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Responses to Information Requests

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22 October 2019

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China: Christian House Churches, including smaller congregations that meet in people's homes; activities and beliefs; treatment of members by authorities, including in Guangdong, Fujian, and Hebei Provinces (2017-October 2019)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to a country report on China published by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), "[i]ndependent churches," which are not state-sanctioned, are "private religious forums that adherents create in their own homes or other places of worship," and include "underground" churches and "house" churches [家庭教會] (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.77). Some sources specify that "house" churches, also called "family" churches, designate protestant organizations [that are not affiliated with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China

Christian Council (CCC) (Yang with Pettit 2018, 54)], while "underground" churches refers to Catholic organizations (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.77; Yang with Pettit 2018, 54, 56). According to the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a New-York-based independent, non-partisan think tank and publisher on international affairs (CFR n.d.), "[u]nderground house churches exist parallel to state-sanctioned Christian churches" and "operate outside the guidelines of the government" (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a). A 2018 Reuters article similarly reports that "China's Christian believers are split between those who attend unofficial 'house' or 'underground' churches and those who attend government-sanctioned places of worship" (Reuters 30 Aug. 2018).

Australia's DFAT report indicates that "house" or "underground" churches vary in size from around 30 to several thousand members (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.77). The CFR similarly states that "underground house churches" are of "widely varying size" (CFR 11 Oct. 2018b). According to the Reuters article, "unofficial" churches can range in size "from small living room-gatherings to large, professional operations" (Reuters 30 Aug. 2018).

Sources state that it is difficult to know the exact number of Christians in China (Distinguished Professor 5 Apr. 2019; Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.30) or that estimates vary (CFR 11 Oct. 2018b). In 2018, the CFR wrote that according to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, there were approximately 29 million Christians in China (CFR 11 Oct. 2018b). Australia's DFAT reports that according to a 2018 white paper by the government of China on religion, 6 million are adherents of Catholicism while 38 million are adherents of Protestantism (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.30). Sources note, however, that other estimates calculate a higher number, from 80 to 100 million Christians (CFR 11 Oct. 2018b; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 7). According to the CFR, members of official churches are outnumbered "nearly two to one" by unregistered churchgoers (CFR 11 Oct. 2018b).

Australia's DFAT report states that there could be between 30 and 100 million unregistered Protestants (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.87). The CFR states that "[m]uch of the discrepancy between official government numbers in China and expert estimates can be attributed to Beijing's nonrecognition of Christians engaged in religious activity outside of state-sanctioned religious organizations" (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a).

2. Beliefs

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the Director of the Italy-based Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), who is a sociologist of religions, stated that house churches in China "are all Protestant and would be recognized as Protestant even in the West" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). However, some sources indicate that there are various streams among the house churches (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019; Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019). The various streams identified by sources include [or "are similar" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019)] to the following denominations:

- Baptist (Director 24 Sept. 2019; Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019);
- Methodist (Director 24 Sept. 2019; Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019);
- Pentecostal (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019; Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019);
- Lutheran (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019);
- Presbyterian (Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an assistant professor of comparative politics at the Université de Montréal who conducts research on state control of religious groups, including unregulated house churches in China, added that

[s]ome of the churches are evangelical, and that is also one of the reasons why they are not registered with the government: the state does not allow churches to preach outside their registered religious venue without government permission, or to proselytize in public. This conflicts fundamentally with evangelical churches' purpose, which is to convert as many people [as possible], and conversions usually take place outside a registered religious venue, and oftentimes in public. (Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019)

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a senior lecturer in theology at the University of Edinburgh who conducts research on Christianity in China stated that "[t]heologically, whilst more evangelical and pietistic/Pentecostal forms dominated in the 1980s, a growing number are identifying as Calvinist or Reformed" (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019). The same source added that many house churches "would have tied their legacy to evangelical groups of the early-20th century, and tended to position themselves against the [TSPM], which is perceived

as a theologically liberal and compromised group" (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

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

3. Legislation

Sources indicate that freedom of religion is included in the Chinese constitution (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.38; CFR 11 Oct. 2018a; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 11). However, according to the *Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI) 2018* for China, which provides country-by-country analysis of developments that relate to political and economic trends, "the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] and state organs frequently interfere with these rights" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 11). The CFR explains that freedom of religion is limited to so-called "normal religious activities," explicitly stating that "no one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the education system of the state." These provisions provide authorities with flexibility when determining which religious practices are consistent with party policy and which fall outside the party-state's guidelines. (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a)

Australia's DFAT report states that "practice of unrecognized faiths or by unregistered religious organisations is illegal and vulnerable to punitive official action" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.44). The BTI notes that some house churches are illegal (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 7).

However, according to the Australian DFAT report, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) [now under the direct control of the CCP since 2018 (CHRD 21 Feb. 2019)] permitted friends and family to hold small, informal prayer meetings without official registration (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.77). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2018* similarly states that SARA's website had a statement "that family and friends have the right to meet at home for worship, including prayer and Bible study, without registering with the government" (US 21 June 2019, 8). According to the Australian DFAT report, this explains in part "the proliferation of sizeable unregistered Christian communities in

both rural and urban China" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.77). Information on whether this policy is still in effect could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

3.1 New Regulations on Religious Affairs

Sources state that China introduced new regulations on religious affairs, which came into effect in February 2018 (US 8 Oct. 2018, 3; CFR 11 Oct. 2018a; Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019). According to the US *Religious Freedom Report for 2018*, many Chinese provinces updated their own regulations after these regulations came into force (US 21 June 2019, 8).

The BTI explains that these new regulations are intended to establish "stricter controls" on religious organizations and are partially "meant to close regulatory gaps in order to manage (and restrict) activities that previously had not been clearly regulated" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 7). Sources state that the new regulations ban unauthorized teaching of religion (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019; CFR 11 Oct. 2018a) as well as "increased oversight on religious gatherings and financing" (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a). According to Australia's DFAT report, the new regulations "impose fines for organising illegal religious events or fundraising" and detail "procedures for approval and monitoring of religious training institutions and monitoring online religious activities" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.42). The US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) adds that the new regulations limit religious activities to approved venues and church leaders to those with official qualifications (US 8 Oct. 2018, 3).

Australia's DFAT report notes that the new regulations "devolve substantial powers and responsibility to local authorities to prevent illegal religious behavior, including undue influence from foreign organisations. Local authorities have significant discretion in interpreting and implementing the regulations at the provincial level" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.40). According to the same source, this devolution of enforcement ... to local government and Party authorities ... affects unregistered Christian churches. Historically, those involved with unregistered churches could be charged with fraud. However, under the [new regulations] it is now considered a crime to organise people for the purpose of religion (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.43)

According to the US *Religious Freedom Report for 2018*, "[r]eligious leaders and groups stated these regulations increased restrictions on their ability to practice their religions" and "Christian church leaders stated the government increased monitoring even before the new regulations came into effect, causing many churches to cease their normal activities" (US 21 June 2019, 2).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a distinguished professor of American Religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, who has studied Christianity in China and sits on the CESNUR Board of Directors, stated that implementation of the new regulations by local officials "has been very erratic" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

4. Treatment of House Church Members by Authorities

Freedom House explains that

[t]he CCP regime has established a multifaceted apparatus to control all aspects of religious activity, including by vetting religious leaders for political reliability, placing limits on the number of new monastics or priests, and manipulating religious doctrine according to party priorities. (Freedom House 2019)

Australia's DFAT report estimates that "[b]roadly speaking, religious practice in China is possible within state-sanctioned boundaries, as long as such practices do not challenge the interests or authority of the Chinese government," adding that "[r]eligious practice that the government perceives as contravening broader ethnic, political or security policies ... is at high risk of adverse official attention" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.44-3.45). The CFR similarly states that "[s]ome argue that state repression of religion often has less to do with religious doctrine than with a group's organizational ability, due to fear that such a group could potentially challenge the CCP's legitimacy" (CFR 18 Oct. 2018b).

According to the CFR, in reaction to what it describes as the "surge" in Christians in China,

Christians have faced growing repression in recent years Repression campaigns ebb and flow. While house and underground churches traditionally faced the brunt of persecution, under [President] Xi's leadership state-sanctioned churches have been targeted as well. Recent repression efforts target both house and state-sanctioned churches through the harassment and detention of Christian believers, blocking entry to sites of worship, interrupting gatherings, dismantling crosses, demolishing churches, and disbanding congregations. (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a)

The Senior Lecturer stated that "a lot more restriction" has been added to religious activities, both for houses churches and state-sanctioned churches, and that "[m]ost house churches are needing to exist more clandestinely" (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019).

Australia's DFAT report states that

[a]dverse treatment can include raids and destruction of church property, pressure to join or report to government-sanctioned religious organisations and, on occasion, violence and criminal sanction, particularly in response to land disputes with local authorities. (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.87)

Freedom House adds that "[a]uthorities routinely try to hinder the operation of unregistered sites and direct believers elsewhere, for instance by placing plaques to indicate registration status, barring donations, or threatening worshippers with fines if they do not shift attendance to a state-approved counterpart" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 117). The US *Religious Freedom Report for 2018* states that

[a]uthorities continued to arrest Christians and enforce more limitations on their activities, including requiring Christian churches to install surveillance cameras to enable daily police monitoring, and compelling members of house churches and other Christians to sign documents renouncing their Christian faith and church membership. (US 21 June 2019, 2)

The same source added that "an ongoing campaign of church closings continued during the year, and authorities removed crosses and other Christian symbols from churches, with Henan Province a particular focus area of such activity" (US 21 June 2019, 2).

According to the Distinguished Professor, houses churches "are being forced to remove any Christian symbols from their front façade" and "any distinctive 'Western' sacred architecture, such as church steeples" (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). In October 2018, CBC reported that "Protestants have seen churches closed and their crosses torn down under new laws" and that "[e]ven government-sanctioned churches have been ordered to reduce their visible presence. Cranes have shown up at many to remove the large red crosses from rooftops" (CBC 31 Oct. 2018). The Distinguished Professor added that all church buildings are being "forced" to open their doors for secular activities during the week (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The CESNUR Director stated that "[t]he authorities have repeatedly stated that one of the aims of the new regulation[s] is to eliminate independent house churches, compelling most of them to become part of the Three Self Church and liquidating the others" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). The Senior Lecturer similarly stated that in some areas, "many" house churches are reportedly "being asked by local officials to register with the TSPM or be forcefully shut down" (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019). Citing "Ying Fuk-tsang, the director of the divinity school at the Chinese University of Hong Kong," a 2018 article by the *New York Times* similarly reports that the "goal appears to be to push Protestant churches to register with the government. 'The message is that they can't be independent'" (*The New York Times* 24 Sept. 2018). Freedom House explains that the procedure for official registration of religions groups, such as house churches, "are highly complex and burdensome" and is difficult without affiliation with state-sanctioned organizations; the source adds that "[c]hurch leaders are reluctant to report the names of congregation members as required, for fear that the members will be vulnerable to surveillance" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 16).

According to the Senior Lecturer, "[i]n the past there was more ability to negotiate relationships with local officials, but this is becoming much more restricted" (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019). Meanwhile, Freedom House explains that "[i]n many locales, low-level officials may turn a blind eye to [religious] activities" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 16-17). The same source also states that "[s]ome unregistered church leaders have made a point of alerting local authorities

about upcoming meetings or showing kindness to local police tasked with monitoring them," with the result that "officials have given de facto approval to 'house churches' in their jurisdictions, and police have warned unofficial church leaders of coming raids" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 12). However, the same source adds that "during periods of political sensitivity or campaigns led by more senior officials, unregistered places of worship are at high risk of harassment, raids, and destruction of property" (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 16-17). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources indicate that house churches are still active in China (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 11; Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019), despite the government measures to control religious activities (Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 11). According to a chapter on "semi-legal" religions in China in the book *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts*,

[i]n the new century [since 2000], however, most house churches have been able to operate with only occasional interference from the authorities. They are no longer in the underground per se, as the police and other government agencies know about these house churches. However, they are not legal either, as they are not registered with the government nor the TSPM/CCC. (Yang with Pettit 2018, 55)

According to the CESNUR Director,

the government simply lacks the resources to liquidate tens of thousands of house churches. Scholars agree that the government focuses on cracking down on house churches that cross some "red lines": they grow consistently, expand from one province to others, keeps relations with evangelicals abroad, or criticize the Three Self Church and refuse to cooperate with the authorities in their campaigns against the *xie jiao* [banned religious groups]. (Director 24 Sept. 2019)

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

4.1 Treatment of Larger and Smaller Congregations

According to Australia's DFAT report, "[p]ublic expressions of faith are more vulnerable to adverse treatment [by authorities] than private worship (including in small groups)" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.47). The Senior Lecturer stated that "[i]f a congregation is small, a dozen or less, then they generally fall under the radar or are overlooked," but "house churches which are larger (more than a couple dozen members), have a larger public profile, or are quite politically vocal are more readily shut down," as "authorities are more concerned with larger groups and the possibility that such groups may try to unify in usurping the government's power" (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019). According to the Assistant Professor, "local authorities will definitely pay closer attention to the larger churches and want to make sure that they are not involved in politically sensitive activities. But churches are not coerced on the basis of the fact that they are large" (Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019). The Distinguished Professor similarly stated that he was unaware of "any pattern of targeting large versus small congregations," but that churches of "outspoken pastors" are targeted (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019).

According to the CESNUR Director, "[u]rban churches, which also tend to be bigger, are more easily liquidated than rural ones, which also tend to be smaller" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). The same source added that "[t]he so-called "megachurches" are being liquidated one after the other, while small independent congregations with a few hundred members or less, with no signs of expansion, no ambition to establish new churches, no international relations, and a good relationship (to the point of often serving as informants about other Christians and against the xie jiao) with local police and party officers may survive - although this precarious survival should not be confused with enjoying genuine religious liberty. (Director 24 Sept. 2019)

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

4.2 Treatment of House Church Leaders

According to Australia's DFAT report, "[l]eaders of both registered and unregistered churches are subject to greater scrutiny than ordinary worshippers" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.77). The Senior Lecturer stated that treatment by authorities "is generally harsher for [house] church leaders" (Senior

Lecturer 27 Sept. 2019). The Assistant Professor explained that "[l]ocal officials usually interact directly with church leaders, and church leaders are ... [therefore] also more at risk, or likelier to get in trouble with the authorities than the average church member" (Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019). The same source further stated that

[i]n the absence of a major protracted conflict between a church and local authorities, local officials might speak with church leaders if there is anything they need to know about an unregistered church. They might not speak with church members.

(Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019)

The CESNUR Director explained that

there is a difference between xie jiao and house churches. Common members of xie jiao also go to jail. [However, u]nless they resist the police, it is comparatively rare for common members of a house church to be arrested and sentenced (some are arrested but kept in a police station for a few days only) although they may be harassed and discriminated in their workplaces and kept in general in a situation of uncertainty and fear. When a house church is selected for liquidation, pastors, on the other hand, often go to jail. (Director 24 Sept. 2019)

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

Australia's DFAT report states that "[c]hurch leaders (registered or unregistered) who participate in protest activity on behalf of their congregations or elsewhere are at high risk of official sanction, but this is likely to relate more to their activism than to their religious affiliation or practice" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.79). The same report adds that "[m]embers of unregistered churches who participate in human rights activism are at high risk of official discrimination and violence, as are their families" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.83). A December 2018 *New York Times* article similarly reports that "[t]he government has focused its campaign on unofficial Christian churches that promote ideas like social justice or have been critical of the party's grip on society" (25 Dec. 2018).

5. Regional Treatment, Including in Guangdong, Fujian, and Hebei Provinces

According to Australia's DFAT report, "[r]estrictions on religious organisations vary widely according to local conditions, and can be inconsistent or lack transparency, making it difficult to form general conclusions" (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.44). The CFR similarly states that "[i]mplementation of religious policy is largely left to local party officials," with leaders in some places having more tolerance for Christian religious activities than in others (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a).

The US *Religious Freedom Report for 2018* states that "[r]egulations concerning religion ... vary by province," and that "local governments, at their discretion, permit certain unregistered religious communities to carry out religious practices" (US 21 June 2019, 8). The same report cites the example of "local governments in Xinjiang and in Heilongjiang, Zhejiang, and Guangdong Provinces that allow members of Orthodox Christian communities to participate in unregistered religious activities" (US 21 June 2019, 8). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The Assistant Professor stated that, according to her field research conducted in several cities of the country, the "logic by which local governments treat house churches is very similar across cities ... [h]ouse churches either cooperate with the state, or they do not. Dissident churches are treated the same, regardless of the cities they are in" (Assistant Professor 29 Sept. 2019). However, according to the Senior Lecturer, there are regional differences with regards to the treatment of house churches (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2017). The Distinguished Professor similarly stated that there are differences in treatment, and

[t]he differences seem to be due to the local implementation of the regulations. In some places the implementation is light and superficial, and [in] some places it is quite heavy. Also, some house church escape notice and others are targeted—seemingly the treatment being a matter of friendliness with the local authorities (sometimes having to do with bribes). (Distinguished Professor 28 Sept. 2019)

Sources note in particular the actions taken by authorities against churches in the Zhejiang province in recent years (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 7; Freedom House 27 Feb. 2017, 47; Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.88). Sources indicate that thousands of crosses have been removed from churches by authorities since the beginning of a 2013 campaign (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.88; Freedom House

27 Feb. 2017, 47; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018, 7). According to Australia's DFAT report, several hundred unregistered churches were also demolished, and the provincial government "punished church leaders who oppose the campaign with heavy sentences (up to 14 years) on public disorder charges, as well as apparently unrelated charges such as embezzlement" and "also targeted lawyers defending" them (Australia 21 Dec. 2017, para. 3.88). The CFR adds that in the city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang province, "known for its large Christian population," party officials "ordered the removal of hundreds of crosses and demolition of dozens of churches that allegedly violated construction regulations, though several had received prior approval from local officials" (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a). According to the Senior Lecturer, "[t]he restrictions in Zhejiang in the past few years was presumed by most researchers to be due to the publicness of those Christians" (Senior Lecturer 27 Sept. 2017). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the CESNUR Director, "[r]epression has been particularly strong in Henan" (Director 24 Sept. 2019). Other sources also indicate a crackdown in Henan Province, including the demolition of several church buildings (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019; CFR 11 Oct. 2018a), the prevention of house church gatherings and the confiscation of religious materials (Human Rights Watch 17 Jan. 2019). According to the CFR, "[o]ther provinces with large Christian populations, including Anhui and Jiangsu, have also undergone crackdowns" (CFR 11 Oct. 2018a).

Information on the treatment of Christians in Guangdong, Fujian, and Hebei Provinces could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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