

From China to the Netherlands in search of a safe haven

Interview with a Chinese believer who fled from China directly to the Netherlands

HRWF (11.02.2019) - Xu L., whose full name is withheld for security reasons, fled from China in search for a safe haven to The Netherlands where she arrived on Christmas Eve. She left behind her husband, her 5-year old daughter, and her parents, both farmers. If she had not left her loved ones behind, she would have been locked away for years in a camp or a prison.

Last year, Xu L. narrowly escaped arrest when the police cracked down on a small group of believers of The Church of Almighty God. Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l interviewed her.

HRWF: Ms Xu, you recently had to leave your country in a hurry, leaving behind your whole family, for an unknown future in another part of the world. What motivated you to make such a heartbreaking decision?

Ms Xu: Last year, I was almost arrested while during a religious meeting with a few other women of my church in a private home. It was an evening in April, and the leader of our prayer group did not realize that she had been followed by the police on her way to our underground meeting place. Just a few minutes after she arrived, the police burst into the room. At that moment, I was in basement toilet. When I heard their voices, I immediately ran out the back door. My spiritual sister, our leader, and our host were all arrested. The police confiscated two printers, four laptops, three MP5 players, the offerings of more than 5000 RMB, and all our religious books.

My spiritual sister Y. couldn't bear the severe torture of the police and revealed my name. After that, she was released but the whereabouts of the other sisters remain unknown. The police came to my home to arrest me but I had already gone into hiding, and over the next months, I was forced to live like a fugitive away from my family. I suffered greatly from this separation, but there was no hope that I could resume a normal family life.

HRWF: How free were you to exercise your religious freedom?

Ms Xu: We had no religious freedom at all. We always had to hide our religious beliefs, and we could only meet clandestinely. Twice a week, I met with four or five sisters in a discreet place to study the Bible and the teachings of our church. We prayed for other brothers and sisters who were experiencing difficulties in their physical or spiritual life, and we also shared our experience about our lives with God. Sometimes, we also sang songs of praise to God but in a low voice because of the surveillance of the Chinese Communist Party.

By trying to be nice with our family, our friends, our neighbours, and other people, we were also good citizens of our country but that is not how the CCP perceived us. The official ideology of China is atheism and believers of any faith are considered a threat to the regime.

HRWF: According to official statistics in China, The Church of Almighty God, which was founded less than 30 years ago, is said to number around one million people. How could you share your beliefs if there is such a strict surveillance of the CCP and the police? Did you do that openly in the street or online via WeChat?

Ms Xu: In China, I was preaching the gospel privately to my family, my friends, and others. That is what we all do.

My mother joined The Church of Almighty God and was almost arrested when preaching the gospel, but she managed to escape.

My husband is also a member of the Church. He has not been arrested but is always in danger because he performs duties in the church. He is currently in hiding.

The risk is that some people we approach with our message are identified by the CCP, harassed, interrogated, and tortured by the police until they denounce us. We do not use online services like WeChat to share our faith because they are closely monitored by the CCP. There are sensitive words like "God" or "the Gospel" that cannot be used online, otherwise we would immediately be identified, located, and arrested.

HRWF: Did you face specific obstacles in regards to your prayer meetings?

Ms Xu: Renting a place for our religious meetings is very difficult in China. Once the landlords know we are Christians they refuse because they are afraid of being involved. I still remember that, two years ago, several sisters and I had gathered in a rental house in Huai'an City, in Jiangsu Province. The landlord had the key to the house; she opened the gate to the yard and heard we were talking about our Christian beliefs. She knocked on the door of our room heavily and shouted at us angrily: "You are Christians. The government arrests you and you dare gather here! You don't care about your lives, but I will be involved because of you! Get out of here right now! I will not rent this house to you anymore. If you don't move right now, I will call the police!" In desperation, we had to move immediately, and the remainder of the rent was not returned to us.

HRWF: Did you get into trouble because of your preaching activities?

Ms Xu: Yes. In April 2017, I preached the gospel to a colleague, and she told my boss. "Now, The Church of Almighty God is the first enemy of the Chinese government and you dare preach the gospel here!" he said. And he fired me.

HRWF: Can you tell us more about the persecution of your Church?

Ms Xu: Yes. In 2014, the CCP carried out the so-called "100-Day Campaign" to arrest Christians all over the country. All the media and the internet were reporting about attacks against our Church. Everywhere we could see policemen in uniform and in plainclothes patrolling and investigating. We often heard that some brothers and sisters were arrested. At that time, my home was a meeting place, and I was nervous every day because I was pregnant and afraid I would be arrested one day. Other sisters were arrested and imprisoned even though they were pregnant, and they underwent forced abortions. I was scared that I would suffer the same fate. In the 6th month of my pregnancy, there was a possible sign of miscarriage but thanks to God's protection my child was born safely. However, my anxiety did not stop with the delivery because what would happen to my baby if I were arrested?

I moved all the time from one place to another to avoid being arrested. As the police could not find me, they harassed my family. They told my mother-in-law that I am a wanted criminal and she should send me to the police station once I would go back home. There was no other choice than to flee to a free country.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) recommends that the Dutch authorities grant Ms Xu L. political asylum. HRWF is in possession of the details of her case (full name, date and place of birth, certificate of membership of The

Church of Almighty God, composition of her family, dates and places of incidents, etc.) and can help the Dutch authorities dealing with applications for political asylum.

Interview taken by Willy Fautré with a translator Chinese-English.

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