**Responses to Information Requests**

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**CHN104304.E**

China: The Church of Almighty God, also known as "Eastern Lightning," including its history, beliefs, and where it is present; treatment of members by government authorities

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

### 1. Background


[all]most all of China's house churches support the efforts of local authorities to crack down, in accordance with the law, on Eastern Lightning, which calls itself a Christian group but has long used violence to harm and persecute house churches, as well as endangering social order. (ChinaAid 20 Dec. 2012)

Two sources report that the Church of Almighty God claims to have about 300,000 members (*Time* 5 Nov. 2001; CFAR n.d.a). Other sources indicate that its members could number a million (*Shanghaidist* 20 Dec. 2012; *The New York Times* 19 Dec. 2012; *Global Post* 18 Dec. 2012). However, according to the Centers for Apologetics Research (CFAR), a Christian organization that describes itself as "an international network of evangelical cult research and education agencies" and seeks to provide information on "cultic movements" in developing countries, it is "more likely that they have between 20,000 [and] 30,000 members" (n.d.a). The British-based international newspaper the *Financial Times* (*FT*) notes that, due to its "underground" nature, the true numbers of the group are "impossible to estimate" (17 Dec. 2012).


### 2. Location of Group
According to two sources, the group appears to be present throughout China (Dui Hua 17 Dec. 2012; FT 17 Dec. 2012). CFAR says that its headquarters are in Zhenzhou in Henan (n.d.a).

In addition to being found in mainland China, the group is also reportedly present in Hong Kong (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; SCMP 18 Dec. 2012), the United States (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; CFAR n.d.a) and Taiwan (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012). The CFAR claims that the group also has headquarters in West Nyack in New York State (n.d.a). Zhao Weishan, the group’s leader, is reportedly living in the US (FT 17 Dec. 2012; Los Angeles Times 17 Dec. 2012).

3. Beliefs

Sources report that members of the Church of Almighty God believe that Jesus Christ has returned as a woman living in China (Dui Hua 17 Dec. 2012). Two sources say that the church believes that she lives in Henan Province (SCMP 18 Dec. 2012; CFAR n.d.a). Some sources also indicate that the group has produced a third testament of the Bible (Shanghaiist 20 Dec. 2012; GlobalPost 18 Dec. 2012; CFAR n.d.a). According to the Dui Hua Foundation, an US-based NGO dedicated to human rights in China (Dui Hua n.d.), the group believes that this female Christ "will reign over a new age in which humankind will be judged and only believers will survive" (ibid. 17 Dec. 2012). CFAR reports that members believe that believers can find salvation through this female Christ (n.d.a). Other sources report that those who do not accept her will experience a "terrible" death (UCANEWS 20 Dec. 2012; SCMP 18 Dec. 2012) or "severe punishment" (UCANEWS 20 Dec. 2012). The woman is also known as "Lightning Deng" (SCMP 18 Dec. 2012) or simply "Deng" (The New Yorker 19 Dec. 2012; The Telegraph 24 June 2002).

Sources report that the group calls for a battle against the "great red dragon" (Los Angeles Times 17 Dec. 2012; Shanghaiist 20 Dec. 2012; FT 17 Dec. 2012). Some sources explain that the "great red dragon" in question is the Chinese Communist Party (AFP 20 Dec. 2012; GlobalPost 18 Dec. 2012; FT 17 Dec. 2012). According to a historian quoted by the Financial Times, the call for the destruction of the Communist Party was a recent development (ibid.). Corroboration of this statement could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

4. Activities

The group is reported to be "highly aggressive" (CFAR n.d.a) and uses "strong-arm" tactics to recruit followers (The New York Times 19 Dec. 2012; SCMP 17 Dec. 2012). According to several sources, the Church of Almighty God tries to convert members from other Christian groups (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; Shanghaiist 20 Dec. 2012; CFAR n.d.a). Two sources indicate that the group has published a manual on how to convert other Christians (Shanghaiist 20 Dec. 2012; CFAR n.d.a). Sources report that some Christian groups have accused members of the Church of Almighty God of attempts to infiltrate their own groups (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; SCMP 18 Dec. 2012).

Some sources indicate that the group has been involved in attacks against other Christian groups (Shanghaiist 20 Dec. 2012; Dui Hua 17 Dec. 2012). According to sources, the group has been accused of using methods such as kidnapping (Los Angeles Times 17 Dec. 2012; UCANews 20 Dec. 2012), brainwashing (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; Time 5 Nov. 2001; CFAR n.d.a), and torture (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; CFAR N.d.). As an example, sources report that, in 2002, the group was accused of kidnapping 34 Chinese Christians in order to forcibly convert them to their beliefs (The Telegraph 24 June 2002; SCMP 8 May 2002).

Several sources report that members of the church were announcing the coming of the apocalypse on 21 December 2012, the date of the end of the world according to some interpretations of Mayan prophecy (AFP 20 Dec. 2012; UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; FT 17 Dec. 2012). Two sources report that the church appeared to use the Mayan doomsday prophecy as an opportunity for recruitment of members (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; Shanghaiist 20 Dec. 2012).

According to the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCANews), which reports on Catholics in Asia, preachers from the group "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" (20 Dec. 2012). Other sources report that members distributed literature and sent text messages indicating that only through the group could people be saved (Reuters 20 Dec. 2012; The New Yorker 19 Dec. 2012; Los Angeles Times 17 Dec. 2012). According to the New York Times they also held outdoor prayer vigils (19 Dec. 2012).

5. Treatment by Authorities

Sources report that Chinese authorities classify the Church of Almighty God group as an "evil cult" (SCMP 18 Dec. 2012; FT 17 Dec. 2012; US 30 July 2012, 4). Groups considered to be "evil cults" are banned under Chinese criminal law (ibid.).
However, according to the US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2011*, "there are no public criteria for determining, or procedures for challenging" an "evil cult" designation (ibid.). The *International Religious Freedom Report* adds that "[i]ndividuals belonging to or supporting banned groups have been imprisoned or administratively sentenced to Reeducation Through Labor (RTL) on charges such as 'distributing evil cult materials' or 'using a heretical organization to subvert the law'"(ibid.).

Several sources indicate that the Chinese authorities are wary of groups such as the Church of Almighty God, as China has a history of religiously inspired groups challenging the State (AFP 20 Dec. 2012; *The New Yorker* 19 Dec. 2012; FT 17 Dec. 2012). According to the Dui Hua *Human Rights Journal*, Chinese authorities have been trying to "eliminate" the Church of Almighty God (Dui Hua 17 Dec. 2012). The *New York Times* reports that the group "has long faced persecution" (19 Dec. 2012). The *Financial Times* reports that authorities have "periodically cracked down" on the Church of Almighty God "for forcing its members to hand over cash and assets" (17 Dec. 2012). *Time* magazine wrote in 2001 that the Church of Almighty God claimed that over 2,000 of their supporters had been imprisoned by authorities (5 Nov. 2001).

### 5.1 Reports of Clashes with Authorities in 2012

According to ChinaAid, on 10 December 2012, members of the Church of Almighty God clashed with police because members had been detained following a conflict with a house church in Anhui Province (20 Dec. 2012). ChinaAid reports that members of the group overturned a police car and injured several police officers (ibid.). Reuters reports that members of the group clashed with police in Henan, Shaanxi and Gansu in early December, sometimes outside government buildings (20 Dec. 2012). Corroboration of this information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.


The *Financial Times*, without providing details, said that authorities were trying to stop members from taking "drastic action on what they believe to be the eve of the apocalypse" (17 Dec. 2017). Other sources state that members of the group were arrested for "spreading rumours" (UCANews 20 Dec. 2012; *Global Post* 18 Dec. 2012) or "gathering unlawfully" (AFP 20 Dec. 2012). However, according to UCANews, it was unclear if all those arrested were members of the church (20 Dec. 2012).

*Shanghaiist*, an English-language website based in Shanghai, that offers news and commentary on China (n.d.), stated that "[w]hile all non-authorised religious groups in China are suppressed to some degree or another, in their recent crack down on 'Eastern Lightning' Chinese authorities have demonstrated a level of paranoia and oppression not seen since the suppression of Falun Gong in the late 90s" (*Shanghaiist* 20 Dec. 2012). The *Financial Times* likewise states that "the scale and severity of the crackdown [was] unprecedented" (17 Dec. 2012).

According to some observers, authorities and state media linked the crackdown against the group to other high profile events, such as an attack against a school in Henan province allegedly influenced by doomsday beliefs (*GlobalPost* 18 Dec. 2012; *The New Yorker* 19 Dec. 2012; *Los Angeles Times* 17 Dec. 2012) and self-immolation by Tibetan protesters (*The New Yorker* 19 Dec. 2012). Some Christian observers have also expressed concerns that authorities may not distinguish between the Church of Almighty God and other Christians groups (*ChinaSource* 21 Dec. 2012; ChinaAid 20 Dec. 2012).

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.

### References


Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral Sources:** Attempts to contact a representative of the Global China Center and an emeritus professor at Calvin College were unsuccessful.

**Internet Sites, including:** Amnesty International; Apologetics Index; Asia Harvest; Asian Human Rights Commission; Australia Refugee Review Tribunal; *China Daily; China Digital Times; China for Jesus; Christian News; Christian Solidarity Worldwide; ecoi.net; Factiva; God's Hidden Advent in China; Human Rights Watch; OMF International; Swiss Refugee Council; United Kingdom Home Office, United Nations – Refworld; United States Congressional-Executive Commission on China; *The Washington Post; Xinhua News Agency.

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