

《中国式造谣》

An outsider's perspective is valuable. But even in this age of instant information the outsider could become a poster boy made malleable by preconceived perceptions and a thirst for contrast.

In the minds of most Chinese, the word "Harvard" is synonymous with educational excellence - to the point of overshadowing other equally top-notch Western institutions of higher education except maybe Oxford and Cambridge.

However, the Harvard in the Chinese imagination is not the Harvard by the Charles River in Boston. It is a myth shrouded in layers of cultural misperception. When I was a kid, a friend of my father's, one of the very few who had been to other provinces of the country, described Harvard as a school with very high walls, where students were not allowed to go outside during the four years of their study, not even when their parents died. They had to memorize tons of text from early morning until late at night.

Now that I recall it, the Harvard believed in by this relatively well-informed person (for that era) was a cross between an ancient Chinese school and a prison. Had he been shown the movie Love Story, which was made around the same time and was about a Harvard student, he would have been devastated: "What? A student could date and get married while in school?"

Even with China's opening up and with the growing exchange of information, some Chinese people simply cannot resist the temptation of molding China's favorite foreign university in our own image, which is essentially a school staffed by thousands of tiger moms. Thus were born the rumors about the 20 statements plastered on the walls of Harvard's library. The statements were said to include: "If you sleep now, you will have a dream, but if you study now, you will realize a dream"; "Even though happiness is not based on a person's performance records, success is the likely result"; and "If you study one more hour, you will have a better husband."

In 2012, The Wall Street Journal carried an article that quoted Professor Robert Darnton, who stated unequivocally: "As the university librarian, I can attest that no such writings exist on any of the walls at Harvard's 73 libraries."

The professor may not know that he has many phantom colleagues who have penned Chinese best-sellers.

There is a special section in China's publishing industry, usually operated underground and with retail outlets on sidewalks, that churn out many inspirational and how-to books.

They tend to have extremely catchy titles, such as Executive Power, which was supposedly authored by a certain Professor Paul Thomas, who is on the Harvard Business School faculty. After selling 2 million copies, this volume of inspiration, which was said to be President Lincoln's favorite book, was found to be totally phony. There was no English original and Paul Thomas was a name the publisher created out of the blue. Harvard Mottos is another such book, but its author seems to have more flesh and blood than Paul Thomas of Executive Power. Danny Feng is reported to be a Beijinger who has studied in the United States. After the scam was exposed, Feng said he based his book on an online post by expanding on each of the 20 mottos. It was a fly-by-night operation, taking

only two months from the book's conception to hitting store shelves.

The trend can be traced back to 2000 when Liu Yiting, the Harvard Girl was published. Liu's mother, Liu Weihua, wrote a book chronicling her methodology of teaching her daughter that ended up with the younger Liu being admitted into Harvard's undergraduate program. The book sold a cumulative 2 million copies and spawned another book of rebuttal.

In Truth, Xiao Yu wrote that the way Liu was trained, as described in her mother's book, is traditionally Chinese rather than Western. He adds: "The reason the myth has held up is the word Harvard. Most in China do not know the real Harvard and they placed a halo of admiration around it."

At least Liu Yiting is a real person who really got into Harvard and her mother really wrote that book.

Most of those responsible for the Harvard-related success stories may not even have a college diploma. Many of those inspirational books were hack jobs by those with marketing savvy and whose writing consists mostly of copying and pasting from online sources.

My parents did not write books. But they instinctively used comparison as a means of motivating me while I was young. "That kid next door is studying from 5 am to 10 pm," or, "He's got all As, but what have you got?"

It dawned on me that my next-door neighbor was actually serving as a kind of miniature Harvard in my parents' pedagogy. But as a real person he posed many inconveniences, especially when he started to flunk his courses. But Harvard is always there, so remote and so impersonal that it can be whatever you need it to be.

Chinese websites are overflowing with feel-good pieces of factoids and dubious information.

People who are eager to share but are totally ignorant of such concepts as "check and verify" will resend a piece they feel important, which could instantly reach millions, usually depending on how catchy the title is. By the time experts come out to clarify, the damage is done. The clarification piece would at best make a small dent in the colossal machine of myth-making.

Misinformation flourishes with issues closest to the hearts of the Chinese people. Education is one. Because many in China are frustrated with the education system, stories from the US are needed as a contrast. Meanwhile, Chinese parents will use the "next-door kid" approach to justify their method of discipline. Likewise, Chinese show their displeasure at official corruption by spreading stories in which foreign bureaucrats were sacked for taking laughably small favors.

Mind you, not all of these stories are fabricated a la the Harvard professors' books. Some are true stories distributed by bona fide news organizations. Others have a modicum of truth, but got embellished as they went around. However, they provide a partial picture if not a distorted one.

If housing prices in China are obscenely high, those in other countries must be affordable, as attested by comparative photos with prices attached. Never mind that it's ludicrous in the first place to compare an apartment within Beijing's Third Ring Road with a house in Montana.

Many people are impatient with stories with context because the subtleties and nuances confuse them, depriving them of the pleasure of drawing simple conclusions. If you say Chinese education has certain advantages that the American way does not, and vice versa, as I have sometimes done, you'll offend both the pro-Chinese-education camp and the opposing camp. Both sides will see you as an enemy.

The third party as contrast is a natural development of an earlier trend, which is the third party as //confirm/i/iation. We used to love this approach, citing foreigners' customary congratulations as testament of the high quality of our artistic works.

Just at the turning point when many Chinese awoke to this pitfall, along came Wolfgang Kubin, a German Sinologist who categorically branded Chinese literature as "trash". He grew to be the voice for Chinese discontent with our own literary scene.

I suspect that even when he stops critiquing Chinese literature people will make up quotes and attribute to him. If I come up with "20 reasons I hate Chinese literature" and put down Kubin's name, I can guarantee the piece will hit every website in China within a day.

By Raymond Zhou (China Daily)

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