

TER HAAR, BAREND J. *Telling Stories: Witchcraft and Scapegoating in Chinese History*. Sinica Leidensia 71. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006. x + 382 pages. Tables, illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. Hardcover €115.00; US\$155.00; ISBN 90-0414-844-2.

The title of this book leads a reader to expect a collection of disturbing ghost and witchcraft stories translated from Chinese; however, this expectation is quickly replaced by surprise as the author introduces the general outline of the book in the introduction. *Telling Stories* is about Chinese “folktales” and “urban legends” from the imperial period. The unexpected surprise is that the book is a historical investigative work, based on various recorded sources, such as local gazetteers, observers’ records, and court cases from the tenth to the early twentieth century.

Telling Stories is based on events in Chinese history that caused collective actions in response to fears that eventually ended with scapegoating and victimizing of innocent individuals. In order to offer a different perspective on approaching these stories, concepts such as fear, scare, and panic in correlation with story, news, and rumor are re-examined. The basic principle of this work is to offer a different paradigm in studying rumors as part of a larger category of oral communication; as a form of information about the local people and their reaction to the world that surrounded them. *Telling Stories* is about people telling stories, or rumors, and the search for a possible understanding of the reasons behind telling and transmitting these stories.

The structure of the author's discussion in each chapter is to provide detailed historical analysis of fears leading to the outburst of collective response. He attempts to take a close look at each particular type of outburst itself in order to build a broader context to understand how the basic form of each type of fear was transmitted over many centuries. The relationship between oral and written literary practice are also discussed, as the lack of interest from the written culture on these rumors have resulted in gaps in stories and their contexts. The scarcity of written sources of certain stories from the past limits the discussion, and leads to speculation and guesswork. Each chapter, or each story theme, is examined in chronological order and combined with anecdotes and records of persecution.

Chapter Two begins with a discussion of the "Spotted Barbarian" and "Auntie Old Tiger" that were told to children at night to prevent them from crying. The author relies on linguistic, etiological, and ritual connection of the stories in an attempt to build a concrete base of analysis. In this chapter, the author not only carries out a comparative study of structure, motif, and linguistic elements between the "Spotted Barbarian" and the "Auntie Old Tiger" in order to show the possible genealogical connection between the two fears, but also offers a brief structural comparison between European and Chinese traditions. The brief discussions at the end of the chapter on the possible transmission routes between Europe and Asia, Ur-version, gender role, and the symbolic interpretation of stories included in this chapter offer invaluable and interesting study and research topics; however, the way in which these points are presented tend to divert the focus of the chapter.

In Chapter Three, "Organ-Snatching and Foetus-Theft," the author discusses the cases in which rumors of organ or fetus theft instigate violent mob reactions against individuals, or groups of people. In examining this type of fear, the author ties this type of practice and reaction to the cultural and worldview of the Chinese, and brings forth the important role of social networks in scapegoating marginalized persons. Based on recorded sources, the author points out that the scapegoating process was not only directed toward clearly marginalized outsiders, but was also politically charged to use against a local person or persons in order to settle local conflicts. The fear of organ snatching and fetus theft, including kidnapping of children, has a long history of recurrences, and these stories have been manifested in different forms, which is an important key point in understanding the anti-missionary riots.

In Chapter Four, Ter Haar leads a convincing argument based on the historical records of fear and scapegoating, and gives an alternative perspective in understanding the anti-missionary riots during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He claims that the fear arising from the heightened visibility of the Westerners during this time as "mysterious outsiders" who were potentially dangerous was built on the pre-existing tradition of orally-transmitted rumors. Missionaries became one of the groups of marginalized outsiders. The two important issues examined in this chapter are marginalization and the power of oral stories in mobilizing people. His conclusion on the "Gathering of Brothers and Elders," a supposed anti-state organization, as an imagined group by the Westerners in an attempt to explain the random and sudden outbursts of collective actions caused by stories provides a good example of the recurrence of story structures and the power of oral communication.

The analysis of the cultural meaning of the belief in the stories of small creatures causing bodily harm, and the investigation of the historical adaptation and modification of these stories in the actual outbreaks of fear are the two main points explored in Chapter Five. The most intriguing part of this chapter is the impact of the "dark miasma" or "dark affliction" on the Imperial Court that lead to an Imperial ritualistic exorcism by religious specialists who could gain access to political power. The author repeatedly states, and demonstrates with historical cases, that these rumors are not groundless stories. The historical

contexts of these stories indicate that the violence and disturbances experienced in the local regions arose from real events, and the outbreaks of fears and reactions to such fears functioned as a way to reduce the anxiety of the group through ritualized means.

The fear of the Drought Demon and the Imperial harem recruitment introduced in Chapter Six are examples of complexity in the marginalization process. The marginalization of an insider is not a new theme since scapegoating has been used to settle local conflicts. The author argues that the nature of the Drought Demon and harem recruitment panic should be understood in the framework of the local view on the gender status of old women, and the position of the Emperor in a local or regional context. The personal records, court cases, and local gazetteers of the fear outbreaks supply details on the case and the people involved; but these records fail to present the big picture, the larger social and cultural context. The list of possible factors and their dates constructed by the author may not provide the exact reason as to why such outbreaks occurred, but do assist in gaining an understanding of the factors contributing to these rumors and panic outbreaks.

Telling Stories concludes by returning to the starting point—the power of oral communication. The author reiterates and challenges today's categorization of these stories as "rumors" that, in his view, can cloud the understanding of the historical and social nature of these stories. He views the community structure, local adaptation and deliberation, commercialization, cultural memories, and orality as factors attributing to the strength and power of these recurrent stories. *Telling Stories* is a historical investigation on the development and transformation of different fears, and it is also an examination of the power of oral stories. The author's intention, based on the repeated emphasis of oral communicative characteristic of these stories, is clear and works well within the temporal and spatial context of these rumors. However, it is important to keep an open mind that the relationship between oral and written communication could be much more complicated. Additionally, the answers to the questions of the existence of these witchcraft and scapegoating stories today may require a search in both written and oral sources. The author's critiques of the biased view on oral communication, and the idea of stories as a form of communication are not new to the field of oral tradition and literature. The intriguing characteristics of this work is that it is an investigation of orally-transmitted stories based on written records of historical events, that are presented by intertwining the stories, events, personal, and court records in chronological order to show the life of oral stories and their impact on reality. The questions raised in the Conclusion on the possible existence of these stories today, could have perhaps been partly answered through fieldwork. It is regrettable that these very important and relevant questions in gaining a deeper understanding on the historical transmission of these stories remain unanswered.

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