



“Sinicization” of Religion and *Xie Jiao* in China:
The Case of the Church of Almighty God

Massimo Introvigne (CESNUR, Torino, Italy)

Rome, 14 December 2017

“Sinicization” and Fight Against “Xie Jiao”



- In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping and other top Chinese leaders called for a further “**sinicization**” of religion and for a stronger, merciless fight against “**xie jiao**”
- Understanding these two words is crucial in order to evaluate both current problems of religion in China and religion-based refugee claims of Chinese asylum seekers abroad

Sinicization

- Both words are politically constructed in China, beyond their literal meaning
- President Xi himself has clarified that “sinicization” of religions means that they should strictly follow the leadership and directives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Religious movements born in China and directed by Chinese are not regarded as “sinicized” if they are not fully integrated in the CCP-dominated Chinese system





Xie Jiao

- ▶ Chinese Web sites often translate *xie jiao* as “evil cults” in order to elicit the sympathy of Western anti-cultists, but the translation is wrong
- ▶ *Xie Jiao* means “heterodox teachings.” Laws against *xie jiao* exist since the late Ming era, and the Emperor “decided on the basis of his own judgement” which religions and movements should be listed as *xie jiao**

*V. Goossaert and D.A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, University of Chicago Press 2011, 27.

A Political Evaluation



- ▶ In practice, groups were listed or not listed as *xie jiao* largely based on political evaluations. Christianity as a whole was listed as *xie jiao* in 1725, and Christians were routinely tortured and executed, but no longer after 1842 because of Western military pressures

A Continuing Policy

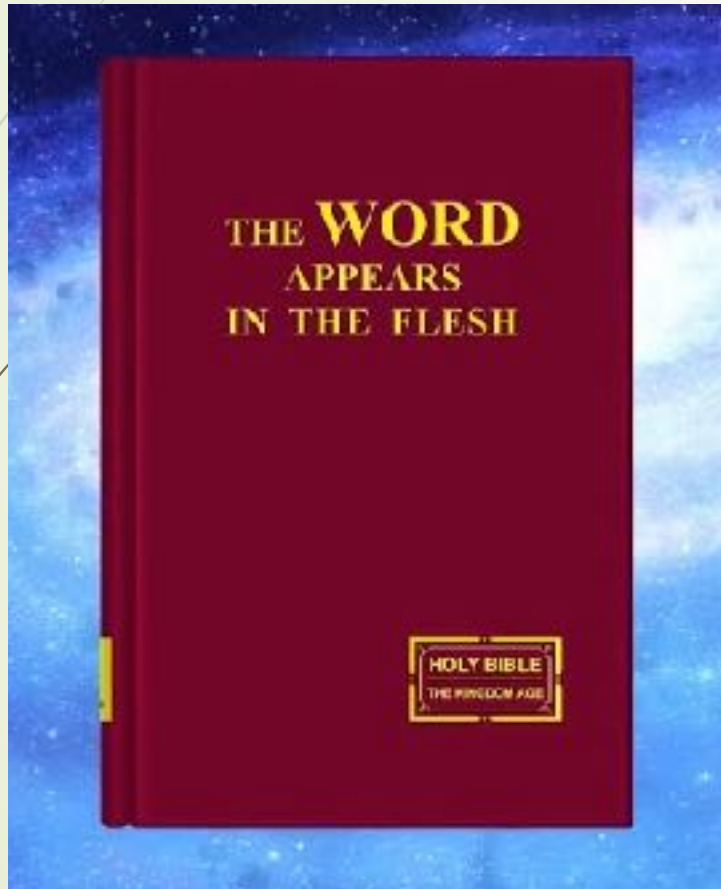
- This policy was continued by the Chinese Republic and by the CCP regime. On January 25, 2017, China's People's Supreme Court defined *xie jiao* as religious groups that “confuse and deceive” the Chinese “by fabricating and spreading superstitious fallacies and other means.” Such a vague definition perpetuates the possibility for the power to list as *xie jiao* (or “cults,” when Chinese propaganda hits the West) any group CCP does not like



Three Categories of Religions in China

- The concepts of sinicization and *xie jiao* govern the distinction between :
 - **fully sinicized religions**, allowed to operate publicly under the control of, and with leaders appointed by, CCP, including the unified Three Self Protestant Church and the Patriotic Catholic Association
 - **non-sinicized religions**, including the underground Catholic Church loyal to Rome and the flourishing Protestant House Churches, that live precariously and could be hit by the regime at any time
 - **xie jiao**, which the regime promises to “extirpate like a tumor”: under Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, being active in a *xie jiao* is a crime punished with 3 to 7 years (or more) in jail, and even simply being in possession of literature from a *xie jiao* is ground for arrest

The Church of Almighty God (CAG)



- ▶ CAG is a new religious movement founded in China, in 1991. It teaches Jesus returned to Earth and incarnated as Almighty God, a living person who teaches the fullness of truth. For this reason, CAG is regarded as a “heresy” by some Christian churches.
- ▶ CAG is perceived by CCP as a fierce enemy of Communism. In fact, it identifies CCP with the Dragon of the *Book of Revelation*. However, if one reads CAG literature, the impression is that the Dragon would fall by itself, and there is no appeal to a revolution

CAG persecuted as a *xie jiao*



- ▶ Credited by Chinese governmental sources with a membership of at least three million, CAG has been listed as a *xie jiao* in 1995. CAG's statistics claim that more than 300,000 CAG members have been arrested in China to date. This is confirmed by 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

The McDonald's Murder

- ▶ The Chinese regime justifies the persecution by accusing CAG of various crimes, including the murder of a woman in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan in 2014. Unfortunately, some Western media repeated this accusation, although scholarly studies have debunked it as an egregious example of fake news spread to discredit CAG



Independent Investigations

2017年6月24日至28日，应郑州反邪教协会、郑州反邪教研究中心邀请，美国贝勒大学宗教研究所美国宗教史特聘教授J.Gordon Melton博士、美国西华盛顿大学副教授Holly Folk博士、美国内华达州法学院荣誉教授James T. Richardson博士、意大利新宗教研究中心主任 Massimo Introvigne博士等一行来河南调研交流。



- ▶ I was among the Western scholars invited by the CCP-related Chinese Anti-Xie-Jiao Association 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

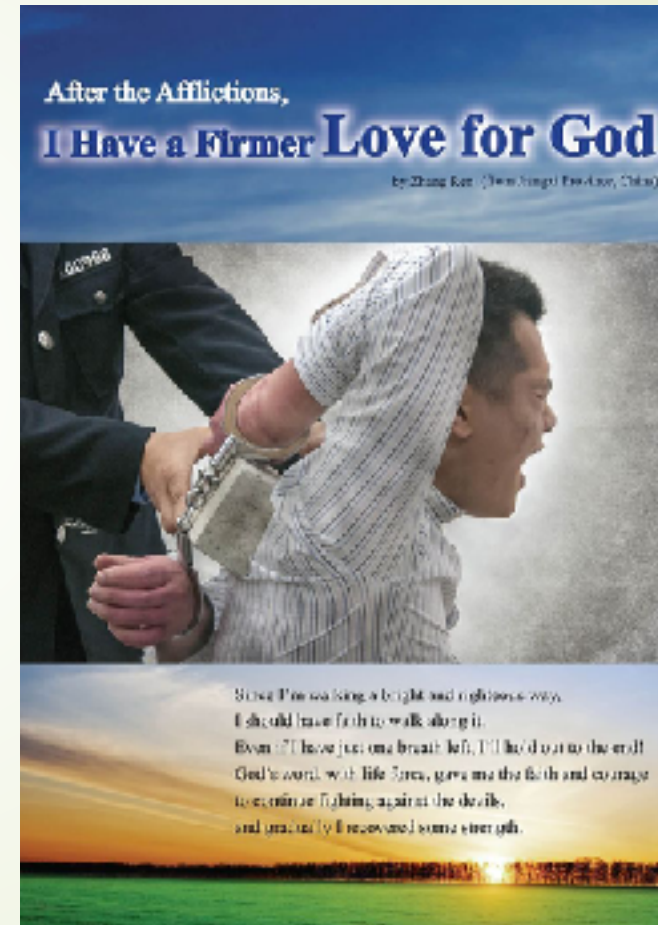
My Conclusions



- 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 CAG, and that other accusations against CAG were also based on unreliable rumors. Other reputable scholars share my conclusions

Refugee Status

- ▶ There can be no reasonable doubt that the mere fact of being a member of CAG in China means to be exposed to a serious risk of imprisonment for several years, if not worse. This should mean that CAG members who reached Italy or other countries are entitled to the status of refugees for reasons of religious persecution



After the Afflictions,
I Have a Firmer Love for God

by Zhang Kai (New Hong Kong, China)

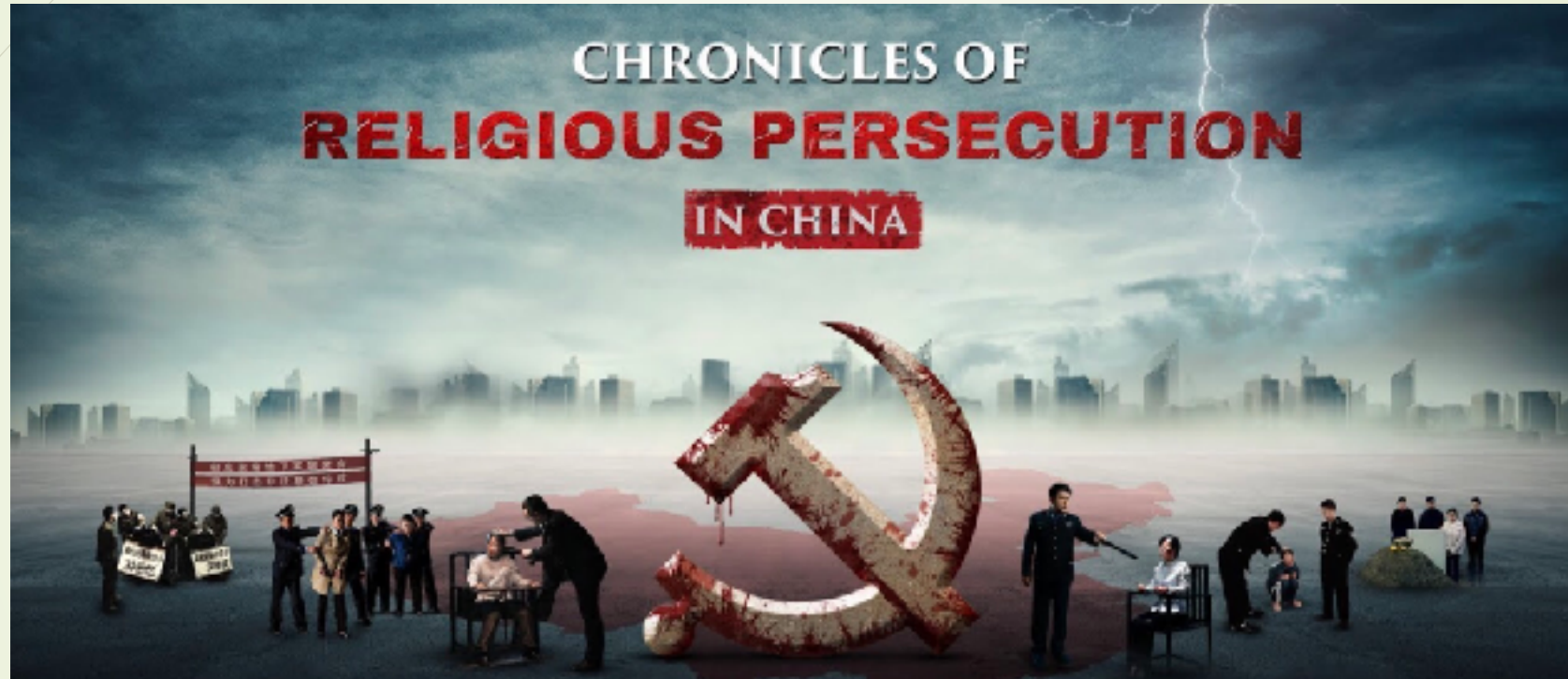
Since I'm walking a bright and righteous way,
I should have faith to walk along it.
Even if I have just one breath left, I'll hold fast to the word
God's word, with life I've given me the faith and courage
to continue fighting against the devil,
and gradually I've received some strength.

Asylum Should Be Granted!



- ▶ The 2004 UNHCR *Guidelines on International Protection: Religion-Based Refugee Claims* explicitly affirm that states cannot require evidence that the asylum seeker has been individually persecuted. It is enough to prove that the individual has a “well-founded fear of persecution”

CAG and “Fear of Persecution”



- It should be abundantly clear that a member of CAG in China has a very well-founded fear of persecution, for the mere fact of being a member of CAG. I regard as a scandal that requests for asylum are denied, both under Chinese pressure and because of a general climate hostile to refugees

CAG: Not the Only Case



- ▶ In this press conference, we mentioned the Church of Almighty God as one of the religions most affected by persecution in China. Clearly, the same right to religion-based refugee status should be recognized to members of other groups listed as *xie jiao*, including e.g. the Shouters (Local Church) and the Unification Church, and of those “non-sinicized” groups which, although not listed as *xie jiao*, are nonetheless persecuted, including many house churches

For more
information:
[maxintrovigne
@gmail.com](mailto:maxintrovigne@gmail.com)

