

Dumb Luck

Vu Trong Phung

translated from the Vietnamese

The University of Michigan Press 2002

A book review by [Danny Yee](#) © 2006 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

A comic farce set in late-colonial Vietnam, in Hanoi, *Dumb Luck* traces the meteoric rise of ball-boy Xuan. He loses his job for peeking at changing tennis players, but is taken under the wing of Mrs Deputy Customs Officer and Mr and Mrs Civilization, and finds his footing as fashion tailor, tennis professor, medical student, poet, and national hero. Xuan is not particularly bright, but he is aided by luck and a way with words picked up in a stint advertising venereal disease medicines.

Phung lampoons the fad for modernization among the Vietnamese bourgeoisie, with their liberated sexual mores, obsession with Western fashion, and mania for sports. He also mocks mercenary "free market" Buddhists, police forced to fine one another to meet revenue targets, and an assortment of other targets. And there are glimpses of lower class "sidewalk" life.

This translation comes with a useful thirty page introduction by Peter Zinoman. This covers Phung's short life — he died in 1939 at age 27 — and background — the new intellectual ferment driven by the introduction of romanised *quoc ngu* script, the rise of newspapers and journalism, and books and films that are possible sources or models for *Dumb Luck*.

Zinoman also considers the fate of Phung's work under the communists; his own suggestion is that Phung fits better in "the capacious category of modernism" than into either "good" social realism or "bad" romanticism.

The introduction might have been better as an afterword, however, as *Dumb Luck* is first and foremost a light-hearted romp, and can be appreciated as such without any background knowledge.

October 2006

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%T Dumb Luck

%A Phung, Vu Trong

%M Vietnamese

%F Cam, Nguyen Nguyet

%F Zinoman, Peter

%I The University of Michigan Press

%D 2002

%O paperback

%G ISBN 0472068040

%P viii,189pp

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