NGUYĔN NGUYĔN
EDWARD F. FOULKS
KATHLEEN CARLIN
Tulane University, New Orleans

Proverbs as Psychological Interpretations Among Vietnamese

Abstract

Vietnamese use of proverbs in everyday conversation, in literature, and in pedagogical exercises is well recognized. This paper demonstrates that some proverbs provide the opportunity for intimates to offer psychologically sensitive insights to a person manifesting problems. The proverbs cited here demonstrate an awareness that conflictual affects can be held secret inside and that it is therapeutic to comment on them so that they might be dealt with openly and consciously. Such use of proverbs reveals a psychological mindedness often not revealed by other idioms of communication among Vietnamese.

Key words: Proverbs/Vietnamese — psychology — healing — communication — conflicts

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PSYCHOTHERAPISTS often use proverbs to describe succinctly to patients observations about their behavior or inner conflicts. Proverbs are often effective in therapeutic communication because they cloak anxiety-laden, raw conflicts in more abstract, and therefore more acceptable, symbolic form. An example from a recent study of Chinese psychiatric practice is the case, cited by KLEINMAN (1988, 97), of a middle-aged Chinese woman who suffers from neurasthenia. She resents her husband's taking sides with his mother, who lives in their household. The Chinese psychiatrist tells her:

> It is your responsibility to care for an old mother-in-law. Perhaps it is your neurasthenia that makes you irritable and stubborn. It interferes with your duties as a wife and daughter-in-law. . . . " Be deaf and dumb! Swallow the seeds of the bitter melon! " Don't speak out! . . . strive not to argue. . . . Once the disease is better, your relationships with your mother-in-law will improve.

The Chinese psychiatrist uses a proverb to advise the woman that she should adhere to traditional family values of caring for older parents and that she should try to repress her resentment for the sake of family harmony. The proverb metaphorically translates the woman's angry feelings into somatic sensations in the stomach, and as such actually reinforces the notion that it is sometimes more congenial in this society to treat familial conflict through the more impersonal and less controversial somatic medium.

The use of proverbs is of course common in many Asian societies (e.g., DURAND and Nguyen Tran HUAN 1985; HENDRY 1964). Several encyclopaedic books about Vietnamese proverbs have recently appeared in the West (among them, NGUYỄN Đăng Liêm 1969). However, research has for the most part glossed over any function that the proverbs might have, probably due to a Western predisposition against cliches or axiomatic sayings. This paper presents the contrasting view that some proverbs are important in Vietnamese and perhaps in other Asian so-

cieties because they offer an indication of empathetic understanding and often point out disfunctional defenses in a manner acceptable to the listener.

Americans view proverbs as trite, simplistic advice that sometimes trivializes any relationship to actual experience. They are suspicious of wisdom encapsulated in too simple a sentence and known to too many people. We are familiar with dozens of sayings in English; but we rarely use them to make decisions, and when one is quoted we often add something like " to coin a phrase " in order to dissociate ourselves.

Using proverbs, however, requires abstract and complicated abilities. According to HANECK and KIBLER (1984), to use proverbs requires four cognitive transformational steps of considerable complexity and sensitivity. The first step involves recognizing that the literal meaning of the proverb does not fit the situation under discussion. Next the subject realizes that the proverb must apply to the situation in some way. The subject searches for a " figurative," or abstract categorical, meaning, which can then be applied to all future analogous situations.

Haneck and Kibler describe a final stage of proverb realization that they term instantiation, but perhaps it is better termed " abstract generalization." Here, the subject is able to recognize all sorts of parallel examples in totally new contexts. They believe that proverbs are more abstract than many other types of communication in that they can be applied widely and have an immediate, here-and-now pragmatic point to make. Proverbs seem to make conflictual situations simpler, are explanatory, and, like good psychotherapeutic interpretations, are usually non-confrontational.

There are probably over three thousand proverbial expressions known to traditionally educated Vietnamese, who were required to memorize volumes of such verses considered to be classics (NGUYỄN Đăng Liêm 1969). However, the use of these verses is not confined to classical scholars. They are ready-made, idiomatic expressions for use in everyday life.

While there may be a literary need for playful arrangements of words and meanings into a rhythmic pattern, we shall argue in this paper that some Vietnamese proverbs have a function that transcends style, and that they provide a lexicon of symbols that express psychological awareness of, and concern for, intrapsychic and interpersonal conflict. These particular proverbs are used by people in everyday life to interpret and instruct family members and close friends in regard to their defensive handling of affects. Vietnamese usually use these particular proverbs in a gentle, indirect, non-confronting way when approaching someone's problems.

Nguyen Nguyen, one of the authors of this paper, has practiced psychotherapy with the Vietnamese community in the U.S. and previously in Vietnam. He has used proverbs in his work, and he recognizes their widespread use among family members and friends. Contrary to the belief that Vietnamese patients are not psychologically minded and express despair in only somatic terms, his experience indicates that such presentations of illness may be more related to the context of being in a biomedical clinic. There, people are asked about their bodily ailments and are expected to present their problems in those terms.

We have selected ten proverbs from the almost countless number that serve these functions in daily conversation among Vietnamese. Each was chosen to illustrate how a particular psychologically defensive posture was addressed in the proverbial rendition. The proverbs are each presented here in Vietnamese, with a literal English translation, a connotative translation/explanation using symbols from Vietnamese culture, and finally an explication of the metaphors of mental mechanisms from Western psychoanalytic psychology required to understand or transmit the verse.

1. Ai ở' trong chăn, mới biết chăn có rận.
   (Whoever sleeps in a blanket knows it has lice.)

This saying is merely acknowledging that, when one is in a situation, one experiences discomforts that may not be observable to anyone else. For example, if a woman is having marital problems but covers up her inner anger and seems to deny any problems even to herself, a friend might quote this proverb in order to invite the other to acknowledge and talk about her problems with her spouse.

The speaker perceives that the listener consciously suppresses painful affects, and invites her to bring her feelings into the open to "air out" the vermin-filled blanket. The assumption here is that denying inner conflict is not good for you.

2. Ai trông thấy ma, mới biết đàn bà ăn ớt.
   (He who can see ghosts is able to know a woman is eating chili peppers.)

Ghosts are perceived as real and threatening phenomena that can be seen—albeit rarely—by particular individuals. Chili peppers usually cause indigestion, and bad feelings in one's guts are those feelings (guilt, shame, jealousy, etc.) that one wants to hide. There is also a general idea that ladies love to eat these hot peppers, and the more they eat, the more jealous they become. The proverb might be paraphrased as,

" someone [like me] who is psychic enough to see ghosts, is certainly perceptive enough to see that a woman [you] has indigestion [from guilt or stress] ". To a woman who is having an extramarital affair but feels guilty and denies any such activity, a friend might quote this proverb, thereby saying in a discrete way, " I know, you can tell me."

Again the speaker perceives and instructs the listener in the fact that suppressed affects will result in somatic symptoms—and that it is better to share them, since they are observable to others who know the person, anyway.

Another proverb that captures this same idea is:

3. Tôi đi guốc trong bụng anh.
   (I walk with wooden clogs in your belly.)

This proverb sounds very uncomfortable, and it gives the idea in translation that someone is stomping around causing a stomach ache on purpose. This is not the idea. Instead, the imagery focuses on the confident sound that wooden clogs make while walking. One's belly is the seat of one's private (in Vietnamese, usually negative) emotions; so someone is telling you that they feel confident they understand your inner (denied) emotions.

For example, a man is planning to have a liaison with a woman after work, but he offers explanations for his more fashionable-than-usual clothes and denies having any plans after work. A male friend might use the proverb in order to communicate the idea that " I understand you, don't deny it."

4. Cầm đuốc soi chăn người.
   (One uses a torch to look at others' feet.)

In rural areas animal excrement is easy to step in, especially if you walk at night. Here, dirty feet are a metaphor for the mistakes one has made. This is analogous to the Western " The pot calling the kettle black " or, even closer, " seeing the mote in another's eye rather than removing the beam in one's own."

Here the speaker perceives that the listener is perhaps overconcerned and overinvolved in examining the sins of others, an attitude that may reflect the listener's own conflict with wishes and prohibitions. According to the psychoanalytic metaphor, the defense mechanism used here is reaction formation.

5. Chư'i chó, mắng mèo.
   (One curses dogs, fusses at cats.)

Here the image is of someone who takes his anger out on a dog,

rather than dealing with the real cause of his anger. The English saying " . . . and the office boy kicked the cat " is very similar.

The speaker recognizes that affects can be displaced from a primary object (where there is perhaps conflict) to a substitute object. Psychoanalysis terms this mental mechanism, the defense of displacement.

6. Chó cắn quanh.
(The dog is barking all around.)

The dog is angry, fearful, or distrustful, but since he cannot admit his feelings, he displaces them by barking constantly at everything.

Here the speaker recognizes that an angry person may be taking his personal frustrations out on the world rather than directing his rage to working out his central problem. Another example of handling conflicted anger by displacement is captured in the proverb.

7. Giận cá, chém thớt.
(One is angry at the fish, one pounds it on the chopping board.)

The fish is used as a symbol of someone else, and one might take out one's anger by whacking away while preparing the fish. An analogous situation might be someone who takes out his frustrations by chopping wood.

Pounding inanimate objects may be seen as an acceptable way of dealing with anger, but this proverb would be quoted when another person gets the displaced violence. For example, a father who comes home and kicks his son might hear this sentence quoted by his wife.

8. No nên bụt, đói nên ma.
(Being full, one becomes Buddha; being hungry, one becomes a ghost.)

If a person stole something because he was poor and then tried to justify his theft, his friend might say this. For many Asians, ghosts are thought to be hungry because they have not been properly taken care of by the living. They are therefore needy and may commit offensive actions. The proverb points out that, when satisfied, we tend to praise our own goodness, and when needy, we may justify our bad actions.

Here the speaker perceives that the listener is rationalizing in order to avoid dealing with internal conflict concerning needy impulses versus guilt over acting them out.

9. Suy bụng ta ra bụng người.
(One blames one's own bad feelings—from the stomach, not the heart—as coming from other people.)

A crook complains that everyone is dishonest; an adulterer decries people's morals. The proverb says we project our own bad feelings (which are hidden in our belly, not our hearts) onto those around us.

According to our psychoanalytic metaphors, the speaker here explicitly recognizes that unconscious ambivalent aspects of the self can be projected outside, where conflict can be acted out interpersonally rather than intrapsychically.

10. Bao lâu vắng mặt khát khao,
Bây giờ gặp mặt muốn cào mặt ra.
(Away, one feels longing; now, face to face, one wants to scratch off the other's face.)

This describes someone who alternately idealizes then devalues his/her loved one. Object-relations psychology metaphorically calls this familiar clinical phenomena the splitting of self and object, with incomplete fusion of good and bad introjects. One can idealize from a distance, but the negative reality of the person "up close" cannot be denied.

In order for these proverbs to be used effectively in conversation, some basic assumptions must be shared by both the user and the receiver:

1. Conflictual affects can be held secret inside.
2. Hiding conflictual affects may be done purposefully (i.e., suppressed), or unconsciously (i.e., repressed).
3. Such repressed affects produce:
   a. signs in behavior that reveal an internal conflict to others,
   b. a sickness inside: belly aches and other somatic problems.
4. It is therapeutic to recognize and deal openly with these conflicted affects.
5. Interpretations by using proverbs may invite the listener to engage in dialogue, or may admonish the individual to change his ways. In either case, the understanding of unconscious repressed conflict remains the same. It is only the method of uncovering the repressed that differs.

Vietnamese patients in American clinics are often unwilling or unable to interact with "psychological mindedness" in the context of inter-cultural counseling or psychotherapy. It is frequently assumed that these patients are more concrete and pragmatic, and less abstract and introspective, in their cognitive styles. Such a perspective leads to a psychotherapy of offering "supportive" advice regarding the practical problems of everyday life. Oriental religion, philosophy, and proverb

construction, however, strongly indicate the possibility of more profound dimensions of cognitive style, and these are most likely considered properly kept within the family sphere and within the self. As Kleinman's example in the beginning of this paper illustrates, psychiatry for the Chinese woman and her family was public exposure requiring face-saving defenses to protect against the shame and humiliation of self-disclosure to an outsider.

Whether Vietnamese-speaking psychotherapists can use proverbs to provide insight rather than advice (as in the Chinese woman's case) has not been fully explored. As SEARLES (1972) has pointed out, all humans have inherent requirements for psychological help from one another using language. In the Western world such requirements have largely been divorced from the family and institutionalized in professional psychotherapy. In the Orient, the family circle rather than professional institutions apparently continues to serve these functions.

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