

The List: The Evolution of China's List of Illegal and Evil Cults

Edward A. Irons

The Hong Kong Institute for Culture, Commerce and Religion

edirons@aol.com

ABSTRACT: In China, departments under the central government have published lists of banned and illegal religious groups since 1995. This practice can be seen as an extension of traditional ways of categorizing heterodox associations dating back to imperial times. Groups on the current list are often identified as *xie jiao*—normally translated as “evil cults.” The list is thus directly connected to questions of the categorization of religion in China. The study of the lists provides insight into the government’s evolving policy on religion, as well as the legal environment for religious activity.

KEYWORDS: China, People’s Republic of China, *Xie Jiao*, Religious Policy in China, Religious Rights in China, Cults, Anti-Cult Movement, Chinese New Religions, SARA.

Over the past quarter century, China has sporadically published lists of banned religious groups. These lists as they have been consolidated and published reflect the government’s evolved thinking on religious policy, and illuminate significant aspects of the contemporary religious scene in China while offering insights into the government’s official policy toward religion. The consolidated lists were published in 1995, 2000, again in 2014, and most recently in September of 2017. These published announcements constitute the “lists” proper. They are supplemented by a number of individual circulars that speak to a more limited number of the banned groups, which provide content that would be subsequently compiled into the longer lists.

A range of agencies are involved in these circulars, but the major lists are published by Public Safety, the State Council, both government agencies, and the General Office of the Central Committee, a department of the party. Recent lists

appear under the aegis of the recently-established agency established to counter *xie jiao* groups, the Anti-Cult Association.

Xie Jiao (邪教)

Nearly all of the lists place the individual groups in the category of *xie jiao*. This term is widely translated inside and outside China to mean “cult.” While convenient for translators, this usage is a misleading simplification. *Xie jiao* in fact has a long history of its own (Wu 2016). It was used as early as the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) to mean heterodox, harmful sects. In the 1990s, *xie jiao* was applied as a convenient, well-known term for translating a foreign word, “cult,” that had its own separate and complex background. Like current usage of “cult” in many countries, *xie jiao* has become a term in common usage. Clearly, the two terms come from different backgrounds. Yet, for better or worse, cult and *xie jiao* are two concepts whose fates remain intermingled.

The 2000 circular gives a useful official definition of *xie jiao*. A *xie jiao* is any group that:

- a. establishes an illegal organization in the name of religion, *qigong*, etc.;
- b. deifies its leaders;
- c. initiates and spreads superstitions and heterodox beliefs;
- d. utilizes various means to fabricate and spread superstitions and heterodox [or cultic] beliefs to excite doubts and deceive the people, and recruit and control its members by various means;
- e. engages in disturbing social order in an organized manner that brings injury to the lives and properties of the citizens (危害公民生命財產安全等活動).

Each of the lists discussed below are *xie jiao* lists. The individual groups are banned because they are *xie jiao*, are harmful, and are hence illegal. *Xie jiao*, an existing concept in the Chinese political lexicon, has been applied to a contemporary religious landscape. This alerts us to the importance of the pre-Communist period in understanding how illegal religious groups are viewed. So, before listing the contemporary groups, I will discuss how such groups were seen in the past.

Banned Groups: A Brief Historical Background

In the early years of the People's Republic of China (PRC), policies toward religion were based on ideology and experience with religion gained before 1949. In the 1950s, the state reorganized existing religions under its own control. The early 1960s was a period of overt antagonism to all forms of religion. This hostility relaxed with the economic reforms introduced from 1979. But religion was not a topic that could be overlooked. Religious shocks such as the Falun Gong demonstrations in 1999 and the rapid rise in non-official Christianity continued to challenge the government.

From the 1990s, the state chose to target specific religious groups. These groups have been prominently declared illegal and suppressed by the various security bureaus. This targeted approach differed from the 1950s and 60s, in which the government made broad proscriptions focused on "religion" as a category that was harmful or, at the very least, false. The new focus moved to specific *groups* that were deemed to be harmful and thus illegal.

The early 1990s also saw an increasing awareness of groups widely categorized as "cults" outside China—for instance, Aum Shinrikyo, the Branch Davidians, and the Order of the Solar Temple. Chinese government units such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Public Security Bureau began initial efforts to track such "cults." Of course, individual groups inside China had already been proscribed, starting with the "Shouters" in 1983. But tracking became formalized when in 1995 a formal *xie jiao* list was issued. On this list, 10 of the 11 groups were home-grown. This change from informal tracking to formal proscription indicates a shift in perception about what things constitute "threats."

Such tracking was not new in Chinese history. It was a renewal of practices dating back at least as far as the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). The Qing regime showed a healthy respect for the power of religious ideas. This was a necessity—the Qing regime had to deal with a long list of religiously-tinged uprisings (Palmer 2008). These included the White Lotus Rebellions (白蓮教亂, *bailian jiaoluan*) of 1794–1806 and the Húi or Dungan Muslim Rebellions (同治陝甘回變, *tongzhi shangan huibian*) of 1862–77 and 1895–6.

The Qing Code (大清律例, *dading lülie*), a detailed body of edicts, offers a wealth of information about imperial attitudes towards religious formations. Of particular interest are the different categories of groups singled out in the Code. Secret societies were a particular concern. They were outlawed, and their leaders were seen as deceptive and dangerous (Sutton 2004, 209–37, 216). The Sacred Edict (聖諭, *shengyu*) of emperor Kangxi (康熙, r. 1662–1722), promulgated widely from 1670, also reflected this dislike of secret societies; it urged the people to “wipe out strange beliefs to elevate correct doctrine” (黜異端以崇正學, *chuyiduan yichongzhengxue*). Brotherhoods were another illegal category. A legal statute of 1671 confirmed that sworn brotherhoods were nothing but rebel organizations; the later penal code of 1764 specified strangulation for all of their leaders (Hsu 2004, 323–64, 327). Officials applied the term *xie jiao* (邪教) to sectarian groups starting from the Kangxi period (Liu 2004, 484).

Clearly, the Qing was not nervous only about secret societies. The state was suspicious of *any* religious sect (教, *jiao*) or association (會, *hui*). On the surface, officials sent to the provinces were dismissive of the leaders of such groups, calling them ignorant and uncultured people exploiting the hopes and anxieties of the poor (Bohr 2004, 393–430, 393). Nevertheless, religious activities were always on the radar. Qing policy was therefore one of wary observation and active suppression of non-orthodox groups.

Republican Policy (国民时代对宗教政策)

By the time the KMT party consolidated power in 1927, this imperial spirit of wariness had expanded into a conscious antagonism towards traditional religions. Anti-superstition and anti-tradition were growing intellectual trends among most educated Chinese beginning in the late Qing. The version of modernity promoted by many intellectuals left no room for such non-institutional religious practices as spirit writing or cultic worship. The KMT offered instead an ideology of rationality (Pittman 2001, 153). In addition, organized religions such as Buddhism were widely perceived as being backward, inhibiting China’s transformation into a modern nation. While Article 6 of the Republican constitution guaranteed “freedom of belief,” the government also maintained a strict separation of church and state (Goossaert, Kiely and Lagerwey 2005, 15).

Between 1927 and 1931, the Republican government launched a formal campaign against superstition and institutional religion. The government waged consistent warfare against Buddhism in particular. There was sporadic but widespread confiscation of the property of Buddhist and local deity temples. This campaign can be seen as an outgrowth of the powerful nationalistic movement dating from 1919, the May 4 Movement, and the allied spirit of anti-traditionalism (Laliberté 2004, 33). The KMT translated this attitude of anti-superstition into policy, as would the People's Republic after 1949. The campaign against superstition only ended when, in 1934, KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石, Jiang Jieshi, 1897–1975) launched his own spiritual program, the New Life Movement (新生活運動, *xinshenghuo yundong*).

PRC Religious Policy (人民时代对宗教政策)

The advent of the People's Republic of China from 1949 was bound to bring changes in all areas of civil society. Leaders of established religions had cause to worry. Marxist ideological antagonism toward religion in general was well known. In addition, religious leaders were often personally associated with the ruling classes. Some religious leaders chose to leave China altogether. Others stayed and were subject to persecution—senior leaders from Yiguandao, the Local Churches, and the Catholic Church suffered in prison, for instance. Beyond these examples, a large number of religious leaders managed to adapt to the new conditions. Despite this generally negative situation, it is not accurate to say the People's Republic did not allow religion of any sort; religion did survive, in many guises (Hattaway 2009). Variability in the tenor of the state's relationship to religious movements and groups is a constant theme in Chinese history. The Communist regime was not the first to suppress religious activity, or to attempt to co-opt major religions. But given the new regime's strong Marxist background, radical change in the position of religion was inevitable.

From our current perspective, looking back over sixty years of Communist rule, it is clear that there has not been a single, consistent approach. PRC thinking on religion has gone through many stages. In the 1950s, there were several campaigns that hurt established religions, indeed wiping such groups as Yiguandao from the landscape. But grass-roots religious practices continued. The 1960s, with the Cultural Revolution, marks a period of extreme antagonism

toward religion; most overt religious activity simply ceased, and many religious sites were destroyed. The very government agencies responsible for overseeing religion disappeared. The succeeding period of economic liberalism ushered in by the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平, 1904–1997, in power 1979–1997) saw a broad relaxation in government control over civil society. With economic liberalization came freedom of movement and opportunities for association, a social milieu exploited by many religions new and old. And since 2012 the government of Xi Jinping (习近平, b. 1953) has moved in a more conservative direction, with an emphasis on ideology reminiscent of the Mao era (1949–1975).

Current Structures for Managing Religion (目前管理宗教结构)

China's current constitution, promulgated in 1982, recognizes and gives protection to religion. Under article 36, all citizens have the right to participate in religious activities, or not; they cannot be discriminated against due to beliefs, nor can they be compelled to engage in religion. At the same time, no citizen may use religious activities to "disrupt public order" (*People's Daily*, Constitution, 2004; Chan and Carlson 2005).

All religious bodies in principle must register with SARA, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (国家宗教事务局, *guojia zongjiao shiwujū*), as well as with provincial level Religious Affairs Bureaus. In fact, many kinds of religious groups exist beyond the five officially sanctioned bodies of Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Christianity (Protestantism), and Catholicism. Unregistered groups include nearly all those that would be classified as new religions. Such unregistered groups are not *necessarily* illegal. Nevertheless, certain groups of a religious nature openly oppose the government. Falun Gong (法轮) and The Church of Almighty God (全能神) are the best known of these. We can place Falun Gong at one end of the spectrum of Chinese contemporary new religions. At that end, the state's position is not only to deem them illegal, but to actively suppress them. Many other groups, while illegal, are not actively suppressed. And still other groups, such as the Mormon Church congregations meeting quietly in large cities, are not registered but are nevertheless tolerated. In sum, there remains a broad spectrum of religious activity outside the SARA umbrella.

SARA and the Ministry of Public Security (公安部, *gonganbu*) are both organs administered directly by the State Council (国务院直属机构, *guowuyuan zhishujigou*). Under the Party organization, the office directly involved with religious policy is the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (中共中央办公厅, *zhonggong zhongyang bangongting*). Each of these units of governance have issued notices regarding the list of *xie jiao* groups.

Following the Falun Gong incident of 1999, the Public Security Bureau established a new organ, the Public Security Anti-Xie Jiao Organization (公安部反邪教组, *gonganbu fanxie jiao zu*), called informally “the 610 Office,” to focus on *xie jiao* groups. In November of 2000, another organization was established, commonly known in English as “the China Anti-Cult Association” (中国反邪教协会, *zhongguo fanxie jiao xiehui*, abbreviated as CACA). A distinction should be made between such government offices, which may use the term “anti-cult” in their English translations, and overseas civil society groups dedicated to fighting “cults.” The Chinese institutions in fact are anti-*xie jiao*. Officially, CACA is a voluntary, non-profit organization. In practice, the media appears to treat its announcements, for instance the June 4, 2014 front-page article on *xie jiao* groups, as official government notices.

State Management of Religion in the Reform Era (改革时期)

The new constitution, launched at the Fifth National People's Congress in 1978, laid the foundation for land reform and economic development. It also marked the triumph of the Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) approach. In the legal sphere, the 1978 constitution reinstated the citizens' right to equal treatment, along with the right to trial and defence.

But this constitution turned out to be preliminary. The government announced another new constitution in 1982 that incorporated most of the contents of the 1978 version. It also reiterated the rights of citizens to “protection from defamation of character, illegal arrest or detention, and unlawful search.”

Contrarian ideological voices were not silenced completely. These increasingly came to the fore even as China embarked headlong on the Four Modernizations (四个现代化 *sige xiandaihua*)—agriculture, industry, science and technology, and the military. Deng's approach was to liberalize the countryside first and rely on

export-led growth. In 1983, conservative elements in the senior leadership, especially propaganda chief Deng Liqun (邓力群, 1915–2015), launched an Anti-Spiritual Pollution campaign (清除精神污染, *qingchu jingshen wuran*). This effort can be interpreted as a reflection of the party's nervousness at growing international contacts as well as the impact of such western concepts as civil rights and human rights.

Despite regular changes at the top, the Chinese leaderships' strategic focus has been consistent throughout the reform era; all leaders since Deng have endeavoured to maintain social stability and rapid economic development. In this, they have succeeded: growth from 1978 to today has been generally rapid, marked by increasing urbanization and a rising standard of living (International Monetary Fund 2014). But legal freedoms have not always followed in the wake of economic development. The key question for NRMs (new religious movements) has been how the constitution's stand on religion is interpreted. In practice, the four major leaders since Deng have treated religion with varying degrees of emphasis.

Jiang Zemin (江泽民, b. 1926), who served as General Secretary from 1989–2002, had what appears to be a particular focus on religion. He famously admitted that religion was a force in society that may outlast the Communist party itself. This seemed to signal an official attitude of accommodation and liberalization that generally continued under his successor, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛, b. 1942; in power 2002–2012). Unlike Jiang, Hu rarely mentioned religion.

In late 2001, Jiang chaired a unique meeting of senior leaders, the Religious Work Conference, to discuss religion. The document that resulted from the meeting left little doubt that religion was a central concern for the Party. "It is," reminded Jiang, "impossible to lower one's guard [against religion.]" The document emphasized that religion, like all aspects of life in China, must come under the supervision of the law. This meant the need to "protect the legal, wipe out the illegal, resist infiltration, and attack crime" (Chan 2004, 325). Chan Kim-Kwong interprets this flurry of activity under Jiang as the Party's effort to adjust policy on religion in the face of such social changes as the WTO accession, which took place in 2001. The leadership chose to adopt a policy of recognition, containment, and guidance of the forces of religion, and, concurrently, harsh suppression of illegal groups. In many ways this rethink was a breakthrough: the Party leadership acknowledged religion to be complex and not simply a distortion

in worldview, as orthodox Marxism teaches (Chan 2004, 347). In other ways, this viewpoint was simply a rediscovery of certain previous positions on religion. For instance, the “five characteristics of religion,” an ideological position promulgated in the mid-1950s, had recognized religion’s long-term and complex nature (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 154–55).

The List of Banned Groups (被禁止名单)

One upshot of the Jiang period has been a clear distinction between approved and illegal religious groups. Since the mid-1990s, illegal and banned groups have been categorized and controlled through designation as *xie jiao*. At some point in the 1990s, a specific list of exactly which groups are categorized as *xie jiao* was compiled. This list has generated great interest in the international media.

The first extensive compilation included overseas groups such as the Branch Davidians and Aum Shinrikyo. In this initial version, the focus was on potentially dangerous overseas groups; *xie jiao* became analogous to the term “cult” as used in other countries. But in 1995, the list was expanded to designate groups deemed to be not only dangerous but also heretical. Many of these were home-grown and had evolved out of the Protestant traditions; only one group on the initial list, Supreme Master Ching Hai, was based outside Mainland China (Guzmán 1996). Later that year, the list was expanded by the inclusion of more local Protestant groups and such overseas groups as the Children of God and the Unification Church (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 339).

The Falun Gong incident of 1999, in which thousands of followers surrounded the senior leaders’ compound in Beijing, spurred the government’s thinking on *xie jiao*. For the first time a well-organized group, one that had been nurtured through government support, was seen as a threat to China and, more seriously, to the Party. The Ministry of Public Security in 1998 designated Falun Gong as a *xie jiao*. As if to clarify the implication, *xie jiao* organizations were formally made illegal by a legislative resolution in 1999. It was at this time that the “610” anti-cult unit was established. The State Council in 2000 followed this up by establishing a separate network of offices to deal with *xie jiao* (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 340–41). The government then published an updated list of

eighteen “heresies and cults” (China21.org 2000; Chinasource 2015; Appendix 1989).

This list has had an immense influence on the perception of new religions. First of all, inclusion meant the full weight of state coercion would be applied against any individual associated with any group on the list. This level of severity echoed the nearly absolute suppression of Yiguandao and other religious groups in the 1950s. For Falun Gong, as with Yiguandao before it, the only way to survive was to move overseas, away from the direct influence of the Chinese state. Inclusion also placed some groups into the status of illegal entities, and forced many of their members to “go underground.” Secondly, as Goossaert and Palmer note, the *xie jiao* list acted as the conceptual opposite pole to allowed religions. As a result, any group not belonging to one end of the spectrum or another was cast into a limbo of uncertainty (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 390–92). Some religious groups scurried to head off the threat of inclusion on the *xie jiao* list. Overseas religions, including the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Scientology, initiated discussions with the Chinese government to explain their peaceful intentions. Finally, these lists, publicized so widely, have given scholars a valuable window on official policy regarding what counts as acceptable religious behaviour. For this reason, we provide here a compilation of the various lists of officially proscribed religious groups, with each group’s year of official proscription listed in parentheses (China21.org 2000).

Religious Groups Banned in China

Pronouncements Issued Before 1995

1. The Shouters (呼喊派, *huhuanpai*)/Teachings of Chángshòu (常受教, *changshoujiao*): recognized in Chinese official sources as descending from the Living Stream Ministry founded in 1965 by Li Changshou (李常受, Witness Lee, 1905–1997) in the US (1983).

2. Full Scope Church (全范围教会, *quanfanwei jiaohui*): founded in Henan in 1984 by Xu Yongze (徐永泽) (1988).

3. The Disciple Society (门徒会, *mentuhui*): started by Li Sanbao (季三保, 1940?–1997?) in Shaanxi (陕西) (1989).

4. The Lingling Sect (灵灵教, *línglíngjiào*): founded in 1986 in Jiangsu (江苏) by Hua Xuehe (华雪和) (1991).

Issued in 1995 and consolidated in document #1995–50

5. Anointed King (被立王, *beiliwang*), established 1992 in Anhui (安徽) by Wu Yangming (吴杨明, 1945–1995) (1995).

6. The Church of Almighty God (全能神教会, *quannengshen jiaohui*)/Eastern Lightning (东方闪电, *dongfang shandian*)/True God (实际神, *shijishen*)/New Master of Power (新能力主, *xinnenglüzhu*): founded 1989 in Henan (河南) by Zhao Weishan (赵维山) (1995).

7. Guanyin Method (观音法门, *guanyin famen*), founded 1988 by Ching Hai (青海, *Qinghai*, b. 1950) in Taiwan (1995).

8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station (中华大陆行政执事站, *zhonghuadaluxíngzhengahishizhan*): founded 1994 in Henan by Wang Yongmin (王永民) (1995).

9. Children of God (天父的儿女, *tianfude ernu*), alternatively, The Family International (家庭国际, *jiating guoji*): founded in 1968 in California by David Berg (1919–1969) (1995).

10. Dami Mission (达米宣教会, *dami xuanjiaohu*): founded in the early 1990s in South Korea by Lee Jang Rim (1995).

11. True Buddha School (灵仙真佛宗, *lingxian zhenfozong*): founded 1979 in Taiwan by Lu Shengyan (卢胜彦, b. 1945) (1995).

Issued in Between 1995 and 2000, and consolidated in document #2000–39

12. New Testament Church (新约教会, *xinyuejiaohui*): founded by Kong Duen Yee (江端仪 Jiang Duanyi, 1923–1966) in Hong Kong 1963 (1995).

13. Bloody Holy Spirit (血水圣灵, *xueshuishengling*): founded 1988 in Taiwan by Zuo Kun (左坤, b. 1930) (1996).

14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society (世界以利亚福音宣教会, *shijieyiliya fuyin xuanjiaohui*), also known as the World Mission Society Church of God: started in Korea 1964 by Ahn Sahng-hong (1918–1985) (1996).

15. The Unification Church (统一教, *tongyijiao*): founded 1954 by Reverend Moon Sun-Myung (1920–2012) in South Korea (1997).

16. Lord God Sect (主神教, *zhushenjiao*): established 1993 by Liu Jiaguo (刘家国, 1964–1999) in Hunan (1998).

17. Three Grades of Servants (三班仆人派, *sanbanpurenpai*): founded in 1988 in Henan by Xu Wenku (徐文库, 1946–2006) (1999).

18. Falun Gong (法轮功): founded in 1992 in Jilin by Li Hongzhi (李洪志, b. 1951?) (suppressed from 1999).

19. Yuandunfamen (圆顿法门): founded by Xǔ Chengjiang (许成江) in Heilongjiang in 1998 (suppressed as a branch of Ching Hai from 1999).

Issued in the 2000s

20. Zhonggong (中功): established in the 1987 as a *qigong* group by Zhang Hongbao (张宏堡, 1954–2006) (2000).

21. South China Church (华南教会, *huananjiaohui*): founded 1990 in Hubei by Gong Shengliang (龚圣亮) (2001).

22. Pure Land Learning Association (净宗学会, *jingzong xuehui*): founded by Buddhist Master Chin Kung (净空, *Jingkong*, b. 1927) in Taiwan 1984 (deemed illegal 2011).

Of the 22 groups listed here, fully 16 (73%) fly under the banner of Christianity. Six of the Christian groups are overseas imports. Three of these (the Unification Church, the World Elijah Gospel Mission Society [aka World Mission Society Church of God], and the Dami Mission) are Christian groups from South Korea. The Children of God (The Family) is an international NRM that started in America. The New Testament Church has its roots in Hong Kong and Taiwan. And the Bloody Holy Spirit originated in Taiwan. The other ten Christian groups developed in China.

Consolidated List: Noting 16 Christian-inspired Groups (73%)

1. The Shouters 呼喊派
2. Full Scope Church 全范围教会
3. The Disciple Society 门徒会
4. The Lingling Sect 灵灵教
5. Anointed King 被立王
6. Church of Almighty God 全能神教会
7. Guanyin Method 观音法门 (Ching Hai)
8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站
9. Children of God 天父的儿女
10. Dami Mission 达米宣教会
11. True Buddha School 灵仙真佛宗
12. New Testament 新约教会
13. Bloody Holy Spirit 血水圣灵
14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society 世界以利亚福音宣教会
15. The Unification Church 统一教
16. Lord God Sect 主神教
17. Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人派
18. Fǎlúngōng 法轮功
19. Yúandùnfāmén 圆顿法门
20. Zhōnggōng 中功
21. South China Church 华南教会
22. Pure Land Learning Association 净土学会

According to the Public Security documents, several groups have roots, or their early members, in one Christian group known as the Shouters. These groups include the Teachings of Changshou (said to be another name for Shouters), the All-Powerful, The Church of Almighty God, and the Mainland China Administrative Deacon Stations (China21.org 1995). The Shouters in turn are linked in official discourse to the Local Churches (Congressional-Executive Commission 2014, 98). The Local Churches are a Chinese Christian movement founded in the 1920s by Watchman Nee (倪柝声, Ni Tuosheng, 1903–1972). The movement eventually spread overseas, first to Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan, then, under the leadership of Witness Lee (李常受, Li Changshou), to the U.S., where it is most commonly known as the Living Stream Ministry. The Shouters came to the attention of authorities early on in the reform era; they were the first group in that era to be officially banned, in 1983 (Bays 2012, 191). Some sources cast doubt on the very existence of a single group called “Shouters;” the name could have started as a label given by irate neighbours describing groups that sang or prayed loudly. Living Stream Ministry and Local Churches groups outside China deny their connection with the Shouters.

Not all the newer Christian groups are derived from Local Churches. A former True Jesus Church member established the Lingling Sect (China21.org 2000). Lord God Sect was founded by a follower of the Anointed King. And the South

China Church descended from the Full Scope Church (China21.org 2000). A final Christian group, Three Grades of Servants, is not described as being descended from any other group.

Consolidated List: Noting 6 **Syncretic** and **Buddhist**-inspired Groups (27%)

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. The Shouters 呼喊派 | 12. New Testament 新约教会 |
| 2. Full Scope Church 全范围教会 | 13. Bloody Holy Spirit 血水圣灵 |
| 3. The Disciple Society 门徒会 | 14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society 世界以利亚福音宣教会 |
| 4. The Lingling Sect 灵灵教 | 15. The Unification Church 统一教 |
| 5. Anointed King 被立王 | 16. Lord God Sect 主神教 |
| 6. Church of Almighty God 全能神教会 | 17. Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人派 |
| 7. Guanyin Method 观音法门 (Ching Hai) | 18. Zhonggong 中功 |
| 8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站 | 19. Fǎlúngōng 法轮功 |
| 9. Children of God 天父的儿女 | 20. Yuandunfamen 圆顿法门 |
| 10. Dami Mission 达米宣教会 | 21. South China Church 华南教会 |
| 11. True Buddha School 灵仙真佛宗 | 22. Pure Land Learning Association 净土学会 |

The six non-Christian groups, at 27%, are clearly in the minority. There are, interestingly, few purely Buddhist groups. The major exceptions are the True Buddha School (真佛宗), which presents itself as a representative of Chinese Vajrayana (esoteric) Buddhism, and the Amitabha Society (净宗学会). The True Buddhist School was founded by Lu Sheng-Yen (Lu Shengyan, 盧勝彥) in Taiwan. The Amitabha Society is a Chinese Mahayana group founded by Master Chin Kung (净空) that enjoyed popularity in southern, central and northeast China during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The four remaining groups, all non-Buddhist, are Falun Gong, Zhonggong, Guanyin Method, and Yuandunfamen. Falun Gong is a new religion that has been prominent in many cities around the world. Zhonggong was a health promotion network from the same period of *qigong* fever as Falun Gong. Zhonggong will be discussed in further detail below. Guanyin Method refers to the Suma Ching Hai movement already introduced above, whose teachings largely derive from the Punjabi Sant Mat tradition. And the Yuandunfamen, in official accounts, is considered to be an offshoot of Ching Hai.

Overall there is balance between the groups which began overseas, accounting for 45% of the total, and the home-grown groups.

Consolidated List:
Noting 10 Overseas Groups (45%)

1. The Shouters 呼喊派	12. New Testament 新约教会
2. Full Scope Church 全范围教会	13. Bloody Holy Spirit 血水圣灵
3. The Disciple Society 门徒会	14. World Elijah Gospel Mission Society 世界以利亚福音宣教会
4. The Lingling Sect 灵灵教	15. The Unification Church 统一教
5. Anointed King 被立王	16. Lord God Sect 主神教
6. Church of Almighty God 全能神教会	17. Three Grades of Servants 三班仆人派
7. Guanyin Method 观音法门 (Ching Hai)	18. Falun Gong 法轮功
8. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station 中华大陆行政执事站	19. Yuandunfamen 圆顿法门
9. Children of God 天父的儿女	20. Zhonggong 中功
10. Dami Mission 达米宣教会	21. South China Church 华南教会
11. True Buddha School 灵仙真佛宗	22. Pure Land Learning Association 净土学会

The list's appearance and public dissemination, especially in 1995 and, more recently, in 2014 and 2017, show its continuing usefulness as a tool for communicating official policy. Yet this list represents only a fraction of new religious activity in China. It will not, for instance, include groups that are part of the network of officially allowed temples or churches, or their unregistered counterparts in the vast grey economy of religious activity. Nor does the list include such groups as the Fangcheng Fellowship (方城团契, *fangcheng tuanqi*), an unregistered network that is regularly repressed by local authorities in Henan.

Recent Religious Policy Under Xi Jinping

China's policy under the most recent leadership of Xi Jinping (习近平), CCP General Secretary since 2012, has moved in a conservative direction. President Xi has on many occasions reiterated the official policy of support for religion. He is quoted as saying that "if the people have faith, the nation has hope, and the country has strength" (Johnson 2017). At the same time, Xi signaled an increasingly harsh approach to unapproved religious activities. In April 2016, Xi

presided over the National Conference on Religious Works (全国宗教工作会议 *quanguozongjiao gongzuohuiyi*). This unusual move indicated an intensification of focus on the subject of religion. In addition, local authorities have cracked down on Christian activity in Zhejiang province by destroying church towers (Phillips 2015). Most recently, the Party has clarified that party members must not be members of religions, and that they are expected to believe in atheism (Finamore 2015). We may conclude that for the current regime “faith,” then, is not a problem. Faith in which particular belief system, on the other hand, is of intense interest.

At the recently completed 19th National Party Congress, Xi mentioned he planned to sinicize (中国化, *zhongguohua*) religion, by which he means inserting socialist values into every religion. Zhang Yijiong (张裔炯, b. 1955), executive deputy head of the United Front Work Department (中共中央统战部 / 中共中央统一战线工作部 [*zhonggong zhongyang tongzhanbu / zhonggong zhongyang tongyizhanxian gongzuobu*]), confirmed that “socialist core values” will take precedence (Gao 2017). This means that youth will be “guided to a belief in science.” Zhang reiterated standard policy against using religion to advocate separatism. Xi also reiterated Party policy banning religious believers from joining the Communist Party. In the light of these comments by Xi and Zhang, a previously mooted trip to China by Pope Francis is now considered unlikely (Maza 2017).

The religious affairs regulations were updated in September of 2017, following a draft published in 2016. Specific changes include a renewed focus on the internet. The updated regulations also confirmed that the Public Security Ministry and its organs have responsibility for controlling *illegal* religious activity (Batke 2017). Responsibility for *monitoring* religion extends to every level of government, down to the most local.

On September 18, 2017, the revamped China Anti-Cult (*xie jiao*)-website reiterated the list of banned groups which had been listed publicly in 2014. Of the total 20 groups, eleven were listed as being “dangerous:”

1. Falun Gong (法轮功)
2. The Church of Almighty God (全能神)
3. The Shouters (呼喊派)

4. The Disciples Society (门徒会)
5. Unification Church (统一教)
6. Guanyin Method (观音法门)
7. Bloody Holy Spirit (血水圣灵)
8. Full Scope Church (全范围教会)
9. Three Grades of Servants (三班仆人派)
10. True Buddha School (灵仙真佛宗)
11. Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station (中华大陆行政执事站)

In addition, the website warned the public to “be on guard against” an additional nine groups, all of which are listed in the consolidated list of banned groups we presented above. From this list it appears there are two categories, eleven major (“dangerous”) groups, and nine others, for a total of 20.

There is no need to list out these remaining nine groups. This combined list of 20 is *identical* with the consolidated summary list of 22, given above, with two exceptions. The two are worthy of comment because of the light they show on how the list is used.

Zhonggong (中功)

Zhonggong was a *qigong* (气功) practice group that rose in the 1980s–90s period of “*qigong* fever” researched in depth by David Palmer and others (Palmer 2007; Thornton 2010). It was founded by Zhang Hongbao (张宏堡, 1954–2006) in 1987 as the China Health Care and Wisdom Enhancement Practice (中华养生益智功, *zhonghua yangsheng yizhigong*). The group was well-organized and widespread in China up until its banning in 1999. *Zhonggong* was highly commercial. It was organized as a corporation, the Qilin Group (麒麟集团, *qilin jituan*), with 300 subsidiaries. It was an early example of a “cybersect” that relied heavily on the internet (Thornton 2003, 149–50). Zhang Hongbao, the founder, claimed it had 38 million followers.

Zhonggong’s teachings were from the start a challenge to Marxist orthodoxy (He 2000, 224–26). But what sealed its subsequent fate in China was its very

success. Zhonggong gave adherents a systematic program of self-development that had its own theology and promised practical results. Its success reflected a strong demand for this type of teaching throughout Chinese society. The highly organized structure also led the government to suspect it had potential to become anti-governmental (He 2000, 224–26). The April 10, 1999 demonstration by Falun Gong, in which members surrounded the senior political leadership's Zhongnanhai compound, merely confirmed that all *qigong* organizations, including Zhonggong, were dangerous. The group was banned along with other similar groups after the October 1999 NPC Standing Committee resolution.

Unlike Falun Gong, however, Zhonggong did not survive as an organization. Zhang Hongbao went into self-imposed exile in the United States, and died in a car accident in 2006. According to a 2014 excerpt on a Quanzhou City, Fujian, government website, once in America Zhang established a shadow government with himself as president. He also became active in a Chinese Alliance Against Political Oppression, which was in opposition to the PRC state. Following his death, his secretary Zhang Xiao (张晓) has remained active in this effort (Luo River 2014). Nevertheless, the fact that the group appeared on a previous list of banned groups but has not appeared in recent (2014, 2017) listings indicates it is most likely not perceived as a threat by the central authorities. Despite Zhang's open involvement in anti-PRC activities, it appears that from the government's perspective Zhonggong was successfully eliminated from Chinese society.

Pure Land Learning Association (净宗学会)

Pure Land Learning Association is banned through a regional circular, not on the national list. Nevertheless, I include the group here to underline the growing importance of regional actions by organs of the State. Regional and local government entities, in taking action against banned groups, certainly reflect state policy.

The Pure Land Learning Association was founded by a Chinese monk, Chin Kung (净空, traditional Chinese 淨空, *Jing Kong*), in Australia in 2001. Chin Kung was born in China in 1927 but moved to Taiwan, where he became a monk in 1959. Chin Kung has founded many organizations to promote Buddhism worldwide. His teachings are recorded and distributed widely. He now lives in Australia.

While Chin Kung's activities have not been included in the national list of banned groups, there is certainly a concerted effort to ban all groups and activities related to him. A Tianjin Anti-Cult Association (天津市反邪教协会, *tianjinshi fanxie jiao xiehui*) website, "Humanism" (人本, *renben*), summarizes activities underway by officials in 28 separate provinces and cities throughout China, from Jilin in the north to Guizhou in the south (Humanism 2015). Most activities dated from 2011–12. The article notes that progress has already been made "under the leadership and oversight and instructions of central leadership comrades" (中央领导同志的重视与指示下, *zhongyang lingdao tongzhi de zhongshi yu zhishixia*), a clear indication that all suppression activities are approved and coordinated by *central* government authorities. The statement also notes that, under the provisions of the Regulations for Management of Religious Activities of Foreigners within China (中華人民共和國境內外國人宗教活動管理規定, *zhonghuarenmin gongheguo jingnei waiguoren zongjiao huodong guanliguiding*), all dharma lecture halls and training centers previously used by Chin Kung's organizations can be legally converted to "other uses." Chin Kung, despite his Chinese heritage, is being seen as a foreigner promoting his own teachings.

The ban on the Amitabha (Pure Land) Learning Association evidently narrow down to these issues:

- Chin Kung's organization and influence had grown quickly;
- his lectures and teachings were promulgated directly to believers, without central control;
- his organization had adopted an aggressive, multi-pronged strategy of pursuing many activities over many regions and sites. Chin Kung's followers have, for example, distributed tens of thousands of free copies of his books throughout East and Southeast Asia through their Buddha Educational Foundation. They have also founded local centers in North America, Europe, Hong Kong, Macau, and throughout Southeast Asia.

Like Zhonggong, the various Pure Land Associations constitute in effect a network that is too well-organized and uncontrolled to be allowed to continue. At the same time, the circular does not formally refer to the organization as a *xie jiao*. We may conjecture about the reasons for this, but the conventional nature of Chin Kung's teachings and his vast number of Buddhist devotees have clearly caused the Chinese government to adopt a different strategy than simply using

Public Security to arrest adherents. The nearest analogy to the clampdown on the Pure Land Association is the destruction of illegally erected crosses and chapels in Zhejiang between 2014 and 2016, mentioned above. These two examples may point to a sensitivity to tackling large, established religious groups through the *xie jiao* branding method. In such cases the government may prefer a coordinated administrative effort to suppress religious activity without mass arrests that play prominently in the media.

The List as Education Tool

One further aspect of the list is worth discussing, its educational function. As mentioned above, government agencies promulgated the list of eleven important banned groups in June, 2014, and again in September, 2017. The 2014 pronouncement was accompanied by commentary that reflect an analysis of theology of various groups. In June 3, the *Youth Daily* explained there are four categories of dangerous cults, based on their teachings. Seven of the eleven are classified as millenarian. In three, the leader describes himself as God. In another two groups, sex is commonly used as a method of promulgation. And in a final category, two directly attack the Chinese government (China Commentary 2014).



This type of message is a departure from straightforward calls to avoid *xie jiao* groups because they are illegal, or dangerous. Here we find an effort to discuss openly and, in a sense, to educate. The analysis of these groups goes into more detail on teachings, theology, methods, and politics than has our own analysis, which focuses on origin and tradition. There was also a handy chart (above) which helped the reader place the different groups using these categories.

This level of discussion is in some ways extraordinary. It seems to acknowledge that readers are educated enough to understand how religious groups function. It goes far beyond the standard anti-religion and anti-*xie-jiao* rhetoric of previous campaigns, for instance the anti-Falun Gong rhetoric used to counter the frequent Falun Gong street demonstrations in Hong Kong. Intriguingly, in a nation in which formal religious education is rarely offered in any schools besides a handful of universities and seminaries, there is now a degree of willingness to discuss religious traits. Conceivably, though, there may be some risk in presenting such detail. Like the formulation of the list itself, the government here draws attention to the presence of such groups, and how they differ. Such openness may serve as a two-edged sword, perking interest as much as it deters participation.

Conclusion

The existence of a single, “official” list is not confirmed by national or regional governments. Instead various bodies within China have issued announcements and circulars about illegal groups. Yet the “list” clearly exists, based on published documents. And it clearly reflects policy about what is a *xie jiao*. While it has been remarkably consistent over the past twenty years, the list is liable to shift in line with the state’s thinking on religion. It is thus of unique value to scholars.

The post-1949 period has been characterized by periods of intermittent suppression and relaxation. Nevertheless religious activity continues to flourish in today’s China, in particular Buddhism and Christianity. The implications of this activity are far-reaching. For instance, the number of Christian believers in China, estimated at anywhere between 60 and 108 million, will by some estimates give China the largest Christian population in the world by 2050 (Lian 2010; Johnson 2015). Such trends have led the leadership to re-evaluate the position and significance of religion in modern China, and to adjust policy at

several turns. Much of that policy was settled in the 1982 constitution, which remains the primary legal and administrative framework for managing religious activity. Yet as religious activity progresses the possibility of sudden policy changes remains real.

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