CHAPTER 6

The Art of Persuasion: Eastern Lightning’s Recruitment Strategies

A month after Eastern Lightning’s Almighty God resumed speaking in February 1991,¹ his words were being proclaimed in Henan province.² A decade later, Time magazine estimated Eastern Lightning’s followers to number “somewhere in the tens of thousands,” and a decade after that, the group claimed to have proselytized over a million people in north China.³ Fifty people converted to the religion at a wedding, seventy-eight heard the message at a market in one morning, four hundred in a factory one evening, and two thousand in a school.⁴ In 2014, the Vice Chairman of the Chinese Anti-Cult Association estimated that the movement had several million followers.⁵ While it is impossible to ascertain just how many members Eastern Lightning has due to its illegal status, there is agreement that, true to its name, Eastern Lightning’s teachings have spread rapidly across Chinese Protestant communities.

This growth reflects the importance of proselytizing in both Eastern Lightning texts and individuals’ religious practice over the past twenty years. Eastern Lightning’s texts present proselytizing as a duty for all believers. Its ninth commandment instructs followers to set aside their earthly ambitions and “throw your whole heart and being into God’s work. Give priority to God’s work and put your own life second.”⁶ A sermon reiterates:

Everyone has a responsibility to testify to God, not only those who are evangelists, but also church leaders; everyone has this responsibility and

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¹ The date of February 11, 1991, is given in “Neirong jianjie 内容简介 [Overview],” in hard copy of Church of Almighty God, Hua zai roushen xianxian 话在肉身显现 [The Word has appeared in the flesh], 2.
³ Church of Almighty God, “Gei ge di jiaohui shen xuanmin de yifeng xin 给各地教会神选民的一封信 .”
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Wang Yusheng (王渝生), “Quannengshen’ xue’an jingxing shiren ‘全能神’ 血案警醒世人 ‘全能神’ 血案警醒世人 [“Almighty God” murder puts people on alert], 科学世界 7 (2014): 87.
a part to play... Ideally, those who are not full-time evangelists will be able to save at least one or two people, and thus have a share in God’s work of expansion.7

This is consistent with a strong norm of proselytizing in Chinese Protestantism.8 While the state prohibits citizens from “compelling” others to believe9 and stipulates that “No religious organization or believer should propagate or preach religion outside places designated for religious services,”10 the exponential growth of Protestantism since the late 1970s could not have occurred without millions of believers actively promoting their faith, seeking to persuade their friends, family, colleagues and strangers of its veracity and efficacy. In interactions with Eastern Lightning, however, the roles are reversed as Protestants become the proselytized. Eastern Lightning views all outside the movement as bound for hell, but focuses on evangelizing Protestants and members of Protestant-related new religious movements because they are thought less likely than the general population to inform the authorities of their activities, and no doubt also due to cultural and religious similarities.11

This chapter investigates the techniques that Eastern Lightning uses to recruit Protestants to the religion. I introduce four different methods, information about each of which can be gleaned from four different texts. First, Eastern Lightning evangelists travel to areas of China where the group has little or no presence in order to establish new congregations. Second, they adopt a clandesine approach that sees recruiters covertly gathering information on potential converts, and relying upon cultivated networks of social relations to attract them. Third, Eastern Lightning adherents distribute literature—notably,

7 “Shixing zhenli yu ren dang jin de benfen” [Practicing the truth and the part that people should play], in Church of Almighty God, Jidu yu jiaohui gongren de zuotan jiyao [A record of Christ’s discussions with church workers], contents p. 2, item 6.
8 I use the terms “recruitment,” “proselytizing,” and “evangelism” interchangeably. While the first of these is preferred by sociologists and the latter two by English-speaking religious groups, all refer to the process of disseminating teachings and encouraging people to adopt them. Eastern Lightning follows Chinese Protestants in using the terms “传道 chuan dao” (literally, “spreading the Word”) or “传福音 chuan fuyin” (“spreading the gospel”).
11 Technically, non-Christians (referred to as “Gentiles” [外邦人 waibang ren]) may also be recruited. In practice, however, I have found no account of a person lacking prior affiliation with a Christian-related group joining Eastern Lightning.