

ARTICLE

Rape in early China: two case studies

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Abstract

With the exception of legal texts, surviving records of rape in early China have been the subject of little academic study to date. This is the result of a number of factors, including the criminalization of both consensual and non-consensual sex outside of marriage in ancient China, the tradition of using euphemistic vocabulary to refer to such topics, considerable variation, depending on time and place, as to what constitutes rape and discomfort that some very famous men are said to have committed crimes of rape and sexual violence. This article examines two famous and well-documented incidents – one concerning the rape of a woman in peacetime, the other an instance of mass gang rape during war – to explore the specific challenges of studying sexual violence in ancient civilizations. Ignoring early accounts of rape serves to significantly distort our understanding of some key events in Chinese history and perverts the textual record.

Keywords: Rape; Sexual violence; Early China; Lady Xi Gui; Lady Bo Ying

Introduction

With the exception of legal texts, surviving records of rape in early China have been the subject of almost no academic study to date.¹ Multiple factors have caused this situation, starting with the fact that definitions of rape and sexual abuse vary enormously depending on time and place; therefore, the examples that will be considered in this article are those which, in the terms of the time, involved heinous, non-consensual sexual activity, although this was not necessarily legally punishable – not least because in many recorded cases the perpetrators were enormously powerful and hence largely beyond the reach of the law. Another factor in the comparative invisibility of sexual violence is that writers in early China were generally quite reticent about discussing sexual matters, using euphemistic vocabulary that has not always been correctly identified as referring to rape and apportioning blame through *weiyán* 微言 or “subtle words”.² In instances where famous and important historical individuals raped people, there was also undoubtedly discomfort

¹ Rape is here understood, as per *Merriam Webster*, as any unlawful sexual activity carried out forcibly or under threat of injury, against a person’s will or in circumstances where the person concerned is unable to consent.

² The idea of using *weiyán* to convey moral judgements through euphemistic terminology is strongly associated with Confucianism and the idea of the correct behaviour of the “gentleman” (*junzi* 君子) as defined in texts like the *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記 (Dai the Elder’s Record of Ritual) (Wang 2008: 70 [“Zengzi lishi” 曾子立事] and 188 [“Wenwang guanren” 文王官人]). As many scholars have noted, certain early Chinese texts are highly restrained when discussing topics such as the murder of rulers, divorce, infidelity and so on (Van Auken 2007; Nylan 2001: 254–6).

at recording actions seen as besmirching the record of great men. Furthermore, since legal codes criminalized sex outside marriage from at least the time of the unification of China in 221 BCE, both consensual illicit sexual activity (*hejian* 和奸) and forced illicit sexual activity (*qiangjian* 强奸) could constitute crimes (Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 1978: 225 [*Falü dawen* 法律答問]; Hulsewé 1985: 169 [D 151–3]; Zhangjiashan ersiqihao Hanmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 2006: 34 [*Ernian lüling* 二年律令. “Zalü” 襍律] and 108 [*Zouyan shu* 奏讞書]; Barbieri-Low and Yates 2015: 617–9 and 1376–93). The criminalization of consensual sex results in a situation where it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish consensual and non-consensual sexual activity in the textual record.³ Furthermore, the earliest surviving statutes concerning rape date to the imperial era, leaving the situation prior to the unification (and potential variation in the laws pertaining to different states) unknown. All of this has ensured that the history of sexual violence in early China remains largely obscure.

In spite of the fact that writers in early China were often uncomfortable with documenting sexual violence, surviving records from pre-imperial and early imperial times describe a wide variety of different forms of sexual abuse and rape. These accounts are found mainly in historical texts, though some fictional literature on the subject has also survived. Thus, in addition to descriptions of individual abusive men raping women and gang rape during warfare, other kinds of assault are also mentioned, such as wives inflicting sexual abuse on concubines, as well as incestuous and necrophiliac rape. For example, in the “Wang Ji” 妄稽, a lengthy Western Han Dynasty rhapsody on the theme of domestic violence, the eponymous wife inflicts a prolonged sexual assault on her husband’s unfortunate concubine: “she attacked her private parts, stabbing and kicking her” (擊陰, 錐躑之) (Beijing daxue chutu wenxian yanjiusuo 2015: 70). Meanwhile, the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty) records how an unnamed woman from Meiyang 美陽 complained to the official Wang Zun 王尊: “My [adopted] son has repeatedly raped me (literally: treated me as a wife), and beats me out of jealousy” (兒常以我為妻, 妒笞我) (Ban 1962, 76.3227).⁴ The *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (History of the Later Han Dynasty) describes the Red Eyebrows rebels engaging in necrophiliac rape of the corpses of Han imperial women: “they broke open the tombs, taking possession of their treasures, and then polluted and humiliated the body of Empress Lü (d. 180 BCE). Of [the corpses] dug up by these bandits, all those encoffined in jade caskets looked just as they had when they were alive, whereupon the Red Eyebrows performed many disgusting sex acts with them” (發掘諸陵, 取其寶貨, 遂汙辱呂后屍. 凡賊所發, 有玉匣殮者率皆如生, 故赤眉得多行姪穢) (Fan 1973: 11.483–4). Such documentation is important for building up a picture of the history of sexual violence during this period.

This article will focus primarily on two case studies, one concerning the rape of an individual woman in peacetime, and the second, a famous instance of gang rape during war. These two examples have been chosen for the unequivocal nature of what occurred – from the context given, there can be no question in either case that this was consensual sexual activity. The first case concerns Lady Xi Gui 息媯 and the rape perpetrated by her brother-in-law, Marquis Ai of Cai 蔡哀侯 (r. 694–75 BCE); the second, the rape in 506 BCE of Lady Bo Ying 伯嬴, the widow of King Ping of Chu 楚平王 (r. 528–16 BCE), and other elite women after the fall of the city of Ying to the forces of King Helü of Wu 吳王闔閭

³ Jia Liying 賈麗英 provides a list of all documented instances of supposedly consensual illicit sexual activity, incest and fornication during mourning from the early imperial era, but notes the problems of identifying cases of rape among them (Jia 2006). Sexual activity during mourning seems to have been regarded with great distress by society as a whole, but was not necessarily more severely punished (Nylan 2005–2006).

⁴ This particular example is interesting for the reticence reported by the official adjudicating the case, who noted: “The legal code has no law against raping your mother, and this is something which the sages could not bear to record” (律無妻母之法; 聖人所不忍書).

(r. 514–496 BCE). These two case studies each serve to illuminate some of the problems of studying rape in early China: in the first example because the vocabulary found in transmitted texts is ambiguous and not easily interpreted; while in the second, the enormous admiration felt by many for Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (d. 484 BCE), the man who organized the mass rape of Chu women, means that these events have frequently been ignored or glossed over.

Case study I: Lady Xi Gui and the vocabulary of rape

One of the key problems with identifying cases of rape in early Chinese texts is that the vocabulary used is often euphemistic, allusive and difficult to understand. This is not an issue with legal texts and, as a result, the evolution of laws about sexual violence has been extensively studied.⁵ Legal texts from early China consistently make use of the term *qiangjian* (variously written as 強奸 or 彊姦) to describe coercive extramarital sex. This term is, however, very rarely seen in other writings, unless they are specifically discussing the legal ramifications of rape or citing an instance of someone being convicted of this crime in a court of law. Thus, the *Mozi* discusses the correct punishment for instances of gang rape, arguing that such a crime should be a death penalty offence: “When the masses use their strength in numbers to treat the young and the weak cruelly and rape women, all should be executed, including those who incite [such violence]” (諸以眾彊凌弱少及彊姦人婦女，以謹譁者，皆斷) (Sun 2001: 601 [“Haoling” 號令]). Another instance of the use of the term *qiangjian* is found in the *Hanshu*, where the case of Liu Duan 劉端, Marquis of Yong 庸侯, is discussed. He was convicted of the crime of raping a married woman in 42 BCE, only to be pardoned thanks to an amnesty (Ban 1962, 15B.500). Again, the use of this terminology was appropriate in the context of a legal case. However, the problems of identifying the language used in literary or historical accounts of rape can be illustrated by the example of Lady Xi Gui.

The earliest surviving record of the rape of Lady Xi Gui is given in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Zuo’s Tradition) account for the year 684 BCE, which describes how, during her journey from her natal home in Chen to her husband’s state of Xi, she was stopped by her sister’s husband, Lord Ai of Cai. According to the *Zuozhuan*, Lord Ai of Cai proceeded “to fail to treat her as a guest” (*fubin* 弗賓), a unique expression for “to rape” which has caused commentators a great deal of trouble (Yang 1981: 184 [Zhuang 10]).⁶ The lack of other comparably early accounts of these events, and the peculiar terminology used, meant that the severity of the assault endured by Lady Xi Gui was not understood for more than two millennia. Other accounts of these events found in early imperial Chinese texts use the vocabulary of disrespect; for example, the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) states that the Marquis of Cai showed “lack of respect” (*bujing* 不敬) (Sima 1959: 35.1566). This interpretation would profoundly influence imperial era readings of the *Zuozhuan*: Du Yu’s 杜預 (222–85) commentary glossed *fubin* as meaning “to act not in accordance with ritual propriety or respect” (*bu lijing* 不禮敬), while Lu Zuqian 呂祖謙 (1137–81) argued that this term described a minor breach of the conventions (*xiaoshi* 小事) which ought not to have had any serious consequences. Zhang

⁵ A number of important studies have been produced on early legislation concerning illicit sex and rape, an area of study that has been transformed by archaeologically excavated legal materials (Sun 2008 and Wang 2007). This has allowed the development of later legislation on rape to be placed in its proper historical context (Xiao 2019; Liu 2014; Peng 2013).

⁶ The commentary on this line provided by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (1909–1992) also suggests that *fubin* refers to some kind of lack of respect (*qingtiao* 輕佻). There are other instances in the *Zuozhuan* where the term *fubin* is certainly used for exactly such a meaning; for example, in the account of 716 BCE, it states: “prior to this, the Rong people paid court to Zhou and gave money to senior and junior ministers, but the earl of Fan failed to treat them [with the respect due to] guests” (初，戎朝于周，發幣于公卿，凡伯弗賓) (Yang 1981: 54 [Yin 7]).

Shangyuan 張尚瑗 (*jinsi* 1688) suggested that Lord Ai of Cai's fault lay in offending the principles of gender segregation by looking at his sister-in-law's face (Du 2007: 152 n.2; Lü 1983: 3.15b; Zhang 1983: 3.16a–16b). Other commentators would avoid the whole subject by theorizing that the story was completely invented (*kong wei shi* 恐未實) (Wang 1983: 3.29a–29b). Such commentaries serve to desexualize and downplay the assault on Lady Xi Gui, and make the widely reported rage of her husband inexplicable; if this was such an insignificant affront – merely a minor breach of propriety – why did he react with such murderous rage? Whatever happened to Lady Xi Gui was sufficiently serious that her spouse mobilized an army in revenge: those commentators who try to minimize what happened in the palace at Cai also completely ignore the response of her spouse. In this context, although commentators have generally erred on the side of interpreting the term *feili* 非禮 (lit. to behave improperly) as a matter of ritual, it is worth noting that right up to the present day it is used for sexual violence and rape.

In revenge for the assault on his wife, the lord of Xi conspired with King Wen of Chu 楚文王 (r. 689–77 BCE) to destroy Cai.⁷ Once he had been conquered, the Chu army proceeded to destroy Xi, and Lady Xi Gui was ultimately installed in King Wen of Chu's harem. Here, different texts provide radically divergent accounts of what happened to her next: the *Zuozhuan* states that Lady Xi Gui became the mother of two successive kings of Chu: Du'ao 堵敖 (also known as Zhuang'ao 莊敖; r. 676–72 BCE) and King Cheng of Chu 楚成王 (r. 671–26 BCE).⁸ Nevertheless, throughout their marriage, she refused to speak to King Wen, and when questioned on the subject, she simply replied: “As a wife, I have served two husbands – since I was not able to die, what do I have to say?” (吾一婦人而事二夫，縱弗能死，其又奚言) (Yang 1981: 199 [Zhuang 14]).⁹ Alternatively, in the “Zhenshun” 貞順 (Resolute and Obedient) chapter of the *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳 (Biographies of Exemplary Women) Lady Xi Gui is said to have taken advantage of the king of Chu's absence to steal out of the palace and rejoin her first husband, whereupon she killed herself to demonstrate her steadfast devotion to him (Wang 2012: 156–7 [“Zhenshun”]; Kinney 2014: 74–5). The incompatibility of these different accounts of Lady Xi Gui's fate have resulted in many difficulties for scholars. However, as an abundance of later imperial era literary representations attest, these alternative endings to her story allowed later members of the literati elite with very different perspectives on the subject of chastity and widow remarriage to take her as an exemplar (Qiao and Xu 2015; Gao 2013).

The issue of the peculiar and difficult-to-interpret vocabulary of the *Zuozhuan* account of Marquis Ai of Cai's treatment of Lady Xi Gui was resolved in 2008 with the gift of a number of looted bamboo texts to Tsinghua University. Included among these texts was hitherto unknown historical work covering the period 789–386 BCE, which was given the title *Xinian* 繫年 (String of Years) by the scholars who prepared it for publication. The *Xinian* is a compilation of historical materials thought to derive from the Kingdom of Chu, which serves to complement and supplement the history of the Zhou Dynasty preserved in transmitted texts (Li 2011).¹⁰ In some instances, this provides

⁷ The reign dates of King Wen of Chu are disputed; the *Zuozhuan* gives him a reign of 15 years (689–675 BCE), while the *Shiji* has 13 (689–677 BCE). It is not known which is correct, but this article follows the latter chronology.

⁸ The fratricidal rivalry between Du'ao and his younger brother, King Cheng of Chu, is recorded in *Shiji* (Sima 1959, 40.1696).

⁹ Different scholars and commentators on the *Zuozhuan* have widely divergent ideas about Lady Xi Gui's silence: some argue that she literally never spoke to King Wen, that she only answered when spoken to, that she never smiled or laughed or they believe she simply never spoke about what had happened in Xi (Zhang 2020).

¹⁰ The historical significance of this new material was quickly recognized and has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest (Li 2013; Liu 2013; Chen 2013). There have so far been two complete translations of the *Xinian* into English (Milburn 2016; Pines 2020).

completely new historical material and in others gives much-needed clarification. This is certainly true of the account preserved in this text of the incident in which Marquis Ai of Cai stopped his sister-in-law only to “fail to treat her as a guest”. The *Xinian* description of these events reads as follows:

²³ Marquis Ai of Cai took a wife from Chen and the marquis of Sai (i.e. Xi) (d. 683 BCE) also took a wife from Chen: this was Lady Gui of Sai.¹¹ Lady Gui of Sai was travelling to her new home in Sai; when she passed through Cai; Marquis Ai of Cai gave orders to stop her. ²⁴ He said: “Given that you are a member of the same clan, you must enter [the capital].”¹² Lady Gui of Sai thus entered Cai and Marquis Ai of Cai raped her. The marquis of Sai bore a grudge about this, so he sent a messenger to King Wen of Chu ²⁵ to say: “If you, my lord, come and attack me, I will request assistance from Cai and then you can defeat them” (Li 2011: 147).¹³

²³ 蔡哀侯取妻於陳，賽[息]侯亦取妻於陳，是賽為=[息媯。息媯]將歸于賽[息]過蔡。[蔡]哀侯命止=[之]，²⁴ 曰：“以同生[姓]之古[故]必內[入]。”賽[息]為[媯]乃內[入]于蔡；[蔡]哀侯妻之。賽[息]侯弗訓[順]，乃使人于楚文王 ²⁵ 曰：“君來伐我。我將[將]求救於蔡，君焉敗之。”

This description is important for two reasons. It emphasizes the coercive nature of what happened to Lady Xi Gui by stressing that it was Marquis Ai of Cai who gave orders to have her stopped and forced to enter the palace – nothing that happened was voluntary or consensual on her part. Furthermore, this text uses a well-recognized term for “to rape” rather than the highly obscure *fubin*: the *Xinian* describes the lord of Cai’s actions as *qi* 妻, which literally means “to treat as a wife”.¹⁴ *Qi* was commonly used to designate coercive sexual activity in early imperial era texts, and can be distinguished by context from other meanings of the same verb, such as “to give as a wife” or “to marry” – as in the example: “Lord Wen gave a wife (*qi*) to Zhao Cui, and she gave birth to [Zhao] Yuan and [Zhao] Tong” (文公妻趙衰，生原、同) (Yang 1981: 416 [Xi 24]). By the Eastern Han Dynasty, *qi* in the meaning of “to rape” was increasingly being expressed by use of the binome *qilüe* 妻略, whereby the second character served to emphasize that this was an act of violation. Thus, the word *qilüe* is found in texts such as the *Hou Hanshu* where it is used to describe the actions of Dong Zhuo 董卓 (d. 192 CE) after he took control of the Han Dynasty capital: “[He]... debauched princesses and raped palace women” (... 姦亂公主，妻略宮人) (Fan 1973: 72.2325). This binome was glossed by Hu Sanxing 胡三省 (1230–1302) as follows: “*qi* means having sex with someone else’s wife or daughter, as if they were your own wife. Since they are wickedly taken, this is referred to as *lüe*” (妻者，私他人之婦女，若己妻然，不以道取之曰略) (Su, Wu and Lai 2013: 277). However, although the two-character word *qilüe* is only fully attested to from the Eastern

¹¹ The characters Sai 賽 (*səʰkh) and Xi 息 (*sək) appear to have been near homophones in ancient Chinese (Schuessler 2009: 111). Evidence from bronze vessel inscriptions from the state of Xi indicates that the two characters were used interchangeably (Yu 1980: 7–8; and He 1988: 111).

¹² Lord Ai of Cai made this comment because his wife was Lady Xi Gui’s sister (Chen and Wan 2013: 51).

¹³ The subscript numbers given in both translation and transcription indicate the number allocated to each bamboo strip in the text by the archaeological team. The difference between what is recorded in this text and the transmitted tradition concerning Lady Xi Gui has aroused a great deal of interest (Cheng 2012).

¹⁴ A number of publications on the *Xinian* have already stressed that Lady Xi Gui was a victim of rape (Cheng and Li 2017; Chen 2012). This has not, however, stopped some scholars from suggesting that she was engaged in a consensual extramarital affair, or that she was somehow temporarily “married” to Marquis Ai of Cai (Pines 2020: 170; Liu 2015: 40). There are certainly some cultures that allow temporary marriages, but there is no evidence that this was possible in early China.

Han Dynasty onwards; *qi* was apparently already understood as meaning “to rape” long before that. In the case considered below, gang rape in warfare was also reported using the same verb, and it is quite impossible that all these women should be considered as temporarily “married” to the enemy combatants who took turns to sexually assault them.

The unfortunate Lady Xi Gui must have experienced great trauma in her life – first as a result of being raped by her brother-in-law, and then enduring the terrors of war as Xi invaded Cai and then King Wen of Chu sought to destroy Xi. However, in the light of evidence from the *Xinian*, it is useful to now reconsider the implications of the term *fubin*. By the time of the earliest commentaries, knowledge of the precise meaning of this word had been lost – certainly no surviving records even hint that it might refer to rape. Nevertheless, when the *Zuozhuan* was originally written, *fubin* may well have been generally understood as a polite euphemism used when referring to sexual violence. In that case, readers of this text would have seen Lady Xi Gui not just as a woman who married twice (a common enough and unproblematic situation at the time) but as someone who had been the victim of rape in between these two marriages. It is in this context of post-traumatic selective mutism that they would have interpreted her unwillingness to speak to King Wen of Chu.¹⁵ It is also relevant to give some consideration to the connotations of the terminology used for rape in early China: *fubin* certainly implies lack of respect, but lack of respect for whom? It is possible that the lack of respect was thought to be directed at Lady Xi Gui herself, but more likely that the rape was understood as an assault upon the status and sense of self-worth of her spouse. This in turn would explain the lord of Xi’s decision to raise an army and go to war in revenge – he believed the rape of his wife to be an act of aggression against himself. Likewise, while the use of the term *qi* or “to treat as a wife” for rape raises interesting questions about early Chinese perceptions of marital rape, it too focuses attention on the position of the woman’s spouse (whether actual or in the future), who, through the act of rape, is losing possession of his wife. The terminology used in early China was highly patriarchal, and it appears that the trauma inflicted on the woman was subsumed by the humiliation and disrespect experienced by her husband.

Case study 2: the women of Ying

The second case study concerns an incident in which a large number of women were subjected to organized gang rape during warfare. The perpetrator of this outrage was Wu Zixu, who is the protagonist of the most extensive body of lore concerning any figure of the Spring and Autumn Period (Blakeley 1999: 66; Johnson 1980, 1981). A highly controversial character in his own time and ever since, he has been at once enormously admired for his strong sense of filial piety which led him to avenge the death of his father at the hands of King Ping of Chu, and deeply hated for the single-minded, relentless and expansive way in which he set about achieving his revenge which ensured that many of those who suffered his wrath were innocent people who were not at all involved in his original grievance.¹⁶ With the imposition of Confucian orthodoxy during the Han Dynasty, filial piety came to be seen as outweighing other considerations and hence Wu Zixu became an ever more righteous character. This in turn ensured that his actions in organizing

¹⁵ Selective mutism is often mentioned in research on the long-term effects of rape on adult women as a well-documented traumatic response. However, it has been the subject of little study. Instead, the majority of research has been directed towards selective mutism in children (Hultquist 1995; Crenshaw and Lee 2008).

¹⁶ Those who disapproved of feuding, particularly when this involved an inferior taking revenge on his superior, would frequently cite the proverbial saying “The ruler’s order is sacrosanct” (*jumming tianye* 君命天也). This can be seen, for example, in the *Hou Hanshu* account of the Su 蘇-Li 李 blood feud (Fan 1973: 31.1109–10; Ess 1994: 161–4).

the rape of his enemies' wives and daughters would become a major stumbling block in the glorification of his deeds, to the point where imperial era accounts rarely address the subject, and subsequently modern scholars have tended to avoid discussing this incident (while at the same time considering in great detail other aspects of the campaign against Chu, such as Wu Zixu's mutilation of King Ping's long-dead body).¹⁷ This avoidance of a terrible event in the biography of a highly controversial character does particular disservice to attempts to understand the early reception of the Wu Zixu story cycle; one of the reasons why he was regarded with such fascination and horror was because he was willing to perpetrate extremely evil acts in pursuit of what he believed to be a greater righteousness. Readers of early Chinese texts were therefore being asked to weigh the suffering of innocent women when raped against the "need" of Wu Zixu to punish their menfolk for their role in the murder of his equally innocent father.

To give a brief outline of the historical events: in 506 BCE, following a series of battles, the forces of the Kingdom of Wu, under the command of their monarch, King Helü, entered Ying, the capital city of Chu.¹⁸ Although King Zhao of Chu 楚昭王 (r. 515–489 BCE) and his younger sister, Princess Biwo 畀我, had managed to escape the previous day, escorted by a small group of courtiers and guards, most of the royal family were still in residence (along with many other members of the Chu ruling elite) when the Wu army entered the city. The Wu army immediately began fighting over the spoils; to give but one example of this, Prince Zishan of Wu 吳王子山 occupied the palace of the Chu prime minister, only to be forcibly evicted by Prince Fugai 王子夫概 (the younger brother of King Helü of Wu) who wanted the place for himself (Yang 1981: 1545 [Ding 4]). However, while the riches of Chu were no doubt the source of much contention, so were the women who had been left behind in the capital city as their menfolk fled. The greatest prize of all was the mother of the young king of Chu, who was a famously beautiful daughter of the Qin ruling house: Lady Bo Ying. Many of the accounts of the rape of the Chu women focus specifically on the treatment meted out to Lady Bo Ying, not least because she was the trigger for the events that brought about the death of Wu Zixu's father and caused his terrible revenge.

Long before Lady Bo Ying was captured by the Wu army, she had already become notorious throughout the Chinese world. At the time of her arrival in the Kingdom of Chu, she was betrothed to Crown Prince Jian 太子建 (d. 522 BCE), the son and heir of King Ping of Chu. However, on being informed of the beauty of his prospective daughter-in-law, King Ping decided to marry her himself; out of fear that Crown Prince Jian might object, he was forced into exile and his supporters executed. Lady Bo Ying later gave birth to a son, who, on the death of his father, became King Zhao of Chu, but the legitimacy of his rule was compromised by the circumstances of his parents' marriage and the presence of Crown Prince Jian's son in exile outside the kingdom. Among the key generals commanding the Wu attack on Ying was Wu Zixu, a long-term ally of the crown prince and staunch supporter of his son, whose father and older brother had been executed by King Ping because of this connection. The cycle of stories describing Wu Zixu's terrible revenge on the man who killed his father, a tale of filial piety pushed to the extreme of murdering a great many other people's parents, has long been one of the most famous epic narratives in early Chinese literature. Many of the texts recounting the life of Wu Zixu omit the rape of King Ping's widow, but some texts – most notably those

¹⁷ Ye Wenxian 葉文憲 (1948–) is one of the rare modern scholars to even mention Wu Zixu's problematic role as a rapist and organizer of gang rape (Ye 2005).

¹⁸ These events should be understood in the context of relentless pressure on Chu from Wu over the course of many years; the *Zuozhuan* states: "After King Zhao came to the throne, Chu did not go a single year without being invaded by the Wu army" (楚自昭王即位, 無歲不有吳師) (Yang 1981: 1542 [Ding 4]).

associated with the Wu-Yue Yangtze delta region – mention it repeatedly. Thus, in the “Wu neizhuan” 吳內傳 (Men of Wu) chapter of the *Yuejue shu* 越絕書 (Lost Histories of Yue), it says:

Although King [Ping] of Chu was already dead, Zixu took command of six thousand men, and he grabbed hold of a whip and slashed at the tomb of King Ping. He said: “In the past, my father was innocent and yet you executed him. Now I do this to make you pay!” The ruler [of Wu] lived in the ruler [of Chu’s] house; the grandees [of Wu] lived in the grandees [of Chu’s] houses; and there were even those who raped the king of Chu’s mother (Yuan and Wu 1985: 16–17 [“Wu neizhuan”]).¹⁹

楚王已死，子胥將卒六千人，操鞭笞平王之墳，曰：“昔者吾先君無罪，而子殺之。今此以報子也！”君舍君室，大夫舍大夫室，蓋有妻楚王母者。

In this account, the juxtaposition of the desecration of the tomb, the occupation of enemy houses and the rape of the king of Chu’s mother is not accidental: all these actions were intended to humiliate elite Chu men in general and King Zhao in particular. The wording of the “Men of Wu” chapter closely follows the *Guliang zhuan* 穀梁傳 (Guliang’s Tradition), which in very similar terms gives an explanation of why the people of Wu should be regarded as barbarians, while also setting the rape of the queen in the context of the mass rape of elite Chu women by the occupying forces: “Their ruler slept in the bedchamber of the ruler [of Chu] and raped the wife of their ruler; their grandees slept in the bedchambers of the grandees [of Chu] and raped the wives of their grandees, and there were even those who wanted to rape the mother of the king of Chu” (君居其君之寢而妻其君之妻；大夫居其大夫之寢而妻其大夫之妻。蓋有欲妻楚王之母者) (Zhong 1996: 687–8 [Ding 4]). Today rape during warfare is generally recognized as a war crime, and its role as a method of intimidation and punishment has been extensively analysed, but the belief that such sexual violence constitutes a particularly heinous action is extremely ancient.²⁰ Furthermore, in the hierarchical thinking of the time, the rape of King Ping of Chu’s widow, who was also the mother of the reigning monarch, was clearly particularly appalling. Therefore, the *Yuejue shu* returns to the topic of the rape of the widowed queen of Chu in the “Pianxu” 篇叙 (Concluding Remarks) chapter, which is structured as a question-and-answer session between an imaginary reader and the compilers of this volume. Again and again, Confucius is cited as the ultimate arbiter of moral values, who despises Wu Zixu for his role in the rape the queen of Chu, but admires him for his other actions:

The question is put: “[Wu] Zixu raped the mother of the king of Chu... Having acted in this way, how can he be considered righteous?” We say: “Confucius definitely deprecated his shortcomings. He considered his revenge to be virtuous but execrated his rape of the king of Chu’s mother.²¹ However, the righteousness [recorded] in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a matter of measuring success and hiding faults.

¹⁹ This passage has generally been dated to the late Warring States era (Zhou 1991: 125). A complete translation exists for the entire *Yuejue shu* (Milburn 2010).

²⁰ The topic of rape in the Greek and Roman world, in both warfare and peacetime, has been extensively studied (Heineman 2002; Deacy and Pierce 2002; Gaca 2018). More research on attitudes towards rape in warfare in ancient China is much needed – this topic seems to have been almost entirely ignored in scholarship to date.

²¹ Wu Zixu apparently did not personally rape the king of Chu’s mother, but he is said to have arranged for other men to do so. Therefore, writings like the *Yuejue shu* accord him full responsibility for everything that happened.

[Confucius] considered him to be virtuous because he was so devoted to those who were good to him” (Yuan and Wu 1985: 77 [“Pianxu”]).²²

問曰：“子胥妻楚王母... 其行如是，何義乎？”曰：“孔子固貶之矣。賢其復仇，惡其妻楚王母也。然春秋之義，量功掩過也。賢之，親親也。”

It seems as though, when weighed in the balance, rape was regarded as besmirching the reputation of a filial son – but not very much. If the great sage Confucius was prepared to hide Wu Zixu’s faults, the compilers of the *Yuejue shu* seem to be suggesting that it behoved everyone else to join him in overlooking them. Thus, when the fall of the Chu capital was recorded in the *Wu Yue chunqiu* 吳越春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Wu and Yue), these events were described in similar but more violent terms than in the *Yuejue shu* – a characteristic of the text, which has long been noted for the greater degree of brutality that it documents.²³ As with the *Yuejue shu*, this text documents the sexual violence experienced by a wide range of elite Chu women: King Zhao’s mother, his wife (who was apparently also abandoned when the monarch fled) and the spouses of various senior ministers in Chu.²⁴ It is worth noting that this account very explicitly states that the rape of the Chu women was planned, involved multiple men from the Wu ruling elite, who are mentioned by name, and that the whole occasion was said to be aimed at humiliating the Chu king and ruling house, who are again also specified by name. The “Helü neizhuan” 闔閭內傳 (Inner Tradition of King Helü) description of this sexual violence again follows the *Yuejue shu* in creating a parallel between the treatment meted out to the women with that visited on King Ping of Chu’s corpse when it was desecrated by Wu Zixu. In his mind, it was apparently a well-deserved humiliation for both the dead and the living:

Wu [Zi]xu... dug up the tomb of King Ping and took out his corpse, whipping it three hundred lashes. With his left foot he stamped on his stomach and with his right hand he gouged out [the dead king’s] eyes, as he berated him: “Who told you to believe those lying sycophants and kill my father and older brother? Surely you deserve all of this!” He then commanded King Helü to rape King Zhao’s wife; Wu [Zi]xu, with Sun Wu and Bo Pi, also raped the wives of Zichang (i.e. Prince Nangwa of Chu) and Marshal Cheng in order to humiliate the king of Chu and his ministers (Zhou 1997: 62 [“Helü neizhuan”]).

伍胥... 乃掘平王之墓，出其屍，鞭之三百，左足踐腹，右手抉其目，誚之曰：“誰使汝用讒諛之口，殺我父兄，豈不冤哉？”即令闔閭妻昭王夫人，伍胥，孫武，白喜亦妻子常，司馬成之妻，以辱楚之君臣也。

²² The term *qin* 親, which would normally refer to blood relatives, from context means “those who are good to one”, which in this case indicates King Helü, who allowed Wu Zixu to use his army to wreak revenge on Chu. Later in the same chapter, the compilers return to the topic of Confucius’s opinion of rapists: “Why did Confucius believe him to have no shortcomings? In his revenge on Chu, they say that [Wu] Zixu raped the mother of the king of Chu, and so he was no different from a barbarian” (孔子貶之奈何?其報楚也，稱子胥妻楚王母，及乎夷狄) (Yuan and Wu 1985: 78 [“Pianxu”]).

²³ To give an example of the escalation of violence found in this text, the earliest references to the murder of Prince Qingji of Wu 吳王子慶忌 say the assassin, Yao Li 要離, survived (Chen 2002: 594–5 [“Zhonglian” 忠廉]). When this story appears in the *Wu Yue chunqiu*, there is a long account of how Yao Li mutilated himself before falling on his sword, having previously failed to commit suicide by drowning (Zhou 1997: 50–1 [“Helü neizhuan”]). The greater brutality of this story is mirrored in other parts of the *Wu Yue chunqiu* as well.

²⁴ The *Lienü zhuan* records a very different fate for King Zhao of Chu’s wife; this text names her as Lady Zhen Jiang 貞姜. It states that she died in the flooding, having refused to move without her husband’s direct permission to do so, which did not arrive until after she had been swept away by the rising waters (Wang 2012: 164–5 [“Zhenshun”]).

A number of different texts state that many Chu elite women were victims of rape when the city of Ying fell – the wife of King Zhao and several of the princes of the ruling family are frequently mentioned. However, their experiences were mostly lost in the focus on the single most prestigious woman among the group of victims – Lady Bo Ying – though accounts vary as to whether she was actually raped or merely one of the intended targets. It is clear that for many, the whipping of King Ping’s corpse and the sexual violence directed at his widow were the most traumatic and dreadful events in the whole of the Wu occupation. They are frequently mentioned together, as a kind of ultimate awfulness that served to place the rest of the invasion, with its brutal destructive battles and vicious squabbling among the victors over the spoils, into some kind of context. This attitude can be seen in the reaction of a music master serving in the Chu court, who was inspired to write a “Song of Utter Calamity” (窮劫之曲) once the Wu army had been expelled and King Zhao returned from exile, which expressed his feelings about everything the occupied population had endured. The preamble to Music Master Huzi’s 扈子 song specifically states that this was a reaction to the horror of “the desecration of King Ping’s tomb, the mutilation of his corpse, and the rape of his wife [which was done] in order to shame the ruler of Chu and his vassals” (掘平王墓, 戮屍奸喜, 以辱楚君臣), since these were considered by many people to be the worst aspects of the whole war (Zhou 1997: 65 [“Helü neizhuan”]).²⁵ The words of the song, however, omit any reference to the rape of Lady Bo Ying, preferring instead to focus on the physical and psychic damage experienced by men, from King Zhao of Chu (at whom the song was directed) downwards:

After three battles they crushed Ying and our king ran away;
The soldiers in control raced to plunder the Chu palace.
The bones of the Chu [king] were dug [from their grave],
The humiliation of whipping and exposing the corpse will be hard to expunge!
Almost were the ancestral shrines toppled, the state altars destroyed,
What crime did our king commit that his country should face utter ruin?
Our knights have suffered appallingly, our people have been terrorized,
Although the Wu army has gone, their fears have not been assuaged (Zhou 1997: 65 [“Helü neizhuan”]).²⁶

三戰破郢王奔發	留兵縱騎虜荊闕
楚荊骸骨遭發掘	鞭辱腐屍恥難雪
幾危宗廟社稷滅	嚴王何罪國幾絕
卿士悽愴民惻悵	吳軍雖去怖不歇

The *Lienü zhuan*, by contrast, gives a different account of the fate of Lady Bo Ying, in which she emerges as a heroine who defends her virtue by engaging in skilled argument with her would-be rapist, King Helü of Wu. This may represent an alternative textual tradition about the fall of Ying, of which this is a unique surviving example, or it may simply have been a tale invented by the author, Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE).²⁷ However, this story not only shows Lady Bo Ying successfully resisting being raped, but frames this as a brave stand by a lone woman at a time of military occupation, when a great many other

²⁵ This translation follows the commentary by Lu Wenchoo 盧文弨 (1717–95) in reading *xi* 喜 (pleasure) in the original text as *qi* 妻 (wife, or in this case widow) (Zhang 2006: 93 n.2).

²⁶ This song consists of rhymed couplets; in each case the rhyme is derived from the *yue-ji* 月祭 group (Schuessler 2009).

²⁷ The circumstances which inspired Liu Xiang to write this text are recorded in *Hanshu*. Here it is described as a manual for Emperor Cheng of the Han Dynasty 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 BCE) to direct him towards a better understanding of morally praiseworthy women (Ban 1962, 16.1957–8).

women were the victims of ongoing sexual violence that she wanted to prevent. Lady Bo Ying is rendered vulnerable by her position as the king of Chu's mother, which makes her a valuable prize in warfare. However, her position also serves as a source of strength – while the rape of other women might pass unnoticed, any assault on her would be a very public failure of virtue on the part of the king of Wu, since she would either be forced to commit suicide in protest or he would have to kill her. This would ensure a notoriety that would not only seriously affect his reputation in general, but call into question his ability to rule his people. The *Lienü zhuan* begins with a very striking confrontation between Lady Bo Ying and the king of Wu:

Wu conquered Chu, and then advanced towards Ying. King Zhao fled, and King Helü of Wu raped every single member of his harem. It was then Lady Bo Ying's turn, and she said, holding a naked blade: "I have heard it said that the Son of Heaven is a model to the entire world, while a lord is an example to his whole country. If the Son of Heaven fails to obey the rules, then the whole world is thrown into chaos; while if an aristocrat fails to control himself, then his country is in danger...²⁸ The reason why you want me is for your own pleasure. If you approach me and I die, what pleasure will you gain? If you kill me first, how will that benefit your majesty?" The king of Wu was shamed by this and withdrew to his chamber. Lady Bo Ying and her duennas then barred the gates to the Long Lanes and did not allow any soldiers in (Wang 2012: 161–2 ["Zhenshun"]).²⁹

吳勝楚，遂入至郢。昭王亡，吳王闔閭盡妻其後宮。次至伯嬴，伯嬴持刃曰：“妾聞：天子者，天下之表也，公侯者，一國之儀也。天子失制則天下亂；諸侯失節則其國危...且凡所欲妾者，為樂也。近妾而死，何樂之有？如先殺妾，又何益於君王？”於是吳王慚，遂退舍。伯嬴與其保阿閉永巷之門，皆不釋兵。

The verse summary at the end of this story serves to highlight both the dangers experienced by the women trapped inside the palace walls (and hence particularly vulnerable to sexual violence from the occupying forces), and the bravery of Lady Bo Ying who was determined to risk her own life to save herself and others like her from assault. This short poem is also useful for the way it clearly demonstrates the coercive and non-consensual aspects of *qi*. These women were not “wives”, they were certainly not “married” to the occupying soldiery – they were victims of rape. Those who wish to understand *qi* as meaning “to take as a wife” or something of that ilk are perverting the real meaning of the text, by implying that the men's actions were in any way licit:

Helü conquered Chu
And entered their palaces and halls.
He raped all the women in the Rear Palace,
Every single one of them trembled in fear.
Lady Bo Ying retained mastery of herself,
She remained firm and concentrated.

²⁸ Lady Bo Ying goes on to mention in passing that the statutory punishment for rape was castration. This was certainly true in early Han Dynasty China (Zhangjishan ersiqihao Hanmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 2006: 34 [*Ernian lüling*, “Zalü”]). Since King Helü was a regnant monarch and these mass rapes were taking place in occupied lands, it would be impossible to punish him legally, but Lady Bo Ying clearly thought it worth reminding him of how these crimes would be viewed if perpetrated by a less privileged man.

²⁹ The Long Lanes (*yongxiang* 永巷) were alleyways constructed within royal palaces in ancient China and hence a metonym for the palace itself. Other translations of this passage into English somewhat obfuscate the issue of sexual violence (Kinney 2014: 76–8).

Gentlemen admired her,
And praised her self-control (Wang 2012: 162 [“Zhenshun”]).

闔閭勝楚 入厥宮室 盡妻後宮 莫不戰慄
伯嬴自守 堅固專一 君子美之 以為有節

The attention given to this one incident raises questions about attitudes to rape in times of war in early China. First of all, it seems very unlikely that rape did not happen elsewhere in the Central States during the terrible fighting that characterized the period before the unification of China in 221 BCE, but it apparently went unrecorded – why? Was rape (and its corollary of forced reproduction) regarded as a legitimate tactic of war or was it the subject of such intense shame that it went unmentioned? In addition, the texts that document the fall of Chu seem to be weighted strongly according to social position, suggesting that the rape of queens and princesses was regarded as significantly more heinous than that of ordinary women. This is an issue which needs to be problematized further, given that the rape of Chu women in 506 BCE was deliberately planned and orchestrated so as to punish their fathers, husbands and sons. It may be that on this occasion these women were targeted in an unusual way, and therefore surviving records document this incident with exceptional horror and disgust, but this does not necessarily mean that the rape of other women was regarded as unimportant. Furthermore, the plethora of Han Dynasty references to Wu Zixu as a rapist also requires more serious scholarly attention than they have had to date. While it is true that these stories were often left out of later accounts, it is impossible to understand the early development of the saga in which Wu Zixu was the main protagonist without considering the ambiguities that Han Dynasty readers were asked to consider. Did they agree that the mass rape of Chu elite women was a justified punishment for what he and his family had suffered at the hands of their menfolk? A great deal more research is now required to place accounts of rape from early China in their proper cultural context.

Conclusion

This article is intended to highlight two particular problems in studying the history of sexual violence in China. The first is the issue of nomenclature: the example of *fubin* suggests that there may well be further instances in which rape or other forms of sexual violence are being described, but modern readers have not recognized this. The existence of euphemistic terminology has obscured the history of sexual abuse, since once the key to understanding is lost, it is difficult to know exactly what is under discussion. The second issue boils down, on some level, to discomfort at the idea that “great men” might commit acts of sexual violence – however, Wu Zixu, King Helü of Wu, Sun Wu (the putative author of the *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法 [*The Arts of War*]) and others were all rapists, and, thanks to their privileged positions, none of them ever faced any punishment. Indeed, they have not even been subjected to any posthumous condemnation, since apparently most people are happy to ignore the tale of the rape of the Chu women. The fact that for the last two millennia people have been unwilling to engage with the knowledge that these men perpetrated mass rape does everyone a disservice, particularly because it distorts our understanding of how they were viewed in the centuries immediately following their deaths when this sexual violence was a part of their story. It also means that canonical representations of virtuous women have been misrepresented: the *Lienü zhuan* tale of Lady Bo Ying was read by generations of young women in China as a tale of a moral exemplar, but the original author was praising her not just for resisting rape for herself, but

also for stopping sexual violence against other women. Liu Xiang wished her to be admired for standing firm and resolute (*zhen* 貞), not for remaining chaste.

It is also relevant to give some space to think about the subsequent fates of the victims of sexual violence described in this article. Later in the imperial period, as women's chastity became more heavily policed and legal codes demanded evidence of resistance unto death, large numbers of rape victims were either killed or committed suicide – but this does not seem to have been the case in early China. Lady Xi Gui certainly survived long enough to enter into an unhappy second marriage and bear two children, deeply traumatized by her experiences. Her later life is unrecorded and her date of death is not known, so it is not clear how much of the fratricidal rivalry between her sons she lived to see. Meanwhile, in the case of the women of Chu, the sexual violence targeting the wives of members of the ruling family must have had a long-standing impact. It is impossible to do more than speculate about the relationships of these couples after the men returned and rejoined their wives who had been raped in punishment for their deeds. What is recorded, however, is that in 504 BCE King Zhao moved the capital city to a new location far to the north, and thus the royal family and wider court were able to leave the site of so much trauma and fear behind them. By the time the capital returned to its original location some 60 years later, all those who had lived through the invasion were long dead and the Kingdom of Wu had ceased to exist. While the vocabulary of sexual violence, trauma and abuse may be new, the underlying concepts were well-understood in antiquity, and the long-term physical and mental consequences of rape were undoubtedly familiar to many in early China.

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