

A Dynamic Religion in China: The Church of Almighty God

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In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping and other top Chinese leaders called for a further “sinicization” of religion and for a stronger, merciless fight against “*xie jiao*” (Li 2017). Understanding these two words is crucial to evaluate the current problems of religion and “cults” in China. Both words are politically constructed in China, in a way that goes well beyond their literal meaning.

President Xi himself has clarified that “sinicization” of religions means that they should strictly follow the leadership and directives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), operate “under the Party,” and follow its “active guidance” (Li 2017). Religious movements born in China and directed by Chinese are not regarded as “sinicized” if they are not fully integrated into the CCP-dominated Chinese system.

Chinese Web sites often translate *xie jiao* as “evil cults” in order to elicit the sympathy of Western anti-cultists, but the translation is wrong. *Xie Jiao* means “heterodox teachings” (Palmer 2012). Laws against *xie jiao* exist since the late Ming era, and the Emperor “decided on the basis of his own judgement” which religions and movements should be listed as *xie jiao* (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27). In practice, groups were listed, or not listed, as *xie jiao* largely based on political evaluations. Christianity as a whole was listed as *xie jiao* in 1725, and Christians were routinely tortured and executed, but went out of the list in 1842, because of Western military pressure (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 31).

This policy was continued by the Chinese Republic and by the CCP regime. The concepts of sinicization and *xie jiao* govern the distinction between three different categories of religions in China:

— fully sinicized religions, allowed to operate publicly under the control of, and with leaders appointed by, CCP, including the unified Three Self Protestant Church and the Patriotic Catholic Association;

— non-sinicized religions, including the underground Catholic Church loyal to Rome and the flourishing Protestant House Churches, that live precariously and could be hit by the regime at any time;

— *xie jiao*, which the regime promises to “extirpate like a tumor” (Gu 2014): under Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime punished with 3 to 7 years (or more) in jail (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Vienna n.d.).

According to Goossaert and Palmer, the category of *xie jiao* was “revived” to attack Falun Gong in the 1990s (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 339–40). “A national network of ‘610 offices,’ led by a member of the CCP Politburo, was established on June 10, 1999, with the specific duty of implementing the persecution of Falungong” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 341). Based on the observation of scholars associated with CESNUR, who were invited to China in 2017 by the local authorities to discuss *xie jiao* and The Church of Almighty God, it seems that the 610 Office operates now through two separate branches, one devoted exclusively to Falun Gong and another to all the other *xie jiao*, with a special attention to The Church of Almighty God (Massimo Introvigne, personal communication). Official lists of *xie jiao* have been published since 1995. The Church of Almighty God has consistently been included in these lists (Irons 2018). In recent years, the church has been on the very top of the list of “cults” for CCP’s clampdown and repression (Gu 2014).

The main reference is the book by Emily Dunn, *Lightning from the East* (Dunn 2015). Dunn, who had previously written pioneer articles on the church (see e.g. Dunn 2008), did a considerable homework, but admittedly she only worked on the movement’s texts and through interviews with opponents of The Church of Almighty God. During her trips to China, she made “no attempt to contact Eastern Lightning adherents” (Dunn 2015, 22). It was obviously a difficult task to meet church members in person, due to the CCP’s vigorous repression and clampdown on the church. She tried to visit members of the church in New York, but had a wrong address and her attempt failed (Dunn 2015, 23). This means that her book was entirely written without any contact or interview with members of The Church of Almighty God. In fact, the church’s very visible presence in several countries outside Mainland China started in 2014, presumably after Dunn’s book had been

written. Her text remains valuable, but needs to be complemented, and occasionally corrected, by other sources.

In the 2010s, Western scholars of new religious movements, an academic category different from sinologists, started paying attention to The Church of Almighty God. American academics J. Gordon Melton and Holly Folk prepared position papers and discussed the church in international conferences. Paradoxically, new impetus to the academic study of The Church of Almighty God by Western specialists of new religious movements was given in 2017 by the Chinese authorities themselves. The Chinese Anti-Xie-Jiao Association, which has direct ties with the CCP, invited twice several leading Western scholars to seminars organized in Zhengzhou, Henan, in June, and in Hong Kong in September, devoted to exploring the notion of *xie jiao* and to offering critical perspectives on The Church of Almighty God.

Although the Chinese media reported the events in typical propaganda style, claiming that the wrong ideas of the Western scholars had been successfully “corrected” (KKNews 2017), in fact Western academics disagreed with Chinese scholars, law enforcement officers, and anti-cult activists on almost everything (Massimo Introvigne, personal communication). The Western scholars, however, encountered a great deal of material produced by Chinese official sources on The Church of Almighty God. Some of them started studying it, and concluded that the main accusations of crimes directed against the church were false. Massimo Introvigne sought the co-operation of leading American sociologist of religions, David Bromley, and studied the documents about the 2014 homicide in a McDonald’s diner in Zhaoyuan, Shandong, of a customer who had refused to supply her phone number to visiting “missionaries.” While CCP-related Chinese media claimed The Church of Almighty God was responsible for the murder, and succeeded in persuading Western media that such was the case, Introvigne and Bromley concluded that a different religious movement, unrelated to that church, committed the homicide (Introvigne 2017a; Introvigne and Bromley 2017).

Another frequent accusation was that in 2013, in the Chinese province of Shaanxi, members of The Church of Almighty God gouged out the eyes of a six-year old boy. Holly Folk studied the related documents and concluded that the crime had been committed by the boy’s aunt, The Church of Almighty God had nothing to do with it, and accusations against the church were spread by Chinese

anti-cultists in the aftermath of the McDonald's homicide, several months after the police investigation had been closed (Folk 2017).

Every religion insists that it originates from divine intervention in human history. Few encourage or like researches into their antecedents. Scholars should, of course, respect this position, but it is part of their job to try to see each group in historical perspective. The study of The Church of Almighty God requires at least a mention of Watchman Nee (Ni Shu- Tsu, 1903–1972), a Chinese Christian leader who in the 1930s encountered a branch of the Exclusive Brethren, a fundamentalist Christian denomination, and was invited to visit their leaders in England in 1933. Although disagreements followed, and Nee's group became separated from the Western Brethren, he absorbed a great deal of their theology, which originated from John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). Nee was later arrested by Chinese Communist authorities and spent most of his life in jail, but his gifted disciple, Witness Lee (1905–1997), was able to move first to Taiwan and then to California, and to establish a large international organization, known as the Local Church in the West and the Shouters in China (Introvigne 2018, 83–85).

The Shouters were listed as a *xiejiao* in 1995 in China, although in the following years they tried to enter into a dialogue with the authorities, and were persecuted less severely than The Church of Almighty God was. The persecution also led to the fragmentation of the group in China into independent branches, without a single centralized leadership. The leader of one of these branches (or perhaps splinter group) in the early 1990s was Zhao Weishan (b. 1951), a native of the Heilongjiang Province in China.

Within the framework of a revival that involved both the Shouters and the House Churches in China in 1989, the person later identified as Almighty God by her followers began attending meetings of the House Churches and, later, of the Shouters. In 1991, she began to utter words that followers compared, for authority and power, to those expressed by Jesus Christ. Many Christians started reading these utterances and believing they came from the Holy Spirit. Among these was Zhao Weishan.

From 1993, readers of the utterances started believing that their author was the second coming of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God, and the only Almighty God, and the movement, born in 1991, took shape as The Church of Almighty God. As it is always the case, the emic self-understanding of its origins by The Church of Almighty God differs from reconstructions by outsiders and scholars. The Church

of Almighty God insists that it did not originate from the Shouters, but came into being because of the work of the Christ of the last days, Almighty God. The work of Almighty God started in the Shouters, and the Christians who accepted this work became The Church of Almighty God.

While stating that God incarnated in our time in a female human being, The Church of Almighty God never mentions her name. Several scholars identify her with Yang Xiangbin, a woman born in 1973 in northwestern China. Zhao Weishan is referred to in the movement as the Man Used by the Holy Spirit, the Priest, or the Brother, and is the administrative leader of the church. His name is not advertised either. The fact that the movement does not mention publicly the name of its leaders may seem strange to some observers, but in fact, this phenomenon exists also in some Christian churches, particularly within the Brethren movement. In fact, only one branch of the Brethren identifies its leaders by name, while the others insist that any cult of the personality should be avoided and that attention on the persons would detract from the primacy of the written Word (Introvigne 2018, 81–82).

In the mid-1990s, a severe persecution targeted both the Shouters and The Church of Almighty God, whose theological differences were not necessarily clear to the Chinese authorities. Since 1995, The Church of Almighty God has been continuously and severely persecuted in China. In 2000, Zhao and Yang went to the United States, which they entered on September 6, and in 2001 they were granted political asylum. Since then, they have directed the movement from New York.

The Church of Almighty God releases periodical statistics, and claims that between 2011 and 2013 more than 300,000 members were arrested (The Church of Almighty God 2017). These figures do not appear unbelievable, if one considers the frequent references to “successful” campaigns against the Church of Almighty God in Chinese anti-xie-jiao propaganda and other official sources. The church also reports that many of its members were tortured in China, and some died while in custody in suspicious circumstances.

But persecution is only one of the features making the history of The Church of Almighty God exceptional. The other is growth. According to Chinese official sources, it had reached four million members in 2014 (Ma 2014). The figure is disputed by scholars, who regard it as inflated, and the situation in China makes counting members of groups labeled as *xie jiao* impossible. Since the Zhaoyuan

McDonald's murder of 2014, the repression in fact intensified, and several thousand members escaped abroad, where they have founded churches in South Korea, the United States, Italy, Canada, France, Spain, and other countries, in addition to those established in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the diaspora, The Church of Almighty God started converting non-Chinese, although ethnic Chinese still form the majority in the communities of most countries. Difficult refugee issues also emerged in several countries, as members of The Church of Almighty God struggled to see their status as refugees escaping religious persecution recognized.

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