

Live organ harvesting in China: Falun Gong and unsettled rumor

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Abstract The study of rumor is used to examine claims about “live organ harvesting” told by a new religious movement, Falun Gong. The veracity of the rumor is debated and its truth status remains unsettled. I argue that an unsettled rumor told by a marginal community is a problem for the sociology of rumor. This problem is partly resolved by examining how the rumor fits within the culture of its carrier group. An analysis based on ethnographic materials and publications shows how mythic significations evoked by the rumor within Falun Gong influenced how participants communicated to non-Falun Gong audiences. Advocates of the rumor attempted to align its details with deeply held meanings shared within the Falun Gong community. Because non-Falun Gong audiences did not share these mythic associations, such rhetoric made the rumor less plausible to general audiences. How rumor details were represented contributed to public skepticism but has no bearing on the truth status of the underlying rumor. This conclusion has implications not only for evaluating the present rumor but also for the wider study of rumor: evaluating an unsettled rumor told by a marginal group requires a culturally sensitive analysis in order to account for the potentially distorting effects of narration.

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In March of 2006, the Chinese diaspora-based religious movement Falun Gong alleged a new atrocity in the persecution of their community in China: they claimed that corrupt Chinese officials, security personnel, and medical workers were murdering incarcerated Falun Gong practitioners and selling their internal organs and bodily tissues for a booming, highly profitable transplantation market. The rumor has continued to circulate since 2006. It is alleged, doctors and security personnel have used incarcerated Falun Gong practitioners as a living inventory of organs, “harvesting” livers,

kidneys, and hearts as needed for the specific tissue matches required by waiting patients. In order to maximize transplant success, the organ harvesting is said to have been carried out on victims who are still alive. In effect, doctors execute victims by the organ removal procedure itself. The earliest version of the “live organ harvesting” rumor alleged that there had been at least six thousand victims. Later, estimates climbed and climbed, reaching now 1.5 million (Kilgour *et al*, 2016). Rumors of live organ harvesting have been a centerpiece of Falun Gong grassroots activism during the past decade. In cities around the world, including New York, Houston, Los Angeles, London, Taipei, Hong Kong, Seoul, Tokyo, and Sydney, Falun Gong adherents have been retelling the rumor at marches, on street corners, through their media publications, in the halls of governments, and at international medical conferences. Such activism is often memorable for those who encounter it because Falun Gong activists highlight the gruesome details of the allegations with photographs of disfigured corpses and even guerilla theater sidewalk performances in which mock doctors cut out organs from gurney-tied Falun Gong victims. The political impact of this relatively small new religious community’s campaign against “live organ harvesting” remains modest, but there have been occasional successes. For example, in June of 2016, the U.S. House of Representatives passed House Resolution 343 (2016), which condemned “the practice of state-sanctioned forced organ harvesting in the People’s Republic of China” and demanded “an immediate end to the 17-year persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual practice.”

From the point of view of studying culture and rumor, live organ harvesting appears similar to other “organ theft” rumors, which also describe people being robbed or killed for their body parts. Existing studies of such rumors usually have entailed a two-staged approach: first, scholars either dismiss or heavily qualify the veracity of organ theft as a reality, and then, second, they analyze the social processes of rumor and its meaning. Analysis often has aimed to explain rumor persistence in spite of being discredited.¹ Usually, organ theft and many other rumors are interpreted as a form of cultural expression that reveals subterranean collective feelings, such as shared trauma, fear, pride, and fantasy. In spite of the many insights of this “rumor as culture” literature (Fine and Ellis, 2010, p. 11), I note that its implicit methodology presents a conundrum if one cannot with reasonable confidence deny the veracity of the rumor. What do we do with rumors when we, as scholars of culture, have no privileged ability to clarify the question of truth? If we interpret rumor as a metaphoric expression of underlying social tensions and collective anxieties, are we implicitly casting judgement on rumor veracity as well – consigning it to mere collective fantasy? Alternatively, if we suspend cultural analysis until some point in time when we

¹ For examples of this two-staged approach, see the following: Drake (1989); Scheper-Hughes (1992); Campion-Vincent (2005); Fine and Campion-Vincent (2005); Fine and Ellis (2010). For an anthropological study of organ trafficking rather than rumor, see Scheper-Hughes (2000).



can establish with relative certainty the truth status of the rumors, are we implicitly conceding that cultural analysis is of secondary priority to realist questions of fact and truth?

The live organ harvesting rumor sits, for now, on the fence separating truth and fiction. As will be argued below, the rumor can be neither definitively discredited nor affirmed. The ambiguity in truth status highlights a knotty inconsistency within the study of rumor. Theoretically, a rumor is simply a claim that “lacks secure standards of evidence” (Fine and Ellis, 2010) and lacking such evidence does not mean that a rumor is fiction: “Rumor is neither inherently true nor false” (Fine and Difonzo, 2011). This means that studying rumor should be independent of the truth status of the rumor. Yet, studies of rumor typically settle the questions of truth first and then explore the social, cultural, and historical processes that account for the rumor and its persistence. The sequence betrays a practical understanding at odds with theory. Implicit in the methodology is an everyday epistemology that stories about real events are neutral representations of the world, whereas fictional narratives are symbolic expressions of culture and psychology. For precisely this reason, a rumor that is indeterminate regarding its truth status – an unsettled rumor – amplifies the tension between theory and practice, since theory tells us truth status should not matter but the practice of analysis presumes that truth status does.

I take the position that theory is correct and cultural analysis of rumor is, if anything, more urgent to undertake in conditions when vulnerable or marginal communities tell rumors for which the truth status cannot be resolved. This is because in the absence of adequate information, people evaluate rumor, in part, upon the trustworthiness of those who tell the rumor (Fine and Ellis, 2010; Fine and Difonzo, 2011). “Consider the source,” one is told as a warning against dubious rumors. If you trust your friend telling you the rumor, you are more likely to believe it. Such common sense logic has far reaching and potentially discriminatory consequences for cases when the source of rumor is a marginal and vulnerable group, such as a new religious movement, undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers, a minority community, or a persecuted group like Jews during WWII. If a group is not deemed trustworthy by the wider community due to unrelated sources of bias, allegations that might be worthy of serious investigation are more likely to be superficially dismissed. As a new religious movement, Falun Gong’s trustworthiness among the Chinese diaspora and the global media has been low since well before the rumor appeared in 2006. Furthermore, the organ theft rumor has obvious propaganda value in the religious group’s efforts to protest and discredit the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with which it has been in a contentious relationship since 1999. Therefore, due to Falun Gong’s marginal identity and particular historical context, the live organ harvesting rumor has faced exceptionally high obstacles to serious consideration.

Cultural analysis offers a disciplined approach to the “consider the source” dictum. Yes, we should consider the source but not in a biased way. Instead, we should carry out research-based interpretive analysis of the rumor in its social context: what does the rumor mean to the community that is telling it? How does the rumor fit into the culture of the Falun Gong? How might those community-specific meanings influence the interpretation of facts and how does that interpretation lead to a particular narrative about organ harvesting that is communicated to non-Falun Gong audiences? Although a cultural analysis is limited to studying within-group dynamics and cannot prove or disprove the rumor, such an analysis can also correct for problems of bias introduced by evaluations of credibility – that is, by relying on the group’s reputation to evaluate the unsettled organ harvesting rumor. If we understand what the unsettled rumor means to the Falun Gong community and how those meanings shaped the group’s telling and retelling of the rumor, we can make a more informed evaluation. Why is this rumor especially important to tell in Falun Gong? How has the particular group culture of the community shaped its generation, telling and re-telling? Answering these questions can shed light on how their ideals and practices shaped the life of the rumor and thereby influenced its reception by the non-Falun Gong community.

The substantive insight of my study is to reveal that the social experience of the rumor within Falun Gong was influenced by the community’s pre-existing shared understanding about the sacred human body and Falun Gong’s foundational myth about “law wheels.” The “mythic” bodily associations of the rumor structured the community’s collective emotional response when the rumor appeared. It also influenced how activists publicly narrated the rumor in two specific ways: First, the mythic association of the rumor spurred Falun Gong activists to see this alleged crime in ultimate moral terms, expressed by depicting organ harvesting as analogous to the Holocaust of Jews by Nazis. General audiences, who did not share Falun Gong’s mythic understanding of the body, found such an analogy to be hyperbolic and discrediting. Second, the mythic bodily association of the rumor spurred the activist community to communicate the rumor through graphic violations of the body, especially the abdomen. These grotesque performances, like the hyperbolic equation with the Holocaust, also discredited the credibility of the rumors. I argue that these two specific rhetorical strategies were both related to Falun Gong’s collective understanding of the sacred body, including its founding “law wheel” myth; also, both strategies contributed to discrediting the rumors when they first appeared.

The implication of my findings for unsettled rumor could be interpreted in opposing ways. One might conclude that the overlap between the rumor and Falun Gong’s mythic understanding of the body is the evidence that the rumor is only a fantastic social-psychological projection that has propaganda and mobilization value. But an opposing conclusion is perhaps equally valid: by identifying how meanings within Falun Gong shaped the idiosyncratic and



discrediting narrative performance of the rumor, the rumor logically becomes more, not less, plausible. This is because the low credibility of the rumor can be traced to how the claims were narrated to the public rather than to evidence pertaining to the veracity of the claims. Unlike all other organ theft rumors, the evidence compiled by those who affirm the rumor is reasonably persuasive and denials by the Government of China have been perfunctory and unspecific. Until the compiled evidence is decisively discredited on its own terms, the plausibility of the unsettled rumor increases after taking into account the distorting effects of how its marginalized carrier group narrated it.

Research for this study involved ethnographic methods, interviewing, and qualitative study of Falun Gong materials. I have been tracking the organ harvesting allegations since they emerged in the spring of 2006, which happened to coincide with participant observation fieldwork I undertook in the Falun Gong community of a small northeastern city in the U.S. This early period of my research included about 50 h total of participant observation. The community I studied had fewer than 12 people, but was also tightly networked with larger Falun Gong communities in New York, Boston, and Washington, D.C. Some members of these communities came to the city of my research in order to participate in public events. During this initial period of research, I learned to do the Falun Gong exercise and meditation practices, attended a weekly beginners class offered by a practitioner at a local community center, joined in publicity events, and on one occasion joined an outdoor group cultivation session on a frigid winter Sunday morning. My primary informants were all Chinese immigrants and would be classified as either “core” or “ordinary” practitioners, using (Chan’s, 2004) typology.

Subsequent to this ethnographic study, I conducted additional research on the Falun Gong, for which my primary data were drawn from both fieldwork and reading movement publications, websites, and other documentary sources (Junker, 2014a, b). My fieldwork included an additional 150 h of observation, participation, and interviewing in Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and various US cities between the years of 2006 and 2016. Interviewing included “intensive interviews” (Lofland and Lofland, 2006), which lasted from 30 min to 3 h, as well as naturalistic conversations with participants I met when attending events. I interviewed a total of 105 people, of which 35 were formal interviews and the remainder were naturalistic conversations. Throughout my study, I continued to follow the live organ harvesting rumor as it appeared in my sources and data.

My study proceeds as follows: I describe the live organ harvesting rumor and its historical context, then I consider it within the literature on organ theft rumor and legends. From this analysis, I argue that the rumor shares many attributes with other organ theft rumors but differs from them in terms of the ambiguity of its truth status. After these preliminary considerations, I use ethnographic and other qualitative data to explore what the rumors meant within the Falun Gong community, how the rumor first surfaced and was

communicated, how those meanings influenced diasporic Falun Gong mobilization, and finally how the Falun Gong narration of the rumor alienated their potential allies. The empirical analysis provides a social scientific interpretation of the unsettled rumor in its specific cultural context and illustrates the complex ways by which within-group culture and narrative performance can influence the credibility of a rumor.

Live Organ Harvesting in Context

Background

Since 1999, China has been waging a campaign of severe repression against the Falun Gong, a new religious movement that emerged in 1992 (Tong, 2009, 2012; Noakes and Ford, 2015). The particular ethos of Falun Gong, which espouses non-violence, calls upon “practitioners” to stand up publicly to voice support for Falun Gong wherever it is disparaged, to proselytize, to never speak falsely against Falun Gong, and to willingly accept suffering if necessary to remain true to the teaching, even if that means enduring torture or death. Such an ethos, when matched against China’s campaign to disparage and eliminate the movement, has fomented a decade and half of non-violent, tenacious, and costly resistance by Falun Gong believers and severe, systematic, and brutal repression by law enforcement agencies.

The repression of Falun Gong has been directed by central leadership within the CCP (Tong, 2009; Noakes and Ford, 2015). People accused of Falun Gong-related crimes, such as distributing Falun Gong literature, are summarily denied legal representation. Most detention and coercion of Falun Gong have been carried out as administrative punishment, especially re-education through labor (RTL), and thus has not included even the pretense of due process that is offered through the judicial system and prisons.² Many credible and non-partisan sources have documented testimony reporting severe torture used against Falun Gong practitioners in detention (For example, see from the UN Commission on Human Rights (2005, 2006), U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy (2007), U.S. Congress (2013), Human Rights Watch (2002), and Amnesty International (2013)). Falun Dafa Information Center provides detailed case information on over 3800 practitioners who died allegedly due to persecution and torture.³ Noakes and Ford provide a recent summary (2015).

² In late 2013, the Chinese government announced that RTL would be abolished, but it remains unclear what are the consequences of this reform for repression of Falun Gong (Amnesty International, 2013). Noakes and Ford report that Falun Gong adherents “are now being sent in greater numbers to prisons or to specialized re-education centres overseen by the 610 Office” (Noakes and Ford, 2015).

³ See <http://faluninfo.net/>.



Along with the repression of Falun Gong, many other changes occurred in China in the first decade of the new millennium. One of these changes was that the Chinese organ transplant sector grew rapidly. The term organ transplant contains some quite different medical procedures that are usually not differentiated in popular discourse and journalism. Strictly speaking, organs refer to those parts of the body that require the donor to be alive (including “brain dead”) when the organ is removed and must be transplanted as soon as possible. Transplant surgery can also involve tissues like corneas, skin, and bone, which can be removed after the donor has died, and thus the supply of tissues relative to live organs is more plentiful. When the Falun Gong media began reporting live organ harvesting, it combined both organs (liver, kidney, heart) and tissues (corneas). Subsequently, the focus of attention has been on organs and especially the liver, because whole liver transplant requires the death of a donor and is a medical procedure in high demand. Since 2000, the number of liver transplants in China has, by all reports, dramatically increased.

Comprehensive transplants statistics are not compiled and made public in China, so statements vary regarding the total number of transplants and the rate of change since 1995, but all sources suggest a huge increase since 2000. According to mainland Chinese-backed Hong Kong media source, Phoenix Weekly, the head physician at one of Sun Yat-sen University’s organ transplantation centers, Dr. He Xiaoshun, said that the year 2000 was a watershed for transplantation in China: the total number of liver transplants that year was ten times that of 1999; by 2005, the total had tripled again (Phoenix Weekly, 2013). In 2008, China’s leading official on organ transplantation (Huang *et al*, 2008) reported that China performed more than 11,000 transplants in 2006 alone, which was second in volume only to the United States. In 2005, Chinese hospitals were reported to have conducted close to 4,000 liver transplants, one-third of which were carried out by a single hospital in Tianjin (Beifang, 2004; Wang, 2006). Advocates of the rumor have compiled many statements from official sources, like hospitals and city governments, that point to a huge expansion in the transplant industry since 2000. David Matas and David Kilgour, for example, cite official websites indicating that dedicated liver transplant centers increased from only 22 before 1999 to over 500 by 2006 (2009, p. 99). Even official statements, which rumor advocates contend remain too low, say that China has performed roughly 10,000 organ transplants annually since 2002.

Such rapid expansion in the transplant sector occurred without any public system for organ donation. The government has officially acknowledged, repeatedly, that the vast majority of organs came from executed prisoners. China’s organ donation system during this period of rapid expansion and growth has, in effect, been the death penalty. Since 1984, China has had a policy of procuring organs from executed prisoners (“the 1984 policy”), which has made it the only country in the world to systematically use executed prisoners for transplant organs (Delmonico *et al*, 2014). In 2005, the government first

openly stated that the majority of organs came from executed prisoners; in 2012, the leading official on organ transplants in China, Dr. Huang Jiefu, wrote that such organs accounted for more than 90 percent of all transplants (UN Human Rights Council, [2008](#); Congressional-Executive Commission on China, [2013](#); Phoenix Television, [2015a](#)). More recently, Dr. Huang stated that without organs from executed convicts, “China’s transplantation sector and its technical maturity today could not have been achieved” (Phoenix Television, [2015b](#)). Using organs from prisoners contradicts international ethical and legal standards and in recent years China has been under pressure to move away from this practice. In September 2013, China began to implement a national system for voluntary organ donation. In January 2015, the government officially abolished the 1984 policy and now claims that it now longer procures organs from executed prisoners. But critics have charged that this was only a change in terminology and an “administrative trick” rather than true policy reform, as Dr. Huang later asserted in the Chinese domestic media that executed prisoners have the right to donate organs (Tatlow, [2015](#)). Furthermore, transplant surgeries appear to continue apace even though the new national donation system is in its infancy.

In summary, the live organ harvesting rumors emerged in a context of three general conditions that made possible their plausibility as rumors: the repression of Falun Gong, the rapid expansion of the organ transplant sector without a transparent and verified system for organ donation, and the official policy of procuring organs from executed prisoners.

Organ theft, as allegation

Rumors about “live organ harvesting” from Falun Gong practitioners emerged in 2006, initially through the Falun Gong’s own media. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture summarized the allegations as follows:

It is reported that there are many more organ transplants than identifiable sources of organs, even taking into account figures for identifiable sources.... Moreover, the short waiting times that have been advertised for perfectly-matched organs would suggest the existence of a computerized matching system for transplants and a large bank of live prospective donors. It is alleged that the discrepancy between available organs and numbers from identifiable sources is explained by organs harvested from Falun Gong practitioners, and that the rise in transplants from 2000 coincides and correlates with the beginning of the persecution of these persons. (UN Human Rights Council, [2008](#))

According to rumor, the state systematically procured organs from among the tens of thousands, if not more, incarcerated Falun Gong practitioners that



clogged the RTL system in the first decade of repression.⁴ Websites of Chinese transplant centers advertised on-demand availability of tissue-matching livers, kidneys, and hearts – an availability which is only possible if tissue matching occurs before death of the “donor.” Furthermore, the allegations stated that executioners and surgeons developed methods to remove organs before the victim was clinically dead, because such a method best preserved the organ’s condition for a successful transplant. More recently, allegations (Phoenix Weekly, 2013; Gutmann, 2014) have emerged that other political prisoners, including Uyghurs, Tibetans, and sectarian Christians also have been subject to predatory organ harvesting.

Organ theft, as rumor and legend

Whatever has in fact transpired in China, the circulation of stories about live organ harvesting constitutes rumor telling. A rumor, according to sociologist Gary Alan Fine and folklorist Bill Ellis, is a claim that emerges from unofficial sources and lacks “secure standards of evidence.” Only because a rumor might one day turn out to be true does it take on its social life as rumor (Fine and Ellis, 2010, p. 7). In Fine’s analysis, rumors develop in the context of ambiguity regarding both “credibility” and “plausibility.” Credibility depends on evaluations of the source of the rumor. A rumor coming from a trusted source is more credible than one from a source regarded skeptically. By contrast, plausibility depends on how much a rumor “makes intuitive and cultural sense, given how we conceive of our world” (5). According to Fine and Ellis, both credibility and plausibility are social phenomenon, but in different ways. Credibility is conditioned on how much one trusts the speaker of the rumor and plausibility depends on how much the content of the rumor matches our already accepted understanding of world.

The credibility of Falun Gong community as a source of the organ harvesting rumor is a different problem from the plausibility of the rumor. Falun Gong is generally regarded with great skepticism in the Chinese diaspora and western public spheres because it is a new religious movement, it has been the target of extensive Chinese state efforts to portray it as a dangerous cult, and it commonly uses media in highly propagandistic ways. Not surprisingly, the rumors have been received as low in credibility. The credibility/plausibility distinction, however, is useful here, in that my study provides insight into what the unsettled rumor has meant within the Falun Gong community and therefore bears on evaluations of the source of the rumor, on credibility, and not the plausibility of the rumor as a set of potential truth claims.

⁴ Noakes and Ford (2015) discuss the number of Falun Gong practitioners in national RTL system; at times, Falun Gong adherents were the plurality of all detainees.

In *Organ Theft Legends*, Campion-Vincent examines rumors of organ theft that have circulated around the world for decades, especially since 1983 (Campion-Vincent, 2005, p. 8). Common versions of the rumor include babies being stolen from Latin America and sold to doctors in North America “for parts”; the story of a wealthy tourist who is drugged in his hotel room and wakes up in bathtub packed with ice and bearing a scar where his kidney was stolen; children’s whose eyes were cut out for transplant and wander the rest of their lives in darkness; and so forth. Campion-Vincent demonstrates that, in spite of the reality of human trafficking and buying and selling of human organs, these rumors are fictional. “The alleged facts were repeatedly denied, in detail and authoritatively, every time there was a major outbreak of the rumors.” Further, “no solid evidence has been produced to support them or demonstrate that any system is involved (since the examples cited have either collapsed, one after another, or could not be verified, and remained isolated)” (Campion-Vincent, 2005, p. x). Her work exemplifies the methodology discussed above in that she first determines the fictional status of the stories and then analyzes what makes them emerge and persist as rumor.

Analysis of a fictional rumor commonly will emphasize its expressive contents and take those as metaphor for wider social conflicts. The body as symbol, it is frequently noted, is an especially evocative metaphor by which to symbolize society and to express social and political conflicts.⁵ The “horror legends” of organ theft, according to Campion-Vincent, are of this sort – “exaggerations and elaborations which spring up around disturbing facts, situations of social conflict, mistrust between social groups” (170). She lays the primary causal blame on pervasive poverty in the global south relative to the affluent north, international adoption, and the moral and symbolic ambiguities inherent to transplant medicine. These legends are convincing not for their logical credibility but for “their emotional power” (xi), especially because they draw connections between “repressed fears,” such as about violations of the body, and “social novelties,” such as transplant technology (175). As Richard Drake put it, even though rumors and legends “may be false literally, they may be true figuratively, especially metaphorically” (as cited in Campion-Vincent, 2005, p. 179). Without question, the Falun Gong community is in a situation of intense social conflict, mistrust, and even violence; the live organ harvesting rumor articulates and represents a version of this social conflict.

Another feature of emotionally and symbolically evocative rumors is that they are often anti-authoritarian and anti-elitist in character. Rumors are inherently ‘good to mobilize with.’ Fine and Ellis describe how “spreading rumors is a fundamentally political act with the power to alter social structure” and motivate drastic action (2010, p. 5). Campion-Vincent writes, “Often encouraged by

⁵ For example, Drake (1989, p. 277) cites Mary Douglas’ identification of the body as a common symbol of society, and Douglas in turn cites Mauss’ discussion of the body as a “natural symbol.”



propagandists, who find in these worrying and sensational stories a means of mobilizing the masses in support of their own objectives, horror legends appear, one after the other, adapting themselves to the diverse historical circumstances of the time" (2005, p. 170). "Rumors," writes Drake, "are ideal vehicles for the expression of intense sentiments in circumstances of ideological conflict" (276). Once again, these observations apply to the live organ harvesting rumors: since the moment they emerged in March, 2006, the global Falun Gong community has made the rumors one of the central themes of all their protest mobilization. The moral and symbolic horror they evoke has helped to maintain commitment by activists over time and space.

Commonly, analyses of organ theft and similar legends also argue that such rumors are a kind of collective version of what Campion-Vincent refers to as "emblematic thought," which is that "sphere of symbolic thought, where symbols and fables flourish, where our fears and wishes become incarnate in exemplary tales of horror" (161–62). Fine and Ellis speak of "rumor as a form of focused attention, a means by which people in confusion and dismay search for meaning" (2010, p. 18). Using a psychoanalytical analogy, rumors are to society what dreams are to the sleeping individual. Fine and Ellis suggest as much in saying, "groups create rumors to address their own wishes and fears" (18). Therefore, they argue that we can interpret rumors as "windows" or "wedges" into cultural attitudes and sentiments.

Rumors are also stories and therefore they take on a life of their own circulating in societies the way that traditional legends and myths do. Campion-Vincent and Gillian Bennett (2005) document many prior historical legends that pre-figure rumors, including organ theft. Drake distinguishes between rumor and legend precisely on this point: rumors are immediate, improvised, unofficial news, whereas legends are stable, known cultural material. When the two meet, "rumors and legends generate and reinforce each other as forms of credibility" (275). If you tell a rumor that has the narrative structure of a familiar and compelling legend, both the rumor will sound more plausible and the legend will indirectly be reinforced in the cultural canon. As we will see below, the organ harvesting rumors are anteceded by a long tradition in Chinese folklore and medicine that pre-figure stories of abdomen violations and bodily dismemberment, as well as special emphasis on the abdomen as a site of spiritual transformation. So rumor and legend collided in the organ harvesting story in a culturally specific way.

There remains an important way in which the live organ harvesting rumor in China differs from the known organ theft legend: the Falun Gong rumor is buttressed by the kinds of plausible information that has been lacking in other cases. Campion-Vincent concluded, as noted above, that there is no systematic evidence to support the decade-old organ theft legend. She cites (2005, pp. 148–49) the example of a Swedish journalist, Jonny Sångänger, who spent four years investigating rumors of children being victims of organ theft,

published in his 1993 book, *Organhandel* (*Organ Trafficking*). Sångänger traveled the world tracking down leads and interviewing anyone who made public claims about child organ trafficking, including humanitarian NGO actors, journalists, and government officials. What he found was an overwhelming paucity of substantial information: “All the thunderous declarations asserting that theft of children’s organs is a reality are simply based on nothing, on a vacuum, on hypothesis,” summarized Campion-Vincent. Sångänger concluded that, although it is impossible to deny that organ theft from children has never occurred, some amount of witness testimony, photographic evidence, or direct evidence should surface if the atrocity occurred on the scale and frequency described by the rumor. No such information could be found.

On this point, the live organ harvesting rumor appears quite different. Two human rights lawyers and one journalist, none of whom are Falun Gong practitioners, investigated the rumor in ways that were at least comparable if not more extensive than that cited by Campion-Vincent of Sångänger. Their efforts led to a series of book-length publications: *Bloody Harvest* (Matas and Kilgour, 2009), *State Organs* (Matas and Trey, 2012), *The Slaughter* (Gutmann, 2014), and most recently the 680-page “Bloody Harvest/The Slaughter: An Update” (Kilgour *et al*, 2016). Unlike the organ theft rumors studied elsewhere, these investigations uncovered witness testimony, incriminating phone call recordings, corroborating statements by Chinese authorities and Chinese media, and systematically corroborating but circumstantial statistical data. The ultimate significance of these reports remains a matter of debate. Nevertheless, if we use the same criteria cited by Campion-Vincent to classify the rumors she studied as fiction, then we must acknowledge that the live organ harvesting rumor passes an initial plausibility test that the rumors she studied did not. From this perspective, the truth status of the live organ harvesting rumor is unsettled.

Here is the conflict between theory and methodology mentioned at the outset of the paper. A methodology that first identifies rumors as fiction and then analyzes them for their expressive contents is in danger of reinforcing the common sense but flawed notion that factual stories are transparent accounts of the real and only stories that are fictional are structured by underlying myths, legends, and “emblematic thought.” It is telling, for instance, that Campion-Vincent’s book encyclopedically described many stories of organ theft and ‘murder of innocents’ but she never considered the rumor of Nazi concentration camps before “secure standards of evidence” surfaced to confirm the rumors as reality. When death camps circulated as rumor only, their facticity would not have prevented the rumor from also expressing social conflict through a dramatic narrative that combined repressed fears about the body and new technology with bits of information emerging from the theater of war. That the rumor turned out to be true does not erase the possibility that the same cultural processes of rumor telling and diffusion were in operation.



Recent work in cultural sociology has emphasized how factual media, like rumor, is also communicated using symbolic categories and stock narratives that are simultaneously logical, moral, and dramatic. “[E]very news judgment remains an interpretation of significance, one that is achieved by typifying previously unrecognized events in discursive categories that are already understood” (Alexander, 2006). Typifying new events – the ‘concrete’ facts encountered as time unfolds – requires arranging those facts within the discursive conditions of communication, which rely on semantic devices like actors, plots, and moral and aesthetic judgments. Citing theory from both the humanities and sociology, Philip Smith describes how narration in this way “mythologizes” the concrete “by aligning actors and events with plots, trajectories, destinies and moral codes” (Smith, 2000, p. 103). What Smith calls “mythologizing the concrete” is a means of entering ‘fact’ into the cultural, symbolically mediated social reality that we inhabit and, as a practical matter, take as real.

Mythologizing, therefore, does not mean making facts unreal in a probative sense, but only means embedding them within a culturally significant, and perhaps inevitably enchanted, register. According to this line of cultural theory, any report of factual events must engage in such ‘mythic’ representation because discursive categories cannot be purely neutral, transparent representations of the real. Independent, commercialized news media regularly engages in a particular form of “mythologizing” in order to make news events conceptually, morally, and aesthetically significant (Alexander, 2006). An implication of this point for the study of rumor is that the fact/fiction line, which has been a methodological guidepost, is misleading because even factual media is subject to the kinds of cultural processes, such as aligning contemporary details with legends and mythic narratives, that are associated with rumor.

Putting the live organ harvesting rumor into the context of theories about rumor, legend and the narration of news points to two conclusions. First, an unsettled rumor can involve the social processes associated with what Campion-Vincent termed “emblematic thought” and Smith termed “mythologization,” even if one day it turns out to be true. Second, understanding the social processes of rumor narration, of what the rumor means to its carrier group and how they mobilize around it, is an important task because it sheds light on how the facts are being embedded into a specific background web of significance. Interpreting the rumor within its cultural context of narration reveals specific and idiosyncratic ways that an unsettled rumor mythologizes potentially factual details.

What Does Live Organ Harvesting Mean Within the Falun Gong?

My interpretation of the live organ harvesting rumor first entails considering the rumor within the religious group’s broader system of beliefs about the human body and then examining how that wider meaningful context influenced the

way the rumor was narrated by Falun Gong activists. When the rumor first emerged in 2006, it resonated in the Falun Gong community in an especially strong way due to a pre-existing mythic discourse of the body.⁶

Central to the Falun Gong understanding of the human body is the myth of the “*falun*,” or “law wheel,” from which the Falun Gong takes its name. According to the community’s doctrine, the founder of Falun Gong places a *falun* into the abdomen of each practitioner and that supernatural implantation cultivates the practitioner. When the “improvised, unofficial news” of organ harvesting first circulated, its dramatic power came in part from the story’s structural, but inverted, similarity to the *falun* myth. Recall Drake’s discussion of how a rumor can reproduce the narrative form of a legend and thereby borrow legitimacy from the legend while also reinforcing the legend’s continued relevance. The live organ harvesting rumor carried within it symbolism about the body, authority, and soteriology that also is found in the story of the *falun*. The formal elements of the rumor as narrative reproduced the *falun* myth and dramatic arc but inverted its valence, making a story of salvation and healing into a story of damnation and destruction. Due to the conjunction of the *falun* myth and alleged reality, I argue, activists responded with extreme emotion; those emotions shaped their propaganda strategies, or narrative performance of the rumor in two specific ways. One, activists attempted to represent the rumors as equivalent in horror and gravity to the Holocaust, which Western history has framed as a universal marker of absolute evil. Framing the rumors as an instance of the ‘Holocaust revisited’ made sense within the Falun Gong community, but was perceived as exaggerated and discrediting by potentially sympathetic non-Falun Gong human rights activists and fellow Chinese dissidents. Two, activists emphasized vivid representations of violations of the body, especially the abdomen, in an effort communicate not just the moral horror of the rumor but also its particular mythic significance.

Given the extremity of the rumor and Falun Gong’s credibility, strategic rationality might have pushed activists to adopt a more cautious and measured form of narrative performance. Yet, ethnographic data indicate that the signifying power of the rumors emotionally compelled activists toward the equation of organ harvesting with the Holocaust and toward vivid portrayals of the bodily aspects of the rumor. These narrative performances, which alienated their audiences, felt indispensable within the Falun Gong community due to the emotional and symbolic resonances of the rumor.

⁶ I use the term “mythic” here in two ways: first, in the broad sense used among sociologists, such as Philip Smith cited above, which refers to a stock of dramatic narratives and codes unconsciously used by people as dramatic frameworks through which to shape representations; and, second, I also mean “mythic” in the much narrower sense used by folklorists, who reserve the term myth for etiological stories about the creation of society. The *falun* myth, discussed below, is a story that explains the origins of the Falun Gong community as a causal explanation of the social group.



The law wheel as an abdomen myth

Falun Gong was one of many *qigong* groups that sprang up during the “qigong craze” of the 1980s and 1990s (Palmer, 2007). Founded by “Master” Li Hongzhi in 1992, Li distinguished his brand of qigong in part by an innovative use of a pre-existing Buddhist term, *falun*, or “Law Wheel.” The word *fa* means “law” or “Dharma” and *lun* means “wheel.” According to Li, what makes Falun Gong unique is that Li installs a “law wheel” inside each practitioner and that the spinning law wheel automatically cultivates the practitioner’s “gong,” or spiritual power (Zhu, 1994). Introductory materials describe the *falun* as “an intelligent, rotating entity composed of high-energy matter” (Falun Dafa.org, 2016). In a recording of Li lectures in Guangzhou, audience members loudly applauded when he said that he had put a wheel personally in each of them.⁷

In Li’s early training classes and texts, Li explained that he personally places a law wheel in each practitioner’s lower abdomen. “What our practice does is cultivate a Law Wheel at the lower abdomen, and I personally place it in students during my class. While I am teaching Falun Dafa we place a wheel in you one by one” (Li, 2003, p. 39). So, where exactly does this Law Wheel fit in the body? Such specifics are explained by Li in the “Questions and Answers” chapter of his first book, *Falun Gong*: “After you have adapted to it [the Falun], you will not have any sensation. But, people with supernormal capabilities can see it. It is just the same with the stomach; you do not feel the movement of your stomach” (Li, 2001, p. 66). “I send out the Falun and install it in your lower abdomen. It is not in our physical dimension, but in a different one. If it were in this dimension, with intestines that are inside of your lower abdomen, what would happen if it started to spin? It exists in another dimension and is no conflict with this one” (Li, 2001, p. 67). These excerpts emphasize the location of the law wheels in the lower abdomen. In two instances, Li acknowledged the organs that already inhabit this area of the body, comparing the sensation of a law wheel to the sensation of one’s own stomach and suggesting that law wheels and intestines share space, but not dimensionality. Li was not figuratively employing language of bodies and lower abdomens: his claim was meant to be understood literally as is indicated by the specific references to other organs in body’s trunk.

By providing law wheels to followers, Li established himself as a kind of savior and created the mythic basis upon which followers could imagine a personal, ongoing, and supernatural relationship with Li. The *falun* concept, therefore, is a kind of founding myth of the Falun Gong community, in that the sacred community has come to be through Li’s omniscience and supernatural action. “I give everyone [who attends my lectures] Falun... At the same time, my Fashen (*law body*) is taking care of you, every one of you, as long as you cultivate Falun Gong. If you do not cultivate, the Fashen naturally will not look

⁷ See <http://www.falundafa.org/media/indexgb.html#1> (Accessed on December 1, 2006).

after you...My Fashen knows clearly and exactly what you are thinking about” (Li, 2001, p. 68). Not only is Li understood to personally implant a *falun* in each follower, but he is also thought to constantly monitor the practitioner’s inner thoughts. Online testimonials by Falun Gong practitioners frequently attribute to “Master Li” the role of directly, omnisciently, and intimately influencing their lives.

My field research gave some glimpses into how the *falun* idea circulated in the wider community of Falun Gong practitioners. In daily life, the law wheel image is invoked through the practice of the five daily spiritual exercises. Instruction and arm gestures for these exercises frequently refer to the law wheel, by which practitioners use its power to cultivate energy and purify the body. The most physically demanding of the exercises is the second one, called the Falun Standing Stance, in which a practitioner raises her arms in a wheel shape above her shoulders for 20 min. “When practitioners increase the frequency and duration of the exercise,” say Li’s instructions, “they can feel a Law Wheel rotating between their arms” (North Carolina Falun Dafa). Of the five exercise, the most iconic is a meditation posture in which a practitioner positions his or her hands before the torso in a way that conveys holding a sphere or wheel at the seat of the abdomen. In asking practitioners about the *falun*, several practitioners in Japan reported to me feeling the *falun* turning in their bodies. A practitioner in New England who worked in medicine gave me a scientific-sounding explanation of law wheels, showing both that she took the claim seriously and that her own understanding hewed closely to the written teachings of Li Hongzhi. I asked her, “It looks like Master Li puts a *falun* into a practitioner’s stomach. If you don’t meet Master Li in person, can you still have a *falun*? Can you have one without him?” She responded firmly but with some discomfort, “No, sorry.” She tempered this reply by dismissing the problem of not everyone personally meeting Li Hongzhi: Master Li operates on many dimensions, she explained, so direct personal contact is not necessary to get a law wheel. One obtains a law wheel by sincerely studying Li Hongzhi’s teachings and participating in Falun Gong activities. Nevertheless, she reported that a *falun* planted by Li in one’s abdomen is necessary for Falun Gong’s form of salvation. These various examples suggest that the mythic notion of the body involving a *falun* implanted in the abdomen of each practitioner circulated widely within the Falun Gong community from the earliest days of the movement.

The *falun* belief is distinctive to Falun Gong but the sacralization of the body’s abdomen is a common motif that has been widely available in Chinese culture, especially through traditional Chinese medicine and *qigong*. For example, a major tenet of traditional *qigong* theory is that the body contains “elixir fields,” or *dantian*. According to *Chinese Qigong Essentials*, “the most important [of the elixir fields] is the lower *dantian*, which houses several important internal organs and is the hub of many channels and vessels through which blood and *qi* flow. It is the fountainhead of energy for the sustenance of life” (Cen *et al*, 1996). Falun



Gong's *falun* belief is a variation on the common qigong theme of the lower *dantian* as a primary site of physical and spiritual transformation. One qigong exercise advocated by a mainstream qigong group that was a contemporary of Falun Gong, for example, is a visualization of one's breath turning revolutions in the lower abdomen (Pang, 1994).⁸ Even though the *falun* belief is particular to Falun Gong, it tapped into widely shared collective representations in qigong about the abdomen as a sacred location of the body.

Chinese tradition also has other legendary precedents for organ harvesting stories. These include stories about the theft of body parts and also legends involving the abdomen as a site of ontological transformation. A few admittedly unsystematic examples from widely disparate sources suggest how bodily decapitation and theft, existential vitality, and abdomens in particular, have been linked in the shared cultural stock of the Chinese mythic imaginary. Consider, first, an example from historian Philip Kuhn (1990), who described how the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) legal code preserved a list of the “Ten Abominations” dating back to the Tang code of A.D. 653. The very first of the “abominations” that was deemed worthy of legal attention for over 1200 years was “dismembering a person to extract vitality” (*caisheng chaige*), which referred to the practice of “cutting out ears and entrails for achieving biodynamic powers” (p. 85). Kuhn further notes that the “horror evoked by this crime is indicated by the penalty of ‘death by slow slicing,’ the same as for killing one’s parents or grandparents” (p. 88). Kuhn’s larger study (1990) also serves as a kind of narrative precedent for organ harvesting claims, in that it describes a mid-18th century public panic about bands of sorcerers stealing the souls out of living bodies, which subsequently caused the robbed bodies to rapidly wither away—soulless—into death. Many other precedents from more recent history exist as well, such as widespread, persistent 19th century and early 20th century rumors that foreign Christian nuns extracted eyes, hearts, and kidneys from local babies (Campion-Vincent, 1997; Tian, 2015).

Another legendary motif relates to the abdomen of the human body as the site of mystical energy and transcendent powers. For example, in the famous Ming novel, *Enfeoffment of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*), the popular folk divinity, Nezha, finally and absolutely pays off his filial debt to his parents by “cutting open his abdomen, digging out his innards, tearing the flesh from his bones, and then returning them to his father and mother” (Xu, 2000). Nezha is a popular character in contemporary China, known through film, television, children’s literature, and other sources. A similar example comes from the Taiping Rebellion. The hagiography of Taiping Rebellion founder, Hong Xiuquan (1814–1864), includes an account of his apotheosis through a dream experience. According to the story, Hong was brought up to Heaven and “by imperial

⁸ This example comes from Intelligent Qigong, which was a mainstream group that espoused a secular philosophy and politically obedient stance relative to the state (Palmer, 2007).

command, his stomach was cut open, removed, and replaced with a new one,” after which he was ordained by his Heavenly Father and Mother to carry out his religious mission (Lian, 2010, p. 22). That mission ultimately entailed one of the most destructive civil wars in human history.

The widely diffused symbolic and legendary significance of the sacred abdomen in Chinese culture, medical philosophy, qigong, and in the particular form it took in Falun Gong provided a context in which the “immediate, improvised, unofficial news” of live organ harvesting could reverberate on multiple registers of meaning simultaneously. The rumor was undoubtedly relevant as ammunition and justification for waging a representational battle against the CCP; but the symbolic elements of the rumor also allowed it to tap into unconscious mythic associations and emotions. This can be seen in how the narrative form of organ harvesting rumors was a symbolic inversion of the *falun* myth. Instead of a savior reaching into the practitioner’s abdomen to implant the means of salvation, the rumors portray corrupt CCP officials and doctors, who in Falun Gong discourse are seen as pawns of evil cosmic forces, reaching into the practitioner’s abdomen, stealing the means of life to sell to another, and then causing the practitioner’s full annihilation, such as being incinerated in the hospital furnace, as was often cited when the rumor emerged in 2006. The *falun* and the organ harvesting narratives are stories of divine embowelment/disembowelment, of being transformed into an elect human through sacred implantation or being reduced to a biological, conscience-less body that is kept alive only until its vital organs find a buyer on the market. The organ rumors invert the Falun Gong salvation process and end in horror rather than salvation.

Public contestation

Once Li Hongzhi’s idea of the *falun* entered public discourse, it became a public sign circulating beyond the control of the Falun Gong community. When the CCP launched its campaign against Falun Gong, official media also told narratives concerning the *falun* and abdomens, at least one of which gained prominent attention. That story was published in the first report by the Ministry of Public Security on the dangers of Falun Gong. The widely cited report (CCTV, 1999a; Ji, 1999; Qiu shi Political Section Editors, 1999) contained demonstration cases of how Falun Gong had harmed followers. First among these cases was the story of a 54-year-old retired worker, Mr. Ma Jianmin, who allegedly died after splitting open his belly with a knife in order to find the *falun* wheel. Grizzly images of the Japanese *seppuku*-style death circulated with the story, showing Mr. Ma’s corpse with a large kite-shaped wedge of flesh missing from his torso and his intestines spilling out.⁹ Official reports (CCTV, 1999b; Ji,

⁹ Readers can see the image at <http://www.kaiwind.com/zyz/zyz/201108/t133330.htm> (Accessed January, 2016).



1999) also circulated at least two cases of practitioners who had ignored an abdominal swelling because they believed it was the *falun* only later to discover a tumor (CCTV, 1999b; Ji, 1999). For example, on August 19, 1999, China Central Television (CCTV, 1999b) described the case of one such woman, “Mama” Zhang:

Who knew that this miraculous *falun*, the more it spun, the bigger it grew! As it spun, it often caused her unbearable pain. It was not until after the Central Committee banned Falun Gong’s illegal organization that those around Mama Zhang finally made the tough decision to force her to go to the hospital. Her surgery proceeded very smoothly. Now Mama Zhang has come to her senses through this experience. She said she would no longer practice Falun Dafa. Also, she thanked the Central Committee for making her recognize the facts, for her “narrow escape from death.”¹⁰

The official media efforts to discredit Falun Gong, therefore, also circulated stories about the *falun*, abdomens, and narratives of danger, death, and horror. The media accounts contributed to the discursive construction of the abdomen of ordinary practitioners as a site of symbolic contest between Falun Gong’s “false teachings” and the CCP’s correct understanding of facts and medicine. Thus, well before rumors of organ harvesting emerged in 2006, the abdomen had already become a symbolic battleground pitting the CCP against Falun Gong.

When the live organ harvesting rumors emerged, the Falun Gong community erupted into a fever of mobilization. I had begun ethnographic participant observation within a Falun Gong community in New England in February, 2006, one month prior to the news about organ harvesting. Once the rumors were first published in March in the Falun Gong affiliated newspaper, *Epoch Times*, the small community I was studying exploded in political activism: members travelled to New York city to protest at the consulate, went to D.C. to lobby legislators and President Bush; held local press conferences; canvased the public outside of a hospital and on university campuses; and joined in a large protest against the visit of President Hu Jintao to Yale University, which occurred on April 21 and which I also observed. The intensity of emotion, horror and moral imperative evoked by the rumors was evident at every event I attended.

The cultural construction of the organ harvesting rumor as a horror legend entailed classifying it in relation to other historical events. Falun Gong practitioners commonly advocated an interpretation of the rumor as a horror that transcends ordinary history. For example, at an introductory Falun Gong class shortly after the rumor surfaced, I observed a disagreement between a “core” and a “peripheral” practitioner about how to classify the organ

¹⁰ Author’s translation.

harvesting rumor.¹¹ The peripheral practitioner, Nikolay (male, middle aged), was a Russian immigrant and the core practitioner. Chen (female, middle aged), was a Chinese immigrant and one of the local Falun Gong community's central figures. Both Chen and Nikolay were raised under communist regimes and immigrated to America as adults. Nikolay's different stance in regard to the rumor is not necessarily representative of all peripheral practitioners, but the debate between the two helps to reveal the logic and emotions I observed among core practitioners like Chen. Both Chen and Nikolay accepted the organ harvesting rumor as true, but they strongly disagreed about what such a "truth" represented. Chen Liao saw the rumor as evidence of an extreme moral horror, which definitively proved the ultimate, history-transcending inhumanity of the CCP. Nikolay espoused a realpolitik orientation, in which he argued that the ordinary excesses in a Communist regime routinely produce these sorts of mundane horrors. Chen, frustrated by her inability to win Nikolay's assent to a more extreme interpretation, broke into the following:

I just read articles about the communists boiling babies to eat. You should see the pictures of this. It looks for them so natural. He doesn't think it's a crime. They don't feel shameful. Criminals! Eating and killing fetuses. That is why morality is completely destroyed. It is like the practice of eating the monkey's brain while the monkey is still alive. They have many wives. The one child policy causes abortion. Also young babies are sent to restaurant to be cooked and eaten.... The communists are no longer people.¹²

Chen's impassioned disagreement with Nikolay was not about the truth status of the rumor but about how to narrate its significance. For this core practitioner, the rumor stirred emotions and meanings that could not be adequately expressed by Nikolay's cynical, matter-of-fact interpretation. To express what the rumor signified for her, she needed to somehow justify an interpretation that elevated the horror of the story from the mundane and historical to the sacred and transcendent.

The intensity of emotions and moral horror felt by core practitioners appears to have sought expression through framing the rumors in reference to the Holocaust and Japanese WWII war crimes, which rhetorically serve as "moral

¹¹ Following Chan's typology of Falun Gong membership, core practitioners exclusively believe in the Falun Gong teachings and aim to carry them out in their lives on a daily basis; by contrast, peripheral members "do not care too much about the belief or the philosophy of the FLG but regard it as one of the many qigong practices and are attracted to it because it is simple and free of charge" (Chan, 2004, p. 672).

¹² According to my handwritten notes (March, 2006), which I took as the conversation unfolded. Names are pseudonyms.



universals” (Alexander, 2003) of twentieth-century evils. The *Epoch Times* spoke of “concentration camps” of Falun Gong practitioners, directly drawing comparisons with the Holocaust. In my local field site, I was personally told that the so-called concentration camps were made to look benign from the outside, “just like the Nazis death camps looked like gardens from the outside”; that my research was like that of someone writing about the Nazi concentration camps when the rest of the world dismissed the claims as rumors; and that Communists found it easy to kill all these people and cover up the evidence because they were “worse than Hitler and Naziism [sic].” In publicity efforts to communicate the rumor, a major rhetorical strategy of practitioners was to frequently, and urgently, link the status of organ harvesting to either Nazi or Japanese WWII atrocities.

For example, in April, a mainland Chinese doctor, who was also a Falun Gong practitioner, toured cities throughout the East Coast to publicize news of the organ harvesting. The local community I was studying arranged for her to hold a press conference in front of City Hall. The brief event was rushed. After recounting the allegations to me, and providing an analysis of organ matching requirements and other medical points for which she had expertise, she hurried to her car to leave. The car was adorned with a large banner that read, “Stop the Slaughter of Falun Gong in China – Prisoners of Conscience Being Killed for Their Organs.” As she got in the car, she pleaded for me to remember how the world swore never to allow the Holocaust to happen again. Yet here it was, she said, reoccurring. As she drove away, she called out, “This is not a political issue, it is a conscience issue.” By citing conscience over politics, she aimed to make the organ harvesting story into a universal evil, to align its concrete details with a transcendent moral narrative. Everything about her presentation suggested urgency, strong emotions, and full-bore moral imperative.

Certainly, the persistent effort to frame the concrete details of the rumors into the sacred register of the Nazi Holocaust was an attempt to elevate the importance of the rumors. Such rhetoric was already common in Falun Gong discourse before the organ harvesting rumors (Chan, 2013). But there are also reasons to make a bolder inference and argue that reception of the rumors within the Falun Gong community was shaped by the particular symbolism of the abdomen as a site of sacred existential and spiritual transformation. For example, on April 20, I attended another press conference organized by Falun Gong practitioners. One of the speakers, who identified as both a Falun Gong practitioner and a medical doctor specializing in the kidney, described the various medical tasks and teams of specialists necessary for a kidney transplant. He verbally walked the press through the process of organ removal and transplantation. He compared the removal of organs from live Falun Gong practitioners to Japanese wartime experiments on Chinese people, and specifically cited an experiment to see how long people can remain alive after their stomachs have been fully cut open. The particular emphasis on the

stomach, on reaching in and cutting out all echo the *falun* narrative with its moral and soteriological valences reversed.

Falun Gong visual media, whether on the Internet, in publications, in parades, or on posters set up as displays in urban spaces, frequently has depicted disfigured corpses with grotesque scars marking their bodies as object of torture, organ harvesting, or both. One especially relevant protest tactic has been street theater performances that enact mock organ harvesting. These performances, which practitioners have carried out in the U.S., Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere, graphically dramatize harvesting abdominal organs from Falun Gong victims. Scenes from these performances are available online. The most common image is of activists dressed as surgeons cutting and removing a mass from the blood-soaked abdomen of another practitioner, who is laid out like a corpse on a surgical gurney (Nuowei dafadizi, 2006; Sound of Hope, 2008; Clearwisdom, 2011; Lin, 2016). Although the intent of such theatrical demonstrations is to call public attention to the allegations, one could imagine many ways to achieve such an end that do not so vividly emphasize violations of the abdomen. The recurrent representational emphasis suggests that the background meanings associated with the *falun* narrative and the sacred body played a role in shaping the form that activism took.

A final example of the intensity and urgency evoked by the organ harvesting rumor comes from the world of diplomacy. About six weeks after the rumor first went public, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited the U.S. At a press conference on the White House lawn, President Hu's speech was interrupted by a member of the press, representing the Falun Gong-related newspaper *Epoch Times*. The journalist's name was Dr. Wang Wenyi; in addition to her work for *Epoch Times*, news reports said she was trained as a medical doctor in China and earned a Ph.D. in pharmacology from the University of Chicago. She had been admitted into the event as a member of the press and then broke ranks from the journalist corps as Hu began to speak. She first yelled in Chinese, "President Hu: Your days are numbered!" After a fast gulp of air, then she screamed in English, "President Bush: make him stop persecuting the Falun Gong!" Her yells stopped President Hu's speech, attracted the gaze of cameras, and created a diplomatic embarrassment that was broadcast live around the world (except in China, where the broadcast was delayed to protect against such an occurrence). In news reports after the event, a spokeswoman for *Epoch Times* said that Dr. Wang's outbreak on the White House lawn was a spontaneous lapse in self-control. She had been researching the organ harvesting issue and was "very overstressed" (Barker and Sun, 2006). If my field site was representative, then her fervor was widely shared throughout the Falun Gong diaspora community.

For activists and believers, the organ harvesting stories had merged myth and fact and thereby transcended history in a most terrifying way. It made sense, in such a context, to use the Holocaust as analogy to convey the perception of



history transcending evil. Vividly representing violated abdomens and bodies similarly resonated with Falun Gong's mythic understanding of the body. In this way, we can trace how the Falun Gong community interpreted the rumor, merging its details with a mythic narrative of the abdomen in ways that shaped how they communicated the rumor. The mythic background meanings likely shaped the narrative performance. The problem faced by Falun Gong, however, was that the audiences they aimed to persuade did not share in these mythic background resonances. Instead, audiences were alienated rather than persuaded by the urgent efforts to align the concrete claims with the Holocaust or vivid displays of bodily violation.

Audience reception

It is beyond my scope to study in detail how diverse audiences reacted to the organ harvesting rumors, but a few general observations are in order. First, many people, both Chinese and non-Chinese, react negatively to the grotesque imagery of body violations and dramatized organ theft. Perhaps, the most common effect of this manner of narrating the rumors is to prompt negative evaluations of Falun Gong as a reliable public voice. Second, equating organ harvesting with the Holocaust in particular may have shaped the way the rumors were received in the diaspora Chinese community, with long-lasting consequences for the credibility of the Falun Gong as conveyer of information.

In April, 2015, I interviewed Mr. Harry Wu, who probably more than any other non-Falun Gong public voice was influential in shaping how the organ harvesting rumors were evaluated in America. Wu is a Chinese-born naturalized U.S. citizen and human rights activist. He spent 19 years in Chinese prison and RTL (laogai) camps, and in 2015, Wu ran the Laogai Research Foundation in Washington, D.C. In 1995, Wu became well known for leaking the 1984 internal Chinese state policy document that officially authorized the use of organs from executed prisoners. He also coproduced a short documentary, called *Organ Trade in China* (Campion-Vincent, 2005). For these reasons, Wu became established as a public authority well positioned to evaluate the Falun Gong rumor in 2006. When the rumor surfaced, Wu quickly denounced it as false. Matas and Kilgour, who later disputed Wu's conclusions, accused him of publicly denying the rumors even before his own investigators finished collecting data for their report (Matas and Kilgour, 2009, pp. 109–111). As recently as December, 2013, Voice of America quoted Wu saying that no reasonably “convincing” evidence has surfaced and that he had “told the Falun Gong very clear[ly] you really need the evidence” (Wu, 2012; Lee, 2013). In April, 2015, Wu discussed the organ harvesting rumors with me. Wu reported that he had not read Matas and Kilgour's reports of 2006, 2007, or 2009, which included published rebuttals to Wu's denial of the allegations. Furthermore, Wu volunteered, without my prompting, that his own skepticism related to Falun

Gong-related media efforts to align the organ harvesting rumor with the Holocaust. Wu stated that he disagreed with the newspaper *Epoch Times* using the term “concentration camp” to describe the imprisonment of practitioners. He recalled personally telling the *Epoch Times* chief editor and Falun Gong representatives not to use the term “concentration camp,” since it is a special term only used for Nazi extermination camps.

Wu’s assessment of Falun Gong’s rhetorical comparison is astute in light of the symbolic status of the Holocaust in America and Europe. According to Alexander (2003), it took several decades for late twentieth-century public discourse to elevate the large-scale systematic murder of Jews to a sacred and universal evil. The status of the Holocaust as a moral universal was not a given feature of the facts but was the result of political and cultural efforts, which only gained momentum in the 1960s, to reshape collective memory. If such was true for the Nazi death camps, then how much more would it be true for an unsettled rumor concerning a minority Chinese religious movement in high tension with its non-Chinese socio-cultural environment?

The media strategy of equating the rumors with the Holocaust appears to have been a factor in shaping Harry Wu’s evaluation of the rumor in 2006 and may have contributed to his not following the rumor thereafter. Given his public stature on the issue of organ harvesting rumors, here is at least one specific way we can trace the credibility of Falun Gong rumor being dismissed due in part to equating organ harvesting with the Holocaust. The rhetorical equation, which felt urgent and indispensable within the community due to its mythic resonances, cast a long shadow over public debate, making it harder for later developments and information to be fairly evaluated.

Conclusion

As I write, the Eastern District Court of New York (Zhang, *et al* v. Chinese Anti-Cult World Alliance *et al*, No. 15-cv-1046 [S.D.N.Y. Jan. 28, 2016]) is hearing a case alleging that pro-CCP activists in New York frequently threatened to kill and “dig out [the] hearts, livers and lungs” of Falun Gong activists. Meanwhile, Falun Gong activists in Hong Kong are preparing to bring their claims that “up to 1.5 million people” have been murdered for organs to the annual international meeting of The Transplantation Society, which will convene in Hong Kong in 2016. Claims about live organ harvesting continue to circulate and even take new forms. The cultural processes of rumor narration and the associations between this rumor and mythic cultural motifs continue to reverberate.

When rumors about live organ harvesting emerged in 2006, they provoked intense mobilization within the diaspora Falun Gong community. Like organ theft rumors in other times and places, these horror legends spurred strong



emotions and drastic action within the Falun Gong community. Like other rumors in other context, the live organ harvesting rumor is a “window” (Fine and Ellis, 2010) into the anxieties, hopes, and shared culture of the Falun Gong. But at the same time, that shared culture – its mythic understanding of the sacred body and its particular *falun* legend – created the “window frame” that contained the rumor. The culture organized scraps of information and potential facts in an idiosyncratic way. In effect, what this means for the study of unsettled rumor is that the analyst needs to do more than use rumor as a window into a culture, but also reverse the direction of interpretation. We must also ask, how does the culture of the narrating community shape the organization of potentially true facts? To be truly agnostic about the truth status of the claims, we need to be reflexive about the possibility that there are realities being mythologized within the rumor. Part of our analytic task then becomes to provide as much specificity as warranted through evidence and interpretation as to how the “window frame” of the rumor was constructed.

For the live organ harvesting rumor, I argue that frame was constructed to convey a rhetorical comparison of the rumor to the Holocaust and to emphasize in visual performances images of the violated sacred abdomen. Such a narrative performance fixed the rumor’s details within a framework shaped by Falun Gong’s mythic notions of the human body, including the *falun* wheel implanted in the abdomen of each practitioner. As a cultural performance for non-Falun Gong audiences, this representational effort was largely a failure. The rumors were consigned not only to rumor in the sense that they lacked secure standards of evidence, but also to being stories that reinforced Falun Gong’s image as a deviant and unreliable community.

As an unsettled rumor, the live organ harvesting rumor draws attention to the disconnect between theory, which sees rumor as not inherently true or false, and research practice, which typically treats rumor – especially organ theft rumor – as expressive fiction. Analysis of an unsettled rumor allows us to challenge this too easy methodological move and to highlight the complex ways that factual narration and expressive, symbolic narration are in no determinate way mutually exclusive. If the organ harvesting rumor eventually turns out to be true, then we will see that narrating the rumor through a mythical understanding of the body did not make the facts untrue – it only made them harder to see. For this reason, interpretive social science has a distinctive and useful role to play in the study of unsettled rumor, especially those told by vulnerable groups with low social status and for which the veracity of the story is highly consequential. A research-based analysis that reconstructs the particular meanings and social experience of the rumor’s narration helps parse the cultural dynamics of narration, separating what Fine calls the politics of credibility, as in who you trust as a source, from the politics of plausibility, meaning what details you might consider as potentially true.

About the Author

Andrew Junker holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the Yale University and an MA in Religious Studies from Indiana University. He conducted research and writing for this article at Yale and at the University of Chicago, where he was a Collegiate Assistant Professor and member of the Society of Fellows in the Liberal Arts. Junker's research concerns culture, social movements, and theory. He has examined a variety of Chinese social movements outside of mainland China, including Falun Gong, the Chinese democracy movement, and Hong Kong's "Umbrella Revolution." Other work by Junker addresses charismatic authority, cultural sources for democratic citizenship, contentious repertoires, and transnational collective action. He is currently finishing a book on religion and politics, titled *Making Activists in Global China*.

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