

# Fake News!

## Chinese Mobilization of Resources Against The Church of Almighty God as a Global Phenomenon

Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR, Torino, Italy)

CESNUR 2018 Conference

Nantou County, Taiwan, June 20, 2018



# The Coming of “Fake News”

- ▶ A meta-analysis conducted in 2017 identified some 7,000 scholarly studies on disinformation and misinformation. Some 250 refer specifically to “fake news” and none is older than 2016, although the term “fake news” had been already introduced during World War I

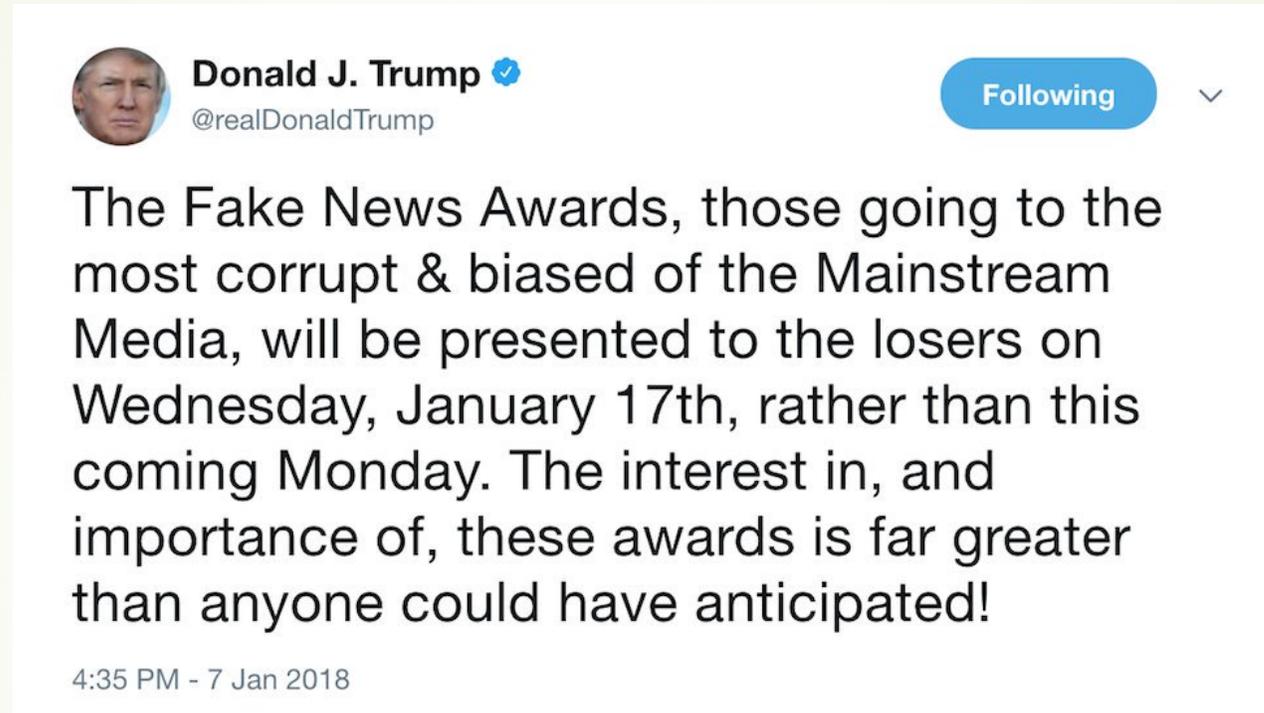


# The Trump Effect



- “Fake news” became a household name after it was used by Donald Trump in his presidential campaign in 2016 (and in his first presidential press conference in 2017). It was also adopted by his opponents to denounce the maneuvers of Trump’s domestic and international (i.e. Russian) supporters

# But What Does It Mean?



- Being in its infancy, the social scientific study of fake news typically spends significant time in trying to determine what fake news is. Farkas and Schou argue that it is a **“floating signifier,”** with no “real” meaning. It is mostly used, with polemical purposes, by the opponents respectively of (a) the mainline liberal media; (b) the Western conservative media and the Russian propaganda supporting them; and (c) the pervasive manipulation of consumers by digital capitalism

# The Classical Paradigm

- ▶ Other scholars criticized Farkas and Schou's approach as unilateral
- ▶ Although contested, the classical paradigm of communication theory suggests that news be studied based on the template

**PRODUCTION**



**MESSAGE**



**RECEPTION**

- ▶ Reception can be studied empirically (e.g, by Allcott and Gentzkow in a controversial 2017 study), assessing how much fake news determine our behavior

# Philosophers and Fake News



- Philosophers are among the scholars most interested in fake news, and proposed several definitions

**Neil Levy** (University of Oxford): “Fake news is the presentation of false claims that purport to be about the world in a format and with a content that resembles the format and content of legitimate media organisations”



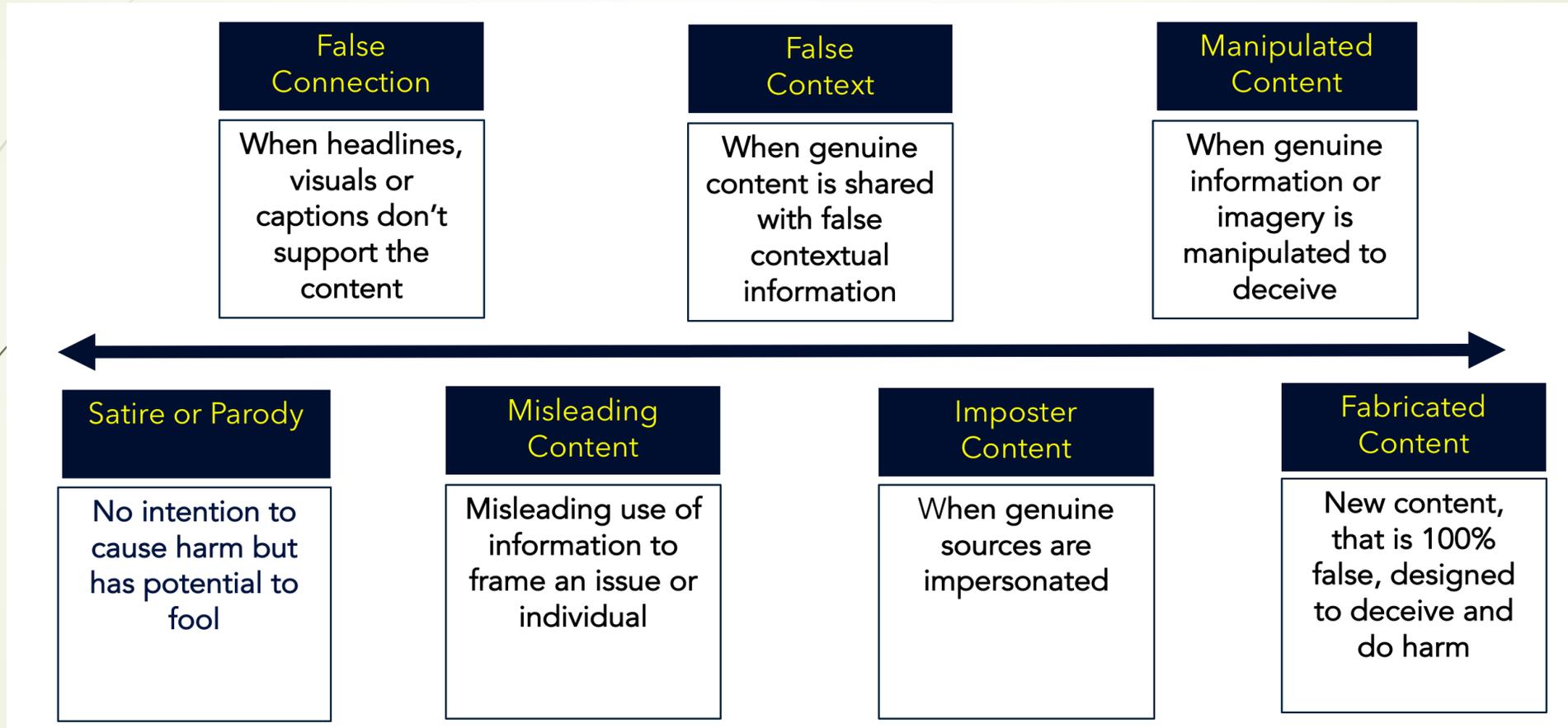
**Regina Rini** (York University, Toronto): “A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience”

# Definition by Axel Gelfert



- Another philosopher, University of Berlin's Axel Gelfert, proposes a simpler definition: **Fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims as news, where the claims are misleading by design**

# Different Kinds of Fake News



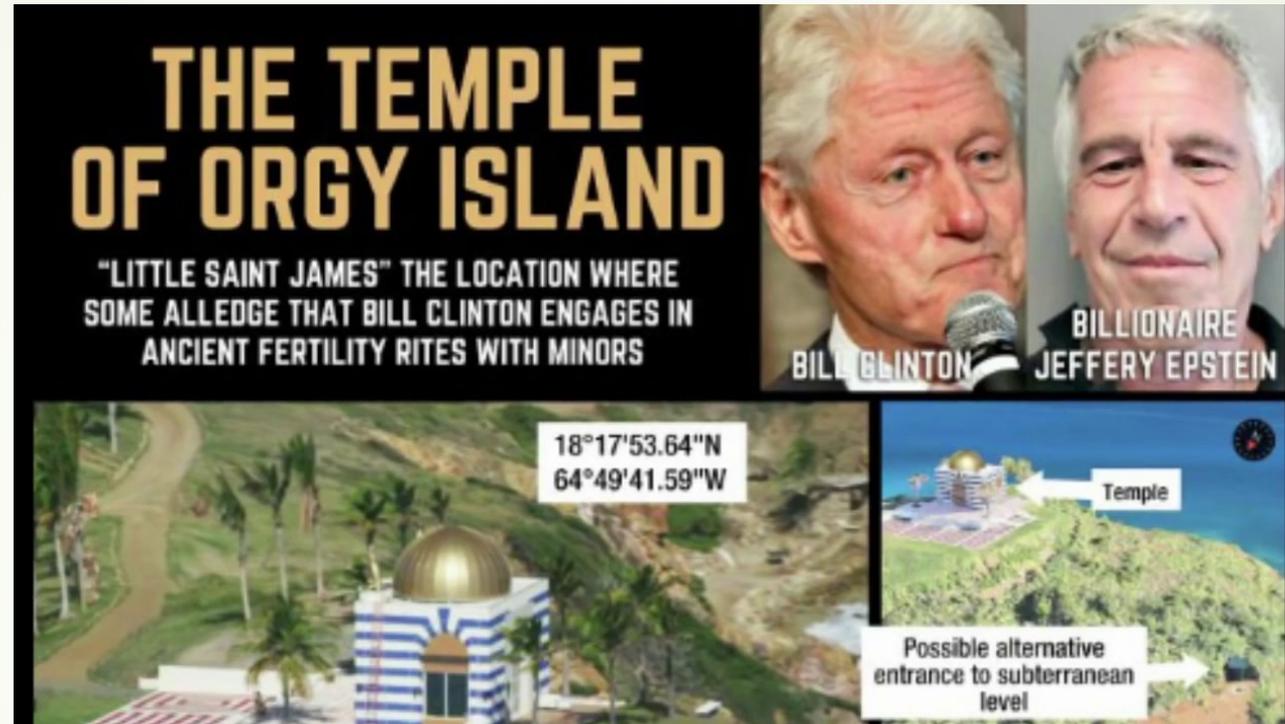
Source: *First Draft News*



## False News, Disinformation, Fake News

- ▶ “Fake news” **is not simply “false news.”** It’s false news deliberately circulated through sustained and reiterated campaigns, and presented in such a way that many would believe they are true
- ▶ Contemporary fake news goes one step beyond traditional, Cold War-style disinformation because of its unprecedented capacity of mobilizing simultaneously a variety of media. “A core feature of contemporary fake news is that it is widely circulated online” (Bakir and McStay, “Fake News and The Economy of Emotions,” 2018)

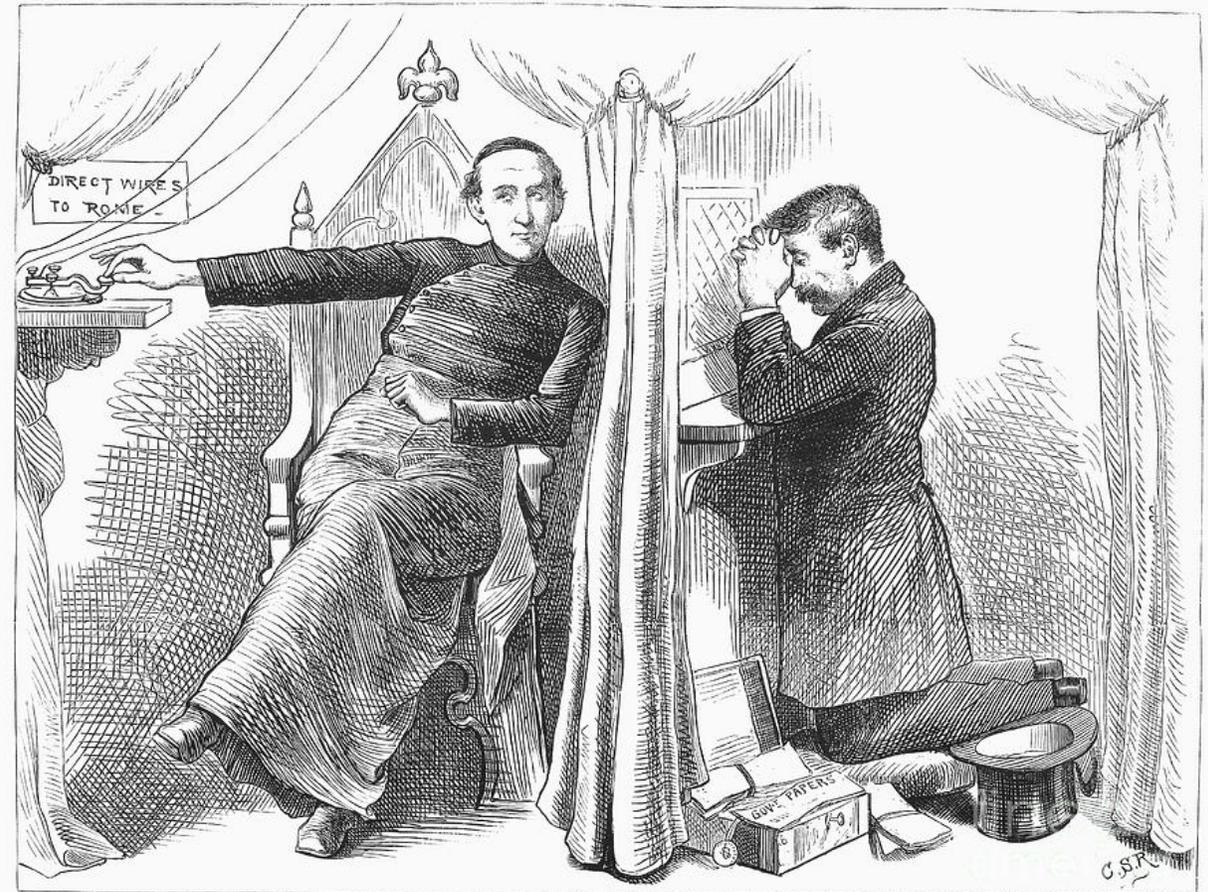
# Fake News and Cognitive Biases



- Gelfert argues that skilled producers of fake news exploit four pre-existing cognitive biases
- ❖ **confirmation bias:** we accept new information if it confirms our beliefs and prejudices
- ❖ **repetition effect:** “if they continue to say it, it should be true”
- ❖ **priming:** use of words that trigger a nonconscious memory reaction, e.g. “cult”
- ❖ **affective arousal:** emotions lower our defenses, e.g. “they abuse children”

# Religion and Fake News

- ▶ Well before the expression “fake news” became fashionable, scholars of religion had noticed how rumors were spread against “bad” religions and made credible by both their reiteration and their endorsement by “authoritative” sources
- ▶ As early as 1960, David Brion Davis had studied how what we would today call “fake news” were used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century against Mormonism and Catholicism
- ▶ Jim Richardson noticed the same phenomenon in creating a widespread “cultphobia” during the “cult wars” and beyond



THE UNSEEN SIGNAL OF THE JESUITS.

# When Governments Strike

- Traditionally, “fake news” about religions labeled as “heresies” or “cults” were spread by **private** “moral entrepreneurs”: secular anti-religious activists or “anti-cultists,” or rival religionists
- In recent years, we have witnessed the spread of “fake news” about religious movements organized, in a much more systematic way, not by private but by **public** actors. Russia has emerged as a leading producer of fake news about both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientology, whose persecution at home it tries to justify internationally



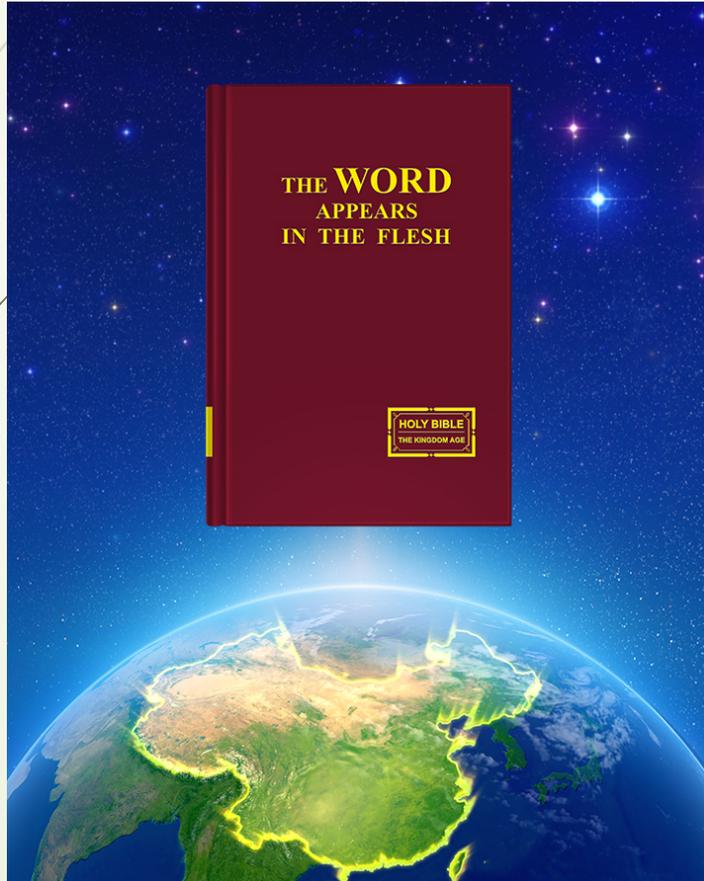
# China and *Xie Jiao*

## Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China

**Article 300.** Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or sabotages the implementation of the state's laws and executive regulations by utilizing superstition is to be sentenced to not less than three years and not more than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, to not less than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment.

- Not unlike Russia, China has the problem of justifying internationally the persecution of several religions, particularly those it lists as *xie jiao* and denounces as “pseudo-religions” or “cults”
- Being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a jail penalty of three to seven years “or more”
- *Xie jiao* (whose translation as “evil cults” is inaccurate) means “heterodox teachings.” Lists of *xie jiao* were compiled since the late Ming era, and Emperors decided which religions were *xie jiao*, based also on political reasons. Definitions are vague and, for all practical purposes, a *xie jiao* is a group listed as such in the official list of *xie jiao*

# The Church of Almighty God (CAG)



- CAG, considered by CCP as a quintessential *xie jiao*, is a Christian new religious movement founded in China, in 1991. It teaches that Jesus returned to Earth and incarnated as Almighty God, a woman born in China, and now living in the U.S., who teaches the fullness of truth, most of whose utterances are collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh*

# Confronting the Red Dragon



- ▶ CAG is perceived by CCP as a fierce enemy. In fact, it denounces the persecution of Christians and identifies CCP with the Red Dragon of the *Book of Revelation*. However, if one reads CAG literature, it is clear that the Red Dragon would fall by itself, and there is no appeal to a revolution

# CAG Persecuted as a *Xie Jiao*



- CAG has been listed as a *xie jiao* since 1995. CAG's statistics claim that more than 300,000 CAG members have been arrested in China to date. Figures are difficult to confirm, but there are frequent references in CCP's own literature to extensive anti-CAG campaigns. There is also believable evidence that many CAG members have been tortured, and some died while in custody in highly suspicious circumstances



# Fake News Against CAG

- There is a whole domestic propaganda apparatus spreading false news against the *xie jiao*, particularly through the specialized police unit Office 610 and the Chinese Anti-Xie-Jiao Association (Chinese Anti-Cult Association, CACA), established in 2000, which has direct ties with the CCP
- This propaganda, while perhaps effective, appears to repeat the schemes of traditional Soviet-style disinformation, and lacks the sophistication that is typical of the contemporary notion of fake news

拼车软件靠谱吗?  
200 台爱心记录仪今天捐赠急救中心

# An Organized Plan

## **The Spirit of the National “Almighty God” Special Remediation Work Teleconference**

On June 16, the Central Office for Prevention and Handling of Cults (hereinafter referred as the Central 610 Office) convened an “Almighty God” special remediation work teleconference. Deputy Leader of the Central Leading Group for the Central 610 Office, Director of the Central 610 Office, and Deputy Minister of the Public Security Ministry, Liu Jinguo; Deputy Directors, Wang Xiaoxiang, Xu Haibin, and Fan Xuyin of the Central 610 Office; Deputy Minister Chen Zhimin of the Ministry of Public Security; and member unit liaison officers of the Central Leading Group for the Central 610 Office, attended the conference at the main venue in Beijing. Provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities)

- ▶ Although the same false news is spread in China and abroad, I will focus here on the international propaganda, which corresponds more clearly to the scholarly definition of fake news. A document leaked by CAG to scholars, allegedly distributed by the Office 610 of Zhanjiang, Guangdong and implementing a nationwide teleconference against CAG of June 16, 2014, presents a credible anti-CAG disinformation plan by the CCP



# How It Works

**OFFICE 610 and CACA**



**CHINESE MEDIA IN ENGLISH**



**FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS IN BEIJING**



**INTERNATIONAL MEDIA**

# Anti-CAG Fake News in Practice

## The Chinese cult that kills 'demons'



Carrie Gracie  
BBC China editor  
@BBCCarrie

13 August 2014



- 1. News are created by Office 610 and CACA
- 2. English-language Chinese media launch them (not necessarily the *People's Daily*, which would be too obvious)
- 3. For whatever reason, *British* (rather than, say, American or French) correspondents in Beijing often pick up the fake news first. Most first Western reports can be traced back to two media outlets only, BBC and *The Telegraph*
- 4. Since, these media are regarded as authoritative, rank high in Google, and are eminently quotable in Wikipedia, the fake news spread to thousands of international media (with occasional direct help by Chinese agencies in various countries)

# Mother of All Fake News: The McDonald's Murder

- ▶ Not coincidentally but, if we believe the leaked document, pursuing a deliberate plan, the mother of all anti-CAG fake news is the murder of a woman in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014. That the murder occurred was unfortunately very much real. The fake news part is that it was perpetrated by CAG



# Independent Investigations

2017年6月24日至28日，应郑州反邪教协会、郑州反邪教研究中心邀请，美国贝勒大学宗教研究所美国宗教史特聘教授J.Gordon Melton博士、美国西华盛顿大学副教授Holly Folk博士、美国内华达州法学院荣誉教授James T. Richardson博士、意大利新宗教研究中心主任 Massimo Introvigne博士等一行来河南调研交流。



- I was among the Western scholars invited by CACA to two 2017 conferences in Zhengzhou and Hong Kong to discuss the notion of *xie jiao* and The Church of Almighty God. I went there with an open mind

# My Conclusions



- However, based on documents published by the same Chinese authorities, I concluded that the McDonald's murder was perpetrated by a *different* religious movement, with a similar name but not related to CAG. It venerated a *different* living Almighty God, one God in two persons, its two female leaders Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan. All scholars who studied the documents share my conclusions



## Unequivocal Statements

- ▶ Lü Yingchun (at trial): “Zhang Fan and I are the unique spokeswomen for the real ‘Almighty God.’ The government has been cracking down on the Almighty God that Zhao Weishan believes in, not the ‘Almighty God’ we mention. They are fake ‘Almighty God,’ while we are the real ‘Almighty God’”
- ▶ Zhang Fan (interview): “I never had contacts with the Church of Almighty God”

# The Machine at Work

## The Telegraph

HOME » NEWS » WORLD NEWS » ASIA » CHINA

### McDonald's murder linked to Chinese heretic cult sect called 'Almighty God'

Police in China have been investigating a cult murder that happened last Wednesday in a McDonald's in an east China city

- A few days after the incident, Chinese media (this time including the *People's Daily*) attributed it to CAG
- BBC (with great fanfare) and *The Telegraph* picked up the story through their correspondents in Beijing
- Some **20,000** Western media had attributed the homicide to CAG by December 2017



## Case No. 2: The Story of Guo Bin

- ▶ Another item of anti-CAG fake news is that in 2013, in the Chinese province of Shanxi, CAG members gouged out the eyes of a six-year old boy. American scholar Holly Folk studied the related documents and concluded that the crime was committed by the boy's aunt, CAG had nothing to do with it, and accusations against the church were spread by Chinese anti-cultists only after the McDonald's homicide, **several months** after the police investigation had been closed

# The Machine at Work, Again

Two Chinese Anti-Cult Web Sites



*Want China Times*, a now-defunct pro-CCP daily in Taiwan (with a false banner, never used by CAG)



Hong Kong journalist Brendon Hong



Several international media, Wikipedia

**Want**  
ChinaTimes

Knowing China through Taiwan

## Chinese doomsday cult expands to Taiwan

Lai Ting-heng and Staff Reporter | 2014-06-02 | 17:46 (GMT+8)



Several cases of violence in China have been linked to the cult, including that of a boy in Shanxi, whose eyes were forcibly removed last August.

The Beijing-based *Mirror Evening News* reported that a large number of local residents are followers of the cult, and some of them have told the newspaper that the assault was a result of the boys' family trying to leave the sect.

## Case No. 3: Predicting the End of the World in 2012?

- ▶ Widespread fake news accuse CAG of having instigated riots based on the prediction of the end of the world in 2012, which became popular in China through the so called “Mayan prophecy” and the movie 2012 (right)
- ▶ However, there is no end of the world (rather, its transformation) in CAG’s theology, and the disasters predicted in the Bible will follow the end of work on Earth of Almighty God, who was alive and well in 2012



# A Case of Dissent

- It is true that some CAG believers in China, like many other Chinese, developed an interest in the so-called Mayan prophecies predicting the end of the world in 2012, and some tried to use this theory as an evangelization tool

But they were rebuked by the leaders and many were expelled. Zhao Weishan stated, "We do not preach the end of the world... The theory of the end of the world is wrong." And, "Even if someone is able to gain others by using inappropriate methods to preach the gospel, those that are gained certainly are not people who really seek the truth but merely people who want to avoid catastrophes"

上面的信

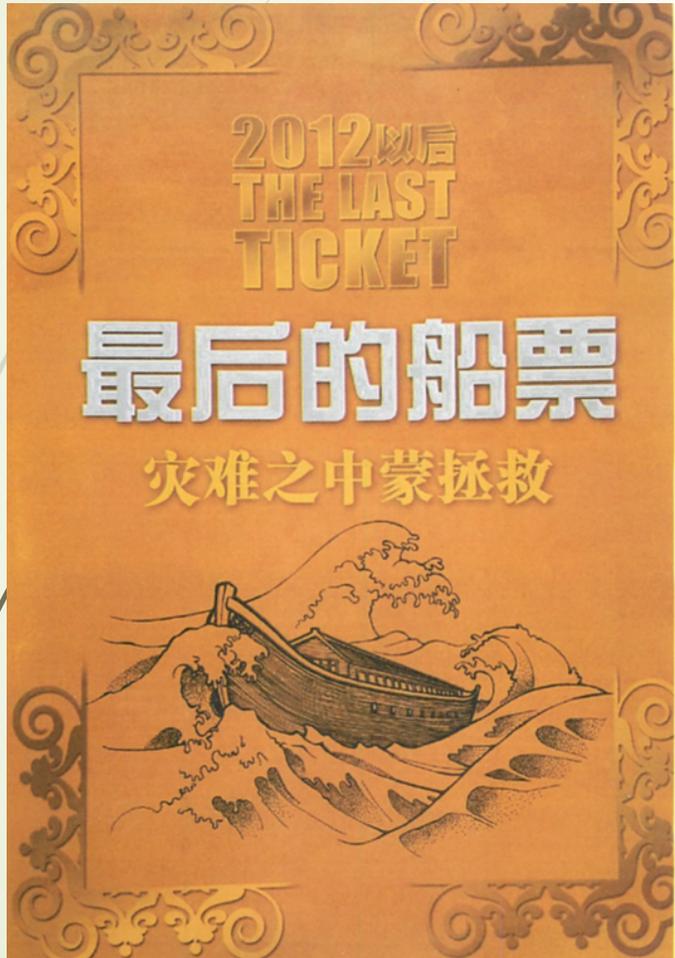
发至众教会 可在聚会中阅读交通

2012年12月16日

## 给各地教会神选民的一封信

现在多数牧区的福音扩展工作已经开始走向正轨，脱离了忽左忽右摇摆不定的情形辖制，采取灵活实用行之有效的方方式，这样就保证了既能多得人又能少出危险事故的实际果效。大红龙就是想把带领工人与传福音指挥抓走限制起来，企图破坏搅扰神的国度福音扩展工作，结果都蒙羞失败了，我们从陕甘区、冀晋区的经历见证中得到证实：“当弟兄姊妹这样传福音时，我们认为大部分弟兄姊妹都不受大红龙黑暗权势的辖制了，果效也开始越来越好了，而且在传福音时看到有的大红龙已经不管不问了，有的说：‘我们不管了，你们传吧。’有的弟兄姊妹被抓在里面见证神后被放了，还有的看到大红龙在拦阻福音工作时当场就遭报应了（有嘴歪的，有出车祸死的）。得知这些后，我们活在了渺茫的想象中，觉得大红龙也不能把我们怎么样，神与我们同在呢，我们就更大胆了，开始公开传。当弟兄姊妹大张旗鼓打横幅、标语时我们没有制止，认可了这种传福音方法，特别是越看到弟兄姊妹被抓越气愤，越要跟大红龙干到底。我们只是交通要保存好实力，认为如果传福音人员被抓会耽误传福音的时间，但并没有卡死不能这样传。在此事上看到我们实在太谬妄、缺弦，不能准确地按照工作安排去落实工作求果效，而是凭着自己的狂妄本性蛮干，就是瞎闯莽夫，对上面安排的用智慧方式开展福音工作、以小的代价换取大的胜利这些方面都抛到了脑后，我们对大红龙的邪恶、恶毒与神敌对的实质也没有真实认识，而是急功近利，总想迈大步尽快把福音工作作完。看到陕甘区面积大、接受的人少、福音工作量大，又听说东北区、冀晋区一个月传了上百万，我们更是着急，就开始为多得人而蛮干，没有了原则，给福音工作带来了负面的影响，大红龙也开始狗急跳墙，在网络、报纸上作一些反面宣传，想对带领工人下毒手。若不是上面这份讲道交通及时下发，我们这样蛮干下去不知会带来多大亏损，招来多大环境，这都是因着自己的撒但本性给福音工作带来了拦阻、打岔，给弟兄姊妹带来亏损，我们只顾自己的名利，不考虑后果，不考虑弟兄姊妹的安危，真是拆毁神工作的撒但恶魔，这是我们在神面前严重的过犯，我们愿意接受上面的对付修理，这是对我们及时的帮助，我们愿吸取失败的教训，严格按工作安排作工作，扭转工作中的偏差，重新开始。

# The Story of A Brochure



- ▶ Banners and brochures were supplied by CACA and other Chinese sources to Western media and scholars “proving” that the CAG had announced the end of the world in 2012. This brochure, however, in fact did not mention the end of the world at all, although its title was indeed “After 2012, The Last Ticket: Gain Salvation in the Catastrophes.” If it has not been fabricated, it is an example of the literature produced by *dissidents* who resisted the warnings of Zhao Weishan and, when identified, were promptly expelled

# ...and Another Brochure



Australian scholar Emily Dunn argued that the contested brochure might be authentic, since the same ark drawing also appeared on another brochure once diffused by the CAG (above). The latter, however, did not mention 2012 at all – nor did it mention theories of the end of the world

## Case no. 4: “Money for Converts”?



- ▶ Another example of fake news, which unfortunately has played a role in leading to decisions where asylum has been denied to CAG refugees in Europe, is that “a [CAG] member receives 20,000 yuan (\$3,237) for every new person they convert,” and that in turn new members should pay “2,000 yuan (\$323) in membership fees” and spend extra money for buying CAG literature

The information was spread by the *Newsweek*-associated *International Business Times* in 2014 in an article largely based (and quoting verbatim on this issue) a post-McDonald's laundry list of accusations against the CAG published by the official newspaper of the Chinese regime, the *People's Daily*

# No Membership Fee

- ▶ CAG members interviewed by the undersigned and other scholars vehemently deny that this is the case, and given the number of converts, even the richest religious organization in the world would have been quickly bankrupted
- ▶ They also insist that there is no membership fee, and literature is distributed freely. CAG official Website states that “Believers of The Church of Almighty God can enjoy all of the books of God’s words, spiritual books, and audio and video productions without charge. They can also participate in the various events held by the Church for free... The Church does not permit anyone to solicit or encourage contributions under any name”



# An Alternative Template

- While the CCP created *most* fake news against CAG, others originated with Evangelical Christians, very much disturbed by the fact that the phenomenal growth of the CAG largely happened at their expenses
- In this case, news traveled from Chinese Evangelicals to Evangelicals abroad, initially *without* the cooperation of CCP, which only recently realized that these incidents were of interest to Western scholars and added them to its laundry list of anti-CAG propaganda items

The teaching of  
“**Eastern Lightning**”, or  
“**The Church of Almighty God**”  
**is not the “Truth”**  
as revealed in the Bible.

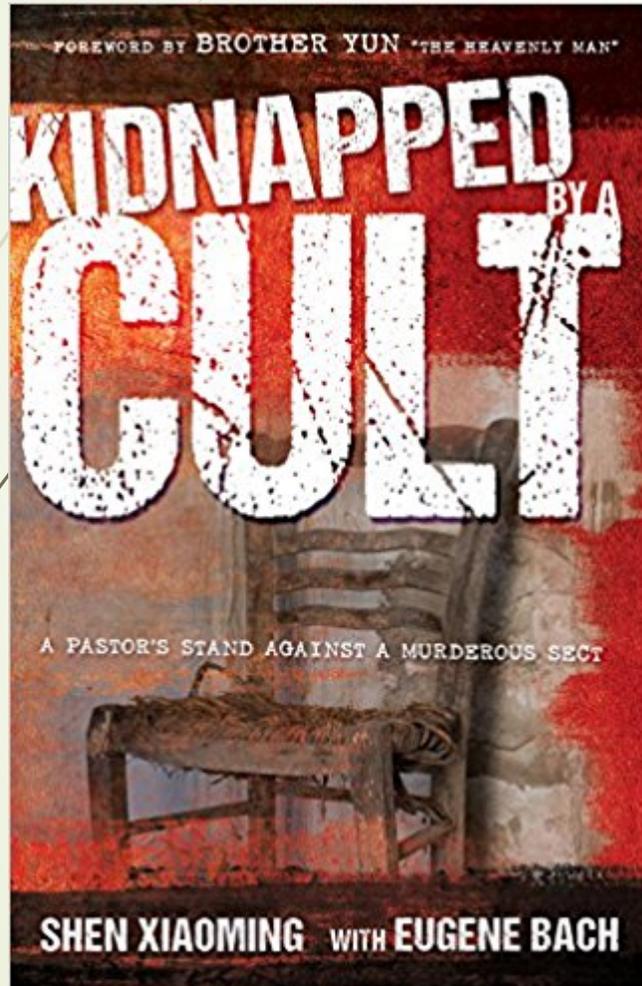


What should you do if you meet a heretic?

1. **Upload his / her photo** — to make a list of the heretics for the church, and remind the saints to stay away from these people.
2. **Avoid contact** — do not touch anything they give, such as a drink.
3. **Tell the church** — have fellowship with the body of Christ, and talk to the responsible brothers of the church.

Christian Belief Research Institute, Taiwan

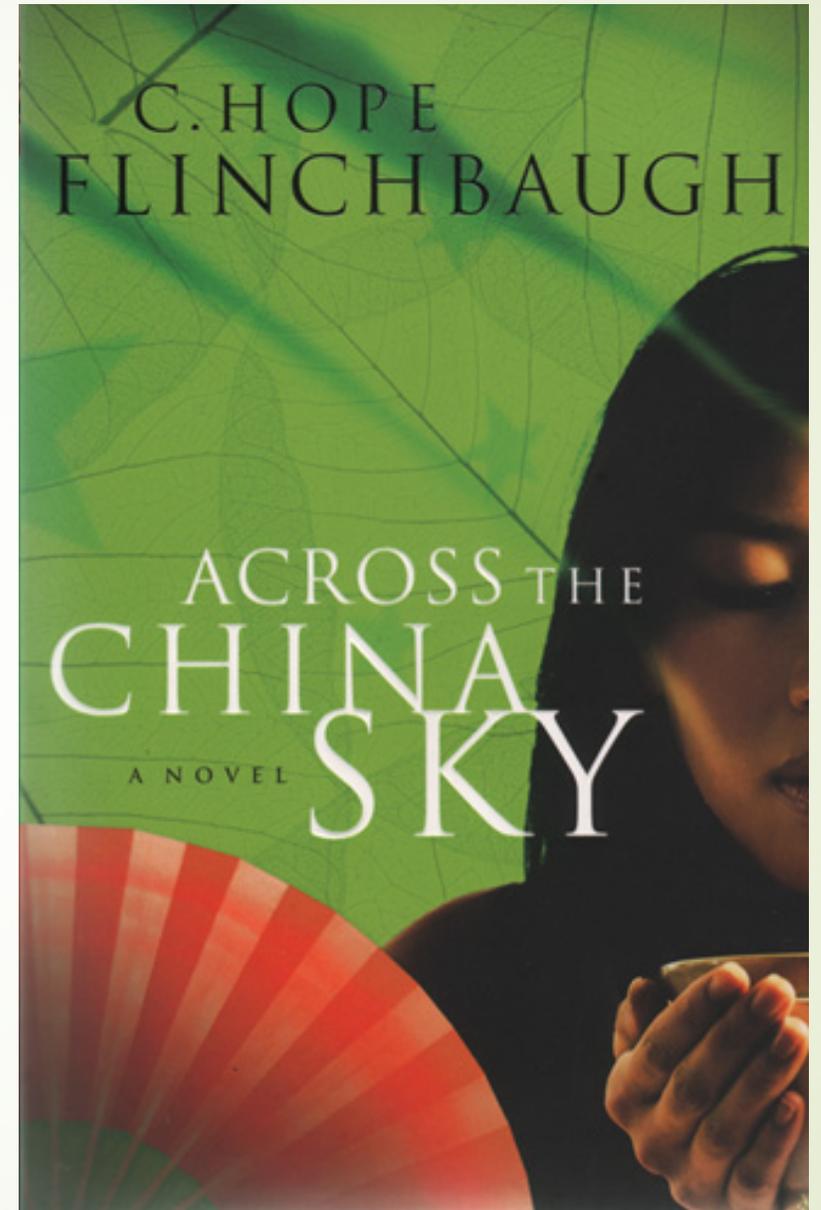
## Case no. 5: Kidnapping Christian Leaders?



- Some Christian opponents of The Church of Almighty God also claim that in 2002 it kidnapped 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). When documents are studied, however, this story too appears to be largely unbelievable

# Fiction and Facts

- ▶ The story is great material for Evangelical novels (which were in fact written) but it is really hard to believe that
  - (1) CAG, hunted as it was by the Chinese police, was able to mount a large-scale kidnapping operation;
  - (2) CGF, which was also persecuted and operating underground at that time, did not verify who those who invited them to a Christian seminar were; and
  - (3) while allegedly informed of what happened, the Chinese police did not arrest anybody



# Alternative Explanations



- It is possible that in fact the CGF leaders went to a training invited by members of the CAG, who did not immediately advertise the name of their church, which some may interpret as deception but can also be explained with the climate of persecution. Then, they reconstructed the event by using the familiar captivity narrative of having been “kidnapped by a cult,” while in fact no kidnapping in the normal and legal meaning of the word happened

# Enter the Scholars



- The leaked document suggests that Chinese propaganda should try to enlist Western *scholars* against CAG, as it was done with some degree of success for Falun Gong. This was perhaps one reason for our invitations to China in 2017. But it backfired spectacularly, generating an unprecedented amount of scholarly research *sympathetic* to CAG. Three of the scholars invited to China signed affidavits or appeals to correct false information about CAG

## Case no. 6: The Red Dragon Strikes Back



- This memorable failure of the attempt to recruit scholars to fight CAG was perhaps not unrelated to a new massive campaign of fake news in the second half of 2017, following and justifying massive arrests of CAG members in Zhejiang by repeating all the old fake news, including the McDonald's homicide

# Variations on a Familiar Theme



*Sixth Tone*, described by *Foreign Policy* as “a media start-up under CCP oversight .. designed to entice Western readers”



Guess who? *BBC* and *Telegraph*, aka the usual suspects



Nearly one hundred articles published in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, the United States, the U.K., Russia, concentrated in a few days, reiterating the fake news and supporting campaigns against CAG refugees



# David against Goliath

- ▶ Yet, things are not in 2018 what they were in 2014 or early 2017. Increasingly, fair coverage of CAG is offered by scholarly journals and quality media, unavoidably landing in Wikipedia as well
- ▶ In Italy, a court of law labeled attempts to attribute the McDonald's murder to CAG as "fake news fabricated by the regime and aimed at discrediting the CAG"
- ▶ A handful of scholars, human rights activists, and lawyers may look like David against Goliath, but Goliath is indeed losing ground, proving that fighting fake news is not impossible



## McDonald's Announce They're Perminatly Removing The Big Mac From Their Menu



By James Bleich — Last updated Apr 15, 2018

For more  
information:  
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@gmail.com](mailto:maxintrovigne@gmail.com)