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14 October 2021

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China: The Church of Almighty God (CAG) (quan neng shen jiao 全能神教; Quannengshen 全能神), also known as "Eastern Lightning" including its leaders, location and activities; treatment of members by authorities; religious texts used; whether all members have access to religious texts (2019–October 2021)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to sources, the CAG was founded in 1991 (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021; Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021), and began in Henan province (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021).

Sources indicated that the CAG's beliefs are "[h]eterodox Christianity" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021) or are "derived from [an] unorthodox interpretation of a few Bible verses from Christianity" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) who is an expert on Chinese religion and has published a book on China's religious revival, stated that the CAG is a "messianic offshoot" and its beliefs "are not mainstream Christian" (Senior Fellow 18 Aug. 2021). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Massimo Introvigne, the Director of the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) [1] and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of CESNUR*, who has written multiple articles and published a book on the CAG in 2020, noted that the CAG is "classified by the scholars who have studied it as a Christ[i]an new religious movement" defined as a group whose "background is recognizably Christian, but which would not [be] considered as orthodox by mainline Protestant and Catholic churches" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an associate professor at the Université de Paris who researches the history of Chinese Protestantism stated that the CAG "is a [P]rotestant-related new religious group heavily characterized by Millennialism (eschatology, the second coming of Christ)" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

According to sources, in 1995 Chinese authorities labelled the CAG as a *xie jiao* 邪教 [2] (CSW 1 Mar. 2021, 2; Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021) or a "cult" (Dui Hua 10 July 2014).

1.1 COVID-19

Information on the CAG during the COVID-19 pandemic was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Introvigne, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CAG "took extraordinary measures" including "suspend[ing] all gatherings, mov[ing] most of their activities online, and basically counsel[ing] their members to stay home" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

2. Background

According to Introvigne, "most" of the CAG's founders "belonged to a Chinese religious group nicknamed the Shouters, whose origins can be found in a Chinese schism of the Brethren" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The same source stated that "[s]cholars ... recognize, ... that CAG's origins are in a Protestant Calvinist and Holiness tradition and in the Brethren movement," but that "most CAG members, except a few leaders who have a theological education, are not aware nor very much interested in this genealogy" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). For additional information on the Shouters, see Response to Information Request CHN106373 of October 2019.

Corroborating information on the background of the CAG could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.1 Foundation and Beliefs

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the President of the ChinaAid Association (ChinaAid), a US-based international non-profit Christian human rights organization committed to "promoting religious freedom and the rule of law in China" (ChinaAid n.d.), indicated that "[d]octrinally, [u]nlike other traditional historical orthodox Christian groups

who believe [in] God of Trinity (One God, three persons-Father, Son and Holy Spirit), [the] CAG only believe[s] [in] a monolithic god" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a research associate at a university in Hong Kong stated that "doctrinally" CAG adherents are "different from Christianity (or common Christian groups)" in the following two ways:

1. They believe Jesus has already come back in the form of a woman in China which holds the same divine status of Jesus that came 2,000 ...[years] ago, whereas Christianity holds the belief that Jesus had returned at the End of the World which has not yet taken place. Doctrinally[,] Christianity believes in Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit, and th[e] CAG believes in a Quatnity: Father, Son, Spirit, and this [f]emale Jesus.
2. They have a source of [d]ivine review message other than the Bible, namely the words from this female Jesus who has continuously given messages allegedly from God, and is still giving new messages. In other words[,] this group has a continuous revelation and the messages from God are still coming. Whereas Christianity adheres to a closed revelation ... with the revealed truth held within the Bible. (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021)

According to the Associate Professor, the CAG "integrates not only Christian doctrine, but also Chinese popular belief[s] such as China's lord of Hell, Heavenly Lord, and register of lifespan" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

Sources noted that a central aspect of CAG belief is that history can be divided into three stages: the Age of Law; the Age of Grace; and the Age of Kingdom (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021; President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021; Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor also stated that together the three stages constitute "God's six-thousand-year management plan" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). According to the President of ChinaAid, the Age of Law was prior to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Age of Grace was after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth "to the age of [the] Chinese female Jesus reincarnation known

as Ms Yang," and the Age of Kingdom is the period of time "after [the] Chinese female Jesus [was] reincarnated around 1991" until "the end of the world" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). Introvigne provided the following information regarding the CAG's three stages of history:

God imparted different teachings in each age. These teachings were valid for that age, but are superseded by God's teaching in subsequent age(s). Although they maintain a certain value, God's teachings for a past age should be interpreted according to the teachings for the most recent age.

The Age of Law corresponds to the Old Testament, when God revealed himself to the Jews as Jehovah or God the Father. The Age of Grace corresponds to the New Testament, when God revealed himself to the world as Jesus Christ. The Age of Kingdom started in 1991, when God started revealing himself to the world as Almighty God. (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a sessional academic at the University of Melbourne who authored a book about the CAG stated that the CAG "believes that Jesus has already returned to China in human form," and it places "more of an emphasis on the Almighty God's judgment than other Christian groups" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). According to the Senior Fellow, a CAG "belief" is that Jesus has returned "to life in rural China" (Senior Fellow 18 Aug. 2021). Introvigne noted that the CAG believes that to "save all humanity" God "who [was] once incarnated in a male body in Jesus" was "this time incarnated in a female body as Almighty God" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor stated that CAG adherents believe that "[i]n the last age, Jesus has returned as a Chinese woman ... to finish the work of Jehovah and Jesus and institute a kingdom of peace and joy" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). According to the President of ChinaAid, the

CAG believes Jesus has "reincarnated" as a Chinese woman and the CAG's "most important belief aspect" is "the revelations of its female Almighty" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021).

Introvigne stated that for the CAG this female body "belongs to a Chinese woman" who "according to most scholars" is Yang Xiangbin, although the CAG "does not confirm nor den[y] that this is the civil name of the person they worship as Almighty God, and most younger members have never heard the name 'Yang Xiangbin'" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the President of Solidarité Chine [3], an NGO whose "aim is to bring help to Chinese democrats and keep the memory of the Tian'anmen Massacre alive," indicated that the CAG members they spoke with "would only mention their belief in 'God', namely the woman they consider as the reincarnation of Jesus" whom they "admitted" was "'real', ... came from the North-West of China, had a name, lived in America," but that "'God' was the only way they could mention her" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021). The Sessional Academic reported that "CAG does not name its leaders," and that the concept of "Yang Xiangbin as the Female Christ" is "nowhere in CAG materials" and comes "from Chinese state media" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021).

Introvigne stated that while members are "aware that Almighty God is a woman, members refer to Almighty God as 'he' rather than 'she,' to underline that the same God ... in the Old Testament, and ... in the New Testament ... speaks today as Almighty God" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The Sessional Academic, however, indicated that "[i]n the earlier days of the movement, [the] CAG was reported to believe in a [f]emale Christ and this was supported by texts on the CAG's website. More recently, however, references to the female nature of the divinity have been expunged" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). According to the Associate Professor, for the CAG "Jesus has returned as a Chinese woman," however "[l]ater, in the CAG's preaching, the gender of Chinese Jesus is intentionally neutralized" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

The Sessional Academic stated that "[s]ome" of the CAG members they spoke with in Australia "claimed they had never believed in a [f]emale Christ" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021).

According to Introvigne, for CAG members "eradicating our sinful nature" is "necessary" since this "purification" was not performed by Jesus, and God therefore "incarnated again as Almighty God to perform it" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

The President of Solidarité Chine noted that the CAG members they spoke with stated that they "were convinced by the CAG's teachings and truth" following "personal experiences" which "[u]sually" involved themselves or a close friend or relative being "sick" and getting "healthy again through the help of other CAG 'brothers and sisters'" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021).

2.2 Religious Texts Used

Sources indicate that the central CAG text is called the *Word Appears in the Flesh* [4] (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021; Director 21 Aug. 2021; Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021), which is a "holy scripture" containing "the revelations of Almighty God" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). Introvigne provided the following information about the *Word Appears in the Flesh*:

It is a book of 2,400 pages, which presents a very elaborated theology. It is easily available (where the CAG has churches open to the public, as ... in the U.S., South Korea, and Spain, everybody can visit a church and buy the book, or could before COVID[-19], after which access to churches was severely restricted), and members are encouraged to read and study it. However, ... not all have the skills and leisure to go through thousands of pages and catch all the subtleties. (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021)

According to the Associate Professor, "each" of the "[t]hree [a]ges" in the "group's concept" has "its own messiah and divine literature" according to the following breakdown: "the Age of Law has Jehovah and the Old Testament, the Age of Grace has Jesus and the New Testament, and the Age of the Kingdom has Almighty God and God's New Word, Word Appears in the Flesh" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). The same source stated that the *Word Appears in the Flesh* "must be studied by every member" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

Introvigne indicated that the CAG also has "shorter and easier books and booklets summarizing the main contents of the *Word Appears in the Flesh*" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The Sessional Academic stated that there are "numerous compilations/excerpts from this text [that] bear other names" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). The same source also noted that there are "other common texts," which include "anecdotes of the Almighty God's blessings and retribution, and hymnbooks" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). The President of ChinaAid stated that the CAG has "published a few booklets of 'Fa Sheng' (Proclamations) by th[e] female Jesus," as well as "hymn books" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021).

According to the Research Associate, the CAG "keep[s] coming out with new messages" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021). The President of Solidarité Chine noted that the CAG members they knew "seemed to be discovering new texts fairly often" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021).

Introvigne stated that while the CAG is not "'against the Bible,'" members consider the Bible to have been "copied, translated, or mistranslated so many times" over "the course of the centuries" that it ended up containing "'many human errors'" in addition to "'genuine messages from God' and 'truthful insights'"; *The Word Appears in the Flesh* helps readers to "discern the 'errors' from the real 'messages from God' in the Bible" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The Sessional Academic

noted that CAG members "quote frequently from the Bible to substantiate their theological claims and criticisms of detractors," but "CAG texts describe the Bible as 'aged and moldy', superseded by *The Word Appears in the Flesh*" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). The President of ChinaAid stated that the Bible is "used as a basis for [CAG's] worldview and core beliefs as written in *The Word Appears in the Flesh*," but is otherwise "nonessential" to members' core beliefs (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor indicated that for members the Bible is deemed as "elementary knowledge," "if not obsolete" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). According to the President of ChinaAid, CAG adherents "rarely" draw on "the whole Bible," and instead "use some verses" that "support" their "new doctrines" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The Research Associate noted that the Bible plays "[v]ery little" role in the beliefs and practices of CAG members, "except to justify that the [f]emale Jesus from China was predicted in the Bible" in "Matthew 24:27," which reads: "[f]or as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021). The President of Solidarité Chine stated that while the CAG members they spoke with said "they also read the Bible," "[t]hey were obviously not very familiar with the usual aspects of Christian religion such as the most common prayers" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021). The Senior Fellow noted that the Bible "is of central importance" to CAG adherents, but "so too" are "the writings of its founders" (Senior Fellow 18 Aug. 2021). Introvigne indicated that "a few leaders have a good knowledge of the Bible," but that the "majority of CAG members" "do not bother reading the Bible at all" since they "are persuaded that what is valid in the Bible is largely quoted, presented, and interpreted in *The Word Appears in the Flesh*" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The same source stated that "except some high leaders," it is "not unusual" to meet CAG members who are "not familiar" with Bible stories that "most Christians know" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

2.2.1 Member Access to Religious Texts

According to sources, ["almost" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021)] "all" members have access to the *Word Appears in the Flesh* (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021; Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). The President of ChinaAid indicated that the text is "widely made available in different formats including hard copies and electronic versions as well as on the internet" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The President of Solidarité Chine stated that "[a]ll members seem to have access to the texts sent by 'God' via email" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021). The Research Associate noted that the "[u]tter[ed] [m]essages from God" are "easily available," "can [be] easily download[ed] from [the CAG's] website," and CAG members "can have copies if they want to" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021).

The Session Academic indicated that the religious texts of the CAG are "prohibited by the Chinese authorities, but nevertheless circulate widely" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). In follow-up correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Research Associate noted that CAG "members both inside and outside of China can download" religious texts as electronic materials, and "hard copies are also easily available for their members, both inside and outside of China" (Research Associate 13 Oct. 2021). However, Introvigne stated that accessing the CAG websites in China requires bypassing the "Great Firewall" [5] (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

2.2.2 Central Aspects of CAG Beliefs

The Sessional Academic stated that CAG adherents would be familiar with the core CAG belief that "Christ has returned to earth to end the present age and judge mankind, beginning with Christians" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). Introvigne provided the following information regarding the common central aspects of CAG beliefs familiar to adherents:

All members would know the doctrine of the three ages (Age of Law, Age of Grace, Age of Kingdom), that we live in the Age of Kingdom, that the normative revelation for the Age of Kingdom is found in the revelations of Almighty God, that Almighty God incarnated in China and started speaking in 1991. They also know that Almighty God is female, but may be reluctant to say it to non-members, since in their theology giving any detail on the physical person of Almighty God is regarded as disrespectful (it is much more a theological issue than a security one aimed at protecting Almighty God from Chinese harassment). They will never ever (assuming they know it) pronounce the civil name of Almighty God, and they will always refer to Almighty God as 'he' rather than 'she.' (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021)

According to the Research Associate, the central aspects of CAG beliefs commonly familiar to adherents are as follows:

- "That [f]emale Jesus had already come";
- "That the End Time is unfolding now," and that "only those who join th[e] CAG will be saved in the End Time";
- That "current Christian churches" are holding on to "false teachings";
- That CAG members have "a missiological mandate to save Christians from falsehood" with the CAG's "revealed truth";
- That CAG members "will be persecuted by other Christians and authorities," and that "the persecution and suffering that they experience confirms that they are the holders of [t]ruth";
- "That God will fight the Evil Power (namely the Red Dragon)" in the "final battle";
- "That God will ultimately conquer the Red Dragon";
- "That CAG stands on the side of God";
- "That the Red Dragon is identified as the Communist Party of China" (Research Associate 9 Sept. 2021).

The President of Solidarité Chine provided the following information regarding central aspects of CAG beliefs commonly familiar to adherents:

The central aspects seem to be that the world is coming to an end soon, that the Red Dragon is there to destroy China and, from there on, the world. It seems they believe 'God' got reincarnated in China because that is where evil is at its worst in this world. By fighting against the Red Dragon, they will save the world. The members of the CAG shall also be saved, and that is why they need to convert as many people as possible, to prevent the end of humanity. (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021)

3. Structure and Leadership

According to the President of ChinaAid, "[h]ardly anyone," including insiders know the CAG leadership structure "fully," since it is "a very sophisticated internationally operational extreme secret structure" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The Research Associate indicated that the CAG is "secretive" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021). Sources stated the structure of the group is ["very" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021)] "hierarchical" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021; Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

According to Introvigne, the CAG "does have leaders" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The same source also provided the following information regarding how "some" CAG members interpret the CAG's leadership structure:

Some CAG members would ... [insist] that in the CAG 'there are no leaders.' This is based on Matthew 23:8-10, where Jesus told the disciples to 'call no man master,' which they translate as 'call no man leader.' It is also the case that the English 'leader' has been phonetically imported into the Chinese language as *ling dao ren*, and has often a negative meaning to indicate an authoritarian, harsh leader. (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021)

Introvigne noted that "[t]he person worshiped as Almighty God is the only source of doctrine and theology" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor stated that "[i]t seems that the female Jesus does not interfere in the group's direction, not directly at least" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

The Sessional academic provided the following information regarding the leadership structure of the CAG:

CAG is a tiered organization. A Supervisory Unit (监察组 jiancha zu) is an administrative structure responsible for communicating instructions from 'the top', and inspecting and reporting on churches every six months. Leaders (带领 dailing) and their Assistants (配搭 peida) lead churches at regional (区 qū), sub-regional (小区 xiaoqū) and church (教会 jiaohui) levels. Each region and sub-region has a Preacher (讲道员 jiangdao yuan), and Deacons for Evangelism (传福音执事 chuan fuyin zhishi). The division of responsibilities between levels is not very specific, but all officers must report to their superiors, and supervise and guide their subordinates to the 'Truth.' (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021)

The Associate Professor indicated that the CAG leadership structure "is organized at several levels, from the leader and the central administrative group at the top, down to the diocese, parish, local church, and group levels," and that "[a] group is composed of three or more people when they are in a dangerous environment and up to seven members when they are in a safe one" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). Introvigne stated that "leaders of the CAG at the local and supra-local level are democratically elected and serve for one year (or two years in some cases)" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The same source noted that "[t]he smaller unit is the church (20 to 50 members), which elects a church leader" and that "[c]hurch leaders in turn elect subdistrict leaders, and subdistrict leaders elect district leaders" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

According to the same source, these "[s]ubdistricts and districts ... are created on the basis of the number of CAG members in a geographical area" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

Introvigne indicated that for the CAG diaspora, "there may be 'national' leaders" in a particular country, who "normally keep a low profile and use their religious rather than civil name" to protect relatives in China from "retaliation" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.1 Zhao Weishan

According to Introvigne, "while Almighty God leads the CAG through revelations, the day-by-day administration of [the] CAG is presided over by a male leader they call '[t]he Man used by the Holy Spirit'," who "is the top administrative leader" and holds this role "for life" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The same source stated that "[a]ll members would" be familiar with this detail (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). According to the same source, this male leader's name is "Zhao Weishan" and "[m]ost members (but not all)" know this name, "but they are not encouraged to divulge" it because "his role is regarded as more important than his personality" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The President of ChinaAid indicated that it is "believed" that Zhao Weishan is the "key founder and current leader of the CAG" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor stated that Zhao Weishan is "reportedly" the "current leader" who is "referred to as 'the Man whom God (or the Holy Spirit) uses' in the CAG's preaching" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). The Sessional Academic stated that the "CAG does not name its leaders" and the name of "Zhao Weishan as mastermind" has "come from Chinese state media" and is "nowhere in CAG materials" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021).

The President of ChinaAid indicated that Zhao Weishan "escaped to [the] US in early 2000" and "is believed" to be living in the New York/New Jersey area (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor noted that he has lived in the US "since 2000" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

4. Locations and Size

4.1 Locations

According to the Sessional Academic, the CAG operates "[e]verywhere" in China (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). The Research Associate stated that the CAG has "spread to every province" (Research Associate 9 Sept. 2021). Introvigne indicated that the CAG operates "[a]lmost everywhere" in China (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor stated that the CAG operates "throughout China except Tibet" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). According to Introvigne, the CAG has "large communities" in Xinjiang where "some members" are "detained" "in the same 'transformation through education' camps" as Uyghurs (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The President of ChinaAid stated that the CAG "reportedly" operates in "most" of China with the "main followers" concentrated especially in "northeast and southeast China" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor indicated that the CAG is "particularly active in the Henan province and [n]ortheast China (Liaoning province, Heilongjiang province and Jilin province), where the leader Z[hao] Weishan has lived as [a] preacher" and where the CAG was founded (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). According to the President of Solidarité Chine, the CAG "operates in many provinces" and the CAG members they met "came from many different provinces," including Shandong, Jiangsu, Shanxi, and Hubei (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021).

4.2 Size

Sources indicated that the size of the CAG inside China is unknown (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021; Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The Associate Professor stated that because the CAG "operates more discreetly than ever" since the start of a "government crackdown in 2014" it is "difficult [to] have an estimate o[f] its size" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). The same source estimated the CAG to have "more than one million members" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). The President of Solidarité Chine noted that the CAG members they spoke with stated the CAG had "around 10 million" members (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021). The President of ChinaAid stated that the size of the CAG is "hard to tell," but "[p]erhaps between 1 to 5 million" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). According to the Research Associate, we "[c]annot have an accurate figure," but "from" the Chinese government's "responses" and the CAG's "oversea[s] activities," there should be "at least" "20,000" members in China, and "ma[y] be equal amounts overseas" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021).

According to Introvigne, the CCP's 2014 stated figure of "3-4 million" CAG adherents in China was "the last time" it provided a "somewhat more precise estimate" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). Introvigne stated, however, that the CCP's "apparatus" to "eradicate" the CAG and other xie jiao is "suspected of inflating the numbers of members of [the] CAG and other groups," while also "sometimes" reporting that they have "greatly reduced" these groups' membership (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

A report by the Dui Hua Foundation (Dui Hua), a "nonprofit humanitarian organization" based in San Francisco focused on "clemency and better treatment for at-risk detainees" in China (Dui Hua n.d), states that according to an indictment filed in 2019 by the Xuzhou Quanshan District Procuratorate against an alleged recruiter for the CAG, by the end of July 2018 the CAG had recruited "over 28,000 members" in the Xuzhou region of Jiangsu province (Dui Hua 2021).

5. Activities

Sources indicate that proselytizing is a central CAG activity (Senior Fellow 18 Aug. 2021; Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021; Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). Introvigne stated that prior to COVID-19 the CAG was a "typical proselytizing movement," whose "main activity," which members "devote significant time to," was "in-person evangelizations" conducted "clandestinely, in China" by "moving ... from town to town" to "make friends, and tell them about the CAG faith" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

According to Introvigne, other CAG activities include "studying CAG scriptures, alone or in small groups" and holding "minimalistic but rich worship services in which they read their scriptures, hear sermons, and sing" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). According to the President of Solidarité Chine, the CAG members they spoke to "would get together ... at least 3 times a week, pray together and read the scriptures that they received from 'God'" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021). The Research Associate indicated that CAG member activities include "[s]mall group meetings to study the female Jesus[']s messages, training people to do mission work for new recruitments, [running] many online chat and worship programs, and productions of their own hymns, literature and worship programs" (Research Associate 29 Aug. 2021). The Sessional Academic stated that CAG activities include "singing hymns, praying to Almighty God, holding church services," and "reading, compiling, and distributing texts (primarily volumes of testimonies)" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). According to the President of Solidarité Chine, who organized "events" in Paris "for a Democratic China" that were attended by CAG members, members "spend a lot of time preparing material for information and propaganda," which includes "sophisticated booklets," which they "carr[y] around" when participating in events, printed on "quality" paper and containing "pictures" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021).

Introvigne stated that "in the last five years," "[v]ideos and websites" have become "an important evangelization tool," but "in China videos can only circulate clandestinely and accessing CAG websites means being able to circumvent the Great Firewall" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

The Associate Professor stated that "[s]ince 2016, the CAG's oversea[s] members have actively participated in conferences, meetings, and demonstrations in favour of refugee reception" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

According to the Associate Professor, the CAG has "adopted some [of the] Chinese Communist Party's political rhetoric and practices due to the period during which the leader of the movement grew up" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021). In follow-up correspondence with the Research Directorate, the same source added that these practices included "criticism and self-criticism meeting[s] for members (especially new members) ... and mutual denunciation" (Associate Professor 11 Sept. 2021). According to the President of ChinaAid, the CAG "is known for" having, in the early 1990s, "coercive[ly] indoctrinate[ed] and conver[ted] ... traditionally orthodox Christian believers ... in both House churches [6] and [Three-Self Patriotic Movement - TSPM] churches [7]" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The same source stated that "[c]onvert[ing] other non-CAG believers to CAG is [a] religiously mandated mission" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). In follow-up correspondence the Associate Professor stated that

[t]he CAG has a special proselytizing strategy. It does not tend to be universal and looks for converting only those who deserve salvation. Members of other Protestant churches are meant to be the CAG's priority target. At same time, the church even adopts a competitive mechanism to stimulate evangelization work. Evangelization work even becomes a

key performance indicator for local leaders, who run the risk of being replaced if they fail to meet their quota of converts. (Associate Professor 11 Sept. 2021)

The President of ChinaAid stated that on "[s]everal occasions in [the] 1990s" CAG members were "credibly reported" to have been "involved [in the] abduction and kidnapping of key house church leaders including renown[ed] leaders in [the] China Gospel Fellowship (CGF)" [8] with the intention of "coercive indoctrination" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). ChinaSource, a non-profit organization registered in California with offices in Colorado and Hong Kong, and which is a "partner and platform for educating the global church on critical issues facing the church and ministries in China, and for connecting Christians inside and outside China" (ChinaSource n.d), reports that on 16 April 2002, 34 "important church workers" of the CGF were "tricked ... kidnapped and detained" by CAG members "attempt[ing] to force them to abandon their earlier Christian faith" and "accept" CAG teachings (ChinaSource 14 Aug. 2018). The same source states that after Chinese Public Security Bureau (PSB) "involvement and investigations," CAG members "were forced to release" the CGF "church workers" (ChinaSource 14 Aug. 2018). However, in a book on the CAG, Introvigne, notes that "none of the accusations concerning the use of violence by the CAG for proselytization purposes has been proved" (Introvigne 2020, 116).

5.1 2014 Murder

According to sources, on 28 May 2014, in a McDonald's restaurant in Zhaoyuan, Shandong province, a woman was murdered when she refused to provide her phone number to a group of people who had requested it (Introvigne 2020, 88; CTV News 21 Aug. 2014; *USA Today* 21 Aug. 2014). In his book on the CAG, Introvigne states that "Chinese police and media quickly attributed the murder to the CAG"

(Introvigne 2020, 88). According to the Associate Professor, the incident was a "failed evangelization" committed by some members of the CAG (Associate Professor 11 Sept. 2021). In his book on the CAG, Introvigne states that the "murder" was a "crime committed ... by a religious group different from the CAG" and was "transformed by Chinese propaganda into a CAG crime ... both at home and internationally" (Introvigne 2020, 82). The Associate Professor noted that the CAG was "officially banned in China" following the 2014 murder of the woman, which also "led to a large[-]scale crackdown on the CAG" (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021).

6. Treatment by Authorities

Introvigne stated that the first group the CCP declared a xie jiao, in 1983, was the Shouters, which included "most of those" who would later form the CAG, including Zhao Weishan (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021).

Section 33 of the Amendment (IX) to the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China, passed in 2015, provides the following:

Article 300 of the Criminal Law is amended to read: "Whoever organizes or utilizes any superstitious sect, secret society, or cult organization or uses superstition to sabotage the implementation of any law or administrative regulation of the state shall be sentenced to imprisonment of not less than three years but not more than seven years in addition to a fine; if the circumstances are especially serious, be sentenced to imprisonment of not less than seven years or life imprisonment in addition to a fine or forfeiture of property; or if the circumstances are minor, be sentenced to imprisonment of not more than three years, criminal detention, surveillance or deprivation of political rights in addition to a fine or be sentenced to a fine only.

"Whoever organizes or utilizes any superstitious sect, secret society, or cult organization or uses superstition to cheat any other person, which leads to the person's serious injury or death shall be punished in

accordance with the provisions of the preceding paragraph.

"Whoever also commits the crime of raping a woman or swindling any person of his or her property while committing a crime as mentioned in paragraph 1 shall be punished according to the provisions on the joinder of penalties for plural crimes." (China 2015)

Sources report that the 2015 amendment raised the maximum penalty associated with Article 300 from 15 years to life imprisonment (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 115; Dui Hua 28 May 2020).

Introvigne stated that the CCP "prohibit[s]" groups declared as xie jiao and considers them to be "hostile to the government and dangerous" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). Sources indicate that the CAG is "persecuted" in China (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021; Senior Fellow 18 Aug. 2021; President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021). According to the Sessional Academic, the CAG's 1995 designation as a xie jiao "pav[ed] the way for its persecution" and it is now "[h]arshly suppressed" and "persecuted with near uniformity" (Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021). The Senior Fellow noted that the government has "launched a propaganda campaign against [the] CAG, trying to show that it is an evil cult" (Senior Fellow 18 Aug. 2021).

Sources stated that the CAG's treatment by authorities is similar to that of Falun Gong (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021; President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). Introvigne noted that "being active in any capacity in the CAG is regarded as a crime in China, and it exposes [one] to serious jail penalties" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The same source described having analyzed Chinese Supreme Court "decisions rendered against some 200 CAG members" in which the accused were "sentenced to spend several years in jail" for "attending illegal prayer meetings, keeping CAG materials at home, or evangelizing even in a very private way" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The President of ChinaAid stated that "China has not tolerated the [CAG's] existence" and has "heavily crack[ed] down [on] CAG members"; based on "widely credible"

reports, the treatment of CAG members by Chinese authorities includes "[a]rbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, [t]orture, and extralegal measures" (President of ChinaAid 25 Aug. 2021). The President of Solidarité Chine stated that CAG members are "followed, arrested, persecuted, and some have died of exhaustion or bad treatment" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021). According to the Senior Fellow, the CAG is "widely persecuted for not being part of the officially sanctioned church," with members "arrested, imprisoned, and forced to recant" (Senior Fellow 18 Aug. 2021).

A report by, CSW, a UK-based organization that advocates for the right to freedom of religion and documents violations of religious rights (CSW n.d), states that CAG members outside of China report "ongoing and serious violations" against CAG members, including "torture in detention, intrusive surveillance, and intense pressure to recant" (CSW 1 Mar. 2021, 2). According to Introvigne, "many witnesses" have "testified" that "prisoners of conscience in Chinese jails and detention camps," including CAG prisoners "risk torture or extra-judicial killing" (Introvigne 21 Aug. 2021). The President of Solidarité Chine stated that CAG members in France they spoke with "spent many hours telling [them] their stories, the stories of friends or family members who had died, or disappeared, or had come home mutilated or under shock" (President of Solidarité Chine 5 Sept. 2021).

In contrast, the Associate Professor provided the following information regarding the CAG's treatment by authorities:

[D]uring my fieldwork carried out [in 2016 in a coastal city in Southeast China where religious politics are relatively flexible (Associate professor 11 Sept. 2021)] I was told [by a friend working in the local Political Consultative Conference (Associate Professor 11 Sept. 2021)] that generally ordinary followers of the CAG would be released soon after they signed a guarantee promising to leave the group, and old followers were just alerted by local authority [not to take part in the CAG anymore

(Associate Professor 11 Sept. 2021)]. ... It also depends on local religious policy which is more severe in some cities while flexible in others. (Associate Professor 27 Aug. 2021)

The same source noted that when "[l]ocal police know" the CAG is "only a social life" for a practitioner, they will "not lose their time investigating them" (Associate Professor 11 Sept. 2021). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to "incomplete" statistics released by the CAG for 2019, "at least 32,815 CAG Christians were arrested or harassed by the authorities," 3,824 "suffered various forms of torture and forced indoctrination," and 19 died "as a result of persecution" (Church of Almighty God 1 Feb. 2020, 3). The CAG's "incomplete" statistics for 2020 state that "at least" 42,807 "CAG Christians" were "directly persecuted," 7,055 were arrested, 5,587 were "subjected to torture or brainwashing," 1,098 were "given prison sentences" (including 57 members "sentenced to seven years or more"), and 21 members "were persecuted to death" (Church of Almighty God 3 Feb 2021).

According to the Dui Hua report, in 2019 "a large crackdown" on the CAG occurred in Xuzhou, Jiangsu, including seven separate indictments and judgements with 12 people receiving "fixed-term sentences" and 2 people receiving "suspended sentences" (Dui Hua 2021). The same source reports that "the majority" of these defendants in these cases were women (Dui Hua 2021). Dui Hua states that it has documented 47 indictments brought against the CAG in Xuzhou municipality between 2018 and 2020, and that there have been 164 total cases recorded in the region since 1999 (Dui Hua 2021). According to Bitter Winter, "an online magazine on religious liberty and human rights in China published by CESNUR" and whose Editor-in-Chief is Introvigne (Bitter Winter n.d), in July 2019 the CCP began a "six-month-long

crackdown on the Christian faith" in Jiangsu province, focusing on "five prefecture-level cities in the north of the province" including Xuzhou (Bitter Winter 5 Nov. 2019).

Dui Hua states that in August 2018 a woman in Xuzhou was detained and accused of "leading the effort to recruit new" CAG members, as well as "developing propaganda materials and fundraising efforts" (Dui Hua 2021). According to an August 2018 article by Bitter Winter, since April of that year the "Chinese authorities have been implementing a national campaign against the [CAG]," and the PSB in Xuzhou "also issued an order to mobilize" the city's police force to "arrest" CAG members (Bitter Winter 14 Aug. 2018). The Dui Hua report states that the Xuzhou woman detained was accused, along with two other co-defendants, of raising "tens of thousands of dollars," some of which was "then transferred overseas" (Dui Hua 2021). Dui Hua reports that the same woman was a "key witness" in "several" 2019 "cult trials related to Almighty God" (Dui Hua 2021). The same source states that in July 2019 the same procuratorate filed an indictment against another woman, who was "named as a leader of the CAG Xuzhou region" and also accused of "developing propaganda materials and fundraising efforts" (Dui Hua 2021).

According to a 2019 article by Radio Free Asia (RFA), "a private, nonprofit corporation, funded through the US Agency for Global Media, an independent federal government agency" (RFA n.d), a man in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region was sentenced to four years in prison "for proselytizing to the local chief of police" by "mailing 18 copies of handwritten, photocopied pamphlets titled 'The New Eternal Gospel' of the [CAG] to the director of the Luchuan county police department, among other officials" (RFA 10 May 2019). The same source reports that the man was "initially held on administrative detention for 15 days" in November 2018, "but continued to be held under criminal detention after the sentence ended" and was "formally arrested" later that month (RFA 10 May 2019).

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 its official website, CESNUR is an Italy-based "network of independent but related organizations of scholars in various countries, devoted to promot[ing] scholarly research in the field of new religious consciousness" (CESNUR n.d).

[2] The Chinese term *xie jiao* can be translated as "cults," (Introvigne 2020, 18) "evil cults," (Introvigne 2020, 18; Sessional Academic 22 Aug. 2021), or "heterodox teachings" (Introvigne 2020, 18-19).

[3] The President of Solidarité Chine noted that they had "relatively frequent" interactions with Church of Almighty God (CAG) members until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (President of Solidarité Chine 27 Aug. 2021).

[4] An English translation of the *World Appears in the Flesh* is available on the official website of the CAG (The Church of Almighty God [2014]).

[5] According to the Cable News Network (CNN), China's "Great Firewall" refers to the "massive Internet surveillance and content control system" which allows the government to "block information it deems counter to its interests" (CNN 25 Mar. 2015).

[6] Freedom House reports that Chinese "house churches" are "underground" Christian churches that are not formally "registered" with the Chinese state (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 11, 16). For further information on house churches, see Response to Information Request CHN200760 of October 2021.

[7] According to Freedom House, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) (or the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement) is a Protestant organization in China, which is one of five "corporatist 'patriotic' associations affiliated with each of the five officially recognized religions" in China, and which "form the foundation of the [Chinese Communist Party's (CCP)] institutional controls" as it is "closely supervised and directed" by CCP organs (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 15). The same source reports that the TSPM was founded in 1954, and that patriotic associations including the TSPM were designed to "link the party, the government, and China's ... Christians while severing ties with foreign churches" (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 44). For further information on Patriotic Christian churches, see Response to Information Request CHN106341 of August 2019.

[8] According to ChinaSource, the China Global Fellowship (CGF) is a "house church network" which was established in 1988 (ChinaSource 14 Aug. 2018).

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Internet sites, including: Amnesty International; Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Religious Freedom; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; BBC; Bertelsmann Stiftung; Center for Studies on New Religions; *China Daily*; The Daily Beast; Deutsche Welle; ecoi.net; European Federation for Freedom of Belief; Factiva; *Global Times*; *The Guardian*; Human Rights Watch; International Crisis Group; International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees; Italy – Ministry of the Interior, National Commission for the Right of Asylum, COI Unit; Netherlands – Ministry of Foreign Affairs; *New Europe*;

The New York Times; *South China Morning Post*; UN – Refworld; US – Congressional-Executive Commission on China, Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom; US-China Catholic Association; *The Washington Post*; Xinhua News Agency.

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