



# The Evolution of “Rumor”

Jing Qin

Ba Culture Institute, Sichuan University of Arts and Science, Dazhou, China

Email: Qinjing66@sina.com

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## Abstract

Rumor is a social phenomenon and its true colors are similar to those of “folk commentaries”, including “folk songs”, “nursery rhymes”, “folk customs”, “ballads”, “new rhymes”, “village ballads”, “chanting ballads” and so on. It is also an important monitoring system in ancient China. With the development of society, “rumor” has changed its semantic meaning. In modern Chinese, “rumor” has become an unreliable, deceptive and derogatory term. This article is to investigate the evolution of rumors and its relationship with hearsay, so as to correctly distinguish the uses of two different forms in real life so as to curb rumors, and foreground the positive role of “hearsay” in the monitoring system.

## Subject Areas

Anthropology, Art, Education, Library, Intelligence and Philology, Linguistics, Literature

## Keywords

Rumor, Hearsay, Social Phenomenon, Folk Commentary

## 1. Introduction

“Rumor” is a social phenomenon that originates from individuals’ cognition or subjective judgment, with some partially real facts, which may be extremely deceptive and seditious. Rumor is generally interpreted as unfounded rumor or fabricated words. It shares similar meanings with gossip, falsehoods, delusions, lies, deceptiveness, hearsay and the like. In *Xunzi-Dalu*: “it is noted that rumors linger in stubborn men but end in wise men.” [1]. According to the American scholars Peterson and Gist, the rumors are unproven explanations or interpretations of things, events, or problems that are privately spreading among people owing to their interest. The social harm caused by rumors must not be underestimated. Article 25 of China’s *Policy on Public Security Administration Penalties*

stipulates: Anyone who spreads rumors, misreports dangerous situations, epidemic situation and police conditions, or intentionally disturbs public orders by other means shall face the punishment of a detention for more than 5 days but less than 10 days, with a fine of less than 500 Yuan; in less serious cases, it can be a detention for less than 5 days or a fine of less than 500 yuan. Article 11 of *The General Principles of the Civil Law* also stipulates that insults and slanders are prohibited, including an insulting to the reputation of citizens and legal persons in some way. Article 52 of *The Regulations on Public Health Emergencies* and Article 48 of *The Emergency Regulations on Major Animal Epidemics* also stipulates that during the emergencies, for anyone spreading rumors to disrupt social orders and market orders, penalties should be imposed; those who commit crimes should be investigated for criminal responsibility according to law. In modern Chinese, “rumor” has become an unreliable, deceptive and derogatory term, and become “a mouse crossing streets”<sup>1</sup>.

## 2. True Colors of “Rumor” and Its Evolution

In fact, those are not the true colors of “rumor”. The meanings of “rumor” can be found in *An Unabridged Comprehensive Dictionary*. one is modern rumor, which is a fictional word without facts, as mentioned above. The second is unaccepted legend. The third refers to popular folk songs or proverbs. In Later *Han-CaiYong* Biography, it is found that “a book is officially finished in five years, the eight ambassadors are chosen through discussion, but three officers can rumor to make an oral presentation to the emperor” [2]. Records of *The Three Kingdoms* cited from *The Legends of Heroes*: “It was rumored that for thousands of miles of grassland, however green it is, it will still come to the end of its life.” [3]. The rumor is similar to folk commentary, and has similar meanings as “folk songs”, “nursery rhymes”, “folk customs”, and “slanders”. The word of “rumors” has a long history. According to *Liezi*: “Yao administered the world for 50 years, during which people didn’t know what a chaotic world was like. Then Yao toured in Kangqu, and there came the nursery rhyme ‘Let me steam, Murphy. I don’t know the Emperor’s rule.’” [4]. It is said that “Yao had a drum, Shun had a slanderous tree, Tang had a prince, and the king of the Wu Kingdom had a caution to remind them of the potential mistakes.” [5]. GaoXiu commented: “Point out one’s fault to make it show.” A large number of songs collected in the *Book of Poetry-National Custom* express the same meaning. For example, “Why not return? If it were not for your sake, O my king, how could I not return home? Why not return? If it were not for your people, O prince, how should we be here in the mire?” “Mice have skin, but the human have not appearance! The human have not appearance, why not die? Mice have teeth, but the human’s desire is endless! The human’s desire is endless, why not die? Mice have appearance, but the human are rude! The human are rude, and why not stupid? “After the harvest, to some extent, it can alert the rulers and provide a reference for adjusting their rules. As is said in *Hanshu*: “poetry is for ambition, <sup>1</sup>It’s a metaphor for bad people and bad things that everyone hates.

while songs are for chanting. Thus, the sad music comes from the feelings in heart, which is expressed by the sound of singing. The words recited are called the poems, and the music chanted the songs. Therefore, there are officials who collected poetry in ancient times, so that the king observed the customs, knew the gains and losses, and corrected himself." [6]. This is the original appearance of "rumors".

By the Han Dynasty, "rumor" developed into "hearsay", which was an important monitoring system in the Han Dynasty. It was originally called "rumoring to the emperor as an oral report of daily events", and later called "hearsay" or "hearsay impeaching", referring to that the supervisors, in spite of the lack of necessary evidence, could file a case to correct it based on rumors instead of on testimony and self-suit, and did not record the name of the person who disclosed it. The content of "hearsay impeaching" is very extensive, "covering a wide range of people from the Crown to the most common people" [7]. Once the person impeached was reported through "hearsay", he would be deprived of his salary, or even be dismissed or killed. "Hearsay impeaching" had a great deterrent effect on criminals who committed crimes, so Du You said: "the imperial censor shouldered the major responsibility, and impeached lawbreakers to alert all the officials." [7]. In the Western Han Dynasty, the government set up a "custom messenger" to collect "hearsay", or sent messengers to travel around the world and collect folk songs. For instance, at the time of Han Xuan Emperor (741-49 BC), he had sent twelve envoys, "to tour the world, ask questions about the widowed, investigate into the conventions, and check the gains and losses" [8]. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, it was called "collecting rumors". The emperor or the Ombudsman sent messengers to the interview site to collect folk songs about good or bad official performances serving as the reference basis for the selection and promotion of officials in the imperial court examinations and the supervision system. For example, Fan Bang once had recommended "impeaching twenty more officials including imperial censors" [9]. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, collecting rumors has a very close relationship with the performance of the government, mainly because Emperor Li Xiu came from the lower class, and had deep concerns about the corruption of the government. "At the beginning, Liu Xiu grew up among the people, he knew them quite well, and after the nation had been created, he advocated seeking popular opinions and watching the rumors. So all the officials of all levels were working hard, and the common people could live their life happily" [10]. The "collecting rumors" method evolved into "hearsay impeaching" in the Jin Dynasty. In fact, "hearsay" is a further development of the second meaning of "rumor".

### 3. Literature References

"Hearsay impeaching" is without evidence at all and not focusing on facts. This is the main difference between "hearsay" and "rumor". There are two ways for "hearsay monitoring". First, the supervisory officials could rectify the case based on rumors, and then file the case. Investigation was followed by the evidence

collecting. For example, during the reign of the Xuanwu Emperor of the Northern Wei Dynasty (500-515 AD), the imperial censor Wang Xian “had heard that the governor in the state of Luo Yin, PingziShirong and the general BaoLaoshou were plotting something unlawful and then he immediately organized an investigation which proved the rumors” [11]. Especially in the Qing Dynasty, many major and important cases were cracked through this method, such as Yu Hongtu’s privately selling of scholars in 11th year of YongZheng (1733), Jiang Zhou’s invasion of Tuerle in the 22nd year of QianLong (1757), Li Shiyao’s embezzlement and bribery in the 45th year of QianLong (1780), Guo Tai and Yu Yi’s corruption case in the 47th year of QianLong (1782), all of which were successful cases in the history of the famous “hearsay impeaching”. Of course, there are many cases based on “rumors” without detailed investigations, which led to unjust, false and wrong cases. In fact, the “rumor” was regarded as “hearsay”, such as the famous case of witchcraft during the period of Emperor Han Wu. Emperor Han Wu was old and sick in his old age, believing in ghosts and gods and trying to live forever. He had also been in the Ganquan palace for a long time, and separated from the queen, his children and ministers for a long time. This allowed some vicious persons to take advantage. The case of witchcraft occurred in 90BC, and it lasted three years, during which thousands of people had died including the queen Wei Zifu, the prince Liu Ju, the princess Zhuyi and Yangshi, Wei Qing’s eldest son the Lord of Changping Wei Kang, the prime minister Gongsun He and Liu Qumao and other imperial relatives, the three councilors of the state and the nine ministers as well as innocent ordinary soldiers and the common people. The blood flowing on the streets of Chang’an was horrifying. Every killing was caused by Emperor Han Wu’s hearing of obituaries, rumors, and slangs. The investigation and trials were designed and framed against someone, which completely violated judicial justice and the original meaning of “hearsay”. The original intention of “monitoring” was an extreme negative case of the operation of “hearsay supervisory”. Another famous case is the case of Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai during the Tongzhi period of the Qing Dynasty (1862-1874). The magistrate of the county Liu Xitong heard the rumors from the streets that the death GuPinlian (the husband of Xiao Baicai) was plotted by Yang Naiwu and Xiao Baicai, who arbitrarily poisoned him. Without investigation, it was a life-threatening injustice. This case not only alarmed Emperor Tongzhi, but also the two empress dowagers, which had a huge impact. There are many cases in history that used “rumors” as “hearsay”, such as King Langb and PengYue killed during the period of Han Gaozu, the prime minister Zhou Bo during the period of Emperor Han Wen, the prime minister Zhou Yafu during the period of Emperor Han Jing, the empress Feng during the period of emperor HanAi and the emperor Liu Yun, all killed by the “rumor”.

The second is that supervisors take the initiative to collect “hearsay”. In *Tongzhi-Official Post* 4: “It is said that in the old cases the censor was not responsible for investigating cases. Here were passers of rumors who stood at the

gate and collected outside the gate of censor path. If it was worth impeaching, the passers would leave out their names, which was all know as the hearsay.” [12]. For example, in the Northern Song Dynasty, the censor Zhai Si played things with “hearsay”. Huang Li said: “the censor’s duty was based on words, so if one failed to hear something, he couldn’t say anything. Otherwise, people would be punished for it, and the censor would no longer listen, and the rumors may lose their meanings.” [13]. It was not only to protect the informants, but also to preserve the seriousness of the censor’s work and guarantee the normal conduct of the monitoring work. In addition to listening to “hearsay” in the station, the censor also often collected “hearsay” in different prefectures and counties. That is, “the censor would go out, and be informed of the hearsay” [14]. Through these methods, the monitoring agency can learn a large number of cases and criminal facts so as to effectively monitor the function the government.

#### 4. Conclusion

As a social phenomenon, “rumor” has changed its semantic meaning after years of development. To this day, in modern Chinese still retains many words that are closely related to “rumor”, such as “nursery rhymes”, “ballads”, “new rhymes”, “folk ballads”, “Chu ballads”, “Wu ballads”, “Qing ballads”, “village ballads”, “chanting ballads”, “sanhu ballads”, “fupi ballads”, “Wukua ballads”, “Fuchai ballads”, etc. But with the development of history, the scope of “rumor” has gradually narrowed, and it has become a derogatory term that is completely irrelevant to “folk comment”. At the moment, micro-corruption is serious, the party and the country have demonstrated unprecedented determination and courage to fight against corruption, and a large number of corrupt elements have been dealt with seriously by the Party discipline and the law. But we believe that these will never be the whole of corruption, and that there are a large number of “lucky people” hiding in the dark and not showing up. We should discover and make use of the reasonable part of “hearsay-monitoring”, and the supervision department must adhere to the mass line, fully mobilize the masses, absorb the wisdom of the masses, and inspire the enthusiasm of the masses, constantly innovating information collection methods, and constructing a monitoring network, so that the grassroots “micro-corruption” has nowhere to hide. The article only explores the relationship between rumors and hearsay, and explains how to curb rumors and foregrounds the role of hearsay. As for the specific operation of hearsay-monitoring and its role, it needs to be discussed in the future research.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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