

Research Notes

“Cruel Killing, Brutal Killing, Kill the Beast”: Investigating the 2014 McDonald’s “Cult Murder” in Zhaoyuan

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In 2017, CESNUR’s managing director, Massimo Introvigne, was 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, Chinese academics, and some Western scholars. 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. That Church is controversial, even beyond China, in particular for having being accused of perpetrating a horrific crime in 2014 in a McDonald’s diner in Zhaoyuan, where a female client was mercilessly beaten to death. Introvigne had access to a number of documents about the murder, and heard the opinions of both Chinese officers and scholars hostile to the Church of Almighty God, and of members of the same Church who escaped to South Korea and the U.S. This resulted in the first scholarly investigation of the McDonald’s murder, whose preliminary conclusions are presented in these research notes.

ABSTRACT: On May 28, 2014, what became known as the stereotypical “cult murder” in China was perpetrated in Zhaoyuan. Six “missionaries” entered a McDonald’s diner for preaching and ended up killing a customer who had refused to give them her phone number. Chinese authorities attributed the crime to the Church of Almighty God (Eastern Lightning), against which a campaign of repression was already going on. A study of the available documents about the case, including documents published by Chinese official sources, supports a different conclusion. The assassins were members of a small movement that used the name “Almighty God” to designate its two female leaders but was not part of, nor connected with, the Church of Almighty God. The article discusses how a small religious movement went from the deification of its leaders to violence and murder.

KEYWORDS: McDonald’s Murders in Zhaoyuan, Church of Almighty God, Eastern Lightning, Xie Jiao, New Religious Movements in China.

Introduction

On May 28, 2014, one of the most horrific murders in the story of new religious movements was perpetrated in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan, in the Chinese province of Shandong. Six "missionaries" entered the diner preaching their religion and asked clients to leave their phone numbers for further contacts. Wu Shuoyan (1977-2014), a sales assistant working in a nearby clothing store, refused to give her number. She was declared an "evil spirit" and beaten to death with a mop handle (Dunn 2015b, 204).

At the time of the murder, the Chinese government was engaged in a campaign for eradicating the Church of Almighty God, or Eastern Lightning, a new religious movement born in China in 1991, whose "priest" is Zhao Weishan (b. 1951), which teaches that Jesus Christ has returned to Earth as the Almighty God. Although the movement never mentions her name nor any bibliographic details, and cautions that any information supplied by outside sources may be wrong, most scholars believe it identifies the incarnated Almighty God with a Chinese woman, Yang Xiangbin (b. 1973: Dunn 2015a, 2015b). For a number of reasons, together with Falun Gong, the Church of Almighty God came to incarnate for the Chinese authorities the quintessential *xie jiao* (邪教) (Dunn 2015b, 21–23), an expression often translated as "evil cult," but which was used in China since the mid-Ming period with the meaning of "heterodox teachings" or "criminal religious sect" (ter Haar 1992).

Chinese police and media quickly attributed the murder to the Church of Almighty God, and this accusation is still routinely repeated by international media. As evidence for the accusation, Chinese media mentioned that, one day after the murder, the police claimed to have found material of the Church of Almighty God in the home of the main defendant, Zhang Lidong (1959–2015) (Chen 2014), including the book *The Scroll Opened by the Lamb* (Phoenix Satellite TV 2014). After another two days, an interview with Zhang Lidong was aired by CCTV, China's state television. He stated that he was jobless and that he had killed Wu because she was an "evil spirit" (邪灵). Asked what his religion was, Zhang answered: "Almighty God" (全能神) (CCTV 2014).

The Church of Almighty God insists that its literature was probably planted in Zhang's home by the police itself, but the question does not appear to be crucial. Although statistics are impossible, due to Chinese repression that compels the

Church to operate clandestinely, scholars and the government itself agree that members are in the hundreds of thousands, and that millions of pieces of literature have been distributed, some of them even left “in public locations such as train stations for passers-by to discover” (Dunn 2015b, 151). Possession of this literature, thus, hardly indicates that somebody is a member of the Church.

There are four Chinese terms the McDonald assassins used for “evil spirit”: 邪灵 (evil spirit), 恶灵 (wicked spirit), 恶魔 (demon), and 魔鬼 (devil). They apparently used them as synonymous, or at least, from their interviews and declarations at trial it is unclear whether they made a difference between different categories of “evil spirits.” By contrast, the term 恶灵 (wicked spirit), which the group used often, never appears in the vast literature of the Church of Almighty God, where there are very specific rules for discerning the presence of 邪灵 (evil spirits). Certainly, identifying at first sight, and based on the simple refusal to give to the group her telephone number, Wu Shuoyan as an “evil spirit” (or “wicked spirit”) who needed to be killed, was something completely alien from the theology and practice of the Church of Almighty God.

The group responsible for the McDonald’s murder went to trial on August 21, 2014, before the Intermediate People’s Court of Yantai, in the Shandong province. The Chinese media connected with the government reported quite extensively the statements and confessions by the defendants. From there, a story emerged that supported the conclusion by Australian scholar Emily Dunn, that none of those who entered the McDonald’s and were responsible for the crime was, at the time of the murder, a member of the Church of Almighty God (Dunn 2015b, 204). They were part of a different group, which never had more than thirty members but whose interest lies precisely in its connection with the crime. Although Dunn (2015a) believes that the assassins, although no longer associated with the Church of Almighty God at the time of the murder, had been once part of it, my conclusions are different, and I am not persuaded that they were ever members of that church.

The Story of a Micro-Movement

The most relevant characters within the group were the Zhang family from Shijiazhuang, in the province of Hebei, and Lü Yingchun, a young woman who was born in Yantai City, Shandong, on March 8, 1975. Zhang Lidong was born

on October 8, 1959 in Shijiazhuang. He married Chen Xiujuan, and the couple had three children: two daughters, Zhang Fan (1984–2015), born on October 24, 1984, and Zhang Hang, born on March 1, 1996, and a son, Zhang Duo, born on September 12, 2001 (Wang 2014).

Although she later quarreled with her husband, who had in the meantime acquired a lover, Zhang Qiaolian, Chen Xiujuan had a relevant part in the genesis of the group's religious interests. She was a member of the Three Redemption Christ, or Mentuhui (门徒会), the “Association of Disciples,” a new religious movement founded by Ji Sanbao (1940–1997) in Shanxi in 1989. Ji, who had been a preacher for the Pentecostal Sabbatarian denomination known as the True Jesus Church, presented himself as “God's stand-in” (*shen de tishen*, 神的替身) and the center of the Third Redemption (Dunn 2015a, 35–39).

Lü Yingchun stated at trial:

I grew up knowing that I was ‘God Himself.’ In 1998, I read the word ‘firstborn son’ in a book concerning ‘Almighty God.’ I was convinced that I was the ‘firstborn son’ myself. (...) Finally, I discovered that I was ‘God Himself.’ (*The Beijing News* 2014)

“Firstborn son” is a title used in the New Testament for Jesus Christ (see *Hebrews* 1:6; *Revelation* 1:5). The book mentioned may or may not have emanated from the Church of Almighty God, but certainly in that Church there is no God living today on Earth other than the only one they identify as such. Starting in the early 2000s, Lü Yingchun led a study group in Zhaoyuan. She also spread her messianic claims via the Internet.

Zhang Fan also confessed that in 2007, she “picked up a copy of the book of ‘Almighty God’ at our doorstep” and found it persuasive (*The Beijing News* 2014). In an interview, she said that the book was called *God's Hidden Work* (神隐秘的做功). It is possibly a pirated or imitated version of *The Hidden Work Done by God* (神隐秘的作工) published by the Church of Almighty God, unless she simply misquoted the title. She did develop an interest in the Church of Almighty God, but never managed to contact the organization. “I never had contact with the Church of Almighty God because they were very secretive and I could not find them,” she later stated (Phoenix Satellite TV 2014).

Zhang Fan's conversion came when she started following Lü Yingchun on the Internet, and found her answers to those criticizing her “terrific” (*The Beijing News* 2014). She then traveled to Zhaoyuan to hear Lü preaching. Enthusiastic

about Lü, in the summer of 2009, she converted her mother Chen Xiujuan and, through her, her whole family, including her father Zhang Lidong, her sister Zhang Hang, and her 8-year old brother Zhang Duo. Eventually, the whole Zhang family moved to Zhaoyuan, where they rented a two-story building. One story hosted the family textile business and the other the religious gatherings.

Before moving to Zhaoyuan, and after she was admitted in 2002 as a student to the Beijing Broadcasting Institute (renamed in 2004 the Communication University of China), where she would graduate in 2008, Zhang Fan read a book called *The Seven Thunders Sound* (七雷发声). In Zhaoyuan, she found out that the book, that possibly Lü Yingchun had also read, had been written by a couple from Baotou, Inner Mongolia: Li Youwang and Fan Bin. At that time, Li and Fan were in prison. Zhang Fan borrowed 50,000 RMB from her mother and send them to Baotou so that, upon their release from jail, Li and Fan could move to Zhaoyuan and stay with the Zhang family. Li and Fan “were addressed as ‘the two witnesses’ [from *Revelation* 11:3–12] and Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan were called ‘the firstborn sons’” by a group that at that time consisted of 20–30 believers (Xiao and Zhang 2014). Fan Longfeng also became part of the group’s inner circle, and in 2010 Lü Yingchun started living together with Zhang Fan.

Some believe that the reference to the “seven thunders” in the apocalyptic visions of *Revelation* 10:1–7 may indicate a connection with the Church of Almighty God, but the latter is obviously not the only group with an interest in the Christian Apocalypse and its symbols, and neither the book nor the authors are mentioned in any of the numerous Church bibliographies and Web sites. It seems safer to conclude that they operated yet another independent group.

In 2011, however, Zhang Fan pronounced Li Youwang an “evil spirit” (邪灵), and he and his wife left the group in Zhaoyuan and moved to Dongyin, Shandong. Fan Longfeng was also identified as an “evil spirit” (邪灵) and expelled from the group (Xiao and Zhang 2014). With the Li and Fan couple out of the picture, Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan were free to reveal gradually that they were both the Two Witnesses of the Book of Revelation and God, although a full disclosure to their small group might have come only in May 2014.

In the end, as is the case in other Chinese new religions, the core belief of the group was the messianic role of the duo Lü Yingchun - Zhang Fan. The frequent references to the *Book of Revelation* implied that apocalyptic times were coming,

with a final confrontation between good and evil, but those who would accept the divine role of the two young women, “two fleshy bodies sharing a same soul” (*The Beijing News* 2014), would be saved. That we live the last days, Lü Yingchun explained, was confirmed by the fact that today easily “people would become ‘Satan’s’ minions unwittingly when they did not understand the situation and would not stand on the side of God. Once that happened, we would be under even greater attack by the ‘devil’ (魔鬼) during the battle between two spirits” (*The Beijing News* 2014).

The messianic role of the duo was exclusive, and this is important to distinguish, and indeed oppose, the belief of the group in Zhang and Lü as a dual “Almighty God” to the doctrine of the Church of Almighty God. At trial, Lü Yingchun clearly explained:

The state labeled Zhao Weishan’s fake ‘Church of Almighty God’ as a *xie jiao*, and we label them as ‘evil spirits’ (邪灵). Only Zhang Fan and I, the ‘firstborn sons,’ could represent the real ‘Church of Almighty God.’ Zhang Fan and I are the unique spokeswomen for the real ‘Almighty God.’ The government has been cracking down on the Almighty God that Zhao Weishan believes in, not the ‘Almighty God’ we mention. They are fake ‘Almighty God,’ while we are the real ‘Almighty God.’ (*The Beijing News* 2014)

Zhang Fan added:

Up till now, only my father, my younger brother, my younger sister, Lü Yingchun, Zhang Qiaolian and I are adherents of the real ‘Almighty God.’ In 2010, I was the ‘firstborn son’ of ‘Almighty God.’ I became ‘God Himself’ because I obtained the authority from the Heaven to kill evil spirits (邪灵) this May. Speaking of ‘God Himself,’ that is to say, I am God in substance. Lü Yingchun is also God in substance. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

Some Christian critics of the Church of Almighty God believe that it was in the defendants’ interest to downplay any relations with the banned organization of Zhao Weishan during the trial, given the Chinese courts’ hostility to that Church. However, had they adopted a conscious defensive strategy (which they probably didn’t), defendants could rather have claimed that they were not totally responsible of their deeds, since they had been manipulated by the “evil” Church of Almighty God, and that would perhaps have served them better in trying to escape the death penalty for their most serious crime, homicide.

Rather than a branch of one of China’s largest new religions, the group was a micro-movement, which never had more than thirty members and was reduced to six in the end. Originally, Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan led the group as

“shepherds.” In the final days of the group, however, Zhang Fan testified that “in the Almighty God organization, Lü Yingchun and I have the highest positions. We are ‘God Himself.’ My father, younger sister and brother, and Zhang Qiaolian are all the ‘chief priests’” (*The Beijing News* 2014).

Two elements are worth noting. The first is that no qualification was needed for the priesthood, except the belief in Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan as the Almighty God. Even a 13-year old boy such as Zhang Duo was considered a priest. The second is that, contrary to the traditional Chinese family structure, in the Zhang family, who was at the same time a micro-new religious movement, there was no patriarchal authority or hierarchy determined by age. The father, Zhang Lidong, was supposed to obey the daughter, Zhang Fan, without questioning her orders. The divine claims completely subverted the traditional order.

The Eve of the Crime: The Sad Story of a Dog

Around May 20, 2014, the two “Gods” identified Chen Xiujuan, Zhang Fan’s mother, as yet another “evil spirit” and expelled her from the group and from the family home. Then, they told Zhang Lidong, Zhang Fan’s father, that his marriage with Chen Xiujuan had ended and he could “call his ex-lover Zhang Qiaolian over so that they could live together.” Now, “they were husband and wife instead [of Chen Xiujuan]. Lü gave them a new spiritual name each. [Zhang Lidong] was called Adam and Zhang Qiaolian, Eve” (*The Beijing News* 2014). Zhang Qiaolian, who was previously not particularly religious, declared her faith in Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan as the Almighty God, and was accepted as a member of the group.

Identifying, denouncing, and expelling “evil spirits” had become increasingly important for the group. The latter practice has a tradition in Chinese religion, but Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan assumed the authority to designate members of their group as “evil spirits.” They were not simply told to leave: apparently, there were rituals characterized by increasing violence.

A particularly disturbing episode was the banning from the Zhang family house, and from the group, of Zhang Fan’s mother, Chen Xiujuan. Although some could cynically conclude that the move was motivated by the desire to

reward Zhang Fan's father, Zhang Lidong, a loyal supporter of the two "Gods," by allowing him to live with his lover, Zhang Qiaolian, rather than with his wife, the expulsion of Chen Xiujuan was enacted as a cosmic drama.

In the previous days, Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan announced that they would be "leaving Earth soon" and return to Heaven. As this expectation grew, so did Zhang Fan's persuasion that her mother "was the 'king of the wicked spirits' (恶灵之王). The 'evil spirit' (邪灵) was carrying out its work on us. I would kill my mother when I met her. I was furious after having found out that my mother was an 'evil spirit' (邪灵), and wished upon her a horrible death." Although Zhang Fan did not resort to actual physical violence against her mother, there was a fair amount of symbolic violence. "Words like 'Cruel killing, brutal killing, kill the beasts' were written on the wall in my house. I wrote those words," Zhang Fan recalled (*The Beijing News* 2014). Although they also referred to her mother's alleged practice of slaughtering animals, writing them on the walls was an omen of the violence to come.

Actual violence first targeted the family pet dog, called Luyi, which was identified as "the substitute of Chen Xiujuan" exactly one day before the murder in the McDonald's. Zhang Fan stated:

Over talking, Lü Yingchun noticed that the dog was grinning towards her, which made her think that it was displaying its power and attack. She identified the figure of Chen Xiujuan in the eyes of the dog, which was raised by Chen Xiujuan but was now becoming the tool of the 'demon' (恶魔), the substitute of Chen Xiujuan. [...] Lü Yingchun pointed to the dog and shouted, 'Chen Xiujuan, I've identified you!' [...]. In front of the 'demon' (恶魔), we are supposed to dump it or kill it immediately. (Xiao and Zhang 2014)

The episode concerning the dog may seem trivial, but Zhang Lidong devoted to it a significant percentage of his statement during the one-day trial, where he was confronted with the very real possibility of being sentenced to death:

Zhang Fan found Luyi under the coffee table and took it outside by its tail. She threw the dog onto the floor of the stairway outside the door, and Luyi could not run after that, but crawled instead. Zhang Fan beat the dog with a mop and broke it. The dog stopped moving after a while of beating, but Zhang Fan said, 'Its tail is still moving.' I stepped forward and stomped the dog on its head. It bled profusely after a while of stomping, and I guessed that it was dead. I then dragged it by its tail and threw it into the trash bin outside the building. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

Zhang Fan felt that the brutal killing of the dog was an event of religious significance, the confirmation of her divine status:

On the 26th in particular, on the evening in which the dog was killed, I was even more certain that I and Lü were ‘God Himself.’ From that evening onwards, I received even greater authority from Heaven and felt especially excited. I had felt that I was God once when I was ten years old, but that was only a thought that flashed in my head for a moment, and I forgot about it after that. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

The McDonald’s Murder

It is indeed impressive how, twenty-four hours in advance, the killing of the dog anticipated the killing of the unfortunate salesgirl, Wu Shuoyan. While Zhang Lidong described the goriest details of the murder, it is worth quoting here the account of Lü Yingchun during her confession at trial, since it throws a special light on the spiritual significance of the crime as perceived by the group:

Zhang Hang asked that lady for her phone number, but she refused to give it to her. When I became conscious of it, I found out that we had been attacked and sucked by a ‘wicked spirit’ (恶灵), which caused us to be weak and helpless. The two of us identified her as that ‘wicked spirit’ (恶灵), and cursed her with words. Not only did she not listen, her attack got even stronger. We saw the air on her body spiraling her back and tummy. Her tummy bloated, and our spirits sensed that her suction was growing stronger, and so was her attack. My body grew increasingly weaker. In the course of the battle, I saw Zhang Fan falling little by little, as if there was a ‘wicked spirit’ (恶灵) tugging her downwards. She screamed with all her might but no sound came out of her mouth. I could only hear a very weak scream. I went to drag her up and she shouted at [her younger sister] Zhang Hang, saying, ‘Why did you not believe? Why didn’t you move?’ I saw Zhang Fan stomping on that woman’s head and shoulders after that, and I did the same on her waist and buttocks. During the attack against us by the ‘demon’ (恶魔), Zhang Fan and I became gradually aware that the woman must die, otherwise it [the demon] would devour everybody. I thus told Zhang Lidong and the rest to beat her up until she stopped breathing. Otherwise, as long as she has breath, the strength of the ‘demon’s’ (恶魔) attack on us would not weaken one bit, even if her body was weak and she could not move. I told the people who came to stop us, ‘Whoever interferes will die.’ The clash between the woman and us was a battle between two spirits, ‘God’ and ‘devil’ (魔鬼). The others could not see it and neither could they understand it. The police could not understand it as well. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

A significant detail, in the case of the McDonald’s murder, was that the victim, Wu Shuoyan, was not an opponent of the group. They did not know her until they entered the McDonald’s. Her refusal to supply her phone number was, however, perceived as an evil deed of cosmic significance, an unpardonable sin against God

himself, and the sign that the final battle between “God” and “the demons” had begun.

In the aftermath of the McDonald’s murder, which was captured both by surveillance cameras and by amateur videos secretly shot by other customers, the Chinese public opinion felt morally provoked and shocked by the fact that nobody in the diner reacted and prevented the murder (see e.g. the comments by “Nancy” 2014). The assassins had no weapons; with the exception of Zhang Lidong, four were women and one a child—and they could have been overcome by the other clients. Perhaps, they were paralyzed by the extraordinary and sinister performance they were watching.

The whole group, including Zhang Lidong, his daughters Zhang Fan and Zhang Hang, his son Zhang Duo, his lover Zhang Qiaolian, and Lü Yingchun, had entered the McDonald’s in Zhaoyuan on May 28, 2014. Except the 13-year old Zhang Duo, all were arrested, jailed, and tried by the Intermediate People’s Court of Yantai on August 21, 2014. On October 11, 2014, Zhang Lidong and Zhang Fan were sentenced to death. Lü Yingchun was sentenced to life in prison. Zhang Hang was sentenced to ten years of jail and Zhang Qiaolian to seven years. On February 2, 2015, Zhang Lidong and Zhang Fan were executed.

An apparently inexplicable performance was enacted at the Intermediate People’s Court in Yantai on August 21, 2014, and in the jails where the defendants were interviewed. Apart from Zhang Hang, Zhang Fan’s younger sister, who declared herself not very religious and with mixed feelings about the whole story (*The Beijing News* 2014), all the other defendants expressed no remorse, and did nothing to avoid the harshest penalties. This is particularly surprising for Zhang Lidong, a man in his prime who had been well-off, although he declared himself unemployed, or in full service of his “Gods,” by the time of the murder (CCTV 2014).

One explanation may be that Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan had already announced that they would soon leave Earth and return to Heaven, and that this was part of their divine plan. Execution was simply a way to leave this planet, and we can even speculate that Lü would have preferred to share the death penalty with Zhang Fan rather than be sentenced to a life in jail. After all, they were “two fleshy bodies sharing a same soul.” Zhang Lidong, whose body language in addition to words during the interviews seemed typical of a true believer (see CCTV 2014), might simply have wished to join his divine daughter in Heaven.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Chinese government used the McDonald’s incident to intensify its action against the Church of Almighty God, even if the Church was not responsible of the homicide and the Lü Yingchun - Zhang Fan group was not part of its organization.

The Church of Almighty God answered by accusing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of having manipulated some “psychopaths” to commit the murder and used it as a justification for its cracking down of the Church (and, at the same time, of several Christian house churches): “the CCP is the killer and the real sinner” (Eastern Lighting 2015).

Some human rights activists also made similar comments. One of them, Xin Shuyan, commented: “After the murder case in Zhaoyuan, Shandong Province, the CCP used the incident to conduct a comprehensive repression on the Church of Almighty God. It was reported that at least 1,500 innocent members of the Church were arrested. The CCP’s campaign-like practice of law enforcement was really a destruction of the rule of law. Why did they carry out the campaign to suppress the ‘cult’? There must be ulterior motives. The CCP’s intention was simply to conceal the social crisis and to divert public opinion. Thus, they laid blame on the religious groups” (Xin 2014; for similar comments see Guo 2014). While CCP’s motivations may be interpreted in different ways, it is clear that it did exploit the murder to justify its campaign against the Church of Almighty God.

In June 2017, the latter leaked to a certain number of scholars a document allegedly transcribing the content of a teleconference of June 16, 2014, where officers of the Chinese Central Office for the Prevention and Handling of Cults (also referred as the Central 610 Office) discussed the Church of Almighty God. They recommended to “firmly grasp the typical case of ‘May 28 McDonald’s Murder’ in one hand to expose the reactionary nature, deceptive tricks and serious threats of the cult,” and “vigorously promote foreign projects” of propaganda. Considering that, as of August 19, 2017, I counted some 20,000 media pages in different languages connecting the Church of Almighty God, or Eastern Lightning, with the McDonald’s murder, this propaganda has been fairly successful. We can only hope that serious efforts by scholars to understand what

exactly happened in Zhaoyuan in 2014 would lead to a sober assessment of what remains a terrible tragedy.

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