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China: Update of CHN106256 of 23 September 2019 on the Church of Almighty God (CAG) (quan neng shen jiao; Quannengshen), also known as "Eastern Lightning," including its leaders, location and activities; treatment of members by society and authorities (2014-October 2019) [CHN106382.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Research Limitations and Access to Information on CAG

In a chapter on illegal religions in the book *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts*, authors Fenggang Yang and J.E.E. Pettit explain that one limitation of research in this field is "a lack of scholarship on these groups, many of whom are documented only in media coverage or in informal, anecdotal accounts in magazines or on the internet" and that "[i]n some cases ... little or no information is available in the scholarly record, and even informal descriptions may be unavailable in English" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an associate professor of religious studies at Western Washington University [1], who is also a member of the *Journal of CESNUR's* [2] editorial board, explains that the "inner circle" of CAG does not want to be identified, and that the group is "secretive," operating covertly for many reasons, including for security and due to fear of apprehension (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019).

2. Background

2.1 Foundation and Core Beliefs

The CAG was established between 1989 and 1991 (RFA 20 July 2018; Director 27 Mar. 2019; Sixth Tone 26 July 2017). The group has been banned in China since 1995 (Sixth Tone 26 July 2017; RFA 20 July 2018).

CAG followers believe God, or Jesus Christ, has returned and reincarnated as a woman (Reuters 13 Aug. 2018; Yang with Pettit 2018, 62; Director 27 Mar. 2019), referred to as "Almighty God" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 62; Director 27 Mar. 2019). Sources further state that this present incarnation is the same God who revealed himself as Jehovah and as Jesus (Director 27 Mar. 2019; Yang with Pettit 2018, 62). In correspondence with the

Research Directorate, the Director of the [Italy-based (CESNUR n.d.b)] Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of CESNUR*, who has written multiple articles and a forthcoming book on the CAG, explained that CAG followers believe that "when the mission of Almighty God will be completed and God in his present incarnation will leave this Earth (i.e. will die), there will be great catastrophes ... , after which the Earth will be transformed in a world of peace ... [called] the Age of Millennial Kingdom" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). Sources reported that CAG adherents believe the Chinese government is the dragon of the Bible's Book of Revelation [the devil incarnate (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019)] (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019; Yang with Pettit 2018, 62). Sources also state that the CAG is anti-communist (BBC 27 July 2017; Director 27 Mar. 2019). However, according to the Director, "CAG scriptures teach [that] the Dragon will fall by itself under the weight of its own errors, counsel members to stay away from politics, and do not advocate any revolution" (Director 27 Mar. 2019).

Sources identify Xiangbin Yang as the woman into whom Almighty God was incarnated (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019; Researcher 29 Mar. 2019; Reuters 13 Aug. 2018). According to Yang and Pettit, the incarnation has taken the "form of a Chinese woman with the surname Deng" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 62). However, sources noted that Almighty God may be referred to using masculine pronouns (Director 27 Mar. 2019) or referred to as male (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019).

Sources stated that Almighty God was later joined by a follower known as the "person used by the Holy Spirit" (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019), the "'Man used by the Holy Spirit'" (Director 27 Mar. 2019), "the Brother'," or "the Priest" (President 3 Apr. 2019). According to the CESNUR Director, this follower, Weishan Zhao, became Almighty God's "chief administrative leader," and that "[h]is interpretation of the CAG scriptures is normative" (Director 27 Mar. 2019).

Some sources describe Zhao Weishan as CAG's founder (BBC 27 July 2017; Sixth Tone 26 July 2017; Researcher 29 Mar. 2019). However, the CESNUR Director said it is a "common misunderstanding" to consider Weishan Zhao the founder of the CAG, since, he claimed, a group of believers existed before Zhao became involved in the movement (Director 27 Mar. 2019). According to a 2018 Reuters article, citing the [state-run] Xinhua News Agency, "Zhao is also known as Xu Wenshan" and he is the husband of Yang Xiangbin (Reuters 13 Aug. 2018). The CESNUR Director stated that "Chinese police sources claim that Mr. Zhao and the woman the CAG worships as Almighty God are married, but the information is denied by the CAG and no documents concerning this alleged marriage have ever surfaced" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

2.1.1 Identification of Principal CAG Leaders by Their Names

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a researcher affiliated with the University of Melbourne's School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, who has written academic articles and a book on the CAG, stated that neither the female Christ figure nor the male leader are referred to by their name in CAG documents (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019). A distinguished professor of American religious history at Baylor

University in Waco, Texas [3], who is also a member of CESNUR's Board of Directors and of the editorial board of the *Journal of CESNUR*, similarly stated, in correspondence with the Research Directorate, that little is known about them and that "[t]he church refuses to confirm biographical information ... for a variety of religious and security reasons" (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019). The Associate Professor of religious studies added that secrecy surrounding the two leaders is both for security reasons and as "part of how religious groups work to elevate leaders" (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). The CESNUR Director explained the following:

For theological reasons grounded in its doctrine of "respect for God," the CAG teaches that the civil name of Almighty God should never be pronounced. Younger members may not even have heard the name of Yang Xiangbin. "Lightning Deng," a name mentioned in some CCP and other hostile sources, is a disparaging nickname used for the founder of the CAG only by opponents, and is also unknown to most members. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

Sources stated the two leaders went to the US in 2000 (Reuters 13 Aug. 2018; Director 27 Mar. 2019), from where they direct the movement (Director 27 Mar. 2019). Sixth Tone, a digital news source that reports on "issues and events from across China" and belongs to the ["state-run" (*FP* 23 July 2014)] Shanghai United Media Group (Sixth Tone n.d.), similarly states that the CAG is "headquartered" in the US (Sixth Tone 26 July 2017).

3. Presence Inside and Outside China

3.1 Inside China

According to sources, the CAG originated in [or was "historically" linked to (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019)] Henan Province, but sources believe that the group is now present throughout China (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019; Researcher 29 Mar. 2019).

Sources state that statistics on the size of the group are not available (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019; Researcher 29 Mar. 2019), because the group is banned in China (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019). The Associate Professor estimated that there are approximately two million members, but the same source noted that it is advantageous for both the CAG and authorities to inflate membership numbers (Associate Professor 7 Apr. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.2 Situation Outside China

According to sources, the CAG is present in over 20 countries (RFA 20 July 2018; Sixth Tone 26 July 2017). The Associate Professor estimated that there may be approximately 10,000 members outside China (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Structure

According to the CESNUR Director, when asked about the CAG's structure and leadership, adherents

often answer that in the CAG there are no "leaders." This may give the mistaken impression that the CAG is loosely organized, while it is in fact highly hierarchical. There is a theological reason for this answer: they refer to the Gospel of Matthew (23:8–10), where Jesus taught to "call no man master," which they interpret as "call no human being leader." (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

The same source added that

[a]nother problem is that most interpreters would translate the English word "leader" in Chinese as *ling dao ren* (领导人). The word phonetically resembles the English "leader," but is not a good word in Chinese and generally denotes an authoritarian leadership. CAG members would have no quarrel with the word *dai ling* (带领), which is another possible translation of the English "leader," and would admit they have "leaders" if this translation would be used. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

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

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the President of the Italy-based International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees (ORLIR) [4], who has also published research as a co-author with the CESNUR Director, stated that "[t]hey don't have pastors or priests, but they have leaders, who are not necessarily permanent and may change quite often" (President 3 Apr. 2019).

The Distinguished Professor indicated that

[t]he church is organized in small groups that meet weekly to study the words of the incarnate Christ. They select their own leaders. Each group is related to others by region and again select their own leaders. Some of the early converts had been ministers [at] other churches and they tended to rise in the leadership. (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019)

The CESNUR Director stated that "[t]here are also national leaders in the diaspora countries, although they often use their religious names rather than their civil names for fear that their position would cause retaliation against their relatives in China" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Demographic Profile of Members

The Associate Professor stated that "the Henan Anti-Cult Association would describe CAG members as middle-aged, single, poor, uneducated women, from mostly rural areas or small cities," but she noted that this is not an accurate picture, as her impression is that membership is found across demographic groups, although some believers cannot read or write or have limited literacy (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). Similarly, the CESNUR Director stated that "[s]cholarly surveys of members of the diaspora have suggested that claims by Chinese authorities that CAG members are mostly uneducated rural women are unsubstantiated" and that "[w]hile it is true that there are more women than men in the CAG, many of those who escape abroad have a good education" and "[m]ost" have "some money" (Director 27 Mar. 2019).

6. Religious Practices and Teachings

According to the CESNUR Director, the CAG teaches that

[t]he Old Testament was the Age of Law, and the time from the birth of Jesus to the manifestation of Almighty God in the 20th century (1991) was the Age of Grace. With the revelation of Almighty God, we have entered the third age, the Age of Kingdom. With Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, the sins of humans were forgiven, but their sinful nature was not eradicated. The mission of Almighty God is eradicating the sinful nature of these humans who will both accept God's new message and accept to be purified accordingly. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

The Distinguished Professor stated that the CAG holds the view that "the Christian Bible is obsolete, and useful primarily for historical reference," noting that "[t]he incarnated Christ has used the material of the Bible to illustrate teachings," but it has been otherwise "discarded" (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019). Similarly, according to the researcher, the CAG "says the Bible is 'old and mouldy,' but nevertheless quotes from it a lot to justify their theological positions" (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019). The Associate Professor stated that CAG works to evangelize Christians, both inside and outside China, and that the level of knowledge of the Bible among CAG members varies; some members know it very well and refer to it a lot, with some even carrying it (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

For further information on CAG's religious practices and teachings, see Response to Information Request CHN104970 of October 2014.

6.1 Methods of Worship

The ORLIR President explained that

[t]here is a special terminology to refer to conversion to the CAG. According to the expression that all my interviewees used, they "accepted Almighty God." There is no other way or ritual to become a believer. There is no baptism as in other Christian churches. One simply confesses her/his belief in Almighty God in front of the local community, after a period in which she/he has regularly attended the meetings, and is accepted by the community (which would normally also investigate the candidate's morality) as a new brother or sister. (President 3 Apr. 2019)

The President stated that

Their way of worshipping is to get together (they call it "fellowshipping"), to pray, read their sacred books, hear a sermon, discuss their holy scriptures and, in particular, organize artistic performances. There is no fixed day of the week for these gatherings. (President 3 Apr. 2019)

The same source added that

CAG does not have worship places similar to traditional Christian churches. In China, of course, they cannot have places of worship due to the persecution and simply gather in private homes. Abroad, where there is religious freedom and communities are large enough (US, South Korea, Spain...), they would buy or rent a building they call a "church." I would say it is more a "community house," with a cross indicating that this place is not a secular house. But there is no altar nor any special ritual or ceremonies of worship. (President 3 Apr. 2019, ellipsis in original)

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

6.2 Religious Texts

Sources explain that the main religious text of the CAG is *The Word Appears in the Flesh* [*The Word Made Flesh; The Word Has Appeared in the Flesh*] (*Hua zai roushen xianxian*) (Yang with Pettit 2018, 62; Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019; Researcher 29 Mar. 2019). According to the Director, the book, originally published in 1997, collects the "utterances of Almighty God" in over one million words and "supplements and, when necessary, explains the Bible, and corrects these parts of the Bible that are merely human words" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). Yang and Pettit state that "[f]ollowers believe this text records words uttered by the female Christ, and they regard it as authoritative" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 62). The Distinguished Professor added that there are "various editions of *The Word Made Flesh*" and this text is a "work of progress" as the female Christ "continues to deliver messages periodically" (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019).

The researcher added that the CAG has "numerous other texts" such as testimonies and hymnbooks (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019). The CESNUR Director stated that "there are other collections of utterances by Almighty God, and authoritative comment[ary on] the holy scriptures written by Mr. Weishan Zhao, the main administrative leader of the CAG" (Director 27 Mar. 2019).

For further information on CAG's religious texts, see Response to Information Request CHN104970 of October 2014.

6.3 Familiarity of Adherents with Texts and Teachings

Sources stated that members of the CAG "should be familiar with" (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019) or are mainly familiar with *The Word Appears in the Flesh* (President 3 Apr. 2019). However, the CESNUR Director noted that "the comprehension of the very elaborated theology presented in *The Word Appears in the Flesh* may vary considerably from one member to another" (Director 27 Mar. 2019).

The Distinguished Professor explained that

[t]he average member would be familiar with the basic teachings concerning the new era (the kingdom dispensation) and the need for personal reformation of their life, but would be at various stages in appropriating the details of the teachings of what is now a vast body of material. (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019)

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

According to the CESNUR Director,

[a]ll members of the CAG would confess that Almighty God has appeared on Earth and has incarnated in our age and time to eradicate the sinful nature of these humans who would accept him and cooperate in their own purification (as explained before, they would say "him" rather than "her"). They would all be familiar with the core doctrine of the three ages, the Age of Law, the Age of Grace, and the Age of Kingdom. And they would expect with faith and hope the glorious Millennial Kingdom to come. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

For further information on the familiarity of adherents to religious texts and teachings, see Response to Information Request CHN104970 of October 2014.

7. Divisions Within the CAG

The Distinguished Professor stated "that various members in China published books that the leadership found unacceptable and were excommunicated from the CAG" (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019). According to the CESNUR Director,

[d]uring the history of the CAG, several individuals have claimed that Almighty God had lost her divine status and that they were the new Almighty God. They have been excommunicated under the Biblical labels of "Antichrists" or "false prophets," and their groups are now separated from, and not part of, the CAG. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

The Distinguished Professor added that

[t]here are factions (break away groups) in China, some of which became visible in 2012 when they accepted teachings from the larger culture about the imminent disruption of the social order from a set of predicted disasters. These beliefs were ultimately from what in the West we call the New Age movement, which had been transferred to China by a popular Hollywood film called "2012." (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019)

The Director stated that "those CAG members who, as did many Chinese, embraced the 'Mayan prophecy' about the end of the world in 2012, were rebuked and even excommunicated by the leaders" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

8. Treatment by Society

The Director said that there is "[p]opular hostility" against the CAG, which

is fueled [among others] by the offer of rewards. Monetary rewards are offered in China to those who supply the police with names of members of *xie jiao* [see Section 8], including the CAG, and information leading to their arrest. ... higher rewards are offered for the "leaders," but rewards are paid also to those who denounce a simple devotee. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

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

Further information on the treatment of CAG members by society could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

8.1 Treatment by Other Christian Groups

The Associate Professor stated that the CAG is "controversial" with other Christian groups and may be regarded with "hostility and suspicion" by them (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). The CESNUR Director added that

[h]ostility to the CAG is also spread by other Christian groups, which regard the doctrine that Almighty God has incarnated in a Chinese woman as heresy, and are also concerned with the high number of conversions to the CAG from their respective flocks. Their claims that the CAG "brainwashes" or even "kidnaps" Christians to convert them should be taken with a grain of salt. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

Further information on the relationship between CAG members and other Christian groups could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

9. Treatment by Authorities

9.1 Overview

The CAG is banned in China (BBC 27 July 2017; Sixth Tone 26 July 2017). Chinese authorities list it as a xie jiao (Director 27 Mar. 2019; Yang with Pettit 2018, 60, 62). Yang and Pettit list the group under "illegal religions" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60, 62). Sources note that while the term xie jiao is often translated as "cult" (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019) or "evil cult" (Director 27 Mar. 2019; Yang with Pettit 2018, 60), the Director explained that the term "'heterodox teachings'" would be more accurate (Director 27 Mar. 2019). The Director added that article 300 of the Chinese criminal code makes being active in a xie jiao "a crime per se, punished with a jail term of three to seven years 'or more'" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). Article 300 of China's Criminal Law, as provided on the website of the Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Vienna, provides the following:

Article 300. Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or sabotages the implementation of the state's laws and executive regulations by utilizing superstition is to be sentenced to not less than three years and not more than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, to not less than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment.

Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or cheats others by utilizing superstition, thereby giving rise to the death of people is to be punished in accordance with the previous paragraph.

Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or has illicit sexual relations with women, defraud money and property by utilizing superstition is to be convicted and punished in accordance with [the applicable regulations] of the law. (China 1979)

The CESNUR Director stated that "[u]nder President Xi Jinping, the struggle against all forms of illegal religion has been reinforced. The situation has considerably worsened in the last few years" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). In their chapter on illegal religions, which includes the CAG, Yang and Pettit note that these groups have been "targets of

systematic and severe crackdowns" (Yang with Pettit 2018, 60). The Associate Professor similarly stated that there has been a "vicious" crackdown on religion by authorities [in recent years], which makes the situation "more dangerous" in China, including for researchers (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019).

The Associate Professor believes that the CAG has continued its activities in China, although in a clandestine manner, often in very small groups (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). Similarly, the Director stated that "[t]he minimalist ... style of worship [and meetings of small groups] of the CAG helps its members escape arrest in China. Other groups are detected because they gather in large numbers, and pray or sing loudly" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). The Associate Professor stated that CAG members listen to sermons and have fellowship online, such as via Skype, in addition to meeting in person, and reproduce materials by hand to disseminate it or transport material electronically, such as on SIM cards (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). Further and corroborating information on activities in China or online could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

9.2 Arrests and Prosecutions

Freedom House states there has been "[l]arge-scale imprisonment for membership in 'heterodox religions'" in China, reporting that

[s]ince early 2014, the Chinese authorities have intensified efforts to suppress, and even eradicate, various quasi-Christian sects with tangential links to mainstream Protestantism. Hundreds of religious clergy and lay believers have been detained and sentenced to prison. (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 48)

In July 2017, the BBC similarly reported that "Chinese authorities frequently crack down on the [CAG], having arrested many of its members over the years" (BBC 27 July 2017). The researcher stated that the CAG itself "claims lots of arrests" (Researcher 29 Mar. 2019). According to the CESNUR Director, the number of arrests is "contentious" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). According to sources, the CAG reported that more than 11,000 of its members were arrested in 2018 (Director 27 Mar. 2019; US 21 June 2019, 14). The CESNUR Director noted that in 2019, the CAG "claimed that the number ... arrested between 2011 and 2017 exceeded 400,000" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). According to the same source,

[t]here is no way to confirm these figures independently. However, that the number of CAG members arrested is at least in the tens of thousands can be confirmed by compiling the frequent news in Chinese media that hundreds, in some cases several hundred, members have been arrested in a given city or province. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

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

According to Freedom House, the majority of people sentenced in verdicts since 2014, "including members of the Almighty God sect, appear to have been imprisoned for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of belief and expression rather than for engaging in violence against other Chinese" (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 48). According to the ORLIR President, "arrested members of the CAG are not accused of any crime other than being believers in Almighty God. Being in possession of the CAG's holy book is a sufficient ground to be arrested and imprisoned" (President 3 Apr. 2019). The Distinguished Professor similarly stated that CAG members have been arrested and mistreated "for nothing more than 'thought crimes'" (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019).

According to Freedom House, in 2014-2015, there was a peak in "[t]he prosecutions [for membership in 'heterodox religions'] ... , with approximately 80 percent linked to the controversial Almighty God" (Freedom House Feb. 2017, 48).

The BBC reports that in August 2016, 36 members were "accused of creating and spreading video content for the CAG" and detained by police in Anhui (BBC 27 July 2017). Sources report that, according to state-run media, 18 people linked to the CAG were arrested in July 2017 (BBC 27 July 2017; Sixth Tone 26 July 2017), in Changxian county in Zhejiang province (Sixth Tone 26 July 2017). Radio Free Asia (RFA) reports that between May and mid-June 2018, 32 members of the CAG were arrested in Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, with 15 still in custody at the time of the report; over 70 members were also arrested in the cities of Nanjing and Yangzhou [also in Jiangsu] (RFA 20 July 2018). The same source adds that 500 members were arrested in Liaoning Province during [translation] "Operation Thunderbolt" between 26 and 28 June (RFA 20 July 2018). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2018* reports the following:

In August [2018] the Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Religious Freedom (ADHRRF), an international NGO providing regular reports on the situation of the Church of Almighty God, reported that between April and August, authorities in Chongqing, Sichuan Province, detained 109 church members. Of those, 40 remained missing at years end. (US 21 June 2019, 11)

The same report also cites the Political Prisoner Database (PPDB) of the Dui Hua Foundation, a human rights NGO, as reporting that 277 CAG members were imprisoned at the end of 2017, while 205 were imprisoned at the end of 2018; according to the Dui Hua Foundation, the PPDB does not include the "total number of religious prisoners" (US 21 June 2019, 13).

The Associate Professor stated that individuals with simple membership or any links to the CAG can be "targeted," not just leaders or activists (Associate Professor 29 Mar. 2019). She stated having heard several accounts, all by women, of being subject to two to three years in jail for "relatively minor offences" relating to the CAG, such as owning the place where a meeting was held, the possession of literature or, in one case, because her name was on a document where a CAG text had been copied (Associate

Professor 29 Mar. 2019). The CESNUR Director explained that "[n]o crime other than being part of a xie jiao is needed for the application of article 300 [of the criminal code]" (Director 27 Mar. 2019). As an example, the Director related the case of

Wang Xiumei, a CAG asylum seeker in Switzerland, who received a deportation order from the Swiss authorities. They did not believe she was at risk of being arrested in China. Knowing that forcible deportation would mean that the Chinese police would wait for her at the airport, Wang accepted to return to China spontaneously on 2 May 2017. Once in China, she took the precaution of not returning to her home in Linshu County, Shandong, but instead rented a room in the housing facility of a construction company in the same county. However, in the night of 27 June 2017, the police knocked at her door and arrested her as a member of a xie jiao. On February 9, 2018, the Linshu County People's Court sentenced Wang to three and a half years in jail under article 300 of the Chinese criminal code. The verdict made it clear that Wang had been wanted for the crime of "using a xie jiao" for having edited and passed to others material of the CAG and having in her possession several CAG books. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

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

The Director also provided the following information regarding arrests of CAG members:

First, there are those who have already been arrested and have been released. They are kept under surveillance and, should the authorities ascertain that they keep attending CAG meetings, they will be arrested again and sentenced to heavier jail penalties. The only way to keep practicing their faith is often to flee abroad.

Second, there are those who have received credible information that they are being investigated and may soon be arrested. There are police officers who are CAG members unknown as such to their colleagues. They systematically collect and provide information about which co-religionists are under investigation and should be counseled to flee abroad to escape arrest. Kunrui Li, one of the CAG's leaders in the [US], was herself a police officer in Dalian, Liaoning, before fleeing China. She claims there are several other CAG police officers still passing the information about who is under investigation. (Director 27 Mar. 2019)

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

9.3 Accusations of Torture

According to sources, the CAG has reported that members have been tortured by Chinese authorities (BBC 27 July 2017; US 21 June 2019, 2) and that members have died while in custody (US 21 June 2019, 10, 11). According to the CESNUR Director, the CAG

claims that, between 2011 and 2017, "hundreds of its members have been tortured, and [approximately one hundred] died either in jail or as a result of police mistreatments," but that "figures cannot be confirmed independently" (Director 27 Mar. 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] The Associate Professor of religious studies at Western Washington University has interviewed members of the CAG and written academic articles on the group.

[2] The *Journal of CESNUR* is a bi-monthly, peer-reviewed online open access publication by the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) which focuses on "religious pluralism, new religious movements, esoteric movements, alternative spirituality, religious and spiritual movements and the arts" (CESNUR n.d.a).

[3] The Distinguished Professor at Baylor University has studied new religious movements, including the CAG in China, has interviewed multiple CAG members, and is preparing a book on the group.

[4] The International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees (ORLIR) is a scholarly and advocacy organization based in Italy that "promotes studies on religion-based refugee claims in general, and on specific cases of persecuted minorities, and cooperates with international organizations, governments, and NGOs" to support the recognition of refugees escaping religious persecution (ORLIR n.d.). The ORLIR President has worked and conducted research on the CAG since 2017, including conducting interviews with members of the CAG in various countries, in the context of research on refugee recognition on the basis of religious persecution.

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