5-22-2008

Rumor and the Sichuan Earthquake

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By Steve Smith

One of the intriguing aspects of the appalling crisis created by the earthquake in Sichuan on May 12—whose death toll as I write is over 40,000 and still rising—has been the role played by rumor. Just four days before the quake, the Sichuan provincial government issued a notice designed to quell “earthquake rumors.” Three days after it, on May15, Xinhua news agency announced that seventeen people had been arrested for circulating malicious rumors, and the Ministry of Public Security revealed that its bureaus in eleven provinces and municipalities had discovered more than forty messages on the internet that “spread false information, made sensational statements and sapped public confidence.”

In the weeks leading up to May 12, warnings of an imminent earthquake emanated from various quarters. Most significantly, Li Shihui, a scientist at the laboratory of geo-mechanical engineering of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, claimed on his blog that in April the seismologist, Geng Qingguo, vice-chair of the Committee for Natural Disaster Prediction at the China Geophysical Institute, had predicted a quake of 7 or more on the Richter scale in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang autonomous prefecture of Sichuan. On April 30, he claimed, the Committee for Natural Disaster Prediction had passed on a confidential report about his prediction to the China Seismology Bureau. Others less qualified posted warnings of an earthquake on their blogs, although most were vague on detail. On May 7, allegedly, a geological worker from Wuhan posted a notice on the internet predicting that an earthquake would strike on 12 May: “the epicenter should be quite near Wuhan. I hope Wuhan residents who see my blog will inform all relatives and friends and take precautions.” Another blogger claimed to have an uncle working in the Sichuan Seismological Bureau: “Even when there were already signs indicating an earthquake, the Sichuan Seismological Bureau still suppressed and failed to report the information, completely disregarding people’s lives.” On the basis of internet chat and reports in the press, a slew of rumors began to circulate that caused many citizens to contact their local earthquake prevention and disaster relief boards. Anxiety seems to have run particularly high in Aba county, specifically mentioned as the epicenter in Geng Qingguo’s unpublished report, and significantly, a major center of pro-Tibetan riots a couple of weeks earlier. The authorities were quick to deny the rumors. On May 9, the Sichuan provincial government issued a statement:

“May 3, 8pm. The Abazhou Earthquake Prevention and Disaster Relief Board got calls from members of the public, asking whether news that an earthquake would strike Suomo town in Maerkang county was true. The authorities quickly demanded that the Maerkang Earthquake Disaster Prevention Bureau take measures to find out where the rumor came from and to refute it, so as to stop the rumors from spreading further... The Abazhou Earthquake Prevention and Disaster Relief Board and the other cadres managed to clear up the misunderstanding in time, and life of the locals is back to normal.”

On May 12 the statement was pulled from the provincial government website.

Much public concern derived from rumors—many of them fed by reports in the press—about animals behaving strangely. In Mianzhu, sixty miles from the epicenter in Wenchuan county, bloggers reported that over a million butterflies had migrated weeks before the quake. According to a report in Huaxi Dushi Bao(Western China City News) on May 10, in Mianyang, the second largest city in the province, thousands of migrating toads descended on the streets, many being crushed to death by vehicles and
On May 13, 2008, Dajiyuan (the Chinese-language version of Epoch Times, the Falungong-sponsored newspaper) published a photograph of thousands of toads crawling out of the Tongyang canal in Taizhou, faraway in Jiangsu province, crossing the Dongfeng bridge “in orderly fashion.” Other warning signs, not involving animals, were, according to the Chutian Dushi Bao, that the Guanyin pool in Enshi in Hubei was suddenly drained of 80,000 tonnes of water on April 26. Whirlpools began to form at about 7 a.m., a roaring noise was heard, and within five hours the entire pool had dried up.

Many of these rumors and internet postings claim authority on the basis of science. Scientists have long hypothesized that animals can predict earthquakes, suggesting variously that they can sense the ultrasonic waves generated by a quake, that they can pick up low-frequency electromagnetic signals emitted by subterranean movements, or that they can detect changes in the air or gases released by movements of the earth. The US Geological Survey, however, which has conducted many studies of the phenomenon, remains skeptical. By contrast, Chinese earthquake scientists, who are among the best in the world, generally give greater credence to these hypotheses. Indeed during the Cultural Revolution, these hypotheses almost acquired the status of scientific certainty. Zhang Xiaodong, a researcher at the China Seismological Bureau, has confirmed that his agency has used natural activity—mainly animal activity—to predict earthquakes twenty times in the past twenty years. This, however, represents a fraction of the earthquakes that have beset the country during that period. The most famous case in which scientists predicted an earthquake on the basis of unusual animal behavior and changes in ground-water levels occurred in Haicheng, a city of a million people in Liaoning, on February 4, 1974. From December onwards, people began to report dazed rats and snakes that appeared “frozen” to the roads. From February there were numerous reports of cows and horses appearing restless, of chickens refusing to enter their coops, and of domestic geese taking flight. As a result, the authorities evacuated the city just days before a 7.3 magnitude earthquake struck. Serious doubt on the capacity of animals to give warnings of earthquakes arose the following year, however, when the second most lethal earthquake in history, measuring 7.6 magnitude on the Richter scale, hit Tangshan in July 1976.

The discourse about animals and earthquake prediction appears to be highly modern: it circulates via the press and the internet, it invokes scientific argument, and raises uncomfortable political questions about the culpability of the authorities in not responding to warning signs and the advice of scientific experts. Yet it is rooted in a much more ancient discourse about omens. For thousands of years, Chinese people have attributed supernatural significance to unusual or destructive natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, comets or eclipses. These phenomena, for example, are systematically recorded in the Hanshu, alongside facts of political importance, and are interpreted
variously by chroniclers as warnings of coming danger, warnings to the Son of Heaven not to undertake a certain course of action and, not least, as divine punishment for actions the emperor has undertaken. As is well known, the Mandate of Heaven rested on the emperor's ability to maintain humankind in harmony with heaven and earth, so the occurrence of freakish natural phenomena was easily interpreted as a sign that the emperor had invoked divine displeasure. I do not wish to argue that there are millions of Chinese today who interpret such natural phenomena in this way. But I do want to suggest that there are millions—especially, in the countryside and among the elderly, although by no means confined to these groups—who take unusual or destructive natural phenomena as omens of some sort, i.e., that they have a supernatural significance in excess of any naturalistic explanation.

The salient characteristic of omens is that they have no fixed and obvious meaning, and it is through rumor that the debate about their meaning is transacted and argued over. If most of the rumors surrounding the current earthquake appear to draw on an essentially "secular" discourse, it is evident even from press reports that older discourses of omens are also being mobilized in the bid to explain the warnings that "heaven" gave in the weeks preceding the earthquake. The account in Dajiyuan about the toad migration in Mianyang, for example, tells us that the immediate reaction of many village people was: "What kind of omen of disaster is this?" It reports that many rural people were anxious and that the forestry department sought to assuage their fear by explaining that the toad migration was entirely natural, caused by the fact that rising temperatures and substantial rainfall had led to unusually high levels of breeding on the part of the toads. In Taizhou, scientists offered a slightly different explanation, saying that the toad migration was due to a rise in temperature and a lack of oxygen in the ditch water where the toads normally spawn. But the response of bloggers to these reassurances was dismissive. "It's obviously an omen." "Officials say that there are environmental factors behind it, but that just shows how ignorant they are."

Why do many consider toads so richly ominous? After all, compared with the fox or the snake, the toad occupies a rather marginal place in China's rich tradition of folklore, drama, opera and song. As a creature of warty mien, associated with dark, damp places, it does not obviously inspire affection. In "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: the Politics of Rumor in the People's Republic of China, 1961-65," an article that appeared in American Historical Review [111:2 (2006), 405-27], I discussed the symbolic associations that toads conjure up. The subject of that article was a rumor that circulated between 1962 and 1963 across a huge swath of China, starting in the northeast and reaching Shanghai a year later. This told of a conversation overheard between two toads which prophesied that old people would perish within the year unless young people baked toad-shaped buns for them. The most obvious message of the rumor, which came in several variants, was that the young should take better care of the elderly in circumstances where, in the wake of the Great Leap Forward famine, many old people may have felt their entitlement to food was no longer secure.

More relevant to the rumors around the Sichuan earthquake, however, is my argument that it is the symbolic meaning of the toad rumor that is all-important, rumor being an inherently emotional form of communication in which the affective charge often goes well beyond the propositional content. In Chinese folklore, the toad is linked to Chang E, goddess of the moon, and this sets up a chain of signifiers that links water, darkness and moon. Each of these signifiers is powerfully coded as yin within popular culture; and I suggested that the subliminal message of the toad rumor of the early 1960s was to indicate that there had been an alarming surge in yin forces. Since 1949, and especially since the Great Leap Forward, it had become increasingly difficult for people to observe the traditional rituals that serve to make ling—the power of supernatural entities—efficacious in the world and that, by extension, ensure balance cosmic balance. The toad rumor reminded people that unless rituals were observed, further chaos such as that that had resulted from the famine could be expected. I have come across no evidence in current reports about the Sichuan earthquake that indicate that the toad migrations are being interpreted in exactly this way. However, as powerful signifiers of yin forces, it seems reasonable to infer that the toad migrations play on fears that the natural and social worlds are out of joint: a fact dramatically highlighted when chaos erupted from the bowels of the earth.

I do not argue that this is the "real" meaning of the migrating toads, rather that it is one possible reading that is easily overlooked when the discourse about the portents of the earthquake appears on the surface to be so largely secular. Yet the response of the abovementioned bloggers suggests that at
least some prefer a supernatural explanation of the omen to a naturalistic one. That said, we must acknowledge that since 1949, scientific or quasi-scientific explanations of natural phenomena have gained huge ground within popular culture. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, the idea that animals can foretell earthquakes became widely understood as proven fact, since ordinary folk were encouraged to watch for strange behavior on the part of animals and report it to the authorities. This was justified more generally in terms of ordinary people seizing scientific endeavor from the hands of “bourgeois” experts. It thus seems likely that there is a widespread assumption that animal behavior does predict earthquakes. Yet such an assumption can exist—with a greater or lesser degree of felt contradiction—with supernatural understandings of earthquakes as omens.

In a forthcoming piece, “Fear and Rumor in the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s” [Cultural and Social History, 5:3 (2008): 269-88], I examine two types of rumor that flourished in the 1950s, both of which were vehicles of fear and anxiety. The first were secular rumors of an imminent third world war or an atomic attack; the second were supernatural rumors about demonic invasions. I reject the temptation to see the first as a “rational” type of rumor and the second as an “irrational” type, arguing that millions of people in the 1950s, especially in the countryside, made little distinction between the two, seeing both as reflecting the fact that the cosmic order that regulates interaction between the human and spirit worlds was out of kilter. In the intervening half century, it is quite likely that supernatural explanations have lost much of their attractiveness. Increased technological control over nature, combined with basic scientific education, has helped to entrench within popular culture the conceptual distinctions characteristic of the post-Galilean world between man and nature, the natural and supernatural worlds, and cause and effect. Nevertheless, it seems likely that many can accept such distinctions and still believe that supernatural beings or forces have the capacity to intervene in nature. Similarly, they believe that supernatural events often connect directly with secular politics. At the time of the Tangshan earthquake, for example, talk of supernatural omens abounded, and many were quick to link these to this-worldly events, such as the deaths of Zhou Enlai, Kang Sheng and Zhu De in the preceding eight months and the death of the Great Helmsman himself, six weeks after the earthquake.

The harsh response of the authorities to the current bout of rumor-mongering reminds us that even the weirdest rumors can be seen as an implicit—if not always intended—challenge to authority. Rumor flourishes in situations of uncertainty, where people feel that it is dangerous not to know what is going on. A critical element in the current crisis around the Sichuan earthquake—at least in its build-up—was the absence of information ordinary people considered reliable or credible. Sharing stories about the strange behavior of animals created spaces in which they could share knowledge and gain a measure of psychological control over an ambiguous and threatening situation. Given that the government puts a premium on the control of public discourse, even the strangest supernatural rumors may be seen as political insofar as they represent a form of unauthorized speech—“an attempt at collective conversation by people who wish to enter their sentiments into a public discourse” (Anand Yang). Regardless of the intentions of the rumor-mongers, rumors ipso facto represent an objective challenge to the regime’s monopoly of news and information. Unlike official news, moreover, rumors travel horizontally rather than top down, setting up a “chain pattern of communication” that bypasses the vertical lines of communication of the centralized party-state.

But it is clear also that some who are circulating “news” via the internet or the press are engaged in a much more conscious effort to discredit the government, particularly by suggesting that it deliberately suppressed information about the impending earthquake in a bid to avoid panic in the run-up to the Olympic games. In the past, earthquakes have regularly stoked up distrust of the government. It is widely believed, for example, that leading scientists and geological monitoring centers issued warnings in advance of the Tangshan earthquake in 1976, but that neither the State Seismological Bureau nor the government took them seriously. Popular confidence in government was further undermined in the wake of the Tangshan earthquake when party leaders refused to acknowledge the scale of the calamity or accept international relief. In the wake of the current earthquake, at least one blogger has been quick to look back to this time: “I am one of the survivors of the Tangshan quake. Tangshan people are extremely hostile towards the China Seismological Bureau because of their failure to predict such a devastating earthquake. Now 32 years later, they have again failed to predict the Sichuan quake. The head of the bureau should resign.” Meanwhile Chang Ping, recently sacked deputy editor of the Guangzhou-based Nanfang Dushi Bao, has argued in the pages of that newspaper that the
current epidemic of rumors surrounding the earthquake is evidence of the need for much greater freedom of information. In a context where the Chinese government has been applauded around the world for its openness in handling the crisis, such criticism will probably come to nothing. But there is always unanticipated political fall-out from earthquakes in China. So watch this space.

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