

The Production of the Myth of “Sister Phoenix”: From the Perspective of Discourse Analysis

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The analytical paper mainly deals with the questions how the image of Sister Phoenix, one of the most “popular” ugly stars in China is narrated, and how it is reconstructed and circulated by the media. In the paper, the author utilize multiple analytical devices, such as Gee’s seven building tasks (2010), Bakhtin’s dialogical processes, Fairclough’s (2003) approaches to critical discourse analysis and Couldry’s (2010) theories about media discourse. The aim of the paper is not only to explore the reason why her self-narration is destined to attract the interest of the media and the modern Chinese society but also aims at seeking how the media constantly helps producing new categories of life in front of the audience.

Keywords: Sister Phoenix, Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Discourse, Pop Culture

Introduction

In 2009, Sister Phoenix rose to fame as a marriage-seeker in central areas of Shanghai. She has given extraordinary high standard for a future mate, but according to the description of the passersby, she is herself a very homely looking girl who does not match the men who have reached the standard at all. Her marriage seeking activities receives intense attention of the society; she starts to become the special guest of different TV shows and news about her marriage-seeking activity flourish throughout media. Discussions about her have become a part of everyday talk of the ordinary people, even if most of them are criticisms and ridicules. It seems that there is one thing which is certain, that is, she is famous. The analysis primarily aims at resolving the following questions: how does Sister Phoenix enable her image potentially eligible for public attention? How the media reproduces and utilizes her image as a channel for disseminating dominating voices of the society? What is the significant (if there is any) of the event of sensationalizing and circulating the myth of Sister Phoenix?

How “Sister Phoenix” Is Produced

Why the act of Sister Phoenix captivates the attention of media and the mass? The answer to this question lies in the discourse of Sister Phoenix itself, and it concerns with how she manages to construct meaning and realize the target of self-sensationalization through various linguistic approaches. The following analysis focuses on how she builds up her “unforgettable” narration in the light of Gee’s seven building tasks.

Firstly, in regards to sign system, she is trying to privilege the tension between the semiotic values indexed by her language and her visual image. In her marriage seeking pamphlet, she offers 7 requirements, including “must earn a master degree at PKU or THU”, “must be economy major”, “must be from east coastline of China” etc. In another situation, she even claims that she wants to pursue Barack Obama. Her utterances imply a very high mate selecting standard, though not talked out explicitly. For it is among the common sense of most Chi-

nese people that PKU and THU are the best universities in China, economy major is one of the hot majors nowadays, eastern coastline is the most developed area in the country and Obama is the most powerful man in the world. When describing herself, she is also extravagant enough to use the most commenting words she can ever imagine: “Many people say that I’m beautiful, and I know that I’m beautiful”, “Given that I have such beauty and wisdom, I can find someone much better than him (her ex-boyfriend)”. However, the visual signs have totally betrayed her self-evaluation. From the TV show, we saw a girl with huge mouth and nostrils, short stature, dressing in an old-fashioned red jacket and jeans. According to the Habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), or the universal dispositions that mediate people’s perceptions and practices of most Chinese people, these traits are the symbols of ugliness and lack of taste.

Moreover, she is not only exhibiting dichotomy in the perspective of visual and language sign system, but is also foregrounding a sharp contrast inside of her language signs. The contrast stems from heterogeneity in her self-identification and the actual content of her words. She is identifying herself as “being greater than Einstein on macro level because she is ir-replicable”, while Einstein “can be duplicated”. However, she is showing ignorance when she makes common sense errors by uttering “I cannot invent light bulb like Einstein did”. A typical example of this contrast is manifested in her most well know quotation as follows:

I started reading at the age of 9; I reached the peak of my life as a learned woman at the age of 20. 300 hundred years back and 300 hundred years after, there was and there would be no man who surpasses me. Now, what I read are books on humanities, such as Bosom Friend and Stories (the former is one of the most welcomed magazine for housewives and the latter is often thought to be favored by migrate workers).

The narration produces a rather glorious and grandiose linguistic form by employing the technique of climaxing and symmetry, when it comes to “300 hundred years back and 300 hundred years after”, it gives the hearers an illusion of confronting with huge waves, which is intimidating. However, an anticlimax brings the billows to a halt, when it comes to “Now, what I read are books on humanity”, people are expecting her

saying something which is extremely profound and advanced, but instead, she mentioned two magazines which are regarded as symbolically mundane and are often related to less educated people. The sharp split between the form and the content of her utterance produces a strong sense of absurdity.

What activity is Sister Phoenix trying to perform through her marriage-seeking discourse? Though in the marriage-seeking program she claims that she just wants to find an ideal spouse, later in other interviews, she admits that she is trying to sensationalize herself by saying something extreme. "Ordinary people can only get into media if they do something extraordinary" (Langer 1998: p. 41), if there is nothing extraordinary in a person, she may try to artificially produce something sensational. This is what Sister Phoenix intends to do beyond looking for a mate.

In terms of relationship, it is interesting that Sister Phoenix is not trying to establish rapport with the audience and the candidates as she does with the media, instead, in her language use, she somehow wants to construct authority and superiority over them. e.g. In one of the program, she says to the audience: "I believe that you are all from regular institutions of higher education. If you neglect the seven standards I give, I guess there will be some of you who want to marry me." When elaborating on what kind of man she wants to marry to, she said: "I am a clean freak, as a result, I hate those fucking man who are anthomaniac.", "Men who are over 30 year-old please be off by yourself". Once she even shouted at a candidate: "Go die!" It is as if she is drawing a clear boundary between herself and the mundane by portraying herself as a celebrity who is gone after by the ordinary, and she is forever in a position higher than the audience and the candidates.

Let's say, all her endeavors in public encounter are dedicated to the activity of self sensationalization, while all other building tasks are rotating around this center. By establishing an image of being abnormal and extremely barefaced, she succeeds to manufacture "extraordinariness", which is a critical step to become the materials of the media. The contrasts between different sign systems, the linguistic form and the content are the major techniques she employs in order to sensationalize her image of being an impressively crazy person, so as to attract the attention of the media. (The example of "300 hundred years back and 300 hundred years after" is a typical form of encontextualization, enabling the text the potentiality and dynamic to circulate through media. A few months before, it is popular online to "make sentences after Sister Phoenix". The ability to undergone retextualization makes her utterances easy and fun to get reproduced.) At last, the superiority she establishes over the audience and the candidates marks the completion of her self-advertising and her transformation from an ordinary woman to a public figure, and the disconnection from worldly-ness goes on reproducing the gap between she and the ordinary life—people will contempt her senseless pride, but they will get to know and remember her modes of meaning construction.

How "Sister Phoenix Phenomenon" Is Reproduced and Circulated by Mass Media

After Sister Phoenix become potentially eligible for public attention, the media started to take on the task of reproducing and circulating the phenomenon as a piece of news. As a matter of fact, what the media is doing is similar to what is described by Bakhtin (1981) as the author of a novel, who orchestrates between different voices and tries to position them on a certain

place where they can reach all of the voices, with a difference in terms of the distance with them.

The author looks into several entertaining programs in which Sister Phoenix gets involved, and finds several linguistic traits they have in common. First of all, all the hosts or the interviewers apply different footings when they conclude the news, or make manifest certain stance and criteria intended for the audience, compared with when they talk with Sister Phoenix in person. When the hosts are interviewing with her, there are hardly any distance between them. They talk on an information-exchanging level, normally, the hosts will only ask questions and paraphrase what she says in order to make sure that they have got what she is trying to express. The tones of the hosts are absolutely neutral, without taking a stance on the incident. For example:

Interviewer: why you choose candidates only from PKU and THU? Like, there are two universities that are also excellent in Shanghai, Fudan University and SJTU, why not from these universities?

Sister Phoenix: overall, people say, in China, there are only two universities: PKU and THU.

Interviewer: yes. You are saying that they are not on the same level?

Sister Phoenix: ((nodding)) as a matter of fact.

However, when the hosts are introducing the topic or when they come to the conclusion after the interview they will switch to another footing, which exhibits a considerate distance with Sister Phoenix's logic. The following is an example:

Some people say that her marriage seeking act is only a form of sensationalization; some other argues that Sister Phoenix is indeed seeking for true love, but she has resorted to an extreme approach. Here, we are more willing to explain her act as an expression of long-suppressed anxiety, an extreme expression because of something irresolvable. While most of us ridicule this form of expression, there is seldom anyone who feels sad. Perhaps some of them will feel sad, that's for the Media. Present era is indeed an era of entertainment, no matter whether there is any aesthetic value, so long as it is eyes-attracting, the Media will be swarming around immediately. What left for the public is only a chaotic value system and visual tiredness. Perhaps you may ask: be it as it may, why you are bandwagoning here? Yes, then why are we here focusing on Sister Phoenix, who is only a morbid and tragic figure positioned under the spotlight in the eyes of the experts. Then who are the tragic ones, Sister Phoenix or us?

In this excerpt taken from the end of a certain piece of special news about Sister Phoenix's marriage-seeking act, the host speaks with a different level of abstraction. She talks as if she is an outsider of the phenomenon, thus is able to draw an outline of the event. She juxtaposes different forms of ideologies about the event ("sensationalization", "extreme approach") and finally arrives at her preferred stance which describes the act as an "expression of anxiety". Moreover, instead of being neutral, the host is taking an emotional stance towards her deeds. By using negative expressions such as "anxiety", "morbid", and "tragic" etc, she is showing a pitiful attitude towards Sister Phoenix, or, she is using a device of epistemological modality in order to establish a hierarchical relationship between herself as one who represents the media, a channel always disseminate something true and advanced versus Sister Phoenix, who has no clear understanding of herself and is thus caught in an asymmetry relationship with the media, in which she is passively subject to constant ideological imposition.

In this excerpt, what is collected and responded is not only

the voice of Sister Phoenix, but also other voices such as the voice of the authority and the society. Here the author argues that, the ground of the remark is based on the social doxa while the conclusion is making an alignment with the authoritative discourse. As a result, it is “mediation between society and the state” (Graham, 2010: p. 52).

Firstly, consider about the voice of this society, or what is taken for granted and ritualized by the public throughout the history, or doxa in a Bordieu’s sense. That is, the principle of exchange at equal value. It is created under the condition of a capital society in which we need to have something in order to get something else, as a result, capital is vital in evaluating a person’s social position. In the case of Sister Phoenix, all criticisms stem from this solid ground of societal differentiation. The following two excerpts come from the introductory parts of two different pieces of news about Sister Phoenix, but as if the transcripts are written by the same person, they all echo the same social doxa mentioned above:

News A: it is that Luo Yufeng, who is not only ordinary in terms of family background, but also plain in terms of appearance. Though only 1.46 meters tall, she has a Great Expectation of herself: she claims to marry no man other than those who graduate from PKU or THU.

News B: the woman, whose name is Luo Yufeng is only a cashier in a supermarket. She is short and plain-looking, but she has given extraordinary high standard for a future spouse.

Both pieces of news have mentioned that Sister Phoenix is plain in terms of appearance, social status and family background. Etc. And apparently, they are not taking a favorable attitude towards her. “Great Expectation”, the name of Charles Dickens’ book is used ironically, in order to show the absurdity of the event itself, and the expressions “not only (something negative) but also (something negative)”, “though”, “only” are signs of revealing inherent limitations of the subject being described. If the social doxa is not presupposed, the transitional logic of the two excerpts will be somehow weird. It is because that there is an underlying assumption of principle of exchange at equal value which claims that because she is plain in all aspects, she has no capital to find someone who is good in all aspects.

A severe violation of social doxa or a deviation from the voice of the society is the reason why Sister Phoenix is brought under the limelight, and why she is under behooove attack by the public. In one of the interview program she took part in, there are two other honored guests being invited, a scholar in a certain college (the male guest), and an actress.

Male Honored Guest: Just now you said “cooperation”, which implies that you two should be on the same level. Even if you pay 51 percent and I pay 49 percent. I would like to ask you what the basis is for this. For instance, I have five bucks in my pocket, and I am hungry, I can have a bowl of noodles on the street. But you want to go to a top grade restaurant; I believe it is more possible for you to wash dishes there for a whole month.

Here, the male honored guest directly equals marriage to business transaction in which people involved are busy calculating all the times about profits and advantages they can take from others. The underlying assumption “No capital, no cooperation” is brought on the table and is compulsorily applied to the realm of love affairs.

Male honored guest: Be polite! Don’t cross your leg and show contempt (Towards a candidate). Do you have any credit to laugh at him? Do you think you have anything better than him?

Female Honored Guest: As a girl, you pay too much attention to vanity. I think you are selfish and Narcissistic.

Does the male honored guest mean that if Sister Phoenix has the “credit”, she is justified to laugh at or showing contempt towards the candidate? In the case of the female honored guest, Sister Phoenix is related to other negative denotations, though she is only narcissistic according to the habitus of ordinary Chinese people, and has nothing to do with selfishness. People on a higher social status are able to impose ideologies irresponsibly to those on a lower social ladder at random, because they have the “credit” to do so, and because they are the celebrities with all the capital of fame, fans or authority in a certain academic domain to justify their claims. The following example made the assumption manifest:

F: I think she has serious psychological deformity.

M: I would like to make a rational abstraction: this is called Erotomania, in which the patient will fall into the illusion of being in love with another person (usually on a higher social status), (the official definition for the problem).

The actress may have no background in psychology, but she is able to come to a definite conclusion that Sister Phoenix has psychological deformity even quicker than a psychologist do; the scholar, on the other hand, take advantage from his ability to make “rational abstraction” by switching to a set of pathological jargon which make no other sense than reaffirming his own authority and the social doxa. In short, as “honored” guest, their social capital endow them the credit to exert ideologies and discursively constructed illnesses to a figure that just rise to fame from the lowest class.

All of the above, both the discourse of the hosts and that of the honored guests are grounded in the social doxa or mainstream voice of the society. Moreover, they act as apparatus to circulate and reinforce the dominance of the doxa and become the techniques through which the dominant Discourse of Capitalism further establishes social differences and hierarchies.

Though the argument of the media is based on social doxa, it cannot manifest an end towards differentiation itself, and it cannot disregard the voices of the authority.

The following is the criticism towards Sister Phoenix phenomenon by the spokesman of China’s State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), which is embedded into one of the special reports about the event.

The emergence of “Sister Phoenix Phenomenon” is due to some of the Media’s act of adding fuel to the fire. Obviously, it will not lead to positive and Truth-Benevolence-Beauty-Seeking values. It will not guide people to go after a better, and a more passionate, more creative and encouraging cultural trend, on contrary, it is leading to the opposite.

SARFT, which represent the voice of the state, is intended to standardize the ethos of the society. However, we find a vagueness or even feebleness in the speech. As to obscurity, who is to be blamed as the culprit for the event is not identified; instead, the spokesman only criticizes SOME of the media’s ADDING FUEL TO THE FIRE. Which media and what’s the root for the deviant aesthetic value is excluded. Moreover, what is “Truth-Benevolence-Beauty-Seeking values” exactly? There is even no clear definition of a should-be attitude. On the other hand, the statement is feeble in that the power of the authority discourse is not in its language itself, but in its ability to put the mandate into legal action. In the statement, the spokesman doesn’t say that the media who sensationalize the event should be looked into or Sister Phoenix should be sanctioned. It seems that there is conflicts and corresponding negotiation between the authority discourse and the media. On the one hand, the

authority doesn't want the society stirred into a moral chaos such as the appreciation of the ugly; on the other hand, they have to realize that the reason why Sister Phoenix rises to fame irradicably has its social root. The authority need to air its voice of standardization while making some concessions to the attention of public which is based on social doxa, so long as the public opinion doesn't threat its dominance. As a result, there seems to be clashes as well as collaboration between the government and the media. By accepting the government's mild criticism towards them and making an alignment with the government, the media earn themselves the chance to disseminate sensational but controversial news which brings them profits.

From the above analysis, the author arrives at the conclusion that the reproduction of Sister Phoenix as a myth in the new era is the result of the media's orchestration of different voices. Sister Phoenix, the center of the story is placed in a distant position, as her morbid and sensational image is discursively reshaped by socio-economical doxa throughout the orchestration. Some of the media may arrive at the voice of the authority, even if this is only form of decorum.

A Last Word about the Phenomenon: What Happen after the "Sister Phoenix" Myth?

The reports and entertaining programs concerning "ugly stars" such as Sister Phoenix are not only performing an act of flooding the people with monopolized representations about class differences and the authoritative standardizations; they are also ritualizing people's actions and construct categories (Couldry, 2010). Nowadays, "the appreciation of the ugly" has become a form of life in which more and more people are taking part in. They dress oddly, talk silly things in order for them to make a leap from "liveness" to "celebrity" (Couldry, 2010). The public, reciprocally, make a space for a category of people who are identified by the majority as those who blur the boundary between the ordinary and the famous ones, or, a new category of people. They are both ordinary and are public figures, they are famous because they dare to challenge the social doxa, and because they dare to present what ought to belong to the realm of everydayness before the camera: ugliness, mundane and ignorance according to the perception of ordinary people. They are famous, but they receive ridicules instead of admirations of the ordinary like the classical type of celebrities do. The new category reproduced by the media can be regarded as a parody of those media-constructed celebrities under the aurora of extraordinariness and perfection in that they bring the mass an awareness of the fact that what the media is busy circulating can be something or someone absurd and stupid, what matters is how their images are parceled up by the media.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Sister Phoenix is building up her own narration in an extraordinary way in that it privileges a contrast between different sign system and what's inside the linguistic system. By employing this technique she is able to establish her image as absurd, morbid and impressive, thus achieve an end of sensationalizing herself. Her image is eligible for public attention and become potential candidate for the circulation of the media in that it seriously deviated from social doxa, as a result, is extraordinary in a sense. In the reproduction of the image of Sister Phoenix, she is depicted as being abnormal, pitiful and disgusting when incorporated as the negative example mocked by the social doxa and rebuked by the authority. However in another sense, it is the media that helps the popularization of the images Sister Phoenix and the like, so that there are more and more "Sister Phoenixes" appearing in the world forming a new category and a way of living. The author is not here to question the ugly stars for their clumsy sensalization, nor is she criticizing the media's identity of being the accomplice of reproducing and deepening social differences. What's important is that the voices of the ordinary can be heard, even if the protagonists should overact their identities in a distorted way and be positioned in an awkward position by the dominant social groups.

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