

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	556
Land:	Kina
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB)
Titel:	China. The Shouters, including origins and founders, core beliefs, activities, and treatment of members by authorities
Udgivet:	23. oktober 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	3. februar 2020

China: The "Shouters," including origins and founders, core beliefs, activities, and treatment of members by authorities (2017-October 2019) [CHN106373.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

Sources indicate that the term "Shouters" [also translated as the "Yellers" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121) or "callers" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60)], is used in reference to a religious movement in China (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019; Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56; Yang with Pettit 2018, 60). In a chapter on illegal religions in the book *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts*, the authors, Fenggang Yang with J.E.E. Pettit, explain that the term "Shouters" is applied to a "diffuse array of practitioners who have been lumped together by government officials" and is associated with the Local Church movement led by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), a sociologist of religions who is also the Editor-in-Chief of *Bitter Winter*, an Italy-based online magazine on "religious liberty and human rights in China" with a particular focus "on the persecution of all religions in China" (*Bitter Winter* n.d.a), similarly explained that the term "is a popular nickname applied to conservative Chinese Protestant groups in the tradition of Chinese preacher[s] Watchman Nee ... and Witness Lee" (Director 24 Sept. 2019).

According to sources, the term Shouters is "pejorative" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60) or "derogatory" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). An article on Witness Lee and Local Churches in the *Journal of Church and State* reports that the term Shouters is used to describe the group by its critics (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 188). A distinguished professor of American religious history at Baylor University in Waco, Texas who studies religious movements and Christianity in China, and who is also on the CESNUR Board of Directors and has published a book with its Director, stated, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, that the term is "is used to label a variety of groups, but no group uses it to describe itself" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). Yang and Pettit similarly state that that term is "applied by the party-state ... to various groups that may or may not be closely following the teachings of Witness

Lee" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60). According to the CESNUR Director, the term is used in China, by "other Christians hostile to the movement," the media and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Director 24 Sept. 2019).

2. Origins and Founders

According to sources, the Shouters originate from the movement initiated in China by "Watchman Nee" [Tuosheng Ni (倪柝声) 1903–1972] (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 195; Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019; Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56), in the 1920s (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019; Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 195; *Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121). As explained below, sources state that the Watchman Nee movement has been known under different names, including:

- "Little Flock" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56; Bitter Winter 15 Jan. 2019; *Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121);
- "Assembly Hall" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56; *Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121) or "Church Assembly Hall" (Bitter Winter 15 Jan. 2019);
- "Christian Assembly" (Director 24 Sept. 2019); and
- "Local Church" or "Local Churches" (Director 24 Sept. 2019; Yang with Pettit 2018, 60; Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 188).

According to sources, [after some time in Southeast Asia, notably Taiwan (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121; Yang with Pettit 2018, 61)] "Witness Lee" [Changshou or Changsou Li (李常受), 1905–1997] founded an offshoot of Watchman Nee's movement in the US in 1962 (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56; *Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121; Bitter Winter n.d.b), with both branches using the name "Local Church" [地方教會] (Bitter Winter n.d.b). Sources describe Witness Lee as Watchman Nee's "student" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56) or "co[-]worker" (Bitter Winter n.d.b; Yang with Pettit 2018, 61).

According to a country information report on China by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the Witness Lee offshoot was brought to China in 1979 (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56). The *Cambridge History of Christianity*, a nine-volume set which seeks to provide a "complete chronological account of the development of Christianity in all its aspects" and throughout the world (Cambridge University Press n.d.), similarly states that the Witness Lee movement established itself in China "in the late 1970s" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121).

According to Bitter Winter, the name "Assembly" (召會) was the name used by Witness Lee in China for the branch of the Local Church which follows his teachings (Bitter Winter n.d.b). The name "Local Church" was used in the West [or in the US] (Bitter Winter n.d.b; Yang with Pettit 2018, 61). According to the Australian DFAT report, the

group is also known by the names "'Assembly Hall'" or "'Assemblies'" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56). Sources add that the Witness Lee group is also known as the "'Lord's Recovery Movement'" in China (Director 24 Sept. 2019) or the "Living Stream Ministry" [LSM] in the US (Yang with Pettit 2018, 61). However, the CESNUR Director stated that Watchman Nee believed that "denominations were responsible for the corruption of Christianity and its followers should have no name except 'Christians'" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). The same source explained that

[b]y the late 1970s, [the Nee/Lee] group was known as the "Local Church" in the West and with a variety of names in China. "Local Church" was also used in China, but by distinguishing the "old Local Church" (Laodifangjiaohui, 老地方教会), who accepted Nee but rejected Lee, and the "new Local Church" (Difangjiaohui, 地方教会), i.e., Lee's own organization. (Director 24 Sept. 2019)

Sources state the term "Shouters" has been used to refer to "several different factions" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019) or "loosely applied to various groups throughout China" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 61). The Distinguished Professor stated that "the term 'Shouters' emerged in the early 1980s" and explained that

as the government began to popularize the term in 1983 during the widespread arrest and trials of house church leaders, it was used indiscriminately against leaders of a spectrum of different house church "denominations" that were forming among the house church members. (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019)

Bitter Winter states that "[i]n China, the terms Local Church and Shouters are often used as synonymous" (Bitter Winter n.d.b). However, Yang and Pettit state that the "Local Church congregations have actively distanced themselves from the Shouters and the actions attributed to them" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60).

According to the *Cambridge History of Christianity*, the Witness Lee group "established itself along the southeastern coast of China and spread to a number of provinces" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121). The Distinguished Professor stated that the Local Church is "spread throughout China (other than Xinjiang and Tibet)" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019).

3. Core Beliefs and Practices

According to sources, the term "Shouters" refers to a practice of worshipping out loud introduced by Witness Lee (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019; *Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121). According to the *Cambridge History of Christianity*, this practice of "'yelling'" is "a form of public, emotional repentance of sin by loud confession" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121). According to sources, the practice consists of "calling out 'Oh, Lord Jesus'" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019) or "'calling on the name of the Lord Jesus'" during prayer (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60). The Australian DFAT report states that Witness Lee "believed that the gift of tongues could be taught, and that salvation could be had by saying 'O Lord' three times" (Australia 21

Dec. 2017, para. 3.56). The same source further states that the actions of believers involve "stamping their feet while shouting as part of their worship" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56).

According to the Distinguished Professor, the Local Church "teaches a fundamentalist church system of belief" and is "an orthodox Protestant Christian theology that privileges the sharing of the communion elements as a sign of acceptance and fellowship" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). The *Journal of Church and State* article similarly states that Watchman Nee emphasized community among the network of Local Churches, but adds that "Nee's fundamentalism differed greatly from American fundamentalism, which places much more emphasis on individual believers, individual pastors, and individual congregations" (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 196). The source further explains that founder Watchman Nee "localized Western Protestant teachings to match the cultural context of China" and "challenged mainstream American Protestant groups" (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 188).

Sources state that the group believes there should be only one church per city (Yang and Pettit 2018, 60; Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 195) or in "each geographical location" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). The Distinguished Professor stated that "Watchman Nee rejected the division of Protestants into denominations" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). The article in the *Journal of Church and State* explains that Watchman Nee "called for a loose network of independent congregations each overseen by a council of elders, ... each city or town ha[s] only one church and one eldership; hence, the name Local Churches" (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 195).

According to the Distinguished Professor, the Witness Lee church "accepted a dispensational approach to Bible study that divides ... biblical history into seven periods. We are seen as living in the sixth (the age of grace) but will soon move into the next, the age of the kingdom" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Australian DFAT report states that Witness Lee created a "'Recovery Bible'" by annotating the standard Bible, and that the movement is also known as "'Recovery Church'" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56). The Distinguished Professor explained that Witness Lee

taught that beginning with Martin Luther, the church was generation by generation being "restored" to its apostolic nature and practice. He introduced several practices he had "recovered" from his study of scripture including "calling upon the name of the Lord" and "prayer reading of the Bible and some new theological terms such as "mingling." (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019)

4. Membership, Structure, and Activities

According to the *Cambridge History of Christianity*, the Shouters "gained a widespread following in China in the 1980s" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121). The Australian DFAT report specifies that the Shouters group had "up to 200,000 followers across China" in the 1980s (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.56). The *Cambridge History of Christianity* states that by the 1980s, the Shouters "were already in most of the provinces of China, especially in Zhejiang, Henan, Fujian and Guangdong" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121-122). The same source adds that "Lushan, a small provincial city in Henan, became their stronghold," with tens of thousands of believers "among a population of just over 100,000" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 122). The Distinguished Professor stated that "[w]e generally think of the Local Church as having a million or so members, but as with other groups, religious statistics are a state secret" and numbers "are extremely difficult to come up with in China" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). The *Journal of Church and State* article, citing an interview the authors conducted with LSM leaders in 2011, states that according to the church leaders, there are approximately 4,000 Local Churches outside of China, and 1,200-1,500 within China (Zimmerman-Liu And Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 188). Further and corroborating information on the number of Shouter or Local Church members could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Australian DFAT report indicates that during the 1980s, the Shouters "splintered into several groups" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.57). Bitter Winter similarly explains that "due to the persecution and other factors, the movement in China further fragmented into several different branches, and the groups referred to as 'Shouters' are not necessarily in communion with others known as 'Local Churches' in the West" (Bitter Winter n.d.b).

The CESNUR Director stated that

[t]here is no centralized leadership in China that I know of, although *some* groups (but by no means all) accept the idea that the headquarters in Anaheim, California, and their branch in Taiwan, responsible for Eastern Asia, have a function of leadership for those acknowledging the teachings of both Nee and Lee as authoritative. (Director 24 Sept. 2019, emphasis in original)

According to the *Journal of Church and State* article, each church has one council of elders and there is no formal clergy (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 195). The source further explains the following:

A group of extra-local coworkers moved from church to church preaching upon the invitation of a locality's elders. The coworkers had no control over local groups except through the power of their teaching; there was no central headquarters, and the coworkers did not receive fixed monetary compensation from any particular local church, churches, or central organization. Most of the elders were employed in regular professions and were volunteers in the church service. (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 195-196)

Further and corroborating information on the structure of the Shouters or Local Churches, as well as on their activities in China, could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Treatment of Members by Authorities

According to sources, the Shouters are among the religious groups banned by authorities in China (US 21 June 2019, 5; Yang with Pettit 2018, 60-61). According to Australia's DFAT report, the Shouters are among groups which may "face harassment, detention and imprisonment" for engaging "in practices deemed superstitious or cult-like" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.54, 3.55). The report adds that "[t]he Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China provides for prison sentences of up to seven years for individuals who use 'superstitious sects, secret societies or evil religious organisations' to undermine the state's laws or administrative regulations" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.54). The *Journal of Church and State* article notes that unregistered religious groups that are branded as cults are viewed as illegal and "[t]he cult label is the most severe form of censure for unofficial religious groups and can entail stiff penalties; typically religious groups classified as a cult are forcibly disbanded and their leaders jailed" (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 193-194). The source adds that for the Local Churches, the cult label has led to "harsher punishments" and more frequent targeting (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 204). Yang and Pettit similarly state that groups labelled as evil cults have been "targets of systematic and severe crackdowns" (2018, 60).

Sources state that the Shouters were first banned in 1983 (Director 24 Sept. 2019; *Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121), before the first official list of *xie jiao* [translated as "cult" but which can also mean "heterodoxy" (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 192)] was promulgated in 1995 (Director 24 Sept. 2019). Sources report that in the early 1980s, the CCP "targeted" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.57) or "labeled" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 61) the Shouters as "counter[-]revolutionary (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.57; Yang with Pettit 2018, 61). According to sources, local leaders were arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison sentences (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121; Yang with Pettit 2018, 61), but the *Cambridge History of Christianity* adds that "the ban did not stop [the group] from spreading underground" (*Cambridge History of Christianity* Mar. 2008, 121).

The Distinguished Professor stated that "[m]embers of the Local Church outside of China have worked for many years to get the Chinese government to separate their fellow believers in China from the label 'Shouters'," adding that "[i]n the last three years, as the government has issued its anti-xie jiao list, the Shouters remain on it, but all references to Witness Lee and Watchman Nee have been deleted from the description" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). The *Journal of Church and State* also states that LSM leaders have been unsuccessful in negotiating their removal from the cult list (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 205-206).

Freedom House states that, since early 2014, "the Chinese authorities have intensified efforts to suppress, and even eradicate, various quasi[-]Christian sects with tangential links to mainstream Protestantism," including the Shouters, which has led to the detention and imprisonment of "[h]undreds" of clergy and lay members of such "'heterodox religions'" (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 48, 61). However, according to the CESNUR Director,

[i]n recent years, the headquarters of the Local Church in California and Taiwan have tried to open a dialogue with the Chinese authorities claiming that there may well be among the groups called Shouters movements whose teachings are bizarre and heretic, but that the groups in contact with the international headquarters are orthodox, law-abiding, and should not be called Shouters but rather Local Church or Lord's Recovery Movement. (Director 24 Sept. 2019)

Without providing further detail, the same source added that this dialogue "did give some limited results" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). The article in the *Journal of Church and State* indicates that LSM leaders have been meeting with "local officials in charge of dealing with the 'Shouters'" twice a year since 2005, that they have been establishing relationships with political officials, and meeting with leaders of the Chinese political system's "higher bodies for controlling religions," including the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 205). The same source states that government treatment of the group varies by location:

The difference in local treatment, according to LSM leaders, hinges on the relationships among local political authorities, local [Three-Self Patriotic Movement, TSPM] [1] leaders, and local Local Church leaders. LSM leaders also report that official attitudes toward the group tend to shift over time. (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 205)

According to the CESNUR Director, "[s]ome groups have escaped persecution and even have opened a dialogue with the Three-Self Church. These groups insist they are not 'Shouters'. Other groups, whose theology is very much the same, although they may not recognize the authority of the California headquarters, continue to be persecuted" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). Yang and Pettit similarly note that "many Local Church congregations that deliberately follow Witness Lee's teachings and practices have been operating in the gray market with only occasional harassment from the police" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 61). According to the CESNUR Director, once the authorities identify the community as part of the Nee or the Nee-Lee traditions, whether someone is "persecuted as a 'Shouter'" "often depends [on] local, largely unpredictable, factors" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). The *Journal of Church and State* article explains that "at lower levels of the political system, officials have had a more mixed attitude and, in some areas, have tolerated or even accepted the group's activities" (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 205). The same source adds that church leaders believe that to "clear the group's name" they will need support to remove the group from the list of cults, but notes that

[u]ntil such time, in China, the group will be subject to the vicissitudes of CCP policy, and its members will live under constant threat of arrest and imprisonment. However, at the grassroots level, Local Church congregations may be expected to continue to flourish in many areas of China. (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 10 Apr. 2015, 206)

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Note

[1] For information on the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), see Response to Information Request CHN106341 of August 2019.

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Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Apologetics Index; *China Daily*; ChinaSource; ecoi.net; Factiva; Human Rights in China; Human Rights Watch; MercatorNet; Sixth Tone; *South China Morning Post*; UN – Refworld; UK – Home Office; US – Commission on International Religious Freedom, Congressional-Executive Commission on China; The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; World Religions and Spirituality Project; World Watch Monitor; Xinhua News Agency.

ecoi.net summary:

Query response on the "Shouters" religious movement (2017 - October 2019)



Country:

China

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Original link:

<https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457948&pls=1> (<https://irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/rir/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457948&pls=1>)

Document type:

Response

Language:

English

Published:

23 October 2019

Document ID:

2019487

Austrian Red Cross

Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research
and Documentation (ACCORD)

Wiedner Hauptstraße 32, 1041 Wien

T (Telefon) +43 1 589 00 583

F (Fax) +43 1 589 00 589

info@ecoi.net

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

