

[Français](#)[Home](#)[Contact Us](#)[Help](#)[Search](#)[canada.gc.ca](#)

Issue Papers, Extended Responses and Country Fact Sheets

[Home](#)

Extended Response to Information Request

CHN33002.EX

8 October 1999

China: Freedom of religious practice and belief in Fujian province

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

This Extended Response surveys the situation with regard to freedom of religious practice and belief in Fujian province. An introductory section discusses the legal context affecting freedom of religious belief and practice in China. The following sections then summarize recent (1998-1999) information from publicly available sources concerning the situation for Christians, Buddhists, Taoists and Falun Dafa (Falungong, Falun Gong) practitioners in Fujian. For information prior to 1998, please consult the IRB databases.

General information about religious freedom in China and Fujian

There are five officially recognized religions in China: Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism (United States 9 Sept. 1999; Human Rights Watch 1997, 2). Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982) is the relevant provision regarding freedom of religion:

Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.

No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.

The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state.

Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.

This right is qualified in several other legislative instruments that affect religious activity in China. Among these is the *Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China* (1997):

Article 300. Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or sabotages the implementation of the state's laws and executive regulations by utilizing superstition is to be sentenced to not less than three years and not more than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, to not less than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment.

Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or cheats others by utilizing superstition, thereby giving rise to the death of people is to be punished in accordance with the previous paragraph.

Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or has illicit sexual relations with women, defraud money and property by utilizing superstition is to be

convicted and punished in accordance with the regulations of articles 236, 266 of the law [dealing with rape and fraud respectively].

The *Criminal Law* also contains protections against abusive public officials:

Article 251. Workers of state organs who illegally deprive citizens' right to religious beliefs or who encroach on minority nationalities' customs or habits, if the case is serious, are to be sentenced to two years or fewer in prison or put under criminal detention.

According to the 9 September 1999 United States Department of State *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999*, no state officials are known to have been prosecuted under Article 251.

There are also a number of administrative regulations that impact upon religious freedom and practice in China, including the *Regulation Governing Venues for Religious Activities* (1994) which contains provisions regarding places of worship and registration and administration of religious activities, as well as provision for penalties for contravening the regulations:

Article 13. The Religious Affairs Bureau of the People's Government at or above the county level shall undertake guidance and supervision in the administration of these regulations.

Article 14. If a religious venue violates the stipulations of this regulation, the Religious Affairs Bureau of the People's Government at or above county level may apply penalties according to the seriousness of the case, issue a warning, halt activities, or rescind registration. If the case is especially serious, it may be submitted to the corresponding level of the People's Government, which may ban the venue.

Article 15. If violation of the stipulations of this regulation constitute an act in violation of public security, the public security organs shall mete out penalties in accordance with the relevant regulations of the "PRC Public Security Administration Penal Code"; if the violation constitutes a criminal act, the judiciary shall undertake an investigation to determine criminal responsibility.

For more information concerning the legal regime surrounding religious belief and practice in China please consult the Australian Country Information Service (CIS) document *Laws and Penalties Relating to Religious Activity in the People's Republic of China* (Sept. 1999), available at IRB Regional Documentation Centres.

Sources indicate that there has been a widespread revival of religious activity in China in recent years (*International Herald Tribune* 23 July 1999; *Time* 4 Oct. 1999; *ibid.*, 27 Sept. 1999). According to the *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999*:

Overall in the years since the Cultural Revolution, when religion was banned, there has been a loosening of repression and a resurgence in religious activity. There are over 180 million religious adherents with a great variety of beliefs and practices, mostly professing Eastern faiths, but with millions adhering to Christianity as well (United States 9 Sept. 1999).

This revival extends to Fujian province which was described as being particularly vibrant and open with respect to religion by Dr. Daniel Overmyer, professor of Chinese Religion at the University of British Columbia who undertook field research in Fujian during visits between 1996 and 1998 (1 Oct. 1999). However, Dr. Overmyer cautioned that there would be local variations from this openness, dependent upon local officials and attitudes. Two other specialists, Dr. Michael Szonyi (22 Sept. 1999) and Mickey Spiegel (15 Sept. 1999) corroborated this. Dr Szonyi, of the history department at the University of Toronto, has researched popular religion in Fujian extensively and undertook field research in Fujian in the summer of 1999. Ms. Spiegel is a researcher-consultant who wrote the October 1997 Human Rights Watch report *China: State Control of Religion*, available at IRB Regional Documentation Centres. This sentiment is also echoed in the Australian CIS report "Government Attitudes to Christian Religious Activity" which cites the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), stating with respect to the underground and house church movement that:

No one has any real handle on the scope of (underground and house churches) ... nor the extent of its suppression, although it is reasonable to surmise that no general rule can be applied throughout China (28 May 1999).

Both Dr. Overmyer (1 Oct. 1999) and Dr. Szonyi (22 Sept. 1999) stated that religious activities at the local level were generally tolerated, even if they were unregistered, provided they kept a low profile and did not try to organize on too large a scale. Both professors also stated that household shrines would be permitted under most circumstances, again referring to the divergence represented by the attitudes of local officials. This was

corroborated in part by Dr. John Lagerwey, Visiting Scholar, Institute of Chinese Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong, who referred to the status of religious freedom in Fujian as "a fluid situation" (2 Oct. 1999). Dr. Lagerwey offered the following general comments regarding the current state of religious freedoms in China:

The authorities in every town, county, prefecture and province differ in their attitudes and actions toward these problems but I think it is fair to say in a general way that, as long as a movement - house church or other - does not take a political turn, the authorities leave it alone. To understand a particular case of sudden repression, therefore, one must know in detail about local politics: something virtually impossible on the outside (ibid).

According to a 8 August 1998 report in the Fuzhou newspaper *Fujian Ribao*, between August 1998 and February 1999 a campaign of "checking-up" on sites of religious activity was to be implemented in which:

Stress would be laid on investigating certain activities at religious sites which violated the Constitution, laws, regulations or state policies, such as creating confusion in internal management, interfering in religious affairs by non-religious organizations, practising feudal and superstitious activities in the name of religious activity and causing trouble which might disrupt security and stability.

Situation of Christians

According to the China Christian Council's Amity News Service, the number of Christians in Fujian province in 1997 was estimated to be between 640,000 and 900,000 (Sept. 1997) of a total population of 32,820,000 in 1997 (National Bureau of Statistics 1998). An August 1999 report from the Australian CIS states that the Catholic population of Fujian is "several hundred thousand" (Australia 12 Aug. 1999). Another report from the Australian CIS, "Situation of Christians in Fujian Province, China," indicates a substantial degree of Christian activity in Fujian, referring to accounts of church construction and to high levels of church attendance for both official and "underground" Protestant and Catholic churches (Australia 15 June 1999). Dr. Overmyer stated in a telephone interview with the Research Directorate that during his field research in Fujian in the period 1996 to 1998 he observed numerous rebuilt churches including one in Fuzhou that was so crowded that the congregation flowed into the street (1 Oct. 1999). Dr. Szonyi corroborated this information stating that, based on his 1999 research in Fujian, Christianity appeared to be practiced actively and openly and that Christian images and posters could be seen in public (14 Sept. 1999).

However, there have been accounts of harassment of Christians in Fujian. According to the Australian CIS, citing the *China Study Journal*, Father Miao Shaozeng, a parish priest of Kangcuo, Fu'an diocese was arrested on 22 May 1998 for disrupting public order after hanging a large picture of Christ in front of his church and playing recorded hymns "for people to hear" (Australia 15 June 1999). Father Miao was apparently released after a week without having to pay a fine and resumed his religious activities (ibid.). According to the report, Father Miao was not affiliated with the government-sanctioned Catholic Church (the Catholic Patriotic Association) and had also been arrested the previous year.

In a June 1998 report, a spokesperson for Fujian's Religious Affairs Bureau denied a report from Freedom House that a church had been demolished in Houlu village, Fujian (AP 4 June 1998). According to Freedom House, as cited in the report, a large raiding party had removed parishioners and tore the building down (ibid.). However, the Religious Affairs Bureau spokesman stated the demolished building had been adjacent to a church, but had no connections to it (ibid.). According to the Religious Affairs Bureau spokesman, the church was not affected by the demolition of the adjacent building (ibid.). Other reports of the destruction of non-registered churches in Fujian are reported by the Australian CIS, citing the *China Study Journal*, stating that in 1998 underground Catholic church buildings built without government approval were destroyed in the towns of Xilu and Changle (15 June 1999). However, the same report cites the government-recognized bishop of Fuzhou, Bishop Zheng, as stating that "According to the law, churches built without government approval must be demolished, but that authorities have not yet set any definite enforcement plan."

According to the *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999*:

There were reports that foreign missionaries were detained in Fujian province in March 1999 for engaging in missionary activities with an unregistered church (9 Sept. 1999).

However, the report provides no further details and makes no other specific references to Fujian. No further references to these detentions could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

A 14 July 1999 "Priority List of Chinese Christians Persecuted for Religious Reasons" published by Freedom

House, which provides details on 112 Christians arrested, detained or harassed by the authorities, does not contain any names from Fujian province.

Situation of Buddhists and Taoists

According to the United States Department of State there are approximately 100 million Buddhists in China, based on official figures (August 1999). The Lonely Planet publication *China* states that there are significant Buddhist temples and monasteries in Fujian in the cities of Fuzhou, Xiamen and Quanzhou (1998, 457, 463, 467).

According to Dr. Overmyer, large numbers of Taiwanese look to Fujian as their traditional homeland and as the location of their "home" temples (1 Oct. 1999; see also *China* 1998, 455). He stated that during his field research in Fujian, he observed a revival of Buddhism evidenced by the prominence of temples, shrines and the holding of festivals (ibid.). This was corroborated by Dr. Szonyi, based upon his field research in Fujian in the summer of 1999, who added, however, that there were restrictions on the holding of large scale festivals (22 Sept. 1999). Both Dr. Szonyi and Dr. Overmyer stated that Buddhist household shrines would be permitted and were unaware of any reports that they had been destroyed (ibid.).

According to Dr. Lagerwey, Buddhism is the religious practice that the authorities in Fujian are most likely to leave undisturbed, based on his experience. However, he also stated that:

There is a centuries-old tradition of these organizations [local forms of Buddhism] being involved in rebellion, especially in west-central Fujian. That the authorities have a tendency to overreact to cases of such organizations is, of course, also notorious: they tend to lump them all together, when in fact the vast majority are perfectly harmless (2 Oct. 1999).

No further information regarding Buddhism in Fujian could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

With respect to Taoism, the *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom in 1999* states that:

There are no available estimates on the number of Taoists [in China]. However, according to a 1997 Government publication, there are over 10,000 Taoist monks and nuns and over 1,000 Taoist temples. Traditional folk religion has revived in recent years and is tolerated unofficially to varying degrees as a loose affiliate of Taoism, or as an ethnic minority cultural practice, despite government campaigns to eliminate "feudalism and superstition" and to destroy thousands of shrines (United States 9 Sept. 1999).

Two media reports indicate that Taoist Mazu (Matsu) worship remains strong in Fujian (Central News Agency 26 Apr. 1999; *Time* 27 Sept. 1999). For further information concerning Mazu worship in Fujian, please consult CHN28406.EX of 1 December 1997 available in the Regional Documentation Centres, REFINFO database and on the IRB Website at <<http://www.irb.gc.ca>>.

Situation of Falun Dafa practitioners

The *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom in 1999* contains the following general information regarding Falun Dafa (also Falun Gong, Falungong):

The Government estimates that there may be as many as 2.1 million adherents of Falun Gong (or Wheel of the Law); followers of Falun Gong estimate that there are over 100 million adherents [in China]. Some experts estimate that the true number of Falun Gong adherents lies in the tens of millions. Falun Gong blends aspects of Taoism, Buddhism, and the meditation techniques of Qigong (a traditional Chinese martial art) with the teachings of Falun Gong leader Li Hongzhi (a native of China who currently resides in the United States). Despite the mystical nature of some of Li's teachings, Falun Gong does not consider itself a religion and has no clergy or formal places of worship (United States 9 Sept. 1999).

Following demonstrations by Falun Dafa practitioners in Beijing in April 1999, a government campaign against the movement was launched, culminating in July 1999 with the official banning of the movement (ibid.). A Shandong official cited in Xinhua stated that Falun Dafa had violated at least six laws and regulations, including: the *Constitution*; *Criminal Law*; *Law of Assemblies, Processions and Demonstrations*; *Regulations on Public Security Management and Punishment*; *Regulations on Publications Management*; and *Regulations on Registration of Mass Organizations* (7 Aug. 1999).

Reports of the detention of Falun Dafa practitioners commenced at this time: according to the BBC, at least 70 practitioners were detained "in various provinces" at the time of the banning (20 July 1999). Further detentions were reported in advance of the 50th anniversary celebrations of 1 October 1999 when it was reported that over 300 members had been detained "across the country" (BBC 19 Sept. 1999). The BBC, citing the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China, also reported that publishers of Falun Dafa materials were also to be tried "on charges of illegal business" (23 Sept. 1999).

Specific information concerning Falun Dafa practice in Fujian is scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. There are no reports specific to Fujian listed on a 1 September 1999 list of "Chinese Government's Severe Violations of Falun Gong Practitioners' Human Rights" on a Website purportedly representing Falun Dafa in North America (Minghui Net 1 Sept. 1999). However, a prefatory note states clearly that the list is incomplete and will be added to as information becomes available.

According to an article in the newspaper *Renmin Ribao* of 26 July 1999 summarizing measures being taken against Falun Dafa across the country, the Fujian armed police force spent three days studying the government's justification for the suppression of Falun Dafa, following which:

Many officers and men have written to their family members on their study experiences and have advised their relatives and friends to clearly recognize the true features of the "Falun Gong" organization.

Xinhua reported on 29 July 1999 that the responsibility for overseeing the destruction of Falun Gong materials had been given to the "National Office for 'Fighting Pornography'"; Fujian is listed among the provinces that held "activities of destruction" of Falun Dafa materials.

Fujian was allegedly one of the provinces under the control of a Falun Dafa "Head of Station" who was reported by Xinhua to have "broken away" and renounced the practice (10 Aug. 1999).

No further information concerning Falun Dafa specific to Fujian province could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Attempts to obtain additional information from Hong Kong- and North American-based human rights organizations were unsuccessful as these organizations were either unable to provide information or were unable to respond within the time constraints of this Extended Response. The Hong Kong office of Human Rights in China had no specific information regarding freedom of religious belief and practice in Fujian.

This Extended Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Extended Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References

Amity News Service [Hong Kong]. September 1997. "How Many Christians are there in China?" <http://is7.pacific.net.hk/~amityhk/96_4_spe.htm> [Accessed 6 Oct. 1999]

Associated Press (AP). 4 June 1998. "Chinese Official Denies Church Torn Down." (NEXIS)

Australia, Country Information Service (CIS). 12 August 1999. "Refugee Claims Relating to Treatment of Catholics in Southern China."

_____. 15 June 1999. "Situation of Christians in Fujian Province, China."

_____. 28 May 1999. "Government Attitudes to Christian Religious Activity."

BBC Online. 23 September 1999. "China to Prosecute Falungong Supporters." <<http://news.bbc.co.uk>> [Accessed 23 Sept. 1999]

_____. 19 September 1999. "China 'Detains' Sect Members." <<http://news.bbc.co.uk>> [Accessed 20 Sept. 1999]

_____. 20 July 1999. "Religious Sect Members Detained in China." <<http://news.bbc.co.uk>> [Accessed 6 Oct. 1999]

Central News Agency [Taichung, Taiwan]. 26 April 1999. Deborah Kuo. "Goddess of the Sea Returns to Tachia Shrine." (NEXIS)

- China. *Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China*. 1 October 1997. Translated by Charles D. Paglee, Chinalaw Web. <<http://www.qis.net/chinalaw/prclaw60.htm>> [Accessed 6 Oct. 1999]
- _____. *Regulation Concerning Venues for Religious Activities*. 31 January 1994. Translated by Charles D. Paglee, Chinalaw Web. <<http://www.qis.net/chinalaw/prclaw110.htm>> [Accessed 6 Oct. 1999]
- _____. Constitution of the People's Republic of China. 1982. (REFLEG)
- China*. July 1998. 8th ed. Hawthorn: Lonely Planet Publications.
- Freedom House. 14 July 1999. "The Centre for Religious Freedom Freedom House Priority List Chinese Christians Persecuted for Religious Reasons." <<http://freedomhouse.org/religion/china.html>> [Accessed 30 Sept. 1999]
- Fujian Ribao* [Fuzhou, in Chinese]. 8 August 1998. "Fujian to 'Check Up' on Religious Sites to Strengthen Security." (BBC Summary 22 Aug. 1998/NEXIS)
- Human Rights Watch. October 1997. *China: State Control of Religion*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- International Herald Tribune* [Neuilly-sur-Seine, France]. 23 July 1999. John Pomfret. "A Moral Compass Lost; Search for Spirituality Growing in China." (NEXIS)
- Lagerway, John. Visiting Scholar, Institute of Chinese Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong. 2 October 1999. Correspondence.
- Minghui Net. 1 September 1999. "Chinese Government's Severe Violations of Falun Gong Practitioners' Human Rights." <http://minghui.ca/eng/china/chronological_record.html> [Accessed 17 Sept. 1999]
- National Bureau of Statistics. [Beijing]. 1998. *Yearbook*. <<http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/nj98/d031a.txt>> [Accessed 8 Oct. 1999]
- Overmyer, Daniel. Department of Asian Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver. 1 October 1999. Telephone interview.
- Renmin Ribao* [Beijing, in Chinese]. 26 July 1999. "PRC Launches Drive Against 'Falun Gong.'" (FBIS-CHI-1999-0726 26 July 1999/WNC)
- Spiegel, Mickey, Human Rights Watch. New York. 15 September 1999. Telephone interview.
- Szonyi, Michael. University of Toronto, Department of History. 22 September 1999. Telephone interview.
- _____. 14 September 1999. Telephone interview.
- Time* [New York]. 4 October 1999. Jaime A. FlorCruz and Joshua Cooper Ramo. "Inside China's Search for its Soul; The 50th Anniversary of Mao's Revolution Finds the Nation Balancing a Rotting Ideology Against a Hopeful Future." (NEXIS)
- _____. 27 September 1999. Mia Turner. "Meizhou Island: Religious Revival, 1999 A Godless Society Looks for Meaning." (NEXIS)
- United States. Department of State. 9 September 1999. *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: China*. <http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/irf/irf_report/1999/irf_china99.html> [Accessed 5 Oct. 1999]
- _____. August 1999. *Background Notes: China*. <http://www.state.gov/www/background_notes/china_899_bgn.html> [Accessed 6 Oct. 1999]
- Xinhua [Beijing, in English]. 10 August 1999. "Former Falungong Station Heads Exposing Li Hongzhi." (FBIS-CHI-1999-0810 10 Aug. 1999/WNC)
- _____. [Beijing, in Chinese]. 7 August 1999. "Official on Laws Violated by Falungong." (FBIS-CHI-1999-0809 7 Aug. 1999/WNC)
- _____. [Beijing, in Chinese]. 29 July 1999. "Localities Destroy Falungong Publications." (FBIS-CHI-1999-0814 29 July 1999/WNC)

**The attached reproduction is a copy of an official work that is published by the Government of Canada.
The reproduction has not been produced in affiliation with, or with the endorsement of the
Government of Canada.**



[Top of Page](#)

[Important Notices](#)