

# THE HONG KONG OCEAN PARK KIDNAPPING RUMOR<sup>1</sup>



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**In March 2010, an emailed rumor spread through Hong Kong's Western expatriate community describing an attempted kidnap-ping of a Caucasian boy by two Chinese women at a popular amusement park several days earlier. The emails were traced back to the original author who explained her role in its dissemination. This article examines the reasons why the rumor was widely believed by expatriate parents. Although factually false, the rumor carried symbolic truth in the fear of a rising China that "steals" Western jobs, and of young Chinese women who "steal" Western husbands. In addition, expatriate women are uneasy over the compromises they must make in having both a family and a career. (Emailed rumors, ethnic stereotyping, Hong Kong expatriates)**

On March 22, 2010, an email rumor swept the Western expatriate<sup>2</sup> community of Hong Kong claiming that there had been an attempt to kidnap a Caucasian boy at Ocean Park, a popular amusement park with rides, an aquarium, and performing sea mammals. Concerned parents contacted the territory's major English-language newspaper, The South China Morning Post (SCMP) and posted messages on online discussion boards. While such rumors are not uncommon, this one caused sufficient worry to get mentioned on television and in the newspaper. This rumor is noteworthy because, first, it spread among highly educated expatriates. Second, though most rumors have an unknown source, in this case it was possible to trace the rumor to the author of the initial email. The article will attempt to show that anxieties and fears motivated these expats to spread the rumor. It will also show that discovering the creator of the rumor does not help in understanding why it spread so widely, only among expats. An explanation lies in uncovering the rumor's symbolism and cultural meanings. This case also shows that rumors that spread widely do not necessarily have one meaning, but may have many. The several meanings may be more salient for different persons, but together they add to the power and resonance of the rumor.

## THE RUMOR

Below is the rumor that spread by email. Typing and other errors are left as they appeared in the message and in other online texts, and only the name "Jane" is a pseudonym; the other names appeared in the newspaper and so are public.

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Subject: Fwd: Fw: Attempted abduction at Ocean Park

A friend of mine just sent this to me - not sure if you have seen it yet.....so scary..pl forward to other mums...

Jane

A close friend had a very upsetting incident at Ocean Park Friday afternoon in which two chinese women tried to abduct her child as she was clipping her baby into the stroller. She says her son (just under 3 yrs old) was not more than 4 ft from her when these women seemed very friendly and were making a fuss over her son, one of them picked him up and within about 10 seconds she couldn't see them. She heard her son crying as they were running/walking fast off with him. A passer by was alarmed and tried to stop the women, they let go of the boy and ran off. This passer by said they had put a hat/scarf on him to cover him up. When my friend talked to security, their first words were 'not again' - at which my friend got understandably very angry with them. Ocean Park staff said they didn't want any 'fuss' and tried to play it down, so she called the police and they have formally lodged it as an attempted child abduction. A friendly security guard at Ocean Park said this was the second time in 3 weeks - both non-chinese toddlers targeted. She is going to talk to Sunshine House tomorrow, where her son goes, to put a notice up and warn as many parents as possible. She is also going to talk to the Editor of Playtimes. I have to say I was going to send my 2yr old with my 4yr old and my helper to Ocean Park next week and have obviously changed my mind. Trina - information worth knowing - and Jayne/Wendy you may want to pass this on at Southside. Please let anyone with toddlers know.

Diane

The emails flew among Hong Kong expatriates on the morning of Monday, March 22, 2010. Many reported receiving multiple copies. During the morning, people called or emailed the SCMP asking them to investigate the story and warn parents of the dangers posed by a gang of kidnappers. By early afternoon, the police had issued a statement and Ocean Park gave a press release (Ocean Park 2010a) saying the rumors were not true.

The story also spread on internet discussion boards (BBSs). The first was on AsiaExpat.com on Sunday night, when "axptguy38" began a new thread entitled "Motive for recent kidnapping attempts in Ocean Park?" and posted a summary of the story. By 8:00 p.m. on Monday, 20 posts by 15 different people had been added to the thread. Some posters were convinced it was true, while others were skeptical. At 3:00 p.m. on Monday, "Norma" posted the emailed story on GeoExpat.com, and by 7:17 p.m. there were 45 posts on the story. It also appeared on hongkongbabies.com (2010). As is often the case, most posters on the BBSs were simply trying to ascertain the truth, passing on information that supported or undermined the rumor (Shibutani 1966). A few who were familiar with urban or contemporary legends were abusive towards the original poster.

Journalist Simon Parry commented "Everyone's getting the email," and it did seem that most expatriates with small children, especially women, knew of the rumor. A kindergarten headmistress even sent the email to all her

student's parents, and a director of a bank forwarded the message to the bank's employees. Parents who called the SCMP insisted that it was true. Many people who contacted Parry gave him the impression that they wanted to believe the story was true. In an email to me, Parry wrote:

I've just had another call from ANOTHER mother who contacted the SCMP and says it's definitely true and happened on Friday because her best friend heard it from the woman directly. She says she will get her to call me this afternoon. However, when I asked her about it more closely the identity of the mother became murky and she admitted it might not be quite so direct a line ... i.e. maybe a friend of a friend of a friend! It seems a classic urban myth scenario but you really get the feeling people WANT to believe it happened.

By late afternoon, after Ocean Park had issued statements calling the email false, the police began investigating the spread of the story. Ocean Park was angry enough about the rumor to consider suing whoever was responsible. This worried those women who found themselves at the center of the story and made some unwilling to talk about it. Others who heard that "the police were investigating" took it to mean investigating the attempted kidnapping, not the spreading of the rumor.

At close to 7:00 p.m., Parry received an email from Diane, the woman who wrote the first email that started the rumor, explaining that she had sent the message to three friends. They forwarded the message to their friends, one of whom forwarded it to a women's reading group, which probably helped the story reach a tipping point. Diane wrote to Parry:

Wow, I can't believe that an e-mail I sent to 3 friends with small kids has turned into this. I have been trying to clarify the situation so that the lady in question, Ocean Park and myself don't get caught up in 'noise and stories' when in fact, the police are treating the incident as a child abduction attempt and is a really serious issue. The lady in question was at a bar on Saturday night, she was telling a few mum's about her child's incident at Ocean Park - I was ducking in and out of the conversation. After she left, you can imagine the various conversations going on, I sent a personal e-mail to 3 ladies I know that take their multiple children to Ocean Park. Then all hell breaks out. I see the e-mail is spiralling out of control and try to at least clarify what happened and put any records straight. So, the incident took place around 3-4 weeks ago. The lady went home with her children without reporting the incident to Ocean Park, this happened afterwards when some details emerged from her child. She called the police, who are, given the evidence, treating it as an attempted child abduction. Ocean Park have since installed CCTV where the incident took place and in interviews said staff noticed 2 chinese women acting suspiciously - this is heresay from [a] friend close to the lady. I don't know what other measures Ocean Park have taken. My friend who was in the crowd on Saturday night said there was definitely a comment by the lady in question that this had been the 2nd incident in about 3 weeks. I would not like to be named in the article, this was a personal e-mail I sent when I got in from the bar sat night/sun morning! However, clearly there is a serious issue afoot - I don't know how it's been kept out of the press for the last few weeks and I think they owe it to hong kong residents to tell them to be extra vigilant - especially coming up to Easter.

Diane, with a few vague, innocuous facts, had created a story about abduction. Even though she admits being in and out of the conversation and not knowing what happened, she was convinced that this was the second incident in three weeks. But the story changed from the security guard saying this was not the first occurrence of an attempted kidnapping to a lady hearing it being said in a bar. Far from a stranger intervening to save the child, it is no longer clear what the incident at the park was. Further, it is something a child says much later that results in the story emerging. What does “2 Chinese women acting suspiciously” mean? Staring at foreign children might seem suspicious to some, but not to Chinese tourists. It seems that Diane has picked up bits of previous emails and contemporary legends, put them together, and, aided by alcohol, did not see that the facts of the story were improbable.

The SCMP investigated the stories and published three articles on the rumor. The first (Parry 2010a), published the day after the rumor surfaced, suggested the story was unreliable, and quoted Ocean Park as saying it had no knowledge of any kidnapping. The second (Parry 2010b) discussed rumors in general. The third article (Parry 2010c) reported the journalist’s discovery of the source of the rumor, Diane, who was shocked by her email’s spread but defiant and unrepentant, insisting that “something had happened” and that parents needed to be cautious.

The rumor was ignored by (or invisible to) the Chinese press. The *Ming Pao* (2010) had a brief story that summarized the rumor and gave Ocean Park’s response; Hong Kong’s five or six other major dailies had brief stories focusing on Ocean Park’s press release (e.g., *The Oriental Daily* 2010; *Sing Tao Daily* 2010). The television network TVB, with about 80 percent audience share, reported Ocean Park’s statement on Pearl English news, but the story was not mentioned on TVB Jade, the Chinese channel. One reason is that the story seemed bizarre and unbelievable to Hong Kong and mainland Chinese. Most Hong Kong Chinese, when told of the rumor, asked why mainland Chinese would want Western children. The illogical premise of the rumor makes it merely puzzling instead of frightening to most Chinese.

Those familiar with contemporary legends would notice similarities to other stories. Snopes.com, the online rumor and contemporary legend investigation site, has several American stories that resemble this case. One from Tupelo, Mississippi, tells of a Mexican woman attempting to abduct a child that she unbuckled from a stroller as the mother was shopping for clothes, purportedly to sell the child on the black market in Mexico (Snopes 2006a). In a story set in northern Texas, a father foiled an attempted abduction of his five-year-old daughter at a Blockbuster video store by beating the kidnappers (Snopes 2006b). Another set of persistent stories has kidnappers

attempting to steal children from shopping centers or amusement parks by shaving their hair and trying to alter their appearance (Snopes 2012).

Several people on the Hong Kong BBSs compared this new rumor to a local contemporary legend about children being kidnapped at Ikea, which Ikea refuted by posting a disclaimer on its home page (Ikea 2010). These rumors are also common in the UK (see Help Find My Child 2010). Such stories, set in a variety of amusement parks, department stores, and malls, all taking place in different cities, predate the Internet (Brunvand 1981:182–4). Similar stories have circulated in Hong Kong. There have been rumors among the Chinese that children in Hong Kong were being kidnapped and taken to Shenzhen in mainland China (Evans 1997:277). A year before the Ocean Park rumor, blogger Lisa Tong (Tong 2009), a Canadian stay-at-home mother living in Hong Kong, posted a message entitled “Be careful of your children when in Hong Kong.” In it she originally presented the story of the attempted Ikea kidnapping as true, but this led to over 800 emails and a newspaper article (Apple Daily 2009), leading her to remove the message from her blog. Thus, the idea that children in Hong Kong are at risk was not new with the email rumor of March of 2010. The underlying fear and a combination of factors came together to raise the issue again.

#### DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

There are several aspects of the story that are illogical. First, an amusement park is a crowded place where children can easily get lost, but it is not a very good place to abduct a toddler. Many parents, perhaps most, have had the frightening experience of losing a child, even if only for a few minutes. But this is quite different from a gang choosing such places to abduct children, as claimed in the email. Second, there are dozens of crying children with domestic helpers in the park, and one must seriously doubt that anyone would “stop” an Asian woman with a crying white child. Finally, the notion of kidnapping foreign children is, at the very least, novel. While there are cases of gangs kidnapping children in China, the children taken are of poor Chinese migrant workers, not foreign expatriates.<sup>3</sup>

In Hong Kong, the number of child kidnappings is very low. The police records show only four cases (and four arrests) from 2005 to 2007 (Apple Daily 2009). In comparison, a survey in the United States conducted by the Department of Justice found an estimated 115 “stereotypical kidnappings” defined as “perpetrated by a slight acquaintance or stranger in which a child is detained overnight, transported at least 50 miles, held for ransom, abducted with intent to keep the child permanently, or killed” (Finkelhor et al. 2002:2). Considering that there were over 70 million children in the U.S. in 1999, the number of abductions was very small (National Highway Traffic Safety

Administration 2010). In the U.S., the chance of dying in a car accident is 100 times greater than of being abducted. The actual risk of abduction both in Hong Kong, as well as other places like the U.S., where some expats come from, is very small, and there has not been a recent rash of abductions in Hong Kong. Considering this, what was it that Diane was really afraid of? In other words, what is behind Diane's fear?

Though the story seemed irrational to many, there were aspects of it that resonated with expat residents' experience, leading them to believe it was or could be true. The story that Diane overheard was actually that of a lost child at Ocean Park a month before the rumor. A mother had lost her two-year-old for three minutes at a playground for preschool-age children. A member of the staff found him, and there were two Chinese women crouching to talk to him (but not touching him) when he was found. The mother was reunited with the boy and thought nothing more of it until a few days later when her son told her "Ocean Park bad place. Chinese women tried to take me." She then reported the matter to Ocean Park and to the police. It was this woman who had recounted the story in a bar, which was then distorted in the version put out by Diane.

As a result of the rumor, the mother and her husband were invited to see the park's Chief Executive the day after the rumor spread. He told Parry that the mother was quite upset about how the story had "gone so sideways" and added that there was no corroboration to the boy's claims. There is no video evidence or any witness to support it. The closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras at the playground were improved after the incident (and before the March rumor), which made the story seem believable, but Ocean Park's executive said it was just a coincidence. Several posters on the BBS argued that the CCTV upgrades showed that Ocean Park knew of the kidnapping attempt and was trying to suppress the news, while taking steps to prevent further incidents. In fact, the presence of CCTV cameras and Ocean Park's statement that they have guards at all exits, while intended to reassure parents, convinced some that the danger of abduction was real. Ocean Park cannot take the chance that such an abduction might occur, but in publicizing their security measures, they reinforced the fear and tension that they sought to ease. Ocean Park claimed that the quote from the guard that "this happened before" was a misunderstanding and that the employee who said it meant simply that another boy had recently gone missing and then been found, not that there had been an attempted kidnapping.

The rumors and BBS chat suggested a conspiracy by Ocean Park to conceal the truth. There is no evidence for such a conspiracy, but there was a misstatement that seemed to be evidence of a cover-up. When Ocean Park issued its press release (Ocean Park 2010a) denying the story, there was no

mention that they had been in contact with a mother who said that her child had claimed he was almost taken away by two Chinese ladies. The Ocean Park Chief Executive had been in conversation with the family involved before the press release was issued, so not mentioning this fed the rumor (and conspiracy theory) for those who knew the family, thereby stoking the idea that Ocean Park had something to hide.

Ocean Park's chairman is on record as saying that he checked with his security "because we've had no report of this made to us." He added that they had no knowledge of any report of any abduction and checked with the police, whose records for the previous two months showed no report of an abduction (Radio Television Hong Kong 2010, "RTHK"). Ocean Park insisted there was no evidence, but it was not clear whether the evidence they spoke of was video corroboration or a report by a near victim. A comment by writer PDLM on the GeoExpat Forum noted, "Ocean Park has confirmed that no record or evidence of such an incident has been found." This statement implies that it might have happened, but due to the lack of CCTV coverage, there is no evidence or record that it did not. Thus, for some, the statement did not end the matter.

The police had also made a mistake that made it seem they were hiding something. The possible attempted kidnapping had been reported at the Stanley police station, but Ocean Park is under the Aberdeen police station's jurisdiction. The Aberdeen police told their superiors that they had no reports of attempted kidnappings, not realizing that a report had been filed weeks earlier at the Stanley police station. It is possible that the police in Stanley felt it was not necessary to file the incident as an attempted kidnapping, since the charge would have been based on a toddler's statement reported by the mother days after the alleged event, and, therefore, they did not report it to the Aberdeen police. When the Aberdeen police found out that the Hong Kong Police did indeed have such a report filed at another station, they tried to avoid the implication that they had lied when they denied its existence, or that they were disorganized for not having found the report. To the public, this made it appear that the police were covering up an attempted abduction, rather than implying their incompetence. Those who knew that the family had filed a report became convinced of a police cover up.

There are aspects of the story that resonate with expatriates in Hong Kong, making the story more believable. Many of these are only partly related to child kidnapping or Ocean Park, but previous research on rumors shows that "both specific fears and free-floating anxieties promote participation in a rumor process" (Koenig 1985:63).

Many Western parents, especially those with blond children, have encountered mainland Chinese who want to have their picture taken with the children.

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It is common for them to pick children up and have their picture taken together without asking permission from the parents (or the child). Ocean Park is popular with mainland Chinese tourists and offers attractive places where tourists pose for photos. As Parry wrote in an email:

I've been to Ocean Park with my kids and they do get terribly fussed over and even mobbed sometimes by the mainlanders there - they always whisk them off to have pictures taken etc. And of course there are a lot more mainlanders coming to Hong Kong these days while expat numbers in general drop - so westerners with children in certain circumstances might feel more outnumbered, more isolated and more "outsiders" than they would have done a few years ago.

In minority areas of China, tourists will take pictures of children and women without asking permission, and will sometimes give candy or money to children after taking the picture, again without asking permission of a parent or other adult. Mainland Chinese tourists simply follow their own cultural rules when they come to Hong Kong, but these rules conflict with Western rules. Westerners complain that their children are "whisked off" for picture-taking, often without permission. Permission would be difficult to obtain, or at least awkward, since neither side speaks a common language. A second aspect is that picture taking is something that Westerners are used to doing as tourists when they see "natives"; it is a bit unsettling to have Chinese treat Westerners as natives. There is also great sensitivity in many Western countries about photos of children increasing the risk of pedophilia. Thus, on several levels, having strangers take their children's pictures is disconcerting for Westerners.

Wealthy Chinese have been kidnapped for ransom. Victor Li, son of billionaire Li Ka-shing, and Walter Kwok, a member of the family that controls Sun Hung Kai Properties, were kidnapped in the 1990s, but the families did not report the crime (Landler 1998). People believe that most families do not contact the police for fear of endangering their loved ones, quietly paying the ransom to obtain a release. The fact that children of some wealthy Chinese families travel to international schools in bullet-proof cars with bodyguards lends credibility to these stories.

Stories of kidnapped children in mainland China are carried in the Hong Kong media. In January of 2010, just months before the Ocean Park kidnapping rumor, stories in the SCMP reported the kidnap and murder of a 12-year-old schoolboy in Shenzhen, across the border (Tam 2010a), and a protest by 39 parents of missing children in Shenzhen (Tam 2010b). Another article on February 9 reported the arrest of 17 persons involved in 51 extortion attempts, trying to make parents pay ransoms for children they falsely claimed to have kidnapped (Tam 2010c). Other news stories involving trafficking in babies contribute to the image of a lawless China that is dangerous for children. In February 2009, for example, Shenzhen police arrested a doctor who



apparently bought a boy and a girl from parents who did not want the children and sold them to other adoptive parents (Lau 2009). Such stories make the idea of mainlanders kidnapping children seem plausible, even if the crimes did not occur in Hong Kong.

An important aspect of Diane's email message and of subsequent discussion board commentary was the suspicion that authorities and powerful business interests were trying to cover up the truth. Ocean Park, the police, and the government were accused of trying to suppress the story to minimize negative information that could affect business and tourism revenues. This belief made it seem important to relay the story to friends, making it spread virally. The failure of the story to appear in the press suggested to some that powerful forces were suppressing it. Though Hong Kong is an open and free society, the presence of oligopolies in many sectors (from real estate to supermarkets) and Hong Kong libel law that tends to protect the powerful make rumors of a corporate cover-up believable.

This lack of trust reflects a lack of transparency in the Hong Kong government. In the months before the kidnapping story there had been controversies over the construction of a high-speed train station that pro-democracy advocates opposed, and pro-China politicians and property tycoons favored (Bradsher 2010). There also is a pervasive and persistent belief that Beijing was controlling Hong Kong politics from behind the scenes. The day the rumor spread was the same day Google's dispute with Mainland authorities came to a head and the company shut its mainland servers and re-directed searchers to its Hong Kong servers (Helft and Barboza 2010). As much of this dispute was not public, a sense that powerful mainland forces were at work was reinforced.

A conspiracy theory frame of reference also reflects the lack of agency felt by those who repeated the story—well-educated expatriates who find themselves as a small minority in a Cantonese-speaking city. Their window on local society is narrowed by language and cultural differences, making many feel more vulnerable and less in control than they probably have at any previous time in their adult lives. They are professional elites in their home countries but at a loss on an ordinary street in Hong Kong. This sense of powerlessness—of things going on around them that they cannot understand or control—can easily lead to concerns that the government and businesses are hiding things.

Hong Kong residents are very fond of Ocean Park, which is unique in Asia for combining amusement park rides with conservation education (Ocean Park 2010b). Revenues fell during the 1990s, and residents feared that, with competition from Hong Kong Disneyland, the park would go out of business. But a developer gave Ocean Park a major expansion, doubling the number of

animals and ride attractions (Bannister 2011). Expatriates like going to Ocean Park, but because it is also popular with mainland tourists, many feel it is losing its value as a family destination due to over-crowding and because the mainlanders are attracted to their children. The kidnapping rumor crystallized a growing ambivalence toward Ocean Park, where an alleged crime nearly occurred and, as the rumor claims, where a cover-up might be occurring.

The email message helped make the story believable. Unlike most internet rumors, it did not say “forward this to everyone you know.” Parents who knew the magazine *Playtimes* and had heard of Sunshine House (an international pre-school) felt they had received a genuine message intended for the writer’s friends. The email is like a contemporary legend, referring to local places and institutions and claiming that the story happened nearby (and to a friend of a friend). However, it was not written as a warning, but as a private message (“A close friend had a very upsetting incident...”). Even though the email has the form of an urban legend, it seems personal, local, and honest, and therefore more believable.

Rumors and contemporary legends have the possibility of being true. No matter how unlikely something seems, it is impossible to be sure that it is false. This was reflected in the online discussions of the story. Some regarded it as a hoax, but others insisted it could be true. One person went from urging that the discussion stop because it was a hoax to writing one hour later that it might be true: “FYI - I have some information from another regular member that this story is probably true and there is indeed an open case at the Stanley Police station.” Even when BBS participants were shown links to contemporary legends, some found the skeptics unpersuasive. Raccon commented, “And what do your links prove - that kids never get abducted from public places because those 3 cases turned out to be hoax? Not very convincing, Sherlock.” Crocodile replied: “It is now very evident that it just never happened—or, if you like, all evidence supports the assertion that the original email was fake. Yes, there is a small chance the police are lying and Ocean Park are lying, but what basis do you have not to believe them? You would rather believe a random email?”

Given that aspects of the story make it unlikely to have happened as initially reported, why did people forward it with such alacrity? Why did the kindergarten headmistress take the extraordinary step of forwarding such an email to parents? Many factors can make some rumors spread widely despite their seemingly illogical aspects. In this case, one can observe at least four themes that together create a resonant chord: ethnic tension, worries over globalization, sexual issues, and, surprisingly, the weather.

## FACTORS SPREADING THE RUMOR

The rumor has an ethnic dimension since the perpetrators are Chinese and the victims are white (which is what is meant by “non-Chinese” in the email). The names in the email seem to be Anglo women’s names, and Sunshine House has schools in Discovery Bay, Tai Tam, and Tung Chung (all areas with many expatriates). Sunshine House calls itself an “International Pre-school,” meaning it is for expatriates. In saying “Chinese” and not “Hong-kongese” or “local,” the story suggests it is about China. It is well known that there are many mainland Chinese visitors at Ocean Park. Expatriates comment on how “crowded” it is and that there are “too many mainlanders.”

Abduction stories often express fear of or contempt for an ethnic group by accusing members of that group of attempting abductions. The Mississippi example mentioned earlier focused on a Mexican woman. In Europe, it is often Roma who are blamed for supermarket abductions. Urban legends of this type date back to Roman times, when Christians were accused of killing babies and drinking their blood (Ellis 1983).

The ethnic aspect is linked to competition between nations in globalization. In Europe and the United States, one may hear claims that the Chinese are “taking our jobs.” Many expatriates who work in Hong Kong assist in the economic development of China by selling goods and services to Chinese clients or working for Chinese companies, and so have some role in assisting in China’s commercial ascent. This concern is transformed into a story about Chinese taking Westerners’ children. Danger to children is an essential element of such myths, for children represent a society’s and a family’s future, their most precious possession. What may seem an odd aspect in this story—that expatriates worry about their children being kidnapped by Chinese—makes sense if the story is seen as expressing anxiety about the future. In the context of China’s rapid economic growth, the rumor can be seen as reflecting anxiety about race relations in a post-colonial world. Chinese industrial expansion is said to be undermining domestic industry in the U.S. and Europe. Expatriates’ fear of their children being abducted by Chinese may be sub-consciously reflecting their anxieties that their children may suffer due to the Chinese control of industry. Such fears and anxieties help explain why many expatriates seemed to want to believe the story.

Scholars recognize that contemporary legends reflect ambivalence and discomfort over changing cultural values (e.g. Fine 1980:227). Some see the rise of contemporary legends about child abductions stemming from increasing urbanization and residential mobility, such that people are surrounded by strangers more so than in the past. But, worldwide, most abductions and sexual assaults are carried out by known assailants. These dangers are not primarily from strangers, though the feared stereotypical kidnapping is by a

stranger (for the U.S., see Finkelhor et. al. 2002:2). The intensity of emotion surrounding this crime reflects psychological fears more than actual danger. As Fass (1997:255) notes, the fear of kidnapping has grown as increasing numbers of women leave their children in the care of paid caregivers. Kidnapping stories are fanned by the fear that parents are missing out on their offspring's childhood and that they might not be able to protect their children because they are working or otherwise busy. Many BBS posts emphasized the need to always hold a child's hand and to keep them within eyesight, not to be distracted by phone calls or chit-chat with other parents. The stories are thus also more common because of contemporary changes in gender roles. As women are torn between their need for a career and their desire to be a stay-at-home mother, a tension emerges that can take the form of exaggerated fears. The abduction of a child is thus a missed childhood, and the feeling that no one else can replace the mother's role makes many women conflicted about working outside the home. The modern nuclear family puts huge demands and responsibilities on women, many of whom feel they can never do enough, leading to a "moral anxiety." The narrative detail that the mother had only turned away for a second is telling (Teresa Kuan, personal communication). Stories about abducted children are therefore more believable, and especially frightening, to women. Evidence for this is that nearly all the names in the headers of forwarded messages were women's.

Child kidnapping has long existed, but the intense fear is recent. Before the Lindberg case in 1932, the most famous case in the United States was the kidnapping for ransom of Charley Ross of Philadelphia in 1872. As a result of the Ross case, kidnapping was changed from a misdemeanor to a felony (Fass 1997:38). In the 1980s, the issue of missing children became a moral panic fanned by the media (Fritz and Altheide 1987), and it continues to inspire fear. Kidnapping stories reflect and intensify a fear of strangers. Expatriates who have limited contacts with Chinese in Hong Kong find the stories more believable because they lack ties to the community.

A more subtle fear comes from the relations between expat and Chinese women. Western women fear that men will leave their wives for younger Chinese women. It is well known that men who travel extensively for work sometimes become sexually involved with younger Chinese women. Cantonese have a term, *bàau yih-náaih* (second wife), to refer to the younger woman who is in a long-term relationship (Tam 1996; Lang and Smart 2002). Among expatriates, extramarital relationships typically result in a divorce, and this is another way that Chinese women represent a danger to expatriate women. It is significant that primarily women spread this kidnapping rumor to other women.

All these factors prepared the ground for accepting the rumor as fact, but it is unlikely that the rumor would have spread so widely had not Hong Kong at the same time experienced the worst air quality in its history. The additional element that made the rumor take off that Monday was the severe air pollution. Air pollution is a major concern in Hong Kong, because air quality has deteriorated significantly since the 1990s. The bad air at the time of the rumor raised stress levels and made many expatriates assume the story in the email was true. As is well known, anxiety at times of natural disasters leads to many rumors, which in turn increase the anxiety (DiFonzo 2008:25), as happened in Hong Kong.

The government Air Pollution Index (API) is part of the weather report in Hong Kong, and it is often “High” (51–100) or even “Very High” (101–200). The government warns people with heart or respiratory conditions to remain indoors when the index is above 100. The highest reading in Hong Kong until then had been 201 in 2004. On Sunday, the day the rumor began to spread, the level was very high (141) by midday. The reading on the Monday, when the rumor spread widely, broke all records, passing 300 by 7 a.m. and rising to its maximum of 500 by 5 p.m. Ten of 14 air quality monitoring stations were off the scale at 9 p.m. This frightening air pollution was caused by a dust storm from the Gobi Desert. On that Monday morning, the sky was brown and the air was visibly bad.

Much of Hong Kong’s usual air pollution, especially particulates, actually stems from within Hong Kong itself (particularly vehicular traffic, power plants, and ships and diesel-powered equipment in the harbor; see Chiu 2010). Some pollutants do blow over from the mainland, and it is common to blame most of the pollution on the factories in the Pearl River Delta there. This time the dust storm particulate really did blow in from China. The bad air represented a physical danger from China, and heightened worries regarding China. Many residents feel powerless when confronted with the issue of air pollution, because they feel that the Hong Kong government does little to address the problem of mainland pollutants. This made the story about a potential kidnapping by Chinese women much more salient.

Expatriates in Hong Kong know that the pollution is bad for their family, especially their children. A widely-cited survey by the local NGO Civic Exchange (2010) found that a quarter of respondents were considering leaving Hong Kong because of the bad air. The danger to children was especially clear that Monday, as government announcements encouraged children to stay indoors. The idea that children were in danger made the rumor resonate with this underlying worry. The worry over the air found an outlet in a rumor about kidnapping.

## CONCLUSION

The rumor of a child's abduction at Ocean Park turned out to be false. Yet for many parents the story had some truth to it. Diane admitted not knowing all the details, but still insisted "there is a serious issue afoot" that warranted parents taking special precautions. Some might be tempted to think that Diane has a "fantasy-prone personality" (Wilson and Barber 1983; Merritt and Waldo 2000), but there is no evidence that she, or the dozens of parents who forwarded the email, had a personality different from the rest of the expatriate community, since such emails do not normally get passed on like this. The rumor does reflect some truth in metaphorically expressing the expatriates' anxieties about living in Hong Kong. At the same time, the false rumor led to children unnecessarily staying indoors, missing after-school activities, exercise, and playtime with friends. It is also not helpful to say those who believed and forwarded the story were irrational, because they were interested in the truth as much as anyone else. How did behavior that might seem irrational make sense to them?

Rumors and contemporary legends circulate without anyone knowing who created the rumor or why, and tracing a story back to a source is nearly impossible (but see Scanlon 1977). But this ambiguity does not matter, because the fact that the story is transmitted broadly makes it culturally meaningful, as it has struck a chord. The originator of a rumor is not important, because it is the story's narrative, symbolism, or structure that makes it spread and gives it its authority. The literal truth and the origin of the story are therefore unimportant for understanding the rumor's spread (Kapferer 1990:19; Turner 1993:3). This case illustrates this approach: Diane's description of how she wrote the original email does not help us understand why it developed into a frenzy. But we find that a story, based on previous stories, reflects partial truths that are recombined in such a way as to make the story meaningful to parents with small children in Hong Kong.

Though the rumor was spread through email, people's reactions were very much like responses to oral rumors. Because the rumor took the form of a fearful story, and because it took a written form, it did not change with retelling (i.e. forwarding); it therefore resembled a contemporary legend more than it might have if it had spread orally. Allport and Postman (1965:162) note that "A legend may be regarded as a solidified rumor. It is ... hearsay which, after a prior history of distortion and transformation, ceases to change as it is transmitted." The main differences between this email rumor and oral rumors are that it was created in a "solidified" form, did not change with transmission, and spread rapidly.

Many parents on the BBSs imagined only two alternatives: that it was true or that it was a prank. Surprisingly, perhaps, no one considered the possibility

that the story might be due to misunderstandings, or that it might express other fears. Thus, the cultural nature of the rumor was not apparent to the well-educated BBS posters at the time.

Another indication of the cultural nature of the phenomenon is the question of culpability. Who was responsible for the rumor? The original poster simply wrote a message to three friends. Several individuals helped the message reach the tipping point: a woman who sent it to her entire book club, a kindergarten headmistress who sent it to all the children's parents, and a bank director who sent it to her employees. Each contributed to the spread of the rumor, albeit not maliciously, since they believed it might be true. As usually happens with such stories, the Ocean Park kidnapping rumor slowly died and was forgotten, perhaps to be resurrected in a new form.

#### NOTES

1. I am grateful to Simon Parry for data he provided from interviews with persons who received and/or sent emails on the rumored kidnapping, and with Ocean Park officials and police. With all, I assured preserving people's privacy and anonymity.
2. "Expat" is the term used for foreigners who live in Hong Kong. The typical expat is a white, temporary resident who does not speak Chinese.
3. It is worth noting that Hong Kong is one of the safest cities in the world (U.S. Department of State 2011). The proportion of police to population is high, and weapons are illegal.

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