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Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

Commission de l'immigration
et du statut de réfugié du Canada

China: Information on the Disciples Society [Association of Disciples, Mentu Hui], including the founder, history, beliefs, and areas of activity; treatment of members by authorities (2015-July 2017) [CHN105840.E]

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1. Overview

Sources indicate that the Disciples Society [Society of Disciples, Association of Disciples, Mentu Hui, Mentuhui] is also known as "The Narrow Gate in the Wilderness" (ChinaSource 13 Mar. 2015; Lian 2010, 223) or "*Kuangye Zhaimen*" (Lian 2010, 223). According to sources, the Disciples Society was founded by Ji Sanbao, a farmer from Shanxi, in 1989 (Lian 2010, 223; ChinaSource 13 Mar. 2015).

In his book *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, Xi Lian, a Professor of World Christianity at Duke University whose research is "focused on China's modern encounter with Christianity" (Duke University n.d.), indicates that "[b]y 1985, Ji [Sanbao] began to build a following among the rural population" and in 1989, "he announced that God had spoken to him in person" and chosen him as his "prophet" and "stand-in"; Ji Sanbao then selected "twelve 'disciples,'" thus formally founding the Disciples Society (Lian 2010, 223). In a 2015 article on religious movements in China, based on "information from [a] [2003] internal document of the Chinese Public Security Bureau," ChinaSource, a non-profit organization located in the State of California that works to engage "the Christian community with the critical knowledge needed to collaborate with and serve the Chinese church and society" (ChinaSource n.d.), notes that Ji Sanbao "claims to be the 'Christ established by God.' As 'God's son,' he also claims the power of miracles including healing and resurrecting the dead" (ChinaSource 13 Mar. 2015). A 2001 report on secret societies in China, written by Kristin Shi-Kupfer, who is "an expert on media policy, civil society, religious policy and ideology in China" (MERICS n.d.), indicates that the leaders of the Disciples Society are [translation] "influenced by the 'True Jesus Church'" [1] (Kupfer Oct. 2001, 3).

2. Areas of Activity

Kupfer provides the following information regarding the Disciples Society's regional areas of influence and number of members: [translation] "Shaanxi, Gansu, Hebei, Qinghai, Hunan, Jiangsu, Yunnan, Guizhou, Shandong, Xinjiang, Sichuan; until 1995 in 12 provinces, 120 cities and 681 districts; 100,000 members in Guizhou, 500,000 members in central and western China" (Kupfer Oct. 2001, 3). ChinaSource states that the "movement spread to fourteen provinces in [China] and by 1995 had an estimated following of 350,000 people, primarily in rural areas" (ChinaSource 13 Mar. 2015).

A 2000 article by *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), an English-language newspaper based in Hong Kong, and the Associated Press (AP), posted on Apologetics Index (AI), a non-profit Christian website that provides, amongst others, "pages of research resources on religious cults, sects, new religious movements [and] alternative religions" (AI 11 Dec. 2016), and citing the Information Centre for Human Rights & Democracy [2]," reports that the Disciples Society's "close-knit, secretive network of house churches enabled it to flourish throughout central and western China, where it claims as many as 500,000 members" (SCMP and AP 20 May 2000). The same source explains that "[t]he group cited local sources as saying there were about 2,000 followers of the movement in Yanting" (SCMP and AP 20 May 2000). According to a 2006 article on Chinese cults, published by OMF International, a Christian organization whose "missionaries" are working to build "a strong church in the countries of East Asia" (OMF International n.d.), by 1995, the group "had spread to 12 provinces and had 500,000 members in central and west China alone" (OMF International April-May 2006). Lian notes that in 1995, the Disciples Society "had expanded into fourteen provinces with more than 350,000 members" and that "[i]n the early 2000s, hundreds of thousands of people, most of them in China's northwest, still remained [within the group]" (Lian 2010, 224).

3. Beliefs and Activities

The OMF International article, based on information from Wu Dongsheng, a researcher at Nanjing University who conducted "extensive research" on cults in China and published his doctoral thesis on the topic in 2005, states that the Disciples Society declares the following to children:

"You can get through without studying" and "Communist education is useless." This causes many pupils to withdraw from school when they are converted. Just in one city in "Q" province more than 1,800 children and youth joined the Disciples. One primary school there originally had 200 or more pupils, but after being affected by the Disciples in 1998-99, two-thirds of the children joined the cult and only seventy were left at the school. (OMF International April-May 2006)

ChinaSource notes that the Disciples Society "has a very strong eschatology, encouraging followers to drop out of school or abandon their farms to pray and await ascension to heaven" and that it "predicted the world would end in 2000" (ChinaSource 13 Mar. 2015). Similarly, Kupfer indicates that the central aspects of the Disciples Society's teaching is an [translation] "[e]nd-times doctrine (year 2000)" and a "doctrine of salvation" (Kupfer Oct. 2001, 3). According to Lian,

[i]n pamphlets such as *The Dream of the Kingdom of Heaven in Hanzhong* (*Hanzhong tianguomeng*), which located the cosmic regeneration in southern Shaanxi, Ji appeared as "the true Dragon, the Son of Heaven" (*zhenlong tianzi*). His more spiritual title as the end-time savior was "the Christ of the Third Redemption" (Sanshu Jidu)-the first two having been offered through Noah's ark and the Cross. Several dates were announced for the end of the world, which would be accompanied by "earthquakes, fire, floods, hail, plagues, and locusts." However, those who joined the society and dedicated themselves to preaching the Gospel would be spared the calamities. Miracles would also follow them: without medicine, the sick would be healed; without the use of fertilizer or pesticide, the faithful would have bumper crops. (Lian 2010, 223-224)

OMF International also indicates that the Disciples Society "allegedly practice faith healing to the exclusion of using medicine" (OMF International April-May 2006).

Lian indicates the following:

Ji's followers were also taught to consume no more than two *liang*-one hundred grams-of grains each day as an expression of their repentance and spirituality. As a result, the group came to be nicknamed *erliang liang* (two *liang* of grains). As long as the believers remained under such spiritual discipline, their wheat and rice would become inexhaustible "grains of life" (*shengming liang*). In remote, mountainous areas of Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Hubei, the Disciples' Society succeeded in establishing its chief bases of operation. Each member was asked to bring at least ten relatives, friends, or neighbors into the group each month and was promised future "grains of life" in proportion to the number of new converts made. Proselytism was made easy with testimonies of faith healing and exorcism as well as generous group aid: "grains of charity" would be brought to the poor, or a free hand would be offered for farm work. (Lian 2010, 224)

The OMF International article, based on information from Wu Dongsheng, states that:

[a]fter the relevant authorities had cracked down on the Disciples they turned the focus of their evangelistic attention to converting youth and children as well as educated people and cadres. They let it be known they would give a prize of 50 RMB [C\$9] for every Party cadre converted; 100 RMB for every rural district cadre or policeman; and 1000 RMB for every county-level cadre. In their Preparations for Work in 1997 which they disseminated in January 1997, they clearly laid down: "In developing new work our target must be lower-level Party members and cadres under

the Evil One's control. For every one of these converted, we win over part of the masses and overthrow part of the government's control at the grass-roots." (OMF International April-May 2006)

According to Lian,

[t]he organization of the Disciple's Society - hierarchical, tight, and secretive from the beginning - also became increasingly sophisticated. Eventually, it even established its own underground "banks" and "post offices" to move funds and goods efficiently in the service of the Gospel. (Lian 2010, 224)

A 2016 article by the Xinhua News Agency, citing the deputy police chief of Yunxi County, in Hubei Province, states that "[t]he [Mentuhui] cult accumulated more than 40 million yuan (about six million U.S. dollars) between 2011 and 2014 through donations and business including supermarkets" (Xinhua News Agency 27 Sept. 2016). According to the same source, the deputy police chief further states that "[t]he cult never deposited money in banks but kept cash in the hands of its leaders, who often took the money for their personal use" (Xinhua News Agency 27 Sept. 2016).

ChinaSource indicates that the Disciples Society's followers "are accused of committing heinous crimes such as abduct[ing] women, rape, and fraud. In addition, they are accused of attacking the Party, instigating riots, and resisting family planning policy" (ChinaSource 13 Mar. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Treatment by Authorities

The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2015* notes that the Chinese government "considers several Christian groups to be 'evil cults,'" including the "Society of Disciples (Mentu Hui)" (US 10 Aug. 2016, 5). According to Lian, authorities in Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Hubei

began their crackdown on the group as early as 1990. In 1995, ... the Public Security system launched a nationwide campaign against the sect. However, neither the arrest of its core members nor the reported death of Ji Sanbao in an auto accident in 1997 was a deterrent to its continued growth. (Lian 2010, 224)

Similarly, the article by SCMP and AP reports that "[a]ngered by its preaching that the world would end in 2000, and its opposition to state-run churches and strict government birth-control policies, authorities started trying to wipe out the sect in 1995" (SCMP and AP 20 May 2000). Without providing further details, sources indicate that there were incidents in the late 1990s in which members of the Disciples Society were detained (Reuters 24 May 1999; Amnesty International 23 Mar. 2000, 9).

In a 2014 article, the *People's Daily*, a Beijing-based newspaper and online news outlet, citing a report on their news platform, people.cn, indicates the following about a "crackdown" on the Disciples Society by the police of Zigui, Hubei to "address signs of a resurgence of the Kuangye Zhaimen (Narrow Door in the Wilderness) in a very few remote rural regions":

[translation]

Beginning in June [2014], a specially designated ten-person unit was organized to move into the village of Luoja, which is under the town of Maoping in the county of Zigui, to investigate and take evidence on a one-by-one basis from key people involved in the cult organization.

The police investigation and factual verification found that the eight principal members of the Kuangye Zhaimen involved in the cult's activities in Luoja Village were Zhu Wenzhang..., Li Yuanwang..., Zhu Wenjie..., Xiong Zuquan..., Yan Fuzhen..., Li Zhifu..., Chen Shiqing... and Chen Shizhen. While pretending to preach "Christianity," they misrepresented Biblical doctrine to induce others to engage in activities of the Kuangye Zhaimen secret society and propagated superstitious cult and secret society thinking. Through such methods as "eating the bread of life," "observing the Sabbath," praying each morning and night and preaching the Gospel, they brought people into cult activities which had a deleterious effect on society.

The people's police involved in the case also confiscated a total of five illegal publications, five banners with the sign of the Cross and over seventy handwritten booklets.

At the present time, the Zigui police have decided on administrative detention for the eight individuals under the Public Security Administration Penalties Act. (*People's Daily* 10 July 2014; ellipses in original).

The US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2015* indicates that a

National Security Law passed in July [2015] by the National People's Congress Standing Committee (NPCSC) explicitly bans "cult organizations." An amendment to the criminal law passed by the NPCSC in August increases the maximum possible sentence for "organizing and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law" from 15 years to life in prison. (US 10 Aug. 2016, 6)

BBC reports that, on 16 July 2015, the People's Courts of Dawukou District and Pingluo County, in Shizuishan city in Ningxia, sentenced 11 out of 148 members of the Disciples Society who were arrested in November 2014 "from three to eight years and six months" (BBC 17 July 2015). The same source, citing unnamed Chinese media reports, indicates that "[s]ince 2013, eleven members of the Mentu Hui cult organization, including defendants Gao and Xie, had been using cell phones to send out promotional messages for the cult, as well as cult videos, audio files and pictures" (BBC 17 July 2015). The BBC indicates that "Chinese media reports refer to the Mentu Hui as an 'evil cult' organization" and that the Disciples Society was designated as a "cult organization" by the government in 1995 (BBC 17 July 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Xinhua News Agency, citing the Chinese "central leading group for prevention and handling of cult-related activities [3]," stated that "[p]rison terms have been handed down to several members of the Mentuhui (Disciples Sect) cult for organizing a cult and causing deaths" (Xinhua News Agency 27 Sept. 2016). The same source further reports that

Yao Xiangzhi, 35, a cult member, was sentenced for causing the death of a cult member surnamed Xu, who suffered from schizophrenia. Xu was denied freedom as well as food and drink for a week, while other cult members prayed for his recovery in June 2015 in Jianli County, central China's Hubei Province.

Yao, who only completed primary school, was sentenced to three years for organizing and taking advantage of a cult and causing death. She is currently serving her prison sentence in the provincial capital of Wuhan. (Xinhua 27 Sept. 2016)

In January 2017, Reuters reported that in "September [2016]," a "court jailed members of a group called Mentuhui, or 'Disciples Sect', for causing deaths, organising the group and illegally collecting money" (Reuters 25 Jan. 2017).

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.

Notes

[1] According to a 2013 article on the True Jesus Church Movement, written by Jiexia Zhai Autry, an Adjunct Professor at the George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, who has conducted research and taught courses on China and on religion (Baylor ISR n.d.), the True Jesus Church is a "Pentecostal Chinese religious group" in China (Autry 2013).

[2] According to its website, the Information Center for Human Rights & Democracy is a Hong Kong-based organization "that provides China's human rights information to international media, the UN and governments" (Information Center for Human Rights & Democracy n.d.).

[3] A 2011 article published by The Jamestown Foundation, whose mission "is to inform and educate policy makers and the broader community about events and trends in those societies which are strategically or tactically important to the United States" (The Jamestown Foundation n.d.), describes "'The Leading Small Group for Preventing and Handling the Problem of Heretical Organizations' (zhongyang fangfan he chuli xiejiao wenti lingdao xiaozu)" as a "key leading group" used by the Chinese Communist Party and whose "targets now include house church Christians, Buddhists and other religious or spiritual groups" (The Jamestown Foundation 16 Sept. 2011).

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