

Research Notes

Captivity Narratives: Did The Church of Almighty God Kidnap 34 Evangelical Pastors in 2002?

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In 2017, a group of Western scholars, including CESNUR's Massimo Introvigne, were invited to participate in a dialogue in China's Henan province in June, followed by a conference in Hong Kong in September, involving Chinese law enforcement officers, leaders of China's official "anti-xie-jiao" association, and Chinese academics. The dialogue was about the notion of xie jiao (an expression difficult to translate, and not exactly equivalent to the English "cult") and one particular group classified in China as xie jiao, The Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning. The dialogue led Western scholars to further investigate accusations against The Church of Almighty God. So far, the accusations investigated appear to be of dubious authenticity.

ABSTRACT: The Church of Almighty God has been accused of various crimes, including the kidnapping in 2002 of 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). News of the incident were spread by two CGF-related Web sites while it was allegedly happening, and the story was kept alive through articles, videos, and two novels, the second published in 2017. The article examines the arguments in favor and against the plausibility of the CGF narrative, and concludes that, as it is normally told, the story cannot conceivably be true, speculating on how and why it was constructed.

KEYWORDS: The Church of Almighty God, Eastern Lightning, China Gospel Fellowship, 2002 China Gospel Fellowship Kidnappings, The Church of Almighty God (and) Kidnappings.

The Journal of CESNUR has published two research notes on accusations of serious crimes advanced against The Church of the Almighty God: one by the undersigned, on the murder of a client in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014 (Introvigne 2017), and one by Holly Folk, on the gouging out of the eyes

of a six-year old boy in the province of Shanxi in 2013 (Folk 2017). In both cases, accusations appeared to be false. The crimes really happened, but were not committed by members of The Church of Almighty God. Another frequent accusation is that The Church of Almighty God kidnaps pastors and leaders of mainline Christian churches to convert them. These accusations have been accepted at face value by some Evangelical leaders and reporters in the West (see e.g. Chan and Bright 2005) and even by scholars (Dunn 2015, 154–60), some of whom were introduced by Chinese authorities to pastors who claimed to have been part of those kidnapped during field trips in China (Dunn 2015, 55). Although there are vague claims, not supported by documents, of other kidnapping incidents involving The Church of Almighty God (Dunn 2015, 60), the bulk of the accusations concerns a case of 2002, when 34 pastors and leaders of the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF) were allegedly abducted and held for two months by the movement. CGF is one of the largest House Churches (i.e., churches not recognized by the government) in China, and some of its supporters claim that it has now some ten million members (Bach 2017).

An Evangelical Cliffhanger

True or false, the sensational incident of 2002 proved good material for novels. American Evangelical novelist, C. Hope Flinchbaugh claimed to have visited China and collected first-hand accounts immediately after the kidnapping, which formed the raw material for her novel *Across the China Sky*, published in 2006 with an appendix about what she claims were the “real” facts (Flinchbaugh 2006). In 2017, another novelized account was published by Shen Xiaoming, the leader of CGF, who claimed to have been one of the kidnapped, and journalist and Evangelical activist Eugene Bach (Shen and Bach 2017).

However, the incident “spread like wildfire in Chinese Protestant circles” (Dunn 2015, 157) well before these books were published. The kidnappings allegedly occurred on April 16, 2002. After eight days, on April 24, 2002, the inter-denominational Christian ministry Asia Harvest started reporting about the incident and posting periodical updates on its Web site (Asia Harvest 2002). Almost simultaneously, China Gospel Fellowship started operating a dedicated Web site, which has been kept alive until the time of this writing, offering its own day-by-day reports on the kidnapping, requests for prayer, and theological

criticism of The Church of Almighty God (China for Jesus 2002). Together, the two Web sites created a unique instance of an Evangelical cliffhanger

As told by these sources, and by the later novels, a chronology of the story can be established as follows.

April 28, 2001: Brother Yang, a CGF minister in Pingdingshan, Henan, was contacted by one Ai Yan-Ling, who introduced herself as a House Church minister from Yuzhou, Henan. She recommended to Yang a certain Brother Lian, who had just arrived from Singapore, was the brother of Sister Li Shu-Xia, a member of Ai's Yuzhou congregation, and was a good preacher. Not realizing that all these people were agents of The Church of Almighty God, Yang accepted to meet Lian.

April 30, 2001: Brother Yang and his co-worker, Brother Jia, traveled to Yuzhou to meet Lian, who introduced himself as the general secretary of Singapore's parachurch Haggai Institute. He suggested that the Institute could train CGF leaders either in China or in Singapore. Lian asked Yang to leave to him a CV, phone number, and a copy of his ID card to be considered for training. Yang complied, and reported back to the leader (and one of the founders) of CGF, Brother Shen Xiaoming, who asked to meet Lian personally before taking any decision.

June 2001: Yang and Shen met again Lian, this time in Ying Yang, Henan. They agreed in principle that CGF leaders would receive training from Haggai Institute. However, months passed without Lian calling Yang and Shen to finalize the matter as he had promised.

March 4, 2002: Unexpectedly, Lian called Yang after several months of silence. Another meeting with Shen was arranged, where a gentleman who introduced himself as Edward Yu, Vice-President of the Singapore Haggai Institute, was also present. Yu explained that Haggai had agreed to train 34 CGF top leaders in Singapore. He asked for, and later received, their CVs, photographs, addresses, and copies of their ID documents.

April 13, 2002: Yu met with the top leaders of CGF, including Shen, and explained that, due to the political situation and the problems in obtaining passports, Haggai had decided to hold the training in China rather than Singapore, and that the 34 CGF leaders will be divided in six groups, for training respectively in Shanghai, Zhongxiang (Hubei), Qingdao (Shandong), Renqiu

(Hebei), Xi'an (Shanxi) and Jinzhou (Liaoning). Yu also recommended that CGF trainees do not bring their cell phones to the training, as they could be tapped by the authorities.

April 16, 2002: The CGF trainees arrived in the different cities. The teachers, who claimed to be from Singapore and to represent the Haggai Institute, informed them that the security situation had worsened. Those who did not follow the advice and brought their cell phones agreed to hand them over for the sake of security. The six groups were further divided in 17 smaller groups of two trainees each.

April 17, 2002: Reportedly, except in Shanghai, at this date CGF trainees realized that the teachers were not from the Haggai Institute but from The Church of Almighty God. They also said they were confined in the house where the training was taking place, and would not be allowed to leave. One Sister Zhao, however, managed to escape.

April 21, 2002: Although some of the top leaders were among those kidnapped, alerted by Sister Zhao the remaining CGF leaders convened an emergency meeting and established a crisis unit to deal with the incident.

April 24, 2002: CGF decided to go public with the story, both through Asia Harvest and its dedicated Web site China for Jesus.

April 25, 2002: While aware of the risks involved, CGF crisis unit decided to send several leaders to Beijing to report what was happening to the police.

April 27, 2002: CGF representatives met the police in Beijing and reported back that they were heard with sympathy and the authorities promised to help.

April 28, 2002: Two trainees, Brothers Yang and Jing, who were confined in Renqiu (Hebei), managed to escape.

April 30, 2002: According to Asia Harvest, it had “received a confirmed report that after being kidnapped, men dressed in police uniforms came and took the believers away to different places”.

May 1, 2002: CGF leaders preached against The Church of Almighty God in Zhengzhou.

May 7-8, 2002: A national conference denouncing The Church of Almighty God was convened by CGF in Zhengzhou.

May 9-10, 2002: Two CGF trainees, Brothers Xing and Qi, were released and reported having been drugged with sexually stimulating substances in order to be seduced by sisters of The Church of Almighty God.

May 14, 2002: A top leader of CGF, Brother Zhang, who had been part of the training, was released together with a sister. He reported that The Church of Almighty God had promised to release all trainees within the next two days.

May 17, 2002: Some of the trainees were released, but not all.

June 3, 2002: Shen Xiaoming and another CGF leader, Shen Yiping, were released.

June 11, 2002: Another two top leaders, Brother Lian and Brother Wei, were released.

June 14, 2002: All remaining trainees were released, except one who had freely decided to remain with The Church of Almighty God. Web sites attributed the release to “the forceful pressure” of the police (China for Jesus 2002).

But Was the Story True?

Curiously, in its propaganda against The Church of Almighty God, the Chinese authorities and their official media did not mention at all, the story of the 2002 kidnappings. It became much more famous abroad than in China, where it was mostly retold in the following 15 years within CGF and other Evangelical circles. In 2017, however, Shen Xiaoming published his book about the events in the United States, although it appears to have been largely ghost-written by Eugene Bach. In the same year, the Chinese *Anti-xie-jiao* association, which is directly connected to the Chinese Communist Party, also launched a program to persuade leading Western scholars of new religious movements that The Church of Almighty God was a criminal organization. Five scholars from the U.S. and Europe, including the undersigned, were invited to two conferences in Zhengzhou in June 2017 and in Hong Kong in September 2017.

The local media reported on the events, and claimed that our misconceptions had been “corrected” (*KKNews* 2017). As part of the “correction” process, we were also told about the 2002 kidnappings. We did not really stand corrected, but certainly our interest in the incidents concerning The Church of Almighty

God was aroused, which resulted in the publication of several research notes (Introvigne 2017; Folk 2017), including this one. The Church of Almighty God itself realized that the kidnapping incident was now being used by the Chinese propaganda beyond the Evangelical circuit, and issued a statement dated October 18, 2017, exposing the shortcomings of the CGF story (The Church of Almighty God 2017).

I have interviewed both Chinese anti-*xie-jiao* activists, police officers, and pastors of churches hostile to The Church of Almighty God, and members of The Church of Almighty God, including some who were already part of the church in 2002. Based on these interviews, I will now list the arguments advanced in favor and against the veracity of the CGF narrative.

(a) *In favor of CGF narrative*

1. The main argument in favor of CGF narrative is that it is endorsed by the top leaders of CGF, some of them claiming to have been kidnapped themselves. CGF is a popular group among Evangelicals, and its leaders were themselves persecuted by the Chinese regime.

2. A second argument is that a vivid narrative was developed when the events were unfolding: why should it have been invented?

3. According to Emily Dunn, it is true that The Church of Almighty God's "leadership evidently does not condone the use of violence" (unlike CGF, Dunn does not believe that the leadership of the church approved or organized the kidnapping), but it is also true that in the situation of persecution it experiences in China, it cannot control the behavior of all its followers. While condemning violence, the leaders "may be unable to impress this upon some followers" (Dunn 2015, 160).

4. Emily Dunn also notes that The Church of Almighty God itself has published the testimony of one "Xie Qiang," whom she believes to be a pseudonym for Xue Mingxue, who was, according to her, the thirty-fourth CGF leader "kidnapped," the one who did not come back and decided to join the church. "Xie Qiang" starts his story as follows:

One day in mid-April 2002, I received a call from my upper leader, and he invited me to Qingdao for a theological training. On the third day of the training, I realized that they were the preachers of Almighty God, the "Eastern Lightning" sect, as I considered. "I'm

deceived. I'm finished!" I thought to myself, "If I refuse to accept their way, they will gouge out my eyes or cut off my nose, or even my life will be in danger." ("Xie Qiang" n.d.)

However, "Xie Qiang" reports that he was not mistreated or coerced in any way. On the contrary, although he "spoke offensive words to mock or dig at them," the members of The Church of Almighty God treated him kindly and patiently:

regardless of how I treated them or what I said to them, they never lost their temper or contradicted me with words but fellowshiped with me patiently. That was just the opposite of my original thought that if I didn't accept their way, I would be in danger, my eyes would be gouged out, my nose would be cut off, and so on. Then, I observed them secretly and found that their daily prayer before God was sincere, either in the presence of people or behind their backs, which was far more than I could do. They were not like those of an underworld organization at all. Although I didn't listen attentively to their new songs, honestly speaking, both the words and tunes of the songs were very touching. Furthermore, though I was so unfriendly and arrogant, the host entertained me with warm hospitality all the time. In addition, during the more-than-ten-day stay with them, I found that they were steady and decent and that they kept a very clear distance from the opposite sex and behaved properly in having meals, fellowshiping, and accommodating. There was not at all the "sexual seduction" as I had fabricated. So, my misunderstanding about the people in this stream gradually disappeared and my resistance against them was also removed. ("Xie Qiang" n.d.)

In the end, "Xie Qiang" converted. Dunn speculates that this may be a different, *post factum* perception of what to others CGF leaders appeared as kidnapping (Dunn 2015, 159–60).

(b) *Against CGF narrative*

1. In 2002, The Church of Almighty God was in the midst of a severe persecution in China, with thousands arrested. The main concern of its national and local leaders was to stay out of jail. Hunted by the police, it is difficult to believe that they were able to set up a large-scale kidnapping operation in different cities and provinces.

2. CGF was itself persecuted and had survived by going underground (as reported by Shen and Bach 2017 themselves). It is difficult to believe that their members would disclose the names, addresses, and ID card numbers of their top leaders to people they had met only two or three times.

3. The fact that these people had introduced themselves as members of the Haggai Institute should have been a further argument *not* to disclose information

to them, as Haggai was known for co-operating with the pro-regime Protestant Three Self Church and China Christian Council. In fact, the same official CGF account reports that Haggai “had been cooperating with the TSPM (Three Self Patriotic Movement) and CCC (China Christian Council) for a long time” (China for Jesus 2002), without explaining why, nonetheless, CGF leaders should have trusted Haggai representatives personally unknown to them.

4. Given the severity of the persecution CGF was itself experiencing, it is unbelievable that they would run the risk of meeting the police and tell to the authorities the names and whereabouts of their 30-odd leaders. Even less believable is that, faced with a massive cross-province kidnapping, the police did not take any action, and did not arrest any member of The Church of Almighty God—nor of CGF (itself an illegal group persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party). This would have given further justification to their suppression of the so-called cults, perhaps following one spectacular anti-cult trial of the kind the Chinese propaganda against the *xie jiao* so much cherishes.

5. As noted by Emily Dunn (who, as mentioned earlier, believes that the abductions were really organized by lesser members of The Church of Almighty God, although not condoned by its leaders), kidnappings and mistreating pastors of other churches is against the theology of The Church of Almighty God. It is also obviously “counterproductive” (Dunn 2015, 160) if the aim is winning the hearts of other Christians and converting them. The Church of Almighty God also claims to have “expelled from 300,000 to 500,000 members” and that it would have had “no reasons to resort to extreme and bizarre maneuvers to gain some 30 more” (The Church of Almighty God 2017).

Conclusion

Several scholars have noted how conversions to “cults” have been consistently interpreted by anti-cultists in terms of “captivity” and “kidnappings,” and have proposed comparisons with racist captivity narratives of white Americans (particularly women) captured by native Americans in the 19th century (see e.g. Bromley 1998; Pike 2009). The captivity narratives about the 2002 incident is, however, unique, for the vivid details “revealed” while the events were allegedly still unfolding. These narratives can be explained in four different ways:

1. 34 pastors were really kidnapped by The Church of Almighty God, or perhaps, as Emily Dunn would have it, by some members of The Church of Almighty God who acted against the church's theology and the indications of the leaders, who were unable to control them. However, the scale of the operation would have required the coordination of a group of believers large enough to make it virtually impossible that it would not have been detected, stopped, and punished by the police.

2. Real kidnappings were organized by the Chinese police. There is one indication that this is a possibility: Asia Harvest's "confirmed report" that on April 30, 2002 "after [the CGF leaders had being kidnapped], men dressed in police uniforms came and took the believers away to different places" (Asia Harvest 2002). Asia Harvest did distinguish mere rumors from "confirmed reports" at that time. Of course, the Evangelical organization came to believe that members of The Church of Almighty God were able to obtain the uniforms and impersonate the policemen, but this, given the situation prevailing in China in 2002, is hard to believe. I am personally fascinated by this possibility, although on the other hand I also doubt that Chinese policemen would have been able to teach theology to Evangelical leaders for several days without being unmasked.

3. Pastors of the CGF went to a training to which they were invited (presumably, *not* under the name of the Haggai Institute) by members of The Church of Almighty God who did not immediately advertise the name of their church, which some may interpret as deception but can also be explained by the climate of persecution. Only gradually, they realized that they were with The Church of Almighty God, as reported by Brother "Xie Qiang" in his testimony (Xie Qiang n.d.). The latter testimony does not show any element of violence, or "kidnapping," according to the common meaning of this term. However, those hostile to The Church of Almighty God had in the tradition of anti-cult captivity narratives a reservoir of clichés they used to describe their experience (in fact, grossly exaggerating) as "kidnapping."

4. It can also be seen from Xie Qiang's testimony that, before 2002 already, to stop their members from converting to Almighty God, CGF leaders had spread rumors accusing members of The Church of Almighty God of preaching the gospel through kidnapping and sexual temptation, which greatly impressed their members. CGF leaders had to confront a credibility crisis when thousands of their members, including top leaders, converted to The Church of Almighty God.

Rather than admitting that this was a process they were not able to contain or explain, they invented the kidnapping narrative. This is the interpretation of The Church of Almighty God in its 2017 statement (The Church of Almighty God 2017). It implies the bad faith of the CGF leaders, that many describe as honorable men and women. This consideration notwithstanding, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the narrative they proposed has so many inconsistencies and shortcomings that it cannot be literally true.

Possibly, a combination of the third and fourth explanation should be used: some CGF leaders attended seminars or training sessions without fully realizing they had been invited by The Church of Almighty God and, although the violence that would justify the label of “kidnapping” was absent, they interpreted their experience in terms of the traditional captivity narratives that were easily accessible to them and part of a Christian tradition of controversies against “cults.” Others, however, spread this narrative knowing that no “kidnappings” ever happened. An academic observer not particularly favorable to the movement, Chan Kim-kwong, also noted that accusations mentioning The Church of Almighty God’s dishonest techniques of “sheep-stealing” were invoked to explain the loss of members of churches experiencing a phase of decline, in an intra-evangelical Chinese religious market that had become increasingly competitive (Chan 2005). Be it as it may be, none of the accusations concerning the use of violence by The Church of Almighty God for proselytization purposes has been proved. And surely the Chinese authorities, when they used the kidnapping story in their campaigns against The Church of Almighty God, reconstructed it as just one more item of fake news, to be added to the McDonald’s murder and the story of the boy whose eyes were gouged out.

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