

The Persecution of Unorthodox Religious Groups in China

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Executive Summary

The past decade has seen an uptick in the erosion of religious freedom and the curtailment of expression and assembly for religious minorities around the world. In some contexts, this is due to authoritarian regimes shrinking civil society space for religious plurality. China's governing powers have long been mindful of the threats to regime stability posed by unorthodox religious movements—the Qing Dynasty was nearly overthrown by the Taipings, rebels of a syncretic religious movement led by Hong Xiuquan who claimed to be the brother of Jesus Christ. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the party-state has waged war against unorthodox religious groups that claim millions of followers, including Yi Guan Dao, Falun Gong, Church of Almighty God, and Zhonggong.

For more than 70 years, the Chinese government has sought to suppress unorthodox groups it has variously named reactionary sects, secret societies, and evil cults. As early as 1951, regulations on punishing counterrevolutionaries targeted leaders of reactionary religious organizations. Currently, the Chinese government allows its citizens to take part in the five state-sanctioned patriotic associations of Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism, but many seeking spiritual salvation look beyond government-approved faiths and embrace unorthodox religious groups.

This report details and analyzes the Chinese government's persecution of unorthodox religious groups, listing known banned groups and the actions taken against them. By collecting and analyzing legal documents, media reports, case studies, official publications, Chinese government responses to requests for information on persecuted prisoners, court statistics, and Dui Hua's Political Prisoner Database (PPDB), this report provides a comprehensive view of how non-state sanctioned religious practitioners come into conflict with the law, how officials at different levels of government criminalize unorthodox worship, and how past trends can inform future advocacy for those undergoing coercive measures for the non-violent expression of their beliefs.

Dui Hua's research found that:

1. The number of adherents of *orthodox* religious groups makes up more than 10 percent of China's population, perhaps as many as 15 percent. *Unorthodox* religious groups exist in all of China's provinces and autonomous regions, and many have developed links to international groups. If the number of unorthodox religious adherents was incorporated into official figures, then the number of all religious practitioners in China would far exceed the current government figure of 200 million official practitioners (as of 2018).
2. Using the most common definition of "political and religious prisoners"—people imprisoned for the practice of their political or religious beliefs—adherents of unorthodox religious groups make up 60 percent of all prisoners in Dui Hua's PPDB. These individuals are subjected to coercive measures for violating Article 300(1) of China's Criminal Law —"organizing and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law"—and other charges often applied to such adherents. Their numbers have swelled in recent years as sentence reductions and paroles have been restricted.

3. The largest groups of adherents practice the teachings of Falun Dafa (aka Falun Gong) and the Church of Almighty God, but there are many other smaller groups. This study has identified 44 unorthodox religious groups operating in China today or at some point over the last two decades.
4. For the period of 1998-2016, women made up 41 percent of adherents of these groups sentenced to prison in China, five times the percentage of all women prisoners in the country.
5. Adherents of unorthodox religions are typically non-violent. In instances of rare violence, the Chinese government features them in “anti-cult” propaganda. Adherents have been convicted of rape and murder. Those so convicted are often executed.
6. The most common crime for which adherents of unorthodox religious groups are imprisoned is covered by Article 300(1) but other crimes are also used by the Chinese government to imprison adherents, including economic crimes like committing fraud (Article 266) and operating illegal businesses (Article 225).
7. Persecution of unorthodox religious groups, adherents of which were classified as counterrevolutionaries prior to 1997, has existed since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. They have been viewed as threats to the government’s hold on power.
8. Persecution of unorthodox religious practitioners rose sharply following the banning of Falun Gong in 1999. In recent years steps have been taken to increase sentences and restrict clemency for practitioners of unorthodox religions. In 2018, there were 3,550 people tried for violating Article 300(1), one of the highest numbers of individuals tried for this charge in recent years.
9. China continued to assert control over religious groups, particularly pressuring house churches to Sinicize and comply with “socialist core values.” Leaders of house churches who refused to participate in the “Three Self Patriotic Movement” are increasingly likely to face penalties for “using cult” activities in recent years.
10. Adherents of unorthodox religions rarely make their way onto prisoner lists submitted to the Chinese government in bilateral and multilateral human rights dialogues. Their numbers are dwarfed by those convicted for practicing their political beliefs.
11. Governments have an opportunity to help stem the persecution of unorthodox religious groups by raising their plights in bilateral and multilateral dialogues with the Chinese government, increasing their numbers on prisoner lists, supporting appeals to the United Nations, and granting asylum to adherents.

1. Introduction

The Chinese government's tally of religious adherents, as of 2018, was around two hundred million, or approximately 14 percent of its population.¹ This number only covers those who belong to the so-called “Five Great Religions”—Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism—of them, 44 million were Christians (6 million Catholics and 38 million Protestants). Observers generally believe that the official figures are a vast underestimate of the actual number of religious adherents. Independent estimates of the Christian population alone vary widely, but they all far outnumber the official tallies and could number as many as 80 million of those who worship in house churches and “underground” Catholic congregations alone.²

Much of the discrepancy between official numbers and expert estimates can be attributed to China's non-recognition of religious adherents outside of the five state-sanctioned patriotic associations. The official numbers would be much higher if, in addition to unregistered Christians, a rich array of communal practices that Chinese officials call “superstition,” were taken into account. Most, if not all, of these people are adherents of unorthodox religious groups, many of whose beliefs and practices are at odds with mainstream religious practices.

Scholars coined the term “new religious movement” to describe the emergence of unorthodox groups in China following the traumas of persecution during the Maoist period.³ The 1980s and 90s can be characterized as decades of restoration and revival triggered by the “spiritual vacuum” and toning down of the ideological control of society in post-Mao China.⁴ Many traditional forms of Chinese religion operating independently of the state were revived, reinvented, or adapted to new forms. New religious beliefs from abroad also enjoyed increasing popularity.

Mindful of the threats to regime stability posed by unorthodox religious movements—the Qing Dynasty was nearly toppled by the Taipings, rebels of a syncretic religious movement led by Hong Xiuquan who claimed to be the brother of Jesus Christ—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has articulated different discourses to justify the repression of religious groups since 1949. The crackdown was initially conducted as a revolutionary struggle against imperialism and feudalism. The CCP labeled scores of religious groups “reactionary secret societies,” or *fandong huidaomen* (反动会道门), while denouncing their members as “instruments of the counterrevolutionaries” or even “enemy spies” who “propagate rumors,” “agitate popular sentiment,” and “disturb social order.”⁵ Although religious organizations took advantage of a relatively freer political climate to reestablish themselves after the Cultural Revolution, the

¹ Universal Periodic Review – China, 6 November 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/CNIndex.aspx>

² “China wants to make its Christians more Chinese,” *The Economist*, 31 March 2021, [economist.com/china/2021/03/31/china-wants-to-make-its-christians-more-chinese](https://www.economist.com/china/2021/03/31/china-wants-to-make-its-christians-more-chinese)

³ Scott Lowe, “China and New Religious Movements,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (April 2001), pp. 213-214.

⁴ David Ownby, “The ‘Falun Gong’ in the New World,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2003), pp. 303-320.

⁵ David Palmer, “Heretical Doctrines, Reactionary Secret Societies, Evil Cults: Labelling Heterodoxy in 20th-Century China,” in *Chinese Religiosities: The Vicissitudes of Modernity and State Formation*, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (ed.) (University of California Press, 2008), pp.113-134.

CCP carried on with Mao's practice of labelling those operating outside of state control as "reactionary secret societies." Tens of thousands of faithful were imprisoned for violating Article 99 of the 1979 Criminal Law: "organizing and using superstition, a sect or secret society to carry out counterrevolutionary activity."

As economic reforms deepened in the 1990s, the CCP gradually distanced itself from revolutionary ideology, and a new discourse on "evil cults," or *xiejiao* (邪教), emerged to replace the concept of "counterrevolution" and "reactionary secret societies." The new label entered popular lexicon in the mid-1990s when Chinese media covered overseas tragedies involving the Branch Davidians in the United States; the Order of the Solar Temple in Switzerland, Quebec, and France; and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan.⁶ In addition to referencing anti-cult movements overseas, China also draws heavily on sociological, psychological, and Christian literature to produce a seemingly scientifically objective polemic that "evil cults" are not only dangerous in China but also as an international menace.⁷ While Falun Gong bore the immediate brunt of suppression, this new discourse centering on Article 300(1) of the 1997 Criminal Law—"organizing and using a sect, cult or superstition to undermine implementation of the law"—has been extended to other unorthodox religious organizations.

Defining "Unorthodox"

There is a lack of universal consensus on the definition of religious orthodoxy, which can vary from time to time and place to place. Groups considered unorthodox in China may not be so considered in other countries after gaining acceptance by mainstream communities. Nevertheless, it is still useful to identify myriad intertwining factors which are at play in determining whether a religious group is "unorthodox." First, a group is so defined when its doctrine contradicts that of its mother religion. This is applicable to Christian groups which survived decades-long persecution in Mao's China. Despite being able to meet clandestinely in small groups in their homes, they were cut off from Western Christian orthodoxy. As such, their doctrines and practices had been largely adjusted to the local contexts of believers' lives.⁸ Also, their communities were marked by a frequent absence of leadership because of repeated arrests and imprisonment. Rank and file members came to play a much stronger role in the organization of liturgical and community life.⁹

Additionally, unorthodox groups are often syncretic, blending elements of Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Chinese folklore, and/or overseas theologies. For instance, Falun Gong combines breathing, meditation, gymnastics, and healing methods with elements of Buddhist and Daoist traditions while sharing an apocalyptic worldview in which salvation can only be attained through exclusive commitment to Li Hongzhi's particular qigong method.¹⁰ Although Guanyin Famen has officially been branded as a "Buddhist" cult

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ David Palmer, "Religion in the Peoples' Republic of China: An Overview," in *Handbook of Contemporary China*, William S. Tay and Alvin Y. So (eds.) (World Scientific, 2001), pp.293-326.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Richard Madsen, "The Sinicization of Chinese Religions under Xi Jinping," China Leadership Monitor, 1 September 2019, <https://www.prcleader.org/sinicization-of-chinese-religions>

organization, its doctrines are mixed with Christian-Buddhist ideas borrowed from the Bible and Buddhist as well as Hindu texts.¹¹

Even in Western democracies, new religious movements are often synonymous with unorthodoxy. Many of the newly emerged Christian groups believe in apocalypticism. In the fast-growing market competing for souls, mainstream denominations often accuse their rivals of stealing members and teaching unorthodox views. The ways in which public discourses discuss them also invoke biases, ignoring or ignorant of the fact that many contemporary “orthodox” religious groups were initially viewed as illegitimate faiths and held in as much contempt by their dominant societies.¹² They were often deemed to be “cults,” had negative connotations, and were routinely thought to engage in sheer falsity and delusion, “mind control,” abuse, exploitation, extremism, antisocial tendencies, and even violence.¹³ While several groups have validated these criticisms by engaging in extremist or harmful behavior, the lack of humility that accompanies discourse on new faith systems can have unexpected and undesirable consequences. In China, where expansive controls and propaganda are in place to maintain a monopoly on the official narrative, such heavy-handedness might even glorify and inadvertently amplify fringe ideas.

In terms of religious beliefs, orthodoxy can also mean acceptance of the standard interpretation of a religion as prescribed by the state. Unorthodox groups run afoul of authoritarian nations’ deep fear of independent movements. They are considered to be potentially disruptive and dangerous when operating outside of the state’s regulatory framework. Many of them follow practices that authorities view as “harming social stability” or “disturbing social order.” In China, members of the Society of Disciples are taught among other things, that one need not work or study in order to have enough to eat and drink, but can simply rely on God and prayer.¹⁴ Particularly when disciples stop working or going to classes, state authorities see such disruptions of routine behavior as disturbing social order and arrest those involved.

Some groups are considered “unorthodox” in part because how they conduct their finances defies common expectations for religious groups. While it is true that religious institutions need organization and finances to spread and gain followers, a segment of the newly emerged groups are remarkably commercialized. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among Buddhist-inspired groups whose growth was triggered by widespread state-led commodification beginning in the 1990s. As such, it is not uncommon for these groups operating independently of the CCP to stand accused of economic crimes. Qigong organizations such as Zhonggong have also been extraordinarily commercial, making it seem at times that they are more akin to a business marketed on its health benefits than to a spiritual organization.

In China, the designation of what is an unorthodox group can be highly arbitrary. Some of them are designated as unorthodox, heterodox, or cult organizations because they criticize one-party rule. In 1995, the Chinese government outlawed True Buddha School, citing critical statements its founder made about the CCP’s decision to violently suppress protesters in Tiananmen

¹¹ Stephen Christopher, “Supreme Master Ching Hai World Society,” *The Database of Religious History*, University of British Columbia, 27 August 2019, <https://religiondatabase.org/browse/570>

¹² Jack David Eller, *Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate* (Routledge, 2014).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ “Selection of Cases from the Criminal Law: Banned Protestant Groups,” *Occasional Publications*, The Dui Hua Foundation, Vol.12, (February 2003).

Square in 1989.¹⁵ Guanyin Famen is also banned because of the founder's remarks made in the early 1990s about communism's inevitable demise in China, Vietnam, and the Eastern Bloc.¹⁶ Almighty God, banned since 1995, reportedly "incited followers to launch a decisive battle with the 'Big Red Dragon' (i.e., the CCP), to make the 'Red Dragon' extinct" and to establish a new reign of the Kingdom of God.¹⁷

¹⁵ "The 'Cult' of Buddha," *Dialogue*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 29 August 2013, <https://duihua.org/dialogue-issue-52-the-cult-of-buddha/>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "China cracks down on 'Almighty God' cult out to slay communist 'Red Dragon,'" *Reuters*, 14 December 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUS424950387120121214>

2. Overview of Unorthodox Religious Groups

The exact number of unorthodox religious groups that exist in China is contested. It cannot be accurately answered just by looking at the various “cult lists” issued by the Chinese government. Back in 1995, China’s State Council and the CCP’s Central Committee issued a circular labelling seven religious organizations “sects” and making them illegal.¹⁸ Beginning in that year and continuing thereafter, seven other groups were also banned and identified as “reactionary sects” or “heretical organizations.”¹⁹

Today, the longest and most circulated list names 20 “cult” organizations.²⁰ It was compiled by the China Anti-Cult Association in 2014 following the McDonald’s killing allegedly committed by Almighty God members. Of the 20, the first eleven were listed as being “dangerous.” The public has also been urged “to be on guard against” the remaining nine groups:

1. Falun Gong
2. Church of Almighty God
3. Shouters
4. Society of Disciples
5. Unification Church
6. Guanyin Famen
7. Evangelical Gospel Mission Armored with Blood and Holy Spirit
8. Full Scope Church
9. Three Grades of Servants
10. True Buddha School
11. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station
12. Spirit Church
13. South China Church
14. Anointed King
15. Lord God Church
16. World Elijah Evangelic Mission
17. Yuandun Famen
18. New Testament Church
19. Dami Mission
20. Children of God

It must be noted, however, that the number of groups that have been targeted in anti-cult campaigns across the nation varies from place to place and totals more than 20. Another lesser-known “cult” list which appeared online in the early 2010s omitted Falun Gong and Buddhist groups, focusing exclusively on unorthodox Christians groups, including the Spirit Church, Almighty God, Society of Disciples, Shouters, Three Grades of Servants, and several groups

¹⁸ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “China Anti-cult Association announces list of 20 active cult organizations,” *Global Times*, People’s Daily, 8 June 2014, [中国反邪教协会公布20个活跃邪教组织名单, 环球时报], http://www.hnr.cn/hnr/3g/3gyw/3gziyaowen/201406/t20140608_1256729.html

not named by the China Anti-Cult Association.²¹ Among these groups are Anabaptists and the Apostolic Faith Mission. Originating from the Radical Reformation in Europe, Anabaptists believe that Christians should only be baptised when the candidate confesses his or her faith in Christ, typically during adulthood.²² The Apostolic Faith Mission, founded in 1907, is a Pentecostal denomination headquartered in Portland, Oregon, United States. However, they are not discussed in this report because Dui Hua was unable to find information about their activities in China.

Several unorthodox religious groups are absent on the “cult” lists despite them being active targets of state crackdowns in recent years. One notable example is Yi Guan Dao, a group combining elements of Daoism, Buddhism, and folklore. In the 1950s, tens of thousands of Yi Guan Dao leaders who bore the stigma of counterrevolution were executed and imprisoned. Dui Hua found that local governments in Guangdong continue to sentence its leaders for cult offenses.²³ Although the China Anti-Cult Association calls on the public to “be on guard against” Dami Mission and Children of God, Dui Hua has yet to find a single criminal case involving these two groups.

There may be different reasons for not including a particular religious group on a “cult” list. Local authorities may deem the size and reach of these organizations to be too small to warrant attention or censure. It could also be the case that some local authorities apply different metrics to determine whether groups meet the criteria of a cult.

It must be stressed that not every religious group is traceable because of their small size and ephemerality. As such, verifying the numbers and determining the exact membership of each of them is nearly impossible. This report discusses a total of 44 unorthodox religious groups in China. They are organized according to how the Chinese government classifies them: Christian, Buddhist, and qigong.

With many churches and cathedrals rebuilt or reopened and their seized properties returned, Christianity has expanded rapidly since 1980. The state-sponsored patriotic associations were established to govern the surging number of Christians, but conflicts over legitimacy and authority led to the split of Christian communities into official churches and unofficial groups. Membership in the latter has far outstripped the official churches; they refuse to come under state control. Almighty God is among the 25 unofficial Protestant groups presented in this report to be considered “heterodox” because of their deviant interpretations of scripture.

Buddhism also came back into the open as an active provider for ritual services such as funerals and rites for healing and blessings. Since the 1990s, urban temples have been pushed by local governments to actively take part in real estate development and tourism in order to attain

²¹ “United in Defence of Biblical Truth, Resolute in Combating Heretics,” Fujian Theological Seminary, 27 March 2013, [同心捍卫圣经真理，坚决抵制异端邪教，福建省基督教两会], <http://www.fjjidujiao.com/newshow.asp?id=97> (Cached URL: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:TKUJ_T4SIYsJ:www.fjjidujiao.com/newshow.asp%3Fid%3D97)

²² “The birth of Anabaptism,” Anabaptist World, 2 March 2015, <https://anabaptistworld.org/the-birth-of-anabaptism/>

²³ “The Ongoing Crackdown on Yi Guan Dao,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 8 April 2021, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2021/04/the-ongoing-crackdown-on-yi-guan-dao.html>

financial self-sufficiency.²⁴ In addition to charging high entrance fees, they have been offering healing, meditation, health-cultivation programs, summer camps, and workshops.²⁵ This report discusses seven Buddhist-inspired groups operating independently of the state-sanctioned Buddhist association. They share a similar goal to obtain a fair share in the growing market, but excessive commercialization has also led to criticism about their Buddhist orthodoxy.

Qigong, an exercise and healing technique involving meditation, controlled breathing, and movement has been the most popular form of spirituality in post-Mao China. Four spiritual groups, including Falun Gong, are classified as qigong organizations in this report. Qigong often becomes religious when a charismatic master combines their teachings with Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and/or folklore. In the 1980s, qigong was highly praised as “somatic science” under the banner of the “Four Modernizations,” which included national defense, agriculture, industry, and science and technology.²⁶ This homegrown practice instilled confidence in Chinese ingenuity when the country was still reeling from decades of internal upheaval.²⁷ The popularity of Hong Kong kung fu films, TV series, and novels also contributed to the qigong craze in the mainland.²⁸ This craze continued into the mid-1990s before the national crackdown on Falun Gong began.

Five miscellaneous religious groups are discussed at the end of this section. They include Tablighi Jamaat—an ultraorthodox Islamic group which has gained traction among Hui Muslims—Yi Guan Dao, and three groups based on Chinese folklore or egalitarianism.

It is worth noting that not all these “cult” organizations are indigenous. At least 16 groups discussed in this report were introduced from overseas. South Korea is the largest exporter of unorthodox Christian groups to China, and this report covers six of them: the Unification Church, World Elijah Evangelic Mission, Dami Mission, Good News Mission, Church of God, and Shincheonji Church. They have been particularly active in the northeast provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning, where the majority of China’s ethnic Korean population is concentrated. The United States, too, is home to four active unorthodox religious groups in China: The Shouters, Children of God, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and True Buddha School. The remainder of the unorthodox groups come from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Australia, South and Southeast Asia.

In his article “Religion in the Peoples’ Republic of China: An Overview,” published in *Handbook of Contemporary China*, sociology scholar David Palmer wrote that China in the 21st century has become “a laboratory for religious change and innovation.”²⁹ Despite an absence of a dominant religious orthodoxy, the 44 unorthodox groups discussed in this report are in line with Palmer’s argument that faiths in China are expanding, innovating, and diversifying against a backdrop of a hegemony of a secularist and anti-religious ideology propagated by the officially atheist state. From time to time, episodes of violence involving

²⁴ David Palmer, “Religion in the Peoples’ Republic of China: An Overview,” in *Handbook of Contemporary China*, William S. Tay and Alvin Y. So (eds.) (World Scientific, 2001), pp. 293-326.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “Zhonggong: The Subversive Business of Qigong,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 14 August 2014, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2014/08/zhonggong-subversive-business-of-qigong.html>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ David Palmer, “Religion in the Peoples’ Republic of China: An Overview,” in *Handbook of Contemporary China*, William S. Tay and Alvin Y. So (eds.) (World Scientific, 2001), pp. 293-326.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

unorthodox religious groups have occurred, but Dui Hua found that they are rare and that the majority of criminal cases involve peaceful activities.

This overview begins with the two most oppressed groups: Falun Gong and Almighty God. While the 44 unorthodox groups outlined here are by no means exhaustive, nearly all of them have been targeted by state-imposed coercive measures over the past two decades. Coercive measures include imprisonment, criminal or administrative detention, forms of education classes, and other measures restricting an individual's physical freedom.

I. Falun Dafa 法轮大法

Falun Dafa, commonly referred to as Falun Gong (法轮功), founded by Li Hongzhi (李洪志) in 1992, has been the most popular qigong organization in China after 1978. As with many other qigong organizations which emerged during the “qigong fever” in the 1980s, Falun Gong combines meditation, breathing, and movement with doctrines and philosophies from Buddhism, Daoism, and folklore.

At its peak, Falun Gong boasted more than 70 million practitioners in China, including those who joined the ranks of the government.³⁰ Alarmed by the prospect of its widespread membership, the CCP changed tack and began describing it as an “evil cult” around the mid-1990s. In April 1999, state-run media ran an article entitled “I Don’t Support Youth Practicing Qigong,” calling Falun Gong “superstitious” and “harmful.”³¹ In response, 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners surrounded Zhongnanhai and demanded an apology.³² Unwilling to make concessions to a group that threatened party loyalty through mass mobilization, the central government outlawed Falun Gong as a cult in July 1999.

Over two decades into the national ban, Falun Gong continues to find itself at the center of the state crackdown, with frequent cases of arrest and imprisonment being reported in both Chinese government sources and human rights groups overseas. Some of the controversial cases involve foreign nationals. In June 2020, Beijing’s Chaoyang District People’s Court sentenced Canadian citizen Sun Qian (孙茜) to eight years in prison. Sun reportedly renounced her Canadian citizenship during the trial. Critics say Sun did so under duress and torture, and her case was another tit-for-tat move over the case of Meng Wanzhou, Chief Financial Officer of Huawei.³³

Additionally, lawyers defending Falun Gong practitioners can risk their careers. Those who challenge the Chinese government’s designation of a cult organization may be deemed in

³⁰ Eva Xiao, “20 years on, Falun Gong survives underground in China,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 23 April 2019, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/04/23/20-years-falun-gong-survives-underground-china/>

³¹ “Complete story of the ‘4·25’ Falun Gong siege of Zhongnanhai in 1999,” *Karamay City Anti-Cult Column*, Karamay City People’s Government, 20 April 2019, <https://www.klmy.gov.cn/003/003005/20190528/30893eee-07ad-4eed-80ff-46214abbba05.html>

³² John Pomfret and Michael Laris, “Silent Protest Draws Thousands to Beijing,” *The Washington Post*, 26 April 1999, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1999/04/26/silent-protest-draws-thousands-to-beijing/e0b7ee29-eeec6-48ba-b6a6-5cd10980ec77/>

³³ “Related to the Meng Wanzhou case? Rich Chinese Canadian Businesswoman Sun Qian Sentenced to Eight Years,” *Radio Free Asia*, 2 July 2020, [与孟晚舟案有关？加拿大华裔女富商孙茜被重判八年], <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shehui/hj-07022020095655.html>

breach of the Measures on the Administration of Lawyers' Practice.³⁴ Thirteen lawyers hired by Sun Qian's family quit the case due to pressure from the Ministry of Justice, Domestic Security Bureau of the Public Security Ministry, and subordinate bureaus.³⁵ Among the lawyers, Xie Yanyi (谢燕益) had his license to practice invalidated.³⁶ The same happened to Ren Quanniu (任全牛) in early 2021, with the Henan Department of Justice saying that his court defence of Falun Gong in 2018 had caused a "negative impact on society."³⁷

There are signs, however, of a relaxation of the clampdown on Falun Gong. Today, the group does not appear to be met with the same intensity compared to the crackdown of the early 2000s, when a number of high-profile leaders such as Wang Zhiwen (王治文) and Li Chang (李昌) were given lengthy sentences of over 10 years for multiple offenses.³⁸ Prison sentences of over 10 years are much rarer due to the 2017 judicial interpretation that raised the benchmark for evidence necessary to sentence cult prisoners to lengthier sentences (see Section 3). Furthermore, Chinese government interlocutors have been more willing to respond to Dui Hua's inquiries on Falun Gong prisoners (many of whom are women) than individuals convicted of endangering state security crimes. Chinese government sources have also confirmed numerous instances of clemency given to Falun Gong prisoners despite the "strict handling" of sentence reduction and parole for prisoners convicted of violating Article 300.

That said, Falun Gong practitioners are more likely than adherents of other religious groups to be convicted of endangering state security crimes. For instance, in 2019, Luan Ning (栾凝) received a nine-year prison sentence for violating Article 300(1) and inciting subversion.³⁹ Both charges stemmed from him mailing out Falun Gong publications critical of the CCP. Luan is scheduled for release on 26 August 2026.

Falun Gong (as well as, to a lesser extent, Almighty God) has, for many years, alleged that the Chinese government has harvested the organs of executed Falun Gong practitioners. This issue has been the subject of investigations and hearings in the United States, Canada, and the European Union, with the US House of Representatives and the parliaments of Canada and the European Parliament passing resolutions condemning the "systematic, state-sanctioned organ harvesting from non-consenting prisoners of conscience."⁴⁰ United Nations experts have expressed alarm over these reports as well as reports of organ harvesting of other minorities

³⁴ "Administrative Penalties Against Lawyers: Another Strike Against Professional Autonomy and Religious Freedom," *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 10 January 2019, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2019/01/administrative-penalties-against.html>

³⁵ "Related to the Meng Wanzhou case? Rich Chinese Canadian Businesswoman Sun Qian Sentenced to Eight Years," *Radio Free Asia*, 2 July 2020, [与孟晚舟案有关? 加拿大华裔女富商孙茜被重判八年], <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shehui/hj-07022020095655.html>

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Kelly Ho, "Mainland law firm linked to the 'Hong Kong 12' case is ordered to disband – lawyer," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 29 March 2021, <https://hongkongfp.com/2021/03/29/mainland-law-firm-linked-to-the-hong-kong-12-case-is-ordered-to-disband-lawyer/>

³⁸ "Will a New Judicial Interpretation on Cults Lead to Greater Leniency?" *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 24 February 2017, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2017/02/will-new-judicial-interpretation-on.html>

³⁹ Ningxia Yinchuan Intermediate People's Court, Judgment [(2018) 宁01刑初41]; Ningxia High People's Court, Judgment [(2019) 宁刑终31号].

⁴⁰ Erwelina Ochab, "Organ Harvesting in China and the Many Questions to be Answered," *Forbes*, 16 October 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erwelinaochab/2018/10/16/organ-harvesting-in-china-and-the-many-questions/?sh=62c5d6d74542>

including Christians, Uyghurs, and Tibetans.⁴¹ A London-based tribunal of experts has generally supported the allegations.⁴² The Chinese government has strenuously denied them and claims that harvesting of prisoner organs—once the main source of organs for transplantation—was outlawed in 2015. Ascertaining the veracity of allegations of organ harvesting of Falun Gong is beyond the scope of this report.

Some Article 300 cases involve what Chinese government sources say are offshoots of Falun Gong. One early example is Compassion Gong, or *cibei gong* (慈悲功). The group was founded around 1998 by former Falun Gong member Xiao Yun (肖郢), with over 900 members spread across Hubei, Hunan, and Jiangxi.⁴³ Chinese government sources claimed that Xiao used his qigong method to amass vast fortunes, and his position to coerce female followers into having sex with him.⁴⁴ In 2001, Xiao was indicted for violating Article 300(1) and rape. Although information about his trial has not been publicly disclosed, Xiao was almost certainly convicted and served or is serving a prison sentence because acquittals are extremely rare in such cases.⁴⁵ Dui Hua could not find information about this unorthodox group following Xi's arrest.⁴⁶

Another recent offshoot of Falun Gong is the “Republican Alliance” (共和联盟). It was founded in the 2010s by former Falun Gong practitioner Xu Yi (徐沂). This group allegedly converted thousands of Falun Gong practitioners and was active across ten provinces including Anhui, Shandong, and Hebei.⁴⁷ Its followers worship Xu as the “Spiritual Mother;” Chinese government sources blame her for promoting superstition and promiscuity between female and male members.⁴⁸ Dui Hua found two judgments involving alleged members of this Falun Gong offshoot. The longest prison sentence of four years was given to Xu Guofang (徐国芳) in Anhui in October 2017.⁴⁹

II. Church of Almighty God 全能神

In 2012, people across the world were anxiously awaiting the arrival of 21 December, a date some believed was prophesied to mark the end of the world. China was not immune from these rumors, and Almighty God was among the unorthodox Protestant groups to use the doomsday rumor to recruit members.

⁴¹ “China: UN human rights experts alarmed by ‘organ harvesting’ allegations,” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 14 June 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27167>

⁴² Sonia Elks, “China is harvesting organs from Falun Gong members, finds expert panel,” *Reuters*, 17 June 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-china-rights/china-is-harvesting-organs-from-falun-gong-members-finds-expert-panel-idUSKCN1TI236>

⁴³ “Wuhan Cracked Down on Variant of Falun Gong: Cibeigong,” *Chinanews.com*, 22 February 2001, [武汉侦破“法轮功”的变种慈悲功], <http://www.chinanews.com/2001-02-22/26/72398.html>

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ “Behind the Rarity of China's Acquittals,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 10 February 2015, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2015/02/behind-rarity-of-chinas-acquittals.html>

⁴⁶ Utiraruto Otehode and Benjamin Penny, “Tension between the Chinese Government and Transnational Qigong Groups,” in *Chinese Religions Going Global*, Nanlai Cao, Giuseppe Giordan, and Fenggang Yang (eds.) (Brill, 2020), pp. 194-209.

⁴⁷ Hunan Yiyang City Ziyang District People's Court, Judgment [(2017) 湘0902刑初4号].

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Anhui Huainan City Tianjia'an District People's Court, Judgment [(2017) 皖0403刑初380号].

Known also as the “Real God” church or “Eastern Lightning,” Almighty God was founded by Zhao Weishan (赵维山) in Henan in 1989. The group believes that divine revelation has identified a “female Christ” who will reign over a new age in which humankind will be judged and only believers will survive. It also calls on members to slay the CCP which they call the “great red dragon.”⁵⁰ The group has an extensive organization both inside and outside China. Almighty God members have reportedly been involved in violent attacks on non-believers and other house church organizations, most notably the killing which took place at a McDonald’s restaurant in Shandong in 2014.

Despite being outlawed since 1995, Almighty God did not become a major target of religious suppression until late December 2012, when media sources reported that Almighty God preachers “showed up on the street, in company offices and school campuses warning non-believers that their righteous path offers the only salvation from the end of the world.”⁵¹ Some media sources have also reported that the unorthodox Christian group adopts aggressive recruitment practices in Hong Kong, where religious groups banned in mainland China can still operate.⁵²

Chinese government sources confirm Almighty God’s widespread influence across mainland China. For instance, a 2019 indictment statement from Jiangsu revealed that there were 28,000 Almighty God members in Jiangsu’s Xuzhou Prefecture alone as of the end of August 2018.⁵³

In its annual report on religious persecution published in early 2020, Almighty God claimed that 6,132 members were detained and 1,355 were sentenced in the prior year.⁵⁴ Overseas groups also reported that a group of 68 Almighty God members were sentenced to heavy prison terms in Xinjiang, with six of them receiving 11-12 years in prison.⁵⁵ In December 2019, Qingdao police raided an activity center and investigated 150 of its members.⁵⁶

A portion of Chinese asylum seekers who have fled overseas are known to be members of Almighty God. As of June 2019, 2,322 members of Almighty God were seeking asylum in the

⁵⁰ “China’s “Almighty God” Rises with Threat of Apocalypse,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 17 December 2012, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2012/12/chinas-almighty-god-rises-with-threat.html>

⁵¹ “Clergy warns of cult efforts to infiltrate Church,” *Union of Catholic Asian News*, 20 December 2012, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/clergy-warns-of-cult-efforts-to-infiltrate-church/66925>

⁵² Vicky Feng, “Hong Kong Christians ‘harassed’ by mainland’s Church of Almighty God,” *South China Morning Post*, 6 August 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1294483/hong-kong-christians-harassed-mainlands-church-almighty-god>

⁵³ Jiangsu Xuzhou City Quanshan District People’s Procuratorate, Indictment [泉检诉刑诉 (2019) 142号].

⁵⁴ “CCP Government’s Repression and Persecution of the Church of Almighty God: 2019 Annual Report,” The Church of Almighty God, 31 January 2020, [全能神教会遭受中共政府镇压迫害的 2019年年度报告], <https://www.hidden-advent.org/persecution/annual-report-2019.html>

⁵⁵ “68 Church of Almighty God Members Sentenced to Heavy Prison Terms in Xinjiang,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 12 September 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/68-church-of-almighty-god-members-sentenced-to-heavy-prison-terms/>

⁵⁶ “Qingdao destroys multiple cult dens and investigates more than 150 people,” *Qingdao News*, 18 December 2019, [青岛捣毁多处邪教全能神窝点 查处150多人], http://news.qingdaonews.com/qingdao/2019-12/18/content_21019864.htm

European Union and 33 in Switzerland.⁵⁷ Additionally, there were 1,038 and 276 asylum seekers in South Korea and Japan, respectively.⁵⁸

As noted above, some observers have suggested that the practice of organ harvesting has been extended to Almighty God, albeit to a smaller extent when compared to reported figures for Falun Gong. This argument was put forward in a book titled *Tortured to Death: The Persecution of The Church of Almighty God in China*.⁵⁹ Published in 2018 by Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers, the book documents 21 cases of Almighty God members who died in custody in suspicious circumstances, with tell-tale signs that their internal organs had been removed.⁶⁰

Unorthodox Protestant Groups

III. Anointed King 被立王

Anointed King, or *bei li wang*, was founded in 1988 by one of the core members of the Shouters, Wu Yangming (吴扬明). By 2002, it had set up over 500 activity centers in 29 provinces, autonomous regions, and cities, and had recruited thousands of people.⁶¹ As is the case with other unorthodox Christian groups in China, Wu claimed that doomsday was coming and that only belief in this particular group could save believers from damnation.

According to government accounts, Wu took the word “anointed” from the Book of John and called himself the “Anointed King.” He allegedly stated that “now that Jesus has gone, God must express himself through a man,” with that man being himself. Wu is said to have interpreted the phrase “being called” in the Bible to mean that women can be “called” by the “Anointed King” to have sex with him in order to “be saved.” In December 1995 in Anhui, Wu was sentenced to death and executed for committing rape. On 28 August 1995, the Ministry of Public Security banned Anointed King.

Dui Hua has not found recent information of arrests involving members of Anointed King. However, the group was occasionally mentioned in Chinese government sources in the 2010s. In Jiangxi’s Linchuan District, police found two Anointed King members amid an anti-cult campaign in 2016.⁶²

IV. “Assembly” or “Local Church” 地方召会

This Protestant movement was initiated in China by Watchman Nee (倪柝声) in the 1920s and is referred to with different names in China and overseas. According to J. Godron Melton, the retired Distinguished Professor of American Religious History at the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, Nee’s movement has been called Little Flock (小群, a name derived from their hymnal), Christian Assembly, the Church Assembly Hall, Lord’s Recovery,

⁵⁷ “Asylum Seekers from The Church of Almighty God (CAG),” Freedom of Religion or Belief Roundtable, Center for Studies on New Religions, 23 July 2019, <https://www.cesnur.org/2019/cag-asylum-seekers.htm>

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Book Denounces Organ Harvesting from Prisoners of The Church of Almighty God,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 10 August 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/book-denounces-organ-harvesting/>

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ “Selection of Cases from the Criminal Law: Banned Protestant Groups,” *Occasional Publications*, The Dui Hua Foundation, Vol.12, (February 2003).

⁶² Linchuan Yearbook (2011-2016) [临川年鉴 (2011-2016)], p. 217.

or “Local Church” in the West.⁶³ In China, this unorthodox group is more often called the “Assembly.”⁶⁴

Nee adhered to the New Testament and felt that only one church should be established in any given city as an expression of church unity.⁶⁵ In 1952, Nee was sent to prison by the CCP and died in a labor camp two decades later. A year before the Communist takeover, Nee sent elder Li Changshou to lead the mission in Taiwan. Li later called himself Nee’s heir and founded the Shouters, which flourished and reached the United States and other countries.

During the 1970s, anti-cult ministries in the United States accused Nee’s movement of spreading heterodox views of the Trinity and engaging in “cult” practices.⁶⁶ Evangelical denunciations led to a defamation lawsuit in 1985, and the judgment ruled in favor of the Local Church.⁶⁷ Since then, the group has continued to operate outside China without being embroiled in much controversy.

In China, three sub-factions of Nee’s movement had emerged by 1980.⁶⁸ The first faction consisted of believers who agreed with Nee that a city only needs one church to solve the problems of denominational divisions. They were largely absorbed by the Three Self-Patriotic Church. The Shouters, the second faction, operates independently of the CCP and accepts Li as Nee’s legitimate successor. The third faction largely follows Nee’s original teachings, rejects Li’s leadership, and remains independent of the CCP.

While the Chinese government outlawed the Shouters in 1983, the Assembly has never been named on any official lists of cult organizations. That said, Melton noted that the Assembly is a network of independent congregations, each of which is different from the others, and remains part of the unregistered Christian congregations about which the Chinese government is concerned.⁶⁹ There are occasions where the Chinese government treats the Assembly and the Shouters as an identical group, accusing Assembly followers of spreading Li Changshou’s heterodox teachings.^{70, 71} Members of the Assembly have refuted the allegations and stated that the Assembly is not part of the Shouters.⁷² Cases of imprisonment involving leaders of the

⁶³ Massimo Introvigne, “Local Church, Shouters, Assembly: Who’s Who in the Watchman Nee Tradition,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 15 January 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/local-church-shouters-assembly-whos-who-in-the-watchman-nee-tradition/>

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ “Obsession with Spreading Evil Cults, Hurts Self, Others, and Results in Jail,” Anhui Huangshan City Tunxi District People’s Court Website, 25 April 2018, [执迷不悟传播邪教 害人害己锒铛入狱], <http://ahtxfy.chinacourt.gov.cn/article/detail/2018/04/id/3280230.shtml>

⁷¹ Shandong Yantai City Laishan District Procuratorate, Indictment [烟莱检公刑诉(2015) 22号]; Anhui Tongling City Yi’an District Procuratorate, Indictment [义检刑诉(2017) 82号]; Shandong Yantai City Laishan District Procuratorate, Indictment [烟莱检公刑诉(2018) 200号].

⁷² “We Are Local Assemblies, Not the So-Called ‘Shouters’” Dialectic of Truth, [我們是地方召會，不是所謂『呼喊派』，真理辨正], <https://cftfc.com/我們是地方召會不是所謂『呼喊派』>

Assembly have also been reported. In May 2020, Beijing-based leaders were each sentenced to three years in prison for “organizing a cult to undermine implementation of the law.”⁷³

V. Children of God 天父的儿女

The Children of God was founded by David Berg in the United States in 1968. This group allegedly uses sexual enticement to recruit members and persuades them to sever contact with family and friends. Similar accusations have been circulated by China’s anti-cult propaganda. Missionaries from the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and France allegedly began infiltrating China in 1980; by 1984, the group had 190 members.⁷⁴ It has reportedly lost traction since being outlawed by the Chinese government in 1995.

There have been few reports about the Children of God in China. The most recent news report involved a case of three leaders who received administrative detention in Hubei in November 2014.⁷⁵

VI. China Gospel Fellowship 中华福音团契

In January 1997, the Henan Public Security Bureau banned China Gospel Fellowship.⁷⁶ Headquartered in Tanghe County, the group allegedly spread ideas that its followers could cure illnesses without medicine and that non-members would go to hell. In 2005, over 80 members were detained in Chengcheng County, Shaanxi.⁷⁷ Most were released after receiving “education.”

Dui Hua has learned of a few criminal cases involving China Gospel Fellowship members. In 2002, the Henan’s Xiayi County People’s Court handed down a suspended sentence to He Guangming (何光明) for violating Article 300(1).⁷⁸ At the time of writing, Shenzhen-based entrepreneur Lai Jinqiang (赖晋强) is facing trial for “illegal business activity” for producing audio Bibles. Lai is reportedly a member of the China Gospel Fellowship.⁷⁹

VII. Cold Water Church 冷水教

The Cold Water Church was established in 1988 by an elderly woman in northern Guangdong called Huang Huanting (黄焕听), who converted to Christianity while reportedly suffering from schizophrenia.⁸⁰ After recovery, she began propagating her belief that cold water could

⁷³ “Follow-up report: Criminal Verdict Revealed that CCP had persecuted Beijing’s ‘local churches,’” China Aid Association, 31 August 2021, [追踪报道: 刑事判决书披露中共逼迫北京“地方召会”详情], https://www.chinaaid.net/2021/08/blog-post_0.html

⁷⁴ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

⁷⁵ “Cult organization ‘Children of God’ arrested recruiting members across provinces, 3 principles arrested,” *People.cn*, People’s Daily, 17 November 2014, [邪教组织“天父的儿女”跨省发展信徒 3名骨干落网, 人民网-湖北频道], <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1117/c1001-26040674.html>

⁷⁶ “Identifying Cult Organizations in China,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 10 July 2014, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2014/07/identifying-cult-organizations-in-china.html>

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ “Guangdong Christian entrepreneur Lai Jinqiang arrested for making electronic Bible players and faces trial,” China Aid Association, 12 February 2020, [广东基督徒企业家赖晋强因制作电子圣经播放器被抓捕, 面临审判], https://www.chinaaid.net/2020/12/blog-post_2.html

⁸⁰ Fenggang Yang, *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts* (Brill, 2018), p.63.

be used as the blood of God the Father to heal physical illnesses without medication, and to eradicate pests without pesticides.⁸¹ Worshipers were asked to consume a bowl of cold water at their Sunday worship, and randomly read a Bible page until they came across the word “water.”⁸²

Huang’s group has grown to more than 1,000 followers.⁸³ Outside of Guangdong, it has also gained adherents in Jiangxi.⁸⁴ In 1999, state news media reported that a group of 31 core leaders in Lianping County, Guangdong, were given administrative detention and three of its churches were demolished.⁸⁵ More research is needed to determine whether this group still exists.

VIII. Corporate Christ 团体基督

The “Corporate Christ (团体基督)” is described as a “mutation” of Church of Almighty God in a post on the China National Anti-Cult Association’s website⁸⁶. The group is said to be led by Sun Zhibing (孙智斌). Sun and several key members were convicted and sentenced for Article 300 in Hubei. The Xiangyang Intermediate People’s Court in Hubei Province rejected the appeal and upheld the judgment on May 27, 2019.

The case is believed to be the only report of this group. Dui Hua’s research could not confirm details of this new unorthodox sect.

IX. Dami Mission 达米宣教会

The Dami Mission was founded in 1988 by South Korean Lee Jang-rim, who predicted that the world would rapture at 11:00p.m. on 28 October 1992. According to Chinese government sources, the group was active across 10 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities after it was introduced to China in early 1992.⁸⁷ In Jilin alone, police once discovered over 60 gathering sites involving 400 members.⁸⁸ The Dami Mission allegedly deceived members into “selling off their personal properties, leaving behind their families, and abandoning production and education.”⁸⁹

Lee disbanded the Dami Mission in November 1992 while awaiting his prison sentence in South Korea for defrauding his followers. Although Dui Hua has not found a single case of arrest in China involving this group, a government record documented one instance of “religious infiltration” from the Dami Mission in Qingdao, Shandong, in 2002.⁹⁰

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ “Absurd ‘Cold Water Sect’ Harms Countryside of Lianping,” *Guangzhou Daily*, 3 September 1999, [荒唐“冷水教”为害连平乡野, 广州日报], <http://news.sina.com.cn/society/1999-9-3/11384.html>

⁸⁶ “A Gansu Zhangye Woman received Ten Years of Imprisonment for Cult Activity,” China National Anti-Cult Website, 15 November 2019, [甘肃张掖一女子从事邪教活动获刑十年], <https://www.chinafxj.cn/n165/c127801/content.html>

⁸⁷ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织 若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Yantai Yearbook (2003) [烟台年鉴 (2003)], p.85.

X. Evangelical Gospel Mission Armored with Blood and Holy Spirit 血水圣灵

In 1988, Zuo Kun (左坤), a former leader of the New Testament Church, set up the Evangelical Gospel Mission Armored with Blood and Holy Spirit (also known as the “Church Reestablished by the Holy Spirit”) in Taiwan. According to state-run news sources, Zuo boasted 300,000 followers and 7,000 churches in mainland China by the end of 2014.⁹¹ *China Daily* cited public security as saying that there were 2,000 members in three cities in Shandong as of December 2014.⁹²

This group was designated as a cult organization by the State Council in 1995. Zuo reportedly calls himself a prophet who conveys God’s will to his followers. The group is known to organize services at residential buildings. The Chinese government accuses the group of hiring believers as cheap laborers for its catering businesses.⁹³

Core leaders affiliated with the Evangelical Gospel Mission are at heightened risk of imprisonment. In December 2019, a local court in Jiangxi sentenced a group of 16 members to 18 months to five years in prison allegedly for illegally amassing 4.63 million yuan.⁹⁴ On 15 January 2020, the Dongguan No.2 People’s Court concluded an Article 300(1) trial involving two leaders who ran a western restaurant to fund the church’s activity and to recruit new members.⁹⁵ The two defendants were each sentenced to two years in prison. On 7 June 2021, a local court in Guangxi sentenced a group of 21 members under Article 300(1), with prison sentences ranging from 10 to 38 months.^{96, 97}

XI. Full Scope Church 全范围教会

The Full Scope Church was founded in Pingdingshan City, Henan, in 1984 by Xu Yongze (徐永泽). This group splintered off from the New Testament Church, another unorthodox Protestant group. By 1991, the Full Scope Church had spread to 88 regions across 15 provinces and claimed thousands of members.⁹⁸ Xu reportedly stated that the “end of the world is coming” and encouraged believers to cry loudly as a form of repentance so that they could be born again.

⁹¹ “Uncovering Cult Organization ‘Blood Water Holy Spirit’,” *Wen Wei Po*, 7 September 2015, [起底邪教「血水聖靈」], <http://news.wenweipo.com/2015/09/07/IN1509070013.htm>

⁹² “Cult seeks converts on the mainland,” *China Daily*, 1 November 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-11/01/content_27234579.htm

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ “Cult organization ‘Blood Water Holy Spirit’ collects 4.63 million yuan in Ji’an County, Jiangxi Province - 16 people sentenced,” *Dajiang Express*, 12 December 2019, [邪教组织“血水圣灵”在江西吉安县敛财463万元 16人获刑, 大江快报],

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:4sGINDjvrQoJ:https://m.jxnews.com.cn/jx/system/2019/12/12/018688348.shtml&hl=en&gl=hk&strip=1&vwsr=0>

⁹⁵ “Evil Cult ‘Blood Water Holy Spirit’ Uprooted After Operating and Preaching in a Western Restaurant in Dongguan,” Fengxiang People’s Government, 15 September 2020, [邪教“血水圣灵”在东莞开西餐厅传教被端],

http://www.fengxiang.gov.cn/art/2020/9/15/art_6114_1207023.html

⁹⁶ “21 Bloody Holy Spirit Members Sentenced in Guangxi,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 18 April 2021, <https://bitterwinter.org/21-bloody-holy-spirit-members-sentenced-in-guangxi/>

⁹⁷ “Sentencing of 21 members of the cult organization ‘Blood Water Holy Spirit’ in Qinnan District, Guangxi,” China Anti-Cult Association Online, 17 June 2021, [广西钦南区集中宣判21名邪教组织“血水圣灵”成员], <https://www.cqkp.cn/expose/377/418965377.shtml>

⁹⁸ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

It was banned in 1988 before the Chinese government began composing its list of “cult organizations” in the following decade.

Xu has been imprisoned or assigned to re-education through labor several times for his religious activities. He was last sentenced in 1997 for “disturbing social order.” Xu reportedly settled down in the United States after completing his three-year prison sentence in March 2000.⁹⁹

The Full Scope Church garnered extensive attention in 2015, when the Cao County People’s Court sentenced two alleged members in Shandong to three to four years in prison.¹⁰⁰ Human rights groups, however, believe that the duo was falsely accused of being affiliated with the church.¹⁰¹ Their defense lawyer also claimed that they had not even heard of the church prior to detention.¹⁰²

Chinese government sources continued to report cases involving alleged members of the Full Scope Church after 2015. In July 2017, police in Taixing City, Jiangsu, raided a summer camp housing 20 minors.¹⁰³ *Bitter Winter* also reported mass arrests in Jiangsu, Henan, and Yunnan in 2020.¹⁰⁴

XII. Good News Mission 好消息教会

Good News Mission, founded by South Korean national Ock Soo-park in 1976, continues to train and send missionaries and pastors overseas. It claims to have 170 churches in South Korea as well as 838 international churches. Due to doctrinal differences, mainstream South Korean denominations have called the mission “heretical.” The accusation stems from its allegedly objectional conduct, such as deceptive recruiting and exaltation of Ock.¹⁰⁵

In China, leaders of Good News Mission are at risk of imprisonment although the group has not been officially designated as a cult organization. Dui Hua’s research into court judgments found that Good New Mission missionary Cho Young-joo was sentenced to seven years in prison in May 2014 for “organizing illegal border crossings.”¹⁰⁶ Cho, a South Korean national, led a group of Christians to cross the Yunnan-Myanmar border in a bid to provide education

⁹⁹ “More than 100 members of the Rebirth House Church arrested,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 5 January 2020, [重生派家庭教會百餘名信徒被捕 同工長老在押中將判刑], <https://zh.bitterwinter.org/all-sphere-church-members-arrested-throughout-china/>

¹⁰⁰ “Shandong Province Suppressing House Churches; Followers Arrested and Sentenced,” *Voice of America*, 16 June 2015, [山东打压家庭教会 教徒被抓判刑], <https://www.voachinese.com/a/shandong-family-church-christians-sentenced/2824490.html>

¹⁰¹ “Viewing the Evilization of House Churches from the Cao County Case,” China Aid Association, 26 April 2015, [从曹县教案看家庭教会的被邪教化], https://www.chinaaid.net/2015/04/blog-post_47.html

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Run Wusheng, “Be Vigilant Against Cult Proselytization During Summer Vacation,” China Anti-Cult Association, 22 July 2020, [暑假谨防邪教的这些坑], <http://www.chinafxj.cn/n161/c125952/content.html>

¹⁰⁴ “Over 100 Members of Rebirth Church Arrested; Co-workers and Elders in Custody Pending Sentencing,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 5 January 2020, [重生派家庭教會百餘名信徒被捕 同工長老在押中將判刑], <https://zh.bitterwinter.org/all-sphere-church-members-arrested-throughout-china/>

¹⁰⁵ “Good News Mission (Ock Soo Park),” Africa Centre for Apologetics Research, <https://acfar.org/groups.aspx?groupid=212>

¹⁰⁶ “Dangerous Border Crossings: The Case of Cho Young-joo,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 11 February 2021, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2021/02/dangerous-border-crossingsthecase-of.html>

for impoverished children in Mongla, a Myanmar city best known for casinos, prostitution, and markets for endangered wildlife with Chinese clientele.¹⁰⁷

More recently, news media sources reported that a group of 26 Good News Mission members were sentenced for illegal business activity in Jiangsu in July 2020.¹⁰⁸ Among them, Xian Renguo (咸仁国), director of the Secretarial Department of the mission, received a prison sentence of 42 months. The 27th defendant Hu Jianguo (胡建国) was convicted of “giving harbor to criminals” and sentenced to five month’s criminal detention.¹⁰⁹ In 2021, authorities in Jilin and Zhejiang have announced a ban on this South Korean group.¹¹⁰

XIII. House of Joseph 约瑟家

The House of Joseph was founded in 1992 by Wei Zhuxiang (魏柱祥) as an offshoot of the Spirit Church, or *linglingjiao* (灵灵教). It is sometimes called “the third generation” of the True Jesus Church (真耶稣教会) from which the Spirit Church splintered in 1986.

According to Chinese government sources¹¹¹, Wei predicted an apocalypse in 2000 and said that conversion to the House of Joseph was the only way to salvation. He allegedly “distorted” the Bible by proclaiming himself Joseph, son of Jesus. He claimed that the Holy Spirit had descended on him and his wife, and the couple became the new god after they united as one. He also stated that he was reincarnated as a shepherd in the earthly world in search of “another flock of sheep.” His goal is to launch an evangelizing mission which he calls “the 6,000-Year Project of God.” Following Wei’s unfulfilled apocalyptic prophecy in 2000, he started calling on believers to join settlements or communities that he termed “vineyards” and described as swathes of paradise on earth. Chinese government sources reveal that Wei used the money to create economic entities in garment processing, engineering construction, planting crops and breeding livestock, catering services, and trading.

The group faced its first persecution in 2005. Wei was among the 12 leading members detained amid a crackdown that year. In 2006, the Kunshan City People’s Court convicted Wei of fraud and sentenced him to 10 years and six months in prison. Wei was released from prison in April 2014. His wife was also sentenced in the same case, but information about the criminal punishment she received is not available. In May 2020, Wei was re-arrested in Suqian, Jiangsu, alongside another leading member **Wang Shoucai (王守财)** for “organizing a cult to undermine implementation of the law.” Six months later, Wei and Wang were among the 17 House of Joseph members who were indicted for violating Article 300. The procuratorate accused them of “disseminating propaganda materials all over the country to promote the cultic

¹⁰⁷ Andrew Jacobs, “A Border City on the Edge of the Law,” *The New York Times*, 14 February 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/25/world/asia/a-border-city-on-the-edge-of-the-law.html>

¹⁰⁸ “26 people given hefty sentences for printing Good News Mission books,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 15 December 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/religious-books-burned-or-trashed-printers-jailed/>

¹⁰⁹ Jiangsu Huaian City Huaiyin District People’s Court, Judgment [(2019) 苏0804刑初382号].

¹¹⁰ “CCP Cracks Down on Korea-Based Good News Mission,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 11 June 2021, <https://bitterwinter.org/ccp-cracks-down-on-korea-based-good-news-mission/>

¹¹¹ “From ‘Vineyard’ to Prison: The House of Joseph,” *Human Right Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 11 January 2024, <https://www.duihuajournal.org/2024/01/from-vineyard-to-prison-house-of-joseph.html>

ideology of the House of Joseph, collecting donations from believers, and illegally amassing a fortune” since 2017. The outcome of the trial is unknown.

Dui Hua found two other members of the House of Joseph who were convicted and sentenced for Article 300 in 2015.

XIV. Jehovah’s Witnesses 耶和华见证人

Emerging from the Bible Student movement in the late 1870s by American pastor Charles Taze Russell, Jehovah’s Witnesses claim a worldwide membership of 8.6 million across 240 countries.¹¹² The group is best known for preaching door-to-door about the imminent destruction of the world. Some religious scholars and organizations outside China have also called it a “cult” for making doctrinal reversals, false prophecies, and erroneous biblical translations.¹¹³ Additionally, it has been criticized for coercive recruitment and fear-mongering, as well as for prohibiting blood transfusions.^{114, 115}

There was no information about the group’s activity in China until news media sources reported the first known case of imprisonment involving 18 members in Korla City, Xinjiang, in June 2020.¹¹⁶ They received prison sentences ranging from two years and six months to six years and six months. According to the indictment statement, the group discourages members from “joining the CCP, joining the military, raising or saluting the national flag, singing the national anthem, and participating in elections.”¹¹⁷

XV. Jesus Family 耶稣家庭

The Jesus Family is an indigenous Christian communitarian group founded in Shandong in the 1920s by Jing Dianying (敬奠瀛). The Jesus Family emphasized simple living, sacrifice, poverty, communal sharing, piety, prophesy, prayers, and the singing of psalms. By 1949, it had over 125 congregations and 20,000 members in Shandong and other provinces.¹¹⁸ The group was briefly condoned by the government, but in 1952 Jing was arrested and sentenced to prison. Its properties were destroyed, and its 500 members were dispersed. The family disappeared during the Cultural Revolution and re-emerged after 1979, reoccupying 43 acres of land, growing crops, and establishing a church and an eye hospital. Under Zheng Yunsu’s

¹¹² The European Association of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Religious Freedom Subcommittee, Submissions in Connection with the Special Report to the 75th United Nations General Assembly on Eliminating Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), 20 May 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Religion/Submissions/CSOs/63.the-european-association-of-jw.pdf>

¹¹³ Alan W. Gomes, *Unmasking the Cults* (Zondervan, 1955), pp. 22-23.

¹¹⁴ “The harm caused by Jehovah’s Witnesses shows charity law reform is urgently needed,” National Secular Society, 26 March 2019, <https://www.secularism.org.uk/opinion/2019/03/the-harm-caused-by-jehovahs-witnesses-shows-charity-law-reform-is-urgently-needed>

¹¹⁵ “Why Don’t Jehovah’s Witnesses Accept Blood Transfusions?” Jehovah’s Witnesses.org, <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/jehovahs-witnesses-why-no-blood-transfusions/>

¹¹⁶ “18 Jehovah’s Witnesses Sentenced to Years in Jail in Xinjiang,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 17 August 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/18-jehovahs-witnesses-sentenced-to-years-in-jail-in-xinjiang/>

¹¹⁷ Xinjiang UAR Korla City Procuratorate, Indictment [库尔勒市检公刑诉(2019)326号].

¹¹⁸ John Kamm, “John Kamm Remembers: Resurrecting the Jesus Family,” *Digest*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 18 May 2021, <https://duihua.org/resurrecting-the-jesus-family/>

(郑允苏) leadership, it had about 3,000 congregants but was subject to police harassment and surveillance.¹¹⁹

In May 1992, Zheng and his four sons were detained and paraded through local villages with placards around their necks identifying them as Jesus Family believers. Police destroyed buildings and detained over 20 members, with another 10 detained in July. Zheng was convicted of fraud and disrupting social order and was sentenced to 12 years in prison. His four sons were sentenced to three-year terms of re-education through labor. Other detainees were released after making confessions and agreeing to cease religious activities.

Despite reports that the Jesus Family either disbanded, affiliated itself with various house churches, or was absorbed into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, a 2015 account says that the Jesus Family exists in non-communitarian form in parts of China while another account from 2019 said that the family is active and enjoys good relations with the Three-Self Movement's Shandong Christian Council.¹²⁰

XVI. Lord God Church 主神教

This group was founded in 1993 by one of the core members of Anointed King, Liu Jiaguo (刘家国), and had thousands of disciples in over 22 provinces, autonomous regions, and cities.¹²¹ Within the organization there are seven levels, the highest being “Lord God” and the lowest called “co-workers.” Liu claimed to be the “Lord God” and preached that “doomsday is coming and only believing in the Lord God can save you.” Liu allegedly raped 19 women under the pretense of “giving God’s spirit” and received over 400,000 yuan in offerings of money and grain.¹²²

In October 1999, Liu was sentenced to death and executed in Hunan Province for violating Article 300(1), and for committing rape and fraud. His cohort, Zhu Aiqing (朱爱清), was sentenced at the same time to 20 years’ imprisonment, which was reduced upon appeal to 17 years’ imprisonment. The Lord God Church was banned by the CCP’s Central Committee and the State Council in a notice issued on 11 April 1998.

The group has been occasionally targeted in religious clampdowns two decades into the national ban. In December 2019, Chinese news media sources reported that a group of 16 members received prison sentences of up to four years and eight months in Nanning, Guangxi.¹²³

XVII. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站

Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station was banned by the Chinese government in November 1995. Formerly a core member of the Shouters, Wang Yongmin (王永民) founded this group as an offshoot in Anhui 1994. At its peak during the early 1990s, thousands of

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ “16 people engaged in ‘Lord God Sect’ cult activities sentenced in Binyang County, Guangxi,” *Sohu News*, 7 December 2019, [16人从事“主神教”邪教活动在广西宾阳县被判刑], https://www.sohu.com/a/358973963_267325

church members distributed “reactionary propaganda” in 69 cities across 20 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions.¹²⁴

Wang proclaimed himself to be the “one true deacon” to seize power from Satan and create the Kingdom of God. China’s anti-cult propaganda has accused him of “confronting the CCP government, raping women, and swindling money.”¹²⁵ In 1996, Wang was sentenced to 20 years in prison for “disturbing social order” and fraud. He was released on parole three years early on 14 February 2012.

Dui Hua found that Wang is serving his second prison term in Anhui for 10 years and is scheduled to complete his prison sentence on 22 March 2028.¹²⁶ The now-72-year-old was found guilty of violating Article 300(1) on 27 December 2019. The judgment stated that Wang resumed his role as the leader upon his prison release in February 2012. Five other people were also convicted.

Another allegation against Wang is his effort to gain overseas recognition as a religious group. Wang allegedly contacted Living Stream Ministry via a professor at the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. Living Stream Ministry is a Christian book publisher based in Anaheim, California, founded by Shouters leader Li Changshou. In February 2025, Dui Hua uncovered information that revealed a key member of the group, Li Yuhong, received a sentence reduction and had been released in 2024. Wang is believed to be the only person who remains in prison until March 2028. No information has been found on whether he also received clemency.

XVIII. New Testament Church 新约教会

The New Testament Church, also called the “Christian Charismatic Evangelistic Band,” was founded in 1960 by Hong Kong movie actress Mei Qi (梅綺) and then handed down to her daughter Ruth Chang. Chang spread her mother’s teachings and established an organization in Taiwan. In 1988, Zuo Kun, one of the leaders of the New Testament Church, set up the Evangelical Gospel Mission Armored with Blood and Holy Spirit.

Mei Qi and Zuo reportedly called themselves “prophets” who “represent the supreme God.” Chinese government reports state that they want to “overthrow the kingdom of man and establish the Kingdom of God” and “save the souls of people who are persecuted under Communism.”¹²⁷

The New Testament Church was banned by the Ministry of Public Security in November 1995. Cases involving this group were occasionally documented in local government records in

¹²⁴ “Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station: Leaders Receive Lengthy Sentences,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 21 September 2021, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2021/09/mainland-china-administrative-state.html>

¹²⁵ “Main Active Cult Organizations in Our Country,” People’s Government of Yiyang City, 15 August 2016, [我国内现存主要的邪教组织], http://www.yiyang.gov.cn/yiyang/2/134/4417/5237/content_226906.html

¹²⁶ “Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station: Leaders Receive Lengthy Sentences,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 21 September 2021, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2021/09/mainland-china-administrative-state.html>

¹²⁷ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

Hebei, Hunan, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang in the 2000s.^{128, 129, 130, 131} Dui Hua has not been able to find recent reports of arrest involving this group.

XIX. Shengzhou Jesus Church 嵊州耶稣教会

Dui Hua could not find information about this local church based in Shengzhou City, Zhejiang, beyond a court judgment and an indictment issued in 2000 and 2020, respectively.^{132, 133} The church was founded in the mid-1980s by six farmers and one worker. They prohibited members from, among other things, watching TV, applying for marriage certificates, taking part in village committee elections, and serving in the military. Primary and secondary school students who joined the church were not allowed to wear red scarves or to participate in group activities in school.

According to the judgment, the church leaders possessed Shouters' publications and "propagated Li Changshou's evil teachings." The lack of public information about this church makes it impossible to determine how its beliefs were connected to the Shouters.

In March 1997, a group of seven church leaders accused several members of fornication and beat them so that they would confess. One of the members was beaten to death. In May 2001, its female leader Shao Lingyuan (邵玲韵) was sentenced to death for homicide, aggravated assault, and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law and to cause death. In November of the same year, the appellate court vacated the murder charge and reduced her sentence to death with two-year reprieve. Six other defendants received prison sentences ranging from four years to life in prison.

Public prosecution of church members continued as recently as 2020. Dui Hua found that two church members were indicted for aggravated assault in August 2020 over the incident in 1997 which had left one of the church members dead.¹³⁴

XX. Shincheonji Church of Jesus 新天地教会

Literally translated as "New Heaven and New Earth Church," Shincheonji was founded in South Korea in 1984 by Lee Man-hee. Mainstream Protestant denominations in South Korea call it a "cult" because of its secretive nature and unconventional beliefs. Lee Man-hee claimed to be the second coming of Jesus Christ uniquely capable of deciphering the Bible's Book of Revelation.

The church was singled out for fierce criticism in early 2020 while South Korea was battling its COVID-19 outbreak. Although a South Korean court acquitted Lee of obstructing the government's efforts to stamp out the outbreak of COVID-19 in January 2021, Shincheonji continues to come under fire for being a virus spreader.

¹²⁸ Cangzhou Yearbook (2002) [临川年鉴 (2002)], p.56.

¹²⁹ Yueyang Yearbook (2008) [岳阳年鉴 (2008)], p.231.

¹³⁰ Pingjiang Yearbook (2005) [平江年鉴 (2005)], p.128.

¹³¹ Hangzhou People's Public Security Record (2001) [杭州市公安志 (2001)], p.99.

¹³² Zhejiang High People's Court, Judgment [(2000) 浙刑一终字第207号].

¹³³ Zhejiang Shengzhou City Procuratorate First Department, Indictment [嵊检一部刑诉(2020) 203号].

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

Before the pandemic made Shincheonji a target of public scorn, China had long perceived the group to be a cult organization, a source of religious infiltration, and a heresy. In 2018, local governments across China began banning Shincheonji in their anti-cult campaigns. The largest raid occurred in November 2018 in Dalian, Liaoning, where the church had grown to 2,000 members.¹³⁵

In February 2020, news media sources reported that Shincheonji had a membership of 20,000 people across China.¹³⁶ There were about 200 members in Wuhan when rumors surfaced in late 2019 about an unknown virus in the Chinese city which would become the epicenter of the epidemic.¹³⁷ Members continued to hold meetings until December 2019 but stopped after they realized that their congregants had been infected with COVID-19.¹³⁸ Shincheonji moved online to share sermons and teachings after December 2019.¹³⁹

Dui Hua's research found two criminal cases involving Shincheonji in China. In both cases, the suspects were accused of fraud. A notice posted on 11 November 2020 indicated that six Shincheonji members were detained for "organizing and using a Korean religion to promote feudal superstition" in Dalian, Liaoning, and by "fabricating that Shincheonji and its founder Lee Man-hee can manipulate one's life and death."¹⁴⁰ In the second case, a female suspect surnamed Chu was accused of receiving an 11,205-yuan donation from church members in the two months since April 2020.¹⁴¹ The prosecutor recommended that the court give her a prison sentence of six months.¹⁴²

XXI. Shouters 呼喊派

The Shouters were founded by Witness Li Changshou (李常受) in 1962 in the United States. It was brought to China in 1979. By 1983, this unorthodox Protestant group had spread to 360 counties and cities in 20 provinces and autonomous regions and had up to 200,000 believers.¹⁴³ They are called Shouters because members engage in public shouting as part of their worship. There are government reports that Li proclaimed himself to be Christ and asked believers to shout out his name in place of the name of Jesus.¹⁴⁴ This accusation is hotly disputed by Shouters who have gained political asylum in the West. Christian groups, particularly members

¹³⁵ "Dalian handles Shincheonji Church in accordance with the law, disbands the organization, shut down its website, and confiscates its illegal propaganda materials," *Sohu News*, 16 October 2019, [大连依法处置“新天地教会”解散组织关闭网站收缴非法宣传品], https://www.sohu.com/a/347459222_671303

¹³⁶ "Coronavirus: secretive South Korean church linked to outbreak held meetings in Wuhan until December," *The South China Morning Post*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3052322/coronavirus-secretive-south-korean-church-linked-outbreak-held>

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Liaoning Dalian City High-Tech Industrial Zone District Procuratorate, Procedure Public Notice, 5 November 2020 [大连高新技术产业园区人民检察院案情通报].

¹⁴¹ Yunnan Procuratorate, Indictment [云检刑诉(2021)81号].

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ "14 Cults Identified in China," *Youth Times Online*, Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, 4 June 2014, [我国明确认定14个邪教组织], http://news.youth.cn/sh/201507/t20150716_6869563.htm

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

of the Assembly, who prayed openly without registering with the Three Self-Patriotic Church could earn the appellation of joining the “Shouters sect.”¹⁴⁵

The Shouters were declared a “counterrevolutionary group” shortly before the first Strike Hard Campaign began in August 1983. During the four years when the campaign was in effect, thousands of Shouters were detained, with the result that many either joined other groups or went further underground.¹⁴⁶ Dui Hua’s prisoner database indicates that by 1987—the last year of the first Strike Hard Campaign—the number of Shouters had begun to stabilize in China. The majority of arrests documented in the database took place in the early 1980s.

In the 1990s, multiple offshoots of the Shouters appeared, some of the best known of which are the Anointed King, Lord God Church, and Almighty God. While the number of Shouters cases has declined in recent years, overseas rights groups continue to report that the leaders face arrest and imprisonment. In September 2020, six alleged members of the Shouters were sentenced to prison sentences ranging from 18 months to five years for violating Article 300(1).¹⁴⁷ In February 2021, the Justice Court of Rome granted asylum to a male member of the Shouters, quoting precedents of refugees from Almighty God who face high risk of religious persecution and imprisonment in China.¹⁴⁸

XXII. Society of Disciples 门徒会

The Society of Disciples (also commonly known as the “Wilderness Christians,” Thrice Redeemed Christ (三赎基督), or *mentu hui*) was founded in 1989 by Ji Sanbao (季三保), a farmer from Yao County, Shaanxi. According to official accounts, by early 1995 the organization had spread to over 300 counties in 14 provinces and had some 350,000 members.¹⁴⁹ Ji was arrested in 1994 when the authorities shut down his organization for “illegal activities,” and was sentenced to seven years in prison. In June 1997, Ji was released on parole. However, he died in a car accident in December of the same year.¹⁵⁰

Ji taught the “seven steps of the spiritual journey” and organized the Society of Disciples into seven hierarchical tiers. He reportedly claimed to be the “Christ established by God” and said that he could perform miracles, had fasted for 32 days, and that he could heal the blind and the paralyzed. Although many members of the Society of Disciples have been arrested for

¹⁴⁵ “We Are Local Assemblies, Not the So-Called ‘Shouters,’” *Dialectic of Truth*,

[我們是地方召會，不是所謂『呼喊派』，真理辨正]，

<https://cftfc.com/我們是地方召會不是所謂『呼喊派』>

¹⁴⁶ “Absurd Cult Charge—Comment on 414 Pingdingshan Ye County Missionary Case,” China Aid

Association, 15 July 2013, [荒唐的邪教罪名——评414平顶山叶县教案]，

https://www.chinaaid.net/2013/07/414_15.html

¹⁴⁷ “Anhui Province Cult Shouters Sentenced,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions,

30 September 2020, [安徽省呼喊派信徒被判刑]，[https://zh.bitterwinter.org/shouters-sentenced-to-jail-](https://zh.bitterwinter.org/shouters-sentenced-to-jail-penalties-in-anhui/)

[penalties-in-anhui/](https://zh.bitterwinter.org/shouters-sentenced-to-jail-penalties-in-anhui/)

¹⁴⁸ “Shouters: Persecuted in China and Entitled to Asylum, Court of Rome Says,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 30 September 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/shouters-persecuted-in-china-and-entitled-to-asylum-court-of-rome-says>

¹⁴⁹ “Revealing Ji Sanbao, leader of the ‘Mentu Hui,’ once was a coal miner (photos),” China Anti-Cult

Association, 14 September 2017, [起底“门徒会”头目季三保 当过煤矿工人(图)]，

<http://122.115.52.129/c/2017-09-14/534284.shtml>

¹⁵⁰ “Be vigilant of these organizations: Mentu Hui,” The People’s Government of Nujiang Lisu Autonomous

Prefecture, 14 January 2019, [警惕这些组织 | 门徒会]，

<https://www.nujiang.gov.cn/xxgk/015279075/info/2019-09344.html>

“disturbing social order” and sentenced to between one and three years in re-education through labor camps, in some instances they have been also convicted of violating Article 300(1). The group was banned by the Ministry of Public Security in November 1995.

The majority of the Society of Disciples cases documented in Dui Hua’s database took place in the 1990s. Although the number of their cases has declined, Dui Hua has been able to uncover the names of prisoners from news media sources from time to time. In October 2019, Qinghai police reportedly uprooted a group of 329 members in the province.¹⁵¹ In February 2020, a woman surnamed Wu in Gong County, Sichuan, received administrative detention for 15 days.¹⁵² She reportedly claimed that conversion could help prevent the spread of COVID-19. In August 2020, a local court in Tianjin sentenced a leader of Society of Disciples surnamed Han to 18 months in prison for violating Article 300(1).¹⁵³

XXIII. South China Church 华南教会

Founded in Hubei Province in 1991 as an offshoot of Full Scope Church, South China Church was designated an “evil cult” by the Chinese government in 1995. In 2001, the trial of 17 members of this Protestant house church sparked an international outcry. Church members submitted sworn statements to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, claiming that the defendants had been tortured into confessing and making false statements prior to and during the trial.¹⁵⁴

Among those sentenced were church founder Gong Shengliang (龚圣亮), who initially received a death sentence for “organizing a cult to undermine implementation of the law,” aggravated assault, and rape. There have been questions about the orthodoxy of Gong’s teachings, as well as allegations of him having sexual contact with female followers and his use of coercion to recruit members.¹⁵⁵ In September 2002, Gong was granted a two-year reprieve from his death sentence after making a successful appeal. The group had 50,000-100,000 members at the time of Gong’s imprisonment.^{156, 157} Some leaders left the church after 2002, while other members have continued to meet and accept Gong’s teachings.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵¹ “Qinghai Police Arrest Members of Mentu Hui’ Cult and destroy its branch in Qinghai,” *Qinghai Daily*, 22 October 2019, [青海警方抓获“门徒会”邪教成员摧毁其在青组织体系], <http://www.qh.chinanews.com/yw/news/2019/1022/71010.html>

¹⁵² “Woman in Gongxian County, Sichuan Province used the epidemic to promote a cult and was quickly investigated and punished,” China Anti-Cult Association, 16 February 2020, [四川珙县一女子借疫情宣传邪教被迅速查处], https://www.sohu.com/a/373542295_267325

¹⁵³ “Man in Dongli District, Tianjin sentenced for engaging in ‘Mentu Hui’ cult activities,” China Anti-Cult Association, 2 February 2021, [天津东丽区一名男子从事“门徒会”邪教活动被判刑], <http://www.ncufz.cn/dept/bwc/shownews.asp?id=708>

¹⁵⁴ Pastor Gong Shengliang v. China, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Opinion No. 21/2008, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/13/30/Add.1 at 25 (2010), <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/wgad/21-2008.html>

¹⁵⁵ “Director of Religious Affairs of China clarifies South China Church case and refutes overseas media reports,” *China News Website*, 26 February 2003, [中国宗教局长澄清华南教会案 驳斥海外媒体报道], <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2003-02-26/134559685s.shtml>

¹⁵⁶ “Evangelical pastor Gong Shengliang is dying in a Chinese prison,” *Asianews.it*, PIME Onlus Foundation, 27 May 2013, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Evangelical-pastor-Gong-Shengliang-is-dying-in-a-Chinese-prison-28027.html>

¹⁵⁷ “URGENT: Imprisoned South China Church Leader Gong Shengliang Paralyzed by Stroke; Family’s Request for Medical Parole Rejected,” China Aid Association, 14 December 2012, <https://www.chinaaid.org/2012/12/urgent-imprisoned-south-china-church.html>

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Dui Hua has also found evidence that the church continued to operate throughout the 2010s. In December 2016, a group of seven South China Church members were sentenced to 20-36 months in prison for “gathering a crowd to disturb social order.”¹⁵⁹ The conviction stemmed from their organizing over 40 church members to travel to Gao’an City, Jiangxi, to protest the police’s handling of a traffic accident that had killed one of the church members.

XXIV. Spirit Church 灵灵教

The Spirit Church was founded in 1983 by Hua Xuehe (华雪和), a farmer from Huaiyin Prefecture, Jiangsu. By 1990, this organization had a total of 15,000 members in more than 13 provinces, including Anhui, Jiangxi, Hunan, and Hubei.¹⁶⁰ Hua claimed to be “the second Jesus” and that “Huaiyin is Jerusalem.” After Hua was arrested and put into a re-education through labor camp, it was widely reported that several core members gathered 700 believers to protest his sentence, thereby “disturbing social order.”

The Spirit Church believes that the end of the world is coming, that the human race will be destroyed, and that only by joining the group can one escape this catastrophe. In their meetings, members of this group practice “trembling” and speaking in tongues to summon the Holy Spirit. In the early 1990s, the authorities cracked down on the group, determining it to be a reactionary sect which harmed production, disrupted normal religious activities, and vied to convert members of patriotic church congregations. The group was banned by the Ministry of Public Security in November 1995.

In 2014, Chinese state media publicized an Article 300(1) case involving seven members in Shandong. They were sentenced to 22 months to three years in prison for stockpiling gold and over 300,000kg of food in preparation for what they called an impending doomsday.¹⁶¹

XXV. Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人

Three Grades of Servants is another indigenous doomsday group. Founded in 1986 in Henan by Xu Wenku (徐文库), the group derived its name from Xu’s teachings on triumvirates. In the group’s hierarchy, Xu positioned himself as the highest-ranking member, or the “Grand Servant,” equivalent to the prophet who directly communicates with God.¹⁶² Chinese government sources stated that Three Grades of Servants was active across 18 provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities.¹⁶³ The Ministry of Public Security began listing the group as a “cult” organization on 12 March 1999.

Three Grades of Servants is known for violently competing for converts with other religious groups, most notably Almighty God. In October 2006, Xu was found guilty of killing members

¹⁵⁹ Jiangxi Yichun Intermediate People’s Court, Judgment, [(2016) 赣09刑终248号].

¹⁶⁰ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

¹⁶¹ “Cult Leader Stored Over 500,000 Cattles of Grains and Waited for the End of the World (photos),” *Qilu Evening News*, 15 August 2014, [齐鲁晚报, 邪教组织头目储粮50多万斤坐等世界末日(图)], <http://finance.people.com.cn/n/2014/0815/c66323-25475504.html>

¹⁶² Emily Dunn, *Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contemporary China* (Brill, 2015), p.46.

¹⁶³ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

of Almighty God between 2002 and 2004, and of defrauding 32 million yuan from followers.¹⁶⁴ Overseas Christians groups, however, reported that other defendants in the same case had been tortured, and one of them even died in custody in 2004.¹⁶⁵

Some religious scholars believe that the Three Grades of Servants ceased to exist following Xu's execution.¹⁶⁶ They also believe that house church Christians may have been falsely accused of joining the Three Grades of Servants by the Chinese government to crack down on Christianity independent from state control. In December 2017, six alleged Three Grades of Servants members in Yun County, Yunnan, received prison sentences of up to 13 years.¹⁶⁷ The defendants denied being part of the group and claimed that they had never even heard its name before being arrested.¹⁶⁸

XXVI. Unification Church 统一教

Founded in South Korea by Sun Myung-moon in 1954, the Unification Church has been labelled “heretical” by numerous mainstream Protestant churches because of its theology, political activism, and the lifestyle of its members. Its ritual of mass weddings for engaged or married couples known as the “Blessing” is also a major source of controversy. Church members are known to own large businesses and found non-governmental organizations in South Korea and overseas. In 1982, Sun was imprisoned in the United States for income-tax fraud.

China designated the Unification Church as a “cult” organization in May 1997, citing also the anti-Communism remarks given by Sun.¹⁶⁹ The Ministry of Public Security accused the group of infiltration under the guise of investment assistance, education, and cultural exchange.

Information about the church's extent of influence in China has been spotty. In the 2000s, local government records in Beijing, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, Shanxi, and Yunnan explicitly mentioned the Unification Church as a target of the anti-cult crackdown.^{170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175} The most recent mention in a government yearbook states that an anti-cult work group targeting the church successfully identified and stopped one infiltration attempt from the group in 2010.¹⁷⁶

¹⁶⁴ “Christian sect leader guilty of killing rivals in China,” *The Guardian*, 7 July 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jul/08/china.jonathanwatts>

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ “Do They Still Exist? Investigating the Three Grades of Servants,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 29 November 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/investigating-three-grades-of-servants/>

¹⁶⁷ “Six Christians Sentenced Up to 13 Years in ‘Cult’ Case in Yun County, Yunnan,” *Radio Free Asia*, 18 January 2018, [云南云县“邪教”案6基督徒被判刑 最长13年], <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shehui/ql2-01182018105144.html>

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

¹⁷⁰ Beijing Xicheng Yearbook (2006) [北京西城年鉴 (2006)], p.126.

¹⁷¹ Heihe Yearbook (2008) [黑河年鉴 (2008)], p.137.

¹⁷² Ningjiang Yearbook (2005-2006) [宁江年鉴 (2005-2006)], p.243.

¹⁷³ Chinese Communist Party Liaoning Yearbook (2007) [中国共产党辽宁年鉴 (2007)], p.191.

¹⁷⁴ Taiyuan Yearbook (2007) [太原年鉴 (2007)], p.134.

¹⁷⁵ Shuifu Yearbook (2007) [水富年鉴 (2007)], p.94.

¹⁷⁶ Beijing Chaoyang Yearbook (2011) [北京朝阳年鉴 (2011)], p.126.

XXVII. World Elijah Evangelical Mission

Also known as the “Elijah Church” or “Elijah Ten Commandments Stone Country Korean Farmers Salvation Mission,” this evangelical mission was founded by a Korean named Park Myung-ho in 1980. After its arrival in China in 1993, the group spread to 11 provinces and municipalities.¹⁷⁷ The majority of its activities were in Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning, where some 1,000 Han Chinese and ethnic Koreans were said to be members.¹⁷⁸ Park claimed to be the last prophet, Elijah, and requested his believers to worship him as the “Immortal Stone.” He called the organization “Stone Country,” allegedly drafted a constitution, national flag, and anthem, and called himself the “only king of the heavenly kingdom.”

In March 1996, the World Elijah Evangelical Mission was banned by public security authorities in Jilin. Dui Hua’s research into official publications has found one instance of arrest involving this group in 1999. Group members allegedly pooled their property and established themselves in a mountainous area to “return to nature” and live by collective labor.¹⁷⁹ They believed that Western medicine was a poison to be avoided and that pain and illness could be combatted through faith.¹⁸⁰

XXVIII. World Mission of Society Church of God 上帝的教会世界福音宣教协会

Known in China simply as Church of God (上帝的教会), World Mission of Society Church of God was founded in 1964. Now headquartered in Bundang, Gyeonggi Province, the Church of God is a Christian movement from South Korea. The group was condemned in a statement released in July 2005 by South Korea’s National Council of Churches as a blasphemous and heretical cult for deifying its founder Ahn Sahng-hong as God the Father and Zahng Gil-jah as God the Mother.¹⁸¹

Although Chinese-language sources have cited reports from overseas news groups to illustrate the “cultic” nature of Church of God, information about the group’s influence in China remains sparse. Dui Hua’s research found that Church of God has made inroads with Han and ethnic Korean Christians in Shandong and Shaanxi. In Weifang, Shandong, the group had over 200 members who worship Ahn as Jesus Christ and Zahng as the mother of Jerusalem.

Dui Hua uncovered eight indictment statements involving Church of God. Of them, only three cases resulted in public prosecution (one for violating Article 300(1), two for committing fraud).¹⁸² Prosecutors withdrew prosecution for violating Article 300(1) in five other cases because of “unclear facts and insufficient evidence.” This high rate of non-prosecution is unusual but might suggest that the group does not yet constitute enough of a threat to the government to warrant punitive action.

¹⁷⁷ “Notice of the Ministry of Public Security on several issues related to recognizing and stamping out cults,” Ministry of Public Security Notice [公安部关于认定和取缔邪教组织若干问题的通知, 公通字[2000]39号].

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ “Selection of Cases from the Criminal Law: Banned Protestant Groups,” *Occasional Publications*, The Dui Hua Foundation, Vol.12, (February 2003).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ “Authorities seize cult assets and detain cult members,” *AsiaNews.it*, PIME Onlus Foundation, 5 September 2018, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Authorities-seize-cult-assets-and-detain-cult-members-43834.html>

¹⁸² Shandong Qingdao City Shibei District Procuratorate First Department, Indictment [青市北检一部刑诉(2020) 158号].

Unorthodox Buddhist Groups

XXIX. Amitabha Buddhist Society 静空学会

Since 2011, Amitabha Buddhist Society has been denounced as a “cult organization” across 28 cities and provinces.¹⁸³ Despite winning multiple honorary awards overseas, founder Chin Kung (净空), a naturalized Australian citizen born in Anhui in 1927, was accused by local governments in China of “deifying” himself through cultural exchanges, trainings, and publications. Expanding into more than 30 provinces since it was introduced to China in the 1990s, Amitabha was initially well-received among religious officials.¹⁸⁴

Chin Kung was a preacher of Pure Land, a school of Mahayana Buddhism built on the belief that all places in the world are corrupt and rebirth in the “Pure Land” is the goal. The Chinese government called Chin Kung’s teachings into question, accusing him of indoctrinating believers with misleading and heretical teachings.¹⁸⁵ Some Chinese-language sources even accused Chin Kung of working as a spy for Taiwan before converting to Buddhism and said that he was a propagator of the 2012 doomsday rumor.¹⁸⁶ The China Anti-Cult Association in Tianjin also directly rebuked Chin Kung on its website for “religious intervention” and “cultural infiltration” in China.¹⁸⁷

Around 2005, a follower called Lin Lidong (林立东) was sentenced in Jilin to five years in prison for “illegal business activity” for producing a large number of Chin Kung’s audio materials and “colluding with Amitabha overseas.”¹⁸⁸ In 2019, local governments in Hebei reportedly seized books and discs related to Chin Kung owned by two Buddhist temples during a campaign to “eradicate pornography and illegal publications.”¹⁸⁹ Dui Hua’s research found that two people were prosecuted in May 2019 for illegal business activity in Hebei after mailing out 33,391 volumes of “cult” books related to Amitabha.¹⁹⁰

XXX. Guanyin Famen 观音法门

Guanyin Famen was established in 1988 by a Vietnamese-born Chinese woman known by her Buddhist name Shi Qinghai (释青海), or the Supreme Master Ching Hai (清海). Founded in

¹⁸³ “Pure Land Buddhism Under Attack in China,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 17 June 2021, <https://bitterwinter.org/pure-land-buddhism-under-attack-in-china/>

¹⁸⁴ “Identifying Cult Organizations in China,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 10 July 2014, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2014/07/identifying-cult-organizations-in-china.html>

¹⁸⁵ “Fearing the Spread of Buddhism, CCP Bans Popular Master’s Teachings,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 16 July 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/ccp-bans-popular-masters-teachings/>

¹⁸⁶ “The United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China: Status Report on Further Boycotting Chin Kung and Resisting the Infiltration Activities of His Foundation,” *Temple News*, Shandong Yicheng Dafo Temple Website, [中共统战部《关于进一步抵制净空及其“净宗学会”渗透活动情况通报》], http://www.sddfs.net/page190?article_id=110

¹⁸⁷ “Fearing the Spread of Buddhism, CCP Bans Popular Master’s Teachings,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 16 July 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/ccp-bans-popular-masters-teachings/>

¹⁸⁸ Changchun Public Security Yearbook (2004-2006) [长春公安年鉴 (2004-2006)], p.174.

¹⁸⁹ “Fearing the Spread of Buddhism, CCP Bans Popular Master’s Teachings,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 16 July 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/ccp-bans-popular-masters-teachings/>

¹⁹⁰ Hebei Hengshui City Gucheng County Procuratorate, Indictment [故检公诉刑诉 (2019) 40号].

Taiwan in the late 1980s and introduced to China in the early 1990s, Guanyin Famen gained about 500,000 followers, including party members and senior cadres.¹⁹¹

According to the China Anti-Cult Association, Guanyin Famen believes that two thirds of the world's population must become vegetarian to prevent the catastrophic effects of climate change. It runs a chain of vegan restaurants known as "Loving Hut," which has expanded worldwide and began operating in China in 2008. The Chinese government is well aware of its connection to Guanyin Famen, blaming its leaders for visiting China frequently "under the cover of traveling, visiting, investing, and opening up factories for the purpose of recruiting and founding secret meeting places" and "intending to amass vast fortunes by opening vegetarian chain restaurants."¹⁹²

Shi has been described by China's anti-cult propaganda as anti-communist for remarks made in the early 1990s about communism's inevitable fall in China, Vietnam, and the Eastern Bloc.¹⁹³ However, Dui Hua's research into online judgments found that other leaders affiliated with the group have reportedly been persecuted not for their political beliefs, but rather for their business practices and association with foreigners.¹⁹⁴

XXXI. Huazang Dharma Group 华藏宗门

The Huazang Dharma Group, founded by Wu Zeheng (吴泽衡) in 1990, is a Guangdong-based organization with Buddhist roots. According to its website, the group aims to "regulate personal conduct," "deeply understand the value of life," and "come to a correct view of human society."¹⁹⁵ Its followers claim to have engaged in charitable acts, such as assisting in flood and earthquake relief, helping retirement homes, and funding schools for impoverished children.¹⁹⁶

In 2000, Wu received his first jail term for "illegal business activity" and "unlawfully issuing securities." His supporters claimed that the imprisonment stemmed from a book he wrote in which he called upon the Chinese leaders to implement political reform and increase government transparency.¹⁹⁷ He was released in February 2010.

In July 2014, Guangdong police conducted a surprise raid on the group's enterprises and residences.¹⁹⁸ Wu and several dozen of his disciples were arrested. In October 2015, Wu was sentenced to life in prison in a closed-door trial after he was found guilty of multiple crimes,

¹⁹¹ "China: Meditation practice called 'Kuan Yin Famen' (Guanyin Famen, Guanyin Method, Quanyin Famen); treatment of practitioners, particularly in Shandong," Refworld, citing Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Hong Kong, 8 February 2001, <https://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?docid=3df4be1b34>

¹⁹² "The 'Cult' of Buddha," *Dialogue*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 29 August 2013, <https://duihua.org/dialogue-issue-52-the-cult-of-buddha/>

¹⁹³ "Total Reveal of Cult Organization 'Guanyin Method!'" Fengxian County Part Committee Website, 15 September 2020, [【反邪】邪教组织“观音法门”大起底!], <http://www.fengxianzfw.gov.cn/index.php?ie=2-624-3181-1>

¹⁹⁴ "The 'Cult' of Buddha," *Dialogue*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 29 August 2013, <https://duihua.org/dialogue-issue-52-the-cult-of-buddha/>

¹⁹⁵ Hua Zang Center website, <http://www.huazangcentre.com/?lang=zh>

¹⁹⁶ "China Harshly Sentences Founder of Huazang Dharma," China Change, 3 November 2015, <https://chinachange.org/2015/11/03/china-harshly-sentences-founder-of-huazang-dharma/>

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

including violating Article 300(1) and committing rape and extortion. State news media began labelling Huazang Dharma Group a “cult” organization which promulgated fallacious and heretical theories, published superstitious books, wantonly amassed profits from selling calligraphy, and even forced followers to buy a house for Wu.¹⁹⁹ However, Wu’s supporters said the accusations about his personal life were pure character assassination.²⁰⁰ In 2016, Wu was transferred from Guangdong to Xinjiang to serve his life sentence.²⁰¹ The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has declared that Wu is being persecuted for his religious beliefs.²⁰²

XXXII. The Order of Holy Lord Maitreya Buddha 圣主弥勒佛教

A judgment Dui Hua discovered online appears to be the only available source of information concerning this Buddhist group.²⁰³ In this case, five defendants were convicted of violating Article 300(1) in October 2019 in Tianjin, with prison sentences ranging from 18 months to six years. The group was founded on 25 December 2012 by Wang Jianhua (王建华), who proclaimed himself to be the reincarnated Maitreya Buddha with the goal of saving the world. Wang believes in theocracy and fantasizes about China turning into a Buddhist state. The prosecutors alleged that Wang vilified Marxism and Leninism as “cultic” ideologies. Wang also said non-believers will go to hell and called for political reform by making Buddhism the state religion.

According to the judgment, this group only had approximately 200 members spread out across China. Members were allegedly asked to hang Wang’s portrait at home and worship him. Wang was accused of amassing 120,000 yuan of income from performing good deeds and repentance rituals for his followers.

Four other leaders affiliated with this group were released in 2022. Wang is the only one known to be serving a sentence, which will expire on 13 September 2023.

XXXIII. Secret School of Mind Recharge 密宗洗心功

Founder of the Secret School of Mind Recharge, Wang Xingfu (王兴夫) proclaimed himself to be a “Living Buddha” and took the Tibetan name Lhosang Tenzin. According to Chinese government sources, Wang swindled hundreds of millions of dollars and raped several women over the course of past decades.²⁰⁴ He once had more than 3,000 followers across China.²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ “Huazang Sect Leader Sentenced to Life Imprisonment: When Arrested Was in Midst of Double Cultivation,” *Southern Metropolitan News*, 4 November 2015, [华藏宗门教首一审获无期徒刑时正与女信徒双修], <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2015-11-04/doc-ixkhcfq1119946.shtml>

²⁰¹ “Wu Zeheng of the Huazang Sect Case transferred from Guangdong to Xinjiang to serve sentence,” *Radio Free Asia*, 18 July 2016, [“华藏宗门案”吴泽衡被从广东转至新疆服刑], <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/Xinwen/4-07182016111603.html>

²⁰² “China: UNCIRF Condemns Arrest of Chinese Buddhist Leader Wu Zeheng and Detention and Mistreatment of Religious Leaders,” United States Commission on Religious Freedom, 30 October 2014, <https://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/releases-statements/china-uscifr-condemns-arrest-chinese-buddhist-leader-wu-zeheng-and>

²⁰³ Shandong Weihai City Rongcheng City People’s Court, Judgment [(2018) 鲁1082刑初285号].

²⁰⁴ “Fake ‘Living Buddhas’ end up behind bars for using Tibetan Buddhism to amass wealth, rape disciple,” *Global Times*, People’s Daily, 2 February 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1214673.shtml>

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Prior to proclaiming himself as a “Living Buddha” in the 2008, Wang dubbed himself a qigong master while working as a prison warden at Jinan Prison and allegedly profited during the “qigong frenzy” in the 1980s. As the government began cracking down on fraudulent “qigong masters” the following decade, Wang changed his “secret school of mind recharge” to an “ancient yoga theory application research institute” and developed a so-called “supreme secret yoga.”

Police found that Wang charged people for his teachings as his main way to “cheat” money, with fees varying from 300 yuan to 800 yuan.²⁰⁶ Additionally, he made nearly 200 million yuan in over 10 years from selling Buddhist instruments.²⁰⁷ In July 2020, a court in Shandong sentenced Wang to 25 years in prison and fined him 20 million yuan for violating Article 300(1), as well as for illegal business activity, rape, and compulsory indecency - a crime akin to sexual assault. The other defendants included at least one ethnic Tibetan; he was sentenced to six years in prison for the sole offense of violating Article 300(1).

XXXIV. True Buddha School 灵仙真佛宗

True Buddha School is a modern Vajrayana Buddhist group founded in Seattle in 1979 by Taiwanese American Lu Sheng-yen (卢胜彦). Introduced to mainland China in 1988, the group emphasizes the need to diligently cultivate spiritual advancement and teaches disciples to transform difficulty into positivity through enlightenment. The Ministry of Public Security reported that the group disseminated a large amount of publications and propaganda and had branches in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Kunming, with followers across 13 provinces and municipalities.²⁰⁸

True Buddha School was banned in 1995 due in part to critical statements Lu made about the government’s decision to violently suppress protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989.²⁰⁹ Chinese authorities labelled Lu as “hostile to the socialist system,” saying he had given “multiple public speeches attacking the party and government,” organized 10,000 people in Hong Kong to join a memorial puja (worship service) for June 4 protesters, and “used newspapers and radio to broadcast the memorial all over the world.”²¹⁰

The group’s activities have been driven underground in China but are not necessarily dormant. Government records document instances of “legal education,” confiscation of religious materials, and the demolition of a temple between 1996 and 2005.²¹¹ As recently as 2018, the Wulan County government in Qinghai listed True Buddha School alongside Falun Gong and Society of Disciples as inspection targets.²¹²

XXXV. Xinling Famen 心灵法门

Xinling Famen, also known as the Guanyin Citta Dharma Door, was founded by a Shanghai-born Australian Lu Junhong (卢军宏, aka Richard Lu). Lu promoted Buddhism and traditional

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ “The ‘Cult’ of Buddha,” *Dialogue*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 29 August 2013, <https://duihua.org/dialogue-issue-52-the-cult-of-buddha/>

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Wulan Yearbook (2019) [乌兰年鉴 (2019)], p.156.

Chinese culture while serving as a director of Australia Oriental Media Group, a Chinese-language radio station operated in Sydney. In 2010, Lu founded Xinling Famen. The group has gained popularity among Chinese immigrants in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

While Xinling Famen describes itself as a Buddhist group, its worship style is similar to that of some Pentecostal churches and charismatic healing cults.²¹³ Lu spread his teaching through online lessons. Lu's media company initially enjoyed a good relationship with Chinese state media and cooperated on cross promotion of radio programs on culture and news. Later, however, China's anti-cult propaganda accused Lu of appropriating Buddhist terms to mobilize a cultic movement centered on his personality. An entry ban was placed on Lu before he passed away from illness in November 2021.

In 2015, a female member of the group was convicted of violating Article 300 and given a suspended sentence of three years. Three additional cases involving the group were concluded in 2016, with all resulting in convictions for illegal business activity.²¹⁴

XXXVI. Yuandun Famen 圆顿法门

Yuandun Famen claims to be able to rescue disciples from an impending apocalypse. The founder Xu Chengjiang (许成江) was originally a follower of Guanyin Famen. Combining doctrines from different Buddhist scriptures, he established Yuandun Famen in 1998. The group was banned a year later, and according to legal documents, Xu was detained seven times between 1998 and 2002 for illegal proselytizing.²¹⁵ In December 2000, Xu named his son Xu Longjing (许珑璟) as his successor and continued to organize large-scale pujas. In the early 2000s, Yuandun Famen had more than 10,000 members across 20 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions.²¹⁶

In 2003, Xu Chengjiang and his son became the only members known to be imprisoned. The former was sentenced to life imprisonment on three charges: violating Article 300(1) and committing fraud and rape. Xu Longjing received a combined 13-year sentence for violating Article 300(1) and fraud. Since information on Yuandun Famen is limited to government sources, it is unclear what the bases of the charges were. The court judgment alleged that the Xus amassed a vast fortune from the sales of cassettes, books, and CDs and "swindled" a total of donations valued at 5.9 million yuan from disciples throughout China.²¹⁷

The group's influence declined after the trial, but there is evidence that run-ins with police continued. In Qindongnan, Guizhou, Yuandun Famen was involved in one of the 10 cult cases discovered by police in 2015.²¹⁸

²¹³ Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion. Volume 11 (2020): Chinese Religions Going Global, <https://brill.com/edcollbook/title/59154>

²¹⁴ "Promoter to Pariah: Xinling Famen's "Unorthodox Buddhism," *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 22 June 22 2023, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2023/06/promoter-to-pariah-xinling-famens.html>

²¹⁵ "The 'Cult' of Buddha," *Dialogue*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 29 August 2013, <https://duihua.org/dialogue-issue-52-the-cult-of-buddha/>

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ Qindongnan Yearbook (2016) [黔东南年鉴 (2016)], p.258.

Qigong organizations

XXXVII. Sun Moon Qigong 日月气功

Despite being less well-known than Falun Gong, Sun Moon Qigong boasted 130,000 followers across 29 provinces and municipalities before the crackdown on “harmful qigong organizations” began in 1999.²¹⁹ This designation parallels the list of the religious groups officially branded “cult” organizations and can result in criminal prosecution and conviction for violating Article 300(1) and committing economic crimes.

This qigong organization was founded in August 1994 in Xuchang, Henan, by Wen Jinlu (温金路), who urged his followers to “use the energy of the sun and the moon to adjust the body, stabilize the mind, and get rid of diseases.”²²⁰ Wen also claimed that only by practicing his qigong could people predict impending catastrophes, increase food production, and develop children’s intelligence.²²¹

In April 2000, Wen received a two-year re-education through labor sentence. Upon completing his sentence in 2002, he began reorganizing his qigong group and recruited over 250 members.²²² Dui Hua was not aware of any of his members receiving prison sentences until April 2017 when Henan police detained a group of 26 core leaders, including Wen, and seized more than five million yuan in cash.²²³ In June 2020, the Luohe Intermediate People’s Court gave seven of them sentences ranging from 34 months to 19 years in prison for violating Article 300(1). Wen, who received the lengthiest prison sentence of 19 years, was also convicted of rape and molesting women.

XXXVIII. Xianggong 香功

Since 2003, Xianggong has been designated as one of the “harmful qigong organizations” by the Chinese government. Tian Ruisheng (田瑞生), born in 1927, founded Xianggong. Tian was reportedly on the verge of dying at a young age because of a skin disease.²²⁴ He was cured by a traveling Buddhist monk, who taught him healing techniques and appointed him as the successor to this qigong school.²²⁵ After the Cultural Revolution ended, Tian began popularizing Xianggong via exercises broadcast by radio. At its peak in the early 1990s, Xianggong claimed to have over one million followers.²²⁶ While Xianggong earned praise in

²¹⁹ “Be wary of the cultization of so-called ‘Qigong’ — Discussions Beginning From ‘Sun Moon Qigong,’” China Anti-Cult Association, 18 June 2020, [要警惕所谓“气功”的邪教化——从“日月气功”谈起], http://www.gssn.gov.cn/ztzl/dzxjsnzd/202006/t20200618_446925.html

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*

²²³ “Henan destroys ‘Sun Moon Qigong’ cult organization, leader sentenced to 19 years,” *Henan Daily*, People’s Daily, 16 June 2020, [河南打掉“日月气功”邪教组织 教首被判19年], <http://henan.people.com.cn/n2/2020/0616/c351638-34089277.html>

²²⁴ “Followers of Persecuted Buddhist Leader Arrested in Henan,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 25 May 2021, <https://bitterwinter.org/followers-of-persecuted-buddhist-leader-arrested-in-henan/>

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

official publications in the 1980s, states news media changed tack in the following decade and began blaming this group for defrauding followers.²²⁷

Amid attacks by state-run media, Tian vanished from public sight in September 1995. In the same year, Tian reportedly died of liver cancer, but his son Tian Tongxin (田同欣) claimed that his father was still alive and assumed Xianggong's leadership.²²⁸ In 2003, Tian Tongxin was sentenced to four years in prison for illegally obtaining his father's retirement payments.

Despite shrinking membership, Xianggong remains active in China and their members are still at risk of arrest. In May 2021, several followers of Tian Ruisheng in Luoyang were accused of spreading the teachings of Xianggong.²²⁹

XXXIX. Zhonggong 中功

Zhonggong, also known as China Healthcare and Wisdom Enhancement Practice (中华养生智能功), was established by Zhang Hongbao (张宏堡) in 1987. Zhang gained popularity by publicly demonstrating his mystical healing powers, as many other qigong organizations did in the 1980s. At its peak, Zhonggong claimed to have 38 million members and 100,000 employees nationwide.²³⁰

Zhonggong was branded a harmful qigong organization for defying China's leaders and spreading superstition in 1999, the same year that Falun Gong was so branded. Zhang fled to Guam shortly after the ban. After receiving protective resident status from the United States in 2001, Zhang faced a series of civil lawsuits and felony charges. By the time Zhang died in a car accident in July 2006, most of these cases had been withdrawn.

With the exception of Zhang Hongbao, individual Zhonggong leaders have garnered little international attention. They are generally not viewed as victims of religious or political persecution.²³¹ This is due in part to the fact that Zhonggong has historically been more commercial than Falun Gong. Its members are required to purchase practice sessions and publications to increase their group rank. In addition to economic crimes such as illegal business activity and tax evasion, Zhonggong leaders are known to have been convicted of Article 300(1) and endangering state security crimes.²³²

While some government reports claimed success in exterminating Zhonggong by 2016, there have been cases involving what the China Anti-Cult Association says are “Zhonggong

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ “‘Xianggong’ leader Tian Ruisheng died of liver cancer—his children continued to swindle for many years,” International Research on Cult, 16 May 2021, [国际邪教研究, “香功” 头目田瑞生肝癌病亡 其子女继续行骗多年], https://www.sohu.com/a/466710152_267325

²²⁹ “Followers of Persecuted Buddhist Leader Arrested in Henan,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 25 May 2021, <https://bitterwinter.org/followers-of-persecuted-buddhist-leader-arrested-in-henan/>

²³⁰ “Zhang Hongbao, founder of China Health and Zhizhi Gong, wanted by the authorities,” *Radio Free Asia*, 3 March 2000, [自由亚洲电台, 中華養生益智功創建人張宏堡被當局通緝], <https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/27104-20000303.html>

²³¹ “Zhonggong: The Subversive Business of Qigong,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 14 August 2014, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2014/08/zhonggong-subversive-business-of-qigong.html>

²³² *Ibid.*

variants.”²³³ Some official sources reported that one variant is under the leadership of a woman called Zhang Xiao (张晓).²³⁴ Zhang Xiao, who moved Zhonggong’s headquarters to Japan from the United States, launched a set of anti-COVID qigong exercises in China using different names, including “Tianhua Culture,” “Oriental Health Cultivation Method,” and “Oriental Bigu Health Cultivation Method” (*bigu* is a Daoist fasting technique to avoid grain).²³⁵

Dui Hua continues to find cases involving Zhonggong and its variants. A recent case was concluded on 21 April 2021 in Zhaoyuan, Shandong. Sun Xuhui (孙旭慧), a self-proclaimed successor to Zhonggong, received a prison sentence of two years for violating Article 300(1).²³⁶

Miscellaneous Groups

XL. Milky Way Federation 银河联邦

Women have played a leading role in several homegrown religious groups which emerged relatively recently in the 2010s. Combining elements of Daoism, Buddhism, Chinese folklore, and superstitions, these groups have never been officially designated as “cult” organizations at the national level. However, their leaders have received lengthy sentences for violating Article 300(1).

Among these groups is the Milky Way Federation (银河联邦), which was established in 2012 by Zheng Hui (郑辉).²³⁷ Zheng resigned from her job and created a website dedicated to promoting a belief she learned from an individual in Germany called Alaje the Pleiadian who subscribes to Pleiadian culture and ideas, which China views as an apocalyptic cult-like ideology. Zheng combined concepts of Buddhism with her belief that extra-terrestrial beings exist. Proclaiming herself to be the female Gautama Buddha, Zheng intended to awaken humankind in her envisioned “Buddha kingdom.” Her group allegedly had over 4,000 members from across China. In July 2015, Zheng was sentenced to eight years in prison for violating Article 300(1) by a court in Nanning, Guangxi.

XLI. New Oasis for Life 生命禅院

New Oasis for Life, or *shengming chanyuan*, was founded by Zhang Zifan (张自繁) when he was working as a businessman in Zimbabwe in the early 2000s. Also known by his religious name Xue Feng (雪峰), Zhang promotes a communal and agrarian way of life and asks his followers to live in the mountains of southwest China to share the bounty of their harvest. Zhang claims that his belief offers “a new path for people to live while consuming fewer

²³³ “Be Vigilant of the Resurgence of “Zhonggong” Activities Online,” China Anti-Cult Association, 28 August 2018, [警惕“中功”在网上死灰复燃], <https://www.chinacourt.org/article/detail/2018/08/id/3475129.shtml>

²³⁴ “Zhonggong: The ‘Cult’ That Refused to Die,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 16 December 2020, <https://bitterwinter.org/zhonggong-the-cult-that-refused-to-die/>

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ “Be wary of “Zhonggong” illegal organization that is dead but not vanquished,” Feng County Political Affairs Website, 19 May 2021, [警惕死而不僵的“中功”非法组织], <http://fengxianzfw.gov.cn/index.php?ie=2-624-3295-1>

²³⁷ “Detailed Court Statistics on Article 300, Part I,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 28 May 2020, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2020/05/detailed-court-statistics-on-article-300.html>

resources and existing more harmoniously.”²³⁸ In 2014, *The New York Times* reported that the group had 150 members who sought escape from environmental pollution and graft.²³⁹ In August 2021, the group reportedly had over 2,000 members in and outside of China.²⁴⁰

Within the communes, members are known as celestials. They are asked to share all property and couples must sleep apart.²⁴¹ To symbolize a bond with the nature, each member takes a new name ending in the Chinese character for *cao* (草 i.e. grass).²⁴² The communes also prohibit marriage, money, supervision, and punishment because they are perceived to impede happiness.²⁴³

New Oasis for Life has not been designated as a cult organization in China, but state-run news media have described the group as possessing certain qualities of a cult. According to the China Anti-Cult Association, Zhang not only proclaimed himself to be God’s messenger, but also “the reincarnation of Jesus, Buddha Shakyamuni, Muhammad, and Laozi.”²⁴⁴ Additionally, the group has been accused of engaging in unlicensed agricultural production and “sharing wives,” but supporters have denied the allegations as “wild assumptions.”²⁴⁵

The group has been pressured to disband since the mid-2010s, with local government officials claiming that it violated laws on marriage, forestry, and education.²⁴⁶ Group members have reportedly faced intimidation from government-hired thugs who sabotaged the groups’ water and electrical supply.²⁴⁷ As recently as April 2021, public security allegedly “rescued” nearly 100 members after raiding and outlawing the group’s communes in Guizhou.²⁴⁸ At the time of writing, Dui Hua has not found criminal cases involving this group.

XLII. Tablighi Jamaat

Tablighi Jamaat is a transnational movement closely tied to the Deobandi interpretation of the Sunni Islamic teachings. It is often seen as an ultraorthodox sect, and some media outlets have erroneously reported that Tablighi Jamaat calls on Muslims to travel the world to convert non-believers. Founded in India in 1926, Tablighi Jamaat encourages all members to form small groups to proselytize both in and outside of mosques. Rather than converting people, Tablighi Jamaat encourages lapsed and practicing Muslims to be more devout. Adherents have also been known to encourage other Muslims to adopt more orthodox lifestyles akin to those of

²³⁸ “Communism Is the Goal at a Commune, but Chinese Officials Are Not Impressed,” *The New York Times*, 14 March 2014, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20140314/c14lincang/dual/>

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ “Uncovering the crooked ways of ‘New Oasis for Life,’” China Anti-Cult Association, 6 August 2021, [揭开“生命禅院”的歪门邪道], <http://www.chinafxj.cn/n238/c735300/content.html>

²⁴¹ “Communism Is the Goal at a Commune, but Chinese Officials Are Not Impressed,” *The New York Times*, 14 March 2014, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20140314/c14lincang/dual/>

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ “Uncovering the crooked ways of ‘New Oasis for Life,’” China Anti-Cult Association, 6 August 2021, [揭开“生命禅院”的歪门邪道], <http://www.chinafxj.cn/n238/c735300/content.html>

²⁴⁵ “Communism Is the Goal at a Commune, but Chinese Officials Are Not Impressed,” *The New York Times*, 14 March 2014, <https://cn.nytimes.com/china/20140314/c14lincang/dual/>

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁸ “Uncovering the crooked ways of ‘New Oasis for Life,’” China Anti-Cult Association, 6 August 2021, [揭开“生命禅院”的歪门邪道], <http://www.chinafxj.cn/n238/c735300/content.html>

Muhammad and the first Muslims. The movement is sometimes referred to in government sources as “da’wah preaching society (达瓦宣教团).”²⁴⁹

The Chinese government sees Tablighi Jamaat as a matter of serious concern in part because the group has gained popularity among Hui Muslims.²⁵⁰ From “being reactionary” to “conducting infiltration, extremism and terrorism,” the Chinese government has put forward different accusations to discredit Tablighi Jamaat. Dui Hua has not found a criminal case where Tablighi Jamaat participants of Hui descent have been convicted of violent or terrorism-related crimes. They are instead convicted of “gathering a crowd to disturb social order,” and occasionally for violating Article 300(1), for illegally proselytizing or for conducting Islamic classes.

XLIII. Yi Guan Dao 一贯道

Literally translated to “the Way of Pervading Unity” in English, Yi Guan Dao was proscribed by the Chinese government as an “illegal secret society” and a “heretical sect” at the end of the Chinese civil war more than seven decades ago. Combining elements of Daoism, Buddhism, and folklore, Yi Guan Dao’s teachings include apocalyptic and salvationist doctrines that say that only converts will go to heaven.

Yi Guan Dao first gained popularity in northeast China during World War II—at one point the group had more than ten million followers in the Japanese-occupied regions. However, it has largely been driven underground since the crackdown in 1950, with some branches operating clandestinely under different names including Tian Dao (i.e. Way of Heaven). The group attempted to re-establish itself in the late 1970s towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, but it quickly became a target of China’s first Strike Hard Campaign in 1983. Many followers were sentenced to death for counterrevolution.

Due to a lack of recent reporting on Yi Guan Dao in China, some experts are skeptical about the extent of the group’s persecution or even its existence in China today, claiming that “it is unlikely that [they] still exist.”²⁵¹ However, Yi Guan Dao practitioners continue to be at risk of imprisonment. Dui Hua’s research into court judgments found that three trials involving Yi Guan Dao leaders were concluded between 2018-2019 in Guangdong.²⁵² These cases demonstrate that the group continues to gain adherents among the middle-aged rural population where prosecutors accuse Yi Guan Dao of conducting “reactionary” activities.

Since 2000, the Canadian and Australian governments have reported receiving asylum applications from Chinese nationals on the grounds of religious persecution of Yi Guan Dao.²⁵³

²⁴⁹ “Tablighi Jamaat and Hui Muslims,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 12 January 2021, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2021/01/tablighi-jamaat-and-hui-muslims.html>

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ Refugee Review Tribunal [Australia], 19 October 2007, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4b6fe1950.pdf>

²⁵² “The Ongoing Crackdown on Yi Guan Dao,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 8 April 2021, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2021/04/the-ongoing-crackdown-on-yi-guan-dao.html>

²⁵³ “The Resurgence of Yi Guan Dao,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 31 December 2018, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2018/12/the-resurgence-of-yi-guan-dao.html>

XLIV. Zhongtian Zhengfa 中天正法

Syncretic religious groups similar to the Milky Way Federation appear to have gained popularity in several provinces. Alongside her husband, Chen Yunxiu (陈云秀) founded Zhongtian Zhengfa (中天正法) in 2010 and called herself the reincarnated mother Buddha, Nüwa (the mother goddess in Chinese mythology), and Saint Mary. Zhang said that conversion to her group was the only way to obtain salvation.²⁵⁴ Zhang was sentenced in Shandong to seven years' imprisonment for violating Article 300(1) in 2018. The court judgment indicated that her group had over 900 members from different provinces.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ “Detailed Court Statistics on Article 300, Part I,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 28 May 2020,

<https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2020/05/detailed-court-statistics-on-article-300.html>

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

3. Laws & Regulations Targeting Unorthodox Religious Groups

The Chinese constitution says that citizens enjoy religious freedom. In practice, such freedom is confined to “normal religious activities,” a term subject to broad interpretation. Unorthodox religious groups falling beyond the purview of normal religious activities operate in a vast and expanding grey area. Some of them may be tolerated, but many more are outright banned in China.

In its decades-long crackdown on religion, the CCP has relied on a variety of laws and regulations. Prior to amending the Criminal Law in 1997, the state would invoke “counterrevolution” and/or “disturbing social order” to convict leaders of religious groups. The most sweeping amendment to the Criminal Law took effect on 14 March 1997, when lawmakers removed the entire chapter of counterrevolution and added another on crimes of endangering state security. The new chapter covered some, but not all, of the acts formerly classified as counterrevolutionary offenses. The counterrevolutionary crimes relating to “reactionary sects,” for instance, were reclassified as Article 300(1): “organizing and using a sect, cult or superstition to undermine implementation of the law.” This article falls under the purview of impairing the administration of social order in the amended Criminal Law and is not categorized as a crime of endangering state security.

First instance trials of impairing the administration of social order are conducted by primary or district people’s courts while first instance trials of endangering state security are conducted by intermediate people’s courts. There are, at present, 409 intermediate people’s courts in China and 3,140 primary or district courts in China, meaning that the Chinese government can try many more Article 300 violators at a faster pace than if the trials were held at the intermediate people’s court level.²⁵⁶

Existing laws and regulations, at least on paper, target organizers, leaders, and core members for punishment while stressing the need to educate ordinary members as part of leniency measures. That said, ordinary members can be subjected to extrajudicial detention through measures such as “legal education” classes.²⁵⁷ Originally targeted at members of Falun Gong and other “cult organizations,” use of these classes has been expanded to include those who engage in persistent, disruptive, or mass petitioning activities.

I. Article 300(1): Organizing and using a sect, cult, or superstition to undermine implementation of the law

Within Chinese law-enforcement bodies, Article 300 is still very much a political crime despite it being categorized as a crime of impairing the administration of social order. Officers from the “domestic security protection” (*guonei anquan baowei*) unit in the public security apparatus are responsible for investigating both endangering state security and cult cases.

²⁵⁶ Zhang Chenyang, “Magnificent Four-level Pyramid – China’s Court System,” China Justice Observer, 18 May 2019, <https://www.chinajusticeobserver.com/a/magnificent-four-level-pyramid-chinas-court-system>

²⁵⁷ “Legal Education: Arbitrary Detention Doesn’t End with RTL,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 2 April 2013, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2013/04/legal-education-arbitrary-detention.html>

Acts punishable under Article 300(1) range from organizing meetings or activities to disseminating literature or other materials online, as well as any other acts carried out in connection with groups that the Chinese government has banned.

(i) Maximum Sentence Raised to Life in Prison

Violating Article 300 carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, which was increased from a maximum of 15 years following the ninth amendment to the Criminal Law in 2015. The amendment is believed to have been triggered by the heightened crackdown on Almighty God. China's propaganda offensive intensified following the killing of a woman in a McDonald's restaurant allegedly by Almighty God members in May 2014. In this case, two members found guilty of committing the murder were sentenced to death in February 2015, and two others received life imprisonment.²⁵⁸ All of them were also convicted of violating Article 300(1).

Although the crime carries a potentially lengthier prison sentence, Dui Hua is not aware of anyone who has received life imprisonment for the sole offense of violating Article 300(1). Buddhist leader Wu Zeheng received a life imprisonment sentence in October 2015, but he was convicted of multiple crimes including fraud and rape. His crime related to cult activity afforded him a sentence of 12 years.²⁵⁹ In December 2016, Falun Gong practitioner Cui Fenglan (崔凤兰) received the longest known prison sentence of 15 years for the sole offense of violating Article 300(1).²⁶⁰ In June 2020, Almighty God leader Jiang Yanghua (江秧花) also received a prison sentence of 15 years for the same crime.²⁶¹

(ii) 2017 Judicial Interpretation: New Sentencing Standards

Since 1997, the Supreme People's Court (SPC) and Supreme People's Procuratorate (SPP) have jointly issued three judicial interpretations to explain the law's specific application. The latest interpretation, effective 1 February 2017, states that the following acts fall under the purview of the normal sentencing standard leading to prison sentences of three to seven years:²⁶²

- Recruiting over 50 members;
- Swindling or leading to an economic loss of over one million yuan;
- Using at least 500 banknotes as a means to disseminate cult information;
- Manufacturing or disseminating cult propaganda over a certain amount:
 - over 1,000 leaflets, stencils for spray painting, pictures, banners, and newspapers;
 - over 250 copies of books or publications, audio-video products, logos, or signs;
 - over 100 CD-ROMs, U-disks, memory cards, mobile hard drivers, or other mobile storage devices;
 - over 50 banners.

²⁵⁸ "China executes two cult members for McDonald's murder," *BBC News*, 2 February 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-31087839>

²⁵⁹ "China court upholds cult leader's life sentence," *China Daily*, 2 February 2016, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-02/02/content_23362360.htm

²⁶⁰ Heilongjiang Harbin Intermediate People's Court, Judgment [(2017) 黑 01 刑终 90 号].

²⁶¹ Xinjiang UAR Aksu Prefecture Aksu City People's Court, Judgment [(2020) 新2901刑初553号].

²⁶² "Will a New Judicial Interpretation on Cults Lead to Greater Leniency?" *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 24 February 2017, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2017/02/will-new-judicial-interpretation-on.html>

- Using the internet to disseminate information about a cult:
 - manufacturing or disseminating over 200 digital pictures or articles, over 50 copies of e-books, publications, audios or videos, electronic files with over five million characters, or electronic files exceeding 250 minutes;
 - composing or making over 1,000 messages or making phone calls;
 - using online chatrooms, chat groups, WeChat, microblogs, or other social networking services to spread information about a cult involving over 1,000 members or followers;
 - cult messages that garner over 5,000 views or clicks.

An act is considered “relatively minor” when such an amount or number falls below one-fifth of what is accepted as the normal standard.²⁶³ In such cases, prison sentences can range from three years or less, and other penalties can include detention, surveillance, deprivation of political rights, fines, and combined penalties with fines. A circumstance is deemed “especially grave” when the quantity is five times more than the numbers accepted as the normal standard. These cases can lead to imprisonment of seven years or more.

The new judicial interpretation appears to lead to greater leniency because it increases the scope of activities under the category of “minor” cases.²⁶⁴ For instance, the threshold quantity of print propaganda materials (such as leaflets, banners, or newspapers) produced or disseminated for cult purposes that constitute a normal offense was raised to 1,000 - a significant leap from 300, as stated in the former 2001 interpretation. For propaganda in the form of books or publications, the quantity for a normal offence requires evidence of at least 250 materials, again a significant leap from the previous count of 100 publication materials.

Despite the trend towards greater leniency in sentence reductions, public security authorities are ready to continue exercising control over Article 300 prisoners even after they have completed their sentences.²⁶⁵ Article 14 of the 2017 interpretation states that a supplemental sentence of “deprivation of political rights” of up to five years may be imposed on cult prisoners. Prior to the interpretation, only prisoners sentenced for the crime of endangering state security and some violent crimes were subject to supplemental deprivation of political rights sentences. These entail depriving them of the right to vote, stand for office, and hold positions in state-owned companies, regardless of the fact that their sentences had already been completed.

Dui Hua has observed worrisome developments in recent years. China has continued to assert control over Christians and other religions, pushing for Sinicization and compliance with “socialist core values.” Leaders of house churches who refused to be part of the official “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” are now increasingly likely to face accusations of “using a cult”, either of “to disrupt social order or to endanger society” (a violation of administrative law²⁶⁶) or of Article 300(1).

In January 2024, Dalian Pastor Kan Xiaoyong (阚小勇) and wife were convicted of Article 300(1), as well as fraud and illegal business activity. Kan was sentenced to 14 years of

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ “Public Security Administration Punishment Law of the People's Republic of China,” The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 1 March 2006, 《中华人民共和国治安管理处罚法》, https://www.gov.cn/flfg/2005-08/29/content_27130.htm

imprisonment. Authorities have yet to categorize any house church as a cult. In March 2025, however, it was reported that police raided the Wheatseed Reform Church, a house church in Fuyang, Anhui and placed two of its key members under administrative detention for “using cult activities to endanger society.” Such a use of penalties, under the guise of anti-cult efforts, has so far only targeted a few leaders or key members of house churches; Dui Hua has not seen this being widely used against regular members.

II. Other Criminal Offenses

Individuals organizing or leading an unorthodox religious organization are not exclusively accused of organizing and using a sect, cult or superstition to undermine implementation of the law. They can also stand accused of the following crimes:

i. Article 300(2): Organizing and using a sect, cult or superstition to deceive others causing serious injury or deaths

Individuals convicted of Article 300(2) are punished in accordance with the provisions of its preceding paragraph in Article 300(1). The former is typically invoked when individuals reject standard medical treatment by relying solely on prayer and thus inflict grievous bodily harm on another person or even cause death.

Online searches of news media articles appear to suggest that banned religious groups, particularly Christian and qigong organizations, are largely responsible for causing accidental deaths of their adherents.^{267, 268, 269}

However, Dui Hua found that there is insufficient evidence to determine a significant correlation between Article 300(2) cases and unorthodox religious groups. On 6 March 2025, Dui Hua uncovered 25 judicial documents which invoked Article 300(2). Out of all of them, only one woman was a member of a religious organization, the True Jesus Church in Shijiazhuang, Hebei.²⁷⁰ It is unclear whether this church can be considered “unorthodox.” None of the indictments state whether the remaining criminal suspects were connected to any religious organizations or held any specific religious belief. Most of the suspects simply believed that the healing power of their prayer or mantra was superior to what physicians can do.

Article 300(2) has never been as frequently invoked as Article 300(1). According to statistics published by the SPC, 103 people were tried for Article 300(2) in the first four years after it came into effect.²⁷¹ In 2016, the last year for which the SPC statistics are available, Article

²⁶⁷ “Exposing the cult of ‘Mentu Hui’: ‘Exorcising demons and curing diseases’ causing bloody murders and cult key members earning tens of millions,” *CCTV News*, 28 September 2016, [揭秘邪教“门徒会”：“驱魔治病”酿血案 骨干人员敛财数千万],

<http://m.news.cctv.com/2016/09/28/ARTImgR0s3gxVGc4dNCgsL2S160928.shtml>

²⁶⁸ “‘Qigong Master’ arrested for using superstition to cause death; many officials dealt with,” *China News Website*, 18 July 2020, [利用迷信致人死亡“气功大师”被捕 多名官员被处理],

http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/shgj/gdxw/202007/18/t20200718_35351803.shtml

²⁶⁹ “Punish criminal activities of organizing and using cult in accordance with the law,” *Guangming Daily*, 13 October 1999, [光明日报, 依法惩处组织和利用邪教组织犯罪活动], <https://www.gmw.cn/01gmr/1999-10/31/GB/GM%5E18226%5E2%5EGM2-3107.HTM>

²⁷⁰ Shanxi Procuratorate, Indictment [晋检公诉刑诉 (2015) 88号].

²⁷¹ The Supreme People’s Court, *Records of People’s Courts Historical Judicial Statistics: 1949-2016*, Vol.1 & 2.

300(2) was used to try only eight cases involving 19 individuals, compared to 2,330 Article 300(1) cases involving 3,605 defendants in the same year.²⁷²

ii. Economic Crimes

Authorities across China can also suppress unorthodox groups using economic crimes, with or without invoking Article 300. The dominant state narrative is that leaders of unorthodox religious organizations support their luxurious lifestyles by swindling and amassing vast fortunes from superstitious followers. They reportedly profiteer from the sale of religious books, accessories, symbols, Chinese couplets, teaching religious or qigong exercise classes, and deceiving adherents into buying things at exorbitant prices.

Illegal business activity, covered by Article 225 of the Criminal Law, has been commonly used by the Chinese government to legitimize criminal punishments against religious groups and private individuals operating outside state control. This is not to suggest that only unorthodox religious groups are targeted for punishment. House churches and officially sanctioned religious groups are equally at risk of arrest when they engage in business activities not authorized by the state. It is partly because the standard of conviction of Article 225 does not always require intent to establish a profitable business. There are cases where members of state-sanctioned churches are convicted for making a marginal profit or simply giving away religious materials free of charge.²⁷³

Compared to religious groups which are considered more “orthodox,” leaders of unorthodox groups face more accusations of amassing millions of yuan worth of ill-gotten gains. During the early years of the religious clampdown beginning in 1999, Falun Gong leaders received hefty prison sentences not just for Article 300, but also for selling books, pictures, audio-video products, and electronic publications. Publishers who print books for banned religious groups are also liable for the same crime despite them not having any religious beliefs. One example is Liang Jiantian (梁鉴添); he received a life imprisonment sentence in 2000 for Article 225 and “producing obscene material.” Both charges stemmed from him printing 13.97-million-yuan worth of Falun Gong publications.²⁷⁴ Liang is not a practitioner of Falun Gong; after multiple sentence reductions he was released in October 2021²⁷⁵. While Article 225 has been much less frequently used against Falun Gong in recent years, other smaller Christian, Buddhist, and qigong unorthodox groups continue to stand accused of this economic crime from time to time.

Financial fraud is another crime often cited in cases involving unorthodox religion, when donations given to the leaders of the groups are considered by the public security bureau to have been received in a fraudulent manner. This accusation is commonly used against unorthodox Christian groups that ask their adherents to contribute a portion of their income. Buddhist groups and qigong organizations, too, have been accused of the same charge.

²⁷² The Supreme People’s Court, *Records of People’s Courts Historical Judicial Statistics: 1949-2016*, Vol.6, pp.466-467.

²⁷³ “‘Illegal Business Activity’ and Christian Bookstores,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 9 May 2018, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2018/05/illegal-business-activity-and-christian.html>

²⁷⁴ “Prisoner Update: Subversion and Cult Offenses,” *Dialogue*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 30 August 2011, <https://duihua.org/dialogue-issue-44-prisoner-update-subversion-and-cult-offenses/>

²⁷⁵ “Printer of Falun Gong Material Released from Prison,” *Press Statement*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 23 March 2022, <https://duihua.org/prisoner-of-falun-gong-material-released-from-prison/>

In addition to violating Article 300(1), Buddhist leader Wu Zeheng was convicted of fraud because he sold Buddhist accessories and instruments in his shop, a business practice his supporters said is common in the Buddhist community.²⁷⁶ This charge alone afforded him a prison sentence of 14 years. State-run news media have also reported fraud cases involving “fake qigong masters,” but they operate on a much smaller scale and can hardly influence the social order and development, according to a *Global Times* article in 2013.²⁷⁷

iii. Violent Crimes

Criminal cases involving unorthodox religion can occasionally result in death sentences. The 2014 McDonald’s killing in Shandong, allegedly committed by members of Almighty God, is among the most controversial cases, in which two of its members received death sentences. Another unorthodox Protestant group, the Three Grades of Servants, is known to have preached with virulence against other rival Christian groups. Its founder Xu Wenku was executed in 2006; he confessed to killing members of Almighty God between 2002 and 2004. Two of his acolytes received death sentences for the same crime, and 14 other members were given suspended death sentences or prison terms of up to 15 years.²⁷⁸

However, some religious scholars believe that a portion of these violent allegations are trumped-up. Massimo Introvigne, founder of online magazine *Bitter Winter*, argued that the McDonald’s killing was committed not by Almighty God, but by a different religious movement which venerated another god in two female bodies.²⁷⁹ He also pointed out that the Chinese government launched a massive disinformation campaign with a goal to stigmatize the increasingly popular Christian group and justify its own religious persecution.²⁸⁰

Chinese government sources often draw attention to the scandalous private lives of those leading unorthodox religious groups. There have been cases where male leaders were convicted of using superstitions to molest or rape women or young girls. One notable case involved the founder of the South China Church, Gong Shengliang. He signed a statement admitting to raping 10 women and to assault charges, but many of his supporters believe that the confession was made under duress.²⁸¹ Wu Zeheng, too, allegedly seduced dozens of women by saying he could give them “supernatural power,” in addition to being accused of violating Article 300(1) and committing economic crimes.²⁸² As recently as 2021, founder of the Secret School of Mind Recharge Wang Xingfu was sentenced to 25 years in prison for multiple crimes, including violating Article 300(1), conducting illegal business activity, and committing rape. Wang

²⁷⁶ “Cao Yaxue: China heavily sentences leaders of Buddhist factions,” *Voice of America*, 4 November 2015, [曹雅学: 中国重判佛教派别领袖], <https://www.voachinese.com/a/voa-news-cyx-20151103/3034689.html>

²⁷⁷ “Qigong ‘masters’ struggle to survive,” *Global Times*, People’s Daily, 19 August 2013, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/804932.shtml>

²⁷⁸ “Christian sect leader guilty of killing rivals in China,” *The Guardian*, 7 July 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jul/08/china.jonathanwatts>

²⁷⁹ “The McDonald’s Murder of 2014: The Crime the Church of Almighty God Did Not Commit,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 20 September 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/the-mcdonalds-murder-of-2014/>

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ Pastor Gong Shengliang v. China, Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Opinion No. 21/2008, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/13/30/Add.1 at 25 (2010), <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/wgad/21-2008.html>

²⁸² “Chinese cult leader faces criminal prosecution,” *China Daily*, 16 July 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-07/16/content_21294088.htm

called himself Lhosang Tenzin. However, Chinese government sources say his doctrines and behavior have deviated from Tibetan Buddhism.

While observers generally believe that in China these allegations of violence cannot be trusted, independent investigations by overseas rights groups found that some of them are truthful. In the case of Gong Shengliang, China Aid Association concluded that he did encourage the use of violence against members who “betrayed” his South China Church, and that he also seduced and molested female church members.²⁸³ Gong’s wrongdoings, however, did not justify the use of torture inflicted on him and other church members. Dui Hua also found that the use of violence among these groups is rare, despite a barrage of media reports focusing on a handful of murder and rape cases involving unorthodox religion.

iv. Endangering State Security

Some leaders of unorthodox religious groups have been convicted of endangering state security, China’s most serious political crime. Falun Gong and Zhonggong are more likely than other religious groups to be accused of this crime, which includes subversion, splittism, incitement to subversion and splittism, and illegally providing state secrets to foreigners.

Inciting subversion cases occasionally involve Falun Gong practitioners. One recent example is Ma Zhiwu (马智武), who received a combined prison sentence of 14 years for inciting subversion and violating Article 300(1) in November 2020.²⁸⁴ His crime of inciting subversion afforded him a two-year prison sentence. The reasons for convicting Falun Gong practitioners of this crime, rather than violating Article 300(1) or committing other crimes, are not always made clear in the judgments but may lie in the nature of some of the “propaganda” they publicly disseminated. Falun Gong practitioners are often accused of possessing *Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party*, a book which is more political than spiritual.

Dui Hua also uncovered another incitement case in 2013 involving a Zhonggong leader surnamed Wang. In addition to circulating Falun Gong publications, Wang allegedly distributed Charter 08, the political manifesto that led to the imprisonment of Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo (刘晓波), and materials about June Fourth.²⁸⁵

Subversion, which should not be confused with inciting subversion defined in Article 105(2) of the Criminal Law, is rather uncommon in cases involving unorthodox religious groups, but such cases do exist. Dui Hua’s research into government records has uncovered one case where Zhonggong leader Li Zhanling (李占领) was sentenced to 10 years in prison for this crime in 2004.²⁸⁶ However, available sources only stated that Li was responsible for organizing practice sessions and training leaders in Cangzhou, Hebei.

Additionally, members of unorthodox religious groups can fall to victim to China’s arbitrary classification of state secrets. Dui Hua’s research into judicial websites found that Almighty

²⁸³ “Jailed South China Church Founder Admits Guilt; CAA Appeals for Leadership Repentance,” China Aid Association, 6 August 2007, <https://www.chinaaid.org/2007/08/jailed-south-china-church-founder.html>

²⁸⁴ “Appeal of Ningxia Falun Gong practitioner Ma Zhiwu, who was sentenced to 14 years in prison, rejected and the original sentence upheld,” *Wei Quan Wang*, 28 September 2021, [获刑14年的宁夏法轮功学员马智武上诉遭驳回 维持原判], <https://wqw2010.blogspot.com/2021/09/14.html>

²⁸⁵ “Zhonggong: The Subversive Business of Qigong,” *Reference Materials*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 14 August 2014, <https://www.duihuaresearch.org/2014/08/zhonggong-subversive-business-of-qigong.html>

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

God member Wang Baozhong (王宝中) was criminally detained in August 2019 for illegally providing state secrets for foreigners.²⁸⁷ Wang was accused of photographing several documents about stability maintenance and anti-cult campaigns in Gu'an County, Henan. The images of these documents were later posted on *Bitter Winter* in February 2019. On 30 June 2020, Wang was convicted of a different crime, that of “leaking state secrets,” and sentenced to three years in prison.

III. Clemency: Sentence Reduction and Parole

Prisoners belonging to a cult organization are singled out for restrictive treatment with respect to the application of clemency. In 2001, the SPC, SPP, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of State Security, and Ministry of Justice jointly issued guidelines outlining special procedures to be followed for sentence reduction, parole, or early release of “key” cult offenders.²⁸⁸ These guidelines call for “strict handling” in dealing with sentence reduction and parole for cult prisoners alongside prisoners convicted of endangering state security and certain violent crimes.

The SPC regulations, however, leave undefined the meaning of “strict handling,” a concept that comes more into focus as one looks at local regulations and guidelines issued by provincial courts and prison administration bureaus. Dui Hua found that in Guangdong, parole is generally inapplicable to prisoners convicted of cult offenses, as stipulated by Article 47 of its provincial sentence reduction and parole regulations.²⁸⁹ The same article also states that parole must be “strictly handled” for Article 300 prisoners, regardless of outstanding behavior or meritorious services in prison. Additionally, Article 21 states that organizers, leaders, and core members of a cult organization have to wait six months longer than ordinary prisoners before receiving their first sentence reduction.²⁹⁰ Any subsequent reduction they receive will be three to six months shorter.²⁹¹

Similar provisions governing the parole restrictions for cult prisoners are in place in Shanghai.²⁹² While provincial regulations in Guizhou, Hebei, Hubei, and Liaoning also state

²⁸⁷ Hebei Langfang City Gu'an County People's Court, Judgment [(2020) 冀1022刑初177号].

²⁸⁸ “Questions Regarding the Resentencing, Sentence Reduction, Parole, Temporary Service Outside Prison, and Early Release from Reeducation through Labor for Key Individuals Who Have Endangered State Security and Key Members of Cult Organizations,” Public Security Notice (2001) No. 27 issued by the Supreme People's Court, Supreme People's Procuratorate, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of State Security, and Ministry of Justice, May 15, 2001,

“危害国家安全重点人员和重点邪教组织人员的改判、减刑、假释、暂予监外执行、提前解除劳动教养等问题,” 公通字 (2001) 27号],

http://www.gzkf.gov.cn/xxgk/bmgkxx/jyj/fgwj/fg/200906/t20090610_1623.htm (Last retrieved: December 2010)

²⁸⁹ “Detailed rules for the implementation of the High People's Court of Guangdong, the People's Procuratorate of Guangdong, the Public Security Department of Guangdong, and the Department of Justice of Guangdong concerning the trials of sentence commutation and parole cases,” joint notice issued on 24 October 2019, [广东省人民政府、广东省人民检察院、广东省公安厅、广东省司法厅关于减刑、假释案件实施细则, 粤高法发 (2019) 2号], <http://www.drxf.com/xf/xx2.asp?bh=8889>

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ “Answers to common questions about prison enforcement,” Guangdong Province Shenzhen Prison Website, 7 February 2018, [监狱刑罚执行常见问题答疑],

http://sfj.gz.gov.cn/gzsfj/flfw/jg/cjwtdf/content/post_6504908.html

²⁹² Shanghai High People's Court, Shanghai People's Procuratorate, Shanghai Public Security Bureau, Notice on the Implementation Rules (Trial) for Handling Cases of Sentence Reduction and Parole, 30 March 2018,

that parole must be “strictly handled,” they lack further elaboration.^{293, 294, 295, 296} Outside of Guangdong and Shanghai, Dui Hua cannot find explicit references to “strict handling” of sentence reductions in prison regulations that are available online.

“Transformed and Reformed (转化)” is crucial in assessing suitability for sentence reduction and parole for individuals convicted of cult offenses. A successful “transform and reform” is assessed according to a prisoner’s willingness to break ties with the organization, report on other practitioners’ activities, and publicly criticize the organization and practices. For example, in Heilongjiang and Ningxia prisons, authorities passed rules placing special restrictions on their ability to earn sentence reductions.^{297, 298} New prisoners are required to undergo a period of special training before receiving their first assessment. These assessments of their daily behavior are used only to measure their levels of “reform,” and prisoners are not yet eligible for the “effective points” needed to earn sentence reductions.

In short, cult prisoners are likely to see their opportunities for early release decrease because of the delay in conducting the clemency assessment, as well as shorter and more infrequent reductions.

IV. Prison Visitation

The visitation and correspondence regulation issued by the Ministry of Justice entitles prisoners to up to one monthly visit not exceeding 30 minutes from family members or guardians in the form of telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, or video calls.²⁹⁹ However, many local prisons across China have taken it upon themselves to place unorthodox religious prisoners under additional scrutiny when it comes to visitation. In Guizhou, correspondence and visitation for Falun Gong prisoners are placed under “strict control.” A notice issued in 2011 states that all visits must be monitored in person by officers and recorded digitally at the same time.³⁰⁰ A more recent visitation rule even went further to deny family visitation to “zealots of cult

[上海高级人民法院、上海市人民检察院、上海市公安局、上海市司法局关于印发《关于办理减刑、假释案件的实施细则(试行)》的通知],

<http://fgcx.bjcourt.gov.cn:4601/law?fn=lar1523s663.txt&truetag=2331&titles=&contents=&dbt=lar>

²⁹³ Guizhou High People’s Court, Regulations on Issues Related to the Handling of Sentence Reduction and Parole, 17 September 2014 [贵州省高级人民法院关于办理减刑、假释案件若干问题的规定].

²⁹⁴ Regulations on Issues Related to the Handling of Sentence Reduction and Parole in Henan Province (Trial), 20 December 2019 [河南省关于办理减刑假释案件若干问题的规定 (试行)].

²⁹⁵ Issues Related to the Handling of Sentence Reduction and Parole (Trial), Hubei Prison Administration Bureau, 17 December 2013, [关于办理减刑、假释案件的实施办法(试行)], http://jyj.hubei.gov.cn/fbjd/xxgkml/lyxxgk/201312/t20131217_347643.shtml

²⁹⁶ Prison Affairs Open Handbook, Liaoning Province Prison Administration Bureau, [狱务公开手册], http://221.180.205.68/ywgk/bmfw/bszn/202106/t20210608_4178784.html

²⁹⁷ Heilongjiang Prison Records, 1986-2005 [黑龙江监狱志: 1986-2005] (Harbin, 2007): p.51, p.91.

²⁹⁸ Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Prison Implementation Rules on Evaluation and Assessment of Criminals (Trial), Ningxia Prison Administration Bureau, [宁夏回族自治区监狱计分考核罪犯实施细则 (试行)], https://nx.12348.gov.cn/views/new_front/newsDetail/newsDetail.jsp?id=21ABC621F6DBA7F4

²⁹⁹ Regulations for Prisoner Visitation and Communications of the Ministry of Justice [司法部罪犯会见通信规定].

³⁰⁰ Notice on Issuing the Interim Provisions on the Management of Communication and Meetings in Prison, Guizhou Province, Guizhou Prison Administration Bureau, 16 September 2014, [关于印发贵州省监狱服刑人员通讯会见管理暂行规定的通知], http://jyglj.guizhou.gov.cn/szs/zwgk/xxgkml/zcwj/201808/t20180807_25452475.html

organizations,” grouping them with prisoners with mental illnesses and serious contagious diseases.³⁰¹

Video visitations provide an alternative to those who cannot travel great distances to see their loved ones face-to-face. However, prisoners serving sentences for cult offenses, or visitors deemed to be associated with a cult organization, may have this right taken away. A guide published by Jiangsu’s Department of Justice classifies cult offenders, alongside prisoners convicted of endangering state security and violent crimes, as ineligible for video visitation.³⁰² Shanxi has launched a pilot rule with the same restriction. Article 19 of this pilot rule states that a video call shall be immediately terminated if family members or guardians are found to have a history of joining a cult organization.³⁰³

4. Court Statistics, 1979-2016

Observers have long viewed religious persecution as being widespread in China, but they were unable to quantify the extent of the crackdown until the SPC published the 12-volume *Records of People’s Courts Historical Judicial Statistics: 1949-2016* at the end of 2018. The records contain extensive information on trials of crimes, including statistical breakdowns of sentencing, age, gender, and defendants’ occupations. The records also note the number of individuals who are ethnic minorities, foreign nationals, and residents of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. This section focuses on the two crimes used primarily against unorthodox religious groups: (i) Article 99 of the 1979 Criminal Law: “organizing and using superstition, a sect or secret society to carry out counterrevolutionary activity;” and (ii) Article 300(1) of the 1997 Criminal Law: “organizing and using a sect, cult or superstition to undermine implementation of the law.”

However, the statistics do not fully reflect the extent of the crackdown on unorthodox religions because they omit a large but unknown number of people whose personal liberties were deprived by administrative detention. The Chinese government has not regularly made public the number of people held in detention centers, where local police can hand out 15 days of administrative detention at their own discretion without much judicial oversight.³⁰⁴

Additionally, many religious practitioners were detained without legal procedure in re-education through labor (RTL) camps, another form of administrative detention. Prior to its abolition in 2013, individuals could be detained and subjected to forced labor for up to three years, extendable for another year, for the vaguely defined conduct of “disrupting social order” on the decision of the public security organs alone. During the 2009 China session of the UN

³⁰¹ Guizhou Prison Affairs Open Handbook, Guizhou Prison Administration Bureau, 10 December 2020, [贵州监狱狱务公开手册],

http://jyglj.guizhou.gov.cn/kl/zwgk/xxgkml/zcwj/202102/t20210226_66873958.html

³⁰² Guides for Providing Education and Help to Inmates Using Remote Conferencing Methods, Jiangsu Department of Justice, 8 October 2016, [服刑人员远程帮教会见指南], http://sft.jiangsu.gov.cn/art/2016/10/8/art_48602_4140275.html

³⁰³ Implementation Rules for Remote Video Conferences for Judicial Administration in Shanxi Province (Trial), 16 March 2021, [山西省司法行政远程视频会议实施办法 (试行)], http://sft.shanxi.gov.cn/zwgk/xxgkml/jst/202103/t20210318_172756.html

³⁰⁴ Law of the People’s Republic of China on Penalties for Administration of Public Security, [中华人民共和国治安管理处罚法], http://www.gov.cn/flfg/2005-08/29/content_27130.htm

Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review, the Chinese government confirmed the existence of 320 RTL facilities with approximately 190,000 inmates, down from 500,000 inmates in 310 RTL facilities in 2005.³⁰⁵ At the end of 2012, the Ministry of Justice claimed that the number of RTL inmates further decreased to 50,000 from across 351 RTL facilities nationwide.³⁰⁶

The court statistics also exclude tens of thousands of “cult” offenders who have been placed in “legal education classes,” which have been in existence for over two decades. This measure provides local authorities with highly flexible means of dealing with individuals who engage in behavior that is viewed as socially disruptive but does not meet the criteria for criminal prosecution or public-order punishment. There is no limit to the amount of time someone can spend in “legal education.”

Despite the limitations, the SPC statistics provide proof of how the Criminal Law has been used to crack down on unorthodox religion:

i. Article 99: “Organizing and using superstition, a sect or secret society to carry out counterrevolutionary activity (1979-1997)”

Table 1: Article 99 concluded cases (1979-1997)

	Cases Concluded		Individuals (Concluded)	
	All Counterrevolution Crimes	Article 99	All Counterrevolution Crimes	Article 99
1979	7,643	108	-	-
1980	879	8	-	-
1981	904	65	-	-
1982	1,271	66	-	-
1983	2,005	301	-	-
1984	2,271	708	-	-
1985	794	202	1,444	692
1986	444	91	862	318
1987	361	46	732	109
1988	208	19	408	52
1989	448	13	916	68
1990	728	26	1,248	93
1991	413	30	820	172
1992	253	46	495	128
1993	187	17	449	35
1994	180	17	361	24

³⁰⁵ Draft Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, China, February 2009, https://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session4/CN/A_HRC_WG6_4_L11_CHN_E.pdf

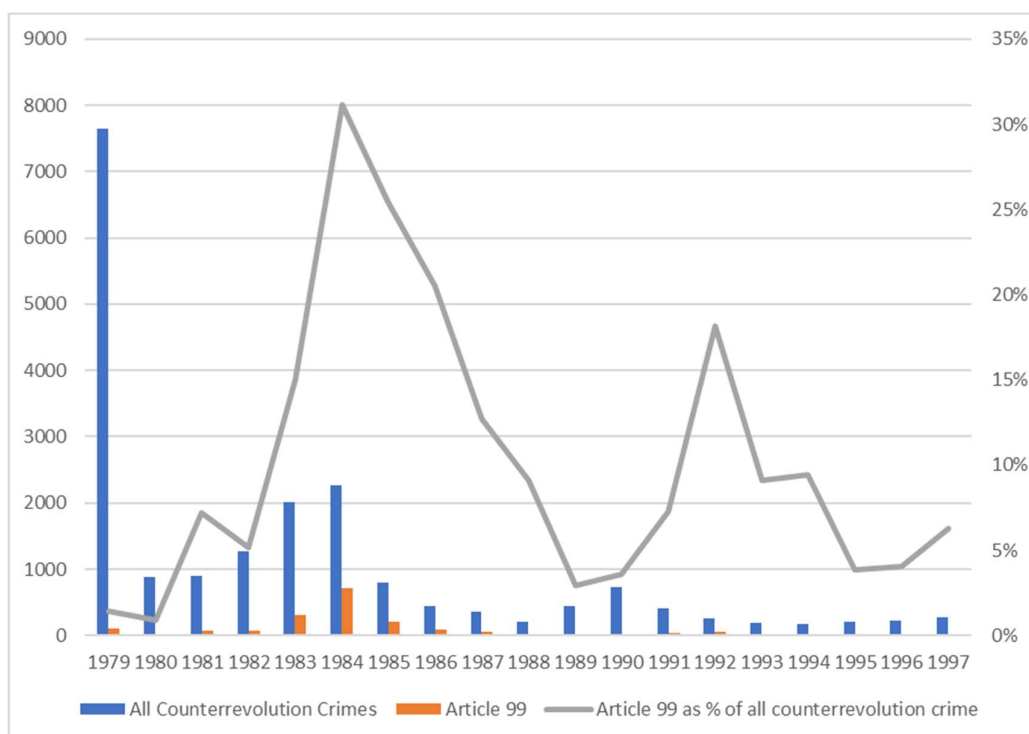
³⁰⁶ “Re-education through labour has been abolished for more than a year: how to fill gaps in system?” *China Youth Daily*, 19 January 2015, [劳教废止一年多 制度空白如何补], http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2015-01/19/nw.D110000zgqnb_20150119_2-04.htm

1995	208	8	436	18
1996	221	9	501	67
1997	271	17	650	21
Total:	19,689	1,797	9,322*	1,797*

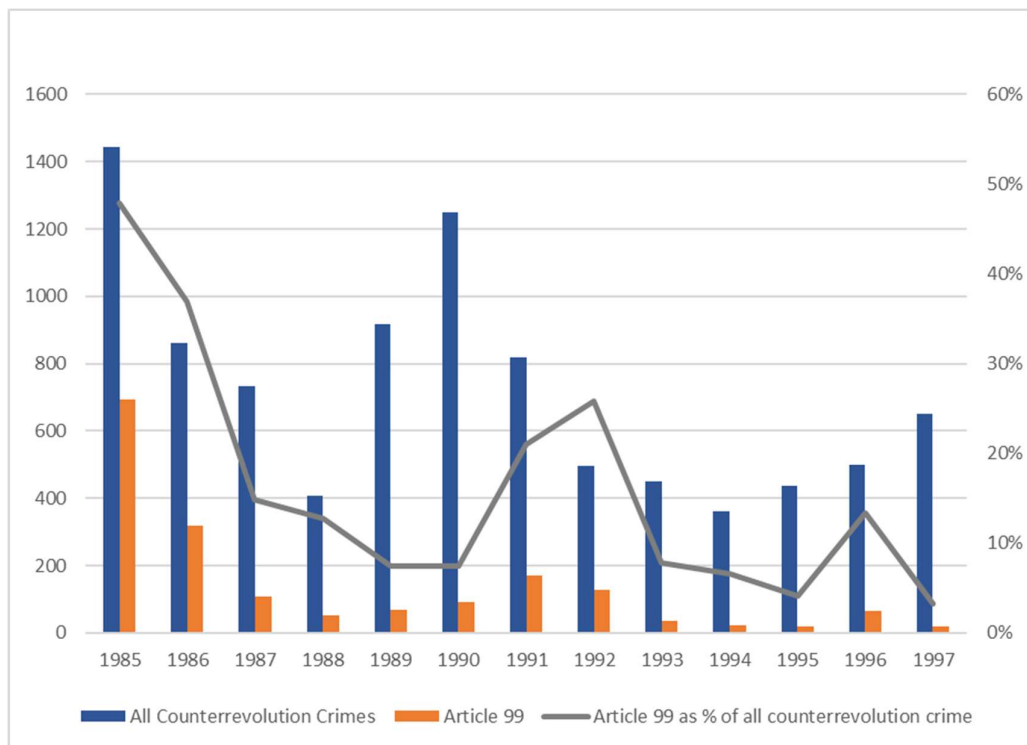
*Since 1985

In the 18 years beginning in 1979, Chinese courts invoked the crimes of counterrevolution to try 19,689 cases. Among them, 1,797 cases, or 9 percent, involved Article 99. The number of defendants was not provided until 1985. Between 1985 and 1997, 9,322 people were tried for counterrevolution, of whom 1,797 or 19 percent, were people accused of leading or engaging in “counterrevolutionary sects” and “reactionary secret societies.”

Graph 1: All counterrevolution concluded cases vs. Article 99 concluded cases for 1979-1997



Graph 2: Individuals tried for counterrevolution vs. Article 99 from 1985-1997



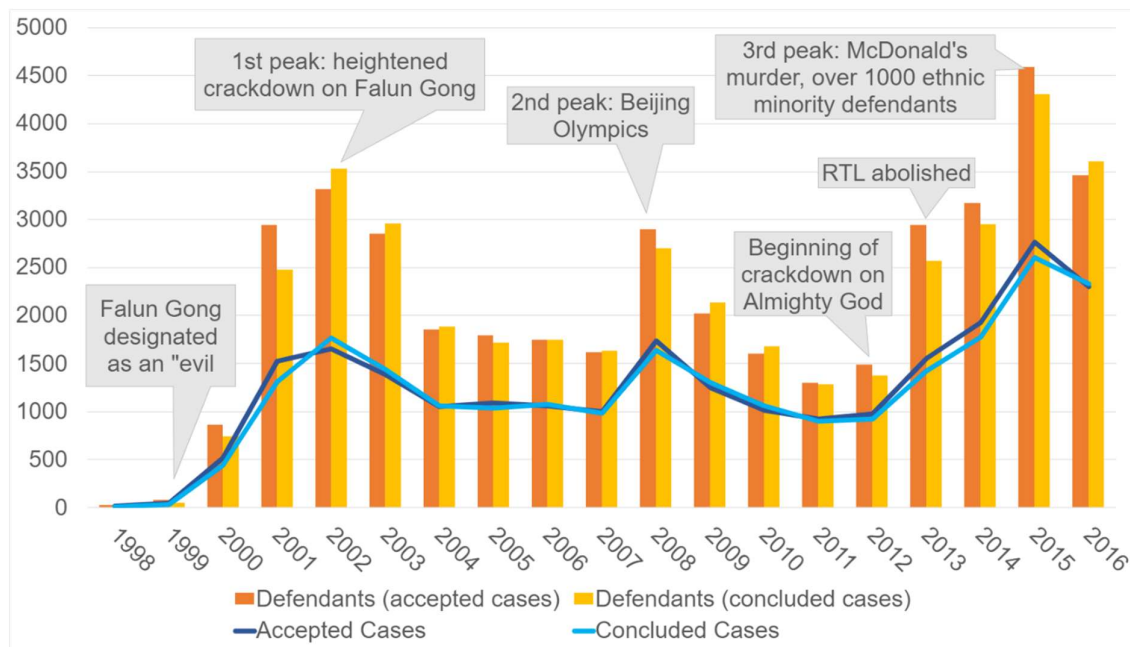
Over 60 percent of these cases were concluded within the first three years of China’s first Strike Hard Campaign, which began in August 1983. The Shouters, which were declared a “counterrevolutionary group” shortly before the campaign, were a major target of suppression. Activities to suppress them were especially strong in Henan and Zhejiang, where scores of Shouters leaders with records in Dui Hua’s PPDB were sentenced to lengthy prison terms. In 1983 in selected locations in Zhejiang, research uncovered by Dui Hua shows that 10,390 Shouters were made to register with the government, 14,800 people were made to leave the Shouters, and 2,039 people were given education.³⁰⁷ Yi Guan Dao was another target of the campaign after the group attempted to re-establish towards the end of the Cultural Revolution.

By the 1990s, China moved away from using the crime of counterrevolution to imprison leaders of unorthodox religious groups and relied instead on the less precise crime of “disturbing social order.” This can be demonstrated by a downward trend in Article 99 cases beginning in 1987. Often, other crimes such as fraud, “deliberately causing injury,” and rape were tacked on to the charge of “disturbing social order.” Among those convicted of “disturbing social order” were Zheng Yunsu, the leader of the Jesus Family, and Xu Yongze, founder of the Full Scope Church.

ii. Article 300(1): Organizing and using a sect, cult or superstition to undermine implementation of the law (1998-2016)

Graph 3: Defendants and 1st-instance cases accepted and concluded for violating Article 300(1)

³⁰⁷ “Selection of Cases from the Criminal Law: Banned Protestant Groups,” *Occasional Publications* (No.12), The Dui Hua Foundation, February 2003.



After the Criminal Law was revised in 1997, “counterrevolutionary sects” and “reactionary secret societies” were replaced by the category of “evil cults.” During an 18-year period beginning in 1998, the statistics reveal that over 23,000 cult cases were accepted by the court and over 40,000 people were tried.³⁰⁸ Article 300(1) began to be used extensively after the Chinese government designated Falun Gong as an “evil cult” in 1999. Chinese courts began filing the bulk of cult cases a year after. The number of people brought to trial skyrocketed from 864 in 2000 to almost 3,000 in 2001. The country recorded its first peak of cult cases in 2002; 3,315 people were subjected to first-instance trials.

The surge of cult cases in 2013 warrants particular attention. Compared to 2012, the number of people who stood trial in 2013 doubled to 2,942. There were two main reasons: first, RTL was abolished in 2013. Cult offenders who were previously sent to RTL were more likely to face imprisonment. Furthermore, China’s sweeping clampdown on Almighty God began in late December 2012.

The highest peak of cult cases occurred in 2015: 2,764 cases and 4,582 defendants. This peak coincided with the amendment to the Criminal Law which turned violating Article 300 into a crime with the possibility of life in prison (up from a fixed-term imprisonment sentence of 15 years). In that year, China intensified its propaganda offensive against Almighty God and sentenced two members who allegedly committed the McDonald’s killing to death.

Other notable observations from the court statistics include:

1. Women constitute 41 percent of the 28,497 cult defendants during the 18-year period ending in 2016.³⁰⁹ During the 2000s, the annual number of female defendants ranged between 400 and 800. Those numbers doubled following a crackdown on Almighty

³⁰⁸ “Detailed Court Statistics on Article 300, Part I,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 28 May 2020, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2020/05/detailed-court-statistics-on-article-300.html>

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

God starting in December 2012. About 2,600 women stood trial in the two years beginning on 1 January 2015.³¹⁰

2. Statistics are given about the defendants' occupational background, but it is unclear how many workers, farmers, and other occupations were women. The statistics indicated that 35 percent of all cult defendants were farmers or migrant workers, and slightly less than one-third were unemployed.³¹¹ Only 7.5 percent of all the defendants were classified as employed or laid-off workers, and another 7.5 percent were retired.³¹²
3. Acquittals are rare in China. In cult cases, only 69 men and women who stood trial from 1998-2016 were acquitted.³¹³ About 99.8 percent of cult trials ended with a conviction. Among them, 384, or 1.3 percent, were exempt from criminal punishment, and 219, or 0.8 percent, were sentenced to criminal detention or public surveillance.³¹⁴
4. In the 18 years beginning in 1998, suspended sentences were not uncommon in cult cases, with 3,620 defendants, or 13 percent, receiving suspended sentences.³¹⁵ During this period, there was an overall upward trend in the use of suspended sentences. In 2013, suspended sentences were meted out to one in every four defendants.³¹⁶
5. From 2002 to 2004, about 40 percent of all cult defendants received prison sentences exceeding five years, versus 26 percent and 18 percent of those who received the medium (between three and five years) and lower end (below three years) of prison sentences, respectively.³¹⁷ The severity of punishment highlighted the heightened repression of Falun Gong at the time.
6. In 2015, the number of people who received prison sentences exceeding five years for violating Article 300(1) surged to 1,218, making it the only year between 1998-2016 when the number exceeded 1,000.³¹⁸ The severity of punishment, which culminated in the 2015 amendment to the Criminal Law that turned Article 300(1) into a crime with the possibility of life in prison, was largely due to the crackdown on Almighty God.
7. In 2016, the latest year for which the 12-volume SPC statistics are available, Chinese courts nationwide concluded 2,330 Article 300(1) cases involving 3,605 defendants, down from 2,607 cases with 4,303 in 2015.
8. Chinese courts continued to try a staggering number of Article 300(1) cases after 2016. The latest available figures provided by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2019 indicated that 3,550 people were tried for Article 300(1) in 2018. Among them, 1,966, or 55.4 percent, were women, 382, or 10.8 percent, more than men tried for the same charge.³¹⁹

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ "Detailed Court Statistics on Article 300, Part II," *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 4 June 2020, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2020/06/detailed-court-statistics-on-article.html>

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ Women and Men in China: Facts and Figures 2019, The National Bureau of Statistics of China [中国社会中的女人和男人—事实和数据] (2019), p.153.

5. Fading Transparency in Article 300 Cases

For a long period of time, Article 300 cases enjoyed a high level of judicial transparency. Information about criminal cases was more readily accessible than cases classified as endangering state security. *China Judgements Online*, SPC's online judgment website which featured more than 117 million judgments from courts across China as of March 2021, enabled Dui Hua to uncover scores of names of political and religious prisoners, many of whom were previously unknown. From 2017-2019, over 6,000 Article 300(1) judgments were posted by June 2020. Although some of these judgments had been periodically taken offline, in early June 2021 over 4,000 Article 300(1) judgments were still available.

In a major blow to judicial transparency, about 11 million judgments and judicial decisions were purged from *China Judgements Online* in 2021.³²⁰ The judgments that were removed were mostly criminal cases, including a large number of Article 300 cases. Only 37 Article 300(1) judgments could still be found on *China Judgements Online*. The contents of these cases were not disclosed; they were all deemed “unsuitable for disclosure.”

Dui Hua drew extensively on *China Judgements Online* to conduct research and advocacy. Information about unorthodox religious groups such as Tablighi Jamaat, the Milky Way Federation, and Zhongtian Zhengfa was discovered almost exclusively from court judgments that were previously posted online. By recounting their ideology, scale of operation, and regional influence, these judgments allow observers to better understand the existence of previously unknown spiritual groups and the complex diversity of religiosity in China. Dui Hua's research with the website also demonstrated that unorthodox groups such as Yi Guan Dao, the Shouters, and Society of Disciples survived decades-long state suppression, contrary to popular beliefs that they had become dormant or even vanished.

State-run news media outlets continue to report Article 300 cases although these sources chiefly serve to disseminate CCP propaganda against cult organizations. The vast majority of news articles circulating online are reprinted from the China Anti-Cult Association. In the first nine months of 2021, the China Anti-Cult Association published 29 original reports featuring arrests and imprisonment of cult leaders. Falun Gong and Almighty God were disproportionately represented in these reports.

Cases of arbitrary detention involving members of Falun Gong and Almighty God are also abundantly reported by unofficial sources overseas. *Minghui.org* reports almost daily about police “kidnapping” Falun Gong members. However, it is unclear whether the term refers to police summons, criminal detention, legal education classes, or other extrajudicial measures. The Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Religious Freedom, with offices in Australia, Germany, and Spain, publishes annual reports about China's persecution of Almighty God. Its 2020 annual report claimed that 1,098 of its followers had received prison

³²⁰ “Millions of court rulings removed from official Chinese database,” *South China Morning Post*, 26 June 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3138830/millions-court-rulings-removed-official-chinese-database>

sentences in the whole year.³²¹ Of those, 360 received sentences of three years or more, 57 received sentences of seven years or more, and three were given heavy sentences of 10 years or more.³²² Cases involving smaller Protestant groups, such as the Shouters, Evangelical Gospel Mission Armored with Blood and Holy Spirit, and the Full Scope Church are occasionally covered by *Bitter Winter* and China Aid Association.

Information on practitioners of unorthodox religious groups can occasionally be found when United Nations Special Procedures publish the results of their consideration of appeals submitted to these bodies.

While it is true that the above sources provide a workaround for uncovering the names of religious prisoners, they only serve to demonstrate the punitive side of China's legal system. *China Judgements Online* was an invaluable source of information with respect to the granting of clemency within the carceral system. Dui Hua's research into court judgments found that it is not uncommon for "cult" prisoners to receive clemency after expressing remorse for their behavior. In June 2020, Dui Hua's Political Prisoner Database documented over 1,200 instances of sentence reductions, parole, and medical parole granted to such prisoners.³²³ Many of these clemency acts were confirmed only by court judgments and decisions posted on court websites. The purge is more than a backwards step in the country's judicial reform to improve transparency; it also represents a missed opportunity for China to show leniency to disprove its critics.

³²¹ 2020 Annual Report on the Chinese Communist Government's Persecution of The Church of Almighty God, Association for The Defense of Human Rights and Religious Freedom, 3 February 2021, <https://en.adhrf.org/2020-Annual-Report-on-the-Chinese-Communist-Government%E2%80%99s-Persecution-of-The-Church-of-Almighty-God.html>

³²² *Ibid.*

³²³ "Detailed Court Statistics on Article 300, Part II," *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 4 June 2020, <https://www.duihuajournal.org/2020/06/detailed-court-statistics-on-article.html>

6. Political Prisoner Database

Created in 2000, Dui Hua's Political Prisoner Database (PPDB) contains information about political and religious prisoners who have been subjected to coercive measures in China since 1980. As of 6 March 2025, the PPDB reached a total of 49,533 names of prisoners. Of these, 29,881 are prisoners of unorthodox religious groups subjected to coercive measures for violating Article 300(1) and other crimes. These include practitioners of Falun Gong, Almighty God, unorthodox Protestant groups, Buddhist groups, qigong organizations, and groups of an unknown or miscellaneous nature. The PPDB differentiates a case as active when the individual is thought to currently be undergoing coercive measures.

Table 2: Breakdown of unorthodox religious practitioners in PPDB by affiliation

Affiliation	No. of Individuals in PPDB	No. of Active Individuals in PPDB
Falun Gong	23,309	2,137
Almighty God	2,268	270
Other Protestant groups	1,568	120
Buddhist groups	88	11
Qigong (other than Falun Gong)	80	5
Unknown/Miscellaneous	2,648	645
Total:	29,881	3,183

The above figures corroborate reporting from unofficial news media sources that Falun Gong and Almighty God are the most persecuted unorthodox religious groups in China. About 86 percent of the unorthodox religious prisoners with records in the PPDB are practitioners of Falun Gong or Almighty God. As of 6 March 2025, there were 23,309 names of Falun Gong prisoners, of whom 2,137 remained in prison or other carceral facilities. Falun Gong alone accounted for 78percent of all unorthodox religious prisoners with records in the PPDB.

Almighty God prisoners made up 2,268 names of practitioners in the PPDB, about eight percent of all unorthodox religious prisoners. Of these, 270 were held in prison or other carceral facilities at the time of writing. Although the group was outlawed in 1995, the crackdown intensified after late 2012. As such, the names of Almighty God prisoners are far outstripped by Falun Gong, whose members have faced at least one decade longer of intense religious persecution . Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in recent years the names of Almighty God prisoners in the PPDB have increased at a faster rate than Falun Gong. Its members remain active in many regions of China. A trial of a CAG case typically involves multiple defendants.

Religious groups other than Falun Gong and Almighty God are not subjected to the same intensity of the crackdown in part because their popularity tends to be more localized. Other than Almighty God, all other unorthodox Protestant groups combined made up 1,568 names, or five percent, of unorthodox religious prisoners in the PPDB. Of them, 120 are currently in prison or other carceral facilities. The majority of these cases involve the Shouters, Society of Disciples, and their various spin-offs in the 1980s. As noted earlier in the report, Dui Hua continued to find criminal cases from Chinese government sources concerning these two

groups in the 2010s. The remainder of the unorthodox Protestant prisoners who are serving sentences for Article 300(1) mostly belong to the Spirit Church, Lord God Church, Evangelical Gospel Mission Armored with Blood and Holy Spirit, Full Scope Church, the Three Grades of Servants, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Only 88 names in the PPDB are members of unorthodox Buddhist groups: Guanyin Famen, Huazang Dharma Group, Order of Holy Lord Maitreya Buddha, and Secret School of Mind Recharge. Of them, 11 remain incarcerated at the time of writing.

The PPDB has 80 names of prisoners who are leaders of qigong organizations other than Falun Gong, including Zhonggong, Xianggong, and Sun Moon Qigong. Of them, five remain incarcerated at the time of writing.

Lastly, unorthodox groups classified as unknown or miscellaneous accounted for 2,648 names in the PPDB. Of them, 645 are serving prison sentences at the time of writing. It is possible that many of these people were members of Falun Gong, Almighty God, and other aforementioned unorthodox religious groups. They are so classified in the PPDB because available sources did not provide information on their religious affiliation. Prisoners categorized as unknown or miscellaneous also include those from the Milky Way Federation, Tablighi Jamaat, Yi Guan Dao, and Zhongtian Zhengfa.

i. Gender Breakdown of Unorthodox Religious Practitioners in the PPDB

Table 3: Breakdown of unorthodox religious practitioners in PPDB by gender

	No. of Individuals	No. of Active Individuals
Male	6,530	602
Female	12,098	1,263
Unknown*	11,253	1,318

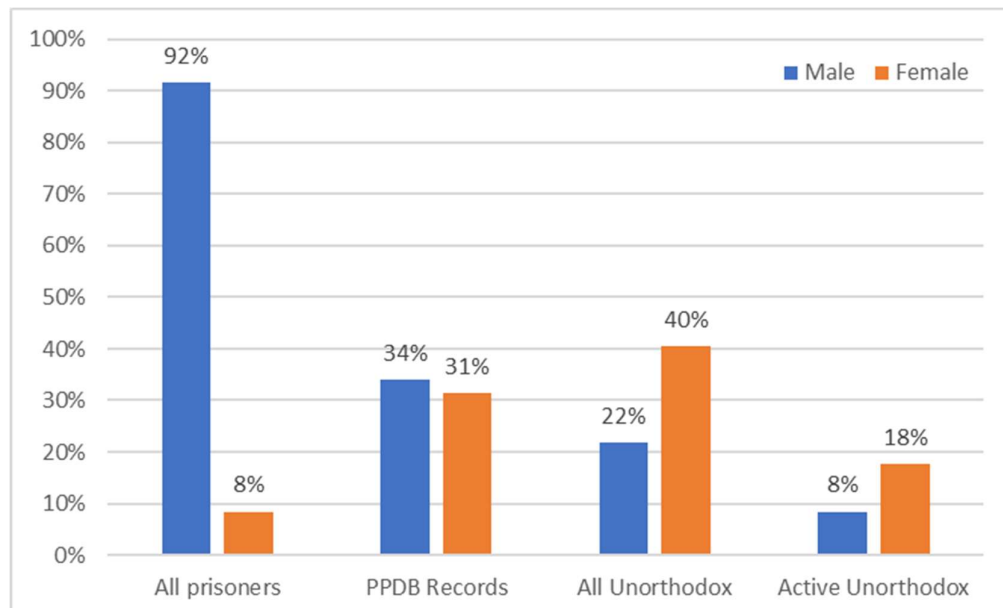
** Gender is not always reported.*

From 2010-2016, women accounted for 5-7 percent of defendants in all criminal cases in China.³²⁴ The latest available information provided by the Chinese government to World Prison Brief indicated that women accounted for 8.4 percent of its prison population in 2018.³²⁵ In cases involving unorthodox religious groups, women are disproportionately represented. In the PPDB, 12,098 individuals are female, compared to 6,530 males (information on gender is not available in every case). Graph 4 shows the gender breakdown for all prisoners, unorthodox religious prisoners, and active unorthodox religious prisoners with records in the PPDB.

³²⁴ "Detailed Court Statistics on Article 300, Part I," *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 28 May 2020, <https://www.duihuajournal.org/2020/05/detailed-court-statistics-on-article-300.html>

³²⁵ "China World Prison Brief Data," World Prison Brief, <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/china>

Graph 4: Gender breakdown of prisoners and unorthodox religious prisoners in PPDB



China’s anti-cult propaganda says that women in cult cases are typically middle aged and “left-behind women” (留守妇女) whose husbands migrated from rural regions to cities for employment or to conduct business for an extended period.³²⁶ It often makes sexist claims that women are “weak-willed and psychologically vulnerable, with a propensity to succumb to coercion or monetary enticements from cult organizations” because many of them have a low level of education.

Although China’s anti-cult propaganda tends to describe women as passive victims in cult cases, they are known to have taken leading roles in several religious groups outlawed by the Chinese government. Many regional leaders and principal members of unorthodox religious groups are women, including those who practice Falun Gong, Almighty God, and Guanyin Famen. Women have likewise had leading roles in several other homegrown religious groups which emerged relatively recently in the 2010s, including the Milky Way Federation and Zhongtian Zhengfa.

Finding the names of unorthodox religious prisoners has become more difficult because of the mass removal of court judgments online beginning in June 2021. In view of the new challenges, Dui Hua will continue to look for alternative resources to expand the PPDB. Additionally, information Dui Hua obtained from interlocutors has become all the more important to understand the fate of people who pursue banned religious faiths.

³²⁶ “Detailed Court Statistics on Article 300, Part I,” *Human Rights Journal*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 28 May 2020, <https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2020/05/detailed-court-statistics-on-article-300.html>

7. Dui Hua's Advocacy: Prisoner Lists & Responses

Dui Hua engages China in mutually respectful dialogue with the aim of securing the release and better treatment of individuals incarcerated for the non-violent expression of political or religious beliefs and for promoting transparency and rule of law. One of the foundation's main activities is the preparation of lists of political and religious detainees incarcerated in China for submission to the Chinese government. The lists are compiled through Dui Hua's research and the PPDB using open-source materials. They contain the names of well- and lesser-known prisoners. As vehicles for expressing concern about individual cases, the lists are believed to have contributed to the better treatment and early release of hundreds of prisoners.

Table 4: Religious prisoners inquired

Religious Affiliation	No. of Prisoners Asked About	No. of Prisoners About Whom Information Was Provided
Falun Gong	330	211
Almighty God	36	20
Other Protestant groups	91	31
Buddhist groups	13	2
Qigong Gong (other than Falun Gong)	5	5
Miscellaneous/Unknown	40	3

Since 1999, Dui Hua has submitted 202 lists directly to the Chinese government on which 515 unorthodox religious prisoners were named. Dui Hua has received information on 257 of them (95 male, 164 female).

During 2024, Dui Hua submitted 28 lists to the Chinese government on which 50 names of unorthodox religious prisoners were raised (nine male, 39 female). 29 of them are Falun Gong practitioners, 11 are members of Almighty God, and one other Protestant cult. The Chinese government provided information on 26 unorthodox religious prisoners (four male, 20 female) during this period. 19 of them are Falun Gong practitioners and six are members of Almighty God.

In recent years, Dui Hua has contributed to prisoner lists for governments in preparation for their human rights dialogues with China. The lists have ranged in length from 20 names to more than 500 names. The number of adherents of unorthodox religious groups who make their way onto governmental prisoner lists used in dialogues with the Chinese government is dwarfed by the number of individuals convicted for political reasons, rarely exceeding 10 percent of the names on such lists. The percentage of adherents that are placed on Dui Hua's lists are far higher than the percentage of those placed on governmental lists.

Since 1999, Dui Hua has learned of 87 acts of clemency and better treatment for 17 male unorthodox religious prisoners and 48 female prisoners on its lists. Examples of clemency following Dui Hua's intervention include:

- **Lai Yiwa (赖亦瓦)** was among the first names of Almighty God prisoners Dui Hua discovered from Chinese government sources after the clampdown on the group intensified in late 2012. In March 2013, Lai was sentenced to seven years in prison in Guangdong for violating Article 300(1). From 2013-2015, Lai was named on four prisoner lists Dui Hua submitted to its Guangdong interlocutors. Lai received his first sentence reduction of six months in 2015 and another reduction of eight months in 2017. Lai was released from Beijiag Prison on 15 October 2018.
- **Li Ying (李英)**, niece of South China Church's founder Gong Shengliang, was released about five years early in 2011. Li was originally sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve at the trial of first instance in December 2001. The appellate court changed her sentence to 15 years in prison in September 2002. Her name was placed on two prisoner lists Dui Hua compiled for foreign governments which engaged with China on human rights.
- In November 2000, **Liang Jiantian (梁鉴添)** s. was found guilty by the Guangzhou Intermediate People's Court of printing 4.5 million Falun Gong publications. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Liang, however, was not a practitioner of Falun Gong. Dui Hua repeatedly inquired about his case via interlocutors in Guangdong. Liang received four sentence reductions before his release in October 2021.
- Female Falun Gong practitioner **Liang Shaolin (梁少琳)** has been imprisoned twice. She was first sentenced to two years' re-education through labor in 2002. Following her release from the camp, she was sent to the Maoming Legal Education School "to continue her education." In 2010, she was sentenced to nine years in prison for violating Article 300(1). In 2016-2017, Dui Hua included Liang on two prisoner lists submitted to its Guangdong interlocutors. Liang was released from Guangdong Women's Prison nine months early on 23 December 2017.³²⁷
- **Su Jianming (苏建明)**, also a Falun Gong practitioner, received a 10-year imprisonment sentence in Tianjin in October 2015. Su was released from Binhai Prison on 18 April 2018 following three sentence reductions totalling 27 months granted in 2014, 2016, and 2018. His first sentence reduction took place one and a half years after Dui Hua inquired about his case in April 2013.
- Formerly a core member of the Shouters, **Wang Yongmin (王永民)** founded the Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station in 1995. In 1996, Wang was sentenced to 20 years in prison for disturbing social order and fraud. Dui Hua submitted four prisoner lists on Wang's behalf. Chinese government sources confirmed that Wang was released three years early on parole on 14 February 2012. However, Wang is now serving his second prison term of 10 years for violating Article 300(1) after being convicted in December 2019.

³²⁷ John Kamm, "John Kamm Remembers: Discovering Legal Education," *Digest*, The Dui Hua Foundation, 14 September 2017, <https://duihua.org/discovering-legal-education/>

- **Wang Zhiwen (王治文)** was named on 14 prisoner lists Dui Hua submitted to Chinese and foreign governments between 2001 and 2014. Wang was an organizer of the Falun Dafa Research Association and the protest surrounding Beijing's Zhongnanhai leadership compound with 10,000 members in April 1999. He was sentenced to 16 years in prison for violating Article 300(1) and for illegally obtaining state secrets. Wang received his only sentence reduction of one year in 2014, the same year he was released on 18 October.
- **Yu Guoping (于国平)** is also among the first groups of Falun Gong practitioners who received hefty prison sentences after the Chinese government began the national crackdown on unorthodox religious organizations in 1999. Yu wrote an open letter denouncing the CCP's persecution of Falun Gong. He was sentenced to 12 years in prison in the early 2000s. Dui Hua placed his name on two prisoner list in 2011 and 2012. A Chinese government source in 2012 confirmed that Yu was released early on an unspecified date after receiving at least one sentence reduction.

8. Conclusion

Since Xi Jinping became general secretary of the CCP in the fall of 2012, religious groups have faced new forms of repression and control. Sinicization, aimed to evoke national pride in the past glories of Han Chinese civilization, has become the guiding slogan for the new crackdown. Xi set out a five-year plan (2018-2022) to make all parts of Chinese culture, including religion, match the needs of national development.³²⁸ Xi also stresses the need to uphold the principle that religions must be Chinese in orientation and to “actively guide religion to fit in with socialist society.”³²⁹

Sinicization has also impacted unorthodox religious groups despite them being overshadowed by widespread coverage of persecution facing Uyghurs, Tibetans, and house church Christians who are considered more “orthodox.” By 2018, policies implementing Sinicization were in full swing. Newly promulgated religious regulations include a fine of up to 300,000 yuan for anyone engaging in “unapproved religious activities” and a maximum fine of 200,000 yuan for providing venues for such activities.³³⁰ Other regulations with a new focus on national security of “suppressing extremism, resisting infiltration, and combating crime” were also passed.³³¹ As recently as July 2021, the SPC issued a new opinion to call for more severe punishment of illegal religious activities, “cults,” and overseas infiltration in rural areas.³³²

Sinicization led to the disbandment of the 610 Office on 21 March 2018. Named for the date of its creation in 1999 to handle day-to-day coordination of the campaign against Falun Gong, the office expanded its mission to target other unorthodox religious groups. Over the years, it has gained notoriety for allegedly inflicting torture on cult offenders in custody. Prominent human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng relayed detailed accounts of 610 officers physically and sexually abusing Falun Gong practitioners before he vanished from public sight.³³³

However, the disbandment of the 610 Office did not lead to a softening of the crackdown on banned religious groups. Hong Kong scholar Edward Irons wrote in February 2019 that what had been “disbanded” was the Central 610 Office, whereas local offices remain operational.³³⁴ Its responsibility has been absorbed by the Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission and the Ministry of Public Security. Some analysts also speculated that Xi scrapped the 610 Office with a goal to weaken rival factions which had dominated the state’s security forces throughout

³²⁸ “The Sinicization of Chinese Religions under Xi Jinping,” China Leadership Monitor, 1 September 2019, <https://www.prleader.org/sinicization-of-chinese-religions>

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ Regulation of Religious Affairs, State Council, Public Notice No. 426 (originally issued on 30 November 2004; revised and passed at the Standing Committee 176th session on 14 June 2017), [宗教事务条例 (2004年11月30日中华人民共和国国务院令426号公布, 2017年6月14日国务院第176次常务会议修订通过)], http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² “Supreme Court Asks for Heavier Repression of Illegal Religion in Rural Areas,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 12 August 2021, <https://bitterwinter.org/supreme-court-asks-for-heavier-repression-of-illegal-religion-in-rural-areas/>

³³³ “The 610 Office: Policing the Chinese Spirit,” *China Brief Volume: 11 Issue: 17*, The Jamestown Foundation, 16 September 2011, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-610-office-policing-the-chinese-spirit/>

³³⁴ “Major Changes in the Structures for Fighting Xie Jiao in China,” *Bitter Winter Magazine*, Center for Studies on New Religions, 24 February 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/changes-in-the-structures-for-fighting-xie-jiao/>

the Jiang Zemin era.³³⁵ In 2021, Peng Bo and Fu Zhenghua were among the former top 610 Office bureaucrats to have been expelled from the CCP and face investigation for “serious violations” of party discipline.³³⁶ Some of them have also received prison sentences for corruption charges.³³⁷

Additionally, the State Administration of Religious Affairs, also known as the Religious Affairs Bureau, was abolished.³³⁸ Its oversight functions are now undertaken by the United Front Work Department whose primary objective is to safeguard CCP’s power. This structural change has received mixed views among observers. While some do not foresee major changes to the religious environment, others opine that the renewed emphasis on United Front work suggests that religion is used as a tool to maintain political and social stability.

Of all the unorthodox religious groups, Almighty God has taken the immediate brunt of Sinicization. This Protestant group has been frequently featured in news of mass arrests. In the two days beginning 26 June 2018, a total of 500 Almighty God members were rounded up in Liaoning amid “Operation Thunder.”³³⁹ Shandong is also among the hardest-hit provinces, where 108 Almighty God criminal suspects were arrested in the two months beginning in September 2019.³⁴⁰

When stringent COVID-19 control measures came into force in early 2020, a new wave of cult cases involving Falun Gong also surfaced.^{341, 342, 343} Local governments in Guangdong have formulated work plans for the township and village subsidiaries, urging them to stop Falun Gong practitioners and other cult members from traveling to Beijing and epidemic-stricken

³³⁵ “Politics Watch: Decoding China’s Party and State Institutional Reforms,” SinoInsider, 21 March 2018, <https://sinoinsider.com/2018/03/politics-watch-decoding-chinas-party-and-state-institutional-reforms/>

³³⁶ “China’s ex-justice minister under probe for serious discipline violation amid tough crackdown on corruption in political, legal system,” *Global Times*, People’s Daily, 2 October 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1235581.shtml>

³³⁷ “China’s Vice Minister of Public Security Arrested in Corruption Probe,” *Voice of America*, 20 April 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_chinas-vice-minister-public-security-arrested-corruption-probe/6187872.html

³³⁸ “Goodbye to the Religious Affairs Bureau: religions are now under the direct control of the Party,” *AsiaNews.it*, PIME Onlus Foundation, 22 March 2018, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Goodbye-to-the-Religious-Affairs-Bureau:-religions-are-now-under-the-direct-control-of-the-Party-43427.html>

³³⁹ “Chinese authorities intensify efforts to arrest believers of Almighty God,” *Radio France Internationale*, 22 July 2018, [中國當局各地加力抓捕全能神信徒], <https://www.rfi.fr/tw/中國/20180722-中國當局加大力度各地抓捕全能神信徒>

³⁴⁰ “Qingdao smashes extraordinarily large “Almighty God” criminal gang with 38 cult principal members arrested,” *Qilu Evening News*, 12 November 2019, [齐鲁晚报], 青岛捣毁“全能神”特大犯罪团伙38名邪教骨干落网], <http://sd.sina.com.cn/news/2019-11-12/detail-iihnzhfy8632665.shtml>

³⁴¹ “Inner Mongolia’s Huimin District solve a case of exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to spread cult,” China Anti-Cult Association, 14 April 2020, [内蒙古回民区侦破一起利用新冠肺炎疫情传播邪教案], <http://www.sichuanpeace.gov.cn/sffxzq/20200414/2211082.html>

³⁴² “Anhui Baohe solve three cases of exploiting the pandemic to spread cult,” China Anti-Cult Association, 2 November 2020, [安徽包河侦破三起借疫情传播邪教案件], <http://www.sichuanpeace.gov.cn/sffxzq/20201102/2339179.html>

³⁴³ “On-the-spot tip-off from the public: Jiaoling County lawfully handles one person who exploited the pandemic to spread cult,” Guangdong Anti-Cult Association, 25 March 2020, [群众现场举报！蕉岭县依法处置一名利用疫情宣扬邪教人员], https://www.gdsfxj.com/tjyd/content/post_254232.html

areas.³⁴⁴ They were also instructed to ensure that there are no mass incidents, television interruptions, cyberattacks, or large-scale telephone harassment by cult organizations during the pandemic.³⁴⁵ As noted earlier in this report, sporadic cases related to COVID-19 involving Society of Disciples and Zhonggong were also found. China's anti-cult propaganda said that these organizations used the pandemic to spread rumors in an attempt to smear China's effort to combat the pandemic.

Despite growing pessimism about China's religious freedom, history reminds us that banned religious groups have been able to find cracks in the system and evade stringent state controls. For instance, Yi Guan Dao survived arguably the most severe persecution in contemporary Chinese history seven decades ago. Falun Gong, too, has managed to continue underground and swelled among the Chinese diaspora 22 years into state repression.³⁴⁶ Arrest and imprisonment are far from sufficient to deter individuals from pursuing proscribed religious faiths, a notable example being Wang Yongmin's attempts to reconstitute his Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station after being imprisoned for 17 years.

Sociologist Richard Madsen offers a sense of optimism of how banned religious groups can continue to survive repression under Xi's leadership.³⁴⁷ From the Deng Xiaoping era to Xi's Sinicization, religious controls have relied on various patriotic associations, state agencies for public security and religious affairs, and the United Front Work Department—instruments anchored to a framework originally designed by Joseph Stalin to control the hierarchical Orthodox Church and the leaders of clearly organized religious institutions.³⁴⁸ Unlike the West, where religion is defined as an organized institution with systemic doctrines overseen by a professional clergy, most religious life in China is communal, diffused throughout the social institutions of ordinary life.³⁴⁹ Madsen noted that religious groups can find ways to quietly provide instruction and/or to be tolerated by local officials, such as setting up a “cultural affairs center,” a “company,” or a “museum,” entities outside the purview of religious affairs agencies despite them carrying out a full array of worship activities.³⁵⁰ Unorthodox religious groups, too, can find similar ways to persist, evolve, and reinvent themselves despite an increasingly repressive religious ecology—something Xi and his successors cannot fully contain.

³⁴⁴ “Notice on Issuing the Work Plan on Strengthening Anti-Cult Work during the Epidemic to Prevent Disruption and Destruction,” Government Information Disclosure: Huidong City Huidong County Baokou Township People's Government, 7 April 2020,

[关于印发《关于加强疫情期间反邪教工作防范邪教捣乱破坏的工作方案》的通知], http://www.huidong.gov.cn/hzhdbkz/gkmlpt/content/3/3896/post_3896434.html#3867

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ “20 years on, Falun Gong survives underground in China,” *Hong Kong Free Press*, 23 April 2019, <https://hongkongfp.com/2019/04/23/20-years-falun-gong-survives-underground-china/>

³⁴⁷ “The Sinicization of Chinese Religions under Xi Jinping,” *China Leadership Monitor*, 1 September 2019, <https://www.prclleader.org/sinicization-of-chinese-religions>

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

9. Recommendations

The Dui Hua Foundation recommends that governments with human rights dialogues with China and the United Nations:

1. Raise the issue of persecution of unorthodox religious groups in formal and informal discussions on human rights with the Chinese government;
2. Contribute names of imprisoned practitioners of unorthodox religions to the European Union (EU) lists compiled for use in the bilateral human rights dialogue with China. Two lists drawn up in the format used by the EU are appended to this report;
3. In considering reports of organ harvesting of Falun Gong and Almighty God practitioners, ascertain the names of those whose organs have allegedly been harvested;
4. After careful consideration and to the extent possible, support appeals of unorthodox religion practitioners to Special Procedures of the United Nations;
5. Focus on persecution of unorthodox religious groups in submissions to China's Universal Periodic Review;
6. Use this report in considering applications of political asylum by practitioners of unorthodox religions; and
7. After careful review, circulate this report to like-minded countries concerned with human rights in China.