

Shark fin soup:

Collective imagination in the transnational public sphere

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Abstract:

Sharks are facing extinction due to global commercial demand for shark fin and shark meat. Drawing on Robert Asen's concept of "collective imagination," this essay investigates two distinct, but mutually reinforcing, cumulative imaginaries that inhibit shark conservation efforts: Traditional Chinese Medicine and Western media products that vilify sharks. In Traditional Chinese Medicine, sharks have medicinal value and rhetorical significance when served as food. Additionally, Western media products construct sharks as monsters that hunt humans. In both cases, sharks are valued only for their anthropocentric value to humans as food, medicine or entertainment. Re-signification of sharks as critical members of healthy ocean ecosystems is essential to developing transnational public support for shark conservation policies.

Keywords: Shark; shark fin; collective imagination; Traditional Chinese Medicine; Jaws

Introduction

Sharks are a species facing extinction due to pressure from a variety of sources. More than 100 million sharks die annually to supply the international trade in shark fins (Ghani, 2018). A pound of dried shark fin can fetch up to \$400, while a bowl of shark fin soup is worth from \$50 to \$200 (Fobar, 2019). In addition to fins, the global demand for fish oil and shark meat is driving sharks collectively toward extinction (Guilford, 2014; Project Aware, 2018). Shark products are widely available in many countries. Mako and Hammerhead shark jerky, for example, are sold online by Amazon in the United States (Bezos, 2019).

The extinction of sharks would devastate the health of the world's oceans. Sharks are top/mid-level predators whose removal causes "trophic cascades" that disrupt all lives in a biotic community (Schindler, Essington, Kitchell, Boggs, & Hilborn, 2002). The Outer Banks of North Carolina experienced a loss of sharks after 1970 that in turn caused cownose ray populations to explode. Subsequently, scallop beds in the island chain were destroyed (Dupree, 2008).

Communication Studies scholars and marine policy scholars have both taken up popular discourse about sharks as a topic of research. The way we communicate about sharks is important because public attitudes shape responses promoted by political leaders. Sharks present a “policy-predator” paradox to governments and elected officials (Neff, 2014). The future of ocean ecosystems (and indeed our own survival as a species) is directly tied to the existence of sharks, however, protection of sharks requires elected officials to promote policies “that may harm the public” (Neff, 2014, p. 108). Therefore, reducing fear of sharks and changing attitudes about their consumption is essential to crafting policy responses that support conservation (Pepin-Neff & Wynter, 2018).

The most recent Communication Studies article to address sharks is by Elaine Jeffreys (2016). Jeffreys investigates celebrity driven public service announcements (PSAs) about threats to sharks that were created by WildAid and run in both the United States and China. Jeffreys argues persuasively that PSAs featuring retired Chinese basketball star Yao Ming and other celebrities were less important for protecting sharks than (a) the fact that the Chinese government banned serving shark fin (and other exotic animals) at state-sponsored banquets (Wassener, 2012) and (b) the collective action of the business community. While the ban was a positive step, it was not designed to protect endangered species such as sharks or alter government support for TCM (which has been consistent since the Cultural Revolution) (Chen, Wu, & Li, 2018). Chinese government authorities were concerned about public perceptions of government corruption, as evidenced by the fact that bans on luxuries such as cigarettes and alcohol were part of the crackdown (Gardner, 2013).

Jeffreys’ research is significant, but only a first step for two reasons. First, Jeffreys overstates the success of efforts to protect sharks. Policies designed to limit the global trade in sharks are not working. There is still a thriving international trade in shark fins (Ghani, 2018). Fins are exported from Indonesia, Spain, India, Argentina and the United States into East/Southeast Asia (China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan) for use as both food (usually as soup) and medicine (sold ground/powdered or dried) (Amour-Levar, 2018). A lack of alternatives to the shark fin market has also led to rising prices, but not less demand, for shark products, particularly in lesser developed nations that harvest large amounts of shark such as Indonesia (Jaiteh, Loneragan, & Warren, 2017).

To be sure, there are recent signs of progress. The Canadian national ban on shark fin is a promising step, and cultural attitudes are beginning to shift in other nations (Cecco, 2019). However, there are also reasons to worry. Enforcement of bans is difficult. California banned the sale of shark fin, but is still one of the largest consumers outside of Asia because the trade has gone underground (Fobar, 2019). Twelve American states ban shark fin, yet America is still one of the global leaders in the export and consumption of shark fin and shark products (The Maritime Executive, 2019). Savannah, Georgia, the leading port in the United States fin trade, exported 18,000 pounds of shark fin in 2018, sending most of the catch to Hong Kong (Landers, 2019). Even worse, finning bans have spurred a market for shark meat, as fishing organizations have to bring the entire animal to shore (Bland, 2015). The overall global trade in shark meat has increased 42% since 2000 (Wilcox, 2015). While imports of shark products (beyond fins) into Hong Kong have been rising since 2014 (Shea & To, 2017).

Second, Jeffreys devotes just a single paragraph to consideration of the history of Traditional Chinese Medicine, which has been a significant regional influence on Asia and modern influence on people around the world. Sharks have a 1400-year history as both food and medicine in China and East Asia more generally (Shea & To, 2017). Shark meat and shark fin are consumed across the Pacific Rim, not just in mainland China. American President Donald Trump, for example, ate shark fin soup on a state visit to Vietnam (Persio, 2017). Notably, Traditional Chinese Medicine is becoming popular in its own

right outside of East Asia, making it a significant transnational force that impacts the future of sharks and the lives of citizens around the world (Shapiro, 2016; Zhan, 2009).

My research builds upon Jeffreys' work by considering two significant transnational imaginaries inhibiting shark conservation efforts: Western media products that vilify sharks and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). I draw on Robert Asen's work on "collective imagination," a useful heuristic construct that centers its critique on the role stereotypes serve in the formation of public policy. Collective imagination is a product of the way in which hegemonic discursive formations characterize subaltern counterpublics. Subaltern communities confront a "cumulative imaginary" as they enter the public sphere: a field of negative images and associations that are "symbolic hurdles" transmitted through negative frames in mass/social media and through common conversation (Asen, 2002).

Sharks exist at the intersection of (at least) two transnational cumulative imaginaries that circulate globally: Western media products that vilify them and Traditional Chinese medico-culinary practices that use them symbolically and medically. While they are non-human, sharks are functionally subaltern in both imaginaries. As monsters, food, or medicine sharks are objects of human control. In the global public sphere and the halls of policymakers, these cumulative imaginaries complement each other; working together to discourage shark conservation. Sharks have no voice in the policies that determine their fate, even as our diets, medical practices and deep seated fears threaten their existence. The future of sharks rests in human hands.

This paper starts by describing the concept of "collective imagination" in the work of Robert Asen. Second, I examine collective imagination of sharks in the Chinese public sphere and investigate the origins of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Within TCM, the body of the shark is a text through which social, cultural and medical beliefs are communicated. The cultural construction of sharks as a "pu food" with medical benefits has material implications for the continued consumption of sharks in East Asia, in diasporic Sinophone communities and among people around the world adopting TCM as an alternative to Western medicine.

Finally, I synthesize the literature on sharks in Communication Studies and marine policy scholarship that draws on Communication Studies theories. Western collective imagination constructs sharks as monsters who roam the depths of the "mean ocean" (Myrick & Evans, 2014). Viewers exposed to shark media are primed to fear sharks and believe that sharks hunt humans (they don't, bites are usually accidents), bites are normally fatal (they aren't), and that culling is the only solution to shark presence in popular swimming areas (Neff, 2015).

My research provides two payoffs. First, I demonstrate how distinct collective imaginaries work together to turn sharks into objects, erecting distinct but complementary discursive barriers to global shark conservation measures. It is easy to accept both the idea that sharks are monsters and that they have utilitarian value to humans when caught and turned into food and medicine. Asen's concept of "collective imagination" is valuable because it pinpoints the role that shared stereotypes play in control of non-human species facing extinction. As activists and policymakers attempt to protect sharks, understanding collective imagination is essential to crafting culturally sensitive messages that are effective at building public support for conservationist policies.

Second, my research brings Communication scholars into conversation with marine policy scholars who have increasingly turned to Communication Studies theorists, in order to synthesize these complementary literature bases. The significant usage of Communication Studies theory in marine policy research warrants a response from Communication Studies scholars. The importance of sharks for

healthy ocean ecosystems makes it imperative that these two communities engage each other and work together to re-signify sharks in media products as key citizens of healthy ocean ecosystems.

Asen: Collective Imagination

For Robert Asen, imagination is the product of a “collective process that participates in constructing a shared social world” (2002, p. 363). Asen is concerned with imagination because he sees it as “a political process of representation” due to the fact that “shared perceptions are not value-free” (2003, p. 287). Counterpublics may participate in the public sphere, but only through the transmission and normalization of negative stereotypes, which Asen (2002) describes as “collective imagination.” Collective imagination is multi-modal (linguistic and visual) and based in representations created through power relations and negative judgments about subaltern counterpublics.

Collective imagination forms “through social dialogue as participants in public discussions form shared perceptions of people, objects, and ideas through their discursive interactions” (Asen, 2003, pp. 286–287). As collective imagination develops, some images linger and construct a “cumulative imaginary” that “constrains the choices of successive participants” because the imaginary “circulates negative images” that discredit counterpublics (Asen, 2002: 363). Even if a counterpublic/subaltern community is included in public policy debates, they are included through sinister caricatures and pejorative characterizations (2002: 364). After policy is crafted, the cumulative imaginary provides a justification for policy and a constraint on the boundaries of acceptable public dialogue. Whereas Asen focuses on debates about welfare to demonstrate the concept of “collective imagination,” I explore the construction of sharks as food/medicine by practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine and their vilification as monsters in Western media products.

Collective imagination in TCM

TCM started in China, but is popular across Asia and around the world, having tremendous influence on the health of people globally (L. Chang & Lim, 2019). TCM circulates through “interactive, trans-local networks and processes” (Zhan, 2009, p. 18) fostered by both diasporic and digital connections. TCM was introduced to Europe in the 17th century (Scheid, 2016), and remains popular across the continent, having found adherents in smaller European nations such as Bulgaria (Todorova, 2017). In the United States TCM is very popular, with large numbers of patients in states such as California turning to it for pain management and a sense of environmental harmony (E. Wu, 2010). TCM has even gained legitimacy within the halls of the World Health Organization (Kuo, 2015).

Traditional Chinese Medicine occupies an interesting place within modern Chinese society. Since the Cultural Revolution of 1949, TCM has been promoted by the leadership of China (Chan-Yeung, 2018). TCM is popular both in mainland China and in Hong Kong, with many people believing that Western medicine is best for acute problems, but that TCM will provide a slower, but better, solution for chronic ailments (Chan, Tsang, & Yanni Ma, 2015; Chen et al., 2018). At the same time, TCM is hotly contested on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, where scientists and doctors rage against its unscientific foundations even as mainstream media outlets sing its praises (Chen et al., 2018). Similar debates take place in Singapore, where doctors that practice TCM are licensed by the government, but report feeling like second class citizens because their practice is always evaluated through the discursive lens of biomedical science (L. Chang & Lim, 2019).

Debates about TCM on Chinese social media are notable, because they point to the significance of TCM as a source of collective imagination about sharks. Chinese media and leadership continue to

support the role of TCM domestically, and TCM continues to enjoy global popularity, making it important to understand the philosophical foundations of its practices. TCM places emphasis on the link between diet and health (Chan-Yeung, 2018). Exotic species, such as sharks, have specific functions within this medico-culinary system (Shapiro, 2016).

TCM has a rich history and philosophy that can be understood through several key characteristics. First, TCM created a large number of texts, many of which represent the first documents on a wide range of advanced medical practices. Second, TCM has a successful record of combating disease and is applicable to a diverse range of situations because it accepts multiple truths and encourages harmony. Finally, food is a core component of health in TCM. Within this system, sharks are a food that promotes power and strength, and which connotes respect when served to guests at a meal.

TCM represents a long tradition of intellectual inquiry and study. Faith in TCM has historical support linked to a proven track record of medical success. TCM began in 2697 BCE (Chan-Yeung, 2018). Acupuncture has been used therapeutically for over 3000 years, with the first needles made from stone (Kwan, 2010). Archaeological discoveries found in Silk Road tombs demonstrate that illustrated medical texts were popular in China one thousand years prior to the invention of printing (Lo, 2018). The first medical book ever published, known as the *Classic of Internal Medicine* was published in China between 475 and 221 BCE (Liu, 1988). The publication of the *Standard Inventory of Pharmacology* by Li Shih-chen, which took 26 years to compile, covers almost 1900 different drugs and approximately 10,000 prescriptions to address a range of health issues (Porkert, 1976).

Second, a key facet of TCM is its ability to combat disease through tailored medical advice. TCM is notable for a “holistic” approach to health that seeks balance internally and with the surrounding world (L. Chang & Lim, 2019). TCM assumes that the world is complex and that truth is contextual (Beinfeld & Korngold, 1991), therefore it is adaptable to multiple situations including psychological and psychosocial problems (Dunn, 1976). Within TCM, knowledge is a tool rather than a step down the road to progress. New procedures are added to old ones rather than displacing old ideas (Unschuld, 1992). Subsequently, TCM promotes harmony and is less confrontational than Western science (Sivin, 1995).

Paul Unschuld (1985, 1992) argues the most important aspect of TCM lies in its approach to disease. China pioneered a range of successful treatments including the first smallpox vaccine, chemotherapy and dental amalgam (Ho & Lisowski, 1997). In 610, Ch’ao Yuan-fang published the *Origins and Symptoms of All Diseases* which provided data about more than 1700 diseases including bubonic plague, measles, dysentery and phthisis (Porkert, 1976). The introduction of medical exams in Arabia in 931 is likely due to Chinese influence (Ho & Lisowski, 1997). In 2007, the first standardized dictionary of TCM terms was published in English and Mandarin (China Daily, 2007).

Third, food, diet and medicine are inseparable categories in TCM (Chan-Yeung, 2018). Food is central to health and balanced living in China (D. Y. H. Wu & Cheung, 2002), a belief that can be traced back to the 7th Century CE doctor Sun Simiao (Fu, 2018). Knowledge of food was both an indicator of class and intellectual prowess. Confucius, for example, was reputed to have a sensitive palate and to be an expert at using spices (Fu, 2018). Qi, the substance/force, that connects the cosmos is found in different amounts and forms in different foods (Chan-Yeung, 2018; Fu, 2018). Foods are classified into their medical properties: hot, cold, wet and dry (Anderson, 1988). The amount and type of food eaten are essential to maintenance of good health (Kwang Chih Chang, 1977). Subsequently, a natural response to illness is an alteration of diet (Anderson, 1988). The goal within TCM is to get the balance of foods correct, so that the person exists in harmony and good health (Fu, 2018)

Food has been a form of social, political and ritual communication in Chinese culture for centuries (Fu, 2018). Food is important for its medicinal properties and rhetorical value as different foods have specific, culturally defined meaning (Kwang Chih Chang, 1977). At special occasions and feasts, food helps to convey social information such as status and ethnicity (Anderson, 1988: 201). Food also allows communication with dead ancestors in religious rituals (Simoons, 1991). The role of food in ancestor worship is universal among both mainland Chinese and in diasporic communities, where the type of food given is based on the person being honored, and may very well include shark fin (E. S. Wu, 2018).

Animals, and the human relationship with nature are key themes in early Chinese medical texts (Lo, 2018). Chinese trade in exotic animals and seafood predates colonial trading contacts that began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (D. Y. H. Wu & Cheung, 2002). This practice has generated consternation and outright racism from early Western travelers to China such as Marco Polo and Walter Medhurst who were critical of Chinese eating habits and identified them as a marker of civilizational difference between China and the West (Fu, 2018).

The eating of exotic plant and animal species comes from the belief that the natural energy of the animal or plant transfers to the eater. The goal within TCM is to get the balance of foods correct, so that the person exists in harmony and good health (Fu, 2018). Some foods are highly prized by the Chinese as foods that provide strength. These foods are “pu” foods. Their opposite, “tu” foods are said to be poisonous, either individually or in combination with other foods (Anderson, 1988). Shark fin is a pu food, but the oldest pu food is bear paw, eaten before both shark’s fin and bird’s nests due to the observation of bears licking their paws throughout the winter, and the belief that if it could sustain a bear it would be a source of immense power for people (Simoons, 1991).

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, sharks have been eaten for centuries: “If there is such a thing as the cultural identity of food, shark-fin consumption in Chinese societies can be categorized as a socially constructed cultural product” (Cheung & Chang, 2011: 346). During the Tang Dynasty, (618 – 907) shark was eaten widely on the southern coast, served as a relish or in slices (Schafer, 1977) while the skin and bile were also used medicinally (Clarke et al., 2007). Shark was a royal food during the succeeding Sung, Ming and Ch’ing dynasty where it was a basic component of meals for honored guests (Clarke et al., 2007; Freeman, 1977; Spence, 1977).

Modern adherents of TCM continue the tradition of eating shark fin for social and medical reasons because of the “belief that shark fins are beneficial as a tonic, particularly in winter, similar to the use of chicken soup in Western cultures as a broad spectrum cure-all” (Clarke et al., 2007: 307). Some adherents to TCM claim shark cartilage has anti-cancer properties (Tutton, 2009). Shark fin is now a staple in a range of domestic Chinese products including “instant shark fin,” and “shark-fin moon cake” (Cheung & Chang, 2011).

At special occasions such as an “annual Chinese business dinner or an important birthday dinner, shark-fin soup is a ‘must have’ dish” (Cheung & Chang, 2011: 346). Large fins are decorations at social functions, where the price of the fin may be prominently displayed (Clarke et al., 2007). Shark fin is one of four items expected to be on wedding menus – the others being abalone, sea cucumber and fish maw (Blumenfield, 2011). Guests expect to be served shark fin, and if they are not they will “feel they are being cheated or not receiving value for money because they have already given a wedding gift, normally in the form of a money voucher” (Cheung & Chang, 2011: 346).

Sharks occupy a special place in the culinary fabric of Chinese culture and in the guiding philosophical principles of TCM. Sharks have become embroiled in the “gastropolitics” that characterizes the globalization of previously localized food traditions (Desoucey, 2016). Collective imagination of sharks in TCM is different than in Western nations. Within TCM, the strength and power of sharks is what makes them valuable as a pu food and as a rhetorical text at celebrations and public events. The presence of shark fin on a table connotes care, concern and respect. The promotion of TCM within China and its global popularity outside of China support a cumulative imaginary that reduces sharks to objects (food and medicine) that benefit people. At the same time, in Western countries, mass media construction of sharks as killing machines primes audiences to fear sharks.

Western collective imagination: Sharks as monsters

Representation of sharks as monsters has occurred throughout United States history. The most widely criticized painting in American art is *Watson and the Shark*, painted in 1778 by John Stuart Copley (Masur, 1994). Philosophical interpretations of *Watson and the Shark* suggest that the painting can be seen as a struggle between good and evil and/or man vs. nature (Masur, 1994). *Watson and the Shark* is a microcosm of America’s modern relationship with sharks. Western media products reap huge financial benefits from vilification of sharks. The ecological significance of sharks does not translate easily into a media product that produces advertising dollars or sells movie tickets.

Monsters serve a comparative function for a culture. They provide a measuring stick that allows a society to compare its own evolution to that of a species that failed to progress. The monster “provides an account, as though in caricature, of the genesis of differences, and the fossil recalls, in the uncertainty of its resemblances, the first buddings of identity” (Foucault, 1994b: 156–157). Foucault’s argument finds material form in sharks. Sharks are one of the most maligned creatures on Earth (Ling, 2008). Since the blockbuster *Jaws*, Western media products have promoted a transnational collective imaginary which constructs sharks as archaic, evil creatures and killing them as noble (Lloyd, 2012).

The significance of mediated representations of sharks as monsters is heightened by the fact that most people have no direct experience with sharks. Subsequently, caricatures of sharks as monsters have “tended to eclipse” accurate and realistic portrayals of them which would support an “appreciation of sharks as a natural, indeed necessary, part of a healthy reef ecosystem” (Ferguson, 2006: 124). There are at least three sources for these attitudes in modern Western media systems: (a) popular movies such as *Jaws*, (b) hyperbolic news accounts of shark bites that travel around the world, and (c) the wildly popular “Shark Week” programming that has run for decades on the Discovery Channel. Each of these is considered in the following sections.

Jaws

Jaws cost \$7 million to make and grossed over \$500 million in sales (Falcon, 2010). *Jaws* was supported by a global marketing campaign that was the largest in the history of Universal Films, and included a feature on the cover of *Time Magazine* (THR Staff, 2015). In the United States, the 1975 release of *Jaws* led to large amounts of shark hunting and fishing competitions (Dupree, 2008).

Jaws was explicitly taken up by communication studies scholars Thomas Frenz and Janice Hocker Rushing (1993) in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. The victory of the scientist and police officer over *Jaws*, portray themes of man conquering the dangerous forces of nature, embodied in a hungry beast that has a taste for people. Frenz and Rushing advance a reading of *Jaws* that goes beyond either archetypal or ideological criticism. They argue that *Jaws* presents a version of the “white hunter myth”

that is more complete than in *Moby Dick* because in *Jaws* the monster dies and the frontier is conquered (Frentz & Rushing, 1993).

What is remarkable about the success of *Jaws* is how inaccurately it portrays sharks. Sharks are not demons of the ocean who have a thirst for human blood. In fact, most shark bites are accidents, not a result of an animal that regularly hunts humans (Stewart, 2012). Nonetheless, the success of *Jaws* is rooted in its ability to tap into a fear that every human has when they enter the ocean: the fear of being completely exposed and unable to defend oneself. That a bite is a low risk, does not mitigate the fear of sharks created by powerful cinematic effects.

Christopher Neff argues that public attitudes toward sharks are a product of the “*Jaws* effect” (Neff, 2015). According to Neff, *Jaws* altered public beliefs about sharks in three distinct ways. First, there is a general acceptance of the idea that sharks intentionally hunt people. Second, the public widely accepts the (false) notion that a shark bite is usually fatal. Third, policy responses that kill sharks are seen as the solution to shark bites. All of these themes are extant in *Jaws*, and affirmed by the resolution of the film and its subsequent movie sequels. Spinoff films such as *Deep Blue Sea*, the *Sharknado* series and 2018 summer blockbuster *The Meg* all rely on the three themes of the *Jaws* effect.

In separate articles, Neff highlights the ongoing impact that *Jaws* has on media framing of shark bites. Neff notes that *Jaws* presents sharks as hunting humans and “intent on attacking swimmers” (2012: 91). Moreover, the term “shark attack” has “discursive power” that “presents an image and outcome from films that create the perception of a fatal event” (Neff, 2015, p. 124). These characterizations are parroted by news outlets who identify shark bites as an “attack” (Neff & Hueter, 2013). “Shark attack” rhetoric has public policy consequences because it signifies an accidental shark bite as a “premeditated crime” that “establishes villains and victims, cause and effect, perceptions of public risk, and a problem to be solved” (Neff & Hueter, 2013: 68). Constructing bites as intentional creates a narrative that is only resolved when the source of the “attack” is neutralized and controlled. The solution is inevitably systematic hunting of sharks to reduce the population.

News Media

Jaws has heavily influenced global attitudes towards sharks, but it is not the sole source of negative media. Sensationalism about sharks is an American tradition. In 1932, Frank Thone wrote an editorial chastising the annual ritual of sensationalist summer news accounts that appeared in newspapers about sharks, arguing that fear of sharks is completely unfounded (Thone, 1932: 394). However, Thone was a voice in the wilderness as, almost a century later, summer news reports continue to trumpet the threat of even the smallest shark bite. Fox News, for example, posted an article the summer of 2019 about a diver in a shark cage who took pictures of a great white shark with the headline “Great white charges at diver in terrifying moment captured on film” (Ciaccia, 2019). While the article describes an open-ocean cage dive intentionally designed to interact with sharks, the headline and associated images depict an unprovoked attack.

A 2013 study of the content and framing of sharks in American and Australian news reports found that “shark attacks were reported at least five times more than conservation concerns or any other shark-related topic” (Muter, Gore, Gledhill, Lamont, & Huveneers, 2013: 194). The study found that shark bite news circulates transnationally, and that coverage focuses almost exclusively on three species of sharks: white sharks, bull sharks and tiger sharks. While these are the species that most commonly bite humans, they are not the most at risk of extinction. Notably, Muter, et al document that positive news coverage is slowly increasing, but the authors conclude that “if sharks continue to be framed primarily as

perpetrators of risk, policy responses will likely remain unfavorable to shark conservation” (Muter et al., 2013: 194). Changing the public narrative about sharks is a key step in developing broader public support for conservationist shark policies.

Daryl McPhee’s (2014) study found that while unprovoked shark bites are unlikely they are framed as the norm by the news media. McPhee explains that, “while the probability (risk) of the hazard occurring is low, the vivid nature of a shark bite ensures a high degree of media reporting and public concern, even though most shark bites result in very minor injuries only” (2014: 478). Sensationalism begets public hysteria, which leads to policies that are not conducive to conservation or preservationist management practices. Like Drymon and Scyphers (2017), McPhee strongly advocates for a more balanced and nuanced portrayal of sharks in the media that de-emphasizes the threat posed by sharks to humans.

Additionally, a 2015 study of news coverage in Australia and the United States found results similar to the Muter et al. 2013 study. McCagh, Sneddon and Blache found that news accounts of human-shark encounters regularly highlight the “risks posed to humans as opposed to the risks posed to sharks” that results in “a discourse of fear in the framing of human-shark incidents” (2015, p. 272). The authors note that political leaders and news accounts often use personification in negative framing of sharks, characterizing them as “man eaters” and “rogue sharks.” McCagh, Sneddon and Blache also found that the content of news reports is important. In Western Australia, for example, reports about a government program designed to cull sharks that balanced both conservation messages and anti-shark/pro-government messages resulted in mixed support for government culling efforts.

Shark Week

Shark Week was created in 1987 and has become cable television’s longest running promotional vehicle. Since its inception, Discovery Channel has broadcast 151 different shark programs during its annual late summer shark TV buffet (Poggi, 2012). These shows garner over 2 million viewers in prime time hours (Myrick & Evans, 2014), demonstrating their tremendous popularity.

A study of Shark Week in Communication Research Reports by Suzannah Evans using framing and cultivation theory, concludes that the various shows are consistently present sharks “as dangerous wild animals” (Evans, 2015: 268). The Evans study found that “viewers of violent clips from Shark Week reported greater levels of fear and a higher risk of being a victim of a shark attack” (Evans, 2015: 271). Evans notes that while some programs include scientific data supporting conservation, the overall emphasis was on the danger posed to humans, with shark bite footage often repeated between programs. Evans also noted that Shark Week programs made references to *Jaws* roughly 9% of the time, demonstrating the continued relevance of this film for current attitudes about sharks.

In an additional study, Jessica Myrick and Suzannah Evans examine pro-conservation Shark Week PSAs using cultivation and priming theory; concluding that violent shark media creates a “mean ocean” effect (2014: 546). Myrick and Evans found that PSAs do not eliminate the fear engendered in viewers by “shark-on-human violence, whether gory, cartoonish, or realistic” (Myrick & Evans, 2014: 557–558). Just as citizens who are exposed to high levels of violence on television experience mainstreaming and the “mean world syndrome” (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beek, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980), media depictions of sharks as monsters create a similar effect on the viewing public. While viewers learn more about sharks from PSAs, they are also primed to be afraid of sharks by the content of the programs.

In sum, Communication Studies research and marine policy literature drawing on communication studies theories provide a comprehensive account of the way Western media products advance a cumulative imaginary that constructs sharks as monsters. *Jaws* was a watershed moment in the history of sharks' long history on planet Earth. The "white hunter myth" that drives the story of *Jaws* is only complete with a (defeatable) monster that roams the mean, dangerous ocean.

Western collective imagination of sharks circulates across a range of media products including feature films, news reports and sensationalist Shark Week programming. In each of these accounts, sharks are bloodthirsty killing machines who prey upon humans. Shark bites are characterized as attacks, criminalizing bites through a personification and vilification of sharks as premeditated criminals. Clearly, there is work to be done if the ocean is to be seen as a source of inspiration rather than fear and dread.

Conclusion

Analyzing discursive barriers to shark conservation is essential to supporting global efforts to craft policies that protect sharks. There are two primary benefits to the research advanced in this essay. First, the construct of collective imagination provides insight into two transnational, mutually reinforcing cumulative imaginaries that foster communicative barriers to shark conservation. Second, this essay serves as a step in re-signifying sharks in the public sphere by acting as a rejoinder to scholars of marine policy who have turned to Communication Studies theorists to change public attitudes toward sharks.

Initially, this essay is important because collective imagination is a heuristic tool that is useful for considering the way society conceptualizes non-human species in both Western media products and among people around the world who practice Traditional Chinese Medicine. Asen's original theory investigates subaltern communities in welfare debates, but collective imagination has value for considering non-human species such as sharks. Sharks are rarely considered as valuable members of an ecosystem in the crafting of public policy, and they are always spoken for by community members. Even in situations where they are being defended, sharks are spoken for by humans – making it imperative that the voices representing sharks be sensitive to their basic right to exist and their key role in maintaining the health of ocean ecosystems.

Asen's construct illustrates that sharks are squeezed from (at least) two different directions by cultural beliefs about their identity and anthropocentric value to humans. In Western media products, sharks are monsters that serve a role as a measuring stick for the evolution of Western society. Their construction as monsters is so thorough that even reading or hearing the word "shark" can create panic, supporting the argument that "people's fear of the idea of sharks can be more threatening than sharks themselves" (Pepin-Neff & Wynter, 2018: 226). Subsequently, shark conservation movements confront a cumulative imaginary that has made deep outposts in the minds of Westerners, and which increasingly circulates transnationally to non-Western nations.

At the same time, the communicative value of food and consumption of exotic species in TCM, has placed some practitioners of TCM squarely into conflict with the future of sharks as a species (Shapiro, 2016). As, Cheung and Chang (2003) note, this conflict is similar to the controversy over Japanese consumption of whale meat. In both instances, environmentalist demands to protect biodiversity are at odds with local/national desires to protect cultural traditions. What is unique to sharks is that Western media products are at odds with the demand of transnational environmentalists leading efforts to protect sharks from extinction. Moreover, vilification of sharks is a unique genre of horror film that increasingly cuts across cultural lines. *The Meg* (2018), for example, brought together both Chinese

and Western movie stars for a shark movie about a Chinese scientist (Li Bingbing) who calls upon a seasoned Western shark hunter (Jason Statham) to help defeat a giant pre-historic shark discovered on the ocean floor. The movie repeats the tropes of the Jaws effect: the shark hunts characters in the movie, it bites victims fatally and it must be killed in order to resolve the film. In *The Meg*, transnational audiences are taught that sharks are monsters that have no intrinsic value. TCM and Western media products are transnational phenomena, whose evolution will have dramatic implications for the future of sharks as a species.

Second, this essay is a small step toward challenging Western collective imagination of sharks as monsters. Better shark policy demands eliminating the discourse of fear surrounding them. Re-signification requires critics to “interrupt the ideological field and try to transform its meaning by changing or re-articulating its associations” (Hall, 1985: 112). Shark Week (and the media in general) has the potential to change public attitudes through “unbiased, non-sensationalized, and accurate” information (O’Byrhim & Parsons, 2015: 46). It is imperative that we recognize that sharks are a key part of healthy oceans and healthy ecosystems.

Conversation between marine policy scholars and Communication Studies scholars is a step away from status-quo collective imagination of sharks. There is a nascent shark conservation movement, but its success hinges on confronting public rhetoric that characterizes sharks (or nature generally) as a threat to humans (Pepin-Neff & Wynter, 2018). Re-signifying sharks in the global public sphere is essential to their survival. There is evidence the public will support a “Save the sharks” movement, but “more attention should be paid to the way fear-reducing messages influence policy preferences” in order to lessen public support for lethal policy solutions to shark bites (Pepin-Neff & Wynter, 2018: 228). Confronting cumulative imaginaries that treat sharks as monsters, medicine and food is the first step toward supporting conservation policies that value sharks as key members of healthy ocean ecosystems.

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