

# United Nations Human Rights Council

## Universal Periodic Review

### China

Religious Freedom in China : The case of the Church of the Almighty God

### Joint Submission by

Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion Belief and Conscience (LIREC);

Association for the Defense of Human Rights and Religious Freedom (ADHRRF)



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## **1. Introduction**

1.1 The situation of religious freedom has been worsening in China between 2014 and 2018. China has been identified as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) by the U.S. State Department for 19 consecutive years. This submission focuses on The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a Christian movement that is being seriously persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Our submission relies on interviews with members of CAG in various countries, as well as on documents published by the Chinese government, international scholars, and CAG itself.

1.2 CAG is a Christian Church that emerged in China in 1991, following the appearance and work of a woman born in China recognized by her followers as God Incarnate, Almighty God, the second coming of Jesus Christ. The utterances of Almighty God are collected in *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, and in other collections. As of 2005, more than 1,000,000 believers from Protestant and Catholic churches had converted to CAG. Some unbelievers also turned to Almighty God in addition. Statistically, CAG has about 3,500,000 members in Mainland China today. CAG has been declared an “authentic Christian Church” by some renowned scholars of religious studies in the West, although its theology is certainly different from the traditional churches (Folk 2018).

1.3 Like other Christian and non-Christian groups, CAG suffers the most serious persecution at the hands of the CCP. Fourteen religious groups, including Christian groups such as CAG and the Shouters, were identified as “cults” and repressed and banned by the CCP from 1995 on, and millions of CAG Christians were persecuted subsequently (Irons 2018). According to the CAG itself, in the span from 2011 to 2013 alone, over 380,000 CAG Christians were arrested, among whom 43,640 were tortured and sentenced to jail penalties by kangaroo courts (The Church of Almighty God 2017). The human rights of CAG Christians were seriously violated.

1.4 After the May 28 McDonald’s Murder in Zhaoyuan, Shandong in 2014, falsely attributed to CAG, the authorities of the CCP openly justified and escalated their arbitrary arrests and persecution of CAG Christians. As a result, the situation became more severe for CAG Christians. In 2017, invited twice by China Anti-Cult Association, Western experts on new religious studies, including Dr. J. Gordon Melton, distinguished professor of American Religious History at Baylor University, Waco, Texas, Dr. James T. Richardson, professor emeritus at the National Judicial College, University of Nevada, Reno, Dr. Massimo Introvigne, managing director of the Center for Studies on New Religions, Torino, Italy, and Dr. Holly Folk, associate professor of religious studies at Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, visited China and came to the conclusion that CAG was not associated with the May 28 McDonald’s Murder. However, the CCP authorities continue to use the murder case to justify and escalate their persecution of CAG (Introvigne 2017a).

1.5 Based on the fact that China has signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, this report largely focuses on the CCP’s violation of the human rights of CAG Christians.

## **2. Denial of the Dignity, Physical Freedom and All Foundational Human Rights of CAG Christians**

2.1 The CCP’s persecution of CAG Christians is a serious violation of human rights and disregard for the Chinese laws themselves. Throughout China, orders delivered to the police officers incite them to conduct a policy of discrediting CAG Christians to the utmost, destroy them economically, and eradicate them physically by “beating them to death with no one to answer for it.” CAG Christians have suffered various punishment such as arbitrary arrests, beating, electric shocks, long-time deprivation of sleep, forced running/standing/half squatting, scalds, frostbites, laying salt on wounds, soaking in the water, hanging/suspending, dog-bites, starving, feeding with shit/urine/mustard oil/chili oil/poison, injection of mental drug, toothpick-stabbing in fingers/toes, fingernail-peeling, tooth beating-off, suffocating, etc. For female CAG Christians, horrific punishments, including stripping naked, raping and forced abortion, were applied. Some members were pushed down off the buildings, which led to their death, while some were found to be dead with some of their organs disappeared. The CCP even uses all kinds of means of high pressure against CAG Christians and their relatives, such as deprivation of property, opportunities for education and profession, limitation of going abroad, revocation of the endowment insurance and adequate standard of living, etc. Documents about tens of thousands such cases are posted by CAG on the Web page <https://www.godfootsteps.org/proofs/>, which is continuously updated.

2.2 The Chinese authorities’ denial of the dignity, physical freedom and all foundational human rights of CAG Christians is in violation of most provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially Articles 1, 2, 22, 28, 29 and 30.

### **3. Denial of the Right to Life**

3.1 As of March 2018, we have examined 44 cases regarding CAG Christians who were proven to be dead due to the Chinese police's violence and mistreatment, among which at least 15 CAG Christians died in abnormal circumstances due to the CCP authorities' arbitrary arrests and detention between 2014 and 2018. CAG Christians were tortured to disability or psychosis in a large quantity. Some couldn't help themselves out of the pressure except by committing suicide. No sign is found to show the fact that the authorities of China have investigated the cases concerning CAG Christians' death in custody or the related persecutors have been punished accordingly. On the contrary, the CCP regime often stops people from investigating the cause of the victim's death. Family members of the victims who made requests of investigation incurred subsequent revenge, including detention, beating and imprisonment.

3.2 Here we mention only one case among those who died in abnormal circumstances:

Ms. **Gao Cuiqin**, a CAG Christian, age 53, was a resident of Huantai County in Zibo, Shandong Province. In the early hours of 15 July 2014, Gao was arrested by police officers from the State Security brigade of Public Security Bureau in Huantai County due to her belief in Almighty God, and later transferred to the Detention Center in Huantai County for interrogation. On 17 July, Gao's family was informed by the local Public Security Bureau that she had died of a sudden heart attack. But Gao's family reported that she had no history of heart disease. On 18 July, Gao's family went to prepare her remains for her funeral. They reported that Gao's face was purple, her back was dotted with red spots, and her armpits were black and blue. Gao's family requested to see the video recording of the interrogation, but the police refused. A man, who claimed to have been in the Public Security Bureau for many years, analyzed the body and concluded that the circumstances of her death corresponded with being jabbed with an electric baton with extremely strong electric currents. [See **Affidavit A**]

3.3 That the authorities of China persecute CAG Christians to death breaches Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human rights.

### **4. Slavery/Servitude**

4.1 Hundreds of thousands of CAG Christians were sent to jails and farms built with the purpose of reformation through labor. They were imposed with forced labor in an extreme inhuman condition there. They were usually forced to work 15 hours a day, some even worked up to 20 hours, with no holidays all year round, and no pay. Long-term persecution, slavery and mental torment led CAG Christians to extreme physical and mental damage and in some cases permanent disability or death was the result.

We mention a typical case concerning a CAG Christian, Mr. HUANG Weidong. He was sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment due to believing in Almighty God. During his imprisonment from 2012 to 2016, he was forced to do the overload labor of picking peppers every day (25 KG of dry peppers or 65 KG of fresh peppers). He choked constantly and sometimes suffocated because of the unbearable spiciness, and gradually developed obsolete pneumonia. For fear that he would be punished for his unfinished work, Huang seldom took time off to drink water or go to the toilet. As a rule, the mealtime was only 5 minutes. And he was assigned to take a 4-hour night shift of guard stand, which led to the insufficiency of rest and sleep. That Huang had to do overload labor for more than 15 hours a day and had meals lacking nutrition, i.e. half a steamed bun (100g) for a meal, resulted him in serious iron-deficiency anemia (the quantity of hemoglobin in his blood is only 3g/dl). His feet began to be swollen, and he felt difficult to breathe and walk subsequently. The guards, however, still forced him to do hard labor, which gradually aggravated his disease to pulmonary heart disease of Level III, with abdominal dropsy and edema. In October 2016, Huang Weidong was released upon completion of his jail terms, but he became completely disabled. [See **Affidavit B** and Huang's **Certificate of Diagnosis** during his detention]

4.2 The Chinese authorities' persecution of slavery or servitude of CAG Christians is in violation of Articles 4 and 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### **5. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment (CIDT)**

5.1 China submitted the sixth report on implementing the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment after the last Review. However, China has not passed laws to regulate the definition of torture up to now, so that no effective mechanisms of supervision or measures against torture have been enforced yet. Furthermore, extralegal directives from the CCP have instead implicitly encouraged the police

officers to continue the use of torture. Criteria for promotions and bonuses for prison guards are established to create an incentive to torture Christians, which has continued the unabated use of torture on Christians. The use of torture against CAG Christians by the CCP remains widespread and systematic as of 2018.

5.2 The use of torture is aimed at forcing CAG Christians to renounce their faith, sign “Statements of Pledge,” “Statements of Confession,” “Statements of Break-up,” “Statements of Denouncement and Criticism,” etc., as well as to extract information on other CAG Christians and the whereabouts of both CAG Christians and church money. Reports of abuse, including photographs and first-hand accounts, continue to be received from contacts in China every day.

5.3 Two examples are given below for understanding of the ill treatment CAG Christians have gone through.

Case 1: Ms. **Rao Jianxing**, born in 1996 in Jiujiang City, Jiangxi Province, joined CAG in 2003. On August 21, 2015, she was forcefully escorted to Ningzhou Police Station because of believing in Almighty God. The police officers slapped her viciously across the face for more than 500 times, which resulted in the teeth in her upper jaw loosening (later, she began to lose her teeth gradually and installed 13 dentures). The police officers also had her arms wrenched behind her back in the “airplane cuffs,” and tied one end of rope to the links of her handcuffs, another to the rail under the “tiger bench”, then the policemen ruthlessly trampled the middle of rope. The pain made her pass out several times. The police woke her up using water and continued to interrogate her. Two pieces of flesh were torn off from her wrists due to the teeth of the cuffs. The police officers also slapped her face with the sole of a slipper and stamped on her toes with their leather shoes. They had been interrogating her for three days and ended up with no results. On April 15, 2016, Rao was sentenced to 22 months in prison on the charge of “sabotaging the implementation of the laws by utilizing evil religious organizations” by the local court. [See **Affidavit C**]

Case 2: Mr. **He Linbo**, age 42, native of Henan Province, was a top leader of CAG when he was wanted online in October 2017 for believing in Almighty God and being active in CAG. On November 26, 2017, he was arrested by the police during a security check at the Shihezi City Train Station in Xinjiang Autonomous Region. After being arrested, he was escorted to the local police station for interrogation and subject to brutal torture. The police officers whipped Him on his hands, back, legs, chest, tops and bottoms of his feet, with a finger-sized electric cable and a thinner copper wire. Then they fed him mustard oil and forced him to do half squats. Later, he was transferred to a hotel for secret interrogation. The police handcuffed him to a tiger bench and deprived him of sleep for seven days and nights to forcibly convert him. In the early hours of December 18, he escaped from the hotel while the guarding police were asleep. [See **Affidavit D**]

5.5 The Chinese authorities’ torture and persecution of CAG Christians violates Articles 3 and 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## **6. Deprivation of Right to Legal Protection and Fair Trials**

6.1 CAG Christians were systematically sentenced without fair trials. Vague definitions of “evil cults” (*xie jiao*) are provided by the CCP, and the CCP convicts and determines the prison term on CAG Christians by using the judicial interpretation of Article 300 of the Criminal Code from the “Two Supreme.” Such a vague legal rule makes any legal defense impossible (The Supreme People’s Court and Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the People’s Republic of China 2017).

6.2 The Chinese judicial system also assists the CCP to persecute CAG. The trial of the CAG Christians in court exists in name only, because CAG Christians are deprived of their rights to conduct their own defense. In some cases, when CAG Christians insisted on conducting their own defense, the judges turned a blind eye on the police officers’ beating the CAG Christians before them. Most family members of CAG Christians were not notified of the trial process and forbidden to attend the hearings. CAG Christians who were injured after suffering the torture were refused parole. Most CAG Christians were threatened to be imposed with supplementary imprisonment for appealing against the previous judgment. Some CAG Christians were sentenced without trial. Some cases violated the Constitution, that is, the CAG Christians in the second instance were penalized additionally without reason or cause.

6.3 The Chinese authorities’ deprivation of CAG Christians’ right to fair trials violates Articles 6, 7, 8, 10, 11 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## **7. Arbitrary Detention and Imprisonment**

7.1 CAG Christians were continuously subject to arbitrary detention and imprisonment without due process from 2014 to 2018.

7.2 CAG Christians were detained on charges like “endangering social order,” or “sabotaging the implementation of the laws by utilizing evil religious organizations,” only because they peacefully participated in religious activities. Many of them were sentenced to long-term imprisonment, i.e. to the maximum term of 14 years as recorded. Hundreds of judicial documents published by the Chinese State prove this fact (See the official website of Judicial Opinions of China <http://wenshu.court.gov.cn/>).

7.3 Some examples may be useful to understand the situation of these CAG Christians.

Case 1: Mr. **He Zhexun**, a CAG Christian, was sentenced to 14 years in prison due to organizing meetings and doing work for the Church, and now he is still in custody (Introvigne 2017b).

Case 2: In August 2014, Ms. **Li Huaxian**, another CAG Christian, was arrested due to spreading the Gospel and keeping on her home over 2,000 pieces of Gospel materials. In December 2014, she was sentenced to 8 years in prison. [See Criminal Verdict of Li Huaxian: <https://goo.gl/y3XwGQ>]

Since the McDonald’s Murder Case in 2014, the numbers of CAG Christians being arrested arbitrarily surged upwards. The international human rights organization Freedom House reported that eighty percent of those arrested between 2014 and 2016 as members of “heterodox religions” (i.e. *xie jiao*) were members of The Church of Almighty God (Cook 2017).

7.4 In 2017, the persecutions were further intensified, and the CCP arrested CAG Christians simultaneously in different provinces (see Huzhou Government Network 2017). At least 583 CAG Christians were arrested in Zhejiang Province alone from July 2 to 10 in 2017, and the number amounted to 638 as of early October 2017. At present, the overwhelming majority are still imprisoned, their family members are not allowed to visit them, and the details of their detention are unknown.

7.5 The Chinese authorities’ arbitrary detention and imprisonment of CAG Christians violates Article 9 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## 8. Incitement of Hatred

8.1 Since 2014, the CCP has continually trumped up rumors to defame CAG and incited people’s hatred against CAG, with the aim of making the persecution national. The most typical case is the May 28 McDonald’s Murder Case in Zhaoyuan, Shandong Province in 2014. The CCP published fake news through all media and Internet platforms domestically and internationally, which blamed the case on CAG Christians to incite Chinese populace hatred and discrimination against CAG. There were also 20,000 media webpages of different languages connecting CAG Christians to the McDonald’s Murder Case.

8.2 After the murder case, the CCP embarked on a nationwide campaign known as the “Hundred-Day Battle” and began to cruelly persecute CAG. The CCP authorities stated: “Firmly grasp the typical case of May 28 McDonald’s Murder to launch a powerful offensive against CAG in public opinions, a wide range of social forces must be mobilized to actively participate in the anti-cult struggle.” In mainland China, there hung posters and slogans of conviction and suppression on CAG in all villages. Every local authority arranged for a performance team to pay visits door-to-door in villages to spread the hate speech against CAG. They also set up the system of whistleblower rewards and grassroots control, neighbor supervision, five-hood joint prevention, etc., in order to incite people to report CAG Christians (Kaiwind 2017).

8.3 In 2017, some leading Western scholars and specialists on religions studied several accusations of the CCP against CAG. As mentioned earlier, their conclusions were that CAG has no connection with the May 28 McDonald’s homicide. The CCP authorities did utilize this murder case to escalate the persecution against CAG (Introvigne 2017a). At present, no accusations of the CCP against CAG have been verified (Introvigne 2018). Several studies and reports by scholars and specialists on religions have been published on academic journals and encyclopedias of religion documenting the Chinese practice of spreading fake news against CAG.

8.4 The Chinese authorities’ trumped-up rumors and incitement of populace hatred against CAG violate Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## 9. Deprivation of Privacy Rights

9.1 The police, without producing any credentials, has repeatedly broken into and raided CAG Christians' families, monitored and tracked Christians and their families arbitrarily. CAG Christians' telephone calls, cell phones calls, networks were monitored, and their private mails and parcels were opened and checked. Their houses were put on monitors and taps. All these methods seem to be commonly used.

9.2 The situation has gotten worse especially in 2017. The CCP conducted special household investigation ("Door-knocking Operation"). The anti-*xie-jiao* unit known as the 610 Office started sharing the information of CAG Christians with Public Security Bureau through Information Management System ("database"), in order to "be able to discover, control, and dispose [of them]." These methods severely abuse the CAG Christians' privacy, subjecting them to being arrested any moment (The Office of the CCP Henan Provincial Committee 2017).

9.3 According to the statistics included in the 2017 annual report published by CAG, there were 2,122 cases of CAG Christians put under residential surveillance during the period January to September 2017.

9.4 The Chinese authorities' abuse of the privacy rights of CAG Christians violates Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## **10. Destruction of Families**

10.1 During 2014-2018, the CCP's monitoring, arrest, and persecution has caused at least 500,000 CAG Christians to flee their home, and several hundred thousand families have been torn apart. Many children have been separated from their parents and deprived of their schooling. Husbands and wives have to live in different places. The CCP has fabricated many fake news to discredit, frame, defame CAG, so some of CAG Christians' families or spouses bar them from following their faith, and their marriages have been led to disharmony or broken.

10.2 The CCP threatens CAG Christians' families with the loss of career, education opportunity, pension payments, subsistence allowances, etc., which intensifies the conflicts of and results in the breakage of their families. Many CAG Christian women have been, while in custody, forced to have an abortion, and some mothers in lactation were separated from their newly-born babies.

10.3 The Chinese authorities' destruction of CAG Christians' families violates Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## **11. Deprivation of the Rights to Freedom of Movement, and the Rights to Seek Political Asylum**

11.1 In order to prevent the released CAG Christians from practicing their belief, Chinese authorities have forbidden them from leaving their cities. They are asked to report to the local Public Security Bureaus every week or month. They are required to report to the local Police if they want to leave their cities (See **Affidavit B and C**).

11.2 Because the persecution of the CCP has intensified since 2014, many CAG Christians have fled to seek asylum abroad. In many of the documents issued by the CCP, persecution of CAG Christians overseas is set as one of its main tasks. In 2015, the CCP has ordered to confiscate or revoke the exit-entry certificates of CAG Christians living in China. They are forbidden to leave the country (although some managed to escape anyway). The CCP have started investigating CAG Christians, put those identified into the black list, and set up effective control system (The CCP Xiangkou Town Commission Office 2015). Many CAG Christians have been investigated and arrested just because of applying for a passport.

11.3 The CCP has deployed all kinds of methods to investigate and harass CAG Christians who have fled overseas. The CCP has developed precise strike plans according to their domestic relationships. It has coaxed and coerced their families to give interviews and orchestrated demonstrations in the countries where they are seeking asylum, manipulated the overseas medias to discredit CAG, and blocked their asylum applications through all sorts of interference.

11.4 The Chinese authorities' deprivation of CAG Christians' rights to freedom of movement, and the rights of seeking political asylum violates the Articles 13, 14 and 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## **12. Deprivation of the Right to Freedom of Religion and Belief, Expression, Peaceful Assembly, and Association**

12.1 CAG Christians, for the mere fact of holding or attending meetings, preaching, writing articles, printing books, accessing the Internet, and making videos, and so on, have been convicted according to the prevailing interpretation

of Article 300 of Criminal Law by the “Two Supreme.” The police have arrested, and courts have severely sentenced, CAG Christians only for the fact that they are the members of CAG or they possess several books of CAG.

12.2 We mention some specific examples.

Case 1: Ms. **Wang Xiaojun**, a CAG Christian, was arrested in 2014 because she downloaded articles and materials from CAG websites, and shared them through programs such as Sina Weibo, Sina Blog, Tencent Qzone, 360 cloud drive. Convicted of “sabotaging the implementation of the laws by utilizing evil religious organizations,” she was sentenced to 4 years of imprisonment in July 2014. [See Criminal Verdict of Wang Xiaojun: <http://bit.ly/2F4L4e0>]

Case 2: In August 2016, 36 CAG Christians were arrested for shooting videos for CAG. They are still in custody.

12.3 The main aim of the CCP’s persecution of CAG Christians is to force them to renounce their religion and belief. CCP’s methods include arbitrary detention, forcible conversion, cruel torture, deprivation of subsistence rights. A great number of CAG Christians have been tortured to the point of being disabled, and many have died of unnatural deaths while in custody.

12.4 The Chinese authorities’ deprivation of CAG Christians’ rights to freedom of religion and belief, expression, peaceful assembly, and association violates Articles 18, 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### **13. Deprivation of Basic Economic, Social, Culture and Individual Development Rights**

13.1 From 2014-2018, Chinese authorities have continued to confiscate the businesses and properties of CAG Christians and their families. Their properties have often been pocketed by the police officers. For example, on March 10, 2017, five Christians in Heze City, Shandong Province were blackmailed by police officers for RMB 155,000.

13.2 CAG Christians and their families have been fired at will, and thus lost their source of living. Their endowment insurance and basic living security have been deprived of. They have been discriminated by their companies or institutes. Their rights to educational opportunities, career promotion, further education have been denied.

13.3 Deprivation of basic economic, social, culture and individual development rights of CAG Christians in China violates Articles 17, 23, 25, 26, and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### **14. Conclusion**

14.1 From 2014 to 2018, Chinese authorities have been abusing the human rights of CAG Christians in a massive and systematic way, and this confirm the opinion of several NGOs that regard China as the worst human right abuser in the world.

14.2 The persecution of CAG Christians is an egregious example of extreme persecution against Christians and members of minority religions in the world today, which is one of the most serious humanitarian crisis in the world.

### **15. Recommendations**

15.1 Recommendations for the United Nations Human Rights Council and its member states:

- Immediately stop China from abusing human rights of CAG Christians.
- Require China to release all currently imprisoned CAG Christians.

15.2 Recommendations for the member states of United Nations:

- Get to know and pay attention to the fact that the CCP persecutes CAG Christians.
- Fulfill the obligations of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.
- Provide the basic humanitarian protection to CAG Christians who fled to the countries where they presently are.

15.3 Recommendations for the Chinese government:

- Truly abide by the signed Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- Immediately cease the persecution against CAG and other religious movements and Christian House Churches.
- All CAG Christians currently imprisoned must be released.
- Respect the human rights of CAG Christians and their families.
- Disclose the truth of May 28 McDonald's Murder in Zhaoyuan, Shandong Province.
- Withdraw all the fake news using this and other cases to slander CAG and investigate the legal liability of the relevant persons.

## Enclosures

Affidavit A (Zhang Liang)

Affidavit B (Li Qiubo)

Affidavit C (Zhu Dongping)

Affidavit D (Yang Tianying)

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