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

General Information

Estimates of the number of Protestants in China vary among sources consulted by the Research Directorate. The Chinese government claims that there are more than 15 million adherents of the official Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement, although Protestant church officials put the number of worshippers who attend registered churches at 20 million (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004). Estimates of the number of Protestants who belong to "unregistered" church groups range from 30 million to 50 million (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 Mar. 2004; *U.S. News & World Report* 30 Apr. 2001; see also *International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. 1). Some academics place the total number of Protestants in China at 90 million (*ibid.*).

Sources agree that the number of Protestants is growing (*ibid.*; *Christian Science Monitor* 24 Dec. 2003; *Economist* 21 Apr. 2005), particularly among urban intellectuals, business people and university students (*ibid.*; *Washington Post* 24 Dec. 2002). Henan, the "Bethlehem" of China (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 Mar. 2004), reportedly has the largest number of Christians among all the provinces of China, with about five million worshippers, most of whom attend "house" churches (*SCMP* 9 Jan. 2002; see also *U.S. News & World Report* 30 Apr. 2001). The poor rural areas of Fujian and other coastal provinces are also home to growing numbers of Protestant groups (*SCMP* 9 Jan. 2002).

Practising Protestantism in China

Protestant denominations have grown rapidly in China as a result of evangelical movements (*Washington Post* 24 Dec. 2002; see also *U.S. News & World Report* 30 Apr. 2001). According to *The Washington Post*, "[m]embership has skyrocketed in groups practicing faith-healing, laying-on of hands, prayer sessions lasting three days and three nights, speaking in tongues and full-body baptism" (24 Dec. 2002). Some networks of underground churches, particularly in rural areas, are reportedly well-organized and receive funds and training from overseas, allowing them to rapidly expand their membership (*U.S. News & World Report* 30 Apr. 2001). In the countryside, Protestant groups train their preachers, who are then dispatched to start their own churches or to spread the gospel in other villages or provinces (*ibid.*). The evangelical movement, according to *The Washington Post*, has even infiltrated the official Church (24 Dec. 2002). Thus, in certain areas, the distinction between official and unregistered congregations is unclear (*Washington Post* 24 Dec. 2002), though *The Christian Science Monitor* noted a growing unease between official churches and "house" churches (24 Dec. 2003). The government has reportedly been attempting to put a halt to the evangelical movement (*Christian Science Monitor* 24 Dec. 2003; see also *BBC* 9 Nov. 2004) by restricting the registration of new churches, even as official congregations are overflowing (*Christian Science Monitor* 24 Dec. 2003).

Nevertheless, two new Protestant churches were being built in Beijing in 2004 to hold between four

thousand and five thousand congregants (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 Mar. 2004). According to *The Christian Science Monitor*, there were plans for at least five additional churches in the city (8 Mar. 2004). The publication also reported that, along the southeast coast of China, Protestants in the unofficial Church held Bible study groups and choir rehearsals, and organized volunteer groups (*Christian Science Monitor* 24 Dec. 2003).

In some areas, underground Bible study groups and Sunday schools have gained the attention of authorities, who believed these gatherings could foment dissent (ibid. 8 Mar. 2004; ibid. 24 Dec. 2003; *Washington Post* 24 Dec. 2002). In Wenzhou in 2001, for example, the local Religious Affairs Bureau circulated a document banning Sunday school, and later conducted church raids (ibid.). However, in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, pilot projects for Sunday schools had begun in some churches, and the central government reportedly informed foreign officials that such schools were legal (ibid.).

A 1998 policy known as the "Theological Construction Campaign," which was implemented in official Protestant seminaries, promotes so-called "Four Againsts: the Bible is not the revealed Word, Jesus was not born of a virgin, the resurrection is a myth, and there is no 'second coming'" (*Christian Science Monitor* 24 Dec. 2003). The official Church also denied the concept of individual salvation (ibid.). According to sources, "house" churches have grown rapidly "because by government decree [official Church] pastors are not allowed to preach the full Christian message" (UPI 20 Feb. 2004; see also BBC 9 Nov. 2004).

Treatment of Protestants

Treatment of Christians generally is said to vary from place to place (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 Mar. 2004; ibid. 24 Dec. 2003; Freedom House 23 Aug. 2004; *International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. 2; UPI 20 Feb. 2004; see also Chan and Carlson 2005, 16). According to *The Christian Science Monitor*, the policy would appear to be one of "simultaneous acceptance and tightening, as officials try to grapple with" the growth in the number of Christians (8 Mar. 2004). Kim-Kwong Chan and Eric R. Carlson, who co-authored a research handbook on religious affairs in China, note 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).

Enforcement of religious regulations is stricter in urban areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, while in the rural areas and in the south of China, there is less scrutiny of and interference in unofficial church activity (*Christian Science Monitor* 24 Dec. 2003). According to the United States (US) Department of State, "urban house churches are generally limited to meetings of a few dozen members or less, while meetings of unregistered Protestants in small cities and rural areas may number in the hundreds" (*International Religious Freedom Report 2004* 15 Sept. 2004, Sec. 2). The Department of State also noted that, "[d]ue to a lack of transparent guidelines, local officials have great discretion in determining whether 'house churches' violate regulations" (ibid.). Local security officials and Communist Party cadres reportedly choose to enforce certain religious regulations on occasion for personal gain and extort money from "house" church organizers (UPI 20 Feb. 2004; *U.S. News & World Report* 30 Apr. 2001). According to the executive secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council, who travels regularly to the mainland to gauge the state of religious freedom and who was most recently in China in August 2005, local officials attempting to extort money from unregistered churches account for many of the reported arrests of church leaders, particularly in rural areas of central China (1 Sept. 2005a).

As the number of Christians has grown, Christian Solidarity Worldwide has argued, government crackdowns have become more systematic and have targeted large-scale gatherings (BBC 9 Nov. 2004). In June 2005, security officials allegedly simultaneously raided 100 "house" churches in the area of Changchun, the capital of Jilin Province (China Aid Association 9 June 2005). Most of the close to 600 church leaders and members who were taken into custody were released after 24 to 48 hours (ibid.). However, by 9 June 2005, about 100 church leaders remained in various detention centres (ibid.). Books were also confiscated during the raids (ibid.). As university students and professors made up a large proportion of the congregants of the raided churches, the China Aid Association speculated that the campaign was an attempt by authorities to eradicate the influence of the unofficial Church on university campuses (ibid.).

Between June and November 2004, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reportedly documented three cases of mass arrests of Christians, each involving the detention of over one hundred people (BBC 9 Nov. 2004). In

April 2004, co-workers and worshippers linked to Reverend Xu Shuangfu, founder and leader of the Three Class Servants Church, were purportedly arrested and their homes raided and belongings seized by police in northern China (Freedom House 19 May 2004). Families of the detainees were subsequently placed under surveillance and threatened with arrests when they attempted to enquire about their relatives (ibid.). Rev. Xu, whose Church is purported to have millions of followers, was allegedly kidnapped by police in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province (ibid.). Amnesty International reported arrests of various church leaders in 2004, mostly in the eastern provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Hebei (BBC 9 Nov. 2004). According to the religious rights organization Voice of the Martyrs (VOM), in 2004 authorities also rounded up a group of underground Protestants who had appeared in an American videotape about the activities of an unregistered church in an undisclosed part of China (UPI 20 Feb. 2004).

The *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) reported in early 2002 that the government was especially targeting "evangelical movements led by charismatic leaders," though it remained unclear which groups were perceived to fit this description (9 Jan. 2002). The *Christian Science Monitor* reported on 24 December 2003 that evangelicals in Henan Province and "house" church leaders in Shanghai had recently been targeted by authorities. In 2004, the same publication noted the arrest of a church historian and a church organizer associated with the evangelical movement in Henan on charges of disclosing state secrets (8 Mar. 2004).

In 1995, a circular issued by the State Council and the Communist Party Central Committee labelled a number of Protestant groups "evil cults" and declared them illegal organizations (Chan and Carlson 2005, 14-15). These groups included the Shouters, Full-Scope Church, New Testament Church, Eastern Lightning, and Spirit Church (ibid., 15). According to Chan and Carlson, since the 1999 introduction of a resolution banning cults, which targeted Falun Gong, "the government has focused on enforcement on all groups labeled as 'evil cult' organizations" (ibid.). Human rights groups claim that following the 1999 anti-cult resolution, authorities cracked down on more than a dozen evangelical Christian groups (AFP 9 Oct. 2002; see also SCMP 9 Jan. 2002). However, one source reported that the authorities' focus on Falun Gong led to an easing in arrests and harassment of unregistered churches in some areas (*U.S. News & World Report* 30 Apr. 2001).

In July 2005, sources reported that Cai Zhuohua, a Protestant pastor from the Beijing area, was put on trial along with his wife and two other church members on the charge of "illegal business practices" for printing more than 200,000 pieces of Christian literature (BBC 7 July 2005; VOM 7 July 2005). Only one organization in China is permitted to print Bibles, which are sold through registered churches, though possession of a Bible is not against the law (BBC 7 July 2005). The lawyer for the accused noted that the books Cai printed were not intended for sale, but were to be given away to church members (ibid.; see also VOM 7 July 2005). The verdict was to be announced at a later date (VOM 7 July 2005). As at 16 August 2005, no information on the verdict could be found among Research Directorate sources.

While acknowledging that arrests of church leaders occasionally take place in China, 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 (1 Sept. 2005a). Officials are well aware of the activities of unregistered religious groups, and arrests of leaders take place periodically, 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). The executive secretary also pointed out that an ongoing trend in parts of China that is little known outside of the country is the registration of religious sites and bodies with local authorities but not with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (ibid. 1 Sept. 2005b). For instance, the Yanji Christian Church registered with the local authorities in Yanji in Jilin Province back in the mid-1990s but not with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. According to *The Economist*, the Chinese government has a "less antagonistic" attitude towards unregistered Protestants than it does towards unregistered Catholics, though it fears "house" churches may act as a cover for dissidents (21Apr. 2005).

A relaxation of authorities' treatment of unregistered Protestants in major cities was noted by *The Christian Science Monitor* in 2004: for instance, an open meeting of young evangelicals was allowed to go ahead in Shanghai, "one of the least accepting cities," (8 Mar. 2004), though Charles Burton, an associate professor of political science at Brock University, who has conducted fact-finding missions to China, noted that religious groups in Shanghai have "excellent" relations with local authorities (24 Apr. 2003, 16). In another city, overseas Chinese ministers were allowed to speak at "house" churches (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 Mar. 2004). In 2002, five Chinese Protestants in Hubei Province, who had been sentenced to death for organizing and belonging to an unregistered religious group which authorities deemed to be an "evil sect," were given a re-trial on appeal (AFP 9 Oct. 2002). Twelve members of the unregistered South China Church in Hubei Province were also granted a re-trial, with the high court citing a lack of evidence for the original convictions

(ibid.).

According to *The Economist*, efforts by the government to retain control of religious groups are "faltering" (21 Apr. 2005). Earlier reports indicate that the Communist regime is unsure of how to handle the rapid and "surprising" growth of the number of Christians in the country (UPI 20 Feb. 2004), which is even creating "consternation" among Party officials (*Christian Science Monitor* 24 Dec. 2003). In part, this growth, *The Washington Post* concluded, has forced the Communist government to relinquish control "in some places" to the official Church and to reconsider past "repressive" policies (24 Dec. 2002). There appears to be a measure of acknowledgement by the Chinese government that Christianity is growing rapidly and may even be benefiting a "spiritually hungry population" (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 Mar. 2004). 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 the government believes that religions 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 religious policy as enunciated by 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. 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 (1 Sept. 2005a). 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 (Executive secretary 1 Sept. 2005a). The executive secretary stated that he is aware of a number of unregistered churches along with Bible schools, fellowships and even missionaries that have been allowed to operate in the two provinces for years (1 Sept. 2005a). As an example, he cited the case of Pastor Samuel Lamb's unregistered Damajan Church in Guangzhou, which he said has been allowed to hold meetings on a daily basis for 20 years without interference from authorities (1 Sept. 2005a). In cases where arrests have been made, the executive secretary pointed out that groups such as the Shouters and the Eastern Lighting, which are considered "heretical" by many Christians, have been targeted (1 Sept. 2005a).

Further information on the situation of Protestants in Fujian and Guangdong specifically 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 group 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 Three-Self Patriotic Movement, 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).

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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Additional Sources Consulted

One oral source did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response.

Internet sites, including: Amity News Service, *Asia Times* Online, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, Human Rights Watch, Jubilee Campaign.

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 [Top of Page](#)

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