

Summary

The subject of the doctoral dissertation *Exit the Dragon. Chinese Urban Legends in the Context of Cultural Memory* are Chinese urban legends and conspiracy theories.

The main aim of the dissertation is to attempt to demonstrate the mythical nature of contemporary Chinese stories that connect them with tradition, and at the same time to read them in a cultural context, referring to categories such as cultural memory, and the strategy of forgetting, and mythorealism. In connection with the adopted research assumption, both a genological and thematic analysis of selected threads of Chinese urban legends and conspiracy theories is necessary. The main research problem concerns the specificity of urban legends in China – thematic and formal (genre), situating the genre in the area of contemporary myths. Stories of this type, like conspiracy theories, which are in close relations with them, can give us insight into how and in what way Chinese society tries to tame and give meaning to the changes taking place. Importantly, by definition, constituting an important part of folklore, they should function independently of the official government narrative, thus not being subject to censorship. One could therefore assume that these narratives are the “authentic” voice of the “Chinese people” that is not filtered through government media. And the government media promotes a culture of forgetting, repressing content and traditions that are inconvenient for the Chinese New Era (新时代) or the Great Renaissance of the Chinese Nation (中华民族伟大复兴).

The source material consists of threads of urban legends and conspiracy theories collected during fieldwork in the People's Republic of China in 2014-2018 during a language course at the Beijing Institute of Technology in Beijing as part of a scholarship from the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun (2014-2016) and during my master's studies in *Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language* at the same university (2016-2018), including work as a Director's Assistant at the Polish Institute (2018) – Cultural Service of the Polish Embassy in Beijing. For this reason, taking into account the center of life, studies, and later work, most of the material was collected in Beijing and its surroundings, including rural areas. Narratives that do not originally come from the aforementioned areas were collected online, via Western search engines, such as Google, and Chinese ones, including Baidu, as well as taking into account instant messengers and social networking sites such as Sina Weibo or WeChat.

In order to achieve the goals, the dissertation was divided into three chapters.

The first chapter, *Urban Legend – Characteristics of the Genre and the State of Research*, addresses terminological issues and presents the current state of research on the “urban legend”

in both Western countries and China. This chapter attempts to consider the concept of “urban legend” from several perspectives: semiotic, due to the different language system of the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom, thus referring to the linguistic and cultural theory of the sign, as well as the text itself; mythological, referring to the concept of myth in the ethnoreligious and structuralist approach, as well as to the concept of contemporary myth as a cultural explanation of certain aspects of reality; vernacular, referring to the theory of Marcin Napiorkowski, who proposes categorizing the “urban legend” as one of the elements of a broader concept of “vernacular narratives”.

The second chapter, *Folklore and folkloristics in China – local sources of urban legends and methods of their study*, takes up the subject of the history of folklore studies in China, describing both the development of the field itself and the tradition of Chinese “strange tales”. This chapter presents traditional literary forms, such as *zhiguai xiaoshuo* or *chuanqi xiaoshuo*, which could be considered prototypes of Chinese urban legends.

The last chapter, the third one, *Chinese urban legends and conspiracy theories in the context of cultural memory*, is a case study. Several groups of urban legends are collected and classified, the main themes of which are: travel, diseases, animals, and ghosts. The most popular motifs in Chinese urban legends occurring in mainland China, including those related to the dragon, are analyzed, comparing them with their Western counterparts, such as the popular theme of the “vanishing hitchhiker”.

The analyses carried out are summarized in a conclusion containing findings on the genre form, themes and motifs, and circulation of Chinese urban legends. The dissertation closes with an appendix, which collects source material – a corpus of stories collected during fieldwork in China and Taiwan and obtained during a search of internet sources.

Aleksandra Bortel-Prybylska
13.12.2024r.