

Research Notes

“Cult Crimes” and Fake News: Eye-Gouging in Shanxi

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In 2017, a group of Western scholars, including CESNUR’s Massimo Introvigne and Holly Folk, were invited to participate in a dialogue in China’s Henan province in June, followed by a conference in Hong Kong in September, involving Chinese law enforcement officers, leaders of China’s official “anti-xie-jiao” association, and Chinese academics. The dialogue was about the notion of xie jiao (an expression difficult to translate, and not exactly equivalent to the English “cult”) and one particular group classified in China as xie jiao, the Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning. The dialogue led Western scholars to further investigate accusations against the Church of Almighty God. So far, the accusations investigated appear to be false.

ABSTRACT: On August 24, 2013, a six-year old boy called Guo Xiaobin was kidnapped by a woman who gouged out his eyes. The investigation on the horrific crime was followed with considerable emotion by Chinese public opinion, and was concluded by the police early in September 2013. The crime had been perpetrated by the boy’s aunt, Zhang Huiyeng, who had committed suicide on August 30, 2013. There were no references to religion in the Chinese media until the homicide committed in a McDonald’s diner in Zhaoyuan on May 28, 2014 was attributed by the Chinese authorities (falsely, as it later came out) to the Church of Almighty God. In June 2014, the attack on Guo Xiaobin was presented by Chinese anti-cult sources as perpetrated by the Church of Almighty God. No evidence of any involvement of the Church of Almighty God on the crime exists, and the government seems to have created the accusation after the McDonald’s incident to further justify its persecution of the Church, exploiting a century-old Chinese anti-Christian theme of accusing Christians of gouging out eyes.

KEYWORDS: Church of Almighty God, Eastern Lightning, Xie Jiao, New Religious Movements in China, Eye-Gouging Themes in China, Eye-Gouging Accusations Against Christians, Guo Xiaobin.

Massimo Introvigne’s research into the McDonald’s killing in Zhaoyuan (2014: Introvigne 2017) should throw into question other allegations of atrocious crimes made by the Chinese government against controversial religious

groups. Along with the McDonald’s accusation, and frequently reported in tandem with that “rumor,” is that the Church of Almighty God was responsible for the blinding of a 6-year-old boy in the Shanxi province in 2013. As with the McDonald’s case in Zhaoyuan, an examination of reports in the press raise questions about the involvement of the Church of Almighty God, or any other group, in this horrific crime.

The Case of “Little Bin Bin” in Shanxi

The maiming of a boy in Shanxi province was an international news story when it happened at the end of August 2013. I have reconstructed it based on the media reports mentioned in the bibliography. At the center of the case was an extended family in Linfen, Fenxi County: two brothers and their spouses and children. Guo Zhiping is the father of Guo Xiaobin, the boy who was blinded. His brother, Guo Zhicheng, was married to Zhang Huiyeng (1972–2013), identified by the police as the attacker. Originally, the families of Guo Zhiping and Guo Zhicheng lived in the same village, in houses that shared a yard. In 2007, to obtain a better education for his children, Guo Zhicheng rented a house in Quaojiaxhuang village, about twenty kilometers away.

The Zhang and Guo families had suffered ample hardship previously. Guo Xiaobin had been born with a cleft palate, and a neighbor told reporters his sister had drowned in a well around 2007. The elderly father of the Guo siblings had a medical condition (hemiplegia) that left him bedridden. For a while, the brothers and their sister shared in the care of the father. He lived with Guo Zhiping, but Guo Zhicheng and his wife, Zhang Huiyeng, contributed to his upkeep by paying 5,000 yuan a year for his care.

At the time of the maiming, the whole family was under considerable strain. In early 2013, Guo Zhiping injured his foot in a car accident, and became unable to work. Guo Zhiping’s wife found herself caring for her husband and paralyzed father-in-law. Soon thereafter, the other brother, Guo Zhicheng (Zhang Huiyeng’s husband) also was injured, leaving Zhang Huiyeng’s salary as the only income for both families. Zhang Huiyeng was likely under considerable stress as the sole earner. Nor was Zhang Huiyeng very much suited to her job as a chicken-gutter in a poultry-processing plant. It was widely reported that she had been psychologically damaged in childhood by the experience of being bitten by a

snake. Several reports on her mental instability noted she had a lifelong fear of blood. Despite her employment at a poultry plant, Zhang Huiyeng did not like to kill chickens.

Interviewed by *Beijing News*, Zhang Huiyeng's supervisor, "Manager Liu," explained that Zhang Huiyeng lived at the chicken farm during the week, because it was a forty-minute drive from her village of Quaojiaxhuang (*Beijing News* 2013). The chicken processing plant closed at 3 pm on August 24, which was a Saturday. The timing explained how she could commit the attack.

Guo Xiaobin was kidnapped at 6:30 pm on August 24. He was playing at home when a woman approached the yard, asking if anyone played mahjong at his house. The woman lured the boy away from his house. Allegedly, the attacker told the boy, "Don't cry, and I will not gouge out your eyes." She then did remove his eyes, with an unknown tool. Guo Xiaobin was found in a field about 11 pm that night. He may have been drugged before the attack.

Traumatized and disoriented, Guo Xiaobin seemed not to appear to understand what had happened to him, repeatedly asking his mother, "Why is it so dark?" He described the woman who abducted him as having "yellow hair," which the police suspected might have been a wig. She spoke with a foreign accent, perhaps to disguise her voice. Wang Wenli, Xiaobin's mother, said she did not know anyone who would want to hurt her son. She and Guo Zhiping ran a mahjong parlor at their home, but it appears to have been a small operation, patronized mostly by their neighbors—not a source of friction in the village.

Investigating the Murder

At first, the police thought they were investigating a ring of organ traffickers, and they offered a reward of more than \$16,000 for the capture of the attacker. Bin Bin's eyes were found at the scene, however, and organ theft soon was ruled out as a motive. On August 25, Zhang Huiyeng and Guo Zhicheng brought his father back to Quaojiaxhuang, because Xiaobin's family was tied up caring for him. This likely put additional pressure on Zhang Huiyeng as a caregiver.

Soon after the attack, a reporter from *Beijing News* visited the hometown of Xiaobin, and included commentary on the "wife of Guo Zhicheng" in the article, before she was named as a suspect. The reporter saw little that was unusual, but

later learned from villagers that the day before she died, Zhang Huiyeng had been speaking very strangely, saying “I am a ghost,” and “I am God.” Villagers speculated that the strange behavior of Zhang Huiyeng was triggered by the police investigation (*Beijing News* 2013). Guo Zhicheng also said she acted abnormally after the police inquiry.

On August 29, Zhang Huiyeng’s father was brought over to see her. He reported that Zhang Huiyeng was acting strangely, very scared, and he said someone had drugged her so that she could not control her body.

On August 30, Zhang Huiyeng committed suicide by jumping in a well. At around 6:30 in the morning, as Guo Zhicheng was making bread for breakfast, Zhang Huiyeng said she was not feeling well. She left the house, ostensibly to go to the neighbor’s. The family heard her jump, and Guo Zhicheng screamed for help. A man went down the well with a hemp rope, but he could not raise her out by himself. It took the help of a second villager, and Zhang Huiyeng had been submerged for ten minutes before she was pulled out. She went into cardiac arrest as they tried to rescue her. Despite attempts at resuscitation, Zhang Huiyeng was declared dead at the scene. Zhang Huiyeng was 41 years old when she died. A small woman, she was known to be quiet and not fond of talking. She was one of five adult children. Her brother and sister, Zhang Ruihua and Zhang Huihua, reported that Zhang Huiyeng had been timid and frightened to leave home since childhood. As mentioned earlier, she had been bitten by a snake when she was ten, and afraid of the outside after that. Zhang Huiyeng also was afraid of rain. She is said to have fainted when she heard news of her niece’s death in the well.

In his disoriented state, Guo Xiaobin had given conflicting descriptions of his attacker, at least once asserting her hair was long and black, not “yellow.” But Guo Xiaobin also described his attacker as wearing a purple shirt (“the color of grapes”), and the police traced a shirt belonging to Zhang Huiyeng matching that description. It was stained with blood that DNA testing revealed to be that of the boy. The police quickly closed their investigation after the suicide of Zhang Huiyeng, without citing religion as a potential motive. The family told reporters that the Guo brothers generally got along. Nor had there been previous conflict with Zhang Huiyeng, who like the rest of the family doted on Xiaobin. Rather, the aunt was remembered for giving her nephew choice pieces of food, like the best bits of sweet potato. Xiaobin’s father told the media he did not believe his sister was capable of the crime. Guo Zhiping attested to his sister-in-law’s weak

psychological state, but says relations with his brother and sister-in-law were “harmonious,” noting that Zhang Huiyeng loved her nephew.

Guo Xiaobin was treated at Shanxi Eye Hospital. A fundraising campaign led by Shanxi Provincial Women’s Association raised more than 160,000 yuan toward his medical care. He was released in December 2013, after being surgically fitted with prosthetic eyeballs. By that time, he had started to adjust to his blindness, and was learning basic tasks. Doctors expressed hope that, as he grew older, it might be possible to compensate for his lost vision with adaptive technologies or even “bionic eyes.”

Accusing the Church of Almighty God

It is worth noting that none of the reports mentioned the Church of Almighty God or any other religious group at the time of the incident. The first time the Church of Almighty God was mentioned in connection with the case of “little Bin Bin” was early June 2014, soon after the May 28 McDonald’s murder of Wu Shuoyan (1977–2014) in Zhaoyuan.

The earliest reports, the ones that launched the story, can be traced to official propaganda organizations. One of the first news stories accusing the Church of Almighty God was a report issued by the Henan Province Anti-Cult Association on June 5, 2014. In an article based on a news release from *Legal Evening News* (part of the Chinese state media), the report maintained that Xiaobin’s village had many Church of Almighty God’s followers, and framed attacks like that on Bin Bin as retaliation for his family’s desire to leave the group: “Boy’s eyes... is the price of retreat.” The story was also published in the pro-Chinese Taiwan daily *Want China Times*, from where it found its way to Wikipedia. The *Want China Times* has closed, though the original article can be read on archived sites.

Few Westerners are aware of the long history in China of associating Christians with eye-gouging. Furthermore, behind the association of Christians with eye gouging is a longer history of seeing it as religiously meaningful. Eye-gouging (*Kongyan*) is one of the tortures in the eighteen levels of Hell in Chinese mythology (Chen 2007, 163; Buckley Ebrey 2010, 178). Eye-gouging also is associated with Zhong Kui, a Taoist deity venerated as an expeller of demons (Huang 2012; Little and Eichman 2000, 272). Furthermore, one of the most

important legends about Kuan Yin revolves around Princess Miao Shan, who sacrificed her arms, hands and eyes (Dudbridge 1978).

In the 19th century, opponents of Western missionaries warned that Christians tore out the eyes and internal organs of Chinese, especially children, either as punishment for apostasy or alchemical purposes (Griffith 1891; Clark 2011, 53 and 226; Clark 2013, 97; Doyle 2015, 5; *The University of Hong Kong Bulletin* 2015). In one source, Chinese readers were warned that Europeans needed the eyes of Chinese to refine silver from lead (Vaudagna 1892). Eye-gouging was popularized during the Boxer Rebellion through pamphlets and didactic cartoon posters (Cleveland 1900; *The Literary Digest* 1900; Cohen 1997, 164–170; Preston 2000, 25–28).

The horrifying incident in Shanxi closely tracked the imagined horrors of anti-Christian rhetoric, to present a golden moment for anti-cult propaganda. Scholars and journalists should be aware that charges of atrocities made by the Chinese government against banned *xie jiao* religious groups often cannot be substantiated. To date, the Chinese government has not produced any evidence to support the accusation that the Church of Almighty God was involved in the attack on Guo Xiaobin. The accusation surfaced only after the McDonald’s murder, some nine months after the investigation had been closed. This incident seems to be a second instance, after the McDonald’s murder in Zhaoyuan, of the government falsely accusing the Church of Almighty God of violent crimes.

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“Fake News” About The Church of Almighty God

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The attack happened in Fenxi, Shanxi province, on 24 August. The boy went out to play and hours later was found by his parents with his eyes removed and covered in blood. The boy is now recovering in hospital. Police have offered a reward of 100,000 yuan (\$16,340, Â£10,500) for information linked to the case. He asks why the sky is always dark and why the dawn still hasn't come. Uncle of boy. "The boy was lured by an unknown woman on Saturday evening into a field, where she gouged out his eyes," state news agency Xinhua reported. The boy's parents are said to be farmers.