

Imagination and Narration: Chinese Narration of Elder John's Legend

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ABSTRACT. *Among the numerous Oriental stories in medieval Europe, the legend of Elder John is the most widely spread and influential. The legend of elder John is closely related to the religious and social background of medieval Europe. The legend led Westerners to believe that King John, a monarch and religious leader, existed in the East. Western churches also sent missionaries to China and once reached the surrounding areas of Tibet. However, the Chinese narrative of missionaries in the cognitive framework of elder John's legend has both recognition and criticism. The Chinese narrative in the Western text reflects some subconscious content of western culture. The Chinese image in the text reflects not so much the reality or history of China as the collective unconsciousness of western culture.*

KEYWORDS: *Elder John, China, Narration*

In medieval Europe, there are many legends about the East, among which the story of Elder John is the most widespread and influential. The legend of elder John originated from the 12th century. It was a legend about the East that Europeans talked about during the Crusades. Elder John is said to be the descendant of the Magi of the East who once visited the holy baby Jesus in the Bible. He is the ruler of the Christian identity in the East. He also has the dual identity of king and elder. He is the imaginary ally constantly sought by Europeans who have been confronting Muslims for a long time.

1. The origin of the legend of Elder John and the Oriental illusion

The legend of elder John is closely related to the religious and social background of medieval Europe. Since the seventh century AD, the Arabs have established a huge empire spanning three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe. Since 636, Muslims have taken control of Jerusalem. Since then, most parts of Asia Minor have changed from Greek and Christian regions to Turkic and Muslim regions, while Jerusalem, as the common holy land of Christianity and Islam, is under the actual control of Muslims, and the pilgrimage of European Christians to Jerusalem is blocked. In November 1095, Pope Urban II launched the Crusade, which lasted for

more than 200 years, under the banner of opposing the infidels and recovering the holy Jerusalem. Most of the eight expeditions ended in the failure of Christians. Christians in Europe, who are at a disadvantage in this competition, are eager to have reinforcements to help them work together against Muslims to turn around the unfavorable situation. It is better to form a crackdown on the Islamic world in the East. Based on this general social psychology, some battles between the Mongols in Central Asia and West Asia or between the Western Liao Empire and Muslims in the 12th and 13th centuries were falsely described by the Christians as the war between the restoration of Holy Land and Muslims by Elder John, while some Mongolians were Nestorians¹The message of the Islamic world made the Western Christians think of the Mongolians as the legendary Elder John.

European records of the legend of Elder John were first found in 1145. Pope Eugene III received the envoy of the Principality of Antiochus, who told the Pope the story of the legendary Elder John. Several years ago, Elder John led a large army to the west to help the Christian world around the Mediterranean after winning the war against Persia. But when he arrived at the Tigris River, Elder John waited for several years, not only failed to wait for the day when the Tigris River was frozen for the army to pass, but also led the expeditionary army to suffer heavy losses due to acclimatization, and finally had to return to the East.²

For the Crusaders and European Christians who were frustrated by the failure of the Eastern Expedition, this legend gave them great

Merchant, people who have experienced failure are like drowning people who seize the life-saving straw and place their hopes on the illusory elder John eagerly. They imagined that in the future, in the contest with Muslims, this Christian brother from the East could help them defeat Muslims together.

Twenty years after Ambassador Antiochus brought the story of Elder John to the Christian world, a letter in the name of "Elder John, the King of India" appeared in Western Europe to "all Christian countries, especially Constantine emperor Manuel and Roman Emperor Frederick".

The letter sent two important messages to the Europeans: first, Elder John came from the East, he was a Christian, and would protect other Christians; second, the country he governed was vast and rich, which almost irresistible to the Europeans who were generally in poverty in the middle ages. In medieval European geographical concepts and common people's impression, India is the most oriental in

¹ Nestoria (386-451), a Syrian, once entered the monastery of Antioch as a monk. The founder of Nestorianism. He served as the Archbishop of Constantinople, was identified as heretic at the conference of the whole Church of Ephesus in 431 A.D, and later developed the Christian Nestorianism under the protection of the Persian Dynasty. Nestorianism is the earliest Christianity that was introduced into China during the reign of Emperor Taizong of Tang Dynasty. The Chinese translation name is Nestorianism. During the Liao and Jin Dynasties, Nestorianism was widely spread in China. In succession, they believed in Mongolian Keri, Wanggu, Hun, Naiman, and some of the Uighur and halalu people.

² See Gong Yingyan and others, Elder John: the Oriental illusion of medieval Europe, Social Science Front, 2010, No. 2, pp. 82-83. (the reference materials are Otto, The Two Cities: A Chronicle of Universal History to the Year 1146 A.D., New York: Columbia University, 1928, pp.1439-444)

the world. Although Europeans have heard about "India" from some Persian merchants, they are full of infinite yearning for the ancient oriental country, which is said to be full of gold and ivory. But no one knows where the "Indian Empire" in the letter is.

So, just as most of these European rumors are widely spread but cannot be verified, the legend of Elder John is also "a mixture of semi- real and pure imaginary events. It reflects the hope and vision of Europe in the era of the Crusades, and the superstition of martial arts, the great conquest of the Crusades in remote areas, and the dream of the glorious scene in the East. " ³

2. Missionaries' Chinese exploration of Elder John

After the western expedition of Mongolia, the contact between Westerners and Mongolians began to increase gradually. The church sent Dominicans⁴ and Franciscans⁵ as envoys to the Mongol Empire and once reached the surrounding areas of Tibet. Once again, some of them connect Elder John with the Tibetans. In their view, the Tibetans are the descendants of Elder John who once defeated the enemies of Christianity in European legends.

In 1244, Pope Innocent IV convened a meeting in Lyon and decided to send a mission to Mongolia. Under the banner of persuading the Mongol Khan to convert to Christianity, they actually spy on the Mongols, understand the movement of the Mongol army, collect intelligence, and find possible allies. The European yearning Elder John is the target of these envoys. In this way, Westerners have set foot on the journey to Mongolia.

In 1245, the monks and their group left for the Mongol Empire in the East. After a long journey of more than one hundred days, they arrived at the golden account of the Mongol Khan. According to their experiences

Along the way, they wrote a book called the pilgrimage to Mongolia. Unfortunately, they didn't meet the legendary Elder John on the way, but they heard

³ [Switzerland] Michel Taylor: *Discovering Tibet*, translated by Geng Sheng, page 1

⁴ Dominicanorum (Latin name: *ordo dominicanorum*), also translated into "Daoming church" and "missionary Brotherhood", one of the main schools of Catholic dervism. They are all dressed in black cloaks, so they are called "black friars" to distinguish them from the "grey friars" of the Franciscans and the "white friars" of the garmeros. In 1215, Dominicanorum was founded in Toulouse, France by dominion I, a Spanish aristocrat. In 1217, and was approved by Pope Honolulu III in 1217. Dominicans take preaching as tenet, focusing on persuading and rejecting heretics. After the eighteenth century, it tended to weaken. The church emphasized the rose Sutra taught by the Virgin Mary and popularized it. Now it is the most popular Scripture preached by Catholics.

⁵ Franciscans (Latin name: *ordo fratrum minorum*), also translated as "fascists", "Saint Franciscans", one of the main schools of Catholic dervism. In 1209, the Italian Francis was founded with the approval of the Pope. Members of the guild called each other little brothers, so they were also called "little brothers". They advocate a life of poverty alleviation and abstinence. Since the 13th century, it has been preaching in China. It is also called grey friar because of its grey uniform. They were loyal to the Pope and opposed heresy. In the middle ages, they traveled all over the world to sell the papal atonement voucher.

that Elder John, as a Christian king in the greater India, led his army to destroy the Tatar Mongols and expel them from their territory⁶.

In 1253, William of rubruk of St. Franciscan⁷, on the secret mission of King Louis IX of France, set out from Constantinople with a letter to meet Sarita, the son of Batu, on the qincha grassland, because it was said that Sarita was a Christian. However, it can be seen from his travels to the East that there was a legend that King John ruled a certain highland before him. But he denied the truth of the legend.

Shortly after lubruk's visit to Mongolia, two Venetian merchants loaded with goods went to the East. They made friendship with Kublai Khan. In 1271, when they set out to visit the East again, they brought Marco Polo, who was only 17 years old. In his later "Marco Polo Travels", he vividly described Elder John and his legends. It is said that the ambitious Genghis Khan wanted to marry the daughter of Wang Han (Elder John), but he was arrogantly refused. Therefore, he sent troops to attack Elder John's country, and Elder John died. Genghis Khan occupied all his territory and married his daughter.

Another Italian monk, edoric, also traveled in China between 1322 and 1328. Elder John can also be seen in his travels. "Edorik's journey to the East" claims that the author "arrived in Elder John's country 50 days after leaving the Khitan country and traveling to the West. The Elder John has many possessions and married the daughter of Khan⁸." But there are not many legends about Elder John in all the missionaries who have been to China, and the narration is very vague.

Among all the legends about Elder John, "Mandeville Travels" known as fantasy literature, is the best. In this completely fictional "Mandeville Travels", the author makes a detailed description of "John the sacrificial king" in a special chapter: "John the sacrificial king has a vast territory, many magnificent capitals, prosperous markets, and huge islands which are different from each other⁹." Although Elder John's land is rich in

Goods, because it is far away and hard to reach, the trade there is not as frequent as that in the Khanate. In Mandeville's works, the Christian priest king in the East is described as a devout and powerful king. "Whenever there is a war between the

⁶ See [Italy] guest of BORANG: the pilgrimage to Mongolia of guest of BORANG, translation note of Han Baishi, translation by Geng Sheng, page 50.

⁷ The Franciscan Church (Latin name: Ordo Fratrum Minorum), also translated as "fascist" and "Franciscan church", one of the main schools of Catholic dervism. In 1209, the Italian Francis was founded with the approval of the Pope. The members of the society called each other "little brothers", so it is also called "little brothers Association". We should advocate a life of poverty alleviation and abstinence. Since the 13th century, it has been preaching in China. It is also called grey friar because of its grey uniform. They were loyal to the Pope and opposed heresy. In the middle ages, they traveled all over the world to sell atonement vouchers for the Pope.

⁸ See [Italy] Edolik and others."Haitun Travel Edoric Traveling in the East, Shahalu's Envoy to China", translated by He Gaoji, p. 89

⁹ [English] John Mandeville: "Mandeville Travels", translated by Guo Zemin, Shanghai: Shanghai Bookstore Press, 2006, p. 110.

Priest King and other monarchs, there is no hunting flag in front of his army, but three golden crosses are erected, tall and majestic, inlaid with strange treasures, burning with light¹⁰."

Mandeville's Chinese fantasy inspired the secular desire in European culture. It's not important whether the Chinese image created by the travels is real. What's important is that the original Oriental Image caters to the needs and aspirations of Europeans in pursuit of material wealth and places the motives and hopes of Europeans in self transcendence. Since the fourteenth century, there have been severe famines and black deaths in Europe for several centuries. Britain and France have been involved in the famous "Hundred Years' War", and the society is in turmoil. The oriental images created in these travels are full of temptation to the dark Christian world, so they are widely spread in Europe in the middle ages.

Although people can not determine the specific geographical location of Elder John's land in the East, a group of missionaries and explorers are not afraid of the hard journey, leaving their footprints in all corners of the East.

3. Chinese Narrative under the cognitive framework of Elder John's legend

In the 16th century, Christian missionaries stepped into Tibet. They came to Tibet with great enthusiasm and overcome many difficulties. First of all, they wanted to confirm the rumors about the existence of Christian countries in the northern foothills of the Himalayas. If the news is true, they should make their misinformed Christianity return to the modern Christian family, that is, Roman Catholicism. If the place is not Christian, they should go there to preach Evangelism.

The legend of Elder John made western missionaries and Tibetans connected in a wonderful way. The expansion of Christian culture in Tibet became a story of Christian family and brothers' reunion. Therefore, under the influence of the legend of Elder John, the missionaries in this period emphasized the common ground of the two religions and tended to identify with Tibetan Buddhism.

In his letter entitled "the discovery of the great Sinian day, the kingdom of Tibet", andord, a Portuguese missionary, stated the reason why he entered Tibet. "I explained to the king the purpose of my visit. I told him that in order to achieve this, I went to his court through all my hardships to verify what I heard about him as a Christian and about him and his people pursuing the true law of Jesus¹¹."

In a letter, andord described the Tibetan lamas and their religions, and repeatedly emphasized their similarities with Christianity. First of all, he juxtaposed the Lama with the priest and endowed the virtue of the Christian priest to the Lama: "the Lama is their priest. There are many lamas there. They live in groups like our priests, and other clergy live in their own homes just like us. They are all poor and live on the

¹⁰ [English] John Mandeville: Travels of Mandeville, translated by Guo Zemin and others, p.113.

¹¹[Italy] G.M. Toscano: Soul leading snow field: the earliest Catholic missionary Church in Tibet, translated by Wu Kunming et al., p.86.

handouts of others. They all have good character. Lamas do not marry for life. They spend most of their time praying. They spend at least two hours in the morning and the same in the evening. As we all know, in Christian doctrine, priests often lead a collective life, forbid marriage, have noble conduct and take prayer as their main work.

Andord seems to have found something in common among Tibetan Buddhism. As a result, andode believes that Tibetans "should not be heretics, in fact, they are quite different from the idolaters we know."¹² Father Casella also believes that "the glory of the gospel has been shining here in some way, and some of the rituals and consecrations used here are similar to those of Christianity, but there are many strange things."¹³

Similarly, in the report of father godyon, who was later sent to Tibet to preach, he praised the Tibetan Buddhism and its believers and made a Christian interpretation of the Tibetan Buddhism: the Tibetans did not worship idols, they recognized the trinity of God, knew heaven and hell, and they also had the fallacy of cognition, but this was mainly due to the influence of the neighboring heretics, The people who serve God in this kingdom are called lamas, and they all have noble characters. They all have noble characters.¹⁴

As missionaries, "God electorate view" and "mission view" are the foundations of andord and other priests' firm beliefs, looking for the separated Christian brothers to return to the church. Under the influence of the legend of Elder John, the missionaries set foot on the road to Tibet. In their eyes, Tibetan religion is just like a copy or adaptation of Christianity. All these excited the missionaries, who seemed to find another hot spot suitable for spreading Christian belief in the expansion of Christian culture.

While the missionaries brought Christianity to Tibet, they also planted seeds for the fierce collision between Christian culture and Tibetan Buddhist culture. While recognizing some similarities between Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity, missionaries can't avoid the heterogeneity between Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity, so they inevitably have conflicts with the local traditional religious forces, and at the same time, almost all of them show their cultural superiority as "God voters". Driven by the legend of elder John, Christian missionaries entered Tibet with great enthusiasm and overcome many difficulties. First of all, they want to confirm all the rumors about the existence of Christian countries in the northern foothills of the Himalayas. If this news is true, it is necessary to bring their misinformed Christianity back to the modern Christian family, that is, Roman

¹² [Italy] G.M. Toscano: Soul leading snow field: the earliest Catholic missionary Church in Tibet, translated by Wu Kunming et al., p. 157.

¹³ [Italy] G.M. Toscano: Soul leading snow field: the earliest Catholic missionary Church in Tibet, translated by Wu Kunming et al., p. 276.

¹⁴ [Italy] G.M. Toscano: Soul leads snow: the earliest Catholic missionary Church in Tibet, translated by Wu Kunming et al., P. 230.

Catholicism. If this place is not Christian, they will go there to preach the gospel. Therefore, their narration of China has Two aspects of identification and criticism.

Therefore, the western missionaries entered Tibet under the guidance of the legend of Elder John. In this process, the missionaries played the role of "discoverers". They brought the legendary Tibet back to the real world. As a religious holy land of the Tibetan Plateau, Tibet gradually appeared in the vision of Westerners. But their Chinese narrative has a contradictory attitude of identification and criticism. Behind these narrative words, there is an image of a writer who is close to and alienated from China. In fact, the Chinese narrative in the western texts reflects some subconscious content of western culture. The Chinese image in the text reflects not so much the reality or history of China as the collective unconsciousness of western culture.

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