University of Washington
Comparative Literature 230
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Final Project
Contemporary Legends, Their Disseminations and Interpretations.

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July 17, 1995

The legends nowadays are usually based on people's experiences. Upon the experiences, traditional or cultural belief, belief-related actions and narratives interact with each other to produce vast number of legends we have today. Legends are usually unnatural, amazing or sometimes even horrible stories to listen and to tell. For example, after the Second World War in Europe, there were many children missing here and there, and there was a general food shortage during that time. Consequently, there were many human meat factories legends widely spread in Baltic states which recited that people finding children's fingers in the sausage. These legends have a lot of stories behind it. This paper is going to discuss how people learn and tell the legends, how the legends disseminate, whether they are true or not, how widely they spread, their duration, effect, and their cultural interpretations based on several popular legends being told recently.

There are stories being told in Latin America about children being murdered and their organs taken out to sell to Americans for transplantation. They have been proved to be a lie by the local police. Furthermore, in the study of the evidence of a possible children's organs trading market conducted by the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva, investigators revealed that there was not any real evidence for the trading. However, the stories alarmed a lot of families in Latin America. They refused to have organ contributions because they are worrying about being murdered for their organs (Barry & Schrieberg, 1995). Similar legends have been told in the south of Guangdong Province of China and Hong Kong too. It scared a lot of Hong Kong

people. They were afraid of entering mainland China, despite the fact that police was denying the fact and the medical experts asserted that the organs capable of being transplanted must be done in a clean hospital with medical experts to remove them, instead of done by some desperate murderers in bushes or backyard.

In India, stories that the CIA gassed 2000 Indians as a chemical-war experiment with the AIDS virus CIA invented at a secret U.S. Army lab (Barry & Schrieberg, 1995) which also understood to be a lie.

Back to the U.S., there was rumor of Proctor and Gamble Co. (P&G) involved in the support of the Church of Satan. It won the lawsuit in 1991 and two Amway distributors were pleaded guilty for starting the rumor. There was another popular rumor about some gang members will shoot motorists who flick highlights on and off as initiations to the gang. It was dismissed by the FBI in 1993.

In the cyberspace, there was a rumor about an electronic mail subjected as "Good Times" which will erase all the data on one's hard disk if one try to download and read it. It was dismissed later by expert too.

Legends we have nowadays spread out very quickly and reach millions of people in a short time due to the advanced information technology. "Indeed, modern communications has turned a

folk tale into an international scandal - all without a shred of hard evidence." (Barry & Schrieberg, 1995).

Despite the fact that most of the legends have been proved to be untrue, they still kept circulating among the folks. Partly because the people believed them, and partly because they are good stories to tell. In the rumor of gang shooting, the story the informant received was circulated in email. Inside the mail, there was even a Canadian police department address and telephone number included as a confirmation source of the story. One would easily believe it without doubt, and people would seldom indeed call up the police department to verify the account. Even though the people was suspected the story, as a rational people would do, they would rather keep it in mind and send it to their friends as a warning rather than simply forget it. People who instantly concluded that was a rumor would be very few and limited only to the very well informed. The same idea worked in the "Good Times" email. These forces thus drive the legends around the world in tremendous pace. In some cases, the legends may be interesting to tell. Therefore, even though it is untrue, people keep telling each other for fun and enjoyment. The story of an old woman who killed her dog by putting it into the microwave to dry it falls into this category. Someone tell the legends because they make money. There was a French film called "Organ Thieves." which narrated a story of a 10-year-old boy in Colombia who had his corneas removed while he was in a mental institution as a teenager. This had been proved to be untrue by the official records, but the film still went on and won France's prestigious Albert Londres journalism prize (Barry & Schrieberg, 1995). Good legends are difficult to stop the dissemination.

The duration of a legend is unbelievable long. For example, the P&G lawsuit had been settled in 1991, but the informant still received the story about it in 1995. He believed it, although it does not quite make sense to have such a large corporation to finance the Church of Satan with the consent of the board of directors. The rumor of gang shootings was dismissed by FBI in 1993, but there were still email messages circulating one year later. The reason might be due to the fact that there are still a considerable uninformed public getting the rumor. However, not matter how greatly a job is done by mass media, there is going to be people uninformed.

Some of the widespread and long lived legends did cause some social problems. In Latin America, organ donations which saves people's life dropped drastically due to the horror of a murderous trade (Barry & Schrieberg, 1995). In Hong Kong, some people was refrained from entering mainland China for the same reason. In the U.S. there was a fried chicken company going bankrupt because an adverse legend accusing it of using rats meat in the food. In other cases, there may not be any direct harm to the public, but the social upset, and feeling of unsecured is tremendous.

Cultural value and traditional belief go hands in hands with legends. Through reading the legends, one can discover the social belief and value behind the stories. For example, in the organ trading legends, there is a major theme of Anti-Americanism in it. The Anti-Americanism theme is also in the legends of AIDS virus in India. In these areas, the people have a traditional resentment of American. As they encountered some abnormal experiences, they tried to framed it

with their belief that it must be the American who did all these evil things. When one of these ideas sprung up from their minds, it quickly disseminate. People sharing the same Anti-American belief undoubtedly accept the idea and pass it on to the others, usually in the same folk group with the same belief. Sometimes more details may be added to the original stories, like the oral tradition. Similar situation happens in the south of Guangdong Province in China. Due to the loosing economic policies in China, the industries in the south heat up very fast and provide a lot of jobs. This attracts too many poor farmers in the rural area rushing into the southern cities like GuangChau and Shengzhen. They cannot find a job in the city nor they have enough money to go back because they have already spent all they have to go to the city. They are trapped, and become street-sleepers and some become so desperate that they kill people for money. Therefore, the local people dislikes them. In the same mechanism, legends of these strangers killing people for their organs spread out like a flame. People are afraid of these desperados. They believe the legends and tell each other about it. This is exactly like the Chinese old saying, "Three men make a tiger," which means if there are three men telling the same lie, the lie with become a truth.

Legends disseminate the fastest in the related folk groups. For example in the rumor of P&G, Christians were pleaded to boycott the product because P&G finance the Church of Satan. It worked very well in a Christian folk group but may not a matter to other people. The "Good Times" computer virus mail may well affect a group of people who use email a lot but not quite familiar with the operations of computers or email. These people will be well alarmed and spread the message extensively.

In general, legends are stories starting out as normal experiences. When they are interpreted, and interacted with people's cultural value and belief, they become legends. Therefore, legends are like a train carrying all those belief and value on it. One can find a lot of useful materials in it, but if not treated carefully, one might be run over by it.

Bibliography:

Barry, J. & Schrieberg, D. "Too Good to Check" Newsweek. June 26, 1995.