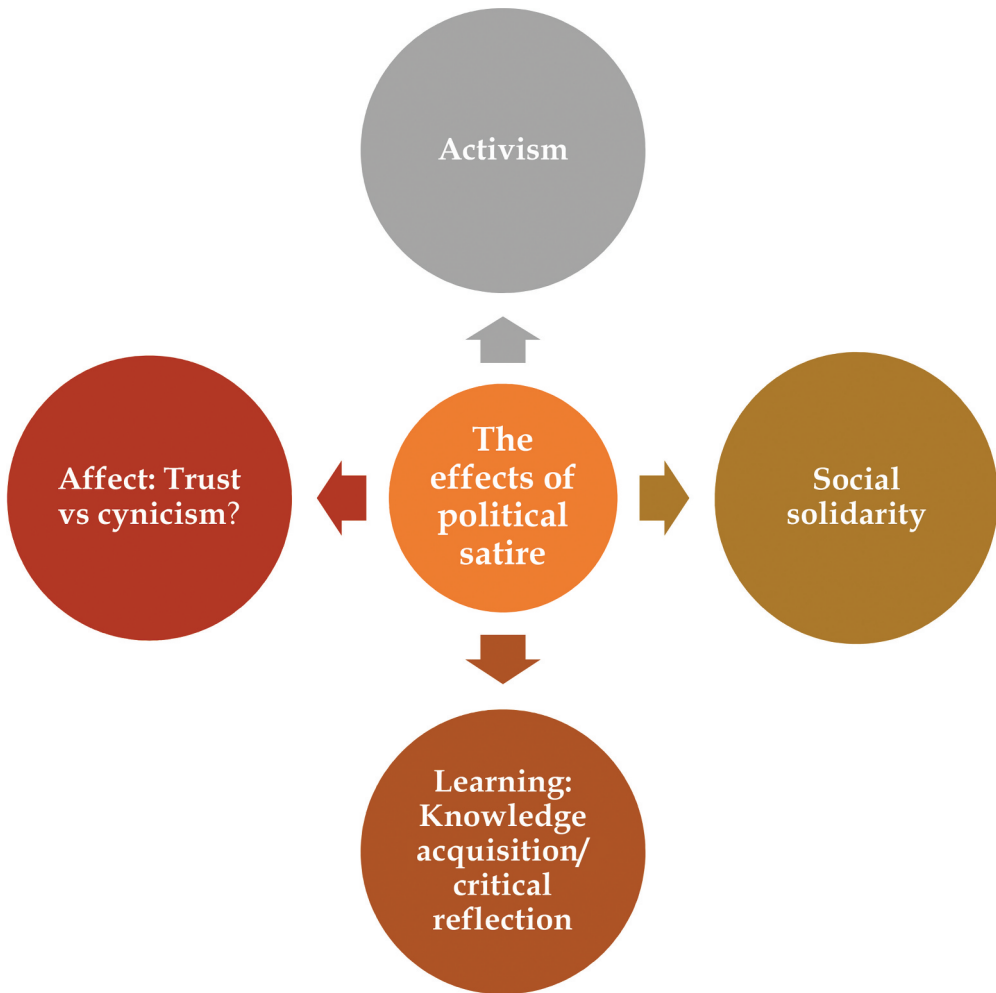


Figure 2. Four dimensions of political satire

language, as well as government policies and corruption (Guo, 2018; Nordin & Richaud, 2014; Tang & Yang, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yang et al., 2015).

Second, researchers wrestle with the meaning of satirical acts in non-democratic contexts. Depending on context and interpretation, the act of joking and laughing can be used to affirm certain communal values, and thus enhance a sense of social solidarity, as seen in China (Szablewicz, 2014; Tang & Yang, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yang et al., 2015). Alternatively, it can be used to create political intimacy, as seen in Lithuania (Klumbytė, 2011) and Hungary (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2015). These uses of satire create social solidarity. Li Hongmei, meanwhile, sees online satire in China as a place where power relations are temporarily suspended (Li, 2011), while Meng (2011) views online satire in terms of a virtual carnival, a collective effort in resistance. These uses of satire belong in the dimension of activism.

Third, also on the activism dimension, the literature consistently suggests that online political satire can generate new forms of civic engagement and participatory culture. This effect of political satire in cyberspace has been demonstrated in China (Guo, 2018; Nordin & Richaud, 2014; Tang & Yang, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yang et al., 2015), post-uprising Bahrain (Owen, 2017), Iran (Rahimi, 2015), Morocco (Marzouki, 2015), Vietnam (Sharbaugh & Nguyen, 2014) and Singapore and Malaysia (Skoric et al., 2016). Although the literature remains inconclusive on whether political satire, in print or online, can inspire offline social movements (Phan, 2003; Yang & Jiang, 2015), many researchers see this artform as useful in generating counter-discourses, due to its strong critical nature (Grdešić, 2017; Krstić et al., 2020; Marzouki, 2015; Rahimi, 2015; Sharbaugh & Nguyen, 2014).

On the learning dimension, another finding on which there is a high degree of consensus is the use of satire in raising political awareness and knowledge (Becker & Bode, 2018; Hoffman & Young, 2012; Mustapha et al., 2019; Riaz et al., 2018). Yet, this increased level of political awareness and knowledge does not reliably correspond to an increase in real-life political efficacy or actual political participation. Some researchers have raised concerns that exposure to political satire could lead to cynicism (Shao & Liu, 2018) and the marginalisation of alternative voices (Miazhevich, 2015). It seems that in some countries ruled by repressive regimes, satire is a way to enhance the sense of community and belonging among the populace (Klumbytė, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015), but as countries liberalise, there is a certain degree of fragmentation as different ideologies surface (Lampland & Nadkarni, 2015).

Content Analysis and Descriptive Statistics of State-sanctioned Political Cartoons

This study analyses changes in the satirical cartoons in *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* (*Youth Humour*) to ascertain what state-sanctioned cartoons published on social media reveal about the representation and management of political criticism in Vietnam. First, *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*, which is filled with satirical cartoons, illustrated jokes and caricatures, has long been an important outlet for cartoonists in Vietnam given the absence of a journalistic tradition, centuries of mandarinal bureaucracy and 100 years of colonial censorship (Lent, 2014). Second, it is a magazine subdivision of *Tuoi Tre* (*Youth*), one of the most widely read newspapers in Vietnam, founded in 1975 as a mouthpiece of the Ho Chi Minh branch of

the Communist Youth Union (Nguyen, 2012). The paper's daily print circulation reached about 400,000 in 2010 (McKinley, 2011). In recent years, the penetration of the Internet and the rise of social media (Abuza, 2015; Hayton, 2010) propelled the launch of *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*'s Facebook homepage in 2015. It had about 927,058 members as of 5 April 2021.

A mixed-method approach

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitatively, the study is inspired by Scott (2007)'s work comparing comic book propaganda from World War II to September 11, which extracts socio-cultural meanings from changes in the representation of heroes over the years. Similarly, this study observes changes in the representation of corruption in *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* over time and compares its findings with those of previous work on Vietnamese satirical cartoons (e.g., Keenan, 1997; Lent, 2014; Phan, 2003).

Quantitatively, a random sample of 100 cartoons from 9 April 2018 to 30 September 2019 was selected. To ensure true randomness, we started with the period from 24 to 30 September 2019. Then, using a random number-generator on the Internet with a constraint set from 1 to 7, a random day was picked within that block of seven days. In the first round, the computer generated number 2, which meant that 25 September 2019 was selected and all political cartoons that appeared on that date were included. The process was repeated until a sample size of 100 was achieved. This method allowed every day from 30 September 2019 backwards to have a chance of being chosen for the final sample.

The cartoons were coded based on the following variables: date collected; date published; number of likes, comments, shares; target categories: morality, governance, injustice, daily struggles; presence of auxiliary markers; presence of systemic corruption; presence of international elements; generic or individualistic depiction. The resultant dataset was saved as an Excel file, and later transformed into a csv file, which was processed and analysed using R software (v3.6.1).

Results and Interpretations

Stereotypical representation of corruption

We found that one of the strongest stereotypes that appeared in Vietnam's political cartoons was of the greedy, corrupt government official. Figure 3a presents a satirical cartoon about the problem of nepotism, in which government officials are referred to using the language of the royal court. Here, corrupt government officials are drawn with big, fat bellies. In many cartoons, government officials are also referred to as mandarins in the royal court ("*quan*" in Vietnamese).

The depiction of the greedy, corrupt mandarin/official as a big, fat person is well established in Vietnamese culture (Phan, 2003). However, there are some important changes that should be noted. In the past, backward and ignorant poor people were often depicted as rats. Nowadays, corrupt officials are depicted as rats digging holes and feasting on the national budget (Figure 3b). These officials are also likened to insects, which appear to be small and harmless, but wreak all sorts of havoc (Figure 3c). The reference is drawn from many well-known Vietnamese idioms about insects, which are

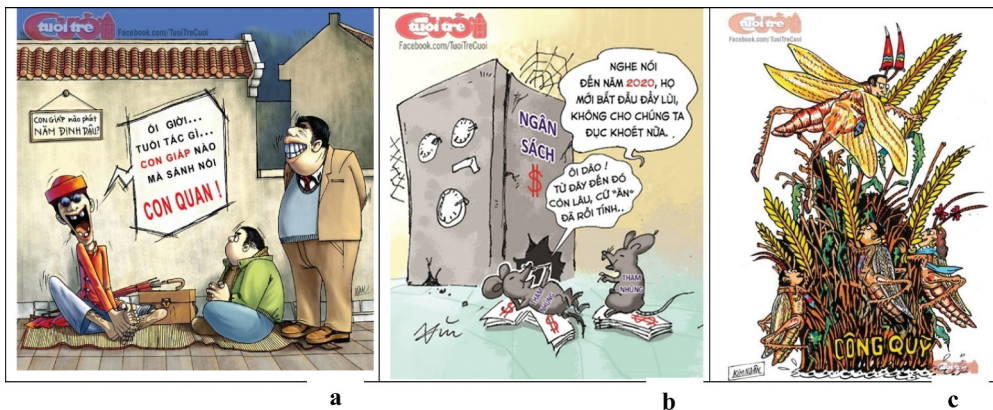


Figure 3. (a) A fortune-teller tells a government official, “it doesn’t matter which Chinese Zodiac sign your son is, he’s always the son of a ‘mandarin’” (*Tuoi Tre Cui* Facebook page, 19 December 2018). (b) Corrupt officials depicted as rats digging holes and feasting on the national budget (*Tuoi Tre Cui* Facebook page, 12 November 2018). (c) Corrupt officials depicted as insects (*Tuoi Tre Cui* Facebook page, 1 January 2019).

often derogatory or pejorative, such as the phrase *Con sâu làm rầu nồi canh* (“one worm ruins the whole pot”).

The willingness to represent corruption as a systemic problem

A notable development in Vietnamese political cartoons is the willingness of artists to depict corruption as a systemic problem. Phan (2003) argues that political cartoons in Vietnam tend to suggest that corruption is only committed by a few greedy and immoral people, as this is the position of the ruling party. However, this seems to be changing in recent years.

In Figures 3 and 4, various aspects of the corrupt political system are depicted. Figure 4a shows a father and son having a conversation. The son asks the father why a fat, bald person is so rich, and is told it is because of bribes from that person’s subordinates, and that those subordinates take bribes from people with less power in the system. Somewhere along the line, ordinary vendors must bribe a government official, which eventually leads to higher prices for goods. Figure 4b depicts corruption in education as a systemic problem, in which pressure for achievements from higher up the chain makes people within the hierarchy push each other, leading to an incident in which a teacher hits her students.

Figures 4c, 4d and 4e present various “escape routes” used by corrupt politicians. In Figure 4c, the excuse of following the correct procedure or protocol is symbolised as a magic shield, which protects politicians from charges of nepotism or cronyism. In the cartoon, the old man reassures the young man, who is assigned a managerial role presumably prematurely, because there is a magic shield.

Figure 4d shows how law enforcement and corrupt officials tend to work together. The rats (the corrupt officials) bribe the cat (the investigators) with an envelope containing money and a golden bell. Another aspect of corruption is depicted in Figure 4e, where an ongoing race between the decision to prosecute some politicians and the decision to



Figure 4. (a) A conversation between a father and son, in which the son asks how and why bribery affects their lives (*Tuoi Tre Cuoi* Facebook page, 19 December 2017). (b) Corruption in education depicted as a systemic problem (*Tuoi Tre Cuoi* Facebook page, 1 December 2018). (c) The excuse “assignment according to the correct protocol” is used as a magic shield to protect politicians from charges of nepotism and cronyism (*Tuoi Tre Cuoi* Facebook page, 1 July 2016). (d) The corrupt (the rats) bribe the non-corrupt (the cat) with an envelope tied to a gold ring (*Tuoi Tre Cuoi* Facebook page, 21 June 2019). (e) A race between the decision by police to prosecute (*Quyết định khôi tố*), and the decision to retire (*Quyết định nghỉ hưu*): “If you win, you get everything; if you fail, you can fall back on retirement” (*Tuoi Tre Cuoi* Facebook page, 3 July 2019).

retire is taking place. In the caption, the cartoonist twists a well-known proverb *được ăn cả, ngã về không* (“if you win, you get everything; if you fail, you lose everything”) to *được ăn cả, ngã về hưu* (“if you win, you get everything; if you fail, you can fall back on retirement”). This ridicules how a flawed system is leveraged to allow corrupt people to get away with their crimes.

Descriptive statistics of the random sample

Table 1 presents evidence to support the observations on taboos, auxiliary markers, and willingness to depict corruption as a systemic problem. Almost the entire sample

Table 1. Generic and Individualistic Depictions

	N=100		Top 20 viral cartoons	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Generic	99	99	20	100
Individualistic	1	1	0	0
Auxiliary markers	100	100	20	100
Systemic corruption	45	45	14	70
Traditional motifs	29	29	5	25
International elements	24	24	4	20

(99 per cent) used generic depictions of people. The only example that used caricatures of real-life public figures was *Year End Meeting* (McAllister & Luckman, 2015).

For auxiliary markers, 100 per cent of the sample used verbal cues to guide the audience's reading. A sizeable portion of the sample and the 20 most-viral cartoons (45 per cent and 75 per cent, respectively) explicitly mentioned some negative aspects of the political system, which clearly shows there is a great willingness in the state-owned media to depict corruption as a systemic problem. It is somewhat more surprising that the artists used the traditional motifs and the international elements to a similar degree (29 per cent and 24 per cent, respectively).

Table 2 shows that, in the sample, the percentage of depictions of injustice was lowest (5 per cent), while governance was the problem most commonly depicted (45 per cent). The second most frequently depicted was daily struggles (33 per cent), followed by the morality of government officials (17 per cent). Of the 20 most-viral cartoons, 75 per cent were examples of failed or incompetent governance, while 25 per cent related to daily struggles. Given that the failure of governance and the daily struggles of ordinary people were the most common subjects of political cartoons, we might surmise that there was a high willingness to point to the systemic nature of these problems.

Discussion

Satirising systematic corruption in a more tolerant media environment

Phan (2003) noted that corruption in Vietnam tends to be depicted as a problem of only a few dishonest and greedy people, in keeping with the official party line. However, as documented in the results above, a major finding of this study is the willingness of

Table 2. Targets of Overall Sample and Most-viral Cartoons

Description	N=100		Most-viral cartoons	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Morality	17	17	0	0
Injustice	5	5	0	0
Governance	45	45	15	75
Daily struggle	33	33	5	25

Vietnamese cartoonists to depict corruption openly. In terms of symbolism, corrupt officials are now likened to rats and insects, whereas historically, rats were only used to depict backward, ignorant and poor peasants (Phan, 2003). Systemic corruption was a theme in 45 per cent of the random sample, but in the 20 most-viral cartoons, the figure was 70 per cent. Moreover, 75 per cent of the most-viral cartoons depicted failed and incompetent governance.

These trends and their symbolism suggest a demand from the audience for cartoons about controversial matters. Here, there can be two liberating forces at play: social media and the globally integrated economy. Arguably, these two forces have generated a change in the sensibility of Vietnam's young and tech-savvy population, which puts pressure on editors and the censors of *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*.

Another notable finding relates to the overwhelming use of generic depictions of people/events in the sample (99 per cent). Studies of political satire in authoritarian regimes have long noted the use of ambiguous jokes to avoid prosecution by the government, to maintain a coherent ideology, and to reach a wider audience (Enis, 2012; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Hence, it is likely that, in Vietnam, editors and cartoonists use generic depictions to talk about political scandals and corruption without being too explicit.

It is also important to keep in mind that *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* is a mouthpiece of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (Nguyen, 2012), which is controlled by the party-state. We can therefore infer that there are changes in the party's view on corruption. The ruling party has intensified its quest to root out corruption, resulting in the prosecution of high-profile politicians (M. H. Nguyen, 2018; Vuong et al., 2019). Moreover, in nationally televised events, the party has acknowledged that the problem of corruption is real at all levels of government (Hayton, 2010). Perhaps, in this political climate, artists have had greater freedom to produce art that challenges the decaying aspects of the political bureaucracy, such as the wasteful use of national budgets, the lack of checks and balances, and nepotism (see, for example, Figures 1, 3 and 4).

This narrative of change is optimistic. It makes a case that these artistic changes reflect Vietnam's transition towards a more open environment due to the interplay of a globalised market economy, a rich tradition of satire, and the penetration of social media in everyday life.

A more cynical media environment?

As encouraging as these signs of growing tolerance and openness in Vietnamese politics are, we should be cautious about the worrying trend whereby social media is also used to manipulate the public. Bui (2016) has noted that although to a certain extent social media has opened new political space for Vietnamese people, high-profile cases of cyber-activism are also emotionally charged. He warns that meaningful political participation requires more than just the spontaneous reactions and emotions of online citizens (Bui, 2016, p. 107).

Just as social media can be co-opted by political actors to serve specific purposes, so can satire. Cynical use of satire can occur at both ends: editors/censors and consumers. Some scholars are concerned that exposure to political satire can produce more cynicism and fragmentation, instead of making viewers more politically active (Miazhevich, 2015;

Shao & Liu, 2018). In one Azerbaijan study, the government started to use satire to produce counter-narratives to the opposition (Pearce & Hajizada, 2014). This raises the question of whether the increased representation of systemic corruption signals a growing apathy among the audience of *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*. It also raises the possibility that the party-state, in promoting its legitimacy (Bui, 2018) and recognising its limits in controlling social media, is allowing open discussion of systemic corruption to provide a semblance of transparency, or a form of “discursive pre-emption” within the framework of a “soft authoritarian tool kit” (Schatz, 2009).

In Vietnam, as shown in the study by Endres (2014) on petty corruption, cynicism is embedded in the governing process in the phenomenon of “law-making” – i.e., *làm luật*, the Vietnamese slang for petty corruption. Endres (2014) shows that both local traders and government officials cynically go beyond the provisions of existing laws to negotiate deals that benefit both. If cynicism is inherent in the governing process and citizens’ interaction with it, then perhaps the only appropriate response is to make jokes about the system. While these jokes might not inspire immediate change, they can still be informative and generate a certain degree of vigilance about the system’s and the people’s follies and hypocrisy.

Collective reflection and social solidarity

In the debate over whether political satire produces a higher level of engagement or cynicism among citizens, one can overlook two other dimensions of the effects of satire: learning and social solidarity (see Figure 2). Some tangible impacts appear to be in evidence in these dimensions. We contend that laughter in *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* works in a similar way to humour in post-Soviet states, in that it creates a sense of political intimacy. In the words of Klumbyte (2011), laughter affirms official values, so it is communal: “an expression ... of closeness and coexistence among the subjects”. Moreover, by shedding light on corrupt aspects of political life, *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*’s satirical cartoons can be a vehicle for both political entertainment and reflection on a daily basis. This echoes the observation by McAllister and Luckman (2015) that the popular satirical Vietnamese TV show *Year End Meeting* entertains large audiences and offers critical reflection on national life at the liminal time of Lunar New Year’s Eve. With the transition of *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* onto social media platforms, the interactive nature of social media can support the transformation of online satire into an everyday networked practice (Yang & Jiang, 2015). And, as shown by de Certeau (1984), everyday practices are tactical in nature and thus form a kind of creative resistance to the oppression of dominant discourses.

Conclusion

Through its quantitative analysis of the content and forms of satirical images in *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*, this article has illustrated how political criticism is represented and managed in Vietnam’s one-party state. The most significant finding was that there is a greater willingness to represent corruption as a systemic problem. A closer examination of this matter suggests that the media environment may have become more tolerant due to the internationalised market economy and the rise of social media. Yet, there are the dual

dangers of cynicism: the audience's apathy and cynical view of politics and the growing cynical use of satirical cartoons as a form of "discursive pre-emption" by the government.

However, this study is not without its limitations. First, it does not make a theoretical contribution. Conceptual frameworks such as those of symbolic power (Tang & Yang, 2011), cultural additivity (Vuong et al., 2018; Vuong et al., 2020), and aesthetic public sphere (Jacobs & Wild, 2013) could be used to study Vietnamese political satire. Moreover, future studies could expand the current sample to cover the entire period that *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* has been published on Facebook (starting in January 2015). Cartoons on other Vietnamese sites could also be used to expand the evidence base. Another important topic is what cartoons in authoritarian regimes can reveal about the efficacy of the visual medium in politics. As noted by El Refaie (2009), the multiliteracies of the visual medium could enable authors to be more forthright than in written texts. Perhaps future works can systematically compare cartoons and written texts on the same political scandals to falsify this hypothesis.

Despite these limitations, this article has illustrated the value of focussing on humour to better understand politics, in Vietnam and elsewhere. Political humour can produce contradictory states of mind: it can persuade us to act or to sit back and shrug at the world's problems. Nonetheless, to only conceive of the power of political satire in these two extremes deprives us of the ability to see it as a catalyst for learning, critical reflection and social solidarity. We should not underestimate the power of humour and comedy to inform people and generate critical thought. A more optimistic view is that daily exposure to *Tuoi Tre Cuoi's* cartoons provides an opportunity for collective reflection and social solidarity to Vietnamese people.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argues that our sense of our life being absurd arises from our ability to view things from a broader perspective: to view ourselves stripped of presuppositions and see that had we been constituted differently, we would not take our lives so seriously (Nagel, 1971). He offers us irony as a cure for this feeling of the absurd. This lesson can be applied in the case of satirical cartoons in Vietnam. Reflecting on the mismatch between aspiration and reality in Vietnam's political system through political satire should not cast one into despair or move one to heroism. Perhaps a sense of proportion and a satiric vision of politics should be counted as a triumph.

Note

1. All images reproduced in this article are freely available for use in published works without the need to seek permission and pay royalties or remuneration, as per Article 25 of the Vietnam Law on Intellectual Property of Vietnam 2005, as amended in 2009 (see cov.gov.vn).

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