

Did members of the Church of Almighty God (CAG) perpetrate the 28 May 2014 McDonald's Murder in Zhaoyuan?

CAG members interviewed in Seoul by HRWF answer NO and accuse Beijing of propaganda against their church

Willy Fautré, Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (21.04.2017) – From July 2013 to 2017, over five-hundred members of the Church of the Almighty God (CAG) [1] from China have travelled to South Korea to seek asylum, but not one has been granted refugee status, nor given the permit to stay for humanitarian reasons. None of them have been prosecuted on the grounds of criminal activities in South Korea and so far, no one has been deported back to China. They are however under threat to be surrendered to the Chinese authorities at any time.

In March 2017, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* met some CAG members at their church in Seoul and interviewed them with an interpreter about the 28 May 2014 McDonald's Murder Case in Zhaoyuan. The answers below are those of Angelia Zheng, a spokesperson of the religious group in Seoul.



Reception desk at CAG, Seoul

The murder

On 28 May 2014, Zhang Fan, Zhang LiDong, Lyu Yingchun, Zhang Hang, Zhang Qiao and a 12-year-old child walked through a McDonald's in Zhaoyuan, in Shandong, soliciting phone numbers from diners. One woman, Wu Shuoyan, 37, was waiting in the restaurant with her seven-year-old son; when she refused to give her number, the group beat her to death with chairs and a metal mop handle. Zhang Fan and Lyu Yingchun reportedly called the victim an "evil spirit," before Zhang bludgeoned her head with a chair, then jumped on her and trampled her head, state media reported at the time of their conviction in October 2014.

The act was captured by CCTV cameras and witnesses using smartphones. The footage quickly went viral online, with many web users wondering why bystanders did not intervene.

Along with Falun Gong, the Church of Almighty God [2]– also called Eastern Lightning - has been on a list of fourteen banned religious groups, issued by China's Ministry of Public Security, since 1995.

Zhang LiDong and Zhang Fan were executed in east China's Shandong Province on 2 February 2015, following the approval of the use of the death penalty by the Supreme People's Court. The pair had been convicted of committing intentional homicide in the province's Zhaoyuan City.

The three other members of the group involved in the incident (Lyu Yingchun, Zhang Hang, and Zhang Qiao) were sentenced to jail terms ranging from seven years to life.

Before the execution, Yantai Municipal Intermediate People's Court arranged for Zhang Fan and Zhang LiDong to meet with their family. (Source: Euan McKirdy, CNN, 2 February 2015)

The interview

HRWF: What can you say about the links between the murder at the McDonald's restaurant and the Church of Almighty God?

On the third day after the murder happened, on 31 May 2014, the "Focus Interview" of CCTV, which has a good audience rating in China, broadcasted a fragment of the journalist's interview with Zhang LiDong, the main offender. In this interview, Zhang LiDong claimed he had believed in the Almighty God for seven years. However the Almighty God that Zhang LiDong and his accomplices were talking about had nothing to do with our Church of the Almighty God (CAG).

Zhang LiDong and his accomplices in the murder were not CAG members at all and the Church of Almighty God (CAG) has nothing to do with the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case which occurred in Zhaoyuan, Shandong in 2014.

The Chinese Communist Party asserted that Zhang LiDong and his associates were CAG members because they found some books of the CAG at their homes. They used these facts and the false statement of Zhang LiDong to put the murder case on the CAG. We have no idea how Zhang LiDong received our books.

HRWF: Which aspects of the beliefs of the murderers made you first think that they were not CAG members?

Zhang LiDong said in his confession that some people would leave the earth and go back to heaven, from where they would lead him. His viewpoint of belief in God doesn't accord with the words of Almighty God at all. The Church of Almighty God never said such a thing.

Besides, the CCP said that Zhang LiDong and the other offenders beat the woman to death because she refused to give them her phone number to preach the gospel to her. As all the members of the Church of Almighty God know, it's not allowed to forcefully drag people into the church. In the administrative decrees issued by the Church of Almighty God, it clearly says, "God's household is not short of members, and there is no need to make up its numbers with people who have no use. All those who do not believe gladly must not be led into the church" (The Word Appears in the Flesh). If Zhang LiDong had been a CAG member for seven years, he should have known the essential administrative decree of the church. Obviously, Zhang LiDong was not a member of the Church of Almighty God at all.

On 21 August 2014, the Intermediate People's Court in Yantai City, Shandong Province held a hearing of the "May 28 Zhaoyuan Case." From the confessions of Lyu Yingchun and

Zhang Fan, it's easy to conclude that Zhang LiDong and his accomplices were not members of the Church of Almighty God. Lyu Yingchun said in her confession, "I'm Lyu Yingchun. I came to know Almighty God in December 1998. From childhood I knew that I am God Himself..." She also said, "In the end, I found that I'm God Himself. Then I found that only Zhang LiDong, Zhang Fan, and Zhang Hang are true believers in 'Almighty God'; the others are all cheaters." "Zhang Fan and I are the only true spokespersons of 'Almighty God.' ... Theirs is the false 'Almighty God,' while ours is the true 'Almighty God.'" Zhang Fan said, "In the organization of Almighty God, Lyu Yingchun and I hold the highest position. We're both 'God Himself.' My father, my sister, my brother, and Zhang Qiaolian are all 'chief priests.' Now I think that only my father, my brother, my sister, Lyu Yingchun, Zhang Qiaolian, and I are true believers in 'Almighty God.'"

Zhang LiDong and his accomplices totally lost their senses, even daring to impersonate God. In our teachings, "The Ten Administrative Decrees That Must Be Obeyed by God's Chosen People", it is clearly stated: "Man should not magnify himself, nor exalt himself. He should worship and exalt God."

However, the CCP insisted that Zhang LiDong and the others were members of the Church of Almighty God, which is sheer distortion of facts and frame-up.

HRWF: How is someone recognized as a member of your church?

New believers must be checked and approved by the church leaders and deacons of the local community before being received into the church. Only those who truly believe in God and have good humanity are accepted. When expelling the adherents, the decision must be made by 80%+ of the believers in the church. The leaders and the deacons know exactly who is and who is not a member of the church. After the Chinese Communist Party made use of the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case to persecute the Church of Almighty God in 2014, the CAG conducted a careful survey. According to the findings, none of the church leaders or adherents in the branch churches in Shangdong was acquainted with Zhang LiDong, Zhang Fan and their associates. The six of them have never been in the CAG.

HRWF: Can you tell me more about the trial of the murderers?

On 21 August 2014, Yantai Intermediate People's Court of Shangdong openly heard the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case. During the hearing, Zhang LiDong and his associates said that they had nothing to do with the Church of Almighty God.

The Chinese Communist Party claimed that Zhang LiDong was a CAG preacher and made an attempt to kill that lady after demanding her cellphone number in vain. They concluded that they promoted their religion with violence. This conclusion was seriously against the truth. The CAG never imposed the gospel on anyone. So it is impossible for the preachers to beat people when preaching the gospel.

As all the CAG members know, we have principles in preaching the gospel. As stipulated in The Ten Administrative Decrees That Must Be Obeyed by God's Chosen People issued by our church, "God's household is not short of members, and there is no need to make up its numbers with people who have no use. All those who do not believe gladly must not be led into the church." (The Word Appears in the Flesh)

HRWF: Does the Church of Almighty God teach that violence can sometimes be used?

The Chinese Communist Party has been fabricating rumors according to which the CAG members preach the gospel with violence, cut people's noses and eyes when they refuse and use violence against those they want to convert and even kill them cruelly. As a matter

of fact, it has been over twenty years, since 1991, that the gospel of the Almighty God has been spread throughout Mainland China. It has also been preached in over twenty overseas countries. If what the Chinese Communist Party said proved to be true, the CAG would have shed blood abroad everywhere. This is not the case anywhere.

HRWF: How was the persecution of group organized in China?

In a short period of three days after the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case, the Chinese Communist Party used the media to wantonly fabricate public opinions and define the nature of the murder case, which jumped before the judicial investigation and trial procedure. The focus point was directed to the CAG, who had nothing to do with the murder case. They openly defined the CAG as a cult organization and ordered a mobilization of the nationwide campaign "One-Hundred-Day Battle", aiming to crack down on the CAG [3]. On 15 July 2014, the Chinese Communist Party convened a symposium of cracking down on the CAG in the Great Hall of the People in Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province. In August 2014, the Chinese Communist Party deployed the armed police and regular troops on a large scale to arrest CAG members. According to statistics reported by the Chinese Communist Party media, 1,858 CAG members were arrested and several hundreds of thousands had to live in exile. Anyone with discerning eyes could easily see that the Chinese Communist Party meticulously instrumentalized the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case just to specially combat and repress the CAG.

HRWF: Did your church carry out its own investigation about the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case?

The local CAG in Zhaoyuan, Shandong, also carried out some investigation about the May murder case and tried to dig out more evidence to prove it was a case manipulated by the Chinese Communist Party.

On 16 July 2014, Song Yuan Rong, Song A, Feng, Li and Wang, five CAG members from Shandong city of Zhaoyuan, were arrested by the police of Qishan Police Station of Zhaoyuan City at a church meeting. At 5:00 p.m. on that day, the policeman, Qin DeHeng, told Song YuanRong, while interrogating her, "I've been working with the public security department for over ten years and seen too many like you. It was we who meticulously plotted the 28 May McDonald's Murder Case. I am a policeman of Zhaoyuan Public Security Bureau myself." According to our findings, Qin DeHeng has been working as a policeman for over twenty years. Now he is serving as the head of Qishan Police Station of Zhaoyuan City.

HRWF: Did your church also carry out some investigation about Zhang LiDong himself?

In the CCTV report, it was said that Zhang LiDong was unemployed, but his true identity was soon found out: he was the owner of a gold mine and a pharmaceutical corporation. He had at least three cars, and the Porsche Cayenne he drove was worth at least one million yuan. As is well-known, the state strictly prohibits private exploitation of gold mines. The fact that Zhang LiDong, a private person, could exploit gold mines shows that he had very strong official backing and was by no means an ordinary person. The CCP tried to cover up the criminal's true identity because it feared that the persons sheltering Zhang LiDong might get involved and lose their official position.

HRWF: What happened to Zhang LiDong and the other persons arrested with him?

On 11 October 2014 in the morning, according to the open announcement at the first trial court of Yantai Intermediate People's Court of Shangdong, Zhang Fan and Zhang LiDong

were sentenced to death. They were executed on 2 February, 2015. Lyu YingChun was sentenced to life imprisonment, Zhang Hang to ten years and Zhang QiaoLian to seven years. The last participant in the murder was a minor. (See BBC article <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-28857395>)

Disclaimer: Human Rights Without Frontiers has not investigated the teachings and the practices of the CAG and therefore does not hold any position about this religious group. The purpose of this article and interview was to collect data from various sides so that the readers can draw their own opinion about whether the CAG was involved or not involved in the 28 May 2014 McDonald's Murder Case in Zhaoyuan, which was the starting point of an indiscriminate wave of repression against CAG members.

[1] According to an article published by the Guardian on 18 August 2014 (<https://wwrn.org/articles/43232/>), "The Church of Almighty God was founded in 1989 by Zhao Weishan, a physics teacher who grew up in Henan province, central China, but fled to the US more than a decade ago. Adherents believe Jesus has returned to earth as a Chinese woman named Lightning Deng, and hold that belonging to the group will save them from an impending apocalypse. Members believe they're entrenched in a life-or-death struggle against the "Great Red Dragon" – a clear reference to the ruling Communist party.

[2] According to the same article as in the previous footnote, Maya Wang, a Hong Kong-based researcher for Human Rights Watch said "The government designating something as an 'evil cult' is a problematic concept from a human rights point of view. The McDonald's killing was terrible, and I think the people should be held accountable. But then the government has subsequently gone after members of Eastern Lightning for organising activities that weren't against the law."

[3] According to an AP press release dated 11 June 2014 (<https://wwrn.org/articles/42702/>), "Slightly more than 1,500 cult members have been detained and prison terms handed out to at least 59, the official Xinhua News Agency said Wednesday. It wasn't clear when the arrests took place, although the reports said some went back as far as two years."