

## **Fake News! Chinese Mobilization of Resources Against The Church of Almighty God as a Global Phenomenon**

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**ABSTRACT:** A growing philosophical and sociological literature examines the concept of “fake news,” its definition, and its rise to prominence during the campaign for the 2016 presidential elections in the United States. Religion has proved a fertile ground for fake news, spread not only by private actors but also by governments, which try to justify their repression of the groups they do not approve of. The Chinese government has emerged as a main purveyor of fake news, aimed at justifying the persecution of groups it labels as *xie jiao* (“heterodox teachings”). The article discusses the notion of “fake news” in general, and examines how the Chinese authorities, with the co-operation of certain Western media, engaged in a massive campaign of fake news in their attempt to discredit one of the groups they persecute as a *xie jiao*, The Church of Almighty God.

**KEYWORDS:** Church of Almighty God, *Xie Jiao*, Fake News, Fake News and Religion, Religious Liberty in China.

### *The Coming of “Fake News”*

A meta-analysis conducted in 2017 identified some 7,000 scholarly studies on disinformation and misinformation (Chan, Jones, Jamieson and Albarracin 2017). Some 250 refer specifically to “fake news” and none is older than 2016, although the term “fake news” had been already introduced during World War I. “Fake news” became a household name after it was used by Donald Trump in his presidential campaign in 2016 (and in his first presidential press conference in 2017). It was also adopted by his opponents to denounce the maneuvers of Trump’s domestic and international (i.e. Russian) supporters (Jankowski 2018).

Being in its infancy, the social scientific study of fake news typically spends significant time in trying to determine what fake news is (Tandoc, Lim and Ling 2017). Farkas and Schou argue that it is a “floating signifier,” with no “real” meaning. It is mostly used, with polemical purposes, by the opponents respectively of (a) the mainline liberal media; (b) the Western conservative media and the Russian propaganda supporting them; and (c) the pervasive manipulation of consumers by digital capitalism (Farkas and Schou 2018).

Other scholars criticize these approaches as unilateral (e.g. Jankowski 2018, 251). Although increasingly controversial, the classical paradigm of communication theory suggests that news be studied based on the sequel production – message – reception (McQuail 2010). Reception can be studied empirically, assessing how much fake news determine our behavior (e.g. by Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, in a controversial study dismissing the impact of fake news on the American presidential elections of 2016 as minimal).

Philosophers are among the scholars most interested in fake news, and propose several definitions. Neil Levy argues that,

Fake news is the presentation of false claims that purport to be about the world in a format and with a content that resembles the format and content of legitimate media organisations (Levy 2017, 20).

Regina Rini believes that,

A fake news story is one that purports to describe events in the real world, typically by mimicking the conventions of traditional media reportage, yet is known by its creators to be significantly false, and is transmitted with the two goals of being widely re-transmitted and of deceiving at least some of its audience (Rini 2017, E45).

Yet another philosopher, University of Berlin’s Axel Gelfert, proposes a simpler definition:

Fake news is the deliberate presentation of (typically) false or misleading claims *as news*, where the claims are misleading *by design* (Gelfert 2018, 108).

Figure 1 shows different kinds of fake news at work.

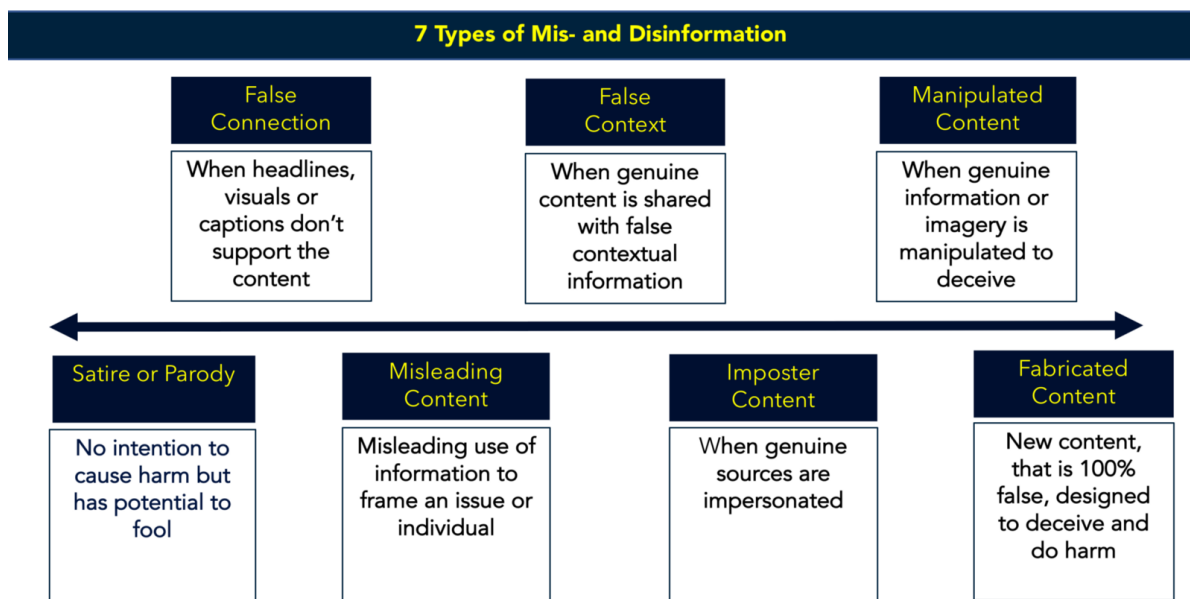


Figure 1. Different Kinds of Fake News. Source: Wardle (2017).

“Fake news” is not simply “false news.” It is false news deliberately circulated through sustained and reiterated campaigns, and presented in such a way that many would believe they are true. Contemporary fake news goes one step beyond traditional, Cold War-style disinformation because of its unprecedented capacity of mobilizing simultaneously a variety of media. “A core feature of contemporary fake news is that it is widely circulated online” (Bakir and McStay 2017, 154).

Gelfert argues that skilled producers of fake news exploit four pre-existing cognitive biases:

- *confirmation bias*: we accept new information if it confirms our beliefs and prejudices
- *repetition effect*: “if they continue to say it, it should be true”
- *priming*: use of words that trigger a non-conscious memory reaction, e.g., in our field, “cult”
- *affective arousal*: emotions lower our defenses, e.g. “they abuse children” (Gelfert 2018, 111–13).

### *Religion and Fake News*

Well before the expression “fake news” became fashionable, scholars of religion had noticed how rumors were spread against “bad” religions and made credible by both their reiteration and their endorsement by “authoritative” sources. As early as 1960, David Brion Davis had studied how what we would today call “fake news” were used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century against Catholicism and other minority religions in America (Davis 1960). Jim Richardson noticed the same phenomenon in creating a widespread “cultphobia” during the “cult wars” and beyond (Kilbourne and Richardson 1986; Richardson 1978, 1979, 1993).

Traditionally, “fake news” about religions labeled as “heresies” or “cults” were spread by private “moral entrepreneurs”: secular anti-religious activists or “anti-cultists,” or rival religionists. In recent years, we have witnessed the spread of “fake news” about religious movements organized, in a much more systematic way, not by private but by public actors. Russia has emerged as a leading producer of fake news about both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Scientology, whose persecution at home it tries to justify internationally.

Not unlike Russia, China has the problem of justifying internationally the persecution of several religions, particularly those it lists as *xie jiao* and denounces as “pseudo-religions” or “cults.” Being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime punished by Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code with a jail penalty of three to seven years “or more” (Permanent Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Vienna n.d). *Xie jiao* (whose translation as “evil cults” is inaccurate) means “heterodox teachings.” Lists of *xie jiao* were compiled since the late Ming era (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 27–31; Palmer 2012). Definitions are vague and, for all practical purposes, a *xie jiao* is a group listed as such in the official list of *xie jiao* (Irons 2018).

The Church of Almighty God (CAG) is considered by CCP as a quintessential *xie jiao*. The CAG is a Christian new religious movement founded in China, in 1991. It teaches that Jesus returned to Earth and incarnated as Almighty God, a woman born in China, and now living in the U.S., who teaches the fullness of truth. Most of her utterances are collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh* (Introvigne 2017a; Folk 2018). The CAG is led and shepherded by the person it recognizes as Almighty God. The CAG believes that, after the

manifestation of Almighty God, the Holy Spirit indicated that Zhao Weishan is the “priest,” the “man used by the Holy Spirit,” who cooperates with the incarnate Almighty God and is responsible for the administrative work of the church. Zhao Weishan also escaped to the U.S. and obtained refugee status there.

The CAG is perceived by the CCP as a fierce enemy. In fact, it denounces the persecution of Christians and identifies the CCP with the Red Dragon of the *Book of Revelation* (Dunn 2008). However, if one reads CAG literature, it is clear that the Red Dragon would fall by itself, and there is no appeal to a revolution (Introvigne 2017a).

The CAG has been listed as a *xie jiao* since 1995. CAG statistics claim that more than 300,000 CAG members have been arrested in China to date. Figures are difficult to confirm, but there are frequent references in CCP’s own literature to extensive anti-CAG campaigns. There is also believable evidence that many CAG members have been tortured, and some died while in custody in highly suspicious circumstances (CAP-LC and others 2018).

### *Fake News Against The Church of Almighty God*

There is a whole *domestic* propaganda apparatus spreading false news against the *xie jiao*, particularly through the specialized police unit Office 610 and the Chinese Anti-*Xie-Jiao* Association (Chinese Anti-Cult Association, CACA), established in 2000, which has direct ties with the CCP (Irons 2018, 39–41). This propaganda, while perhaps effective, appears to repeat the schemes of traditional Soviet-style disinformation, and lacks the sophistication that is typical of the contemporary notion of fake news.

Although the same false news is spread in China and abroad, I will focus here on the international propaganda, which corresponds more clearly to the scholarly definition of fake news. A document leaked by the CAG to scholars dated June 16, 2014 (copy in my archives), allegedly transcribing the content of a teleconference of June 16, 2014, led by officers of the Central 610 Office, presents a credible anti-CAG disinformation plan by the CCP. The model suggested by this and other documents is as follows:

1. News are created by Office 610 and CACA.

2. English-language Chinese media launch them (not necessarily the *People's Daily*, which would be too obvious).

3. For whatever reason, *British* (rather than, say, American or French) correspondents in Beijing often pick up the fake news first. *Most* first Western reports can be traced back to two media outlets only, BBC and *The Telegraph*.

4. Since, these media are regarded as authoritative, rank high in Google, and are eminently quotable in Wikipedia, the fake news spread to thousands of international media (with occasional direct help by Chinese agencies in various countries).

### *Case no. 1: The McDonald's Murder*

Not coincidentally but, if we believe the leaked document, pursuing a deliberate plan, the mother of all anti-CAG fake news is the murder of a woman in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014. That the murder occurred was unfortunately very much real. The fake news part is that it was perpetrated by the CAG.

I was among the Western experts of new religious movements and the CAG invited by CACA to two 2017 conferences in Zhengzhou and Hong Kong to discuss the notion of *xie jiao* and The Church of Almighty God. I went there with an open mind, as recognized by Chinese governmental media (*KKNews* 2017).

However, based on documents published by the same Chinese authorities, I concluded that the McDonald's murder was perpetrated by a *different* religious movement, with a similar name but not related to the CAG. It venerated a *different* living Almighty God, one God in two persons, its two female leaders Lü Yingchun and Zhang Fan (1984–2015) (Introvigne 2017b). Other scholars who studied the documents share my conclusions (see Introvigne and Bromley 2017).

The statements by the assassins were indeed unequivocal. Lü Yingchun stated at trial,

Zhang Fan and I are the unique spokeswomen for the real 'Almighty God.' The government has been cracking down on the Almighty God that Zhao Weishan believes in, not the 'Almighty God' we mention. They are fake 'Almighty God,' while we are the real 'Almighty God' (*Beijing News* 2014).

Zhang Fan stated in an interview that, “I never had contacts with The Church of Almighty God” (Phoenix Satellite TV 2014).

A few days after the incident, however, Chinese media (this time including the *People’s Daily*) attributed it to the CAG. BBC (with great fanfare: Gracie 2014) and later *The Telegraph* (Moore 2014) picked up the story through their correspondents in Beijing. According to a research I performed in November 2017, by then some 20,000 Western media had attributed the homicide to the CAG.

After the scholarly articles published in 2017, the matter should have been laid to rest. Periodically, however, the CCP tries to revive the dead horse of the McDonald’s case. Zhang Fan had been executed in 2015 but Lü Yingchun was in jail, and so was Zhang Fan’s younger sister, Zhang Hang, who had also been convicted for complicity in the murder. Zhang Hang had stated during the trial that she “did not believe very devoutly” (*Beijing News* 2014) and, as mentioned earlier, Lü Yingchun had vehemently denied any association with the CAG. Chinese media reported that they were successfully “re-educated” in jail, participated in competitions for the best criticism of *xie jiao*, and were rewarded with sentence reductions (*China News* 2017). To prove their “re-education,” the two women now declared that they had been initially corrupted by reading the CAG scriptures. However, despite the long permanence in jail, Zhang Hang still maintained that their faith was that God had returned to Earth in the dual person of her sister and Lü Yingchun (*Kaiwind Net* 2016), a belief obviously very different from the CAG. As late as 2018, while the persecution of the CAG intensified with a massive wave of arrests, the CCP was still trying to attribute the homicide to the CAG by quoting as reliable sources the BBC and other Western media (China Anti-Xie-Jiao Website 2018), conveniently forgetting that it had fed the fake news to them in the first place. It was an interesting case of “fake news about fake news,” showing once again that, after several years, the CCP still felt the need to refer to the McDonald’s murder to justify the persecution.

### *Case No. 2: The Story of Guo Bin*

Another item of anti-CAG fake news is that in 2013, in the Chinese province of Shanxi, CAG members gouged out the eyes of a six-year old boy. Holly Folk, one of the Western scholars invited to the anti-CAG conferences in 2017 in

China, studied the related documents and concluded that the crime was committed by the boy's aunt, the CAG had nothing to do with it, and accusations against the church were spread by Chinese anti-cultists only after the McDonald's homicide, *several months* after the police investigation had been closed (Folk 2017).

Folk shows that the false attribution of the crime to the CAG was first spread by two Chinese anti-cult Web Sites and the *Want China Times*, a now-defunct pro-CCP daily in Taiwan. Hong Kong journalist Brendon Hong was then the link who published the story and relayed it to Western media (Folk 2017, 100).

### *Case No. 3: Predicting the End of the World in 2012?*

Widespread fake news accuse the CAG of having instigated riots in China based on the prediction of the end of the world in 2012. However, there is no end of the world (rather, its transformation) in CAG theology, and the disasters predicted in the Bible will *follow* the end of the earthly mission of Almighty God, who was alive and well in 2012 (Introvigne 2017a).

It is true that some CAG believers in China, like many other Chinese, developed an interest in the so-called Mayan prophecies predicting the end of the world in 2012, and some tried to use this theory as an evangelization tool. But they were rebuked by the leaders and many were expelled (Dunn 2015, 95). Zhao Weishan stated, "We do not preach the end of the world... The theory of the end of the world is wrong" (The Church of Almighty God 2012b).

Banners and a brochure were supplied by CACA and other Chinese sources to Western media and scholars "proving" that the CAG had announced the end of the world in 2012. The brochure (one photocopy of which is in the archives of CESNUR), however, in fact did not mention the end of the world at all, although its title was indeed *After 2012, The Last Ticket: Gain Salvation in the Catastrophes*. If it has not been fabricated, it is an example of the literature produced by *dissidents* who resisted the warnings of Zhao Weishan and, when identified, were promptly expelled.

Australian scholar Emily Dunn argued that the contested brochure might be authentic, since the same ark drawing also appeared on another brochure once diffused by the CAG (Dunn 2016, 219). The latter, however, *The Church of*



*Almighty God—The Last Ark*, did not mention 2012 at all—nor did it mention theories of the end of the world (The Church of Almighty God 2012a).

*Case no. 4: “The CAG Pays Money for Conversions”*

A fourth example of fake news, which unfortunately has played a role in leading to decisions where asylum has been denied to CAG refugees in Europe (see e.g. Home Office 2017), is that “a [CAG] member receives 20,000 yuan (\$3,237) for every new person they convert” and that in turn new members should pay “2,000 yuan (\$323) in membership fees” and spend extra money for buying CAG literature (Mintz 2014).

CAG members interviewed by the undersigned and other scholars vehemently deny that this is the case, and given the number of converts, even the richest religious organization in the world would have been quickly bankrupted by giving money awards for each new convert. They claim there is no membership fee for any church members. As for the literature, CAG rules mandate that, “Believers of The Church of Almighty God can enjoy all of the books of God’s words, spiritual books, and audio and video productions without charge” (The Church of Almighty God 2017).

Obviously, monetary contributions are needed in a large organization such as the CAG. The CAG’s *Principles*, however, leave a large individual latitude. “Some insist on making an offering of ten percent, while others contribute in different ways. As long as it is being offered willingly, God will gladly accept it. God’s house only specifies that those who have only believed in God for less than a year are temporarily exempt from providing any offerings, while poor people are not required to provide any offerings but can make offerings according to their faith. The church will not accept offerings that might lead to family disputes. Those making an offering of money must pray several times, and only after they are sure they are completely willing and are certain they will never have any regrets are they to be allowed to make their offerings” (The Church of Almighty God 2003).

The derogatory information was spread by the *Newsweek*-associated *International Business Times* in 2014 (Mintz 2014), in an article largely based (and quoting verbatim on this issue) a post-McDonald’s laundry list of accusations against the CAG published by the official newspaper of the Chinese regime, the *People’s Daily* (*People’s Daily* 2014).

*Case no. 5: Evangelical Christian Leader Kidnapped by the CAG*

While the CCP created *most* fake news against the CAG, others originated with Evangelical Christians, very much disturbed by the fact that the phenomenal growth of the CAG largely happened at their expenses. In this case, news traveled from Chinese Evangelicals to Evangelicals abroad, initially *without* the cooperation of CCP, which only recently realized that these incidents were of interest to Western scholars and added them to its laundry list of anti-CAG propaganda items.

Some Christian opponents of the CAG also claim that in 2002, it kidnapped 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). When documents are studied, however, this story too appears to be largely unbelievable (Introvigne 2018).

The story is great material for Evangelical novels (which were in fact written: Flinchbaugh 2006; Shen and Bach 2017, the latter a novelized account co-authored by one of the self-proclaimed victims), but it is hard to believe that,

- (a) the CAG, hunted as it was by the Chinese police, was able to mount a large-scale kidnapping operation;
- (b) the CGF, which was also persecuted and operating underground at that time, did not verify who those who invited them to a Christian seminar were; and
- (c) while allegedly informed of what happened, the Chinese police did not arrest anybody.

It is possible that in fact the CGF leaders went to a training invited by members of the CAG, who did not immediately advertise the name of their church, which some may interpret as deception but can also be explained with the climate of persecution. Then, they reconstructed the event by using the familiar captivity narrative of having been “kidnapped by a cult,” while in fact no kidnapping in the normal and legal meaning of the word happened.

*Case no. 6: The International Campaign of 2017*

The leaked document suggests that Chinese propaganda should try to enlist Western *scholars* against the CAG, as it was done with some degree of success for Falun Gong. This was perhaps one reason for our invitations to China in 2017.

But it backfired spectacularly, generating an unprecedented amount of scholarly research *sympathetic* to the CAG. Three of the scholars invited to China signed affidavits or appeals to correct false information about the CAG.

This memorable failure of the attempt to recruit scholars to fight the CAG was perhaps not unrelated to a new massive campaign of fake news in the second half of 2017. The first conference against the CAG was organized in Henan between 23 and 27 June 2017. In the intentions of CCP, the Henan conference should have offered some international academic justification to the persecution, but this did not happen. However, the usual journalistic connections were still working. In early July 2017, nearly 600 CAG members were arrested in Zhejiang Province. The Chinese governmental media did not report it until July 25, 2017, when they claimed that only 18 members of the CAG had been arrested. On July 27, the Beijing correspondents of multiple foreign media, including the usual BBC and *Telegraph* (*BBC News* 2017; Connor 2017), reported the arrests, mentioning the usual stories about the crimes allegedly committed by the CAG. Some media mentioned the 2012 end of the world riots. I went through all English language reports of the crackdown published between July 27 and July 29, 2017, and noticed that *all* mentioned the McDonald's murder, attributing it to the CAG.

The chronology shows that, after the official Chinese news agency Xinhua had first reported the arrests (*Xinhua* 2017), the first subsequent coverage was by *Sixth Tone* (Lam 2017), a Web site which was described by *Foreign Policy* as “a media start-up under [Chinese Communist] party oversight that features a slick, attractive website and appealing headlines designed to entice Western readers” (Allen-Ebrahimian 2016). Next came the BBC and the *Telegraph*, the two usual suspects whose Beijing bureaus really seem to enjoy a special relationship with Chinese propaganda sources, followed by dozens of other media that largely relied on these earlier reports.

The second conference against the CAG was organized in Hong Kong on September 15–16, 2017. Again, it failed to produce international academic endorsement of the campaign against the CAG. I was among the Western participants, all of whom refused to sign a “final document” with “conclusions” from the conference. I do not claim that media campaigns against the CAG are directly correlated with the conferences. It is, however, not impossible that the fact that the expected academic support did not materialize was one of the factors

persuading the Chinese authorities to launch new campaigns against the CAG through their usual media connections. Another factor may have been that some scholars who had participated in the two seminars in China, including the undersigned, decided to sign appeals in favor of CAG asylum seekers in South Korea and elsewhere, denouncing the persecution in China, and spoke at international events supporting CAG refugees, including at the United Nations. On October 27, 2017, for example I appeared in an event organized in Seoul by several NGOs discussing the situation of CAG refugees in South Korea.

Two days later, on October 30, the Korean daily *Jeju Ilbo* published an attack against CAG refugees (*Jeju Ilbo* 2017). Some information came from Ou Myeng-Ok, the representative of a Korean pro-Chinese magazine, who organized anti-CAG street demonstrations in various Korean cities. Although only a handful of people participated in the demonstrations, they were covered by several Korean media, and the usual accusations were repeated. In the following month, the Hong Kong daily *Ta Kung Pao*, which is owned by the agency representing the Beijing government in Hong Kong, published 15 articles targeting the CAG (see e.g. *Ta Kung Pao* 2017). Some of their comments were republished by another Hong Kong daily newspaper owned by the same Chinese agency, *Wen Wei Po*, and (quite curiously) by the Taiwan state-owned *Central News Agency* (*Wen Wei Po* 2017; *Central News Agency* 2017). Again, together with criticism against CAG refugees in South Korea, the 2012 alleged doomsday predictions and the McDonald's murder were mentioned.

### *Conclusion: Fake News, A Blessing in Disguise?*

Things are not in 2018 what they were in 2014 or early 2017. Increasingly, a fair coverage of the CAG is offered by scholarly journals and quality media, unavoidably landing in Wikipedia as well. In Italy, a court of law labeled attempts to attribute the McDonald's murder to the CAG as “fake news fabricated by the regime and aimed at discrediting the CAG” (Tribunale di Perugia 2018).

This may be a confirmation of a more optimistic comment offered by some scholars of fake news. It has been argued that “fake news [is] the best thing that's happened to journalism,” as it generated a reaction and taught many to double-check their sources more critically (Beckett 2017). This is not always the case when media report about groups labeled as “cults.” However, as far as The

Church of Almighty God is concerned, things have somewhat improved. A handful of scholars, human rights activists, and lawyers fighting the huge machinery of Chinese propaganda may look like David against Goliath, but Goliath is indeed losing ground, proving that fighting fake news is not impossible.

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