



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

China

China – CHN38072 – Religion –
Jehovah's Witnesses – Treatment
4 February 2011

1. Are you able to provide up to date information on the treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in the PRC?

While several sources refer to a small population of Jehovah's Witnesses existing in the People's Republic of China (PRC), limited recent information was found on their geographical distribution and treatment. Practicing Jehovah's Witnesses do not follow a state-sanctioned religion and as such their practice is considered outside 'normal' activity of registered religious organisations. Chinese authorities remain active in controlling unregistered religious activity, including in Shandong Province. Western sources express concern for small and unregistered communities in China, explicitly including Jehovah's Witnesses. Nevertheless, access to Jehovah's Witness websites do not appear to be blocked in China and only limited reports of suppression of Jehovah's Witnesses were found.

Sources indicate that there is a small population of Jehovah's Witnesses in China, although exact numbers were not found outside of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, where the United States Department of State estimated that there were 4600 followers in 2009.¹ The Watchtower statistical report for 2010 does not contain a section for China but reported 5156 followers across 64 congregations in Hong Kong.² The small community and scant statistical information are not surprising given that as discussed below, congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses are not able to register on mainland China, and also given that China does not allow proselytising in public or in unregistered places of worship.³

The PRC recognises five religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism.⁴ All religious groups are required to register with one of seven government-approved associations linked to these religions. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that China's National Regulations on Religious Affairs (NRRA) only protect 'normal' religious activity of registered organisations.⁵ Jehovah's Witnesses are not covered on the list of approved religions and are therefore not able to register.

¹ US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau)*, Hong Kong Section I, 26 October – Attachment 1

² 'Statistics: 2010 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide' 2011, Watchtower website – http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm – Accessed 2 February 2011 – Attachment 2

³ UK Home Office 2010, *Country of Origin Information Report – China*, 15 November, pp.71-2 – Attachment 3

⁴ UK Home Office 2010, *Country of Origin Information Report – China*, 15 November, p 66 – Attachment 3

⁵ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2009*, May, pp.73-84 – Attachment 4

The NRRA regulations also contain national security provisions which have been used as justification for suppression of activity by unregistered groups. Ill treatment in recent years has affected followers of a range of faiths across the PRC and has taken the form of harassment, fines, detention, physical abuse, forced closure, confiscation of property and forced disappearance. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom considers China a 'country of particular concern'. It is noted that while the Commission's two most recent annual reports describe religious suppression as systematic and ongoing, across various faiths including Tibetan Buddhism, Uighur Islam, unregistered Protestant and Catholic groups and Falun Gong, the reports do not contain specific examples of suppression relating to Jehovah's Witnesses. The reports also note that enforcement of the NRRA varies from province to province.^{6 7}

In February 2006 the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada reported that in correspondence to the Research Directorate, the general counsel for Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania stated that it would be imprudent to disclose statistical information about Jehovah's Witnesses in China, including about their geographical representation across the country. The general counsel further stated that the organisation was not aware of any current reports of arrests or detention of Jehovah's Witnesses in China. The executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council, who travels regularly throughout the Chinese mainland to gauge the state of religious freedom commented in January 2006 correspondence to the Research Directorate that he was not aware of any documentation on Jehovah's Witnesses in China. However he did claim to know of Jehovah's Witnesses literature being circulated in China, which may imply 'clandestine' activity amongst followers in mainland China.⁸

As noted above, limited recent information was found on treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses by PRC authorities. Moreover, more recent sources tended to rely heavily on primary sources published between 2000-2006. No recent cases of ill treatment of individual Jehovah's Witnesses by Chinese authorities were found.

Several news sources made mention of the following quote from Heiner Bielefeldt, UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in October 2010 in which he specifically mentioned Jehovah's Witnesses. Speaking at a meeting of the UN General Assembly's human rights committee, Bielefeldt is quoted as stating that:

"Small communities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Ahmadis, Falun Gong and others are sometimes stigmatized as 'cults' and frequently meet with societal prejudices which may escalate into fully fledged conspiracy theories."

In the same committee meeting, a Chinese representative is said to have claimed that religions coexist harmoniously in China, while simultaneously disagreeing with the rapporteur's comments in relation to Falun Gong and asserting that China has the right to eradicate Falun

⁶ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2010, *Annual Report*, May, pp.103-122 – Attachment 5

⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2009, *Annual Report*, May, pp.73-84 – Attachment 4

⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2006, *CHN100946.E – China: The status and treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses (2004 – 2006)*, 24 February – <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45f147082f.html> – Accessed 27 January 2011 – Attachment 6

Gong as an 'evil cult'.⁹ Jehovah's Witnesses are not on China's list of officially banned 'cults',¹⁰ and sources did not report any specific mention of Jehovah's Witnesses by the Chinese representative at the committee meeting. Nevertheless it is noted that under Article 300 of Chinese Criminal Law, use of 'superstitious sects or secret societies or weird religious organizations' to undermine the state carries a penalty of three to seven years' imprisonment.¹¹

Sources suggest that practicing Jehovah's Witnesses may face resistance from the state by virtue of falling outside the list of recognised religions, as noted above. In 2006, Forum 18 proposed that church unity, or religious hegemony within allowed religions, was important for the Chinese state in maintaining social order. Therefore the state was 'unlikely to look favourably' on smaller religious communities, including smaller Christian denominations, attempting to formalise their existence:

This political logic also means that the state is unlikely to look favourably toward any attempt to introduce and seek recognition for religions such as the Jews, Baha'i, Hare Krishna devotees, and Jehovah's Witnesses – all of whom exist in China. Without a fundamental relaxation of controls, recognition of other religions would require the commitment of additional state resources - which are already over-extended - to "manage" these religions. At the very least, if the existing approach to control is maintained, recognising "new" religions such as Judaism and the Baha'i Faith would require new patriotic religious organisations, similar to the TSPM for Protestant Christianity and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) for Catholicism.¹²

An Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada response dated 6 September 2000, quoting advice from the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Canada, did report that Jehovah's Witnesses were not able to register with the government and that incidents of arrest and detention of Chinese Jehovah's Witnesses for participating in prayer study had occurred.¹³ In November 2005 the Australian branch of the Jehovah's Witnesses advised the Tribunals that to the best of their knowledge this information was still correct.¹⁴ Tony Lambert, a Sinologist specialising in Christian groups in China, also advised the Tribunals in November 2005 that during his 10 year survey of cults and sects in China he had found 'hardly anything' on Jehovah's Witnesses.¹⁵

In 2004 Forum 18 conducted a study of accessibility of several hundred religious websites in China. The study included testing access from various geographical locations in China to

⁹ 'UN envoy defends Falun Gong, 'evil cult' for China' 2010, *Reuters*, 21 October,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE69K61O20101021> – Accessed 28 January 2011 – Attachment 7

¹⁰ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2006, *CHN100946.E – China: The status and treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses (2004 – 2006)*, 24 February – <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45f147082f.html> – Accessed 27 January 2011 – Attachment 6

¹¹ UK Home Office 2010, *Country of Origin Information Report – China*, 15 November, pp 87-8 – Attachment 3

¹² Hornemann, M. 2006 'China, State-imposed monopolies deny China's religious reality', Forum 18, 5 December, http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883 – Accessed 28 January 2011 – Attachment 8

¹³ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2000, *CHN35327.E – China: Status and treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly in Fuqing, Fujian (1999-2000)*, 6 September <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=country&docid=3df4be1a12&skip=0&coi=CHN&query=jesu&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date> – Accessed 7 November, 2005 – Attachment 9

¹⁴ Frank, G. 2005 Fax to RRT Research & Information 'RE Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia', 14 November – Attachment 10

¹⁵ Lambert, T. 2005 Email to RRT Research & Information 'Request: CHN17660', 12 November – Attachment 11

websites in several languages, maintained by a range of denominations, expressly including Jehovah's Witnesses, over a two month period. Other denominations included in the study included both legal and unregistered religious groups, namely Christianity, Islam, Daoism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Baha'i, Mormon, and Falun Gong faiths. Interestingly, whilst a 'handful' of English and Chinese language websites run by Jehovah's Witness communities in Hong Kong and other countries in the region were inaccessible, the majority appear to have been accessible.¹⁶ Whilst now dated, this study implies at least that as at 2004, literate Jehovah's Witnesses with internet access on mainland China were in theory free to access information from websites relevant to their faith. Results of the Forum 18 study were not available broken down by province.

Shandong Province

Information on Jehovah's Witnesses particular to Shandong Province was not found. However, in 2010 a young Jehovah's Witness from Malawi turned down a full scholarship which would have taken her initially to study Chinese at Shandong University, then on to study medicine in Hunan, based on fear shared by her family and church that Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in China.^{17 18}

Moreover, sources report recent suppression of unregistered religious communities in Shandong. According to the Christian 'Continental News' website, China Aid Association received reports in 2010 of increased religious persecution in several provinces for the period following the Beijing Olympics, expressly including Shandong where a Pastor was sentenced to two years re-education through hard labour.¹⁹ Specific instructions around suppression of Falun Gong have been issued to several provinces including Shandong²⁰, whilst an unregistered house church with a following of around 1000 parishioners was also forcibly shut down in January 2011.²¹

¹⁶ Corley, F. & Hornemann, M. 2004 'China: Government Blocks Religious Websites', Forum 18, 21 July <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=search&docid=468918bdd&skip=0&query=%20jehovah%20&querysi=china&searchin=title&display=10&advsearch=y&process=y&allwords=jehovah&exactphrase=&atleastone=&without=&title=&monthfrom=&yearfrom=&monthto=&yearto=&coa=&language=&citation=&sort=relevance>

– Accessed 27 January 2011 – Attachment 12

¹⁷ This fear may have been influenced by the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses, and banning of the faith in Malawi under Hastings Kamuzu Banda during the 1960s – 90s.

¹⁸ 'Malawi girl rejects China scholarship over religion concerns', 2010, *Agence France Presse*, 18 August – Attachment 13

¹⁹ 'China: Persecution Intensifies', 2010, Continental News website, 11 December – <http://continentalnews.net/persecuted-christians/china-persecution-intensifies-3894.html> – Accessed 28 January 2011 – Attachment 14

²⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2010*, May, pp.103-122 – Attachment 5

²¹ Xiao, D. 2011, 'Radio Free Asia Follows Up on Police Raid on Mass Evangelistic Meeting in Shandong', China Aid Association website, 17 January <http://www.chinaaid.org/2011/01/radio-free-asia-follows-up-on-police.html#uds-search-results> – Accessed 28 January 2011 – Attachment 15

Attachments

1. United States Department of State 2009, *2009 Report on International Religious Freedom - China (Includes Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau)*, 26 October.
2. 'Statistics: 2010 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide' 2011, Watchtower website – http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm – Accessed 2 February 2011.
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9. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2000, *CHN35327.E – China: Status and treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly in Fuqing, Fujian (1999-2000)*, 6 September <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?page=country&docid=3df4be1a12&skip=0&:coi=CHN&querysi=jehovah&searchin=title&display=10&sort=date> – Accessed 7 November 2005.
10. Frank, G. 2005 Fax to RRT Research & Information 'RE Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Australia', 14 November.
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13. 'Malawi girl rejects China scholarship over religion concerns' 2010, *Agence France Presse*, 18 August (FACTIVA)

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