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VERNACULAR NARRATIVES MADE IN CHINA

Abstract:

This paper explores the Chinese vernacular narratives as independent stories that are found on the Internet creating a different "reality" in the censored media environment. Vernacular narratives such as urban legends, rumours, gossips and conspiracy theories belong to vernacular culture, which is understood as the non-professional, non-institutional, informal, spontaneous and amateur culture. They offer a window to understanding the concerns and fears of the modern society, in this case Chinese society. The paper contains an ethnographic and netnographic research, during which material from Chinese and English-language pages (visited also by Chinese users) has been collected and subjected to comparative analysis. In conclusion states that Chinese vernacular narratives such as conspiracy theories function in the country as independent narratives only seemingly. They are allowed as long as do not interfere with the interests and policies of the state.

Key words:

China, vernacular narratives, conspiracy theory, urban legends, modern folklore

Introduction

Conspiracy theories, as well as urban legends, are a kind of discourse that emerges from the social context and social interactions, presented with the help of various forms and media. The themes of these narratives are closely related to the projection of cognitive dissonance which is an attempt to interpret an incoherent picture of the world, as well as a try to explain this picture. Just like urban legends, conspiracy stories belong to a larger group of vernacular narratives which belong to the non-professional, non-institutional, informal, spontaneous and amateur culture. However, unlike urban legends, which exist in a more isolated way, conspiracy

theories “express general attitude to the world, politics and power¹”. Ipso facto, urban legends more often exist in a local context (with the multiple versions of the plots occurring in different cultures) and they attempt to make sense of certain incidents, when conspiracy theories play the role of the key to understanding the world and they are linked to a bigger system of thought. They offer a window to understanding the concerns and fears of the modern society, in this case Chinese society.

The characteristic feature of vernacular narratives is their independence and “living their own lives”, as such they are not related to the government’s propaganda. They are non-regime, unless the government is the source of the rumour. At this point, it is possible to assume that the “authentic” voice of the “Chinese people”, which is not filtered by the government media, can be found within these narratives. However, it seems that conspiracy theories in the modern Chinese society, in contrast to urban legends, cannot be perceived as a kind of emancipation mechanism which would situate them in opposition to official, non-governmental, narratives. In contrast, these theories seem to be an instrument of government propaganda that may be useful to control the political views of society in accordance with the will of the Communist Party of China. In this case, those narratives bear the influence of the regime, and are spread by the regime, because, in contrast to contemporary legends, they are more often connected to the politics and they are perceived as a “surveillance tool”. There would be nothing unusual in this (in the end, conspiracy theories function on two levels: the governmental level, when the government is a source of a theory and the social level, when the community creates its own narratives) were it not for the fact that these “social ones” are quickly censored (if they do not meet with the approval of the government) and, in the end, there is no “non-institutional” narrations at all. It stays only one, the governmental one, in many “acceptable” versions.

A permanent element appearing in the most of Chinese conspiracy theories, despite their multiple versions, is the government of the United States of America and its activities that strike the social, cultural and economic stability of China. To make it real in 2003 the Communist Party of China agreed to publish controversial book of Tong Zeng (Chinese: 童增), *The Last Defense Line: Concerns About the Loss of Chinese Genes*. (Chinese: 最后一道防线: 中国人基因流失忧思录). Censorship in China is not a secret and is officially based on Chinese law. The ruling party justifies censorship by protecting citizens from unauthorized information or “unwanted ideologies” and against external enemies. In this case, consent to the publication of a book that confirms the belief of the society in a negative interference of the USA in Chinese

¹ Czech F., *Spiskowe narracje i metanarracje*, Kraków 2015, p. 131.

politics, it is nothing but a deliberate action of the Chinese government, which stabilizes the situation and collective belief in its country.

SARS as an American anti-Chinese genetic weapon

The book of Tong Zeng put forward the view that SARS virus may be a genetic weapon against the Chinese people². According to the author, in the 1990s, the US strategic framework for China was planned to actively prepare for the genetic warfare in the 21st century. It was determined that a large number of Chinese genetic DNA would be collected, and then genetic research of Chinese ethnic groups could be carried out to develop a new genetic weapon. Since 90s, they have collected a large number of Chinese blood samples and extracted Chinese DNA from many provinces and cities in China through their private channels. A large number of them was sent to US laboratories where they were tested. According to Tong Zeng through those blood samples and genetic tests, the American created a genetic weapon according to the characteristics of Chinese races.

Tong Zeng puts forward different views on SARS as a chemical weapon: if SARS is a chemical weapon, it will infringe on borders and races, but the actual situation is that SARS mainly ravages Chinese in China and the Chinese community in other countries. Therefore, SARS may be a more advanced genetic weapon than biological weapons. Due to genetic differences, different races have different infections. Gene weapons are made based on the genetics of a certain ethnic group. The weapon is made for the specific race, in this case, in author's opinion, it was made for the Chinese.

What is interesting, virus SARS as an American anti-Chinese genetic weapon is a common belief in Chinese society. From the fieldwork and interviews, which were made in 2016-2018 in the mainland of China (mostly in Hebei Province – Beijing), can be said that most of the respondents, who still remember the SARS virus epidemic in 2002-2003, believe in the version of Tong Zeng and, consequently, in the version of the Chinese government. The most common responses were: “The Americans fly over in planes and drop it [SARS] on us” or “SARS may be a genetic weapon attack because the US genetic warfare project includes genetically modified foods and medicines.” Only few of them pointed out that SARS is a virus that could be spread by contact with the wild animals or it caused so many deaths because people didn't pay attention to personal hygiene or were eating unverified food in the streets. What is worth noting is that in Chinese consciousness there is a conviction that the West,

² Tong Zeng, *The Last Defense Line: Concerns About the Loss of Chinese Genes*, Beijing 2013.

especially the Americans, are responsible for the modified foods and medicines in China. They perceive GMOs as a form of “bioterrorism” against China, very often without any knowledge of what the GMO is and how it affects people’s health.

Although convincing data would not be collected on the potential causes of infection for more than 5,000 Chinese people³, it can be assumed that in the consciousness of the majority of society, the SARS virus will always be associated with the US government, even if this knowledge is not concrete.

Tianjin explosion – kinetic bombardment

On August 12, 2015, explosions of dangerous materials occurred in the industrial zone of the Tianjin port in China – it is estimated that over 100 people died and over 700 were injured. In the face of such a great tragedy and the causes which have not been fully explained, there are some speculations about what truly happened. Around the accident in the port, which was recorded by several witnesses, many stories arose. One of them is the use of cosmic weapon.

Mike Adams is the founder of Natural News⁴, the website promoting alternative medicine but also scientific fake news and various conspiracy theories. According to the website, China and America are at war and the explosion was caused by space weapon. Many Chinese, but also Americans, think that the Pentagon has a cosmic kinetic weapon called *Rods from God* (also called *Project Thor*) and that this weapon was used to destroy Chinese city. On the other hand there are speculations that the reason of the attack was the US government’s retaliation for China devaluing the Yuan (official currency of the People's Republic of China). This currency manipulation created unfavourable conditions for international exchange, caused some problems on Wall Street and as a consequence, according to some Chinese, hence the reason for the attack on one of the four largest ports in the world, which is a strategic place in China.

In addition to the hypothesis of using space weapons by US government, two more theories are often repeated in the local narratives about the events of April 2015. Although they do not refer directly to the United States, it can be assumed that they refer to the same weapon. The first says that explosion was supposed to be an attack on the president Xi Jinping. The second says that the main goal was a supercomputer located near to the place of the explosion.

³ *Summary of probable SARS cases with onset of illness from 1 November 2002 to 31 July 2003*. World Health Organization (WHO). Source: https://www.who.int/csr/sars/country/table2004_04_21/en/ [Access date: 28.12.2018].

⁴ Official website: <https://www.naturalnews.com/index.html> [Access date: 28.12.2018].

Both of these theories do not exclude the use of the weapon, they just change the purpose of its use.

But why is the president supposed to be the target of the attack in Tianjin? The rumour is that the head of state of the People's Republic of China, president Xi Jinping, along with other high-ranking officials, was holding a secret meeting that day, after which he would make a business trip to Tianjin. However, the plans were cancelled at the last minute. The Americans, in order not to reveal themselves to the secret operation, found another object that was supposed to be a cover for the whole action. The new target, which was mentioned before, was Tianhe-1A supercomputer, which felt the impact of the explosion but it wasn't destroyed, in contrast to a building standing nearby...

Falun Gong – “Bloody Harvest”

Falun Gong (Chinese 法轮功) is also called Falun Dafa (Chinese 法轮大法). As you can see, both names have a common root – “Falun”, which means “Law Wheel” and refers directly to Buddhist bhavacakra - the Wheel of Life. This is one of the most important symbols of this philosophical and religious system, presenting six spheres of existence. The word “gong” in Chinese means reaching the master level in any field. The most-known use is in the form of gong fu (kung-fu) which means mastery in martial art. The phrase “Dafa”, which is more common in the circles of people who practice this technique, means “Great Law” or “Older Law”. Thus, Falun Gong is nothing but a spiritual practice through which the practitioner tries to harmonize with the world and reach a state of higher consciousness.

This system consists of meditation combined with a set of Qigong exercises (Chinese 气功), that are referring to Buddhist and Taoist tradition. The term “qi” in literal translation means “air” or “breath” and in Chinese philosophy it represents life energy. Through a set of exercises, the adepts try to take control of their energy. The improvement of body and mind is to help affect state of physical and mental health as well as affect the environment. It is also an important element of martial arts.

The practice of qigong varieties, originally prohibited by the Chinese government in 1949 as a form of religion, was very popular in the nineties. This doctrine was distinguished by freedom and openness. The simplicity and accessibility of the “Great Way” mainly related to the fact that Dafa is a free practice that does not have hard rules and focuses on morality. It also does not have an organized group in terms of administration and does not require official membership. It promotes a healthy lifestyle and spiritual liberation, through harmony with the

world. Thanks to this, in the mid-nineties, it gained supporters around the country and reached 70 million or as some sources say - about 100 million practitioners.

Since then, a lot of narratives around the movement began to emerge. They focus on two points of view – Chinese and American-Canadian perspective. In 2006, dr. David Kilgour, former Secretary of State for Asia and the Pacific Affairs and dr. David Matas, a lawyer specializing in human rights law and chasing Nazi criminals, published a controversial report "Bloody Harvest" known also as "Kilgour–Matas report". It contains data on the mass murders of Falun Gong practitioners in the People's Republic of China for the purpose of obtaining organs for transplantation. According to the report, since the implementation of the idea of transplants in China, their number far exceeds the percentage of voluntary donors, which drew the attention of Canadian activists. Despite the evidence and testimonies of eyewitnesses – including transplant doctors that statements appeared in Western press, the issue internationally is not taken seriously.

The reason for the lack of international engagement is the inability to present hard evidence – the controls carried out in China have not discovered any of the camps described by witnesses. Also, the number of witnesses is insufficient to convince the government to undertake a detailed investigation. Nevertheless, the report presents a complex and multidimensional picture that is difficult to consider to be completely false. The report presents both analytical factors as well as specific research carried out with the accompanying evidence. However, it is impossible to verify them, due to the long time that has passed since the publication of the report until the revision of the facilities presented by it by the Chinese government. Therefore, it creates opportunities for the emergence of subsequent narratives in the public opinion.

Publication of the report and many conferences devoted to it caused that China began to conduct a broadly planned action spread over two sides - internal to Chinese people and outside to foreign citizens, initially focusing on repelling charges and attempting to undermine the evidence provided by the report. While the campaigns and official positions of the government seem to have a small impact on world's public opinion, the internal actions already bring the expected result.

Therefore, we have here the position of the West. Although the report was prepared by Canadians, in public opinion in China it equals to the position of America, which is generally regarded as a symbol of the Western ideology. On the other side, we have China striving not only to repulse the accusations of committing mass crimes, but they try to discredit the movement itself, considering it a dangerous sect. There are many articles published on Internet

with cases of people who have died for Falun Gong practice. There are also blogs where quotes foreign medic doctors, from Australia and even America, who cooperate with Chinese transplant centers and accuse Falun Gong followers of spreading defeatism. How does this relate to public opinion circulating outside the Internet?

Citizens of China are convinced that Falun Gong is an organization founded and headed by the US government. They are spies who confuse Chinese society. This is an opinion that is also supported by the Chinese government. It means that this opinion also goes beyond cyberspace and circulates among citizens "on the street." Here is the statement of one of the people I talked to on this topic:

[quote] Falun Gong is an initiative of the American government. It is an organization that was founded in China, but through the Americans and is directed by them to this day. Many Chinese people do not realize this and are drawn into a game against their own nation. The values transmitted by them are only a cover, the main goal is the destabilization of the state. And the supposed black transplant market is just their invention. [end of quote]

We can also note here that the speaker believes that there are people who do not know or believe in US government conspiracy, that they are drawn into a game against their own nation. Despite the censorship in the Chinese Internet, which is supported by national law, there are websites on which the opinion on the Falun Gong camps is presented. However, these are illegal websites and available only to a small group of users. Although, from the quoted opinion, it appears that they are not completely foreign to the Chinese people.

The situation in American-Chinese relations is constantly changing. Political, economic and social tensions arise, which are constantly fueled by new events and speculations. China is a growing power that feels more confident in the international market and is therefore not afraid of expressing controversial opinions. Everything that happens at the level of power also finds resonance in social moods.

Summary

Conspiracy theories function in China as independent narratives only seemingly. So long as they are "harmless" and they do not interfere with the interests and policies of the state, they are allowed to function in the social circle.

In the first example, it is known for sure that the topic of that theory was consistent with the will and assumptions of the party. The book was allowed to be published because it was a good way to divert public attention from internal problems, such as hygiene or sanitation. Thus,

attention was focused on another country, the United States, with which China has been fighting for economic dominance for several years.

In the second example, regarding the Tianjin explosion, it seems that the government is willingly sustaining (not censoring) theories about the alleged failed assassination of the president. The official report says “that more than 11,300 tons of hazardous goods were illegally stored at a warehouse owned by Tianjin Ruihai International Logistics⁵” which was the cause of the explosion. It is impossible to say for sure, if the government was the source of these narratives or it was just its interference or consent. But what is more important, it is sure that this narrative has fulfilled its task. It’s been perceived as one of the (tempting) possibilities explaining an unexpected incident. And even if the official statement cannot directly persuade to follow the theory, the “surveillance tool” can be used to spread doubts in the consciousness of society.

The one can be said for sure, “Big Brother is watching you”, and he will decide what is the next step of this society.

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