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Rumor in the Early Chinese Empires

This is the first English translation of Lu Zongli's major study of rumor in the early Chinese empires. Zongli explores how rumor, a non-official form of public opinion, formed and spread through non-official channels of early Chinese history. In this careful investigation, Zongli utilizes sources concerning dynastic politics, popular songs, mythology, and prophetic texts, dissecting the nature, function, and impact of rumor on politics and culture. His work demonstrates the ways that historians can examine views outside of mainstream thinking, interpret group mentality, and try to understand the atmosphere of a specific moment in history.

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Rumor in the Early Chinese Empires

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Translated by Wee Kek Koon

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Preface

What are rumors?

In Modern Standard Chinese, rumors are defined as “hearsay that is not based on fact; fabricated news”;¹ “news that has no basis in fact”;² and “hearsay that has no basis in fact.”³ Some Chinese writings on popular psychology define rumors as speech that is deliberately fabricated out of thin air and circulated within a specific time and place.⁴ Chinese works on social psychology refer to rumors as “news that is erroneous and untrue,”⁵ and “imprecise information about people or things that is propagated among people in a society.”⁶ There are historians who, in their works on rumors in modern history, define rumors as “downright lies that are fabricated out of thin air without a shred of proof,” whose “constituent factors are totally bereft of authenticity.”⁷

Each of the above popular or academic definitions has its own specific context and academic and social background. A classic Western work on the psychology of rumors argues that rumors are specific statements or those related to current events that people make based on their beliefs, and they are usually propagated among people through word of mouth. In the process of propagation, any rumor could contain some real information.⁸

How do rumors come about? How are they formed? According to Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, the formation of a rumor is predicated on two basic conditions: a circulated rumor must contain themes that are “important” to those who spread the rumor and those who receive it; the real information contained in the rumor is secret and processed to render it “ambiguous.”⁹ Rumors also adhere to a general rule in social psychology: people’s perception and interpretation of their environment inevitably involve subjective emotional distortions, and the level of these distortions is determined by the overlapping

¹ Cihai (1999), 1 ce, p.1094. ² Dictionary of Modern Chinese (2005), p.1583.

³ Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Phrases (1993), 11 ce, p.382.

⁴ Zhang Tiemin (1997), pp.6, 30. ⁵ Liu Anyan (1993), p.133.

⁶ Zhou Xiaohong (1997), p.427. ⁷ Su Ping (2001), p.5.

⁸ Allport and Postman (1965), p.ix. ⁹ Ibid., p.33.

effects of “importance” and “ambiguity.”¹⁰ From these observations, Allport and Postman summarized rumors and their occurrence with a famous formula: Rumor = importance \times ambiguity, or $R = i \times a$. “Ambiguity” here refers to the uncertainty of the circumstances or contexts in which the rumor occurs. Based on this formula, the more important the information or theme is, and the more ambiguous the context is, the more impactful the rumor will be.

This formula is quite convincing in its articulation of the prerequisites of the formation of rumors, and helps us to understand the mechanism with which they occur. However, it ignores the importance of interpersonal communication networks in the formation, propagation, and evolution of rumors, as well as the responses and interactions of different groups and individuals. The formula inadvertently considers the groups and individuals who are involved in the occurrence and spread of rumors as “unconsciously reacting” entities.¹¹

In their study of rumors, Western sociologists delved into the interpersonal networks and group dynamics at play during the spread of rumors. Tamotsu Shibutani found that different disciplines focused on different things when they studied rumors. Historians and scholars of jurisprudence are concerned with questions of reliability of words and testimonies, while psychologists focus on the accuracy of perceptions and memories. Psychiatrists have a special interest in the repressed impulses that are expressed during the act of communication, whereas sociologists focus on how collective solutions, public opinion, and group responses to disasters take shape when rumors occur.¹² Describing rumors as “improvised news,” Shibutani believed that rumors were a collective way of solving problems, a method of communication that repeatedly occurred in groups of individuals and in society. Through this communication method, people in uncertain and unstable social circumstances attempt to pool their intellectual resources to construct an interpretation of their situations that is meaningful to them.¹³

Some scholars believe that while the element of uncertainty is a common impetus in the formation of rumors, it is not the most important one; other environmental factors, such as contradictions and conflicts in the community, are more important.¹⁴ What sets rumors apart from other speech information such as news reports, accounts, and statements is that they are unconfirmed by authoritative sources. This unconfirmed information may be confirmed as real afterward, but of course it could be false.¹⁵ “Rumors are not facts, but hearsay: some rumors eventually prove to be accurate, but while they are in the stage described as ‘rumor’ they are not yet verified.”¹⁶

Whether or not a rumor can become widespread and accepted by a large audience depends on its themes, opinions, and demands. Shibutani believed

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.44. ¹¹ Neubauer (1999), p.167.

¹⁴ Knopf (1975), pp.90–91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹² Shibutani (1966), p.3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁶ Rosnow and Fine (1976), p.10.

that the interpersonal interaction and group propagation in the course of the formation and spread of rumors should be a dynamic process that went through a conscious “distortion,” communication, collective discussion, construction, and reconstruction, before it reached a consensus. For this reason, fabrications and falsehoods are not the essential features of rumors. A rumor may convey false information in the beginning, but in the course of construction and reconstruction, it gradually develops into a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁷

With reference to the above social psychological and sociological theories on rumors, I shall, in this book, define rumors as unconfirmed, but not necessarily fabricated or false, speech information that is spread mainly through word of mouth (of course, the written word can also be a medium), which is constructed and takes shape through interpersonal communication, collective participation, and widespread propagation. This book is not really concerned with whether the original version of a rumor is a fabrication or if the intention of a rumor’s originator (if any) was to manufacture something out of thin air. If it cannot enter a channel of propagation and secure some recognition and attention in the course of interpersonal interaction, then the speech is not the type of rumor that this book is concerned with. Rumors discussed in this book are information in the form of speech that enters a channel of propagation and creates considerable social impact, and in its group dynamics is successful in constructing a version that musters a certain level of consensus. This means the rumor is already representing the wishes and demands of the group, and it no longer has anything to do with the subjective intentions of its originator. This book is concerned with rumors that form a ubiquitous social and cultural phenomenon: they exist in all historical periods, all countries and regions, and all cultural forms. “While the content is unique in each historical context, the action pattern itself is recurrent.”¹⁸ It is precisely because they are a cultural phenomenon that is universal in its existence and impact that rumors have become an important field of study in modern linguistics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, communications studies, and marketing studies.¹⁹

Rumors and history are also connected in many profound ways. In fact, most of human history can be seen as a series of responses to and interactions with rumors or rumor-type expressions.²⁰ In ancient Athens, rumors were considered oracles from Zeus, and altars were erected for PHEME, the goddess of rumors.²¹ In the Roman Empire, the goddess was called Fama, which in Latin means fame, public opinion, gossip, and rumors. The imperial capital

¹⁷ Shibutani (1966), pp.14–24, 70–97, 140–181. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁹ For example, in his *Modern Social Psychology* (1997), Zhou Xiaohong discusses the nature of disseminated talk and rumors, the process of their propagation, and the ways of curbing them in his exploration of collective behavior influenced by propagated information. (pp.427–434).

²⁰ Allport and Postman (1965), p.159. ²¹ Neubauer (1999), pp.14–16.

Rome was a city of gossip, of hearsay, of rumors.²² In Europe, rumors were rife in the Middle Ages and early modern period, which is the focus of many works written by Western historians, e.g. *News and Rumor in Renaissance Europe: The Fugger Newsletters* (1959) by George T. Matthews; *The Quest for Eastern Christians: Travels and Rumor in the Age of Discovery* (1962) by Francis M. Rogers; *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution* (1991) by Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel; *A Rumor about the Jews: Reflections on Antisemitism and the Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* (2000) by Stephen E. Bronner; *A Rumor of Revolt: The "Great Negro Plot" in Colonial New York* (1985) by Thomas Davis; and so on.

Rumors were also a pervasive social and cultural phenomenon in China's past. Many well-known and enduring legends and myths were in fact "rumors" in their original forms. The false and deceitful words that were heavily utilized in military strategy and political conflicts could be considered "rumors." Insincere proclamations of the court, censures by Censors, the many political myths, and popular legends could also be considered "rumors," even if eventually they found their way into official histories.

Chen Hsueh-Ping,²³ the pioneer in the study of rumors in Chinese history, had already written back in 1939 that "essentially, rumors are communicable with all other language- and words-based reports or narratives, such as news reports, legends, history, and so on." If "truthfulness" is the standard with which various forms of speech information are differentiated, then being "unreliable" and "untruthful" are not unique characteristics of rumors. News from newspapers and the radio is an indispensable source of knowledge in modern life; news and rumors should be very different in their respective natures. However, given the complexities of international politics, news censorship, and an era where superstition and fraud are prevalent, news may not be entirely believable. It is widely known that some popular and time-honored folk legends and even historical legends were once rumors that have survived the passage of time. The most valuable and reliable historical sources, and the historical works based on these resources, inevitably contain many unreliable elements. In the remembrance of things past, objectivity is no longer possible.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.37, 43.

²³ Chen Hsueh-Ping (1901–1999), a native of Yixing, Jiangsu Province, graduated in 1926 from Peking University with a degree in philosophy and a major in psychology. He then headed to the United States, where he studied psychology at Columbia University and obtained a master's degree. After returning to China in the early 1930s, he taught at Northeastern University, Beijing Normal University, Peking University, and then National Southwestern Associated University. During this time, he wrote *The Psychology of Rumors* (1939). In 1948, he was appointed Under Secretary of State for Education and Acting Minister of Education in the government of the Republic of China. In 1953, he began his tenure at Taiwan University as a professor of psychology. His son-in-law is the historian Yu Ying-shih.

What ought to be the most accurate archival materials were often altered or removed altogether because “making them public would not be advisable.” The parts removed may well be more important than what remains. The way *Records of the Eastern Flower Gate* was compiled is a good example. Various intended or unintended subjective prejudices that find their way into the sources diminishes the reliability of history. If rumors are defined as “baseless words” and “unverified hearsay,” then such speech is surely “ubiquitous in news, testimonies, legends, declarations, and history.”²⁴

In citing the above, my intention is of course not to equate rumors with speech information whose sources are authoritative, but to explain that in the study of history, all language- and words-based information have their specific value and limitations. In this respect, the following works on Qing and modern history, which begin their narratives with rumors, are excellent works: *Soul-stealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (1990) by Philip A. Kuhn; chapter 5 of *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (1997) by Paul A. Cohen; and *A Study of Rumors in Religious Cases in Modern China* (2001) by Su Ping.

Regarding historical sources, researchers of rumors of the Qing and modern period have an embarrassment of riches to refer to. Although there are limited numbers of extant and unearthed texts from ancient China, there are records of rumors and rumor-type expressions from the distant past. Some of the political myths that enjoyed official recognition and “folk stories” that circulated among ordinary people were written down. These narratives are often thought of as false, erroneous, nonsensical, and superstitious. They were taken as baseless hearsay, fabricated information, and weird heresies that devious and unscrupulous types used to mislead and fool the people, rather similar to what Modern Standard Chinese refers to as “rumors.” These rumors or rumor-type expressions may appear sporadically in the annals and biographies of historical writings, or they might have been collected, together with *chen* poetry, folk rhymes, and children’s rhymes that were popular throughout the realm, and filed under the “Portentous Poetry” category in the various treatises of the Five Agents, becoming the footnotes that scholars use to interpret the past. These Five Agents treatises of various dynastic histories have proved to be a treasure trove.²⁵ To date, there has yet to be a systematic review and proper discussion of these rumors or rumor-type expressions in the study of China’s ancient past, which means that it is difficult to give proper answers to the following questions: What kinds of speech were labeled as rumors in ancient China? Why did rumors start? What forms of expression did they take? How did they spread? How were they constructed? What were the natures and special

²⁴ Chen Hsueh-Ping (1939), pp.4–9, 13. ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8.

features of the information they conveyed? What was the relationship between the information rumors conveyed and truth, falsehood, and fallacy? How were rumors seen by their propagators and receivers? Why did people believe in rumors and spread them? What kind of social and political influence, functions, and limitations did rumors have? How did rulers deal with and respond to rumors? How did intellectuals deal with and respond to rumors?

Given the constraints (including limited historical sources, as well as this writer's limited academic expertise and insights), it is difficult for this book to answer all the above questions, or to provide a complete reconstruction of the rumor-charged social and cultural milieu in the remote past. However, a careful examination and study of the recorded disseminated talk, unverifiable talk, portentous talk, *chen* prophecies, rhymes, political myths, folk legends of the early imperial period, including the Qin, Western Han, Xin and Eastern Han dynasties, and the contexts in which they occurred in, may reveal to us alternative truths or historical views outside the official texts and mainstream thought. It may help us gain an understanding of group mentalities and social psychologies in specific historical contexts, with which we can create multidimensional historical images of many different layers and hues. We can thus offer a more complete interpretation of the relationship between the "historical truth" of such information and their specific historical contexts. This is what this writer has attempted to do in this book.

Chronological Chart of Early Chinese Empires

- Qin 秦 (221–206 BCE)
 - The First Emperor 始皇帝 (r. 221–210 BCE)
 - The Second Emperor 二世 (r. 210–207 BCE)
 - King Ziying 子婴 (r. 207–206 BCE)
- Western Han 西汉 (206 –8 BCE)
 - Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 206–195 BCE)
 - Emperor Hui 惠帝 (r. 195–188 BCE)
 - Empress Dowager Gao 高后 (r. 188–180 BCE)
 - Emperor Wen 文帝 (r. 180–157 BCE)
 - Earlier Reign (179–164 BCE)
 - Later Reign (163–157 BCE)
 - Emperor Jing 景帝(r. 157–141 BCE)
 - Earlier Reign (156–150 BCE)
 - Middle Reign (149–144 BCE)
 - Later Reign (143–141 BCE)
 - Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE)
 - Jianyuan 建元Reign (140–135 BCE)
 - Yuanguang 元光Reign (134–129 BCE)
 - Yuanshuo 元朔Reign (128–123 BCE)
 - Yuanshou 元狩Reign (122–117 BCE)
 - Yuanding 元鼎Reign (116–111 BCE)
 - Yuanfeng 元封Reign (110–105 BCE)
 - Taichu 太初Reign (104–101 BCE)
 - Tianhan 天汉Reign (100–97 BCE)
 - Taishi 太始Reign (96–93 BCE)
 - Zhenghe 征和Reign (92–89 BCE)
 - Houyuan 后元Reign (88–87 BCE)
 - Emperor Zhao 昭帝 (r. 87–74 BCE)
 - Shiyuan 始元Reign (86–81 BCE)
 - Yuanfeng 元凤Reign (80–75 BCE)
 - Yuanping 元平Reign (74 BCE)

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- Emperor Xuan 宣帝 (r. 74–49 BCE)
 - Benshi 本始 Reign (73–70 BCE)
 - Dijie 地节 Reign (69–66 BCE)
 - Yuankang 元康 Reign (65–62 BCE)
 - Shenque 神爵 Reign (61–58 BCE)
 - Wufeng 五凤 Reign (57–54 CE)
 - Ganlu 甘露 Reign (53–50 BCE)
 - Huanglong 黄龙 Reign (49 BCE)
- Emperor Yuan 元帝 (r. 49–33 BCE)
 - Chuyuan 初元 Reign (48–44 BCE)
 - Yongguang 永光 Reign (43–39 BCE)
 - Jianzhao 建昭 Reign (38–34 BCE)
 - Jingning 竟宁 Reign (33 BCE)
- Emperor Cheng 成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE)
 - Jianshi 建始 Reign (32–29 BCE)
 - Heping 河平 Reign (28–25 BCE)
 - Yangshuo 阳朔 Reign (24–21 BCE)
 - Hongjia 鸿嘉 Reign (20–17 BCE)
 - Yongshi 永始 Reign (16–13 BCE)
 - Yuanyan 元延 Reign (12–9 BCE)
 - Suihe 绥和 Reign (8–7 BCE)
- Emperor Ai 哀帝 (r. 7–1 BCE)
 - Jianping 建平 Reign (6 BCE)
 - Taichuyuanjiang 太初元将 Reign (5 BCE)
 - Jianping 建平 Reign (5–3 BCE)
 - Yangshuo 元寿 Reign (2–1 BCE)
- Emperor Ping 平帝 (r. 1 BCE –5 CE)
 - Yuanshi 元始 Reign (1–5 CE)
- Liu Ying, the Prince Imperial 孺子婴 (r. 6–8 CE)
 - Chushi 初始 Reign (8 CE)
- Xin 新 (9–24 CE)
 - Wang Mang 王莽 (r. 9–24 CE)
 - Shijianguo 始建国 Reign (9–13 CE)
 - Tianfeng 天凤 Reign (14–19 CE)
 - Dihuang 地皇 Reign (20–24 CE)
- Eastern Han 东汉 (25 CE–220)
 - Emperor Guangwu 光武帝 (r. 25–57 CE)
 - Jianwu 建武 Reign (25–55 CE)
 - Jianwuzhongyuan 建武中元 Reign (56–57 CE)
 - Emperor Ming 明帝 (r. 57 –75 CE)
 - Yongping 永平 Reign (58–75 CE)

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- Emperor Zhang 章帝 (r. 75–88 CE)
 - Jianchu 建初 Reign (76–83 CE)
 - Yuanhe 元和 Reign (84–86 CE)
 - Zhanghe 章和 Reign (87–88 CE)
- Emperor He 和帝 (r. 88–106)
 - Yongyuan 永元 (89–104)
 - Yuanxing 元兴 Reign (105)
- Emperor Shang 殇帝 (r. 105–106)
 - Yanping 延平 (106)
- Emperor An 安帝 (r. 106–125)
 - Yongchu 永初 Reign (107–113)
 - Yuanchu 元初 Reign (114–119)
 - Yongning 永宁 Reign (120)
 - Jianguang 建光 Reign (121)
 - Yanguang 延光 Reign (122–125)
- Emperor Shao 少帝 (r. 125)
- Emperor Shun 顺帝 (r. 125–144)
 - Yongjian 永建 Reign (126–131)
 - Yangjia 阳嘉 Reign (132–135)
 - Yonghe 永和 Reign (136–141)
 - Hanan 汉安 Reign (142–143)
 - Jiankang 建康 Reign (144)
- Emperor Chong 冲帝 (r. 144–145)
 - Yongxi 永熹 Reign (145)
- Emperor Zhi 质帝 (r. 145–146)
- Emperor Huang 桓帝 (r. 146–167)
 - Jianhe 建和 Reign (147–149)
 - Heping 和平 Reign (150)
 - Yuangjia 元嘉 Reign (151–152)
 - Yongxing 永兴 Reign (153–154)
 - Yongshou 永寿 Reign (155–157)
 - Yanxi 延熹 Reign (158–166)
 - Yongkang 永康 Reign (167)
- Emperor Ling 灵帝 (r. 167–188)
 - Jianning 建宁 Reign (168–171)
 - Xiping 熹平 Reign (172–177)
 - Guanghe 光和 Reign (178–183)
 - Zhonghe 中平 Reign (184–188)
- Emperor Shao 少帝 (r. 189)
 - Guangxi 光熹 Reign (189)
 - Zhaoning 昭宁 Reign (189)
 - Yonghan 永汉 Reign (189)

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	Zhonghe 中平 Reign (189)
	Chuping 初平 Reign (190–193)
	Xingping 兴平 Reign (194–195)
	Jianan 建安 Reign (196–219)
	Yankang 延康 Reign (220)