



Analysis on the Features of Cult Crime and Its Governance

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Abstract. Cult is a group that used supernatural forces or irrational beliefs that covered by religion or science to commit diverse of crimes like killing、sexual and economic crimes, which pose a serious threat to social safety. This article analyzes the current situation of cult crime and aims to summarize the features of cult crime and its membership including leaders and followers. It also provides referential legal implications in three aspects for the governance of cult crime. The classic cases will be analyzed as examples in this paper to elaborate and structurize the traits of cult crimes.

Keywords: Cult Crime · Criminal behavior analysis · Victimology

1 Introduction

As a social phenomenon, cult crimes appear in society from ancient times to our contemporary era, which brings a great difficulty to law enforcement and social governance. For cult crime, there are three different perspectives to define it. From the perspective of religion science, it refers to heresies that deviate from traditional religion, but heresies are not always the evil religions and harmful to society. Political perspective regards cult as a group that their belief is contradicted to political idea and go against the rule of the country. From the perspective of sociology, western scholars argued that cult is a group that manipulates followers to do things that harmful to society by mentally and physically controlling the mind of followers and making them give up the mainstream beliefs and values, which is more alike the legal concept of cult crime [1]. At present, the concept of cult crime under the perspective of sociology is wildly agreed among legal and research settings.

Although, recent years, the general trend of cult crime are declining, cult crime in China is still a serious problem, especially in nowadays post-pandemic era, it brings more obstacles to the investigation and governance of cult crimes. Empirical studies showed that after the outbreak of COVID-19, criminal behavior of cult is more diverse, transferring from the off-line to online. In China, cult crime also shows a special geographic features, the hotspots are Henan、Sichuan、Shandong、Jilin and Liaoning. The per capital GDP in those areas ranks low, which proved that cult crime is closely related to the level of economic development [2]. The currently most influential two cults in China are Falun Gong (replaced by F below) and Quan Nengshen (also known as the church

of almighty god or eastern lightening, replaced by Q below), respectively 137 and 52 crimes were committed after the outbreak of COVID-19 [2].

Domestic and foreign scholars have done a great amount of extensive research about cult crime. Some analyzed the classic cases and made the psychological profiling of cult crimes by applying theoretical models; some summarized the characteristics of cult crime and provided legal implications for it based on the criminal behavior; some researched the investigative methods and provided valuable investigative experience that helpful for solving cult crimes.

2 The Features of Cult Crime

2.1 Well-Organized Structure

One of the most prominent features of cult is the well-organized structure within the group [3]. The cults always have a clear frame and operational system to maximize the efficiency as well as a way to attract their followers by showing the mature organizational structure with formality. Cult is centers on the leader or several core individuals who need to develop this group by coaxing their victims and make them serve to their own purpose and benefit. Therefore, this corporate-like systematic structure helps the core leaders to make function divisions by the establishment of different departments. Every department take their own duties and responsibilities but ultimately service to these core individuals, they usually are the sub-leaders of department. This well-organized system makes the vertical management serve to personal purpose of core leaders of cult as a tool to improve the efficiency of operation and always with a strict hierarchy and regulations.

Take the cult of Q as an example, the two leaders of Q hid in America and remotely established the systematic structure of Q [4]. In the case of Q, it set four levels of hierarchy according to scale and authority: dioceses - districts - sub-districts and local propagation units. Every hierarchy have four departments with different missions and tasks: administrative - propaganda - inspection and liaison department. Administrative department in charge of planning and allocating the missions; propaganda department responsible for developing the new cult members and coaxing victims; inspection department check the completion of work and supervise the followers in that level of hierarchy; liaison department in charge of contacting relevant cult members and information communication. By forming the well-organized structure and fulfilling their own missions, the Q could make the operation smoothly works out within the system in an effective way.

2.2 Concealment and Deception

Cult activities have high concealment. Firstly, cult always hidden in the shelter of orthodox religion. It would commit crimes that harmful to society or threatening life in the names of a religion, in reality, its just a way to serve to personal and selfish purpose of the core individuals of the cult, which make others hard to distinguish between the cult and real religion [3]. Secondly, the organized structure usually uses the secret ways of communication, one-way communication and nickname of followers isolated the source

information of the cult. It also has private or remote location to hold relevant cult activities and avoid the interruption during the brainwash [5]. Thirdly, cult members would use forms of violence and intimidation to force their members completely allegiance to the organization, which make victims afraid to report and prosecute cult crimes until they totally turned from victims to cult members [3].

The beliefs and values the cult conveys to followers usually break away from mainstream of the society. It would support some feudal and ignorant values or rely on the force of supernatural, which is anti-science and anti-social, to attract victims. This deception will be covered by the rumors of doomsday, magic power of god, or extreme liberalism. The cult of F coaxes their followers to practice “Qigong” in order to become the gods after death. F also in virtue of the outbreak of COVID-19 to incite the doomsday in a flourish of trumpets. The leader of “Manson Family” (replaced by M below) asserted that he is reincarnation of Jesus and incited the ethnic war as well as extremism to pursuit drug and sex, committed brutal serial killings with his followers [6].

2.3 Mental Control: A Way to Manipulate

Mind control is the stock-in-trade of cult. Steven Hassan, a famous psychologist and sociologist use the “BITE” theory to explain mental control in cult crimes [7]. “B” refers to behavior control, cult will hold a great amount of activities like rite and ceremony to force their members to participate. Reward and punishment also a way to intensify their behaviors and fixate by regulation that tore out their individual characters. “I” refers to information control, the cult will set barriers to prevent external information that not conducive to mental control flow to cult members. “T” stands for thinking control, the cult will repeatedly pour the twisted moral value and irrational cognition into the mind of members or even change their mind by hypnosis. “E” stands for emotion control, by taking advantage of emotion of fear and guilty, cult will conduct moral abduction to make members feel sorry about themselves and put more beliefs on the organization thereby more easily to be controlled. By persistently carrying out “BITE” model, the victims will completely turn into cult members whose cognition、thinking and behavior are totally changed.

The quirky ritual ceremonies organized by cult always involved the input of twisted values and beliefs that serve to the purpose of mental controlling. The F organizes the regular meeting for exercising the “Qigong”, claimed that their spirit could stay forever. The Q repeatedly requested members to have a faith and willingly to sacrifice for god in order to intensify their misconception that deeply rooted in their mind. Some members have strong individual consciousness, in that case the cult will force them to obey the authority by intimidating、torturing or even killing unless members bend over. Cases showed that many members of Q cannot stand the violent threats so that they ended their own life. Cult will also order members to cut off their social relationship to “dive into the cultivation of god” even abandon their families. The cult of “peoples temple” (replaced by P below) mandatorily segregates their followers in a remote Jonestown to cut off their interaction to the exterior [8].

Other ways of mental controlling include the effect of bandwagon effect、cult of personality and desperate personal needs [5]. Members will obedience to the authority by the pressure caused by the conformity of group. The core leader of cult usually

plays the role of god that need their members totally believed in, therefore, the group consciousness formed by personality cult. It also could take advantage of the needs and desires of individuals and promise about the cure of serious illness, immortal body and great amount of wealth.

3 Analysis on Criminal Behaviors of Cult Crime

3.1 Abetting Murders and Suicides

Killings are extreme and frequent form of cult crime. These killings always organized, planned by the core leaders but committed by followers under the mental control. Cult as a group, the cohesion and atmosphere will amplify the extreme thoughts, which means violent crimes involved with cult are more serious than general violent crimes, brutality and premeditation are noticeable features of killing in cult crimes.

The motivation of murdering is diverse in its forms, but the ultimate purpose is serve to personal needs of core leaders of the cult. Most leaders of cult abet their followers to commit murders in the names of “exorcism” or even causes a mass murders that seriously threat to public and security. In 2014, The followers of Q beat a women to death in a Mcdonald’s of Shandong, China while yelling at the victim as “evil spirit” [9]. The Q convinces their followers that killing the evil incarnate is a good thing that could help them improve their cultivation of god. In 1969, the leader of the M, Charles Manson abetting their followers, three young girls from middle class, to commit the serial murders and the victims are celebrities from upper class who are stabbed multiple times in purpose of framing these murders on black people in order to provoke the race war [6, 10]. From these cases we can see that murder is a form and instrument of cult crimes, the essence of cult murder is an additional product and external or behavioral form of irrational beliefs that the leaders of the cult adopted to control over.

Abetting suicide is also frequently connecting with cult crimes. The cult members are turning into victims. After the long-term brainwash of mental control, victims have no self-awareness, and their mind is filled with distorted world view that the cult leaders planted in. The core leaders of cult often lead their followers to commit suicide in names of “glorious sacrifice”、 “salvation of god”、 “test of god” or “to be god”. In 1978, leader of the P: Jim Jones abetting his followers to take cyanide and those who disobeyed this order will be killed, which caused 913 victims in the Jonestown, as well known as “mass suicide of Jonestown” [8, 11]. In 2001, 8 cult members of F burned themselves at Tian’anmen Square in order to pursuit the so called consummation and become the god or Buddha [12]. These cases showed that killings in cult crimes always motivated by two aspects, directly caused by their irrational and twisted beliefs and indirectly caused by abetting of the leader of cult, mental control make a bridge between two of them.

3.2 Economic Crime

Illegal fund-raising is another form of cult crimes. Pursuing the material possessions is the original core purpose of the cult leaders who needs this money to satisfy their own desires as well as provide operation of cult material support. The main source of it is coming from their followers and industry chains.

The cult followers under the long-term mental control are more easily to be manipulated. The authority would make followers voluntarily give their money in the names of “donation for god” or fraud by selling items or services related to cult, like classes、treatments、ceremonies [3]. The Q claimed that more money you donate, closer the god will be around you. The funds raised from followers will be used to invest on larger industrial chains. The cult leaders will start their career by establishing the legitimate business then hide behind the economical entity so that they could obtain the stable source of finance to sustain the operation the cult. Another way is to privately create the illegal industrial chain by selling the books、magazines or brochures that related to cult to the followers or potential followers. The followers of M even raise their funds by selling drugs. The economic structure of cult provides a circular system, which could provide cult a great amount of assets for more criminal activities. The source covered by legal industry or secret illegal industry still are main ways for fund-raising.

3.3 Sexual Crime

The group of cult labeled with “promiscuous”, the core leaders of cult would have sexual relationship with their followers in names of “god” or “psychic rite” [13]. It always involved the extreme worship of female followers for cult leaders so that they voluntarily have sex with them in order to fulfill the irrational beliefs in mind like “speaking to or integrating with god”. The lewdness of sexual behavior bring a great damage physically and mentally to female followers. The female followers of M willingly to have sex with mason as a way to condemn the secular sex rules and support the extreme freedom of sex. The Q claimed that the followers need to be examined if they are the “chosen one” or not by sending their naked pictures to the leaders. It also proposes to hold the so called “spiritual practice” by having sex with the cult leaders to integrate or to be a part of god. It should be stressed that sexual behaviors also happened under the mental control, which bring the difficulty to judiciary authorities for the mental state of victims is hard to assess, thus influence decision on the “voluntarily sexual behavior”.

3.4 Offense Against Public Security

The cult activities have great impact on public security and seriously interrupt the social order. The cult members will wildly spread some rumors like doomsday argument or start some anti-governance and anti-science speeches that badly causes the mass panic among citizens to reversely advertise for their “salvation of god”. Some cults disguised by the religion will hold parade or gather around to lead to disturbance and riot. The F once gathered their followers in a large scale around the buildings of government to realize their goals of manipulation, which caused the social disorder、traffic barriers and panic of people. The cult may even brings a great potential hazard for public safety and carry out the serious public security events. The followers of Japanese cult: Aum Shinrikyo released the sarin gas in the subway of Tokyo, causing 13 people died and 6300 people injured [14]. More seriously, some cults even interference in the political power within internal affairs of a country. Cult crimes featured as diversity in its forms of crime, which needs the public security department and law enforcement to pay attention to strengthen the governance to cult crimes.

4 Profiling of the Cult Membership

4.1 Characteristics of Leaders of Cult

Most leaders of cult have the antisocial personality disorder and dark triad: psychopathy \ machiavellianism and narcissism. They lack of remorse or regret \ selfish with low empathy \ fulfill their purpose by fair means or foul. Their criminal behaviors showed a strong sense of antisocial tendency and manipulation over the followers. They also capable or good at establishing social relationship and have leadership ability for the needs to develop the group. They are eloquent \ charming and always boast their twisted and irrational beliefs to their followers. These elements of cult leaders contribute to coax new cult members and carry out the mental control over the followers.

Research suggested that most leaders of cult went through a serious life events in the early stage of life or even in childhood, they may have a terrible background, which planted the seed of antisocial personality rooted in the mind. They are relatively unwell-educated, less rational thoughts, more extreme and feudal thoughts and lack of cultural quality [15]. They also possibly have religion backgrounds in their life. Leader of M: Charles Manson, went through a horrible childhood. His mother was a prostitute and the frequenter of prison, then he was adopted by his aunt but went through the family violence. The leader of F: Hongzhi Li, born in a poor family, then parents divorced. He only owned the junior high school diploma, a normal but self-conceit student in others' eyes. The leader of Q: Weishan Zhao, also born in a poor family that cannot even afford the life necessities, he went through a miserable childhood but as an eldest son in family, he took more responsibilities and pressures. Leaders of cult used to be an ordinary person, but under the pressure of family \ life and times, they choose to step on the way of crime.

4.2 Victimology Analysis of Cult Members

4.2.1 Personality Traits

From the perspective of personality, by using the NEO-FFI, empirical research found that the cult members are showed a prominent differences compared with other criminals [16]. Cult members scored high on neuroticism, which means they have low stability of emotions and are more easily to be activated by external stimulation. After went through the serious life events, they showed more tendency of negative cognition. This personality trait pave the way to blindly follow the cult under the incite and deception. They also featured as low extraversion, which means cult members are generally diffident and solitary, lack of experience of social communication with limited social circle or even have autism tendency. After being a part of cult, they incline to enjoy the satisfaction of the strong group cohesion that they never felt, under the abnormal mental state, they are more easily to commit crimes. Cult members also have scored low on conscientiousness, which means they have low level of self-control and self-concept, their poor willpower and high impulsivity make them more possibly commit crimes instigated by leaders of cult.

4.2.2 False Cognition and Irrational Beliefs

Cult members possibly have twisted world view and value orientation that make them more incline to idealism [16]. They have a belief in the force of supernatural and heretical ideas thereby are more willing to believe in the stories that make up by cult. Therefore, their interest for supernatural power is more likely to be activated by the coaxing of cult. This could also be expressed in attribution pattern, most of the cult members prefer to attribute the reasons of things happened to external exist, like “god”. Their false cognition and irrational beliefs make them more easily to be brainwashed or mentally controlled by cult. Statistics showed this trait are more frequently possessed by female, and indeed 70% cult members are women. This trait make them enjoy to be controlled by powerful authorities that provide safety and dependency for them and more possibly indulge in the world that the cult makes that hard to get out.

4.2.3 High Susceptibility and Low Recognition Ability

The susceptibility refers to the specific traits of individuals that more likely to be effected by external stimulation [16]. Cult members always have the high susceptibility so that they would be more easily attracted to the coaxing compared with average. The cult leaders would take advantage of it to manipulate and abet their members to commit crimes for the low activation level. Statistics showed that cult members relatively have lower educational background, which means they lack of rational knowledge to help recognize the cult that disguised by religion or science. Research also showed that most of cult members come from rural areas where the educational resources and level of economic development are relatively low. Those who come from rural areas are possibly lack of scientific knowledge and blindly follow the lead of cult.

5 The Governance Strategies of Cult Crime

5.1 Improve Investigative Techniques and Skills

The improvement of investigative techniques plays a core role for governance the cult crime cases. Because of the concealment and deception of cult crimes, investigative officers should be sensitive to evidence that they are looking for, view in a larger perspective and seize the whole information chain [3]. Any single case involved with cult may reveal information about the group like their beliefs \ how they behave or the leader of cult. The ability of organize all the scattered traces in single cases is also important, which may construct a larger picture of serial crimes committed by a cult. It should be stressed that pay attention to connectivity of dotted information after long-term following and dive-in investigation would complete in different aspects [3, 17]. Therefore, logically analyze and construct related information is indispensable.

On the other hand, it is important to collect two kinds of evidences: physical and behavioral evidences [3, 17]. In cult crimes, the corporate-like organized structure make them possibly left evidence in crimes, like files or documents that could reveal the identity of cult members. The illegal publication tool of propaganda like brochures \ fliers and books as well as illegal industrial chains or business also lead the direction of investigation. When killings involved, there will be a great amount of physical evidence like

weapon - fingerprint or other traces that may reveal the information of cult. Behavioral evidences like how they coax the victims and operate mental control - where and when they hold the regular cult activity should be figured out to deeply profiling the psychological status of cult members. When crimes involved with cult happened, by analyzing the ritual behaviors or the methods of crimes, it could bring more leads to complete the whole picture.

5.2 Intensify the Social Awareness of Anti-cult

The theory of attitude inoculation claims that as our body is immune to germs, an individual's attitude is immune to some point of view that may potentially cause our attitude to change [18]. This theory could provide valuable theoretical support for the governance of cult crime, which involved the psychological change in a large extent. From the perspective of social psychology, if we receive a great amount of anti-cult information in a long time, there is higher possibility that we immune to the irrational beliefs of cult, which means we have enough mental resources to resist the heathenism and mental control. The application of this theory would help for prevention of cult crimes.

The core element of the application of theory is about establishing the powerful social awareness or ideology of anti-cult, which should be deeply rooted in the mind of citizens regardless of age and sex. Different social organizations should widely carry out the work of publicity and expressed rational and scientific value orientation that prevent the permeation of cult ideology [18]. Regularly holding the activities that related to anti-cult in diverse forms are also play a great role in governance of cult crime. Especially for the schools and communities where those who have lower ability of recognizing cult are closely gathered. Statistics showed that juvenile delinquency involved with cult plays a great part since their views on the world - life and value is not completely formed yet, therefore, easily to be changed and mental controlled by cult. Individuals gathered in communities are relatively senior citizens, who are lack of ability of self-protection and rational thoughts as well as spiritual support. That make them a high-risk group that targeted by cult. By sending fliers - pamphlets - holding lectures or publicity activities, the awareness of anti-cult will be formed, which benefit for prevent of cult crimes.

5.3 Form the Comprehensive Public Security System

Cult crimes not only need the social governance, but more importantly, the power of public security department should be fully utilized, which means there should be diverse forms of channels of governance that construct a comprehensive public security system [5, 19]. Firstly, with the coming of post-pandemic era, a lot of cult members transfer their workplace to the internet world. Therefore, there is a great need to strengthen the regulation of internet so that the cult members cannot find online space [20]. Then, blockade internet speeches relate to cult in time could reduce social influence, they could also target the users who post comments and timely arrest, which provide leads for investigation. Secondly, for cult crimes that happened in high frequency in the close areas, there is a need to found a Task Force to centralized dealing with these serial cult crimes, which the systematic and overall information would provide a more all-sided

picture. Thirdly, as the information plays an essential role in cult-crime-solving, there is a great need to share valuable information among different departments. Information sharing provides more potential possibilities for discovering the leads or even evidences of cult crime, which may piece together the whole picture of cult crime.

6 Conclusion

The cult crimes are diverse in forms, which could be involved in different fields like politics、economy and public safety. More cult crimes are involved with murdering or suicide, these crimes are often well-organized and instrumental that aims to individuals and society. Killings committed by cult members are always brutal and inhuman with a great diversity of methods of crimes. Cult crimes are essentially a form of abnormality of mind that involved with distortion of beliefs and cognition. Therefore, the prevention and governance of cult crimes should be carried out from the perspective of social psychology, like intensifying the social awareness and ideology of anti-cult. Others methods of governance should pay attention to the investigation and the formation of comprehensive public security system.

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