

The Body Snatchers: Rumor and State in Southwest China

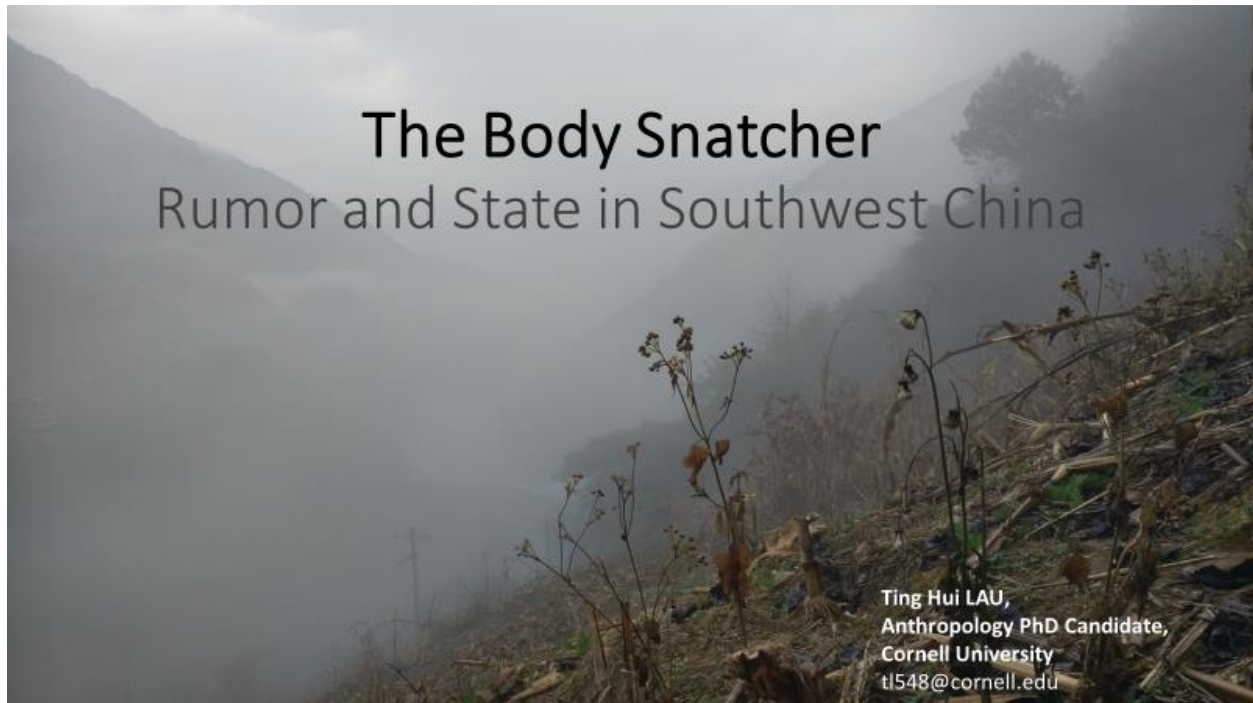
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Short abstract:

Comparing the amorphousness of rumors to the written and recorded archive of “the news” in an ethnic minority region of Southwest China, I discuss rumor as a thing outside the control of the state. The potency of rumor lies in its ability to breach taboos and create alternative realities/truths.

Long Abstract:

In rural Southwest China, on the border to Northern Burma, the Chinese urbanization machine churns. Freshly built bridges, buildings, and electric stations incessantly sprout in this remote mountainous region. Rumor has it that people are going missing from these developments. They are sacrificed—poisoned, kidnapped and buried alive under the new edifices. Such rumors are not unique to China. Similar stories have been reported in other parts of the world, including in India and in Malaysia. This paper attempts to account for this “Body Snatcher” rumor. Who are the body snatchers? What do they do with the people they kidnap? How do they choose their victims? This paper compares rumors to such things as dreams, jokes, and legends. I analyze the form, the narrative structure, and the symbolic content of the body snatcher rumors to understand the significance of such kinds of rumors in this particular historical moment. Comparing the amorphous nature of rumors to the written and recorded archive of “the news,” this paper discusses rumor as a thing outside state purview and bureaucratic control. This ability to breach taboos and create alternative realities/truths is precisely where the potency of rumors lies. I argue that the body snatcher rumors show us the generalized fears and unspoken desires that ordinary people have towards their condition and towards authority.



This presentation examines a rumor I encountered while conducting fieldwork in Southwest China.

OUTLINE

1. Introduction
2. The rumor
3. Conclusion

The outline of my presentation is as follows: I will begin by introducing my fieldsite. Next, I will discuss and analyze the rumor in mention. Finally, I will conclude with some thoughts on the direction I plan to take my final analysis into in my dissertation.

- 1. INTRODUCTION**
2. The rumor
3. Conclusion

I will now begin by introducing my fieldsite.



Introduction

In rural Southwest China, on the eastern border of northern Myanmar and the southern edges of Tibet, the Chinese development machine churns relentlessly.



Trucks loaded with sand, concrete, and steel, like worker ants carrying food to their queen, move constantly up and down the narrow, winding valley road. Bridges, roads, buildings, and power stations sprout incessantly on both sides of the river banks, reaching all the way into remote mountain villages.



As I speak right now, a road expansion project is taking place to upgrade and widen the narrow valley road into a “secondary road” (二级公路), a project that is connected with China’s broader One Belt One Road Initiative. This initiative seeks to expand China’s political and economic capacity by increasing China’s connectivity with the Eurasia.



The place I am speaking of is called the Nu Valley. Located in China's border province of Yunnan, it is a sixteen to eighteen-hour bus ride from the provincial capital city of Kunming.

THE LISU

- A transnational ethnic group
- Majority are Protestant Christians
- Population 1,200,000 est, 730,000 in China

Officially, China has fifty-six state recognized ethnic groups. Among this fifty-six groups, the Han is dominant. The Nu Valley has at least fifteen to sixteen state-recognized ethnic groups residing within it, with the Lisu-ethnic group being the largest among them. The Lisu are an ethnic people living in China, Myanmar, India, and Thailand, the majority of whom have converted to Protestant Christianity. My work and this presentation focus on the Lisu in Southwest China.



Scholars consider the Nu Valley part of “Zomia”—a transnational region, historically outside the reach of government control (Schendel 2005; Scott 2009). However, in recent decades, governments have increasingly asserted influence in these zones.

The people in this remote region have experienced various waves of civilizing missions and projects, including ... [click to next slide]



Christianity through foreign missionaries and ... [click to next slide]



Confucian values through school education.



To control “dirty, mess, poverty” depends on “you, me, and him/her”

Today, the Chinese development drive is yet another permutation of these colonial processes. In contrast to the government’s hopeful promotion of development through the idea of the “Chinese Dream”, the people living in this remote region are distressed by the social disruptions associated with rapid development and massive outmigration. Under these conditions, people say that development is devouring humans: Rumor has it that people are going missing. They have been kidnaped by construction workers and sacrificed to strengthen the foundations of new structures.

Cannibalistic Demons = “**NI**”

Development and the State metaphorically associated with demons.

In this presentation, I examine the significance of these “body snatcher” rumors among the Lisu people in the Nu Valley. I argue that these rumors about bodies disappearing retool the Christian slash Lisu hybrid concept of the “cannibalistic demon”—*Ni*—to signify the unpredictable violence of development and the amorphous yet absolute nature of the State imagined. The idea that bodies are being buried alive under modern structures associates the “state” with cannibalism. By giving a name and an identity to situations outside of their control, communities recuperate their capacity to actively engage in and transform the world. The term rumor here is not a judgement on the truth of these stories. I use the term “rumor” because the Lisu people themselves treat these stories with some skepticism. Bracketing out the question on whether these stories are true or not, my paper is interested in how people experience social change.



This paper is part of a chapter of my dissertation. Broadly speaking, my dissertation is concerned with how the Lisu living at the margins of China imagine and conceptualize rapid social change. Between 2015 and 2017, I conducted eighteen months of continuous fieldwork. Prior to long term fieldwork, I conducted nine months of preliminary fieldwork between 2009 and 2014. During all my fieldwork, I lived in Lisu villages with Lisu families, immersing myself in their everyday activities. I worked alongside Lisu subsistent farmers, planting corn, cutting firewood, looking for pig food, and attending religious ceremonies. Although, I based myself in one village in particular, I also travelled, visited, and stayed for longer periods of time in selected villages.

1. Introduction
- 2. THE RUMOR**
3. Conclusion

Let me now tell you more about this body snatcher rumor and how I came to learn about it.



The Body Snatcher Rumors

I heard of the body snatcher rumor in my first visit to the Nu Valley in 2009. A big bridge was being built to link the east bank to the west bank of the Nu River. Friends were warning me to be careful—Han construction workers were on a lookout for sacrificial victims to bury underneath the bridge, they said. Missionaries were often flabbergasted by the spreading of these rumors, annoyed that the Lisu who have mostly converted to Christianity, were still vulnerable to such pagan imaginations. Even among the Lisu themselves, there was often doubt about the truth of these stories. But still, everyone preferred to be cautious than risk being buried alive.



This summer, during my long-term fieldwork, this theme emerged once more. The government and a power station company were building a new power station in the village I was living in.



Men with horses were carrying heavy equipment through village roads to build new transmission towers. Sometimes the old village roads were too small and villagers were called to remove crops planted by the roads or to dig new and wider paths for the power station workers. My host auntie, Auntie Yona, was worried about the power station and the strange people coming into the village. Although some of the workers were Lisu, they were from the South and spoke Southern Lisu, which many northern Lisu people cannot understand. During those days, everyone in the village were weary of the horse men, careful not to interact too much with them or to invite them into their houses.



One day, there was a power shortage in our village. Auntie Yona and I were hoeing in the field, preparing the land for yam planting. We joked about how the workers at the power station have become hungry and how we should bring them chicken meat if we want the power in the village to come back on.

In this context, Auntie then asked me, “When you first came here, and you were following people to their villages, were you ever scared that people would to sell you?”

I chuckled, thinking auntie was joking, “Why would anyone want me?” I replied “I am not pretty. I am short. I can’t do anything. I can’t even speak Lisu properly. I am not of sellable material.”

Auntie stopped her hoeing and looked at me seriously. Then she said, “it is not about whether or not you are pretty or not. The people who take you, they do not care how you look. People go missing here. Like you were saying the other day, the kid in your friend’s village that went missing. They drug you like this,” she clasped her hands over her mouth, “they cover your

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mouth with a piece of cloth like you see on TV until you fall asleep. You become unconscious and then they take you.”

I wiped my smile off my face, realizing that auntie was not joking.

“A Han woman—a really pretty one—she just arrived, married to a Lisu man a few years ago. She just went missing a few weeks ago. Two Burmese people in the opposite bank, went missing too. Those people who take you, they don’t care if you are pretty or not. They will take you and burry you underneath the power station.” Auntie had once told me that they buried people underneath the power stations to make the stations strong.

“They take mainly young people, don’t they?” I asked.

“No, they take all sorts of people. Young, old, children. In one case, a bad husband sold his own wife. The husband did not like his wife, so he drugged her and sold her to the power station people. And then when people ask what happened to his wife, he just said he didn’t know.”

“My mother always reminds me not accept drinks from strangers,” I replied weakly, trying to assure auntie that I know to be careful.

“That’s right. Don’t trust people you do not know,” she said.



Since my first visit to the Nu Valley, many Lisu friends have often urged me to be extra careful when I was travelling. Moving up and down the Nu Valley alone, they worry that I may get kidnapped and become one of the victims. Some say that the body snatchers were especially looking for people from far away. “For example, if you are building a bridge here, they will bury someone from the next county. If they are building a bridge in the other county they may find someone to bury from this county,” explained a Lisu brother of mine. I have also heard people say that the snatchers prefer catching little children. Little kids are easy to catch they say. They run around a lot, so no one knows where they go. It’s easy to catch them without people finding out. Some say they chose their victims by drawing lots. Using the bus tickets that people buy as lots, they randomly pick their victims based on the ticket they draw.



Some say that for bridges, the bodies have to be buried on both sides of the bridge—the head of the bridge and the tail of the bridge. For smaller bridges, animal sacrifice suffice. But for bigger bridges, human sacrifice is required. In the case of power stations, a big hole is dug next to the station, and the body buried in the holes. The rumor was that the state, or *guojia* (as the Lisu say, borrowing the Han Chinese term for the state), knows that people are being killed and buried alive for bridges and other construction buildings. But the state, *guojia* does nothing, these killings are seen as necessary and therefore not illegal. So even if villagers reported to the police about the body snatchers, the police would let the body snatchers go.

These stories about people being killed for or by development are by no means new or specific to China. Anthropologists have analyzed similar rumors in other parts of the world. Drake (1989) analyzing construction sacrifice rumors in Borneo argues that these rumors are a metaphor for the tension between tribes and the state. Kroeger (2003) in her paper about AIDS rumors in Indonesia, connects rumors to conceptions of the body. In Masquelier's (2000)

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examination of cannibal rumors in Nigeria and Niger, she relates rumors to moral imagination. Rumors about bad husbands selling their wives to other people are also found in Masquelier's study. The existence of similar rumors across places brings to light the classical anthropological quandary of balancing cross-cultural similarities, on the one hand, and the distinctiveness of culturally specific experiences, on the other hand.

Elements of the Rumor

- (1) The snatching of a body;
- (2) The burial or the sacrifice to the construction;
- (3) The workers who perpetrates the act;
- (4) The random victims;
- (5) The state.

I see these rumors as examples of how people retool culturally familiar language to understand new and disquieting situations. The body snatcher rumors among the Lisu reframes Chinese development in terms culturally familiar to the Lisu. There are a few key elements in the rumor worth highlighting: (1) The snatching of a body; (2) the burial or the sacrifice to the construction, usually a bridge or a power station; (3) the construction workers, usually Han, who perpetrates the snatching and the burying, (4) the random victims, usually Lisu but may also be Han or Burmese, and (5) the state that turns a blind eye to the harm development is causing people.

The progression of the body snatcher rumor holds much structural parallel to Lisu stories about cannibalistic demons or “*ni*” as they call them in Lisu. In one such story, the demon makes a pact with humans—in exchange for life and health, humans must make offerings of meat to the demons. Sudden, unexpected deaths are often understood as caused by meat craving demons or demonic humans. In the body snatcher rumor, the state and the processes of development are

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objectified as demonic things. Human bodies are sacrificed to give strength and longevity to construction, metaphorically associating the state with cannibalism. The association of the state and of development with demons, show us the generalized fears and social anxieties that ordinary Lisu people have towards their condition and towards authority.

(3) CONCLUSION

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to highlight the role of rumor as a tool for the apparently obedient subalterns to express discontent.



Steven Harrell writes that in the process of “civilizing” the margins, people in the periphery can only achieve recognition if performed in line with the civilizer’s script. As Harrell puts it, “the answer to whether the subaltern can speak is that the subaltern can speak on the sufferance of the civilizer. Voice is granted on the provision that it will speak in favor of the project, or at least in the project’s terms.” (Harrell 2000: 34). By reappropriating the image of the demon to understand state led civilizing and development processes as human-eating, the Lisu reframe their experiences and voice their discontent in a political climate where speaking back is otherwise impermissible.

The potency of rumors thus lies in its ephemeral nature. Efforts to dispel myths and rumors often seem backfire: Instead of discrediting rumors, they reinforce them. The amorphous nature of rumors makes it a thing outside state purview and bureaucratic control. This ability to breach taboos and create alternative realities/truths is precisely the reason for the recurrence of

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certain kinds of rumors. Like ghosts of lost memories, rumors haunt the hard facts of life, giving insight into our deepest fears and ambivalent desires.

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