

The Church of Almighty God

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The Church of Almighty God (CAG), initially called ‘Eastern Lightning’, is one of the largest new religious movements that originated from Mainland China at the end of the 20th century.

The history of the CAG cannot be separated from the figure of Watchman Nee (1903–1972) who was a Chinese Christian leader. In the 1930s, he encountered a branch of the Exclusive Brethren, a fundamentalist Christian denomination, and integrated a great deal of their theology into his teachings. He established churches throughout China.

Following the Communist Revolution Watchman Nee was persecuted and imprisoned for his faith and spent the last twenty years of his life in prison. He was commemorated by Representative Christopher H. Smith of the US Congress on 30 July 2009. One of his disciples, Witness Lee (1905–1997), later founded another religious movement in China known as ‘The Shouters’.

In the early 1990s, a splinter group of The Shouters was created by Zhao Weishan (b. 1951). One of the members of Zhao Weishan’s group was later identified as the Almighty God. In 1991, this individual, a woman, began to utter words that were likened to those expressed by Jesus Christ and thus were believed to come from the Holy Spirit. Later, her followers concluded that she was Jesus Christ reincarnated and the only Almighty God. The movement of the Church of Almighty God (CAG) then came into being.

Although the CAG personifies God reincarnated as a female, her name is never mentioned. Several scholars identify her as Yang Xiangbin, a woman born in 1973 in northwest China. Zhao Weishan is referred to as the ‘Man Used by the Holy Spirit’, the ‘Priest’, or the ‘Brother’, and is the administrative leader of the Church.

In the mid-1990s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began to severely persecute both the Shouters and the CAG, whose theological differences were not necessarily clear to the authorities. Since 1995, CAG members have continued to experience extreme repression in China. On 6 September 2000, Zhao Weishan and Yang Xiangbin fled to the United States (US) and, in 2001, they were granted political asylum. Since then, they have directed the movement from New York City.

In early 2009, He Zhexun, who used to oversee the work of the CAG in Mainland China, was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison. On 17 July 2009, Ma Suoping (1969-2009), who took over He Zhexun's role, was also arrested. She died while in custody.¹

Relentless persecution is only one of the exceptional features of the CAG's history. The other is its rapid growth. According to official Chinese sources, it had reached between three and four million members in 2014, a little over two decades after its emergence. This figure is disputed by scholars, who argue that it is inflated by the government to justify the need and urgency for harsh repression. Moreover, the CAG's status as an illegal *xie jiao*² makes it impossible to accurately count their members. However, it is likely that Chinese officials aren't far from the true number of CAG followers, since the Chinese police and intelligence are among the only agencies equipped to collect data on clandestine organisations in China.

In 2014, the CCP falsely accused members of the Church of being responsible for a homicide at a McDonald's in Zhaoyuan, Shandong. Consequently, all of the media outlets under the CCP's control attacked, defamed, and slandered the CAG. In 2017, Dr Massimo Introvigne investigated this criminal case and published evidence of the CCP's deliberate deception in an article in *The Journal of Cesnur*.³

¹ Zoccatelli, Pier Luigi, "Anti-Cult Campaigns in China and the Case of The Church of Almighty God: An Introduction," *The Journal of CESNUR* | 2/1 (2018) 3—12, accessed 27 June 2020, https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/tjoc_2_1_full_issue.pdf.

² The expression of *xie jiao* is far from clear. It is incorrectly translated in English into 'evil cult,' but in fact it means 'heterodox teachings'. This notion was born in the Ming period. What teachings were 'heterodox' was determined by the Emperor and lists of *xie jiao* were based on both theological and political grounds. For example, Christianity as a whole was classified as a *xie jiao* in 1725, but taken off the list in 1842, due to Western political and military pressure. Nowadays, the list of *xie jiao* (<https://bitterwinter.org/what-is-a-xie-jiao/>) includes any movement that the Chinese government considers hostile to the CCP. Being active in a *xie jiao* is punished with severe jail penalties under [Article 300](#) of the Penal Code. (<https://bitterwinter.org/Vocabulary/article-300/>).

³ Introvigne, Massimo, "Investigating the 2014 McDonald's 'Cult Murder' in Zhaoyuan", *The Journal of Cesnur* | 1/1 (2017) 43—60, accessed on 28 June 2020, https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/tjoc_2_1_full_issue.pdf.

After the Zhaoyuan McDonald’s murder of 2014, the CCP’s repression of the CAG intensified. They attempted to eradicate the Church entirely by confiscating funds, harassing leaders, and brutally torturing members who were arrested, sometimes to death. Approximately 400,000 CAG members were arrested before the end of 2019, with 146 dying while in custody since the Church’s foundation.⁴

Several thousand members have escaped abroad, leading to a CAG diaspora. They have founded churches in South Korea, the US, Italy, Canada, France, Spain, and other countries, in addition to those established in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The Church of Almighty God started converting non-Chinese, but ethnic Chinese members still form the majority of the CAG communities worldwide. Difficulties in becoming recognised refugees have occurred in several countries, as CAG members struggle to have their claims of religious persecution accepted.

Here are statistics regarding the asylum claims of CAG members as of June 2020:⁵

COUNTRIES	Total Applications	Asylum Granted	Asylum Rejected	Departure Order	Deported
GERMANY	301	113	188	15	2
FRANCE	444	42	402	236	0
ITALY	827	186	466	0	0
GREECE	45	9	31	0	0
NETHERLANDS	67	23	23	23	0
CZECH REP.	37	3	2	0	0
FINLAND	38	36	2	0	0
SWEDEN	8	6	2	2	1
SWITZERLAND	33	3	29	25	3
PORTUGAL	11	0	9	0	0
BELGIUM	11	0	11	11	0
UK	9	6	0	0	0
IRELAND	2	0	0	0	0
AUSTRIA	8	2	6	0	0
SPAIN	559	0	0	0	0
AUSTRALIA	232	18	23	0	0
NEW ZEALAND	61	59	0	0	0
SAIPAN	304	3	0	0	0
JAPAN	264	0	94	0	0
CANADA	244	215	15	7	0
U.S.	> 1000	54	1	1	0

⁴ Introvigne, Massimo, “Inside The Church of Almighty God: The Most Persecuted Religious Movement in China”, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, accessed 15 June 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/inside-the-church-of-almighty-god-a-new-book-tells-it-like-it-is/>.

⁵ Source: Private communication between HRWF and The Church of Almighty God in Seoul, South Korea.

SOUTH KOREA	1008	0	711	178	0
TOTAL	4513	778	2015	498	6

Teachings

Holly Folk of Western Washington University in the US is one of the few religious scholars around the world that have examined this group and its teachings.

In *Protestant Continuities in The Church of Almighty God* published in 2018, she explains that the CAG is a peaceful and non-threatening religious group and describes its theology, detailed below.

The Church’s main belief is that the same God who manifested himself as Jehovah in the Old Testament and later as Jesus Christ has appeared again in the flesh and is called Almighty God.

Whereas the Old Testament is labelled the ‘Age of Law’, and the New Testament is known as the ‘Age of Grace’, the CAG believes that the new incarnation of Almighty God has ushered in the ‘Age of the Kingdom’.

The mission of Almighty God is to express the religious truth for the last days and to purify and save humankind. This time, Almighty God incarnated as a female in China, whose name the Church’s official documents never mention. Several scholars strongly believe her to be Yang Xiangbin, who was born in 1973 in northwest China. She is currently living in the US, and her messages, called utterances, are regarded by the CAG as authoritative Christian scriptures.

Holly Folk explains that the CAG teachings strongly resonate with the doctrines of Protestantism. However, differences do exist. For example, the CAG believes that both Jesus and the living person it worships as Almighty God originate from the Spirit of God, and thus are one and the same God. It recognises the importance of both The Bible as well as a book titled ‘The Word Appears in the Flesh’, which includes most of the utterances of Almighty God. In a final comment, Holly Folk says, ‘understanding continuities with teachings of traditional Christianity supports the conclusion that The Church of Almighty God is indeed “Christian”’.⁶

⁶ Folk, Holly, “Protestant Continuities in The Church of Almighty God”, *The Journal of Cesnur* | 2/1 (2018) 58—77, accessed on 28 June 2020, https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/tjoc_2_1_full_issue.pdf.

CHINA: Reasons for the Persecution of the Church of Almighty God

In July 2019, the US government estimated the total population of China to be 1.4 billion. According to the State Council Information Office (SCIO) report *Seeking Happiness for People: 70 Years of Progress on Human Rights in China* published in September 2019, there are more than 200 million religious adherents in the country. The SCIO April 2018 white paper on religion in China stated that there are approximately 5,500 religious groups.⁷ However, many experts believe that official estimates understate the total number of religious adherents.

According to official Chinese sources, the number of CAG members had reached approximately four million members by 2014. However, this figure is disputed by scholars who argue that it is inflated. They believe this over-estimation is used by the CCP as justification for the urgent need to persecute the CAG. Due to this group being labelled as *xie jiao*, counting its members accurately is impossible.⁸

The philosophical-political doctrine of the CCP is incompatible with the worldviews of religions. The only way for the CCP to resolve this contradiction is to keep all religions and belief systems under control or to destroy them, while simultaneously promoting atheism.

Any movement that experiences rapid growth is perceived as a threat by the CCP. This is the case with the CAG, which was declared an illegal *xie jiao* in 1995. Thousands of their members have been imprisoned in the last 25 years.

Believers of The Church of Almighty God in Prison in China

The CAG is a new religious movement that has only gained visibility outside of China due to thousands of its members fleeing and applying for refugee status in Europe and North America. It has been defamed by Chinese propaganda and, as a fast-growing movement, it is perceived as a competitor by Protestant Churches inside and outside of China, which present its theology as heresy.

The CAG releases periodic statistics on its website.⁹ According to this source, between 2011 and 2013 more than 300,000 members were arrested. These figures are not inconceivable if one factors in the frequent references to ‘successful’ campaigns against the CAG in Chinese anti-*xie-jiao* propaganda and other

⁷ For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau) 2018*, 2018. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china-includes-tibet-xinjiang-hong-kong-and-macau/>.

⁸ Zoccatelli, Pier Luigi, “Anti-Cult Campaigns in China and the Case of The Church of Almighty God: An Introduction,” *The Journal of CESNUR* | 2/1 (2018) 3—12, accessed 27 June 2020, https://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/tjoc_2_1_full_issue.pdf

⁹ Website in English of The Church of Almighty God : <https://www.holyspiritspeaks.org>

official sources. The Church also reports that many of its members were tortured, and that some have died while in custody under suspicious circumstances.¹⁰

Believers of The Church of Almighty God behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **4,020 cases** of The Church of Almighty God members in its Prisoners' Database.¹¹ 80% of these are female prisoners. However, this number only represents the tip of the iceberg.¹²

Most of CAG members in HRWF's Prisoners' Database were sentenced to between three and seven years in prison, but some individuals received much longer sentences.

According to the American Dui Hua Foundation,¹³ which analysed the statistics of the Supreme People's Court (SPC) of China, more than 40,000 people were prosecuted under Article 300 (see below) between 1998 and 2016. Only 96 individuals were acquitted. Most of the sentenced believers were Falun Gong practitioners and members of The Church of Almighty God. Additionally, Dui Hua stresses that those statistics do not include cases of extra-judicial detention and others that remained out of the radar of the SPC.¹⁴

Articles of the Penal Code

Members of the CAG are usually sentenced under **Article 300** of the Chinese Criminal Code,¹⁵ which was published in 1997 and amended in 2015. This article prohibits the formation of 'superstitious sects, secret societies and weird religious

¹⁰ Human Rights Without Frontiers & Bitter Winter, *Tortured to Death. The persecution of The Church of Almighty God in China*, 2018, accessed 27 June 2020, <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/CAG-Brochure-Tortured-to-Death.pdf>

¹¹ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned members of The Church of Almighty God, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

¹² Falun Gong's website <http://en.minghui.org> publishes a high number of cases of persecution every day. HRWF only documents individual cases which have the date of arrest and the duration of the sentence available: this amounts to approximately one out of every 50 cases of arrests and detention documented by Minghui. This is a clear indication that the over 1,400 cases contained in HRWF's Prisoners' Database reflects only a small portion of the actual number of cases.

¹³ Dui Hua, is a San Francisco-based non-profit humanitarian organisation that seeks clemency and better treatment for at-risk detainees through the promotion of universally recognised human rights in a well-informed, mutually respectful dialogue with China (*Dui hua*, is pinyin for the Chinese word meaning 'dialogue'). Focusing on political and religious prisoners, juvenile justice, women in prison, and criminal justice and death penalty reform, Dui Hua's work rests on the premise that positive change is realised through constructive relationships and exchange.

¹⁴ Dui Hua, Detailed court statistics on article 300, Part I, 28 May 2020. Dui Hua, Detailed court statistics on article 300, Part II, 4 June 2020. <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2020/05/detailed-court-statistics-on-article-300.html>.

¹⁵ The Dui Hua Foundation, The Dui Hua Foundation's submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review of China of China in March 2018. https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/document/china/session_33_-_may_2019/dhf_upr31_chn_e_main.pdf.

organisations’. It criminalises any activity carried out by members within groups that have been identified as ‘*xie jiao*’.¹⁶ Sentences range between three and seven years of imprisonment and may be longer in ‘especially serious’ circumstances.¹⁷

Typical accusations against practitioners are: subverting state power, distributing religious information of a banned religious movement, and/or undermining law enforcement. It is not uncommon for members of the Church to be sentenced without any legal representation and many trials are held in secret.

International advocacy

Very few faith-based organisations take up the defence of members of the CAG. To date, none of the large, international human rights organisations have campaigned for the release of these religious prisoners.

In comparison, the **US Department of State** mentioned the CAG 10 times in its annual reports in 2018 and 2019. As a single religious movement, the CAG was named as the most persecuted group in the last report. This document states that ‘The Church of Almighty God reported authorities arrested 11,111 of its members during the year, of which 2,392 remained in custody’, and that the CAG ‘reported authorities subjected hundreds of their members to “torture or forced indoctrination”’.¹⁸

In its 2019 Annual Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)** wrote that:

in 2018, the Chinese government harassed and arrested thousands of followers of other *xie jiao* groups, including The Church of Almighty God. Many of those detained during the year – whom The Church of Almighty God estimates to be in the thousands – suffered torture and other abuses, in some cases resulting in deaths or unexplained disappearance while in custody.¹⁹

¹⁶ “HOME: Xie Jiao,” Bitter Winter, accessed June 2020. <https://bitterwinter.org/what-is-a-xie-jiao/>.

¹⁷ Introvigne, Massimo. “Article 300: CCP’s Secret Weapon of Religious Persecution.” Bitter Winter, April 10, 2019. <https://bitterwinter.org/article-300-ccps-secret-weapon-of-religious-persecution/>, accessed May 2020. <https://bitterwinter.org/article-300-ccps-secret-weapon-of-religious-persecution/>, and, The Journal of CESNUR, Volume 3, Issue 5, September-October 2019. http://cesnur.net/wpcontent/uploads/2019/09/tjoc_3_5_full_issue.pdf.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on International Religious Freedom: China (Includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau) 2018&2019*, 2018 & 2019. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CHINA-INCLUDES-TIBET-XINJIANG-HONG-KONG-AND-MACAU-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf> and <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china-includes-tibet-xinjiang-hong-kong-and-macau/>

¹⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: China, 2020*, accessed 15 June 2020,

Additionally, in November 2019, USCIRF adopted 35 prisoners of conscience in China, 25 of them being members of the CAG.²⁰

Unfortunately, in its 2020 Report, USCIRF failed to mention ongoing repression of the CAG. Nonetheless, it recommended that the US State Department:

- re-designate China as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) ‘for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations’;
- impose targeted sanctions on Chinese government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the US under human rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;
- and publicly express concerns about Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and state that US government officials will not attend the games if the Chinese government’s crackdown on religious freedom continues.²¹

Noteworthy are also the 28 March 2019 report of **Italy’s National Commission for the Right to Asylum of the Ministry of the Interior**²² as well as the 24 October 2019 Report of the **Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada**²³ on the CAG. Both documents facilitate the work of these two countries in the examination of applications for political asylum.

CASE STUDY

From China to Spain to flee discriminatory arrests and torture

In December 2019, **Zhang Wenbo**, 50, landed in Spain after escaping the ‘Chinese Communist paradise’ where he had spent nearly his entire life. He hopes to start a new life in this safe haven, where he is free to practice his religion without fear. About 600 asylum seekers from China who fled harsh religious

https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/China_0.pdf.

²⁰ Introvigne, Massimo, “USCIRF ‘Adopts’ 35 Chinese Prisoners—25 Are Members of The Church of Almighty God”, Bitter Winter, 29 November 2019, accessed 15 June 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/uscirf-adopts-35-chinese-prisoners-25-members-of-the-church-of-almighty-god/>

²¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: China, 2020*, accessed 15 June 2020, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/China_0.pdf.

²² Ministero dell’ Interno, Commissione Nazionale per il diritto di asilo, *Persecuzioni per motivi religiosi in Cina, Church of Almighty God*, 28 March 2019, accessed 15 June 2020, https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/italy/PLib/2019_03_28_Cina__Chiesa_di_Dio_Onnipotente.pdf

²³ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *China: Update of CHN106256 of 23 September 2019 on the Church of Almighty God (CAG)*, 24 October 2019, accessed 15 June 2020, <https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457950&pls=1>

persecution are still waiting for Madrid to recognise them as refugees. Spain has not threatened to deport any of them, but it has not granted them political asylum either.

Zhang Wenbo was born to a Christian family in Henan province, one of the cradles of Chinese civilization. As an adult he converted to the CAG, and he has now been a member of it for 22 years. He was arrested twice by the Chinese police in 2003 and 2012 due to his missionary activities inside the country. Both times, he was subjected to inhumane torture and nearly killed.

He shared his experience of religious persecution in China during an interview with HRWF.

Arrested and tortured in 2003

‘I was arrested for the first time because of my faith in 2003. Over a dozen police officers surrounded the place where four of us were worshipping. We were apprehended and tortured to reveal the names of our church leaders. I was forced into painful positions for prolonged periods of time, such as half squatting. Additionally, they shone a 1000-watt spotlight into my eyes which caused severe pain in my head, but they would beat me if I closed my eyes.

After this incident, the police visited my furniture shop frequently. They would ask me whether I continued believing in God. Sometimes they would take me to the police station and try to force me to revoke my faith. To evade potential arrest and further persecution from the CCP I had no choice but to go into hiding’.

Arrested again and tortured in 2012

‘On 17 December 2012, the director of Tongren City Public Security Bureau and over a dozen officers discovered our hiding place. They confiscated more than 10 cellphones, 6,000 RMB (about 755 EUR) in cash and a deposit book. They then took me to the Bijiang District Police Station of Tongren City, where they interrogated me about our church leaders. As I refused to cooperate, they slapped me in the face, punched me and kicked me. I was assaulted to the point that I felt dizzy and pain all over.

Over the course of 16 days, I was subjected to torture as the officers tried to force me to talk. I was taken to the basement of the police station for the so-called “swing treatment”. While handcuffed, I was hung on a door frame so that my feet were no longer touching the ground. They tied my feet to a rope and then, for an hour and a half, they swung my legs back and forth. This caused excruciating pain in my wrists and blackened my hands.

Since I still refused to betray our church leaders, they then laid me on the ground and hit my back, waist and shoulders with a 70 cm long steel tube, fracturing my ribs. Next, I was forced to kneel, and this steel tube was rolled over my calves. This was so painful that I thought it was crushing my knees and ankles.

Then, one of my handcuffed wrists was hung high above my head on the wall, so that only one of my feet could touch the ground, whilst the other hand was tied around my back. This meant I was hanging from one arm and barely standing on one leg, and so I could neither stand or squat down.

On 3 January 2013, I was transferred to Bijiang District Detention Centre in Tongren City. I was detained there for an additional 13 days.

During my detention, I was fed minimally. Other inmates often abused me and beat me up due to instigation from the guards. Also, at one point, the authorities forced me into a wooden chair and stabbed my genitals with a long iron awl.

On 26 January 2013, my family and friends from the church used their connections to obtain my release on bail. My freedom was bought with 16,000 RMB (about 2,014 EUR), although the standard fee was registered as only 3,000 RMB (about 378 EUR).

To this day I have not recovered from this torture. It was traumatising and created long-term physical damage to the extent that I am now unable to do any physical labour.'

Under constant threat of a new arrest: no choice but to flee

'After my release in 2013, I was under strict surveillance by the police. I had to report to them every month and they threatened and interrogated me on a regular basis.

Between 2013 and 2018, I was always on the run, moving from place to place and living in constant fear and pain. While preaching in Sanmenxia City of Henan Province in 2013, I was reported to the police and narrowly escaped arrest. In 2016, I was questioned by the police in Yiyang City. Ultimately, I realised that I had no alternative but to leave China if I wanted to live according to my faith.

In December 2019, I managed, with great difficulty, to obtain a passport and flee to Spain. I submitted my asylum application and received an interim residence permit. In February 2020, my case was heard by the refugee board. Now I'm awaiting the decision of the Spanish government'.

Thousands of members of the CAG have fled China to save their lives and are desperately awaiting refugee status in Europe (about 2,500), in the US (about 1,000), in South Korea (about 1,000) and other countries. In these democratic countries, they continue living in fear of being deported back to China where they would be arrested and interrogated under torture. It is the moral and legal duty of all countries that are signatories to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to grant them a safe haven without delay.

*HRWF Comment: During Zhang Wenbo's interview with HRWF, he disclosed details about additional sexual torture that he was subjected to.*²⁴

Conclusions

The severe repression of the CAG by the Chinese government has not shown any sign of slowing. Moreover, the 2015 National Security Law has further tightened control on illegal *xie jiao* organisations. The future for members of the CAG looks grim. They are stuck choosing between remaining in China and risking imprisonment and torture or fleeing. Countries where CAG members have filed for asylum should not deport them back to China and instead grant them political asylum.

²⁴ HRWF Database of FoRB news, accessed 28 June 2020, <https://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Spain-2020.pdf>.