

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	470
Land:	Kina
Kilde:	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
Titel:	Information on the Olive Tree Church in Beijing and in Foshan, Guangdong Province, including founders, history, beliefs and areas of activity; treatment of members by authorities (2013-2017).
Udgivet:	13. oktober 2017
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	10. januar 2018

[EN](#) | [DE](#)

- **Source:**
IRB - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
- **Title:**
China: Information on the Olive Tree Church in Beijing and in Foshan, Guangdong Province, including founders, history, beliefs and areas of activity; treatment of members by authorities (2013-July 2017) [CHN105966.E]
- **Publication date:**
13 October 2017
- **ecoi.net summary:** Query response on Olive Tree Church in Beijing and in Foshan, Guangdong province (2013 - July 2017) [ID 349158]
- **Countries:**
China
- **Original link** <http://www.irb.gc.ca/Eng/ResRec/RirRdi/Pages/index.aspx?doc=457242&pls=1>

Recommended citation:

IRB - Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: China: Information on the Olive Tree Church in Beijing and in Foshan, Guangdong Province, including founders, history, beliefs and areas of activity; treatment of members by authorities (2013-July 2017) [CHN105966.E], 13 October 2017 (available at ecoi.net) http://www.ecoi.net/local_link/349158/481053_en.html (accessed 10 January 2018)



Immigration and
Refugee Board of Canada

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

China: Information on the Olive Tree Church in Beijing and in Foshan, Guangdong Province, including founders, history, beliefs and areas of activity; treatment of members by authorities (2013-July 2017) [CHN105966.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Information on the Olive Tree Church (*gan lan shu jiao hui*) was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

1. Olive Tree Church in Beijing

The information in this section was obtained from two 2013 articles in Christian Times, a Chinese-language news site launched in 2008 which describes itself as [translation] "a Christian, cross-denominational general information website that speaks from the perspective of the Chinese church and Chinese Christians" and states that it is "not affiliated with any church or religious group" (Christian Times n.d.).

1.1 Founding and Leader

The Beijing Olive Tree Church was founded in 2003 and was originally called the Tiantong Church (7 Mar. 2013). Pastor Zhou Ming, described as [translation] "a highly skilled cardiac surgeon," reportedly "did pastoral work on a part-time basis" from 2003 to 2005 (28 Feb. 2013). The Tiantong Church reportedly "divided into two churches in 2009. The one led by Pastor Zhou Ming formally changed its name to the Olive Tree Church" (7 Mar. 2013). In March 2010, Pastor Zhou "decided to serve full-time" (28 Feb. 2013).

1.2 Activities

According to a Christian Times report on a 10 year anniversary ceremony of the Beijing Olive Tree Church on 24 February 2013, Senior Pastor Zhou Ming described the development of the church according to three stages: 2003-2005; 2006-2009 and 2010-present [2013] (7 Mar. 2013). He described 2003-2005 as [translation] "the start-up stage" during which "there were only small home gatherings. During the week there was a Bible study group for married couples" (7 Mar. 2013).

During the [translation] "stabilization" or "development" stage (2006-2009), the church's activities included: a "Couples Fellowship"; the "New Life and New Living Deeper Bible Study group"; "the Seniors Fellowship"; a choir; "a number of camps supporting various types of theological training"; and a Children's

Sunday School (28 Feb. 2013). Over the course of this period, the church [translation] "increased in numbers and was forced to split its gatherings. As a result, the Tiantong Church divided into two churches, one of them being the present Beijing Olive Tree Church, led by the family of Pastor Zhou Ming" (7 Mar. 2013). Pastor Zhou's Olive Tree Church [translation] "moved into a three-storey commercial building, thereby changing its character from a 'house church' to a 'community church'" (28 Feb. 2013). After this split, the church's [translation] "pastoral team, church fellowship groups, community church and free clinics gradually developed into full maturity," and "[a]lthough the church divided because there were so many people, it also began its history of working in coalition with other churches in Beijing" (7 Mar. 2013).

Since 2010, the church has been [translation] "a full-fledged entity" (7 Mar. 2013). In 2010, the church [translation] "began five o'clock morning prayers" and "set new benchmarks in church membership, pastoral care groups, family devotions and ministry to the community" (28 Feb. 2013). In 2011, the church's primary work was its "Christian Education and Cleansing Stream Healing and Deliverance ministries" including an "Accelerated Christian Education" school (28 Feb. 2013). In 2012, the church formed a "Healing Fellowship" and organized "two sessions of a 'Men's Camp' in Beijing" (28 Feb. 2013).

1.3 Treatment by Authorities

According to a Christian Times article,

[translation]

[i]n its start-up stage [2003-2005], the Beijing Olive Tree Church was already beginning to be persecuted. When it started its gatherings in April of 2004, it often encountered interference, and was forced as a result to move several times. The church never stopped changing locations until 2009, when it had completed its sixth move. (7 Mar. 2013)

The same source states that during 2006 to 2009, "persecution and interference were a constant reality" (7 Mar. 2013).

Further and corroborating information on the Beijing Olive Tree Church and its treatment by authorities could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2. Olive Tree Church in Foshan, Guangdong Province

2.1 Leaders

Without providing further detail, a 2016 Chinese-language article by Radio Free Asia (RFA) indicates that Tan Xiuhong [translation] "opened the Olive Tree Church" in Guicheng (RFA 12 July 2016). According to RFA, Jiang Jianping was [translation] "the church's acting leader" as of July 2016 (ibid.). ChinaAid describes Jiang Jianping as "a church leader" (ChinaAid 28 July 2016).

2.2 Treatment by Authorities

In September 2014, RFA reported the following:

[translation]

Two Protestant house churches in Foshan, Guangdong - the Church of the Ark and the Olive Tree Church, attended by about fifty people, were subjected to raids last Sunday, September 21, during worship. A number of people were taken off to the local police station, and by that evening a total of six people had been placed under criminal detention. (RFA 22 Sep. 2014)

Another article by the same source indicates that [translation] the "local Church of the Ark and the Olive Tree Church are both part of the same church" and that in a "large-scale assault by authorities," on 21 September 2014, "Foshan's Olive Tree Church's lay workers Tan Xiuhong, Ma Xilu and Wen Jie were led away" (ibid. 12 July 2016). A 2014 article by ChinaAid, an "international non-profit Christian human rights organization committed to promoting religious freedom and the rule of law in China" (ChinaAid n.d.), similarly notes that in Guangdong on 21 September 2014, five churches, including the Olive Tree Church, and Foshan House Church, described as a "branch of Olive Tree Church," "were raided by special police and officials from the religious affairs bureau who claimed the gatherings weren't approved and were, therefore, illegal" (ChinaAid 29 Sep. 2014). The same source notes that "[a]t least six church members from Fangzhou Church and Olive Tree Church, which is the home church of Jiang Junjie who was delivering the sermon at Fangzhou Church, were placed under a three-day administrative detention for refusing to comply" (ibid.).

The 2014 RFA article, citing "Yang Xingquan, a lawyer knowledgeable about the situation," also reports that [translation] "[b]ibles, computers and other objects were hauled away" and that families of church members received "criminal detention notices, the charge being 'suspected use of a cult to undermine the application of the law'" (RFA 22 Sep. 2014). The same source quotes the same lawyer as indicating that these house churches had not previously been raided or harassed by police (ibid.). The same source also provides the following:

Lawyer Yang Xingquan told this reporter that, although there had been raids before on house churches, very few urban house churches had been deemed to be "cults," so the incident bears being watched closely. In addition, between the time the church members were taken away and the time the criminal detention notices were issued, less than a day had elapsed, so it can be inferred that the actions were planned. (ibid.)

According to a notice published on 17 October 2014 by the Municipal Civil Affairs Bureau of the city of Foshan, the "Foshan Olive Tree Church" was declared an illegal civil society organization and banned (China 17 Oct. 2014).

A July 2016 article by RFA reported the following:

[translation]

During a gathering of its members on July 10 [2016], a house church in Foshan, Guangdong, was raided and searched by several dozen people from the local Religious Affairs Bureau, Public Security Bureau and the Neighbourhood Committee Office. Church belongings were removed and impounded, and over twenty members were taken to the local police station and interrogated one by one. Most were released a few hours later, but four people who were either in charge of the church or were church workers, were placed under administrative detention by Public Security for four days on the grounds that the Church had failed to register. (RFA 12 July 2016)

The "meeting site rented by the church has now been closed down, and all of the church's items have been trucked away by the police and impounded" (ibid.). The same source also cites a church member as stating that "the church was called the Olive Tree Church and that the persons in charge of the church, Tan Xiuhong and Jiang Jianping, were being held under security detention by the Public Security authorities" (ibid.). In July 2016, ChinaAid reported the following:

On the morning of July 10, officials from the religious affairs bureau and police department interrupted Olive Tree Church's weekly worship service and took pictures of the scene. After confiscating church property, they took 30 of the congregants to the police station for questioning, sealed the church building and banned its members from meeting. (ChinaAid 28 July 2016)

In April 2017, RFA provided the following:

[translation]

According to the American-based China Aid Association, the Olive Tree Church in Foshan was raided and searched by over ten people from the local Public Security and Neighbourhood Office on March 19 during the course of a worship service. They accused the church of having failed to register and of conducting religious activities as an [ordinary civil] organization. They demanded that the church cease its gatherings and hauled over twenty members off to the local police station for a brief detention and questioning. (RFA 6 Apr. 2017)

Further and corroborating information on the Foshan Olive Tree Church could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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.

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