
Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of “Superstitious” Rumors in the People’s Republic of China, 1961–1965

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SINCE THE DEATH OF MAO ZEDONG in 1976, there has been an astonishing revival in the People’s Republic of China of what the government calls “feudal superstition”; this in spite of the fact that under Mao the regime waged a fierce onslaught against the “four olds”—old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits—especially during the Cultural Revolution. The 1980s and 1990s saw a rush to rebuild temples and ancestral halls, the resurgence of spirit mediumship and exorcism, renewed interest in divination and geomancy, the reemergence of heterodox religious cults, notably Falungong, and the appearance of “jade emperors descended from heaven.”¹ The rapidity and extent of this upsurge in once-proscribed beliefs and practices raised questions about the power of the Maoist state, suggesting that despite its intensive propaganda campaigns and bouts of repression, its capacity to remold popular thinking and behavior was much less than scholars had once supposed. This, in turn, raised questions about the nature of the beliefs and practices that revived during the era of economic reform. Were these manifestations of a tradition that had been preserved unscathed in the face of turbulent socioeconomic and political transformations? Or were these substantially new configurations of beliefs and practices adapted to the changed power relations of the reform era?² One form of “feudal superstition”—what the authorities call “superstitious rumors”—maintained a vig-

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¹ Elizabeth J. Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (Armonk, N.Y., 2002), chap. 10; Xin Yuan, “A Place in the Pantheon: Mao and Folk Religion,” in Geremie R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, N.Y., 1996), 195–200.

² Helen F. Siu, “Recycling Rituals: Politics and Popular Culture in Contemporary Rural China,” in Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz, eds., *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic of China* (Boulder, Colo., 1989), 121–137; Vivienne Shue, “Powers of State, Paradoxes of Domination: China, 1949–1979,” in Kenneth Lieberthal, ed., *Perspectives on Modern China* (Armonk, N.Y., 1991), 205–225; Cai Fengming, *Shanghai dushi minus* [Shanghai Urban Folklore] (Shanghai, 2001), 241–272.

orous existence through the Maoist era, serving to articulate popular concerns and to perpetuate a religious cosmology radically at odds with that of the party-state. The present article aims, first, to explore the meaning of superstitious rumors in the context of the early 1960s, asking what they tell us about the mentality of Chinese peasants and workers and about how they coped with pervasive social uncertainty; second, it explores the politics of superstitious rumor, asking whether the more explicitly political of these rumors can be construed as a form of popular resistance to the party-state.³ The article conceptualizes rumors as stories about the way the world is, stories rooted in social beliefs about the nature of the human and supernatural worlds. On the one hand, such stories represent responses to the social and political milieu, which refract in a culturally specific idiom the conscious and unconscious concerns of those who retail them; on the other, they intervene in that social and political milieu by investing it with new meanings, and thus potentially have the capacity to change it.⁴

ON JULY 2, 1962, THE MINISTRY OF PUBLIC SECURITY of the People's Republic of China (PRC) issued a confidential circular to public security organs on the prevention and suppression of rumor.⁵ It claimed that "In the most recent period, the number of rumors in circulation has been large" and linked this increase to the activity of counterrevolutionaries, especially Guomindang (GMD) agents, who were said to be using rumor to undermine the authority of the state. The circular coincided with a noisy campaign in the press and on the radio to warn the population of the dangers of spreading and giving credence to rumors. This campaign explained rumormongering entirely in terms of the evil machinations of counterrevolutionaries, hostile class forces, and "bad elements." By contrast, the confidential circular offered a more subtle explanation of the epidemic of rumor. It classified rumors into three categories: those that arose from inadequate understanding of the complicated international situation and the difficult domestic economic situation, those that expressed the "complaints and grumbling of a minority of malcontents," and those that were "fabricated and propagated by counterrevolutionaries and malcontents." In contradiction to everything said in the public campaign, the circular admitted that "not many" rumors fell into the latter category, "although they are very dangerous." By far the largest number, it said, were rumors that "arise from inadequate understanding" of the international and domestic situations.⁶ These included rumors of war—said to be the most widespread at the time—rumors about the state of the economy,

³ For pioneering analyses of "feudal superstition" in the post-Mao era as resistance, see Ann S. Anagnost, "The Beginning and End of an Emperor: A Counterrepresentation of the State," *Modern China* 11, no. 2 (1985): 147–176; and Stephan Feuchtwang, "Religion as Resistance," in Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London, 2000), 161–177. Helen Siu rejects the view that popular religion in the Maoist period was "inherently antistate and antihegemonic"; Siu, "Recycling Rituals," 122. For a subtle account that sees it as an arena characterized by ambivalence toward the state, see Vivienne Shue, "Legitimacy Crisis in China?" in Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen, eds., *State and Society in 21st-Century China* (New York, 2004), 43.

⁴ Glen A. Perce, "Rumors and Politics in Haiti," *Anthropological Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (1997): 1–10.

⁵ *Neibu cankao* (NBCK) [Internal Reference Materials], July 2, 1962, 2–4. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2–3.

and “superstitious” rumors. The circular recommended that education and propaganda be stepped up to deal with these. On superstitious rumors it said nothing very specific. Yet the increased access to provincial and local archives that has become possible since the 1990s makes it clear that superstitious rumors were rife in the PRC at this time.⁷

For Communist regimes, rumor represented both a form of unauthorized speech (and thus a potential threat to social stability) and a useful insight into popular attitudes and mood.⁸ This ambivalence reflected the dilemma of the regimes, which on the one hand were “wary of allowing citizens to express uncensored opinions about matters of public import in public,” and on the other were “extremely anxious to know what people were thinking.”⁹ They thus invested substantial resources into monitoring the moods and opinions of their citizens. In itself this was no novelty: absolutist states in Europe in the early modern period had begun the business of gathering information on the sentiments of their subjects. As Peter Holquist notes, however, “Whereas policing aimed at reporting on delinquents, malcontents and revolutionaries as individuals in order to uphold an existing order, surveillance sought information on the whole population to amass aggregate data on attitudes in order better to act upon them.”¹⁰ Communist surveillance, in other words, was designed not merely to measure the public response to various revolutionary measures, but to provide information that could be used to remold popular attitudes and values in accordance with the long-term revolutionary vision. In China, local public security and party organs, trade unions, and the women’s federation, together with thousands of informers, reported rumors circulating in villages, marketplaces, teahouses, factories, schools, and university corridors. Public security bureaus collated these rumors in reports on local opinion, which they then submitted to county-level or provincial-level security organs. The latter, it appears, were responsible for producing summaries of the “mood of the population” for party leaders, classified according to the putative social class of those whose sentiments were being reported, social class being seen as the key parameter that could render the social body transparent to party-state manipulation.¹¹ Extracts from these summary reports were regularly published in *Internal Reference Materials* [*Neibu cankao*], a newsletter pro-

⁷ Since the fall of Communism in the Soviet Union, access to archives has revealed how seriously the Soviet authorities also treated rumors. See Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin* (Oxford, 1996), chap. 2; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (Oxford, 1994), 286–296; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (Oxford, 1999), chap. 7; Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge, 1997), 113–119; Timothy Johnston, “Subversive Tales? War Rumors in the Soviet Union, 1945–47,” in Juliane Furst, ed., *Late Stalinism in Russia: Society between Re-construction and Re-identification* (London, 2006, forthcoming).

⁸ In theory, spreading rumors was a criminal activity because it was deemed to threaten the security of the socialist state. Rumormongering was listed in the Criminal Code of the Soviet Union under the articles on anti-Soviet agitation, and in the PRC Criminal Code under the section on crimes endangering national security. <http://www.colaw.cn/findlaw/crime/criminallaw2.html> (accessed February 24, 2006).

⁹ Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 164.

¹⁰ Peter Holquist, “What’s So Revolutionary about the Russian Revolution? State Practices and the New-Style Politics, 1914–21,” in David L. Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (London, 1999), 91–92.

¹¹ These were similar to the “reports on the mood of the population” (*svodki o nastroenii naseleniia*) produced by the Soviet secret police and the *Stimmungsberichte* of the Gestapo in Nazi Germany. Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford, 1983).

duced by the New China News Agency for restricted circulation among ranking party and state officials. Such extracts invariably appeared under the caption “reports of rumors”; but “rumor” (*yaoyan*) was an elastic term, because it encompassed all manner of opinions about contemporary events and policies, including those that were relatively factual or subject to empirical verification, suggesting that the authorities considered “rumor” to be any information or opinion at variance with the official construction of reality.

Rumor is present in all societies, and in Communist societies it functioned, to a large extent, exactly as it does in non-Communist societies—namely, as “improvised news” in which people comment upon the events taking place around them.¹² In the PRC, where the news media were tightly controlled by the party-state, it reflected a pervasive lack of trust in information that emanated from government. During the Korean War, for example, people in Shenyang, Chengde, and Hunan were reported as saying, “There’s nothing in the newspapers worth reading. They publish only the good news, not the bad. If something happens, they daren’t talk about it.”¹³ Teachers in Wuxi and Suzhou were said to feel that the *People’s Daily* “has too little and too tardy news about the international situation.”¹⁴ In Zhejiang, “merchants” opined: “The *Zhejiang Daily* is a Communist newspaper, so it only publishes news favorable to the Communists.”¹⁵ Given this profound skepticism toward the news media, rumors about economic difficulties, about conflict among political leaders, or about tensions in international relations purported to reveal what the party-state was anxious to hide. In addition to the function of rumor as “improvised news,” however, much of the sociological literature stresses the role of rumor as a response to situations of crisis or uncertainty. According to Tamotsu Shibutani, when times are out of joint, people share rumors as a way of garnering the support of others in determining the meaning of uncertain, ambivalent, or fear-inducing events.¹⁶ In this context, rumor may express popular fears and anxieties, hopes and aspirations, frustrations or anger. Ralph L. Rosnow expands on this argument, claiming that rumors “give vent or expression to anxieties and uncertainties as to how people attempt to make sense of the world in which they live.” The creation and passing on of rumors, he hypothesizes, occurs when there is an optimal combination of four variables: general uncertainty, “outcome-relevant involvement” (i.e., people have a stake in whether a rumor turns out to be true or false), personal anxiety, and credulity.¹⁷ Such conditions were present in abundance in the PRC in the early 1960s.

Between 1959 and 1961, the PRC was ravaged by what was probably the worst famine in human history in terms of the absolute number of deaths. The total of “excess deaths”—deaths that occurred earlier than would be expected on the basis of normal mortality trends—has been estimated at around 30 million.¹⁸ Yet the

¹² Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumor* (Indianapolis, 1966).

¹³ *NBCK*, October 25, 1950, 200.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, November 9, 1950, 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, November 17, 1950, 73.

¹⁶ Shibutani, *Improvised News*, 17, 164.

¹⁷ Ralph L. Rosnow, “Inside Rumor: A Personal Journey,” *American Psychologist* 46, no. 5 (1991): 488.

¹⁸ Xizhe Peng, “Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China’s Provinces,” *Population and Development Review* 13, no. 4 (1987): 649; Basil Ashton, Kenneth Hill, Alan Piazza, and Robin Zeitz, “Famine in China, 1958–61,” *Population and Development Review* 10, no. 4 (1984): 619.

newspapers, radio, and propaganda agencies said not a word about the famine, except through allusions to the drought and other natural disasters that occurred during what came to be known as the “three bad years.” In the course of 1962, all provinces except Gansu began to recover, as labor and other resources were redirected to agriculture, as procurement quotas were further reduced, and as the weather improved. The death rate returned to normal in all but five provinces, and fertility recovered, although urban areas took longer to recover than rural ones. In 1963, the PRC witnessed the biggest boom in fertility in its history.¹⁹ Interestingly, it was in this period of recovery, rather than in the period when the famine was at its most ferocious, that the epidemic of rumor broke out. For although the country was recovering quite rapidly, uncertainty about the future remained acute. In 1962, the government drastically scaled down the size of the communes, unexpectedly reversing one of the most utopian elements in the Great Leap Forward. At the local level, officials began to contract out farming tasks from the production teams to individual households.²⁰ The permanency of these policy reversals, however, was by no means clear. For Mao Zedong, the re-empowerment of the individual household, for example, represented an unacceptable concession to capitalist forces, and at the Tenth Plenum of the Central Committee in September 1962, he made an impassioned plea to “never forget class struggle.” Domestic uncertainty was massively compounded by the threat of war with Taiwan. The Nationalist government at this time was vociferously broadcasting plans to launch military action against the eastern coastal provinces of mainland China. The Voice of America—a “factory for fabricating rumors,” in the view of one commentator—did its bit to step up insecurity.²¹ In June 1962, Nationalist guerrillas landed at several places along the coast, and on September 9, a U-2 spy plane was shot down.²² On June 9, the Ministry of Public Security issued a circular to six coastal provinces, which was extended to eighteen provinces on June 23, urging its organs to step up reconnaissance and investigation of suspected sympathizers of the GMD and to prosecute those suspected of forming subversive organizations, plotting to carry out bombings, or circulating leaflets and rumors.²³

It was in this context that the government launched its campaign of June 1962 to warn people of the dangers of listening to and passing on rumors, a campaign that harped relentlessly on the connection between rumormongering and counterrevolutionary subversion. In an article entitled “The Truth about Rumors,” which appeared in Guangzhou’s *Southern Daily* [*Nanfang ribao*], Guan Zhendong explained that throughout Chinese history, reactionaries had utilized rumor as a political weapon, and that the GMD was now resorting to the same tactic, hoping thereby “to fish in troubled waters and stage a comeback.” He claimed, doubtfully, that only “a few backward elements” were engaged in spreading rumors, “due to their lesser

¹⁹ Peng, “Demographic Consequences,” 645, 643.

²⁰ Dali L. Yang, *Calamity and Reform in China: State, Rural Society, and Institutional Change since the Great Leap Forward* (Stanford, Calif., 1996).

²¹ Guan Zhendong, “The Truth about Rumors,” *Nanfang ribao*, July 4, 1962. *Survey of the China Mainland Press* (SCMP), 2788, July 30, 1962.

²² Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961–66* (Oxford, 1997), 272, 300.

²³ *Zhongguo renmin gongan shigao* [Draft History of Chinese People’s Public Security] (Beijing, 1997), 318.

political standing, their relatively low level of revolutionary vigilance, and their inferior abilities to distinguish friend from foe.”²⁴ The press also carried news reports such as that about Yang Ju, who left Guangzhou in 1957 for Hong Kong, where she was recruited as a GMD spy. Posing as a “compatriot of Hong Kong and Macau returning to the homeland to see relatives,” she returned to Guangzhou in 1962, where she recruited her husband, Guan Gen, and her adopted son-in-law, Situ Que, to listen to Taiwan radio and the Voice of America and to spread rumors based on what they heard. In return, they were promised several hundred Hong Kong dollars a month. According to the report, Situ and Guan became regular customers at the Yanxiang restaurant, where they invited lineage members and friends to sip tea and have heart-to-heart conversations.

They were often seen whispering rumors in one another’s ears. Sometimes they purposely spoke in a louder tone so that nearby tea-drinkers could hear them. They always began with “I’ve heard” so as to emphasize their “objective” position. If a tea-drinker sitting at a neighboring table showed some interest by joining in the conversation, they would treat him as a “bosom friend of ten years’ standing” and continue to tell him one rumor after another. But if someone was doubtful and questioned them, they would immediately change their tune and say “That’s right. I don’t believe it either.”²⁵

That this linkage of rumor to subversion served to intensify the apprehensive mood of many is affirmed by a number of readers’ letters. The *reductio ad absurdum* came in a letter from Wu Daihao, a housewife in Guangzhou, who wrote: “One day during the early part of April when I was shopping in the street, I heard a stranger say: ‘Rabbits can call their owner’s name, and when the owner’s name is called he will die.’” Without thinking, she went home and killed three of her five rabbits and sold the other two. “The more I think about it, the more regretful and sorry I am. Naturally, I am even more resentful of the secret agents who spread this rumor.”²⁶

Over the next three years, the authorities claimed to detect a huge upsurge in “superstitious activity,” a key component of which was the circulation of superstitious rumors. We cannot rule out the possibility that this upsurge was, in part, a consequence of heightened vigilance on the part of the authorities, since in February 1963, in response to Mao’s concern that capitalist forces were now rampant in the countryside, they launched the Four Cleanups, a campaign designed to combat corruption on the part of local officials.²⁷ In time this campaign developed into the broader Socialist Education Movement, which entailed sending work teams into the villages to identify cadres on production teams and in brigades who were guilty of “capitalism,” which included household contract production, speculation, abandoning agriculture for peddling, and lending at high interest rates; “feudalism,” which included mercenary marriages, religious activities, and “superstition” of all kinds; or “extravagance,” which referred mainly to lavish celebrations of weddings, births,

²⁴ SCMP, 2788, July 30, 1962.

²⁵ “The Secret Agent’s Family,” *Nanfang ribao*, July 4, 1962. SCMP, 2788, July 30, 1962.

²⁶ *Nanfang ribao*, July 8, 1962. SCMP, 2788, July 30, 1962.

²⁷ Frederick C. Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China*, 2nd ed. (Armonk, N.Y., 1993), chap. 11; Richard Baum, *Prelude to Revolution: Mao, the Party, and the Peasant Question, 1962–66* (New York, 1975); Shiping Zheng, *Party vs State in Post-1949 China: The Institutional Dilemma* (Cambridge, 1997), chap. 6.

beam raisings, and funerals.²⁸ A key manifestation of “feudal superstition” was deemed to be the spreading of rumors about supernatural happenings.²⁹ It seems likely that “superstitious activity” of all types did in fact grow in this period as a result of the pervasive uncertainty of the times and a more liberal policy toward popular religion on the part of the government; but the possibility cannot be ruled out that some of the increase was due to the fact that local officials were now under greater pressure to record and combat acts that they once would have ignored.

AS THE STRUGGLE TO STAY ALIVE RECEDED, ordinary people began to reflect on why the country had been ravaged by famine. The official explanation of the “three bad years” was simple: they were the product of a concatenation of natural disasters that included drought, floods, typhoons, plant diseases, and insect pests. We know that there was skepticism about this explanation even in party circles. At the Seven Thousand Cadres Conference in January–February 1962, a majority of delegates appear to have concluded that the disaster was 70 percent man-made.³⁰ For millions of peasants and workers, however, the debate as to whether the famine was a natural or man-made cataclysm missed the point; they were convinced that it was the neglect—or active proscription—of rituals designed to energize relations between the spirit and human worlds that was the root cause of the disaster. In Pei County in Jiangsu, peasants declared: “In recent years, people have lost their good conscience, and are not offering incense. Consequently, we haven’t had good harvests.” They exhorted their fellows to pray to the gods to “wipe out disaster and bestow happiness.”³¹ In June 1962, the party cell at the No. 9 State Textile Mill in Shanghai asked nine women workers to give their views about the causes of the famine. Six were convinced that the disasters had been sent by the gods (*pusa*). Thirty-nine-year-old Wang Jinxiu said: “During the past years, there have been an awful lot of natural disasters—first we hear of floods, then of droughts, then of hailstorms, then of whirlwinds. This is all because people no longer believe enough in the gods. Buddha has sent us the famine.” Yang Jinmei opined: “In the past when it failed to rain, we could burn incense to pray for rain. And when locusts flew down from the sky, we would burn incense, and they would fly away at once. Now we can’t even buy incense, and the temple has been demolished.”³² In the countryside, the belief that catastrophe

²⁸ C. S. Chen, ed., *Rural People’s Communes in Lien-chiang: Documents Concerning Communes in Lien-chiang County, Fukien Province, 1962–63*, trans. Charles Price Ridley (Stanford, Calif., 1969), 44. Beam raisings were ceremonies held to mark the raising of the final roof beam of a new building.

²⁹ The campaign of the CCP was in many respects a continuation of the campaign against “feudal superstition” first launched by the Guomindang in the late 1920s. See Prasenjit Duara, “Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth Century China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 4 (1991): 67–83; Rebecca Nedostup, “Religion, Superstition and Governing Society in Nationalist China” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2001).

³⁰ MacFarquhar, *Origins*, 152.

³¹ Zhonggong Jiangsu weiyuan xuanchuanbu xuanchuanchu [Propaganda Department of the Propaganda Bureau of the Jiangsu Provincial Communist Party], “Nongcun mixin huodong zeng duo” [Superstitious Activity among the Peasantry Is on the Increase], April 28, 1962, Jiangsu Provincial Archive: 3039-duan-639.

³² Shanghai shi zonggonghui bangongshi [Shanghai Municipal General Labor Union Office], “Bufen zhong laonian nügong zhong mixin sixiang hai hen yanzhong yiji guomian jiuchang Yang Xiaomei xiaozu guanyu ‘Nongye zaihuang shi fou shi bu xiangxin pusa de yuangu’ wenti de taolun” [Superstitious Think-

had struck because the regime was inhibiting rituals of propitiation and exorcism was particularly entrenched. In July 1963, the Rural Affairs Department of Hubei Province reported that people were blaming a new outbreak of drought directly on the antireligious policies of the regime. In the Taizi Temple District of Yangxin County, Daoist monks and sorceresses claimed that the drought had occurred because temples had been pulled down and images of bodhisattvas removed, so there were no longer places where they could pray for rain.³³ Such views were rooted in a cosmology that held that order in the human, natural, and supernatural worlds depended on local communities' observing rituals that were "modes of extending the reach of human agency, of garnering *ling*, the power inherent in the cosmic landscape for human purposes."³⁴ Crucially, as we shall see, the failure to observe rituals of sacrifice and to practice the mantic arts allowed forces of disorder—demonic spirits and ghosts—to run rampant.

On April 1, 1962, the Jilin Provincial Trade Union reported a rumor that was fast spreading through the province, especially among factory and mine workers. A conversation had been overheard between two toads. One said: "Don't say that I am big. This year none of the old men and women will survive." The other said: "Don't say that I am small. This year people will have abundant food." The big toad retorted that the elderly would survive only if they were each given sugar-filled dumplings equal in number to their age. When questioned, people gave conflicting accounts of where these gnomic utterances had first been heard. In Baicheng, some miners said that a man in Zhenlai County had dug up the toads while digging a grave; others said that the party secretary of the Yaodong commune in Anxian County had raised them from a well while fetching water. In Changchun, workers claimed that they had seen the toads on their way to Chaoyanggou to hold a memorial ceremony for the dead; others said that a woman had given birth to the toads.³⁵ A year later, the same rumor cropped up in the distant city of Shanghai. In April 1963, the General Labor Union of Shanghai Municipality reported that workers at the No. 9, No. 12, and No. 17 State Textile Mills, at the No. 4 Printing and Dyeing Mill, and in the working-class district of Yangpu were gripped by a rumor that a "toad spirit" (*hama jing*) was roaming the suburb of Pudong—just across the Huangpu River from Yangpu. The toad weighed 2.5 *jin* (1.5 kg) and was able to speak. Like its prototypes in Jilin, it forecast: "This year more than half of the old people will die," but added that they might survive if they ate a toad before the first day of the fifth lunar month. Many workers were said to be frightened by the rumor, and they set off to look for toads to give

ing among Some of the Older Women Workers Is Still a Serious Problem: A Note on a Discussion among the Yang Xiaomei Team of the No. 9 State Textile Mill on "Whether the Agricultural Disasters Have Been Caused by the Gods"], June 20, 1962, Shanghai Municipal Archive, C1-2-3697.

³³ Nongcun gongzuo bu [Rural Work Department], "Qingkuang jianbao" [Situation Report], no. 25, July 11, 1963, Hubei Provincial Archive, SZ 18-2-217.

³⁴ A. R. Zito, "City Gods, Filiality and Hegemony in Late Imperial China," *Modern China* 13, no. 3 (1987): 350.

³⁵ "Guanyu changkuang qiye zhong yaoyan feiyu liuchuan qingkuang he jinhou yijian" [On the Circulation of Rumor and Gossip in Factory and Mining Enterprises and on Suggestions for the Future], Jilin Provincial Archive, 17-15-46 (1962).

to their elderly relatives. Failing to find any, they made toads out of flour, steamed them, and gave them to relatives to eat.³⁶

Within a month, the same rumor in a more developed narrative form had spread from Shanghai into the adjacent counties of Jiangsu Province. The women's federation in Chuansha County reported that the rumor was causing considerable apprehension. A large toad had appeared when a building was pulled down. People had tried to kill it, but it uttered the following prophecy: "If you weigh me, I am 2.5 jin. If you don't weigh me, I am still 2.5 jin. Most of the old ladies [*lao taiipo*] are going to die." As people scurried indoors, the toad cried out: "Disaster will be averted only if young married women bake toads made from 2.5 jin of flour and give them to their mothers and the old folks to eat." It added that the bread toads must be eaten in the fourth intercalary lunar month, for by the fifth lunar month it would be too late.³⁷ Women thereupon abandoned work in the fields to bake toad buns and take them to their mothers, who often resided in brigades at some distance. At the start of June, the beginning of the fourth intercalary month, only seven or eight of the twenty-seven communes in Chuansha County had been affected by the rumor; by the second half of the month, twenty-two were affected. When offering the toad buns to their parents, daughters first burned a stick of incense; they then presented the buns and two poached eggs to the kitchen god before giving the food to their parents to eat. The authorities were particularly concerned that party members were participating in this activity. In the Gongbei Brigade, the secretary of the party branch and the head of the women's federation both presented toad buns to their mothers. In the Xinji Brigade, the head of the women's federation, while attending a party meeting, deliberately allowed her children to cause a ruckus so that she could leave the meeting early. She then visited her mother with toad buns that she had made. Among the Nanzhu production team, nine out of fifty-seven households baked toads, giving away a total of twenty-one buns, while four households received a total of seven buns. The greatest amount of flour used by any single household was two jin, and the greatest number of toad buns made by any household was seven. A few communes managed to dispel the "superstitious activity" by acting promptly to organize ideological education for the "female masses." In this way, in six out of thirteen brigades in the Sunxiaoqiao commune, the evil wind (*xie feng*) was dispelled and the masses were enabled to understand the rumor rationally (*dong de liao daoli*). The overall effect of the rumor, the report concluded, was to waste flour, reduce turnout for work in the fields, and increase feudal superstitious thinking.³⁸

³⁶ "Yangpu qu bufen fangzhi chang gongren jizhong juzhu diqu zuijin yaomo-guiguai de yaochuan hen duo" [In Yangpu District, Where the Workers of the Textile Mills Live, There Have Recently Been Many Rumors of Demons, Ghosts, and Monsters], July 15, 1963, Shanghai Municipal Archive, C1-2-3899.

³⁷ The Chinese calendar combined solar and lunar cycles, a lunar month being approximately 29.5 days in length. In order for the lunar cycle to catch up with the solar cycle, seven leap years occur over a nineteen-year period, in which an extra intercalary ("leap") month is inserted. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, 4 vols. (Cambridge 1959), 3: 390-408.

³⁸ Chuansha xian fulian [Chuansha County Women's Federation], "Chuansha xian funü qunzhong de yaochuan he mixin huodong" [Rumors and Superstitious Activity among the Women of Chuansha County], Shanghai Municipal Archive, C31-2-910. The importance of this rumor is reflected in the fact that two years later, reference was made to it by the party cell of the Shanghai Municipality's Science and Technology Association. Shanghai Municipality Science and Technology Association, "Guanyu kaizhan pochu mixin de kexue puji xuanchuan de qingkuang huibao" [A Report on Propagating Scientific

The most obvious message of the toad rumor was that the young should take care of the elderly. Amartya Sen has argued that it is not a decline in food availability that is crucial in causing famine, but a change in people's "entitlement"—their ability to obtain food.³⁹ It is possible that as a result of the famine, old people felt that their entitlement to food was no longer as secure as it had once been. Although we lack hard evidence, it seems plausible that the toad rumor reflected a determination on the part of the elderly (particularly old women, to judge by the reports) to bolster their entitlement to food. The cultural expectation that children should provide care and security for their parents was still well entrenched after 1949, and backed by a Communist state that expected families (mainly female family members) to provide for the elderly in the absence of state provision, notably, of old-age pensions for rural inhabitants. Scholars, however, have argued that the elimination of private ownership of land and capital weakened the hold that elderly parents exerted over their children, and that the increased involvement of women in paid work, together with official encouragement of equality and mutual assistance in family relations, served to erode traditional norms of filiality.⁴⁰ Yunxiang Yan contends that old-age security began to decline in the second half of the 1950s, as young people became more active in public life, and that the balance of public opinion tipped away from support for the older generation in favor of greater autonomy for the young.⁴¹

Most variants of the toad rumor were pitched at married daughters. It was they who were summoned to bake toads for their parents or for the elderly in general. An earlier generation of scholars maintained that the ties of a married daughter to her natal family were weak, since daughters moved into the households of their husbands and kinship patterns remained patrilineal.⁴² More recently, Ellen R. Judd and Neil Diamant have questioned this claim, suggesting that neither marriage out of her natal family nor having children in her husband's village necessarily broke the emotional and practical ties between a daughter and her parents, at least in the early years of marriage.⁴³ The purpose of the toad rumor was apparently to strengthen ties between daughters and parents, since it is surely significant that no version of the rumor exists in which daughters-in-law were called upon to give toads to the parents-in-law with whom they resided. Another rumor that circulated in Chuansha County at this time also suggests that it was the relationship of daughters to their parents that was salient. An eighty-two-year-old woman in the Huamu commune was said to have grown new teeth and black hair, which those who retailed the rumor in-

Knowledge in Order to Promote the Destruction of Superstition], June 29, 1965, Shanghai Municipal Archive, C42-1-311.

³⁹ A. K. Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Oxford, 1981).

⁴⁰ Yao Yuan, "Weakening Cultural Support for the Elderly in China," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2001): 26–34; Paul Kwong and Cai Guoxuan, "Ageing China: Trends, Problems, and Strategies," in David Phillips, ed., *Ageing in East and South-East Asia* (London, 1992), 122. For a more positive picture, see Deborah Davis-Friedmann, *Long Lives: Chinese Elderly and the Communist Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 106–107.

⁴¹ Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–99* (Stanford, Calif., 2003), 184, 189.

⁴² Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, Calif., 1985); Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago, 1983).

⁴³ Ellen R. Judd, *Gender and Power in Rural North China* (Stanford, Calif., 1994); Neil Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949–1968* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000).

terpreted as meaning that the younger generation would not grow to maturity. In order to avert this prospect, the rumor advised daughters to feed their parents two bowls of meat, a bowl of eggs, and a bowl of rice.⁴⁴ The notion that eating choice dishes could avert disaster was commonplace. A 1962 report from the Propaganda Bureau of the Jiangsu Provincial Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claimed that in areas severely hit by drought, “class enemies” were spreading rumors that the only way to avoid disaster was to prepare expensive dishes of food: “Eating soybeans that have been fried for three nights will protect you from disaster”; “Eating dumplings with meat filling will protect you from disaster”; “Eating pine seeds will protect you from disaster.” It noted that in many communes, married daughters were cooking three meat dishes and three vegetarian dishes for their mothers and grandmothers.⁴⁵ In these instances, the giving of food seems to have been more self-interested than in the case of the toad rumor, since it was designed to stave off a disaster that would affect the young themselves, whereas the prestation of toad buns was aimed at preventing the extinction of the elderly. In all cases, however, such food offerings between the younger and older generations echoed exchanges between the living and the dead, since the presentation of food by married daughters was central to the funeral rites of their parents.⁴⁶ This suggests that the offering of toad buns had a dimension that was as much about restoring harmony between the generations and, by extension, between the living and the dead as it was about strengthening social ties between parents and daughters.

To construe the toad rumor as simply creating and sustaining social networks is only to scratch the surface of its meaning. What are we to make of a story in which a marauding toad strikes fear through its prophecies of doom? Luise White reminds us that people “construct and repeat stories that carry the values and meanings that most forcibly get their points across.”⁴⁷ It is clear from its reported description and from the attempts made to kill it that the toad, a creature of ugly, warty mien associated with dark, damp places, did not inspire affection. But as an animal that carried multiple symbolic associations, the toad was good to think with. Compared with the fox or snake, it occupied a rather marginal place in Chinese mythology. It was neither one of the four sacred animals nor one of the twelve animals of the calendar.⁴⁸ It was, however, one of the five venomous creatures (*wu du*)—along with the spider, snake, scorpion, and lizard—to which demonic powers were attributed.⁴⁹ This did not necessarily make it frightening, since its power could be harnessed for good. Indeed, certain Manchu folktales—although from an area of the northeast somewhat distant from that where the toad rumor originated—represent the toad

⁴⁴ Chuansha xian fulian, “Chuansha xian funü.”

⁴⁵ Zhonggong Jiangsu weiyuan xuanchuan chu, “Nongcun mixin huodong zeng duo.”

⁴⁶ Stuart E. Thompson, “Death, Food and Fertility,” in James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski, eds., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988), 77. Among the Cantonese, however, married daughters may present only a raw offering of a pig’s head and tail at their parents’ funerals, since cooked food is deemed to absorb the “killing airs of death.” James L. Watson, “Of Flesh and Bones: The Management of Death Pollution in Cantonese Society,” in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, eds., *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982), 175.

⁴⁷ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 30.

⁴⁸ Li Wei-tsu, “On the Cult of the Four Sacred Animals,” *Folklore Studies* 7 (1948): 1–94.

⁴⁹ Henri Doré, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, 5 vols. (1918; repr., Taipei, 1966), 5: 646.

in tones that are more humorous than frightening. In Xiuyan County in Liaoning Province, for example, a folktale tells of an old lady who gives birth to a toad that later turns into a young man. He falls in love with a young woman, before turning into a “toad immortal.”⁵⁰ Within folk culture, it is the association of the toad with the moon that is most pronounced. Chang E, goddess of the moon, drank an elixir of life intended for her archer husband, Hou Yi, and so was transported to the moon and turned into a three-legged toad. (In other variants, she lives on the moon with a three-legged toad, a rabbit, and the woodcutter Wu Gang.) It is said that on the fifteenth day of the lunar month, when the moon is at its fullest, Hou Yi comes to visit his wife in the Palace of the Moon, which represents the meeting of sun and moon. In another variant, the toad on the moon is depicted as dancing on its hind legs while pounding the drug of immortality in a mortar. Here the toad’s sloughing of its skin evokes rebirth, a connotation that connects with the moon’s phases of growth, decline, and rebirth.⁵¹ The symbolic association of the toad with the moon is present subliminally in the toad rumor, in its insistence that people act in the fourth intercalary month before the onset of the “poisonous” fifth lunar month. Intercalary months “always inspired special terror” because of their irregular appearance in the calendar.⁵²

The symbolic chain between the toad, water, darkness, and the moon clearly establishes its *yin* character.⁵³ Yin and *yang* have been described as the “binary pulse” of a universe that is in a constant process of transformation. The terms originally referred to the shady and sunny sides of a hill; but the essence of the idea is that the shady and sunny sides are constantly changing, nothing in the world ever staying the same.⁵⁴ Yin and yang interact to produce creation, reproduction, and transformation. Although they correspond to female and male, darkness and brightness, moon and sun, ghosts and gods, their meaning shifts according to the situation, so they cannot be construed as rigidly dyadic attributes affixed to things.⁵⁵ If correctly mediated, yin and yang produce *ling*, which means they make the power of gods and spirits efficacious in the world. What the toad rumor implied was that this mediation was not working, that the yang forces that underpin the structured order of this world were under siege from chaotic yin forces of the spirit world. It conjured up a world in which yin, the principle of disorder, threatened to overcome yang, the principle of order. This particular understanding of the yin-yang dyad reflected the fact that popular religious culture was profoundly demonological.⁵⁶ Barend J. ter Haar has questioned the notion that ordinary people saw relations between the natural and

⁵⁰ Zhang Qizhno, ed., *Manzu san laoren gushi ji* [Stories Told by Three Old Manchus] (Liaoning, 1988), 256–262.

⁵¹ Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore, Md., 1993), 144–145.

⁵² M. Kriukov, V. Maliavin, and M. Sofronov, *Etnicheskaia istoriia kitaitsev na rubezhe srednevekov'ia i novogo vremeni* (Moscow, 1987), 170. The fifth lunar month was sometimes known as the “poisonous month” (*du yue*). From the first to the fifth days of that month, five Daoist gods presided over summer diseases and formed a special board of health officers to whom people could turn if epidemics broke out. Vendors sold pictures of the “five venomous creatures,” which could be worn as talismans against the malignant emanations (*xie*) that caused disease. Doré, *Researches*, 5: 645–646.

⁵³ Vivienne Lo, “Huangdi Hama jing (The Yellow Emperor’s Toad Canon),” *Asia Major* 14, pt. 2 (2001): 73; Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London, 1996), 1010–1011.

⁵⁴ James Millar, *Daoism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2003), 43–44.

⁵⁵ Steven Sangren, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford, Calif., 1987), 136.

⁵⁶ Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (Richmond, Surrey,

supernatural worlds in terms of the normative Confucian representation of harmonious integration, arguing instead that they saw the ordered world as under constant violent assault from demonic forces.⁵⁷ In the words of an earlier scholar, humanity was “engaged every day in a restless defensive and offensive war” against malevolent spirits, and in this confrontation it needed the protection of whatever arts could be mobilized.⁵⁸ This “demonological paradigm” may seem at odds with the yin-yang model outlined above, since the latter is often married to the conception of a holistic and harmonious cosmic order, but popular cosmology was not monolithic, and was capable of embracing both the notion of a “benign imperial cosmos” and the notion of a “demonic cosmos,” according to context.⁵⁹ In normal times, regimes of propitiation and exorcism could regulate relations between the human and spirit worlds harmoniously, but the neglect of sacrifice and the mantic arts—indeed their active discouragement by the regime—could allow demonic forces to wreak havoc on communities.⁶⁰

That millions felt the world to be under siege from yin forces is confirmed by the many stories of ghosts that circulated at this time. In 1959, women at the textile mills in the Hongqiao District of Shanghai were terrified by the tale of a woman at the No. 6 State Textile Mill who befriended a young man on Hongqiao Street on her way home from work. After some time, the man gave her his home address and a wrist-watch. The next day, she went to see him at that address, only to be told by his mother that he had been dead two years.⁶¹ Four years later, a similar rumor flared up in the same district, and women workers were said to be too scared to leave the mills at night. In one variant of the rumor, a woman returning home passed three men playing cards at the side of a road near Qiujiang Bridge. Curious, she walked toward them, but noticed they had no chins. Tearing herself away, she bumped into a policeman who also had no chin.⁶² In a panic, she arrived home and promptly fell ill. In a different version, the female worker going home met a “stiff-corpse ghost” (*jiang shi gui*) that also had no chin, and she too fell dangerously ill the same night.⁶³ This is the “zombie-like Chiang-shih,” described by Myron Cohen as “the most extreme contrast with the properly dead.”⁶⁴ According to J. J. M. de Groot, “It is more malicious than any other specter because, having a body at its service, it possesses more

2001), 43–51. For a discussion of early Buddhist and Daoist demonology, see Michael Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford, Calif., 2002), chap. 2.

⁵⁷ Barend J. ter Haar, “China’s Inner Demons: The Political Impact of the Demonological Paradigm,” *China Information* 11, nos. 2/3 (1996): 54–85.

⁵⁸ J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, 6 vols. (Leiden, 1910), 6: 931, cited in Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 104–105.

⁵⁹ Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion*, 51–59.

⁶⁰ Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004), 13.

⁶¹ “Zhen ‘gui’ bu hui you, jia gui dao yao fang” [True “Ghosts” Do Not Exist, but We Must Guard against False Ghosts], *Xinmin wanbao*, June 14, 1959.

⁶² The belief that ghosts had no chins was widespread. N. B. Dennys, *The Folklore of China, and Its Affinities to That of the Aryan and Semitic Races* (London, 1876), 72.

⁶³ “Yangpu qu bufen fangzhi chang,” Shanghai Municipal Archive, C1-2-3899. In the same year, in the Handan Mining District in Hebei, it was said that some party secretaries talked about ghosts so vividly that young workers were scared to work the night shift, since they dared not go home in the dark. *NBCK*, July 19, 1963, 4.

⁶⁴ Myron L. Cohen, “Souls and Salvation: Conflicting Themes in Chinese Popular Religion,” in Watson and Rawski, *Death Ritual*, 191.

strength and vigor than other disembodied ghosts . . . It commonly kills its prey by sucking its blood, a proceeding which it completes in a few seconds.”⁶⁵ Another flurry of rumors was sparked by the death of Dai, a worker at the No. 9 State Textile Mill, who crashed into a truck while cycling home from work. One old lady claimed that for many nights before his death, she had seen two ghosts walking around his house in the new residential area of Kongjiang. Another reported: “Recently, people in Kongjiang have heard ghosts crying and dogs howling at night. They knew someone was about to die, and now Dai is dead.” Another said that since Dai’s death, ghosts had been seen knocking on his door at midnight.⁶⁶ All these rumors feature workers traveling home from work, which suggests that the locality gods (*tudi gong*) who protected people when they were out of doors were not doing their job.⁶⁷ These ghost stories did strike terror in those who heard them. By contrast, although the toad rumor often frightened people, it was not what Paul Cohen has called a “dread” rumor, in that it did not provoke panic, hysteria, or pogrom-like behavior.⁶⁸

One influential reading of Chinese religious culture contends that the spirit world is divided into gods, ghosts, and ancestors. Gods and ghosts must be honored (*bai*), whereas ghosts must be propitiated (*ji*).⁶⁹ Ghosts include souls that do not have a place in the kinship structure, such as unmarried women; those who die a violent death, such as suicides and those who drown; or those who die in a strange land. Not receiving the sacrifices of ancestors, these “hungry ghosts” are evil and vengeful. Such malevolent ghosts are often visualized as having ugly human features, such as bodies covered with hair, big black teeth, pointed heads, red hair, and dark faces, and sometimes as being without noses, mouths, lips, or chins. In their efforts to annoy and frighten, ghosts breathe noxious fumes, spit cold saliva, knock on doors, whistle, or emit an eldritch cackle.⁷⁰ As in other cultures, they personify the dark and frightening forces that are outside the control of humankind. According to Richard von Glahn, “whether envisioned as hapless and beggarly souls or predatory bandits, ghosts were shrouded with a fell aura of malignancy that evoked fear and aversion.”⁷¹ Robert Weller qualifies this depiction, arguing that in popular culture, understandings of ghosts were not unitary: whereas ghosts that were understood as marginal gods were indeed dangerous and malignant, those that were understood as marginal ancestors were to be pitied rather than feared.⁷² All ghosts, however, are dead per-

⁶⁵ J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religion of the Chinese* (New York, 1910), 76. See also John L. Nevius, *China and the Chinese* (New York, 1869), 166. The first stories of the “stiff-corpse ghost” are recorded in the Southern Dynasties period (429–500 C.E.), but knowledge of the ghost may have come less from folk tradition than from commercialized fiction, for at least two stories about such ghosts were published in popular magazines in 1942. Xu Hualong, ed., *Zhongguo gui wenhua da cidian* [Dictionary of Chinese Ghost Culture] (Nanning, 1994), 217, 433–434.

⁶⁶ “Yangpu qu bufen fangzhi chang,” Shanghai Municipal Archive, C1-2-3899.

⁶⁷ Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion*, 105.

⁶⁸ Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York, 1997), 162–172. For examples, see rumors about the barbaric behavior of foreigners and Chinese Christians during the Boxer rebellion, or rumors about Japanese poisoning tea urns during the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Cohen, *History*, 162–172; S. A. Smith, *Like Cattle and Horses: Nationalism and Labor in Shanghai, 1895–1927* (Durham, N.C., 2002), 103–104.

⁶⁹ Arthur Wolf, “Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors,” in Wolf, ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford, Calif., 1978), 131–182.

⁷⁰ Kriukov et al., *Etnicheskaia istoriia*, 160.

⁷¹ Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, 6.

⁷² Robert Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle, Wash., 1987), 60.

sons who in some sense are still alive, and their existence in large numbers indicates that social control of the dead is failing, that the boundary between this world and the supernatural world is unstable. During the famine, millions had died unnaturally, and the funeral rites that ensure that the socially appropriate persons absorb the pollution of death and help restore the balance between yin and yang had been observed at best superficially.⁷³ And since, as James Watson puts it, “the world order and the social structure of the living have meaning only through the manipulation and preservation of the dead,” the failure to deal properly with the dead was one reason why chaotic spirits were now believed to be in the ascendant.⁷⁴ Stranded in the human world, the ghosts connoted a sense of the normal order besieged by forces of disorder, anomaly, and random tragedy. The stories of the “stiff-corpse ghost,” in particular, whose soul was not separated properly from its body by means of correctly performed funerary rituals, seem to echo the fate of famine victims.

Taken as a whole, superstitious rumors constituted an allegory about the wrenching times that people were living through, one couched in terms of widely, if no longer universally, shared beliefs, one at odds with the official narrative of the party-state. The social effect of the rumors was contradictory. On the one hand, the transmission of these stories spread anxiety about the power of yin forces and the threat to cosmic order; on the other, transmission may have been a way of coping with unease. As Marilyn Ivy points out, “As long as one can talk about ghosts, the fear that an encounter would bring is deferred. It frames the fear of ghosts while at the same time, reserving the possibility of encounter.”⁷⁵ Even where a rumor inspired fear—as tales of the “stiff-corpse ghost” undoubtedly did—they nevertheless fostered communication and local solidarity. Tales of prodigious creatures and their prophecies created spaces in which people could share knowledge about the extraordinariness of the times and gain a measure of psychological control over an ambiguous and threatening situation. As Gary Fine puts it, “In general, having a corpus of shared stories that reflects collective anxiety brings people together and fosters the recognition of community—the commonality of fears, knowledge and attentional focus. These stories help to knot networks . . . and help to cement relationships.”⁷⁶ We need not suppose, however, that superstitious rumors were a monolithic expression of beliefs and values unquestioningly shared by the vast majority of the population; rather, they served to provide “the terms and tropes through which people caught up in changing worlds may vex each other, question definitions of value, form alliances and mobilize oppositions.”⁷⁷

⁷³ In many areas there was a ban on ceremonial expenditure during the famine. In the village of South Gaoluo, not far south of Beijing, where between 60 and 80 people out of a population of 1,600 starved to death, funerals became perfunctory, and it was hard to find anyone to act as coffin-bearer. Stephen Jones, *Plucking the Winds: Lives of Village Musicians in Old and New China* (Leiden, 2004), 132.

⁷⁴ Watson and Rawski, *Death Ritual*, 194.

⁷⁵ Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan* (Chicago, 1995), 167.

⁷⁶ Gary Fine, *Manufacturing Tales: Sex and Money in Contemporary Legends* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1992), 31.

⁷⁷ Jean and John Comaroff, “Introduction,” in *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, 1993), xxiii.

AS WE HAVE SEEN, THE PRC GOVERNMENT WAS EVER ALERT to the potential of rumor to stir up sedition. If superstitious rumors were not the type of rumor the authorities feared most, some rumors could nevertheless carry a surprisingly powerful political charge that understandably made the government edgy. In Jiangsu Province in July and August 1962, rumors abounded that there was going to be a war and that the CCP and Chairman Mao were going to be defeated. In the Shuangfeng commune in Taicang County, a female spirit medium (*wupo*) declared that Chiang Kai-shek was coming back and that burning incense would help people stay calm.⁷⁸ In Chuansha County, an “immortal” who had cast out a devil from a sick person in the Qingong Temple prophesied: “In August there will be huge floods, with water rising higher than our houses. This year there are more caterpillars than usual, dropped by heavenly soldiers and generals. This means that heaven wants to see change. Just before Liberation in 1949 there were also a lot of caterpillars.”⁷⁹ This particular prophecy fits ter Haar’s “demonological paradigm” neatly, for Daoist priests, shamans, and other ritual specialists were commonly called upon to enlist other demonic armies—“heavenly generals” (*shenjiang*) in command of “heavenly soldiers” (*shenbing*)—to counterattack offensives from the underworld.⁸⁰ Similarly, in the Yanqiao commune in Chuansha County, worshippers at the Deity Zhou Temple were reported as saying: “Deity Zhou has been fighting a war in the netherworld [*yinjian*]. Now we are going to have a war in this world [*yangjian*]. When the war starts, households will work independently and will have rice to eat.”⁸¹ Those who participated in an exorcism in this commune returned home with the news that “Abroad they say that Chiang Kai-shek is coming back. We should prepare to welcome him with firecrackers. People in disaster regions have nothing to eat. Chiang is sending airplanes to drop bread and ration coupons.”⁸² Similar rumors flourished in Jilin Province. In Tonghua, people said that roosters were crowing and dogs barking before nightfall, and that this was an omen of war, since the last time it had happened was when the Japanese withdrew from China.⁸³ Workers in Tonghua retailed a story about an old man who had received a book from heaven that foretold impending chaos. Neither Chiang Kai-shek nor Mao Zedong was the Son of Heaven, the book said: Chiang was the spirit of a carp (*liyu jing*), and Mao the spirit of a crab (*pangxie jing*). A true Son of Heaven was now on earth, aged twenty.⁸⁴ In Suining County in Sichuan, two years later, redemptive sects were said to be urging people to pray and burn incense in order to avert a new Great Leap Forward in which people would die of hunger in the communal mess halls.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Zhonggong Jiangsu weiyuan xuanchuanbu xuanchuanchu, “Nongcun mixin huodong zeng duo.”

⁷⁹ “Guanyu chuli jiaoqu qunzhong mixin huodong wenti de qingshi baogao” [Situation Report on Handling the Problem of Superstitious Activity among the Masses in the Suburbs], December 11, 1962, Shanghai Municipal Archive, B22-1-118.

⁸⁰ Ter Haar, “China’s Inner Demons,” 54–85.

⁸¹ “Guanyu chuli jiaoqu qunzhong mixin huodong.”

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ “Guanyu changkuang qiye zhong yaoyan.”

⁸⁴ Jilin sheng zonggonghui gongzuo zu [Work Department of the Jilin Provincial General Labor Union], “Jieji douzheng zai gongren duiwu zhong de jizhong biaoqian” [Several Manifestations of Class Struggle among the Ranks of the Workers], Jilin Provincial Archive, 17-16-21 (1963).

⁸⁵ Zhonggong Suining xian xuanchuan bu, Zhonggong Suining xian wei tongzhanbu [Propaganda and United Front Bureaus of the Suining County Communist Party], “Guanyu zai Lingquan, Guangde ‘huiqi,’ dui ‘jiang xiang’ qunzhong he seng-ni jiaqiang jiaoyu, guanli, xueruo zongjiao mixin huodong de

Such rumors seamlessly combined the idioms of the supernatural and the secular; in so doing, they reflected the political consciousness of millions whose view of the world was rooted in an essentially religious cosmology yet was powerfully shaped by the revolutionary policies and propaganda of the Communist regime. On the one hand, these politically explicit superstitious rumors referred to real events—such as the landing of Nationalist guerrillas on the Fujian coast or the contracting of farming tasks to households; on the other, they drew on occult knowledge derived from magical specialists, from a heavenly book, or from omens, such as caterpillars or roosters crowing at nightfall. This higher knowledge made it clear that heaven wanted to see change and that people must ready themselves for war and social turmoil. Such knowledge was grounded in a cosmology in which no hard-and-fast distinction was made between the world of the gods, the netherworld, and the world of human beings. Chiang Kai-shek's imminent transfer of operations from Taiwan to the mainland was not ontologically different from Deity Zhou's imminent transfer of operations from the yin to the yang world. If the idiom was supernatural, it was nevertheless galvanized by secular fears of war or of a return to the communal mess halls of the Great Leap Forward, by bitter memories of war against Japan or of life under Chiang Kai-shek, and by hopes of a better future that centered on such possibilities as the return of land to households.

In public, the authorities explained rumors of all types as the handiwork of reactionary elements. Superstitious rumors were particularly associated with the redemptive religious sects that flourished during the war against Japan. These sects, promiscuously lumped together as *huidaomen* by the Communist authorities, varied considerably in terms of doctrine, organization, and social appeal. But all were congregations defined in terms of belief, rather than residence or descent, and were oriented toward individual salvation. By 1949, there were said to be more than three hundred redemptive sects, the most significant being the Yiguandao (Way of Permeating Unity), the Xiantiandao (Way of Former Heaven), and the Jiugongdao (Nine Temples Way). Conservatively, they were reckoned to embrace 820,000 masters and ritual specialists plus 1.3 million disciples.⁸⁶ The Yiguandao, especially, was subject to heavy repression in 1950–1951, accused of collaborating with the Japanese and the Guomindang.⁸⁷ In investigating the genesis of superstitious rumors, the public security organs seldom uncovered the work of the *huidaomen*. Indeed, privately they sometimes conceded that such rumors were no more than the product of a “tradition of fantasy” (*huanxiang er chuantong de*).⁸⁸ Nevertheless, if we must treat with skepticism the claim that all superstitious rumors were manufactured by politically hostile forces, some were clearly sown with the intention of undermining the authority of local officials or of changing government policies. In Hebei, a rumor claimed that Chairman Mao had sanctioned the building of temples after his daughter-in-law was

zongjie baogao” [Summary Report on Strengthening Education and Administration of the Masses Who Offer Incense and of the Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Order to Reduce Religious Superstition during the Temple Fairs at Lingquan and Guangde], April 20, 1964, Sichuan Provincial Archive, 50-174.

⁸⁶ Shao Yong, *Zhongguo huidaomen* [Heterodox Sects of China] (Shanghai, 1997), 452.

⁸⁷ Thomas David DuBois, *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in North China* (Honolulu, 2005), 138–151.

⁸⁸ *NBCK*, November 11, 1950, 42. This is not to doubt that *huidaomen* were behind some protests that occurred in the 1950s. See Perry, *Challenging the Mandate*, 277–290.

cured by a powerful god; another claimed that Mao had joined the Yiguandao after a “black man riding a black horse and wearing a black armband” told him that supporting the Yiguandao was the only way to stave off foreign invasion.⁸⁹ In Yangxin County in Hubei, a female spirit medium in the Taizi Temple District urged members of the Jiatuyan Brigade to rebuild the village temple and not to be intimidated by local officials; as a result, they rebuilt the temple in a single night.⁹⁰ In Pei County in Jiangsu, a “reactionary” put out a story that during 1962—an ominous year, because it was the Year of the Tiger—those born in the years of the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, horse, ram, monkey, dog, or pig should “avoid the stars” (*duo xing*) in order to escape disaster. As a result, everyone on the production team began to start work after sunrise, to leave the fields before sunset, and to refuse to attend evening meetings. Local officials believed that this was a deliberate ploy to sabotage production.⁹¹ In 1964 in Suining County in Sichuan, a rumor circulated that Chairman Mao, “who himself believes in religion,” had said that nonbelievers would be sentenced to death and that local officials must allow people to burn incense and to pay their respects to the gods.⁹² In the same province, a superstitious rumor was used to scare dependents of members of the Socialist Education Movement work teams. After the work team “squatting” in Mianning County forbade the masses to go to Lingshan Temple to worship Yang Zushi, “class enemies” spread a tale that the child of one work team member had fallen sick because his father had given a lecture that denied that Yang Zushi was a god. His wife, who was distraught that her child had been cursed, was told: “You must bring your husband home; otherwise your child will die.”⁹³

Despite the utilization of superstitious rumors for clearly political ends, we should be cautious about interpreting them unconditionally as a form of resistance. One of the most influential attempts to theorize rumor as resistance is that of James C. Scott, for whom rumor is a critique of power under the guise of anonymity. He locates it in the realm between what he terms the “public transcript,” in which subordinates appear to defer or consent to the expectations of the powerful, and the “hidden transcript,” in which they vent their true feelings “behind the backs of the dominant.”⁹⁴ In this intermediate realm is located a “politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have double meaning or to shield the anonymity of the actors.” Rumor is one of the ways “by which subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance in disguised form into the public transcript.”⁹⁵ Scott’s model is heuristically valuable, but it does not capture the specificity of the rumors discussed above. First, those who circulated superstitious rumors in the PRC were not at pains to conceal their critique of power: some of the rumors,

⁸⁹ Rehe sheng renmin zhengfu gonganting [Public Security Department of the Rehe People’s Government], “Guanyu Chaoyang dengdi fasheng qunzhongxing de qiushen taoyao shijian de baogao” [Report on Mass Events of Seeking the Gods and Begging for Medicine in Chaoyang and Other Areas], April 8, 1954, Hebei Provincial Archive, 684-2-432.

⁹⁰ Nongcun gongzuo bu, “Qingkuang jianbao.”

⁹¹ Zhonggong Jiangsu weiyuan xuanchuanbu xuanchuanchu, “Nongcun mixin huodong zeng duo.”

⁹² “Guanyu zai Lingquan,” April 20, 1964, Sichuan Provincial Archive, 50-174.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn., 1990), xii.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19, 136.

as we have seen, were astonishingly frank about people's desire for the return of Chiang Kai-shek or their hope that Mao and the CCP would be overthrown. Second, it does not seem persuasive to read the supernatural idiom of the rumors as a *disguise* of more secular intentions or as a coded attack on the policies and institutions of Communist rule. Certainly they can be considered allegorical, in that they spoke to something beyond their manifest content; and as Caroline Humphrey notes, allegory is peculiarly suited to times of strife because it is a "narrative that demands interpretation."⁹⁶ Nevertheless, they were allegories only in the general sense that they provided an extended metaphorical scenario through which people could talk about the disasters that had befallen them and prepare for better things to come. They were not allegories in the narrow sense of inviting the listener to ignore their literal meaning in favor of some deeper meaning. Rather, the rumors created an arena in which people could work out their dilemmas and express their hopes and fears in terms of a cosmology that made sense to them, one at odds with the materialist world view of the party-state.

The cosmology articulated by the rumors—especially where the "demonological paradigm" was most explicit—conforms to what Harry G. West and Todd Sanders call an "occult cosmology": an understanding of the world as animated by secret, unseen, or mysterious powers.⁹⁷ Occult cosmologies "claim that power operates in two separate yet related realms, one visible, the other invisible. Between these two realms there exist causal links, meaning that invisible powers sometimes produce visible outcomes."⁹⁸ Rather than simply resist power, those who subscribe to an occult cosmology seek to reveal and harness the hidden forces at work behind the scenes. In theory, the cosmology of the party-state was the antithesis of an occult cosmology, since it purported to render the social body transparent through scientific classification and thus make it amenable to the dictates of reason. In practice, however, many in the party subscribed to a world view that was almost as occult as that of the superstitious rumors, insofar as it assumed that the world of appearances was intrinsically deceptive, masking a hidden world whose nature was dark, cruel, and threatening.⁹⁹ One could cite many examples. In Hubei Province, for instance, in the wake of the famine, the Rural Affairs Bureau called for the exposure of "cow ghosts and snake spirits," a locution drawn from Buddhist demonology and much favored by Mao Zedong, and urged poor peasants to tear off the masks of "landlord elements," "rich peasant elements," sorceresses and sorcerers, Daoist monks, and all who were secretly sabotaging Communist construction.¹⁰⁰ In a different register, Erik Mueggler has shown how among the Lolop'o people, encouraging young activists to identify the origin of their words and actions in Mao Zedong Thought—that is, outside themselves—reinforced customary notions of gathering and granting

⁹⁶ Caroline Humphrey, "Stalin and the Blue Elephant: Paranoia and Complicity in Post-Communist Metahistories," in Harry G. West and Todd Sanders, eds., *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order* (Durham, N.C., 2003), 198.

⁹⁷ Todd Sanders and Harry G. West, "Power Revealed and Concealed in the New World Order," in West and Sanders, *Transparency and Conspiracy*, 1–37.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹⁹ Lowell Dittmer, *China's Continuous Revolution: The Post-Liberation Epoch, 1949–1981* (Berkeley, Calif., 1987), 87.

¹⁰⁰ Nongcun gongzuo bu, "Qingkuang jianbao."

power through bodily possession.¹⁰¹ There were, in other words, good reasons why ordinary people might suspect the official narrative of societal transparency, seeing in it not so much a scientifically superior account of the world as a rival occult cosmology.

The intention of the regime, of course, was not to put into circulation an alternative occult cosmology. As Katherine Verdery has reminded us, Communist regimes sought to make official discourse authoritative, to create a stable and monolithic universe of discourse by stripping out linguistic ambiguity and by fixing a singular meaning to key terms, since the authorities had relatively few material resources at their disposal to transform the beliefs and values of their citizens.¹⁰² From this perspective, rumor represented a particularly unsettling challenge to the drive to create a monological discourse, since by its nature it is protean and dynamic. Someone hears a story and becomes its teller, interpreting it as she passes it on, changing details, adding new elements, so that different versions coexist and spin off each other. As James Scott puts it, “As a rumor travels, it is altered in a fashion that brings it more closely into line with the hopes, fears and worldview of those who hear and retell it.”¹⁰³ In that sense, it is a “democratic” form of speech in which there is not the disparity of knowledge between communicator and audience that is built into official discourse. Whereas the latter travels from the top down, rumor travels horizontally, setting up a “chain pattern of communication” that bypasses the vertical lines of communication of the centralized state.¹⁰⁴ In addition, since the origin of a rumor is unknown and since it is anonymous in nature, people can disclaim ownership of it should they be held to account by the authorities.¹⁰⁵ This quality of deniability—what Maurice Blanchot calls “irresponsibility”—was vital in a regime in which the first instinct of the authorities was to assume that rumormongers were engaging in counterrevolutionary activity.¹⁰⁶ Paradoxically, in seeking to track down the perpetrators of rumor and to trace its circuits of travel, the public security organs themselves played a vital role in establishing the credibility of rumor. Through the accusation, interrogation, and confession of individuals and through practices of surveillance designed to measure the impact of the rumor, they helped to give it substance in the eyes of the populace.¹⁰⁷ And while the authorities may have hoped that transmuting the ephemeral and protean character of rumor into the durable, fixed form of writing would serve to control its disruptive effects, we know that in the case of the “stiff-corpse ghost” rumor, its reporting in the press merely served

¹⁰¹ Erik Mueggler, “Spectral Subversions: Rival Tactics of Time and Agency in Southwest China,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 3 (1999): 471.

¹⁰² Katherine Verdery, “Theorizing Socialism: A Prologue to the ‘Transition,’” *American Ethnologist* 18, no. 3 (1991): 431.

¹⁰³ Scott, *Domination*, 145.

¹⁰⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), 257.

¹⁰⁵ Maurice Blanchot, “Everyday Speech,” trans. Susan Hanson, *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 19.

¹⁰⁶ That said, one should note that the Public Security Ministry, in reaction to “leftist excesses” in public security work during the Great Leap Forward, stressed the importance of distinguishing between superstitious activity fostered by counterrevolutionaries and that by peasants seeking “spiritual solace” (*jingshen anwei*) as a result of “the calamities and difficulties.” See the circular of August 22, 1961, *Zhongguo renmin gongan shigao*, 311.

¹⁰⁷ For an argument that officialdom creates rumors even as it reports them, see Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “Plague Panic and Epidemic Politics in India, 1896–1914,” in T. Ranger and P. Slack, eds., *Epidemics and Ideas* (Cambridge, 1992), 224–226.

to lend it authority. All in all, the evanescent, “democratic,” “irresponsible” characteristics of rumor made it threatening to a regime that aspired to control the ways in which social and political reality was represented.

If by dint of contesting the efforts of the party-state to centralize and control meaning, superstitious rumors can be construed as a form of resistance, they nevertheless illustrate what has been called the “entanglement of power and resistance.”¹⁰⁸ For if these rumors represented a challenge to power, they also represented “an attempt at collective conversation by people who wish to enter their sentiments into a public discourse.”¹⁰⁹ While rejecting the right of the party-state to determine the boundaries of power, they nevertheless articulated “a desire for inclusion in the circuits of power, however differently conceived.”¹¹⁰ In the words of Vicente L. Rafael, “by staking for oneself a position from which to imagine the potential occurrence of events (i.e. events as they could have been or might be) one begins to share in the circulation of potentiality itself. Put differently, rumors point to the possible unfolding of history and the circulation of power elsewhere, at a tangent to the present trajectory of events.”¹¹¹ Retailers of rumor aspired to open up spaces of alterity and opposition within the grid of state power, to “maneuver around the dissimulations of power, circulate stories, and struggle to carve out social knowledge of the ‘way things are,’” in ways that complicate the dichotomy of domination and resistance.¹¹² Insofar as superstitious rumors constituted a form of resistance, it was one that was profoundly implicated in those “processes by which power is tested and eroded by the actions of the subordinate, and by which it reconstitutes itself in response.”¹¹³

In the early 1960s, rumor in the PRC never jeopardized the status quo. Certainly, people acted on the basis of the stories they heard in ways that brought them into confrontation with authority: in the case of the toad rumor, women failed to turn up for work in the fields or illicitly used flour to bake toad buns; in the case of the rumor about “avoiding the stars,” people turned up for work late and left work early. In addition, the more political of the superstitious rumors articulated a very public critique of Communist power, even though they do not convey anything like the degree of popular antipathy toward the regime that was evident in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, the perspective on reality purveyed by the rumors rarely entailed a call to collective action. Those who retailed superstitious rumors saw change as coming through the complex mediation of higher deities, human beings, and lower ghosts. Human agency could—and should—influence this mediation, but change was not seen as coming via confrontation with earthly power-holders.

¹⁰⁸ Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, “Introduction: The Entanglement of Power and Resistance,” in Haynes and Prakash, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991), 18.

¹⁰⁹ Anand A. Yang, “A Conversation of Rumors: The Language of Popular Mentalités in Late Nineteenth-Century India,” *Journal of Social History* 21 (1986): 485.

¹¹⁰ Vicente L. Rafael, “Anticipating Nationhood: Collaboration and Rumor in the Japanese Occupation of Manila,” *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (1991): 75.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Perice, “Rumors and Politics in Haiti,” 9.

¹¹³ Haynes and Prakash, “Introduction,” 4.

¹¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 287. This is a generalization based on my own work on rumor in the Soviet Union. See S. A. Smith, “Heavenly Letters and Tales of the Forest: ‘Superstition’ as a Weapon against Bolshevism,” *Antropologicheskii Forum* 3 (2006) (forthcoming in Russian and in English).

Admittedly, we still know rather little about the extent and nature of popular protest in the Maoist era, but it seems doubtful that in the early 1960s, at least, rumor served to catalyze organized opposition to the party-state. Apocalyptic rumors do not appear to have swept society to the same extent as in the 1930s and 1940s, when they fueled the rise of the Yiguandao and other redemptive sects.¹¹⁵ Nor did “dread” rumors mobilize hatred of others to annihilating effect, as they had in the past. To give a full explanation of why there seems to have been so little collective resistance to the party-state—except of the particular kind generated by the Cultural Revolution—would take us well beyond the purview of this essay.¹¹⁶ But we can conclude that the capacity of rumor to generate collective action in this period was limited. It could discredit, disorient, and dismay authority, but the conditions in which it could precipitate revolt were lacking.

In the light of the resilience of superstitious rumors as an idiom of popular politics during the Maoist era, what Kenneth Dean has called the “extraordinary renaissance of reinvented traditional forms of ritual activity” in the post-Mao era looks less surprising.¹¹⁷ This is not to suggest that the era of reform has simply witnessed a “return of the repressed”; for as Helen Siu demonstrates, the resurgent rituals represent “new reconstructions” adapted to the changing social and political environment of post-Communist China. At the same time, the prevalence of “superstitious activity” during the Mao era, which greater access to the archives of the PRC has revealed, suggests that the claim that the Maoist regime destroyed the social bases and political functions of popular beliefs and practices is overstated.¹¹⁸ Without doubt, the regime conducted a frontal assault on many aspects of popular culture, sometimes with lasting consequences. Yet in spite of its commitment to recast popular culture along lines of science and rationality, it was constantly forced to engage with the cosmologies through which millions of citizens, especially in the countryside, understood and appropriated the message of revolution. Superstitious rumors suggest that traditional beliefs and practices evolved to meet new needs and challenges, just as they have done in the era of reform, sometimes appropriating elements of official ideology, sometimes sitting uneasily alongside them, sometimes resisting them outright. The religious mode of thinking revealed in the rumors proffered a sharp challenge to the official construction of reality; but more generally it served to render the latter “more complex by calling attention to its hidden and contradictory logics, proposing alternative ways of understanding and engaging it.” In so doing, it allowed ordinary people the opportunity to debate the meanings of the disruptive and sometimes traumatic economic, political, and social changes that were sweeping over their lives.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Shao Yong, *Zhongguo huidaomen*, 452.

¹¹⁶ Lucien Bianco is surely correct to state that in the period 1953 to 1978, “peasant resistance was at its lowest” in relation to the entire twentieth century. Lucien Bianco, *Peasants without the Party: Grass-Roots Movements in Twentieth-Century China* (Armonk, N.Y., 2001), 244; see also Perry, *Challenging the Mandate*, chap. 9.

¹¹⁷ Kenneth Dean, “Ritual and Space: Civil Society or Popular Religion?” in Timothy Brook and B. Michael Frolic, eds., *Civil Society in China* (Armonk, N.Y., 1998), 172.

¹¹⁸ Siu, “Recycling Rituals,” 121, 124.

¹¹⁹ Sanders and West, “Power Revealed,” 16.

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