

Reminders about trust, respect, and personal blessings

December 6, 2015, By Daniel J. Bauer

Friday night a week ago, minutes before 11 o'clock, I got word from the China Post that the column I had submitted 24 hours earlier had run amuck. I had fallen for what appeared to be a legitimate news report, and wrapped my commentary around it. My editor said media sources now saw that the original report was "a joke," an elaborate prank.

I had thought the "report" was about the liveliest thing I'd read in years. Its title, humorous to my eyes, was "Australian called Phuc Dat Bich 'honored' after name goes viral."

Readers may know the purported news was that a fellow surnamed "Phuc," of Vietnamese ancestry, was fed up with Facebook (FB) authorities shutting down his account because of discomfort over his name. Top folks at FB agreed with viewers, he alleged, who claimed "Phuc etc." was both offensive and fake.

Mr. "Phuc" suggested he was a victim of discrimination because he was "Asian." In addition to all this baloney, he took the trouble to post an ID card on his FB wall with his "name" on it, and a photo.

The result? Hundreds of FB-users left supportive comments, and the fellow drew 40,000 followers on his postings.

I don't prefer to be lumped with "the media" in general, partly because I am not on the staff of any publication, including the China Post, and take pride in my role as an occasional gadfly, an independent free-lancer. Nevertheless, I was among many in the media who was taken, who, in other words, fell for this rather pathetic, if interesting practical joke.

It is scant consolation that I was not alone. The internationally respected (well, arguably so) BBC actually broadcasted a serious and detailed explanation in which an Asian woman (who appeared to be Vietnamese) referred to the tonal nature of Vietnamese language, and taught "the proper way" to pronounce "Phuc," which is to say "Phoo."

This entire story is loaded with threads to pull, and each has something to offer us.

Obviously the old saw "if it's in print, it must be true" has again proven to be what old-timers call pure balderdash. You may prefer a more

contemporary term. Ours is an era, of course, of social media up the kazoo, a time of computer-linked high tech conveniences, and mass, instant dissimulation of information, and, we are here vividly reminded, wild jokes. The caveat: be careful of what you find in any and every type of media.

Secondly, on the surface level, this appears to be a case in which someone goes to bat for, call it what you will, racial or cultural sensitivity. The exact opposite is true.

People just might have given names in their original cultures that do not fit smoothly into or that take on embarrassing connotations or meanings in other cultures. The prankster in this case had his cake and ate it, too. He seemed to say, "Let's choose respect and courtesy over guffaws and mockery." What he was doing, as we can see, was in fact denigrating another culture and its people. He was really saying, "Hey, names that sound Asian are fair targets for ridicule and insult." Oh, really?

For the past several days, I've been asking myself what my reaction might have been to this joke if I were not in the fortunate position I am in as a columnist, and a foreign one in an Asian country, to boot. I am not sure of my answer. As I mentioned above, despite all my nice-sounding words about respect for cultures different than mine, I found the original headline on the prankster story hilarious.

After church services last Sunday morning, I sat in a fast food restaurant near the Guting MRT station and opened my favorite newspaper with a cup of coffee and a sandwich in hand. "How does it feel to be on your own?" I asked myself. Fans of Bob Dylan recall his asking the same question long ago in one of his earliest and best songs.

As I planted my eyes on page 4, I saw I was on my own, all right. I wasn't where I usually was on Sunday mornings, and it didn't feel very good. Ha ha.

So, Lesson 1 – Always question the source of a news report. Skepticism about a particularly interesting or odd event is always necessary. Lesson 2 – Remember that a sense of humor is a wonderful gift, but it demands care and responsibility. Lesson 3 – Never take your blessings for granted. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department of Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points

- 1) This column offers 3 reminders # 1 of which is "Always be careful to believe what you find in the media, especially via the 'wang lu". Have you ever read UNBLIEVEABLE news reports on the Internet?
- 2) Lesson # 2: "A sense of humor and playing jokes on people is fine, but be careful not to hurt anyone." Do you personally have a sense of humor? Do you enjoy telling or hearing funny stories? Is humor a help or a problem in life? Give an example of a humorous thing in Taiwan that may not be humorous outside the country.
- 3) Lesson # 3: "Do not take your good fortune or blessings for granted . . . always be grateful for the good in your life." What is especially good in your life? What blessing are you especially thankful for?

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