

A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Chinese Rhetorical Vision on Xinjiang Cotton Incident

Yanan Wu*

Faculty of English, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an 710128, Shaanxi Province, China

*Corresponding author: Yanan Wu, 2645449705@qq.com

Abstract: At the end of March 2021, some international brands and international organizations boycotted Xinjiang cotton and related products in their commercial activities, which aroused great indignation among people from all walks of life in China, and people had come forward to stand up for Xinjiang as well as Xinjiang cotton. This paper emphasizes on the response of Chinese people to the Xinjiang cotton incident and commits to analyze what and how the fantasy themes are able to achieve with regards to the creation of rhetorical visions within contexts of symbolic convergence theory.

Keywords: Symbolic convergence; Fantasy theme; Rhetorical vision; Xinjiang cotton incident

Publication date: September 2021; **Online publication:** September 30, 2021

1. Introduction

At the end of March 2021, a statement released by H&M (Hennes & Mauritz) was circulated on a Chinese Twitter-like service, Weibo, and it stated that H&M would boycott Xinjiang cotton and stop its cooperation with Xinjiang garment manufacturers for the accusations of forced labor and discrimination of ethnoreligious minorities in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. However, in the perspective of Chinese people, the forced labor in Xinjiang was a purely malicious accusation, and as Chinese, they should be united as one to defend China against smear campaign, which were Chinese people's rhetorical visions formed after the wide on-line discussion over the Xinjiang cotton incident. The author will use Ernest Bormann's symbolic convergence theory, an important communication theory, and the fantasy theme analysis, a method of rhetorical criticism rooted from the theory, to analyze the fantasy themes created by Chinese.

In this paper, firstly the author will briefly introduce Bormann's symbolic convergence theory and the method of fantasy theme analysis. Secondly, the author will review the origin and development of Xinjiang cotton incident. Finally, he will analyze the setting theme, character theme, and action theme that helped construct the rhetorical vision, by means of fantasy theme analysis.

2. Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory and Fantasy Theme Analysis

As the theoretical foundation of the fantasy theme, symbolic convergence theory (SCT) investigates how exercising collaborative fantasy engenders group mindedness and eventually symbolic convergence among participants. It was propounded by the late University of Minnesota communication professor Ernest Bormann in 1972. At that time, Harvard social psychologist Robert Bales was working to categorize comments made in small-group discussions. On the basis of his research with zero-history problem-solving groups in his lab, Bales discovered that dramatizing was a significant type of communication that often-

fostered group cohesiveness^[4]. This fantasizing communication in small groups is described in this way, “The tempo of the conversation would pick up. People would grow excited, interrupt one another, blush, laugh, forget their self-consciousness. The tone of the meeting, often quiet and tense immediately prior to the dramatizing, would become lively, animated, and boisterous, the chaining process, involving both verbal and nonverbal communication, indicating participation in the drama”^[1]. Bormann picked up on Bales’ finding and undertook a more extensive study. He inferred that fantasization and dramatization would also occur within a greater scope of communication. He extended Bales notion of fantasizing into a theory, symbolic convergence theory, and a method, fantasy theme analysis, that can be applied not only to the study of small groups but also to the study of communication of social movements, political campaigns, organizational communication, and other kinds of rhetoric as well^[5].

Symbolic convergence theory states that the sharing of group fantasies will display symbolic convergence among participants. People share the symbolic facts such as fantasies, cues, and types with each other. They reiterate and reconfigure, repeat and embellish, and take the themes as their own, which unifies various dramas to give participants a broader view of things.

Fantasy theme is the basic unit of communication for symbolic convergence. Proposed by Bormann, the “fantasy” is different from the “imagination” what we often say. It refers to a creative and imaginative interpretation of the facts. The word “fantasy” in SCT implies shared explanation of matters that “fulfills cohort’s psychological or rhetorical necessities”^[3]. “Contrary to popular perceptions of narratives as unrealistic day-dreams, fantasies incorporate previous or visualized futuristic incidences that unravel complexities from joint realities”^[5]. Communication theorists used an imaginative example to illustrate the fantasy process. Suppose a group of Kentucky-born, middle-aged white guys are sitting around a cigar store smoking hand-rolled imported cigars. As the topic shifts from college basketball to the risk of smoking, the owner tells the story of a heart surgeon who came into the shop after having been on duty for 36 hours. After lighting up, the doctor blew out a big mouthful of smoke and said, “This is the most relaxed I have felt in days. Now how can that be bad for you?” Whether or not the doctor really said this isn’t the issue. If the story triggers responses such as a chuckle in appreciation, nods in agreement and other similar stories, a fantasy chain reaction is developed in the group, so is the symbolic convergence. With convergence, individuals share a common consciousness and have “the basis for communicating with one another to create community, to discuss their common experience, and to achieve mutual understanding”^[2]. The explanatory power of SCT stems from its portrayal of the communicative process that leads to meaning convergence for groups, and fantasy themes contribute to the formation of a shared identity and convergence for groups. In this paper, I will use this method to investigate the fantasy themes and the rhetorical visions shared by Chinese people in their response to the Xinjiang cotton incident.

3. The Boycott of Xinjiang Cotton

On March 24, 2021, a statement published on H&M’s official website in 2020 was widely spread on Weibo. This statement claimed:

H&M Group is deeply concerned by reports from civil society organizations and media that include accusations of forced labor and discrimination of ethnoreligious minorities in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). We do not work with any garment manufacturing factories located in XUAR, and we do not source products from this region. XUAR is China’s largest cotton growing area, and up until now, our suppliers have sourced cotton from farms connected to Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) in the region. As it has become increasingly difficult to conduct credible due diligence in the region, BCI has decided to suspend licensing of BCI cotton in XUAR.

The civil society organization referred to by H&M is BCI, a global non-profit organization with the headquarters in Switzerland. It is also the largest cotton sustainability program in the world, providing

“good cotton” certification for those enterprises that produce and process cotton. They can put the “BCI” label on their products after they have proved that their products can meet the sustainable development requirements of the cotton industry. BCI and its members’ statement of “boycotting Xinjiang products” caused uproar at home and abroad, and multiple brands including H&M, Nike, Adidas, Converse, Puma, Uniqlo, Burberry, and Zara were involved.

As soon as this statement was unveiled, a series of chain reactions were triggered. The hashtag “support Xinjiang cotton” immediately listed the top trending topic on Weibo. State media lashed out against what it called lies made with ulterior motives. Many Chinese have called for boycotts, celebrities have cut ties, and e-commerce platforms have dropped H&M. H&M was not the only international retailer facing the wrath of Chinese web users. Other involved international brands like Nike, Adidas and Puma were also facing backlash. The Chinese government also responded to the incident. The Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that the so-called “forced labor” in China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region was completely unfounded. Chinese opposed any external interference in Xinjiang affairs and national internal affairs. The China Consumers Association called on that the relevant industry organizations and international companies should stop implementing practices of false propaganda and discriminatory policies, stop harming the legitimate rights and interests of consumers.

4. Chinese Rhetorical Vision and Fantasies

Fantasy theme is the basic unit of symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis. A rhetorical vision lies at structural level and is a “composite drama in which large groups of people participate”^[9]. The theory also suggests that humans are storytellers and that “when they share a dramatization of an event, they make sense out of its complexity by creating a script or narrative to account for what happened”^[9]. Like any other forms of drama, this one also includes the setting, where the action taking place; the characters, the agents or actors taking the action; and the action or the plot lines of the drama. In order to fully understand the origin and the development of Chinese rhetorical visions formatted during the Xinjiang cotton incident, we need to carefully analyze its three-fantasy theme.

5. Setting theme

Setting is the scene of a drama, the place where the action occurs, and the place where the characters of the play act out their roles. In many dramas, the setting or the scene becomes so important that it appears to influence both the qualities attributed to the actors or characters and the plotlines within the vision^[8]. The setting of this drama is a boycott of Xinjiang cotton incident which is believed by Chinese people to be a malicious excuse.

In October 2020, BCI claimed that it would stop all on-site activities in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the cause of which was accusations of forced labor and discrimination of ethnoreligious minorities. As for how this conclusion was reached, BCI did not give a detailed explanation. Chinese believed that BCI did not understand the truth at all, and these accusations did not match the reality. BCI’s accusation of forced labor in Xinjiang is mainly aimed at manual cotton picking which is no longer dominated by manual harvesting. Beginning in 2015, the demand for cotton-picker machine in Xinjiang has shown a spurt of growth. According to the data released by Xinjiang’s agricultural department, the machinery picking rate of Xinjiang cotton has reached 69.83%. The extensive use of cotton-picker has greatly saved labor costs and improved production efficiency. Simultaneously, the degree of mechanization of cotton planting is also increasing. With the support of various technologies, Xinjiang’s cotton production has increased from 3.67 million tons in 2014 to 5.115 million tons in 2018, accounting for from 60% to 83.8% of national production. All kinds of evidence have contributed, at least partly, to the formation of Chinese rhetorical vision that the “forced labor” is purely mendacious, and that the Xinjiang cotton incident

was maliciously framed.

6. Character theme

Characters are agents or actors in the drama. “These characters are attributed certain qualities, depicted as taking certain actions, represented as appearing within a certain scene, and their actions are motivated or justified by the sanctioning of a certain agent”^[8]. In a certain drama or a vision, the characters include both heroic and villainous ones, as well as minor and supporting players. In the drama of the Xinjiang cotton incident, Chinese identified themselves as a heroic player.

H&M’s statement about boycotting of Xinjiang cotton sparked outrage among Chinese netizens. Some people on Weibo called for H&M to leave China. Additionally, the hashtag “support Xinjiang cotton” remained to be the top trending topic on Weibo for nearly a week. In the view of Chinese people, Xinjiang is not only an autonomous region of China, but also an inseparable part of the country. So stigmatizing Xinjiang is stigmatizing China. Therefore, all Chinese people participated in the destigmatized campaign of Xinjiang, because they believed that defending Xinjiang is defending the entire country. This mind has much to do with the collectivism that China pursues.

There is also a very important value in China that has played a significant role in this incident. People believe that when personal interests and collective interests clash, they should subordinate their personal interests to those of the collective, and that when it is necessary, they will sacrifice their personal interests. In the case of Chinese celebrities, although many Chinese celebrities have made lots of well-paid cooperation with some brands involved, they resolutely issued statements to terminate the contracts with those brands such as H&M. Nearly fifty celebrities have stopped their cooperation with those involved brands. Those kind of behavior were believed to be the heroic behavior by giving up individual interests and putting national interest first.

7. Action theme

Rhetorical vision is a composite drama that catches up large groups of people into a common symbolic reality shared by a rhetorical community^[6]. The plot line or action is an important part of the drama. In the drama, people from all walks of life in China have taken different actions to contribute their strength to the defense of Xinjiang and Xinjiang Cotton.

Once the Xinjiang Cotton incident was exposed to social media, it immediately attracted widespread attention and support from Chinese netizens. Some celebrities with great influence in China and even in the world would issue statements to sever the cooperative relationship with the brands involved. Then, mainstream media outlets, including the People’s Daily, weighed in. They called the incident a typical case of vilification and published relevant authoritative information to prove Xinjiang’s innocence. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce also declared that Chinese government had always welcomed normal business activities of multinational enterprises in China and supported their efforts to build an industrial chain. Foreign enterprises were also welcomed to investigate Xinjiang and do business in Xinjiang. But the action of taking advantage of China while damaging China’s interests would be strongly opposed.

8. Construction of Rhetorical Vision

Very briefly, a rhetorical vision is created in the communication through linking fantasy themes to a setting, characters, and actions that together form a symbolic drama or a coherent interpretation of reality^[5]. Chinese people wove the setting theme, confronting with the boycott of Xinjiang cotton incident that initiated by some international institutions and companies. They hold that Xinjiang Autonomous Region was misunderstood, suffering from malignity and rumor. In this situation, the Chinese were both the victims

and heroes. They were representative of heroic one, while the organization boycotting Xinjiang cotton was synonymous with villainous one. A villain's behavior was to spread rumors to attack Xinjiang, and the mission of the hero was to prove Xinjiang's innocence and defend Xinjiang's rights and interests. All Chinese were called to have the sense of unity and to arouse their sense of responsibilities. Under the influence of strong patriotic enthusiasm and national pride, when Chinese people's fantasy themes were linked, they would unconsciously accept the ideology behind the rhetoric based on shared knowledge, beliefs and values. It seemed that the only way out for them was to be unified with each other to defend Xinjiang and China against all malicious movements. In this way, the rhetorical vision had been formed.

9. Conclusion

Fantasy-theme rhetorical criticism is an effective method of rhetorical criticism and research. Based on the symbolic convergence theory, this paper has applied this method to analyze Chinese people's response to or fantasy interpretation of Xinjiang cotton, and to investigate the process that Chinese achieved the same rhetorical vision. In order to make a more detailed analysis, firstly, the author made a brief introduction of the origin and development about Xinjiang cotton incident. Then, by adopting the fantasy-theme rhetorical strategy, the author studied how the rhetorical vision was constructed and analyzed the fantasy theme created by the Chinese from three aspect. The Chinese achieved the same rhetorical vision, which made a great significance to call on all Chinese people to be proud of their motherland, cherish their traditions, abandon their old disagreements, and unite for the common good of China.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Bormann EG, 1972, Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*: 58, 396-407.
- [2] Bormann EG, 1983, Symbolic Convergence Theory: Organizational Communication and Culture. In L. Putnam & M. E. Paconowsky (Eds.), *Communication and organizations: An Interpretive Approach*. Beverly Hill, CA: Sage: 99-122.
- [3] Bormann EG, 1985, Symbolic Convergence Theory: A Communication Formulation. *Journal of Communication*: 35-4, 128-138.
- [4] Bormann EG, Cragan JF, Shields DC, 2001, Three Decades of Developing, Grounding, and Using Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT). In G. William (Ed.), *Communication yearbook*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum: 271-313
- [5] Foss SK, 1989, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration & Practice*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press: 289-290
- [6] Griffin E, Ledbetter A, Sparks G, 2019, *A First Look at Communication Theory 10th Edition*. Boston: McGraw Hill: 288.
- [7] H&M Group Statement on Due Diligence, 2020, H&M Group. Available: <https://hmgroup.com/sustainability/fair-and-equal/human-rights/h-m-group-statement-on-due-diligence/>.
- [8] Shields DC, Preston CT, 1985, Fantasy Theme Analysis in Competitive Rhetorical Criticism. *The National Forensic Journal*, 3: 102-115.
- [9] Sovacool BK, Ramana MV, 2015, Back to the Future: Small Modular Reactors, Nuclear Fantasies, and Symbolic Convergence. *Science, Technology, & Human Values*, 40-1, 96-125.