Fake News!

Chinese Mobilization of Resources Against The Church of Almighty God as a Global Phenomenon

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The Coming of “Fake News”

A meta-analysis conducted in 2017 identified some 7,000 scholarly studies on disinformation and misinformation. Some 250 refer specifically to “fake news” and none is older than 2016, although the term “fake news” had been already introduced during World War I.
“Fake news” became a household name after it was used by Donald Trump in his presidential campaign in 2016 (and in his first presidential press conference in 2017). It was also adopted by his opponents to denounce the maneuvers of Trump’s domestic and international (i.e. Russian) supporters.
But What Does It Mean?

Being in its infancy, the social scientific study of fake news typically spends significant time in trying to determine what fake news is. Farkas and Schou argue that it is a “floating signifier,” with no “real” meaning. It is mostly used, with polemical purposes, by the opponents respectively of (a) the mainline liberal media; (b) the Western conservative media and the Russian propaganda supporting them; and (c) the pervasive manipulation of consumers by digital capitalism.
The Classical Paradigm

- Other scholars criticized Farkas and Schou’s approach as unilateral.
- Although contested, the classical paradigm of communication theory suggests that news be studied based on the template:
  
  PRODUCTION
  
  MESSAGE
  
  RECEPTION
  
- Reception can be studied empirically (e.g., by Allcott and Gentzkow in a controversial 2017 study), assessing how much fake news determine our behavior.
Philosophers and Fake News

- Philosophers are among the scholars most interested in fake news, and proposed several definitions

**Neil Levy** (University of Oxford): “Fake news is the presentation of false claims that purport to be about the world in a format and with a content that resembles the format and content of legitimate media organisations”

**Regina Rini** (York University, Toronto): “A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience”
Another philosopher, University of Berlin’s Axel Gelfert, proposes a simpler definition: *Fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design.*
Different Kinds of Fake News

- **False Connection**: When headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content.
- **False Context**: When genuine content is shared with false contextual information.
- **Manipulated Content**: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.
- **Satire or Parody**: No intention to cause harm but has potential to fool.
- **Misleading Content**: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual.
- **Imposter Content**: When genuine sources are impersonated.
- **Fabricated Content**: New content, that is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.

Source: First Draft News
“Fake news” is not simply “false news.” It’s false news deliberately circulated through sustained and reiterated campaigns, and presented in such a way that many would believe they are true.

Contemporary fake news goes one step beyond traditional, Cold War-style disinformation because of its unprecedented capacity of mobilizing simultaneously a variety of media. “A core feature of contemporary fake news is that it is widely circulated online” (Bakir and McStay, “Fake News and The Economy of Emotions,” 2018)
Gelfert argues that skilled producers of fake news exploit four pre-existing cognitive biases:

- **confirmation bias**: we accept new information if it confirms our beliefs and prejudices
- **repetition effect**: “if they continue to say it, it should be true”
- **priming**: use of words that trigger a nonconscious memory reaction, e.g. “cult”
- **affective arousal**: emotions lower our defenses, e.g. “they abuse children”
Religion and Fake News

- Well before the expression “fake news” became fashionable, scholars of religion had noticed how rumors were spread against “bad” religions and made credible by both their reiteration and their endorsement by “authoritative” sources.
- As early as 1960, David Brion Davis had studied how what we would today call “fake news” were used in the 19th century against Mormonism and Catholicism.
- Jim Richardson noticed the same phenomenon in creating a widespread “cultphobia” during the “cult wars” and beyond.
Traditionally, “fake news” about religions labeled as “heresies” or “cults” were spread by private “moral entrepreneurs”: secular anti-religious activists or “anti-cultists,” or rival religionists.

In recent years, we have witnessed the spread of “fake news” about religious movements organized, in a much more systematic way, not by private but by public actors. Russia has emerged as a leading producer of fake news about both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientology, whose persecution at home it tries to justify internationally.
China and Xie Jiao

Not unlike Russia, China has the problem of justifying internationally the persecution of several religions, particularly those it lists as xie jiao and denounces as “pseudo-religions” or “cults.”

Being active in a xie jiao is a crime punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a jail penalty of three to seven years “or more.”

Xie jiao (whose translation as “evil cults” is inaccurate) means “heterodox teachings.” Lists of xie jiao were compiled since the late Ming era, and Emperors decided which religions were xie jiao, based also on political reasons. Definitions are vague and, for all practical purposes, a xie jiao is a group listed as such in the official list of xie jiao.
The Church of Almighty God (CAG)

- CAG, considered by CCP as a quintessential xie jiao, is a Christian new religious movement founded in China, in 1991. It teaches that Jesus returned to Earth and incarnated as Almighty God, a woman born in China, and now living in the U.S., who teaches the fullness of truth, most of whose utterances are collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh*. 
CAG is perceived by CCP as a fierce enemy. In fact, it denounces the persecution of Christians and identifies CCP with the Red Dragon of the Book of Revelation. However, if one reads CAG literature, it is clear that the Red Dragon would fall by itself, and there is no appeal to a revolution.
CAG Persecuted as a *Xie Jiao*

- CAG has been listed as a *xie jiao* since 1995. CAG’s statistics claim that more than 300,000 CAG members have been arrested in China to date. Figures are difficult to confirm, but there are frequent references in CCP’s own literature to extensive anti-CAG campaigns. There is also believable evidence that many CAG members have been tortured, and some died while in custody in highly suspicious circumstances.
There is a whole domestic propaganda apparatus spreading false news against the xie jiao, particularly through the specialized police unit Office 610 and the Chinese Anti-Xie-Jiao Association (Chinese Anti-Cult Association, CACA), established in 2000, which has direct ties with the CCP.

This propaganda, while perhaps effective, appears to repeat the schemes of traditional Soviet-style disinformation, and lacks the sophistication that is typical of the contemporary notion of fake news.
An Organized Plan

- Although the same false news is spread in China and abroad, I will focus here on the international propaganda, which corresponds more clearly to the scholarly definition of fake news. A document leaked by CAG to scholars, allegedly distributed by the Office 610 of Zhanjiang, Guangdong and implementing a nationwide teleconference against CAG of June 16, 2014, presents a credible anti-CAG disinformation plan by the CCP
How It Works

OFFICE 610 and CACA

CHINESE MEDIA IN ENGLISH

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS IN BEIJING

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA
Anti-CAG Fake News in Practice

1. News are created by Office 610 and CACA
2. English-language Chinese media launch them (not necessarily the People’s Daily, which would be too obvious)
3. For whatever reason, British (rather than, say, American or French) correspondents in Beijing often pick up the fake news first. Most first Western reports can be traced back to two media outlets only, BBC and The Telegraph
4. Since, these media are regarded as authoritative, rank high in Google, and are eminently quotable in Wikipedia, the fake news spread to thousands of international media (with occasional direct help by Chinese agencies in various countries)
Mother of All Fake News: The McDonald’s Murder

Not coincidentally but, if we believe the leaked document, pursuing a deliberate plan, the mother of all anti-CAG fake news is the murder of a woman in a McDonald’s diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014. That the murder occurred was unfortunately very much real. The fake news part is that it was perpetrated by CAG.
I was among the Western scholars invited by CACA to two 2017 conferences in Zhengzhou and Hong Kong to discuss the notion of xie jiao and The Church of Almighty God. I went there with an open mind.
My Conclusions

However, based on documents published by the same Chinese authorities, I concluded that the McDonald's murder was perpetrated by a different religious movement, with a similar name but not related to CAG. It venerated a different living Almighty God, one God in two persons, its two female leaders Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan. All scholars who studied the documents share my conclusions.
Unequivocal Statements

- Lü Yingchun (at trial): “Zhang Fan and I are the unique spokeswomen for the real ‘Almighty God.’ The government has been cracking down on the Almighty God that Zhao Weishan believes in, not the ‘Almighty God’ we mention. They are fake ‘Almighty God,’ while we are the real ‘Almighty God’.”

- Zhang Fan (interview): “I never had contacts with the Church of Almighty God.”
A few days after the incident, Chinese media (this time including the People’s Daily) attributed it to CAG.

BBC (with great fanfare) and The Telegraph picked up the story though their correspondents in Beijing.

Some **20,000** Western media had attributed the homicide to CAG by December 2017.
Case No. 2: The Story of Guo Bin

- Another item of anti-CAG fake news is that in 2013, in the Chinese province of Shanxi, CAG members gouged out the eyes of a six-year-old boy. American scholar Holly Folk studied the related documents and concluded that the crime was committed by the boy’s aunt, CAG had nothing to do with it, and accusations against the church were spread by Chinese anti-cultists only after the McDonald’s homicide, several months after the police investigation had been closed.
The Machine at Work, Again

Two Chinese Anti-Cult Web Sites

Want China Times, a now-defunct pro-CCP daily in Taiwan (with a false banner, never used by CAG)

Hong Kong journalist Brendon Hong

Several international media, Wikipedia
Case No. 3: Predicting the End of the World in 2012?

- Widespread fake news accuse CAG of having instigated riots based on the prediction of the end of the world in 2012, which became popular in China through the so called “Mayan prophecy” and the movie 2012 (right).

- However, there is no end of the world (rather, its transformation) in CAG’s theology, and the disasters predicted in the Bible will follow the end of work on Earth of Almighty God, who was alive and well in 2012.
A Case of Dissent

It is true that some CAG believers in China, like many other Chinese, developed an interest in the so-called Mayan prophecies predicting the end of the world in 2012, and some tried to use this theory as an evangelization tool.

But they were rebuked by the leaders and many were expelled. Zhao Weishan stated, “We do not preach the end of the world... The theory of the end of the world is wrong.” And, “Even if someone is able to gain others by using inappropriate methods to preach the gospel, those that are gained certainly are not people who really seek the truth but merely people who want to avoid catastrophes.”
Banners and brochures were supplied by CACA and other Chinese sources to Western media and scholars “proving” that the CAG had announced the end of the world in 2012. This brochure, however, in fact did not mention the end of the world at all, although its title was indeed “After 2012, The Last Ticket: Gain Salvation in the Catastrophes.” If it has not been fabricated, it is an example of the literature produced by dissidents who resisted the warnings of Zhao Weishan and, when identified, were promptly expelled.
Australian scholar Emily Dunn argued that the contested brochure might be authentic, since the same ark drawing also appeared on another brochure once diffused by the CAG (above). The latter, however, did not mention 2012 at all—nor did it mention theories of the end of the world.
Case no. 4: “Money for Converts”?

Another example of fake news, which unfortunately has played a role in leading to decisions where asylum has been denied to CAG refugees in Europe, is that “a [CAG] member receives 20,000 yuan ($3,237) for every new person they convert,” and that in turn new members should pay “2,000 yuan ($323) in membership fees” and spend extra money for buying CAG literature.

The information was spread by the Newsweek-associated International Business Times in 2014 in an article largely based (and quoting verbatim on this issue) a post-McDonald’s laundry list of accusations against the CAG published by the official newspaper of the Chinese regime, the People’s Daily.
No Membership Fee

- CAG members interviewed by the undersigned and other scholars vehemently deny that this is the case, and given the number of converts, even the richest religious organization in the world would have been quickly bankrupted.

- They also insist that there is no membership fee, and literature is distributed freely. CAG official Website states that “Believers of The Church of Almighty God can enjoy all of the books of God’s words, spiritual books, and audio and video productions without charge. They can also participate in the various events held by the Church for free... The Church does not permit anyone to solicit or encourage contributions under any name.”
An Alternative Template

- While the CCP created most fake news against CAG, others originated with Evangelical Christians, very much disturbed by the fact that the phenomenal growth of the CAG largely happened at their expenses.

- In this case, news traveled from Chinese Evangelicals to Evangelicals abroad, initially without the cooperation of CCP, which only recently realized that these incidents were of interest to Western scholars and added them to its laundry list of anti-CAG propaganda items.
Case no. 5: Kidnapping Christian Leaders?

Some Christian opponents of The Church of Almighty God also claim that in 2002 it kidnapped 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). When documents are studied, however, this story too appears to be largely unbelievable.
Fiction and Facts

- The story is great material for Evangelical novels (which were in fact written) but it is really hard to believe that

(1) CAG, hunted as it was by the Chinese police, was able to mount a large-scale kidnapping operation;

(2) CGF, which was also persecuted and operating underground at that time, did not verify who those who invited them to a Christian seminar were; and

(3) while allegedly informed of what happened, the Chinese police did not arrest anybody
Alternative Explanations

- It is possible that in fact the CGF leaders went to a training invited by members of the CAG, who did not immediately advertise the name of their church, which some may interpret as deception but can also be explained with the climate of persecution. Then, they reconstructed the event by using the familiar captivity narrative of having been “kidnapped by a cult,” while in fact no kidnapping in the normal and legal meaning of the word happened.
The leaked document suggests that Chinese propaganda should try to enlist Western scholars against CAG, as it was done with some degree of success for Falun Gong. This was perhaps one reason for our invitations to China in 2017. But it backfired spectacularly, generating an unprecedented amount of scholarly research sympathetic to CAG. Three of the scholars invited to China signed affidavits or appeals to correct false information about CAG.
This memorable failure of the attempt to recruit scholars to fight CAG was perhaps not unrelated to a new massive campaign of fake news in the second half of 2017, following and justifying massive arrests of CAG members in Zhejiang by repeating all the old fake news, including the McDonald’s homicide.
Variations on a Familiar Theme

*Sixth Tone*, described by *Foreign Policy* as “a media start-up under CCP oversight .. designed to entice Western readers”

Guess who? BBC and *Telegraph*, aka the usual suspects

Nearly one hundred articles published in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, the United States, the U.K., Russia, concentrated in a few days, reiterating the fake news and supporting campaigns against CAG refugees
Yet, things are not in 2018 what they were in 2014 or early 2017. Increasingly, fair coverage of CAG is offered by scholarly journals and quality media, unavoidably landing in Wikipedia as well.

In Italy, a court of law labeled attempts to attribute the McDonald’s murder to CAG as “fake news fabricated by the regime and aimed at discrediting the CAG”

A handful of scholars, human rights activists, and lawyers may look like David against Goliath, but Goliath is indeed losing ground, proving that fighting fake news is not impossible.