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“Jus Primae Noctis in the Middle Kingdom: A Critical Account of Chinese Accusations of Rape Against Martyr Saint, Alberic Crescitelli (Guo Xide)”

On October 1, 2000, Pope John Paul II (1920-2005) canonized 120 Chinese martyrs, and while the prelates of Taiwan and Hong Kong celebrated the new saints, the Chinese media reacted with heated invectives against the Vatican. October first is National Day, the celebration of the founding of the Peoples Republic of China – its “Liberation” from “feudal” tradition and foreign imperialism. But October first is also the feast of St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), the patron saint of missions – a day that seemed eminently appropriate for such a ^{ceremony} celebration. Chinese officials, however, viewed this event as a deliberate insult.

Priests and bishops in the “official Church” were directed not to celebrate, or even mention, the canonizations. Responding to the Vatican’s March, 2000, announcement that the canonizations would take place on October 1, the *People’s Daily*, on September 26, grouched that, ^{“Quite} “The proposed canonization falls on October 1, which is China’s National Day, a day that marks the Chinese people getting rid of imperialist and colonialist aggression and pillage . . . and the timing is an insult and defiance to the Chinese people and the Chinese Catholic Church.”¹ Sun Yuxi, of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, issued a statement on the day of the canonizations asserting that, ^{“Quite} “. . . some Catholic missionaries were the very perpetrators and accomplices in colonialist and imperialist invasion of China . . .,” and

¹ *People’s Daily*, September 26, 2000.

further that, "Some of those canonized by the Vatican perpetrated outrages such as raping and looting . . . and committed unforgivable crimes against the Chinese people."²

On October 2, the *Xinhua News Agency* released a report excoriating the Vatican's canonization of three European missionaries, St. Auguste Chapdelaine (1814-1856), St. Francis Capillas (1607-1648), and St. Alberico Crescitelli (1863-1900), asserting that they were all lecherous, and that in the case of Crescitelli, baptism was merely a euphemism for rape.³ The newspaper noted that:

Quote
He went to this area [Shaanxi] to preach in 1898 and ordered all the daughters of his church followers to be 'baptized' by him on the eve of marriage. No one could escape being raped by this 'saint.' The wives of local Catholics, Pan Changfu, Zheng Ganren, and Yang Hai, had all been raped by the missionary before marriage.⁴

The article concludes its account of Crescitelli with the statement that the local people

Quote
"could no longer put up with his sinning so they killed him."⁵

Finally, on October 6, the *People's Daily* published an additional criticism of the canonizations, this time noting that, *Quote* "Over twenty experts on history and religions held a symposium . . . exposing the crimes committed by recently 'canonized' foreign missionaries and their followers."⁶ The article continues to condemn, *Quote* "the Vatican's vicious intention to intervene in China's internal affairs through religious activities . . . [trampling] on the sovereignty of the Chinese Catholic Church and severely provoking the 1.2 billion Chinese people."⁷ Several other articles published around that time presented similar critiques, one quoting the anti-Roman head of the Patriotic Church, Bishop Fu Tieshan. In several ways, the Chinese media accusations of rape directed toward Chapdelaine, Capillas, and Crescitelli

² Ibid, October 1, 2000.

³ *Xinhua News Agency*, October 2, 2000.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *People's Daily*, October 6, 2000.

⁷ Ibid.

resonate in tenor with the medieval legend of *jus primae noctis*, or “right of first night,” the purported jurisdictional right of a landed lord to deflower virgins under his auspices.⁸

By the 15th century, medieval Europe had become accustomed to the popular belief that the lord of a manor had first right to the new brides of peasants under ~~their~~ ^{his} authority, an idea that sweeps across temporal and cultural boundaries. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh, the Mesopotamian king of Uruk, is said to have had intercourse with new brides before their husbands, noting that, ^{Quote} “His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior’s daughter nor the wife of the noble.”⁹

Herodotus’ (ca. 490-425) *Histories* inform that one of the tribes of Libya had the particular custom of allowing its king first sexual rights to soon-to-be-wed virgins. He writes: ^{Quote} “They are the only Libyan tribe to follow this practice . . . of taking girls who are about to be married to see the king. And the girl who catches his fancy, leaves him a maid no longer.”¹⁰ Irish monks record in the eighth century that Vikings required first night privileges from Christian newlyweds: ^{Quote} “. . . the chief governor of them should have the bestowing of any woman in the kingdom the first night after marriage, so before her own husband should have carnal knowledge of her. . . .”¹¹ And Marco Polo’s *Travels* mention sexual customs wherein men must deflower women before they are married.¹²

Some texts recall ritual deflorations of virgins by socially dominant men. In the narratives of the putative 14th-century traveler John of Mandeville is an account of an island where poor peasants are required to deflower virgins before their husbands because their

⁸ The term is also known in French as “Droit de seigneur,” or “the lord’s right.”

⁹ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. by N. K. Sandars (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 62.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Séincourt (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1983), 167.

¹¹ Quoted in S. MacPhilib, “Jus Primae Noctis and the Sexual Image of Irish Landlords in Folk Tradition and in Contemporary Accounts,” *Bealoideas – The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society*, vol. 56, 1988, 103, n. 29.

¹² See Polo’s description of the customs of Tibet in *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. by Ronald Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 172.

sexual organs are cursed and poisonous. The peasants thus protect the new husbands from contamination, an idea typical of early hymeneal blood fears common to several cultures. It is noteworthy that in all appearances of this *topoi* (theme), the narratives describe either foreign people who are enemies, as in the account of the Vikings, foreign people as curiosities, as in Polo's Tibetan women, or people who are empowered above others, such as landowners and rulers. *Jus primae noctis* and ritual defloration of virgins is reserved as a pejorative distinction for the "Other."

Chinese texts are replete with examples of this trope. In the wake of the Opium War (1840-1842), an increasing anti-Christianism began to flourish after 1860. Paul Cohen notes that during this turbulent era, ^{Opium} the empire was deluged with a growing torrent of violently anti-Christian pamphlets and tracts.¹³ The most acrid text to emerge then was the *Bixie jishi* 辟邪紀實 (A Record of Facts to Ward Off Heterodoxy), authored under the nom de plume, *Tianxia diyi shangxin ren* 天下第一傷心人, or "The world's most heartbroken man." It was first published in 1861, and contains several manifestations of antiforeignism; among them is the theme of *jus primae noctis*. In one passage, Sunday Mass is described with somewhat lurid interjections. It notes:

^{Opium} On this day work ceases entirely and old and young, male and female, all assemble at the Christian church. The pastor takes his seat at the front and extols the virtue of Jesus. . . . The whole group mumbles through the liturgies, after which they copulate together in order to consummate their joy.¹⁴

¹³ Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism: 1860-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 45.

¹⁴ Quoted in Cohen, 49.

Paul Cohen describes another passage wherein Western marriage is described. The author first notes that in the West go-betweens are not utilized, but then he asserts that the bride is required to have intercourse with the priest before her wedding.¹⁵

The charge of *jus primae noctis* in the *Bixie jishi* is but one example of several such sexual accusations made against Christians. In one peculiar passage, the author notes that women are esteemed above men in the West because it is believed that their menstrual flow is the most valued gift God bestows upon humanity. Accordingly, the text recounts that, as Cohen puts it, ^{quote} . . . when a woman's period arrives, the barbarians vie with each other to obtain some of her menses and drink it – thus accounting for the unbearable stench which many of them have."¹⁶ Indeed, the contrivances intended to disparage Christian "improprieties" become increasingly curious. I think that Cohen is correct in his statement that, ^{quote} . . . charges of sexual license and perversion have always, in the most varied cultural milieus, been the favorite devices by which indignant upholders of orthodox order have sought to incriminate their real or maligned foes."¹⁷ While I am not suggesting here a postmodern or Foucaultian interpretation of *jus primae noctis* and its application in Chinese sources, there can be little dispute that the legends are enmeshed in a discourse of power. They function to highlight the apparent misuse of power and underpin the incivility and cultural invasiveness of an unfamiliar culture, one that has perhaps inserted itself into one's native rhythms without invitation.

Let me finally turn to the case of Alberico Crescitelli, or Guo Xide 郭西德. His biographical information is mostly recounted in hagiographical works, but brief mentions are also made in secular Chinese texts. Principal documents include the *Positio* kept in the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, 58.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Vatican's Secret Archives, two Chinese hagiographies, the *Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan* 中華殉道聖人傳 (Biographies of the Chinese Martyr Saints), an abridged recension of the same text, the *Zhonghua xundao shengren zhuan lue* 中華殉道聖人傳略 (Abridged Biographies of the Chinese Martyr Saints), and two short works published by the Order to which Guo belonged. The most important Chinese works dealing with the Crescitelli case are the *Ningqiang xianzhi* 寧強縣志 (Local Gazetteer of Ningqiang Province) and the *Zhongguo jiao an shi* 中國教案史 (History of Chinese Missionary cases) by Zhang Li 張力 and Liu Jiantang 劉鑑唐; the primary value in these documents rests in their extra-ecclesial provenance.

Alberico Crescitelli was born in Altavilla Irpina, Italy on June 30, 1863, and entered the Pontifical Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul in 1880. He was ordained in Rome on June 4, 1887, and finally arrived in Shaanxi, China, in August of 1888. He lived in China for twelve years before his martyrdom on July 21, 1900, during the height of the Boxer Uprising violence. Much of what we know of his activities in China are recorded in several hundred letters he sent to his family while in Shaanxi, though present Chinese documents almost exclusively recount the charges of sexual misconduct, largely taken *a priori* as historical truth.

Vatican documents report that Guo fled his village after hearing of his intended assassination, and shortly afterwards entrusted himself to the care of a nearby customs official.¹⁸ That evening, a crowd surrounded the customs office calling for his capture, after which he was seized, tortured and killed the following afternoon. The narrative notes that:

Quoted
As he spoke one of the most bloody and infuriated among them, hit him on his left arm, almost cutting it off. At first signal of the massacre, all the others, like hyenas,

¹⁸ The English translation of the *Positio* I have consulted is to located in Fr. Gianni Criveller, *The Martyrdom of Alberico Crescitelli: It's Context and Controversy* (Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre, 2004), pages 39-42. Criveller's text appears in both English and Chinese.

wounded him with their knives and sticks while one of those most angry lifted a large sword and dropped the blade on his head to open it totally.¹⁹

Discounting the clearly hagiographical tenor of the Vatican account, the local Chinese gazetteer renders an almost identical history. The *Ningqiang xianzhi* states that:

晚九時許，民眾衝至稅卡門前，怒吼：「捉拿洋人！」姚卡長對郭西德說：「你看民眾這麼多，我無法阻止，唯一的辦法是逃走。」郭便出後門，跪地向上帝祈禱，被憤怒的農民抓住，郭西德說：「我做什麼事，領我到官府裡去吧！」群眾不由分說，即用大刀長矛向郭西德亂砍亂戳，當即傷其左臂，鼻子和嘴。

O Guo
At nine o'clock that evening a crowd of people rushed to the front of the tax office, shouting angrily, 'Capture the foreigner!' The customs official, Yao, said to Guo Xide, 'You can see how many people there are; I have no way of holding them back. Your only recourse is to flee.' Guo exited the rear door and knelt, looking up to God in prayer. The angry peasants seized him. Guo Xide said to them, 'What have I done? Take me to the local authorities.' The crowd took no account of his words, but used their great swords and long spears to hack and pierce him indiscriminately, injuring his left arm, nose, and mouth.²⁰

The skeletal details of the story are the same; Guo sought sanctuary at the office of a customs official, a crowd gathered there calling for his capture, and once he was seized he was indiscriminately struck by weapons, injuring his left arm and face. Except for their tenors, both narratives retain similarities throughout. Guo Xide was finally taken to Jialing River where two inebriated men slowly sawed off his head, dismembered his body, and threw it into the waters. Significantly, nowhere in the local gazetteer is Guo's alleged molestation of women mentioned; such details are conspicuously absent from the local record. We first encounter these accusations in a later Chinese text, published in 1989.

The *Xinhua News Agency* reported on October 2, 2000, that, *Guo* "The wives of local Catholics, Pan Changfu, Zheng Ganren, and Yang Hai, had all been raped by the missionary before marriage." The account appears to have relied completely on Zhang Li and Liu

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The original Chinese passage from the *Ningqiang xianzhi* is included in Criveller, 36, in the Chinese section of the book. The translation here is my own.

Jiantang's 1989 *Zhongguo jiao an shi*. Indeed, the newspaper's syntax is an almost a verbatim retelling. The original 1989 text reads:

郭西德也規定教民之女出嫁前必須到教堂去「領洗」，猶如西區中世紀的「初夜權」，凡去者，皆遭他蹂躪姦污。當地的潘長富，鄭幹仁以及來自楊海等人的妻子都在出嫁前被郭西德將姦。教會也要求基督徒送他們的女兒做「修女」，以滿足神父的性須要。．．．由於教會跟封建政權合作，壓迫和剝削人民，人們越益仇恨他們，不斷想到在適當的時候起義。

Guo Xide obliged Christian girls who were to be wed to go to the church to be 'baptized,' as in the Western European Middle Ages practice of 'right of first night' (*jus primae noctis*). Everyone who went encountered his lecherous seduction and rape. The wives of such Yanghai men as Pan Changfu and Zheng Gan were all raped before marriage by Guo Xide. The church required Christian believers to send their daughters to be 'nuns' in order to satisfy the Father's sexual needs. . . . Since the church cooperated with the feudal regime, pressuring and exploiting the people, they hated the Christians more and more, and continually thought about when they could start an uprising.²¹

Here we have a typical example of the *jus primae noctis* trope so commonly employed. Guo is first accused of practicing the medieval "right of first night," and then two women are identified, the wives of Pan Changfu and Zheng Gan. The passage also notes that the church required women to become nuns to satisfy the sexual appetites of the priest, and finally suggests that the people rose against Guo because Christians cooperated with the "Feudal regime" and exploited them. Take note that neither the 1989 book nor any of the recent newspaper articles seem to consult the local ^{chinese} gazetteer written immediately after the event, a text that says nothing to validate any accusations of sexual impropriety.

Gianni Criveller has already written a small English/Chinese pamphlet attempting to exonerate Guo Xide wherein he briefly mentions the *jus primae noctis* trope. But he also notes that the wives of Pan Changfu and Zheng Ganren were never Christians at all. They would thus never have been "baptized" or married by Guo Xide. Indeed, Criveller writes that,

²¹ Zhang Li and Liu Jiantang, *Zhongguo jiao an shi* (Chengdu: Sichuan sheng shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1989), 555-557.

quote

“Pan Changfu . . . [was] among Crescitelli’s assassins, and later (1901) condemned to death for this crime.”²² It is therefore quite unlikely that Zhang and Liu’s account is credible. And if this was indeed the source for the recent articles that accuse him of sexual improprieties, then these reports, too, are suspect.

Returning to the trope of *jus primae noctis visavis* the Guo Xide case, we must bear in mind that once such an accusation is made there remains, perhaps, a bit of suspicion, and an objective scholar must not ignore documentary evidence because of personal prejudice or bias. An honest historian must nonetheless weight evidence impartially, and in light of the literary history of making such accusations based on otherness, unfamiliarity, and fear, the Chinese newspaper charges appear to be little more than an *argumentum ad ignorantiam*, an argument based on ignorance of the facts. Accusations of sexual improprieties were commonly ascribed in China to missionaries and foreigners in general – Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall, for example. Robert Entenmann writes that, “Christians were often suspected of sexual license, a charge often made against the White Lotus sectarians.”²³ A Chinese official from Xintu, among those who conflated Christians and the White Lotus Sect, wrote to local Christians: “they say that every day, morning, and night, you pray to God, and men and women gather together; that at night, you keep in good order as long as the prayer lasts, then as soon as it is over, you extinguish all lights and engage in shameful and abominable crimes. Is that true?”²⁴

The *Bixie jisbi* contains prints of Catholics in often-ridiculous depictions. The text refers to Catholicism as the “pig grunt religion,” employing a homophone from the term

²² Criveller, 35.

²³ Robert E. Entenmann, “Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan,” in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. By Daniel H. Hayes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 183.

²⁴ Quoted in André Ly, *Journal d’André Ly, prêtre chinois, missionnaire et notaire apostolique, 1747-1763*, ed by Adrien Launey (Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1906), 12.

“zhujiao,” 主教 or “Lord of Heaven” religion, keeping the pronunciation but changing the characters to “zhujiao,” 豬叫 or “pig’s grunt.” In one print we see a crucified pig surrounded by worshippers, and below them are foreign priests and a Chinese Christian with women on their laps. The captions read:

original
The stench of [Christianity] has flowed through two thousand years of time. . . . From all quarters people who hardly know each other freely mate and pair, human beings (i.e., Chinese) and devils (i.e., foreigners), women and men, sleeping upon the same pillows. . . . Let all join with their relatives, their neighbors, and the members of their parents’ and wives’ clans in taking stringent precautions against the entry of cuckolds – the brothers of the pig of heaven – into their homes.²⁵

The men are all wearing green hats, the traditional Chinese sign of a cuckold. With such images and rumors disseminated during the late nineteenth century, it is no wonder that the *jus primae noctis* trope was so readily ascribed to foreigners such as Guo Xide.

In light of the evidence, the accusations may be consigned to the same status given to the medieval belief in the “right of first night” – namely, “legend.” Chinese sources demonstrate that histories of Guo Xide evolve from an innocent victim of local hostilities in the early-twentieth century *Ningqiang xianzhi*, to a lascivious rapist in the 1989 *Zhongguo jiao an shi* and the recent Chinese newspapers. *The People’s Daily*, the *Xinhua News Agency*, and other Chinese sources published near the canonizations share a common theme – historical misprision inspired by reactions to what seems to be colonialist invasion, itself an apparent form of rape.

²⁵ Translated in Cohen, image 6 after page 140.