



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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China: Situation of Catholics and treatment by authorities, particularly in Fujian and Guangdong (2001-2005)  
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

### General Information

According to the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), in June 2004, there were 5.2 million Catholics in China, with an average of 70,000 people being baptized each year (*China Daily* 21 June 2004; see also *Xinhua* 21 Apr. 2005). However, the total number of practitioners in both the sanctioned Catholic Church and in the unofficial Roman Catholic Church in China is difficult to ascertain (*Economist* 21 Apr. 2005; see also BBC 9 Nov. 2004) and reported numbers vary among sources consulted by the Research Directorate. *The Economist* states that Chinese authorities "try to prevent surveys by foreign or Chinese researchers that might challenge the official view that Christianity is still a marginal phenomenon" (21 Apr. 2005). The Vatican estimates that altogether there are approximately ten million Catholics in China (*The Economist* 21 Apr. 2005; *International Religious Freedom Report* 15 Sep. 2004, Sec. 1), while the BBC states that about eight million people belong to unregistered churches, in addition to the more than five million who practise in the state-sanctioned Church (8 Apr. 2005). Other sources put the estimated total number of Catholics in China at 12 million (*Calgary Herald* 8 Feb. 2004; *IHT* 5 April 2005; *Tripod* Autumn 2004).

News sources state that the number of Catholics in China has grown since the 1980s, though not as fast as the number of Protestants (*Asian Wall Street Journal* 21 Apr. 2005; *Economist* 21 Apr. 2005; *IHT* 5 Apr. 2005). Radio 86, which provides cultural information and news on China, reported that Catholicism has traditionally been practised in rural areas but has begun to appeal increasingly to the urban population, particularly professionals and university students (7 May 2005).

There are reportedly 70 bishops and 1,200 priests serving at least 90 dioceses under the authority of the CCPA (*China Daily* 21 June 2004). Estimates of the total number of bishops belonging to the unofficial Church vary from 46 to 50 (Cardinal Kung Foundation n.d.; *Tripod* Autumn 2004). The Holy Spirit Study Centre, the research branch of the Diocese of Hong Kong principally concerned with the situation of Catholics in mainland China (Holy Spirit Study Centre n.d.), estimated that there are about 1,000 priests in the unofficial Church, along with 1,700 nuns and 10 seminaries (*Tripod* Autumn 2004).

AsiaNews.it, which provides information on ecclesiastic communities in Asia (3 Dec. 2003), indicates that the northern province of Hebei has "the highest concentration of Catholics" in China (AsiaNews.it 8 June 2005; see also *International Religious Freedom Report* 15 Sep. 2004, Sec. 2; *Washington Post* 29 Apr. 2005), while a 5 April 2005 *International Herald Tribune* (*IHT*) article notes that Hebei is "a center of unregistered church activity in northern China."

According to Beatrice Leung, an expert on Chinese Catholic issues who is based at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, the official Church is "strongest" in China's largest cities while in the rural areas, practitioners "often don't care about the government's controls" (*IHT* 5 Apr. 2005).

## Practising Catholicism in China

According to a report by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), state-sanctioned churches must not have any contact with the Vatican and must teach, among other things, the use of contraceptives to adherents and preach that former Chinese leader Mao Zedong has ascended to heaven (24 Dec. 2003). AsiaNews.it reported that the leaders of the official Church are required to undergo months of "training" on the Government of China's religious policy and take courses on Marxism and the authority of the Chinese Communist Party (25 June 2004). The same news source noted, however, that the majority of bishops named by the CCPA since 2000 "have secretly requested the recognition of and reconciliation with the Holy See" (AsiaNews.it 25 June 2004). The *IHT* reported that in the last few years bishops nominated by the official Church have sought the written approval of the Vatican before assuming their duties (5 Apr. 2005). According to Father Benoît Vermander, the director of the Ricci Institute in Taiwan, more than half of the bishops practising in the official Church have "at least de facto recognition" of the Vatican (CathNews 10 Mar. 2004; see also Burton 24 Apr. 2003, 9; *USA Today* 4 Apr. 2005).

In contrast, the unofficial Church maintains ties with the Vatican, which has secretly recognized all unregistered bishops (BBC 24 Dec. 2003; CathNews 10 Mar. 2004; *International Religious Freedom Report* 2004 15 Sep. 2004, Sec. 1). However, the Chinese government considers such ties as amounting to interference by a foreign entity in the country's internal affairs and, thus, a roadblock in normalizing relations between the two states (Xinhua 21 Apr. 2005).

In June 2005, Monsignor Giuseppe Xing Wenzhi was named bishop of Shanghai after being nominated by the Holy See, marking the first time the Chinese government accepted a Vatican nominee for the official Church (AsiaNews.it 28 June 2005). However, *AsiaNews.it* reported that it was unclear whether the new bishop would be able to establish relations with the Vatican or the Roman Catholic Church abroad (ibid.).

A 29 April 2005 *Washington Post* article asserts that the position of the unofficial Church in China is likely stronger now than at any other time under the rule of the Communist Party. Though there have been continued reports of arrests of priests and bishops, many unregistered congregations are able to practise openly, even in Hebei province (*Washington Post* 29 Apr. 2005). New unregistered churches have reportedly been constructed in Hebei while, according to local priests, local officials "look the other way, because they sympathize with worshippers or want to collect fees and fines from them" (ibid.).

Some leaders of unregistered congregations have cited pressure from the government to register with the Chinese state (*International Religious Freedom Report* 2004 15 Sep. 2004). According to the executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council, who travels regularly throughout the mainland to gauge the state of religious freedom and who was most recently in China in August 2005, government officials periodically meet with leaders of unregistered churches to persuade them to register with a patriotic association (Executive secretary 1 Sept. 2005a). In June 2004, AsiaNews.it reported that a government campaign to have bishops of the unregistered Church break ties with the Vatican and answer instead to the Chinese leadership was unfolding (AsiaNews.it 25 June 2004). In response to allegations made by the Vatican that bishops had been arrested and detained, the Religious Affairs Office in Beijing explained that it had organized "courses for local clergy that teach [its] religious policy" and that the bishops were attending these "voluntarily" (ibid.).

## Treatment of Catholics by Authorities

According to the Connecticut-based Cardinal Kung Foundation, which promotes the Roman Catholic Church in China, each one of the bishops of the unregistered Church is "either in jail, under house arrest, under strict surveillance, or in hiding" (Cardinal Kung Foundation n.d.). The president of the Foundation, Joseph Kung, was quoted in the *Asian Wall Street Journal* as saying that between January and April 2005 three bishops of the unregistered Church had been imprisoned, and two others were put under 24-hour surveillance (7 April 2005). Priests of the Church have also been targeted for arrests (Cardinal Kung Foundation n.d.). In July 2002, three priests from the unregistered Church in Baoding, Hebei, were reportedly sentenced to three years in a labour camp under anti-cult laws (ibid.). Freedom House reports that according to Human Rights Watch (HRW), these laws have been used by authorities to sentence members of religious groups other than the Falun Gong, which has been the principal target of anti-cult laws (Freedom House 23 Aug. 2004).

The Cardinal Kung Foundation also states that a variety of penalties ranging from fines and house arrest to imprisonment and labour camp internment have been imposed on those belonging to the unofficial Church (n.d.). Raids and the demolition of unregistered churches by authorities have also been reported: The BBC noted that authorities had bulldozed a church in 2002 (24 Dec. 2003) while the Cardinal Kung Foundation reported on a church demolition that took place in June 2003 (n.d.). Agence France-Presse (AFP), with

information obtained from the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy, reported that in December 2004 police officers had conducted a raid on an unregistered church in Zhejiang Province, dismantling a makeshift set-up for Christmas service, though not damaging the church itself (27 Dec. 2004).

However, the executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council stated in correspondence to the Research Directorate that the current view of the central government is that unregistered Christian groups should be discouraged but also tolerated (Executive secretary 1 Sept. 2005a). Julius Jia Zhiguo, a bishop of the unofficial Church in Hebei, whose movements have reportedly been restricted by police since 1995, also told the *Washington Post* that conditions overall for unregistered Catholics were improving (29 Apr. 2005). According to the executive secretary, arrests of leaders take place occasionally, not as a result of religious policies, but when unregistered religious meetings "become too aggressive or high-profile" or when local officials attempt to extort money from unregistered churches (Executive secretary 1 Sept. 2005a). In fact, in his estimation, financial extortion accounts for most of the reported arrests of church leaders, particularly in central China (ibid.). The executive secretary also pointed out that an ongoing trend in parts of China, which is little known outside of the country, is the registration of religious sites and bodies with local authorities but not with the CCPA (ibid. 1 Sept. 2005b). For instance, in 2005 more than 70 Christian churches, including Catholic churches, registered with the local government in Zhejiang Province but not with their respective patriotic associations (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Other sources note that the treatment of Catholics in the unofficial Church in China varies from place to place (*Washington Post* 29 Apr. 2005; see also Chan and Carlson 2005, 16; *International Religious Freedom Report* 15 Sep. 2004, Sec. 2). Kim-Kwong Chan and Eric R. Carlson, who co-authored a research handbook on religious affairs in China, state the following:

Due to problems in coordination across all levels in a country as large as China, the implementation of the Party's very same policy on freedom of religious belief can range from endorsement of religion to suppression. Local politics dictate the final outcome of religious policy. ... Therefore, one needs to be extremely careful in interpreting the implementation of religious policies, as China is composed of thousands of local governments with cadres of varying levels of administrative skill and technical knowledge of religion (2005, 16).

The *Freedom in the World 2004* report notes that, "[i]n many areas, unregistered ... Catholic congregations - particularly those that are small and unobtrusive - worship freely," but elsewhere, local officials disrupt services of unregistered churches (Freedom House 23 Aug. 2004). So, too, Chan and Carlson note that unregistered religious groups are in some instances allowed to practise even with the knowledge of local public security and Religious Affairs Bureau officials (2005, 24). In Hebei Province, for example, the police in Baoding have "not let up on the underground church" while in other parts of the province, unregistered Catholics practise openly (*Washington Post* 29 Apr. 2005).

According to observers, the government is intent on preventing any foreign religious organizations from establishing themselves in China (Burton 24 Apr. 2003, 5, 27; Chan and Carlson 2005, 23). Chan and Carlson indicate that the government believes that religion must play a role in "cushioning the societal transformations brought on by China's [World Trade Organization] accession while preventing unwanted foreign influences from infiltrating" (2005, 22). Thus, according to the policy of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, religion and Chinese socialist society must learn to adapt to each other, and while the "government will not encourage the development of religion [neither will it] suppress all religion by force" (Chan and Carlson 2005, 22).

## **Fujian and Guangdong**

Human Rights in China (HRIC) commented in 4 August 2005 correspondence to the Research Directorate that the treatment of Christians is poor in southern China, particularly in the rural areas, though the organization could not elaborate, citing a lack of available information. In 2002, the Cardinal Kung Foundation reported that unregistered Catholics were arrested while attending catechism classes in Fujian (n.d.). In 2003, a group of seminarians in Changle, near Fuzhou, were also arrested while reading the book containing the day's service during a picnic (Cardinal Kung Foundation n.d.). Most recently, in July 2005 Father Lin Daixian, along with nine parishioners and one seminarian, was arrested while conducting mass in a private home in Fuzhou (ibid., 28 July 2005). According to a Cardinal Kung Foundation press release, as at 28 July 2005, Father Lin was being held at the Pingtan detention centre (ibid.).

However, the executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council commented that Fujian and

Guangdong have "the most liberal policy on religion in China, especially on Christianity" (Executive secretary 1 Sept. 2005a). In his travels, the executive secretary has met with local authorities who, he said, usually tolerate activities of unregistered Christian groups (ibid.). While authorities are of a more tolerant nature in rural areas than in urban centres, they would usually take steps to discourage religious activity if it had a link to groups from outside China (ibid.). The executive secretary stated that he is aware of a number of unregistered churches that have been allowed to function for years (ibid.). Though he has received a few reports of arrests of Catholic priests in the years 2003 to 2005, the executive secretary noted that overall, Christians in Fujian and Guangdong "enjoy one of the most liberal polic[ies] on religious freedom in China" (ibid.). Further information on the treatment of Catholics specifically in Fujian and Guangdong could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

### **New Religious Regulations**

New Regulations on Religious Affairs, designed to protect the rights of people engaged in "normal" and "legitimate" religious activities in China, came into force on 1 March 2005 (AI 21 Dec. 2004; BBC 19 Dec. 2004; *Boston Globe* 1 Mar. 2005). The regulations, among other things, define the role of various government offices and units in supervising religious activities (AI 21 Dec. 2004; Chan and Carlson 2005, 24; Spiegel 14 Mar. 2005). However, according to both Amnesty International (AI) and Mickey Spiegel, a senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch (HRW), the text does not clarify what is meant by "normal" (AI 21 Dec. 2004; Spiegel 14 Mar. 2005), though Chan and Carlson note that any groups not deemed "normal" could be categorized by authorities as "cult organizations" (2005, 23). Mickey Spiegel commented in testimony to the United States (US) Congressional-Executive Commission on China that the new regulation does not explain what the rights of religious organizations and citizens are (ibid. 14 Mar. 2005). In Spiegel's estimation, the new regulations "further codify the rules restraining religious practice in China and the bureaucratic mechanism used to enforce it" (ibid.). While the new provisions prohibit any organization or person from forcing someone to "believe or not to believe in any religions" (ibid.; see also BBC 19 Dec. 2004), observers say the new regulation does not represent a relaxation in religious policy (AI 21 Dec. 2004; BBC 19 Dec. 2004; Chan and Carlson 2005, 24; Spiegel 14 Mar. 2005). Chan and Carlson conclude that the regulations provide no measure of protection to unregistered religious groups, which may in the end be "worse off" (2005, 24).

However, the executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council noted that the new regulations allow religious sites and bodies to register with local authorities without having to also register with their respective patriotic associations, a practice which he said has been in place in parts of China since the late 1980s (1 Sept. 2005b). The codification of this form of registration into law is a sign that religious policy in China is loosening, and the executive secretary expects that in the future the Chinese government will continue to clarify the rights and obligations of religious bodies in the country (Executive secretary 1 Sept. 2005a).

### **The Death of John Paul II**

Following the death of Pope John Paul II in early April 2005, memorial services were reportedly held in official churches throughout China (MSNBC 11 Apr. 2005; Xinhua 4 Apr. 2005). To mourn the Pope's passing, one unregistered congregation in northern China was reported to have held an open-air mass and procession that was attended by around 500 worshippers (MSNBC 11 Apr. 2005). Police cars were present at the closing of the ceremony (ibid.), although the Research Directorate could find no reports of arrests. Similarly, according to a Catholic news service, in Hebei province, in light of security concerns, Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo, who was able to lead a private mass in honour of the Pope, encouraged Catholics to hold small vigils rather than a larger mass in honour of the Pope (CathNews 11 Apr. 2005). Surveillance of unregistered bishops reportedly increased in some places following the Pope's death: in Bishop Jia's case, police cars were parked outside his church (CathNews 11 Apr. 2005). According to one news source, the Chinese government introduced an official countrywide news blackout of John Paul's funeral (MSNBC 11 Apr. 2005).

In the aftermath of the Pope's death, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson indicated that China was willing to improve relations with the Vatican if the latter agreed to break ties with Taiwan and not "interfere" in the country's internal affairs (Xinhua 21 Apr. 2005; MSNBC 11 Apr. 2005). While there were rumours that the Vatican might be willing to cut ties with Taiwan in order to re-establish links with the mainland (BBC 8 Apr. 2005), one Chinese analyst was quoted in a MSNBC article as saying that restoring diplomatic ties with the Vatican was a low priority for the Chinese government (MSNBC 11 Apr. 2005).

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 additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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**Oral sources:** Cardinal Kung Foundation; two additional sources did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

**Internet sites, including:** Agenzia Fides, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Forum 18, *National Catholic Register*.

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