Original Paper

A Critical Pragmatic Perspective on Identity Construction through Non-Verbal Evidentiality in Cyber Rumors

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Abstract

In the era of wide use of social media , cyber rumors often construct false "chains of evidence" by strategically employing non-verbal symbols such as images, audio, and video, making them significantly more deceptive than text-only versions. Integrating Critical Pragmatics and Pragmatic Identity Theory, this study examines how cyber rumors strategically manipulate non-verbal evidential resources to co-construct fabricated "evidential chains" and corresponding "credible identities". The research finds that cyber rumors extensively utilize multimodal resources, such as image modality to create an illusion of empirical evidence, format/layout symbols to appropriate institutional authority, video modality for spatio-temporal manipulation, and fabricated follower counts as quantitative "social proof". These strategies falsely construct identities such as pseudo-authoritative institutions, pseudo-eyewitnesses, pseudo-victim advocates, pseudo-scientific experts, and pseudo-internal informants. Fundamentally, these identity constructions violate the maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle and subvert the identity appropriateness and sincerity conditions of speech acts. By creating an "illusion of empirical evidence" through multimodal synergy, they erode the public's ability to judge the authenticity of symbols. This study is expected to expand the multimodal dimension of evidentiality

theory, deepen the linguistic explanation of cyber rumor dissemination mechanisms, and provide novel analytical perspectives for rumor identification and governance.

Keywords

evidentiality, multimodality, cyber rumors, pragmatic identity, Critical Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Cyber rumors, as a typical form of manipulative persuasive discourse, derive their core potency from strategically dismantling audience vigilance and inducing acceptance of false propositions in rumors. During this persuasive process, the linguistic expression of source of the messsage and the rumor makers' commitment to its reliability plays a crucial role, which is evidentiality (Aikhenvald, 2004; Chafe, 1986; Hardman, 1986, p. 115; Whitt, 2011, p. 347). Traditionally categorized into sensory, reported, inferential, and belief-based types (Chafe, 1986; Brugman & Macaulay, 2015; Chen & Yu, 2017), evidential strategies provide "evidentiary" support for discourse claims by constructing representations of information sources. They are key semantic and pragmatic means for establishing credibility and influencing audience judgment, manifested in lexical terms and grammatical constructions (Aikhenvald, 2004, p. 10; Ju, 2023). Rumor producers achieve manipulative goals precisely by strategically distorting evidential resources to mislead audiences about the empirical basis of false information. In the social media era, information dissemination increasingly relies on the synergistic interplay of multimodal symbols such as text, image, audio and video. When rumors propagate as video "eyewitness evidence" or imagery "visualizations", their evidential force is strongly built upon the "empirical illusion" created by non-verbal symbols, such as the indexical implications of forged screenshots or the emotional arousal of background music. Their deceptive power far exceeds that of text-only rumors, posing a severe challenge to information authenticity and public discernment. Current research on evidentiality in cyber rumors exhibits significant gaps. Firstly, existing studies predominantly focus on dissemination pathways, social impacts, or textual features, offering relatively insufficient in-depth linguistic analysis of how systematic evidential strategies construct false credibility, calling for deep researches on cyber rumor evidentiality. Secondly, traditional evidentiality theory primarily concentrates on grammaticalized markers within linguistic symbols, paying inadequate attention to the mechanisms by which non-verbal symbols like images and sound in rumors are appropriated as evidential strategies to fabricate "chains of evidence" and enhance deception. This theoretical lag fundamentally limits explanations of cyber rumors' deceptive efficacy.

The rise of multimodal communication exacerbates these gaps. When rumors propagate as "eyewitness videos" or "visualized data", their persuasive force hinges on the empirical illusion crafted by non-verbal symbols, e.g., the indexicality of forged screenshots or the affective power of background music. With all these in mind, this study addresses how cyber rumor producers strategically co-opt non-verbal evidential resources to construct false "pseudo-evidential chains" and corresponding

"credible identities.

2. Theoretical Considerations

Identity is a core concern within the humanities and social sciences (Grad & Rojo, 2008, pp. 3-18; Chen, 2013). From a traditional sociological perspective, identity was viewed as a static category composed of fixed social attributes such as gender, occupation, and age (Tajfel, 1981). With the rise of social constructivism, identity studies have increasingly shifted focus towards a dynamic perspective, emphasizing its provisionality, context-sensitivity, and plasticity within communicative interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Identity is thus understood as a role positioning and a resource for identification dynamically constructed by interactants through social engagement. It encompasses both an individual's cognition of their own social attributes and involves others' interpretation and negotiation of these attributes (Hall, 2017, p. 118). Pragmatic Identity Theory, a significant branch of pragmatics, examines how communicators strategically select, construct, negotiate, and manage specific identities within dynamic discourse practices to achieve particular communicative goals (Chen, 2013; Tracy, 2002). It emphasizes that identity is not pre-fixed but is a social action instantaneously constructed and displayed through linguistic (and multimodal) choices in specific contexts. Identity construction is even more strategic and malleable in online communication. Rumor producers do not merely disseminate false information but actively construct and project specific "credible identities" (e.g., authoritative institutional spokesperson, event eyewitness, scientific researcher, knowledgeable insider, victim advocate) through meticulously designed multimodal evidential strategies. With such practices, it becomes more possible for rumor producers to dismantle audience vigilance and secure initial trust. The core of this identity construction lies in utilizing symbolic resources (text, images, sound, interface design etc.) to manufacture an "identity illusion", causing audiences to misjudge the reliability of the information source and the speaker's epistemic stance, thereby cloaking false propositions in a veneer of "credibility".

Critical Pragmatics integrates the formal linguistic analysis of classical pragmatics with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 2009) which focus on exposing ideological manipulation and social power imbalances. This theory posits that linguistic communication is not merely a tool for information transfer but also a carrier of social practice and power relations. In analyzing cyber rumors, Critical Pragmatics can direct researchers' attention to two core dimensions: on the one hand, revealing how rumor-mongers strategically violate fundamental cooperative principles and ethical norms of verbal communication to serve manipulative ends; and on the other hand, dissecting how they utilize multimodal symbolic resources to construct false "chains of evidence" and "identity illusions", ultimately serving the interest expression of specific groups or individuals, such as inciting social discord, promoting specific agendas, perpetrating fraud, et al. Critical pragmatic study on this fraudulent speech act can expose the ethical crisis of linguistic symbols being instrumentalized

as tools of ideological manipulation in the digital age.

Guided by Critical Pragmatics and deeply integrating the perspective of Pragmatic Identity Theory, this study tries to investigate how cyber rumors strategically manipulate multimodal symbolic resources, text, images, audio, video, layout and interfaces, in particular, to co-construct false "pseudo-evidential chains" and, in the process, dynamically construct specific "credible identities", as an effort in covering their deceptive nature.

3. Semiotic Deception Mechanisms of Multimodal Evidential Strategies

Rumors are complete, encoded messages that generate sensational reflections while appearing persuasive in a peculiar way (Neubauer, 2004, p. 231). A primary reason people believe rumors is their seemingly reliable sources (Kapferer, 2008, p. 72). Leveraging the multimedia nature of the internet, cyber rumors have transcended textual limitations. The inclusion of images, video and other non linguistic means significantly enhances their perceived credibility. These rich formats exist within rumors as purported "evidence", making inherently ambiguous rumors appear ostensibly well-substantiated.

3.1 Image Modality: Constructing the "Illusion of Empirical Evidence"

Cyber rumors combining text and images appear well-supported, making their represented content seem more authentic and credible. The use of images is diverse, including accompanying images, integrated text-image formats, and intertextual image sets.

Numerous cyber rumors bolster textual claims with images to confirm reliability. For example, the rumor "Dandelion Root Has Miraculous Anti-Cancer Effects" used 6 images (Note 1), while "The Magical Wheatgrass Juice Sweeping Europe and America: 'Anti-Cancer Medicine' Grown on Your Balcony" used up to 11 images, predominantly showing vibrant, dew-covered wheatgrass, creating a strong sense of vitality and visual impact to enhance the persuasive power of the "anti-cancer" claim. Some rumors integrate text and image seamlessly, enhancing readability and contextual cues. For instance, a photo of a kindergarten notice board circulated on WeChat claimed children developed high fevers and hand-foot-mouth disease after eating lychees soaked in a corrosive solution (Note 2).

Figure 1. Kindergarten Notice Board from the "Lychee Soaking Causes Hand-foot-mouth Disease" Rumor

In terms of evidentials, this example's key feature is the integration of text and image, using the picture to amplify the text. The "small notice board", green playground, children's play equipment, and school building in the background construct the physical context of a "kindergarten", lending an aura of traceability to the information. Cyber rumors also employ intertextual sets of images. For example, a rumor about a 360 router launching a "Pregnancy Mode" claimed to reduce radiation and protect pregnant women. It used two images (Note 3) showing different health modes in the router settings to jointly demonstrate the device's powerful health-protection features. In an era dominated by visual culture, images in cyber rumors offer easier, more direct consumption and stronger visual impact. Images have become "picture frauds", capable of fabricating facts or reshaping the "objective reality", possessing high persuasive power and attracting widespread attention.

3.2 Format and Layout Symbols: Mechanisms of Authoritative Appropriation

Cyber rumors frequently appropriate the formatting and layout symbol systems of professional texts, such as administrative documents, academic reports, to construct a visually authoritative "façade of evidence". This constitutes a theft of formal textual conventions, creating a "credible illusion" that aligns with audience cognitive expectations through enforced intertextuality between text and visual modes.
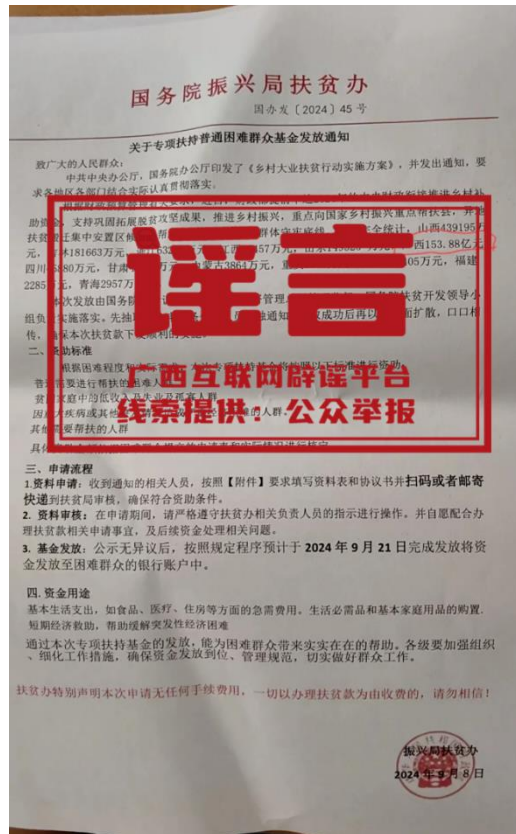
Figure 2. Screenshot of the "Poverty Fund Disbursement" Cyber Rumor

Take the widely circulated 2024 rumor "Guangxi Receives 15.3 Billion Special Poverty Fund Awaiting Disbursement" (see Figure. 2) (Note 4). The rumor-monger meticulously forged a document mimicking a "red-headed" official document from the Rural Revitalization Bureau's Poverty Alleviation Office. Visual presentation showed that the text strictly adhered to the formatting norms of Chinese Communist Party and government documents: a prominent red line separated the letterhead from the body; enlarged red font at the top identified the issuing unit; an official document number was included—instantly conveying seriousness and importance. The body text used the standardized GB/T 9704-2012 imitation Song font, reinforcing formality. What makes it more persuasively powerful is that an electronic seal featuring the national emblem was added, visually replicating an official seal in every detail. These layout details precisely match the public's cognitive schema for authentic official documents, subconsciously leading audiences to equate the rumor with genuine government communication.

3.3 Video Modality: Spatio-Temporal Manipulation Strategies

Micro-videos in cyber rumors primarily include misattributed footage of real events, self-produced staged videos, and re-edited film or TV clips with altered dubbing or captions.

These strategies use fabricated "on the spot" videos to recreate events or "reveal the truth", presenting

seemingly irrefutable evidence. Following the death of a student at Taifu Middle School in Luzhou, Sichuan, numerous video rumors surfaced (Note 5), "disclosing" gruesome death scenes, distraught relatives wailing, a bridal shop owner being hunted by gangsters for filming, and police drawing guns on-site. These "authentic truth restorations" provoked public outrage, gained massive attention and shares, and even prompted lawyers to offer legal aid to the family. Official investigations confirmed these videos actually depicted a junior high student being beaten with sticks in a classroom elsewhere, unrelated to the Luzhou incident. Cyber rumor videos can also be entirely staged by the rumor producers. Food safety rumors often use this format. Videos typically feature "actors" demonstrating how food is "illegally" processed. For example, videos linked to the "plastic seaweed" panic (Note 6) showed "actors" proving seaweed was "problematic": it wouldn't soak soft or chew, and melted quickly with a pungent smell when burned—purportedly proving it was fake seaweed made from recycled plastic bags by unscrupulous traders. Videos also frequently "substantiate" rumors about safety accidents or violent incidents. For instance, the rumor "Xuzhou Gangsters Mass Brawl, On-Scene Video" spread widely online, leading viewers to lament "Xuzhou gangs are really rampant". The "star" of the fight video, later apprehended by police, confessed the brawl was entirely self-staged to increase his follower count and earn online profits.

3.4 Fabricated Follower Counts: Quantitative Forgery Strategy

"Fans" (supporters) originally referred to enthusiasts or idol worshippers. On platforms like Weibo and Baidu Space, fans are supporters of a blogger or account holder. Follower counts can serve as indicators of popularity or even credibility. In cyber rumor production and dissemination, follower counts can be appropriated by malicious actors as implicit evidential resources to enhance perceived credibility.

For example, accounts offering services to "check Weibo/WeChat visitor records" claimed users could "find out who recently visited their profile for just 3-20 RMB" (Note 7). Accounts like @Yunnan Cyber Police confirmed this was a scam. Scammers typically log into the use's account to screenshot their friend/block lists, or use random profile pictures to forge visitor records. Providing account credentials risks data theft or the scammer sending phishing links or loan requests to contacts. A crucial detail on these service account pages is the follower count. Zero followers raise suspicion, but a three or even four-digit count becomes a potent evidential resource. For instance, the account "Fairy Who Checks Weibo Visitors" boasted 1075 followers, implicitly boosting its credibility and the scam's success likelihood. Similar to online shopping, where buyers judge product quality based on store ratings, transaction volume, and reviews, "existing customers" (who have patronized the store) following and thus implicitly endorsing a service account provides reference for potential "clients". Hence, follower count functions as an evidential resource. Larger follower counts foster greater trust, prompting more clicks on "Follow", gradually ensnaring victims. Of course, data about these "old customers" and follower counts is entirely fabricated by fraudsters. This evidential type is often embedded within text

or images, working synergistically with other evidential resources to imperceptibly enhance the rumor's credibility.

4. Identity Construction with the Use of Multimodal Evidentials

The multimodal evidential strategies of cyber rumors construct various false identity types based on the combination of symbolic modes and the function of the fabricated evidence, with psudo-authoritative institution, Pseudo-Eyewitness, Pseudo-Victim Advocate, Pseudo-Scientific Expert and Pseudo-Internal Informant as the major types. These identities exploit meticulously designed symbolic strategies to gain audience trust and achieve deceptive or inflammatory goals.

4.1 Pseudo-Authoritative Institution

The core mechanism of information manipulation via pseudo-authoritative institutions lies in fabricating institutional endorsement through a forced intertextuality of textual narratives and counterfeit visual symbols, thereby constructing a cognitive trap. As outlined in Section 3.2, its typical manifestations involve misappropriating government agency logos, replicating official document formats, or plagiarizing academic journal insignia and expert portraits. Within China's specific socio-cultural context, this strategy exhibits heightened levels of deception and harmfulness. Public trust in the administrative system and professional authority is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, manifesting as an almost instinctive reverence and compliance towards "red-headed" official documents, government seals, specific "national-level" institutional designations, and honorific titles such as "Academician" or "Authoritative Expert". Fraudulent actors deliberately target and exploit this ingrained cultural psychology and institutionalized trust: they not only replicate logos and layouts but also meticulously mimic the distinctive formalistic rhetoric of official documents, employing formulaic phrases like "It is decided upon deliberation..." or "This is hereby notified..." and the precise diction of academic discourse. This calculated imitation creates a hyperreal semblance of an evidentiary chain meticulously aligned with bureaucratic conventions and public expectations. The construction and dissemination of such pseudo-authority constitute a deliberate act of deception, knowingly propagating false information while deliberately obscuring sources, e.g., "according to internal sources" "confirmed by relevant departments", to evade accountability. Essentially, this practice constitutes a willful violation of the maxim of Quality (disseminating known falsehoods) and the maxim of Manner (using ambiguous expressions) under Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975). Its fundamental nature is the malicious hijacking of the public's habitual trust in administrative symbolic systems, ultimately serving the manipulator's core objective of information control.

4.2 Pseudo-Eyewitness

False identity constructed here creates spatio-temporally displaced "eyewitness evidence chains" by editing footage from real events and overlaying misleading captions. The core technique involves recontextualizing raw material from disasters or social conflicts, leveraging the "indexical" nature of

moving images to lend empirical weight to false narratives. For example, during Typhoon Doksuri in 2023, a short video claiming "Shanghai Metro Line 16 Flooded, Passengers Wading to Escape" spread rapidly on Tiktop. It showed waist-high water inside a carriage with passengers filming on phones, triggering public doubt about the city's flood defenses and garnering 1.5 million shares in a single day. Its evidential force stemmed from multimodal synergy: the shaky handheld perspective enhanced immediacy; matching metro signage with heavy rain scenes blurred spatio-temporal discrepancies; and the "Shanghai" location tag activated local audiences' crisis anxiety, inducing intuitive cognitive validation bias. Shanghai cyberspace authorities confirmed the video was actually shot during the Zhengzhou "7.20" floods years back in 2021. The forger deleted the original Henan dialect audio and added "Shanghai Heavy Rain Today" subtitles. Features like yellow walls and grey/orange metro trim were inconsistent with Shanghai lines (see Figure 3) (Note 8). In essence, this false identity construction disseminates false spatio-temporal information, creates ambiguity through editing/subtitles, and obscures the true source, deliberately violating Grice's Quality and Manner maxims. It exploits the "seeing is believing" psychological bias to sow panic, misguide public perception, and divert attention from real crises.

Figure 3. Debunking Screenshot of "Shanghai Metro Station Flooded" Rumor

4.3 Pseudo-Victim Advocate

This type involves a pseudo-emotional strategy by employing fabricated narratives of underdog suffering synergized with high-arousal sensory symbols to hijack audience empathy and enact moral blackmail. For example, a Tiktop account with 35,000 followers posted videos alleging "forced matchmaking" and "illegal confinement" (Note 9), prompting followers to address the female blogger as "poor girl" and urge her to leave that home. Police investigations revealed that the so called adoptive mother in fact was her biological mother, and the "suitor" was a fellow villager acting to cooperate. The scenarios described were entirely fabricated by the account holder and her mother to garner

sympathy and attract traffic. Similarly, numerous "poverty alleviation" livestreams (Note 10) involved sellers hiring temporary actors, scripting tragic scenarios, and fabricating settings under the guise of "aiding farmers" to drive traffic and profits on short video platforms. Videos featured disabled fruit farmers in tattered clothes selling fruit for a "terminally sick son", or middle-aged female farmers kneeling to wholesalers begging them to purchase the large amount of mangoes unsold. Critical Pragmatics reveals this identity construction fabricates tragic facts and insincerely expresses pleas for sympathy, violating Grice's Quality maxim and abusing the sincerity condition of speech acts. It not only defrauds money and exploits public goodwill but also stigmatizes relevant institutions, damaging trust in social assistance systems.

4.4 Pseudo-Scientific Expert

This pseudo-scientific strategy perpetrates cognitive fraud by colluding data visualization modes with specialized terminology to mimic the objective representation of academic discourse. The "Largest Earthquake" rumor (see Figure 4) (Note 11), for example, deliberately imitated Xinhua News Agency's layout conventions: blue background with white text for the title bar, an "International" section label, and a "Deep Observation" banner, even forging a "26 April 2022" timestamp to anchor the visual perception of an authoritative media source. In presenting relevant data, the rumor spatio-temporally grafted the magnitude data of the 1960 Chile 9.5 earthquake onto a 3800-year-old geological speculation. A red line graph exaggerated the "estimated magnitude" from 9.2 to 9.5, while misusing geological terms like "subduction zone" and "tsunami transverse wave period". Purposefully, key qualifiers like "radiocarbon dating error is about more or fewer than 150 years" and "no consensus exists in paleoseismology" were omitted from the chart notes. By visually bundling news media formatting symbols with falsified data, it constructed a cognitive trap of an "authoritative scientific discovery". This strategy essentially appropriates the symbolic system of academic discourse, exploiting public trust in mainstream media to package unverified speculative conclusions as "major scientific breakthroughs". In fact, this identity construction distorts data, fabricates conclusions, and conceals key qualifying information, violating Grice's Quality and Quantity maxims (Grice, 1975). Cloaked in "science", it disseminates fallacy, misleading public understanding of specific scientific issues and eroding the discourse authority of the scientific community and trust in the scientific method.

Figure 4. "Largest Earthquake" Rumor Screenshot

4.5 Pseudo-Internal Informant

Rumor producers forge "organizational insider" identities, utilizing multimodal splicing of textual narrative and simulated communication interfaces to fabricate exclusive information sources and create an illusion of "hidden truth". The core deception logic lies in accurately mimicking the symbolic characteristics of internal corporate discourse—such as employee identification markers, internal communication jargon (e.g., "HR PIP talk" "HC freeze"), office scene screenshots—combined with rhetoric like "leak" or "personal experience" to activate audience trust in "privileged insider knowledge". A 2025 case reported by Anhui cyber police involving "NIO employee spreading layoff rumors" exemplifies this (Note 12). Netizen Xu, venting frustration, impersonated a NIO employee online, claiming "3 colleagues around me were PIP'd by HR" and posting a fake "equity distribution chart" generated using AI software. Such rumors hijack public expectations of corporate transparency by presenting personal grievances as "public interest revelations", inciting moral suspicion towards the company. This identity construction fundamentally breaks away from the felicity condition about identity appropriateness of speech acts (Grice, 1975), as the speaker utterly lacks the claimed identity and disseminates false internal information. Its harm lies in creating panic (e.g., unsettling employees/investors), damaging corporate reputation and market stability, and eroding societal trust in "whistleblowing" as a form of oversight.

5. Conclusion

Guided by Critical Pragmatics and integrating Pragmatic Identity Theory, this study reveals how cyber rumors strategically manipulate multimodal symbolic resources, such as text, images, audio, video, layout, interfaces, to construct false "pseudo-evidential chains" and, in the process, dynamically build specific "credible identities" such as "Pseudo-Authoritative Institution" "Pseudo-Eyewitness" "Pseudo-Victim Advocate" "Pseudo-Scientific Expert" and "Pseudo-Internal Informant". This process deliberately violates fundamental ethical norms of verbal communication, particularly Grice's maxims

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of Quality and Manner within the Cooperative Principle, as well as the essential conditions of sincerity and identity appropriateness for speech acts. It distorts the authentic function of evidential resources, weakens the public's ability to judge symbolic authenticity, and erodes the foundation of trust in public discourse. Theoretically, this study contributes to extending evidentiality theory into the multimodal domain, reveals identity construction as core to rumor deception mechanics, and provide a critical pragmatic framework for analyzing symbolic manipulation in digital discourse. In practice, this study calls on public media literacy relating to semiotic deception tactics and provides some insights for rumor governance. Future research could employ mixed-methods designs integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, incorporate diverse theoretical perspectives, and examine dissemination characteristics and patterns within specific cultural contexts to deepen the linguistic explanation of the deceptive essence of cyber rumors.

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Notes

Note 1. http://www.360doc.com/content/14/1219/09/202359_434067788.shtml

Note 2. http://jiankang.163.com/15/0609/18/ARMGVBLA0038002Q.html

Note 3. https://www.guokr.com/article/441030/

Note4.https://www.toutiao.com/article/7414358464190841383/?upstream_biz=doubao&source=m_redirect

Note 5. http://www.sohu.com/a/132228990_706879

Note 6. http://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2017-02-25/doc-ifyavrsx5037605.shtml

Note 7. http://www.sohu.com/a/195286390_726398

Note 8. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=17721922592893293995&wfr=spider&for=pc

Note 9. https://www.piyao.org.cn/20240328/0b650265be25480d95f205d71db5247d/c.html

Note10. https://www.piyao.org.cn/20250228/d8899d58db8847b78b4eb3059fab11f1/c.html

Note 11. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1820959374890971585&wfr=spider&for=pc

Note12. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1834165206932301362&wfr=spider&for=pc