

The Black Market: Illegal Religions

In the 1950s, the PRC banned religious groups outside the five recognized religions as reactionary organizations (*fandong huidaomen* 反动会道门). Some religious groups that formed later were labeled as counterrevolutionary organizations (*fangeming zuzhi* 反革命组织). Although all religions outside the associations of the five officially recognized religions are considered illegal, most of them have actually existed and operated in the gray market of legally ambiguous religions. Since the 1990s, however, the Ministry of Public Security has maintained a list of a select number of illegal religious groups that have been designated as “evil cults” (*xiejiao* 邪教). These groups have been targets of systematic and severe crackdowns.

The so-called evil cults operate under conditions of explicit illegality and are therefore regarded as comprising the black market of religion in China. This section contains brief descriptions of many religious groups on the official list of evil cults. In our presentation, we strive to overcome three limitations. The first is a lack of scholarship on these groups, many of whom are documented only in media coverage or in informal, anecdotal accounts in magazines or on the internet. Where possible, we reference scholarly sources in our descriptions. In some cases, however, little or no information is available in the scholarly record, and even informal descriptions may be unavailable in English. In those cases, we draw from internet sources, including those written in Chinese from Baidu and Baike. In the following account, we risk describing the religious groups imperfectly in the hope that presenting these descriptions in an academic outlet will stimulate more scholarly research as well as ongoing critical discussion.

The second limitation relates to the risks inherent in categorizing and describing politically and socially marginalized groups. We sometimes use names of religious groups that were coined not by the groups themselves but by their antagonists. For instance, the so-called Shouters (*Huhan pai* 呼喊派) are a diffuse array of practitioners who have been lumped together by government officials who speak publicly about their actions. The term “Shouters” is, in fact, regarded as pejorative by many to whom the label is applied. Here we use “Shouters” not to reify their existence as a homogenous religious group or network but to identify a political category of people who are collectively affected by statements and regulations directed at “Shouters.” As such, we recognize the political implications of these terms, yet hope to divorce them from pejorative value judgements leveled at the people from

the outside. Moreover, given the social scientific nature of this atlas, we do not assess the theological orthodoxy or heresy of black-market sects related to Christianity. Other Christians inside and outside China may regard some groups as heretical and some as orthodox. Because the “Shouters” were the first group designated as a counterrevolutionary group or an evil cult since the end of the Cultural Revolution, and also because several later groups were splinter groups from the early “Shouters,” they will be described first below, followed by the other groups in alphabetical order.

A third limitation is the necessarily incomplete nature of this account. There are more religious groups that operate illegally than those listed here, and the religious groups that we do describe are, in reality, often divided into multiple networks with differences that are meaningful and important to insiders. It is for this reason that we use the political category of *xiejiao* as a starting point. We intend the following descriptions to be exploratory and phenomenological rather than exhaustive or conclusive.

1. The Shouters (*Huhan pai* 呼喊派)

The Shouters have a complicated and contested history. The term has been associated with the Local Church (*Difang Jiaohui* 地方教会 or *zhaohui* 召会) movement led by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声, 1903–1972) and Witness Lee (Li Changshou 李常受, 1905–1997), which follows what they understand to be the New Testament practice of having one church per city. However, the Local Church congregations have actively distanced themselves from the Shouters and the actions attributed to them. Witness Lee advocated “calling on the name of the Lord Jesus” during the worship gathering, which the followers believe is following the Bible (e.g., Romans 10:13).¹ “Shouters” is actually a pejorative term derived by changing “callers” (*huqiu* 呼求) to “shouters” (*huhan* 呼喊) to create an impression of being disruptive to social order. The pejorative label has been applied by the party-state with the support of the TSPM to various groups that may or may not be closely following the teachings of Witness Lee.

As soon as churches began to reopen for worship services in 1979, the TSPM was restored and began to establish local committees. However, as described above in the

¹ Lee, *The Subjective Truths in the Holy Scriptures*, 58.

section on the house churches, many Christians viewed TSPM as compromised in faith and no more than a tool of party-state control, and thus resisted it. When two representatives of the Zhejiang Province TSPM committee went to Dongyang County 东阳县 to set up a local TSPM committee, several hundred local Christians staged a peaceful demonstration, in fact a three-day outdoor prayer meeting near the place of the TSPM meeting, on February 14–16, 1982. Soon after the clash between TSPM officials and those Christians, the police raided their meeting places and detained many people in Dongyang and the neighboring Yiwu County 义乌市.² Thereafter, the provincial and national TSPM committees reported to the authorities that it was the “Shouters Sect” (*Huhan pai* 呼喊派) that instigated the mass confrontation in Dongyang and Yiwu and that the sect followed heretical teachings of Witness Lee.³

Witness Lee, a close coworker with Watchman Nee in China in the 1930s and 1940s, was sent by Nee and other coworkers to Taiwan in 1949 to continue the ministry there; he migrated to the United States in 1962, founded the Living Stream Ministry in 1965 to publish Watchman Nee’s books and Witness Lee’s expositions of the Bible, and established a number of Local Churches in various places in the United States. Since the late 1970s, however, amid the anti-cult frenzy in the United States, Witness Lee and the Local Church have been criticized by anti-cult organizations for heretical teachings, authoritarian rule, and deviant practices.⁴ Even though these wrongful criticisms were refuted immediately by Lee and his followers, and later denounced by evangelical institutions such as Fuller Theological Seminary and *Christianity Today* magazine in 2006,⁵ the stigmatizing accusation of cultic heresy was adopted by the TSPM officials to justify the suppression of uncompliant Christians in Dongyang and Yiwu.

In 1983, the party-state officially labeled the “Shouters Sect” as a counterrevolutionary and heretical sect and began to crack down on the uncompliant Christians in Zhejiang and elsewhere who refused to join the TSPM. Many people were arrested and sentenced to prison terms. Two young men of the Local Churches in Dongyang and Yiwu were even sentenced to death or life imprisonment; they were released after serving more than 10 years in prison.

In 1995, the authorities adopted a new term, *xiejiao* 邪教 [evil cult], for the Shouters and other unruly religious sects.⁶ Some other black-market religious groups, such as the All Scope Church and the Established King movement, have adopted some of the teaching materials of Witness Lee but deviated in some aspects of beliefs and practices. However, the Shouters Sect label has been loosely applied to various groups throughout China. On the other hand, many Local Church congregations that deliberately follow Witness Lee’s teachings and practices⁷ have been operating in the gray market with only occasional harassment from the police.

2. All Scope Church (*Quanfanwei jiaohui* 全范围教会)

The All Scope Church has been categorized as a splinter sect originating from the Shouters.⁸ It was founded by Peter Xu Yongze 徐永泽 in the 1980s and has been reported under many English names: the All Range Church, the Total Scope Church, or the Born Again Movement;⁹ the Criers or the Word of Life Church;¹⁰ and the Crying Faction or the Holistic Church.¹¹

Xu began preaching in Henan Province in 1968, during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution when all religions were banned.¹² By the early 1980s, his group of followers was experiencing rapid growth. Their influence was expanding into other provinces including Sichuan, which became a major hub of the group. Xu was arrested and sentenced to forced labor camp in 1982, but he escaped and continued preaching. By 1988, the All Scope Church comprised over 3,000 churches, and Peter Xu had gained such popularity that he met with Billy Graham when the American evangelist visited China. Xu was imprisoned again between 1988 and 1991 and between 1997 and 2000. After his release in 2000, Xu left China for his own safety and settled in the United States. The church declined over the following years, but Xu himself continued to receive international attention from evangelicals. For instance, the American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* ran

2 Chinese Christian Research Centre, *China Prayer Letter*, June 1982; Y. Huang, “The Clash Between Religious Freedom and Political Persecution.”

3 Jiang, “An Investigative Report on the Shouters.”

4 Spiritual Counterfeits Project, *The God-Men*.

5 Christianity Today, “Loose Cult Talk.”

6 Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*.

7 For a brief introduction to the major beliefs and distinct practices of the Local Church, see J. Hu, “Spirituality and Spiritual Practice: Is the Local Church Pentecostal?”

8 Irons, “Chinese New Religions.”

9 Ma, “Police Crack Down on Underground ‘Religion.’”

10 Wesley, “Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?”

11 Amnesty International, *People’s Republic of China*.

12 Wesley, “Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?”

a story on the All Scope Church in 1998 in which they dismissed claims that the group was heretical.¹³

Followers of the All Scope Church emphasize that repentance and rebirth through Jesus Christ is the only means of obtaining eternal life.¹⁴ Believers have been labeled as charismatic due to their demonstrative worship services and have come under scrutiny for encouraging followers to cry frequently during worship (earning the nickname “the criers”). However, the group has also been characterized as noncharismatic on the basis of conversations with sect members.¹⁵ Although the All Scope Church emphasizes healing and the power of the Holy Spirit, they only rarely speak in tongues and do not practice prophecy. The church has a seven-point mission strategy that stresses evangelism, fellowship, perseverance in suffering, and the worldliness and illegitimacy of the TSPM.¹⁶

This church also has an intimate relationship with the South China Church (*Huanan jiaohui* 华南教会), which was established in 1990 by Gong Shengliang 龚胜亮, one of the core leaders of the All Scope Church.¹⁷ The mission of the South China Church was to establish a new kingdom of God. Followers believe in Christianizing the entire nation and culture. Part of that vision includes the controversial goal of overthrowing the party-state.

3. Church of the Almighty God (*Quannengshen jiaohui* 全能神教会)

The Church of the Almighty God is a Christianity-inspired sect that originated in the 1980s in northern China. It is also known as Eastern Lightning (*Dongfang shandian* 东方闪电), a name taken from Matthew 24:27: “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.”¹⁸ Followers believe that Jesus’s most recent earthly incarnation was in the form of a Chinese woman with the surname Deng. The Church of the Almighty God has generated political tension by equating the Chinese government with the “dragon” in the New Testament book of Revelation. Its members have also been implicated in

a number of violent crimes, including kidnapping and murder. The Church of the Almighty God maintains a website where users can watch videos, purchase books, and chat online with a practitioner.¹⁹

The Church of the Almighty God includes the Bible in its canon along with its own sacred text, *The Word Appeared in Flesh* (*Hua zai roushen xianxian* 话在肉身显现). Followers believe this text records words uttered by the female Christ, and they regard it as authoritative.

The church’s texts present history as a series of epochs, “God’s six-thousand-year management plan,” in which God was revealed to humans in different ways.²⁰ In the first epoch, the Age of the Law, God (Jehovah) guided the children of Israel through the prophet Moses. In the second epoch, the Age of Grace, God (incarnated as Jesus Christ) died for the sins of humanity. Nevertheless, humankind remained sinful. In the final epoch, the Age of the Kingdom, God (now known as Almighty God and revealed through the female Christ) has returned to earth to help humans attain perfection. The sect’s three-era cosmology—as well as its equation of the Chinese Communist Party with the great red dragon of Revelation—is not new, but resembles that of some other heretical sects.²¹

The Church of the Almighty God has a hierarchical structure in which local leaders report to subregional and regional leaders, who in turn report to an inspector.²² At all levels and among the laity, followers are strongly encouraged to proselytize, a fact that has led to the rapid growth of the sect throughout China’s rural north. The founder of the Church of the Almighty God is reported to have moved to the United States.²³ A small group of followers in New York State manages the sect’s finances.²⁴

4. Cold Water Sect (*Lengshui jiao* 冷水教)

The group known as the Cold Water Sect was founded in 1988 by Huang Huanting 黄焕听 in Reshui Township 热水镇, Heping County 和平县, in northern Guangdong Province.²⁵ Huang was 70 years old when the movement was founded. It is said that she suffered from schizophrenia and came to believe in God while ill. After her

13 Morgan, “A Tale of China’s Two Churches.”

14 Wesley, “Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?”

15 Wesley, “Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?” 238.

16 Wesley, “Is the Chinese Church Predominantly Pentecostal?” 237.

17 Information for this section was obtained from Cnhubei.com, “Churches in South China.”

18 Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 226–227.

19 <http://www.holyspiritspeaks.org>.

20 Church of the Almighty God, “About Us.”

21 Dunn, “‘Cult,’ Church, and the CCP,” 101.

22 Dunn, “‘Cult,’ Church, and the CCP,” 101–102.

23 Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 243.

24 Dunn, “‘Cult,’ Church, and the CCP,” 102.

25 Information for this description was obtained from Baidu Baike, “Cold Water Sect.”

recovery, she started preaching to others in Heping County. From there, the movement gained traction and spread to Lianping County 连平县 and other regions near Jiangxi Province until the movement had grown to more than 1,000 followers, with three churches and more than 10 gathering places. In 1991, however, the movement's growth was halted after a police crackdown in Daping Township 大坪镇 in Lianping County.

Followers of the Cold Water Sect believe that cold water is the blood of Father God (*Tian'aba* 天阿爸) and therefore has supernatural power. Cold water, they believe, has the potential to heal physical illness. The sick person needs no medication; simply drinking cold water is enough to cure disease. Furthermore, crops need no pesticides. An application of cold water is believed to keep pests at bay.

Worship is held on Sundays. Upon first meeting, believers consume a bowl of cold water. Followers are then reported to open the Bible and begin reading an arbitrarily selected page. They scan the pages until coming to the word "water," at which point they stop and read the entire page, believing they have been directed to do so by the Holy Spirit.

5. Dami Evangelism Association (*Dami xuanjiaohui* 达米宣教会)

The Dami Evangelism Association is a South Korean religious movement founded in the late 1980s by Li Changlin 李长林 (Korean: Lee Jang Rim 이장림). The movement first spread to mainland China in the early 1990s. Li prophesied that Christ would return on October 28, 1992, taking true believers into heaven and ushering in seven years of calamities for those left on earth. Christ would return again in 1999, issue a final judgment on the world, and bring about the end of human history in the year 2000.²⁶ Missionaries recruited thousands of followers among ethnic Koreans living in China, and the movement had gained an estimated 100,000 followers worldwide by 1992.²⁷ New recruits participated in midnight worship services and training sessions designed to prepare them for the coming apocalypse. Many followers engaged in self-destructive behavior leading up to October 28; one man fasted until he died from malnutrition, and four other followers committed suicide in anticipation of the rapture.²⁸ On October 28, 1992, as followers turned up outside of a Dami Mission church in Seoul, they were met by riot

police, emergency vehicles, and journalists. A few minutes after midnight, a boy shouted from a nearby window, "Nothing's happening!"²⁹

After the prophecies failed, many members felt cheated. Li Changlin had already been arrested and imprisoned for defrauding followers before October 28, 1992, and he eventually disbanded the group. Nevertheless, the Chinese government has maintained a ban against the group, presumably to ward off any future mass suicides. In the aftermath of the failed prophecies, Han Wan Sang, a professor of social policy at Seoul National University, tried to make sense of the fact that so many Koreans—even well-educated people—had joined the sect. He ventured that Koreans were "troubled by a lack of progress in improving ties with North Korea and uncertainty over the domestic political situation."³⁰

6. Disciples Sect (*Mentu hui* 门徒会)

The Disciples Sect, also known as the Narrow Gate in the Wilderness *Kuangye Zhaimen* 旷野窄门, is an apocalyptic sect founded by Ji Sanbao 季三保 (1940–1997), a farmer from Shaanxi Province.³¹ After the Shouters began to attract persecution in 1982, Ji Sanbao established his own religious movement. In 1989, he appointed 12 disciples and proclaimed that he had been appointed as a prophet embodiment (*tishen* 替身) by God.³² His group grew rapidly and by 1995 claimed more than a quarter million followers across 14 provinces.³³ However, the sect began to attract attention from the authorities, and many followers were jailed or assigned to labor camps. In September 2016, several Mentu Hui members were jailed on charges of illegally collecting money, organizing an illegal group, and causing the death of followers.³⁴

The activities of Mentu Hui are well organized, and it spreads its doctrines and attracts followers through effective management. For the country as a whole, Mentu Hui set up seven levels of agencies, including the federation, general assemblies, big branches, small branches, big points, small points, and gathering points. The levels recall the organization of the country's civil administration.

26 Watanabe, "No Doomsday Rapture for S. Korea Sect."

27 Irons, "Chinese New Religions."

28 Watanabe, "No Doomsday Rapture for S. Korea Sect."

29 Watanabe, "No Doomsday Rapture for S. Korea Sect."

30 Watanabe, "Apocalyptic Movement Stirs Social Crisis in South Korea."

31 Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 223.

32 Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 195–196.

33 Chang, *Falun Gong*, 148.

34 Carsten, "China Jails Members of Banned 'Cult' Amid Religion Crackdown."

Every level has corresponding leaders and an activity stronghold.

Mentu Hui associates itself with the legal religion of Christianity and claims that its followers are Christians. It connects Western Christians with local prophets as a means of interpreting the Bible. However, Mentu Hui forbids its followers from entering any churches.³⁵ Its meetings are held out in the open. Like many similar groups, Mentu Hui was founded with an “extremely tight internal organization,”³⁶ centered around Ji Sanbao and the 12 disciples whom he appointed. Followers would cite the words of the Bible to emphasize that the achievement of Christianity’s redemption via the Chinese people was inevitable. In the Chinese version of the Bible, for instance, “Sinim” is translated as Qin 秦, an ancient name for a Chinese state in the northwestern part of China. By 221 BCE, Qin had emerged as the dominant power in the region and unified China. Ji Sanbao is said to have been born in Shaanxi Province, the initial location of Qin. This local saint seems to have appealed to people who have little knowledge of Christianity.

7. Established King (*Beili Wang* 被立王)

Established King was founded by Wu Yangming 吴扬明, who was born in Anhui Province in 1945. Wu Yangming’s involvement with the Shouters led to an early arrest and imprisonment.³⁷ After his release, Wu began gathering materials from the Shouters in Henan Province and soon founded his own sect in Anhui Province. Wu focused on the Gospel of Luke and its references to anointing, declaring himself to be the Established King. The name “Established King” or “Anointed King” was inspired by the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke, in which Jesus is depicted as the anointed king.³⁸ Wu’s leadership was strict, forbidding members to enter other churches, sing hymns, or leave meetings early. Wu was arrested in 1995 on charges including rape and fraud and was later convicted and executed.

When joining Established King, followers receive “soul names” and their birth names are discarded. Followers are asked to obey strict rules, including waking at 5:30 a.m. to pray, limiting their diet to two meals a day with at most two dishes per meal, rejecting fruits and snacks, and

avoiding personal luxuries such as makeup and television. Followers also attend secret meetings every five to seven days. They also contribute money to the leaders for organizational purposes. Wu was later accused of embezzling this money.

Foundational texts of the Established King sect are often sourced from the Local Church movement, including writings of Witness Lee. In Wu’s own contribution to this literature, he argues that only by joining Established King could someone be saved from the impending apocalypse. He also claims that the CCP itself is evil, and that Wu himself will overthrow the CCP and establish a kingdom of God on earth.

Followers of Established King consider Wu Yangming as their Father King. In 1993, Wu established 16 power authorities under him: Lord Mother (*zhumu* 主母), Fine Gold (*jingjin* 精金), Pearl (*zhenzhu* 珍珠), Sincerity (*zhencheng* 真诚), Devotion (*fengxian* 奉献), Rose (*meigui* 玫瑰), Anticipation (*panwang* 盼望), Happiness (*kaixin* 开心), New Heart (*xinxin* 新心), Kindness (*liangshan* 良善), Sapphire (*lanbao shi* 蓝宝石), Sacrifice (*xianshen* 献身), Dedication (*zhuanxin* 专心), Marvel (*qiaomiao* 巧妙), Praise (*songyang* 颂扬), and Evergreen (*changqing* 长青). Under each leader, two people called *fengchai* 奉差 are assigned to assist recruitment efforts. These two individuals wear uniforms and go out to preach to new believers.

8. Falun Gong (法轮功)

Falun Gong (Practices of the dharma wheel) is a meditative practice and a set of moral and spiritual teachings that emerged in China in the early 1990s. Although Falun Gong initially enjoyed favorable recognition from the authorities, the practice was officially banned shortly after a protest demonstration in 1999. A subsequent campaign against Falun Gong resulted in thousands of arrests that attracted international attention from human rights organizations. Today, Falun Gong practitioners can be found worldwide. The founder, Li Hongzhi 李洪志 (b. 1951), now resides in the United States.

Falun Gong’s origins lie in China’s Qigong movement, which emerged in the late 1980s and the 1990s along with numerous meditative practices based on the discovery and manipulation of *qi* 气 energy. In May 1992, Li Hongzhi declared himself to be a Qigong master and delivered a series of public lectures at a middle school in Changchun.³⁹ These initial lectures precipitated a remarkably rapid ascent into public life as Li traveled to dozens of cities

35 Irons, “Chinese New Religions.”

36 Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 195.

37 Irons, “Chinese New Religions.” Except where otherwise noted, information for this section was obtained from Baidu Baike, “Established King.”

38 Kupfer, “Saints, Secrets, and Salvation.”

39 Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*, 37.

across China—most of them provincial capitals.⁴⁰ The movement's success, however, would attract suspicion from the authorities in the ensuing years. Tensions between Falun Gong and the authorities grew until the movement staged a protest in 1999 demanding legal recognition. The same year, Chinese authorities launched a nationwide crackdown, arresting thousands of practitioners and blocking access to Falun Gong–related websites hosted outside China. Media reports estimated that as many as 2,000 deaths were attributed to the government's actions against Falun Gong.⁴¹ The crackdown decimated the movement, reducing the number of followers from perhaps as many as 40 million to less than 1 million.⁴² The U.S. Department of State reported that half of all inmates in China's labor re-education camps may have been Falun Gong practitioners.⁴³

Like other Qigong movements, Falun Gong teachings emphasize health and spiritual enlightenment. Many practitioners consider Li to be a Buddha or a divine being superior to the Buddha and Jesus, and followers expect to attain a higher state of being through practicing Falun Gong. In pamphlets made available by the movement, meditation techniques emphasize the wheel (*lun*) of the dharma (*fa*), which “is expected to bring about a positive personal development but also to renew society, in particular current society in mainland China.”⁴⁴ Li's own writings, *Zhuan Falun* 转法轮 and *China Falun Gong* 中国法轮功, are regarded as sacred scriptures by some followers.

J. Tong's organizational analysis of Falun Gong focuses on a key paradox: official Chinese accounts characterize the movement as highly organized, with a hierarchical authority structure and efficient communication networks.⁴⁵

On the other hand, Falun Gong's own sources depict the movement as loosely organized, spontaneously maintained, and disinterested in financial profit. The divergence arises from each group's motivation: the central government's interest in suppressing Falun Gong relies on the legal position that the organization operates in a politically subversive manner. Conversely, the movement's ability to deflect political attacks rests on its self-presentation as a band of volunteers whose protests are spontaneous acts by sincere practitioners rather than centrally planned acts of defiance. Tong's analysis reveals that although the movement may not have been as organizationally sophisticated as the central government claimed, it did have an organizational structure, as shown below.⁴⁶

9. Guanyin Method (*Guanyin famen* 观音法门)

The Guanyin Method, also known as the Immeasurable Light Meditation Center and the Way of Sound Contemplation, was founded in 1986 in Taiwan.⁴⁷ In 1992, the Guanyin Method was introduced to mainland China and spread freely for several years until 1995, when Chinese authorities labeled it a “cult organization.” The Guanyin Method claims that its membership had reached 500,000 followers by 1999.⁴⁸ Ching Hai 青海, the founder and spiritual teacher of the Guanyin Method, claims that the practice is “an eternal universal law” that is the “best, easiest, and quickest” way to reach enlightenment.⁴⁹ Her teachings borrow concepts and ideas from other major world religions. According to Ching Hai, the Guanyin Method is “like the way of the universe,” which “has existed since the

Administrative level	Falun Gong organization	Officer's title
National capital	Falun Dafa Research Society (Beijing)	President, Vice-president
Province/region/municipality	Main stations (39)	Main station chief
City/district	Branch stations	Branch station chief
County, urban district	Guidance stations (19,000)	Guidance station chief
Village clusters/ housing blocks/ work units	Practice sites (28,000)	
Groups of individuals	Study groups	
Individual	Practitioners	

40 Penny, *The Religion of Falun Gong*, 38.

41 For example, see Jacobs, “China Still Presses Crusade against Falun Gong.”

42 Irons, “Chinese New Religions.”

43 U.S. Department of State, “International Religious Freedom Report 2008.”

44 Pye, “Religions in East Asia,” 498.

45 Tong, “An Organizational Analysis of the Falun Gong.”

46 Adapted from Tong, “An Organizational Analysis of the Falun Gong,” 643.

47 Thornton, “Manufacturing Dissent in Transnational China.”

48 Thornton, “Manufacturing Dissent in Transnational China.”

49 Ching Hai, *Master's Words*; idem, *Quan Yin Method Is the Easiest Way to God*.

beginning of time when the universe was first formed.”⁵⁰ She regards it as “a universal law that people must follow if we want to get back to the Origin, back to our true Self, back to the Kingdom of God or our Buddha nature.”

The Guanyin Method accepts people from diverse religious backgrounds and does not require an official change of one’s religious affiliation. Its method mainly involves meditation. It also advocates a vegetarian lifestyle: new followers are taught to stop eating animal products for ten days per month and to meditate for half an hour per day.⁵¹ Ching Hai also borrowed the Five Precepts from Buddhism, requiring followers refrain from taking the life of sentient beings, speaking what is not true, taking what is not offered, sexual misconduct, and the use of alcohol.⁵² Apart from incorporating teachings from other religious traditions, Ching Hai lays claim to her own spiritual authority within the Guanyin Method. In her book *The Key of Immediate Enlightenment*, she writes that followers will be elevated if they recite her name.⁵³

Ching Hai is regarded as the Supreme Master of the Guanyin Method. Behind this organization, there is a corporate entity named Supreme Master Ching Hai International. According to Thornton, Supreme Master Ching Hai International started as a business enterprise that has now expanded its operations to include a global network. Ching Hai has been portrayed as a “tireless publicity seeker.”⁵⁴ However, several financial scandals were exposed when the Supreme Master Ching Hai made great attempts to garner transnational support for herself.⁵⁵

10. Lingling Sect (*Lingling jiao* 灵灵教)

Lingling Sect was established in 1985 by Hua Xuehe 华雪和 in Muyang County 沭阳县, Jiangsu Province and the followers refer to Huaiyin in Jiangsu as “Eastern Jerusalem.”⁵⁶ Hua was born in 1940. In 1979, he joined the True Jesus Church 真耶稣教会, an indigenous Chinese Pentecostal sect that originated in the 1910s. In the same year he started to preach in Jiangsu, then went to Henan Province to continue his preaching. In 1985, he established

the Lingling Sect. By 1990, the sect had spread into 13 provinces including Henan, Shandong, Anhui, and Hubei, with 29 communication locations and followers reportedly totaling near 15,000. In 1990, Hua was arrested and sent to labor camp for three years. Hua Xuehe died in 2000. However, the movement survived his death. In 2013 and 2014 there were reported cases in Shangdong where core leaders of the Lingling Sect were sentenced to jail.

The Lingling Sect has adopted certain teachings from the True Jesus Church. It emphasizes speaking in tongues, miraculous healing of illnesses, and exorcising demons. Hua Xuehe differed from the True Jesus Church in that he claimed to be enlightened by God and directly received messages from the Holy Spirit. He also claimed that his name was only one character different from Jehovah (*Yehehua* 耶和華), and he preferred to be called “Jesus the second” or Father Hua. The core teaching of Lingling is that only by completely following Hua and becoming detached from worldly attractions such as material wealth and romantic or familial love can one be saved. Followers of the Lingling Sect believe that the end of the world is nigh, and that the only way to be saved from the apocalypse is to join the group.

At worship meetings, followers sing songs and practice holy dances. In fact, one speculation about the origin of the group’s name is that when praying, followers would visibly shake and shout “Ling 灵! Ling! Ling!” to indicate that they were becoming filled with the spirit. These meetings take place in secret, with times and locations frequently changed to avoid government detection. When not engaged in worship, followers spread the message about the coming end of the world.

Hua Xuehe claimed that he was the reincarnation of Jesus and was the chief leader of the Lingling Sect. Below him were major priests (*da jisi* 大祭司), minor priests (*xiao jisi* 小祭司), two olives (*er langan* 二橄榄), four living beings (*si huowu* 四活物), 12 followers (*shier mentu* 十二门徒), 24 elders (*ershisi zhanglao* 二十四长老), a chief commander (*zuozhen zongzhahui* 坐镇总指挥), and a general (*lingbing dayuanshuai* 领兵大元帅). It is said that Hua Xuehe grouped his followers into geographically defined dioceses called *fang* 方, with every *fang* containing some *dian* 点 (places). Each *fang* includes several thousand people with regional leaders who are rewarded or punished according to their performance.

11. Lord God Sect (*Zhushen jiao* 主神教)

The founder of the Lord God Sect is Liu Jiaguo 刘家国 (b. 1964), who was one of the core members of the

50 Ching Hai, *Master’s Words*.

51 G. Young, “God Inc.”

52 Ching Hai, *Quan Yin—The Five Precepts*.

53 Chan, “Cult Branches Spread Worldwide.”

54 Guzmán, “Immaterial Girl.”

55 Thornton, “Manufacturing Dissent in Transnational China.”

56 Except where otherwise noted, information for this section was obtained from Baidu Baike, “Lingling Sect.”

Established King Sect. The beliefs and structure of the Lord God Sect are similar to those of the Established King Sect.⁵⁷ After joining Established King in 1989, Liu Jiaguo was assigned to preach in Hunan Province in 1991. He was arrested by the police. After his release, Liu continued his religious activity using different names to avoid detection. In 1993 Liu had a conflict with Wu Yangming, the founder of the Established King Sect. After Wu shouted at him in public, Liu took materials from the Established King Sect and started the Lord God Sect in Hunan, claiming that he was the Lord God. After Wu's death, Liu claimed that the Established King was the Father and the Lord God was the Son. Since the Father had died, followers must believe in the Son, i.e., they must join the Lord God Sect. Starting in 1995, the Lord God Sect trained leaders in Xiangxiang 湘乡, Hunan Province, and used the locale as a base as it spread across the nation. By 1998, the sect was believed to have more than 10,000 followers in 23 provinces.

The basic principle of the Lord God Sect is that the Lord God is the reincarnation of Jesus whose mission is to save the world and judge the people. His relationship to the people should resemble an emperor's relationship to his subjects. Followers must obey rules and regulations in front of the Lord God. To signify their complete devotion to their leader, believers are given new names (soul names) upon joining the sect. They hope to establish a kingdom of God on earth, claiming that the government is corrupt and will be replaced.

The organizational structure of the Lord God Sect is strict and hierarchical, with eight levels in total. At the top is Lord God Liu Jiaguo. On the second level is *zaishang zhu* 在上主 [Lord on high], a group comprised of six people selected by Liu. The third level contains the Four Living Beings (*sihuo wu* 四活物). The fourth level is known as the Seven Angels, each of whom is in charge of a specific geographical region. The fifth level is the *quanbing* 权柄 [Authority], who serve at the local level. The Lord God has identified 22 provincial *quanbing*. In the sect's materials, the Lord God states that the *quanbing* represent the power of the military, and each has the prestige and authority of a general. On the sixth level are the *tonggong* 同工 (coworkers), who serve in specific areas of development. The seventh level is comprised of the Host Families (*jiedai jiating* 接待家庭) who accommodate preachers when they travel out of town and host religious gatherings. The eighth level constitutes the rank-and-file followers.

57 Except where otherwise noted, information for this section was obtained from Baidu Baike, "Lord God Sect."

12. New Testament Church (*Xinyue jiaohui* 新约教会)

The New Testament Church (NTC) is a Taiwan-based religious group founded by Hong Kong actress Jiang Duanyi 江端仪 in the 1960s.⁵⁸ The actress, known to her followers as Sister Kong, starred in a string of films in the 1950s before retiring for health reasons. In the late 1950s, Kong converted to Protestant Christianity, after which she embarked on a missionary journey throughout Southeast Asia.⁵⁹ In 1965, Kong met Elijah Hong in Taiwan. Hong, along with a group of his followers, had left the Assemblies of God and set out on a journey into south Taiwan. They encountered a mountain—later known to the group as Mount Zion 锡安山—and decided to wait at that particular site until God would reveal a prophet to them. Elijah Hong has declared that God has forsaken the original Mount Zion in Israel and has chosen the new Mount Zion in Taiwan as his home.⁶⁰ NTC theology, which emphasizes the actualization of God's judgment through natural disasters, believes that Mount Zion will be the site of God's eventual tribulation judgment on the world.⁶¹ The NTC tends to attract the attention of authorities, as their teachings cause followers to distrust all secular authorities and give total allegiance to the sect.

Sister Kong arrived two years later and was accepted by the group as God's prophet. Kong, however, died shortly after arriving at Mount Zion. She bequeathed the ministry to her daughter Ruth, but after a protracted leadership struggle, Elijah Hong seized control of the group, which he continues to lead.⁶²

Today, the movement is headquartered on the holy Mount Zion in Taiwan, God's new chosen home and the site of his future tribulation judgment. Since its founding, the group has inspired some offshoots, such as the Complete Gospel Propagation Group of Jesus Christ's Blood and Water under an NTC recruit named Zo Kun 左坤.⁶³

The New Testament Church has over 29 separate branches in Taiwan. Although the group is banned in mainland China, there are followers in over 20 cities

58 Irons, "Chinese New Religions"; Farrelly, "Taiwan: Mount Zion and Typhoon Morakot."

59 Or returned to Southeast Asia; see Farrelly, "Taiwan: Mount Zion and Typhoon Morakot."

60 Farrelly, "The New Testament Church and Mount Zion in Taiwan."

61 Farrelly, "The New Testament Church and Mount Zion in Taiwan," 183.

62 Also Zhang Lidu; see Irons, "Chinese New Religions."

63 Irons, "Chinese New Religions."

and provinces.⁶⁴ Elsewhere NTC members reside in the Offshoots of Zion, which have been described as “a modest international network of consecrated lands, primarily in Asia and the Pacific, which, like Mount Zion, are regarded as sacred.”⁶⁵

13. Three Ranks of Servants (*Sanban puren pai* 三班仆人派)

The Three Ranks of Servants is an apocalyptic sect that originated in the 1980s. Followers originally believed that the world would end in a series of disasters. Most sources list the founder as Xu Shuangfu 徐双富 (1946–2006),⁶⁶ who converted to Christianity as a child and joined a group of wandering evangelists at the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1970s, Xu was arrested at least six times on charges of beguiling his believers with false ideas. In 1980, Xu took part in a coalition of anti-TSPM preachers in Henan Province but fled into rural Shaanxi Province after the suppression of the Shouters in 1982.⁶⁷ By the mid-1990s, Xu had established a network that spread across many provinces. His trademark, according to his critics, was “the remission of sins through lashes”: believers were subjected to 40 lashes for sins against the community. Such practices echoed older practices of the Catholic Confraternity of the Passion (Kuhui 苦会), as well as the Daoist practice of *zibo* 自搏 (self-slapping) and the Buddhist practice of *zipu* 自撲 (self-beating).⁶⁸ Xu predicted that Christ would return to the world and eliminate nonbelievers in 1989 and later in 1993, but he did not predict Christ’s return a third time.⁶⁹ Huo Congguang 霍从光 was another important leader in this movement; he apparently made several predictions about the apocalypse, saying that the end of the world would occur in 2000, and that it would be preceded by seven disasters.⁷⁰

Practitioners of the Three Ranks sect are literally divided into three ranks of servants, with the sect’s leader serving as God’s chief servant. Xu Shuangfu governed his followers harshly, controlling all aspects of members’ lives through lashings imposed on the disobedient.⁷¹ During

the sect’s peak, it attracted more than a million followers and competed with Eastern Lightning for followers. Some members of the Three Ranks of Servants were implicated in the murders of several Eastern Lightning followers. As a result, dozens of members were jailed and many of them were sentenced to death. The sect’s numbers seem to have declined since a nationwide crackdown on cults in 2004 and 2005 and the execution of Xu Shuangfu himself in November 2006.⁷² However, followers of the Three Ranks sect remain active in some places. For example, in late 2017, there was a court case against some members of the sect in Yunnan.

14. True Buddha Sect (*Zhen fo zong* 真佛宗)

The True Buddha Sect was founded by Sheng-Yen Lu 卢胜彦 in 1975 in Taiwan and spread to the United States in 1982. Lu was once a Christian and active at a Presbyterian church in Gaoxiong 高雄 and taught Sunday school.⁷³ In 1969, accompanied by his mother, who was a believer in traditional folk religion, Lu had an extraordinary experience at a folk religious temple where he had a vision of seeing three *pusa* (boddhisattva) and receiving a gift from the Jade Emperor, the supreme God in Daoism and folk religion. Thereafter, he began to publish articles and books about religions and his personal extraordinary experiences, which attracted many followers. In 1975, he formally established Lingxian zong 灵仙宗 [Immortal Sect], integrating beliefs and practices of folk religion, Buddhism, and Daoism. After he migrated to the United States and settled in Seattle in 1982, following intense interactions with Tibetan Buddhist leaders, he rebranded Lingxian zong as the True Buddha Sect (*zhen fo zong* 真佛宗). In numerous books he has published, Lu claims himself to be a “fully enlightened Buddha,” and he is known by his followers as “Living Buddha Lian-sheng.” Today, the True Buddha Sect has established chapters of various sizes across the globe, and its head temple is located in Redmond, Washington.⁷⁴

Purposefully syncretizing elements from different major religions, Sheng-Yen Lu argues that his teaching amalgamates different “paths to achieve control over one’s birth and death in the most efficient way possible.” While taking concepts and ideas from other religious traditions,

64 Irons, “Chinese New Religions.”

65 Farrelly, “The New Testament Church and Mount Zion in Taiwan,” 183.

66 Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 201.

67 Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 224–225.

68 Mungello, *Spirit and Flesh in Shandong*, 80–81.

69 Kahn, “Violence Taints Religion’s Solace for China’s Poor.”

70 J. T. Lee, “Christianity in Contemporary China.”

71 Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*.

72 Kahn, “China Executes at Least 12 Members of a Secret Christian Sect.”

73 Melton, “The Affirmation of Charismatic Authority.”

74 Ng, *Lotus Blossoms: A Collection of Studies of the True Buddha Sect*.

the True Buddha Sect teaches its followers to “take refuge in the Living Buddha Grand Master Lian-Sheng” and “accept Master Lu as the incarnation of Padmakumara.” Only then can its followers proceed to the next steps for self-cultivation though body and mind cultivation practices.⁷⁵ In 1995, the True Buddha School was labeled a “cult organization” by the Chinese authorities.

15. World Elijah Association (*Shijie yiliya fuyin xuanjiaohui* 世界以利亚福音宣教会)

Established by a Korean named Piao Minghu 朴鸣呼 in 1980, the World Elijah Association entered China in 1993 and has followers in 11 provinces. The group was founded when its leader, Piao Minghu, proclaimed himself to be the last prophet, Elijah. He prophesied that the world would end in the year 2000, after which Piao would reign on earth as God. When the movement spread to northeast China in the early 1990s, followers were known to sequester themselves in villages without modern conveniences such as television and radio. Piao's villages were united in what seemed like a distinct political organization, known as the “Stone Nation,” complete with a flag, a constitution, and a national anthem. The group attracted attention from the Chinese authorities and was declared an illegal “cult” in 1996.⁷⁶

16. Yiguandao (一贯道)

Yiguandao, variously translated as “the way of pervading unity” or “the persistent way,” is a Chinese sect whose religious roots stretch back to antiquity, but the group only acquired its current name in 1905.⁷⁷ The sect remained marginal during its first decades, then grew to include a few thousand followers in Shandong Province by 1930. By the late 1940s, Yiguandao had become the largest sect in China apart from the world religions, claiming millions of followers and spreading across the Chinese mainland. After extreme state suppression on the mainland, Yiguandao spread to Taiwan. It was suppressed in Taiwan for decades but was legalized in the late 1980s and remains popular today.⁷⁸ The ascendancy of Yiguandao has been

called “one of the greatest sectarian success stories in China’s history.”⁷⁹

As a movement, Yiguandao traces its history back to the Xiantiandao 先天道 movement, emerging as its own unique tradition in the late nineteenth century. In the 1930s, Yiguandao was a local sect with a relatively small number of followers. However, under the leadership of Zhang Guangbi 张光壁 (1889–1947)—a leader who proclaimed himself the eighteenth patriarch of the movement after a brief succession crisis—Yiguandao spread across the Chinese mainland. After the Communist revolution, Yiguandao was banned as an illegal sect. The Communist party-state created an exhibition condemning Yiguandao in Beijing in 1951, and in 1952 the party released a film with the sarcastic title, *The Way of Persistently Harming People* (*Yiguan hairen dao*). During those years, the movement spread to Taiwan where it was initially treated with suspicion but later flourished as important businesspeople joined its ranks.⁸⁰ Today, Yiguandao is an international religious movement with over a dozen lineages and global headquarters in both Taiwan and Los Angeles.⁸¹ Interestingly, the movement has spread back to mainland China through international channels. Although it was the target of widespread government repression in the 1970s, recent years have seen a cooling of tensions between the Chinese government and Yiguandao, whose leaders now seek to cooperate with Chinese government officials and nongovernmental organizations.⁸²

Although Yiguandao exists today in multiple lineages on multiple continents, its common core of teachings focuses on the existence of the universe as a cyclical pattern of creation and destruction. The heavens and earth are born and reborn during epochs that last thousands of years. Only one being—the Eternal Mother 无生老母, who is the only deity in the Yiguandao tradition—survives the destructive cycles. The Eternal Mother is said to have 1.6 billion Buddha children (*fozi* 佛子) or “origin children” (*yuanzi* 原子) who, at some point during each epoch, leave the Eternal Mother’s side and descend to earth, forgetting their divine origin. The evangelistic urgency in Yiguandao is the need to awaken the Eternal Mother’s Buddha children before the coming apocalypse.

75 Tam, “A Study of the True Buddha Sect’s Religious Experience.”

76 Information for this section was obtained from Baidu Baike, “World Elijah Association.”

77 Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan*.

78 Lu and Lang, “Impact of the State on the Evolution of a Sect.”

79 Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan*, 21.

80 Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan*, 58–59.

81 Lu, *The Transformation of Yiguan Dao in Taiwan*, 5.

82 Munro and Spiegel, *Detained in China and Tibet*; Zhuo, “Relationship Between Religion and State in the People’s Republic of China”; Billioud and Thoraval, *The Sage and the People*.