



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

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“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



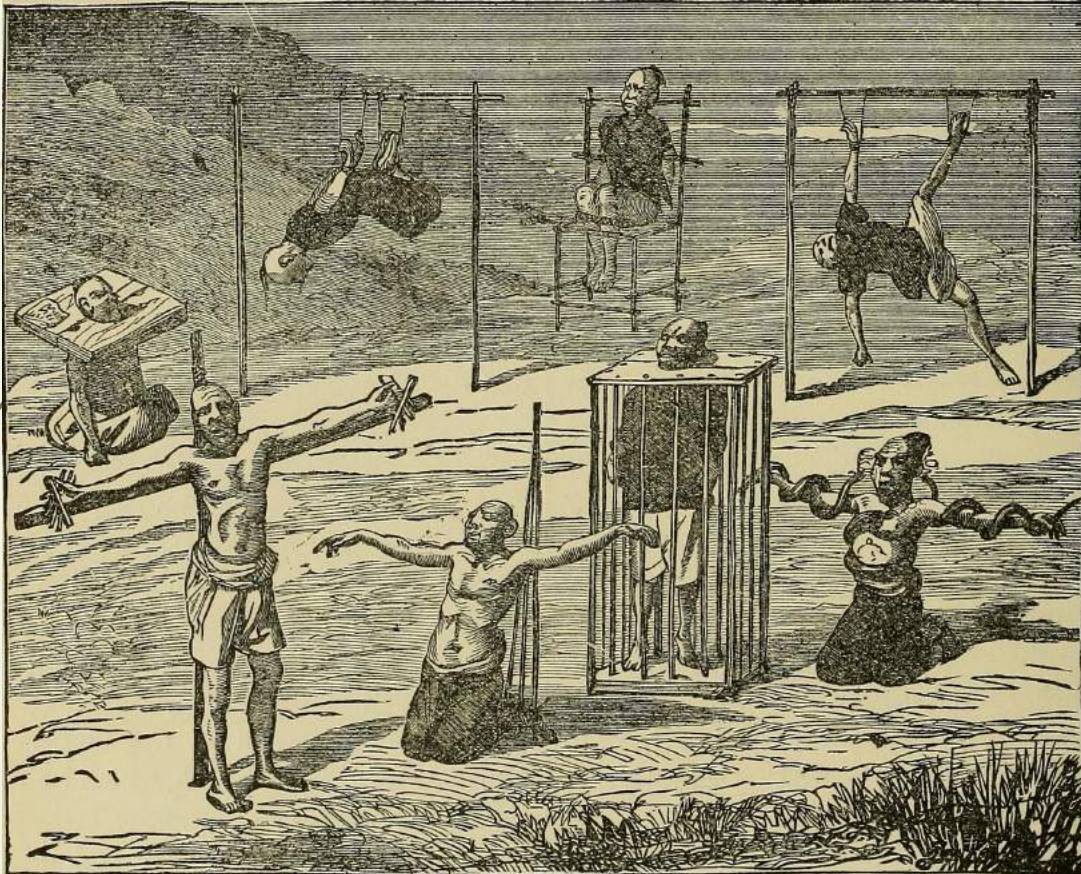


Xie Jiao

- 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

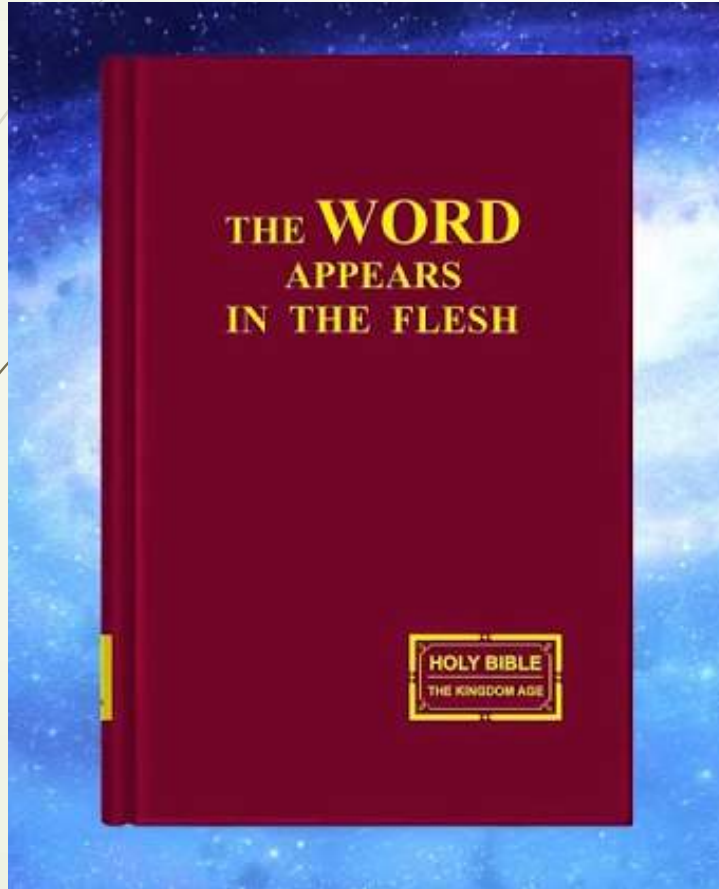
- This policy was continued by the Chinese Republic and by the CCP regime. On January 25, 2017, China's People's Supreme Court defined *xie jiao* as religious groups that "confuse and deceive" the Chinese "by fabricating and spreading superstitious fallacies and other means." Such a vague definition 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

The Church of Almighty God (CAG)



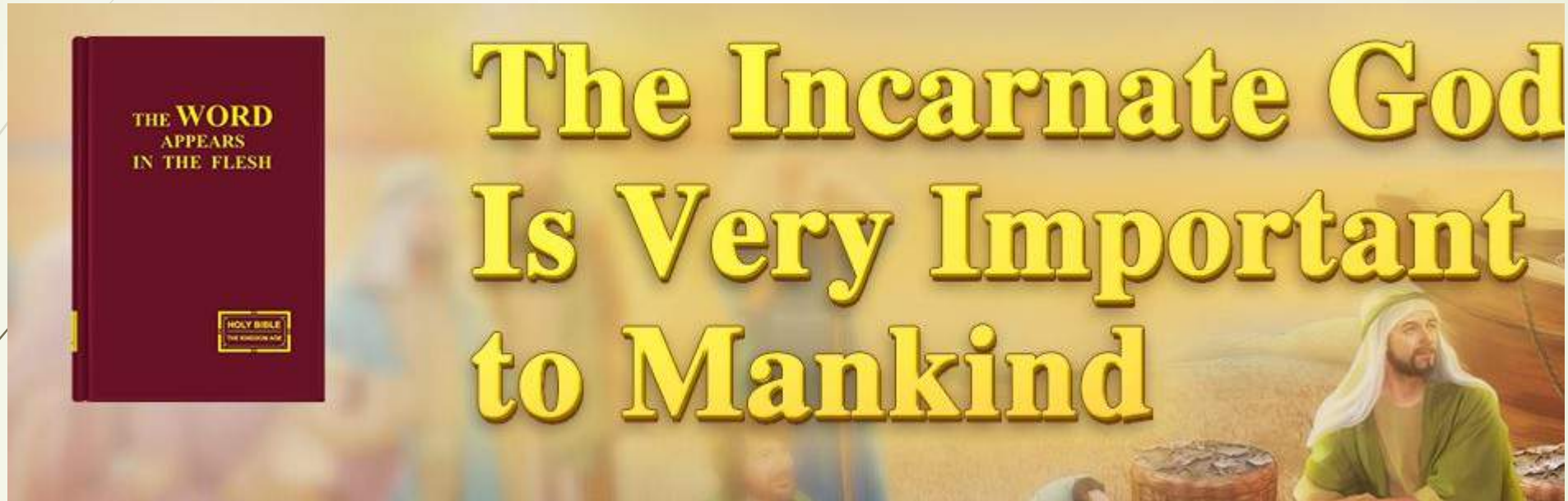
- CAG, considered by CCP as a quintessential *xie jiao*, is a new religious movement founded in China, in 1991. It teaches that Jesus returned to Earth and incarnated as Almighty God, a living person who teaches the fullness of truth. Her utterances are collected in the book *The Word Appears in the Flesh*

The Origins of CAG

- Although the movement never mentions her name nor any biographic details, most scholars believe it identifies the incarnated Almighty God with a Chinese woman, Yang Xiangbin (b. 1973), who was born in northwestern China
- In 1989, the person identified by the movement as Almighty God formally entered the House Church movement. In 1991, she (CAG normally uses “He”) began to utter words, that followers compared for authority and power to those expressed by Jesus Christ, while attending meetings of the Brethren-derived group originating from Watchman Nee (1903–1972, right) and Witness Lee (1905–1997), known as the Local Church in the West and as the Shouters in China



A New Religious Movement Emerges



- Many Christians in the Chinese House Church movement believed that those words were from the Holy Spirit and started reading them in their gatherings, although only in 1993, the person who was the source of these messages was recognized as Christ, the incarnate God and the only one true God

The Man Used by the Holy Spirit



■ Among those converted to Almighty God was Zhao Weishan (b. 1951), at that time a leader in an independent branch of the Shouters. He was later recognized as the Man Used by the Holy Spirit, and the Priest of the CAG. The CAG is personally led by the person it recognizes as Almighty God, while Zhao Weishan is cooperating with the work of Almighty God, and is in charge of the administrative affairs of the church

Continuous Persecution



- Since 1996, the Church of Almighty God has been severely persecuted in China, and many of its members, including national leader Ma Suoping (female, 1969–2009), were arrested or killed. In 2000, Zhao and Yang went to the United States, which they entered on September 6, and in 2001 they were granted political asylum. Since then, they have lived and directed the movement from New York

Growth and Diaspora



- Despite persecution, the CAG grew in China and, according to Chinese official sources (perhaps exaggerated), had reached four million members in 2014. Several thousand members have escaped abroad, where they have founded churches in South Korea (left), the United States, Europe, Canada, and other countries, in addition to these established in Hong Kong and Taiwan

Visual Arts Flourish



- As happened with Tibetan Buddhism, the persecution in China and the international diaspora of the CAG had two unintended consequences. First, it led to a globalization of the movement, as non-Chinese started joining it in South Korea, the United States, and elsewhere. Second, it also caused an unexpected flourishing of artistic activities within the diaspora communities, in the fields of painting and movies (with some of them [above] winning awards in international festivals)

The Three Ages



- According to CAG, Almighty God came to inaugurate the third and final age of humanity, the Age of Kingdom, which follows the Age of Law, i.e. the time of the Old Testament, and the Age of Grace (of Jesus). In the last days, the work of Almighty God has the main aim to eradicate the humans' sinful nature

A Time for Purification



- The present Age of Kingdom is not to be confused with the Age of the Millennial Kingdom. In our Age of Kingdom, God's glorification on earth is not yet complete. Only when those who were predestined and chosen by God will have been made perfect and purified, God will be glorified, and the transition to the Age of the Millennial Kingdom will start

Towards the Millennial Kingdom



- The Church does not believe that the person it worships as Almighty God would live on Earth forever. The return to Heaven of Almighty God would mean that the purification work had come to an end. The disasters prophesied in the *Book of Revelation* will follow, in the shape of earthquakes, wars, and famines. Planet Earth, however, will not be destroyed. It will become the eternal home of God's purified followers

A Rich But Minimalist Worship



- There is no formal liturgy in the Church of Almighty God, nor sacraments such as baptism or eucharist: these were practices of the Age of Grace, which have no place in the Age of Kingdom.
- This, however, does not mean that gathering together is not important for the members of the Church of Almighty God. They worship and “fellowship” by meeting and discussing Almighty God’s words, hearing sermons, and singing hymns

Confronting the Dragon



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

CAG persecuted as a *xie jiao*



- CAG has been listed as a *xie jiao* since 1995. CAG's statistics claim that more than 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. Other reputable scholars share my conclusions



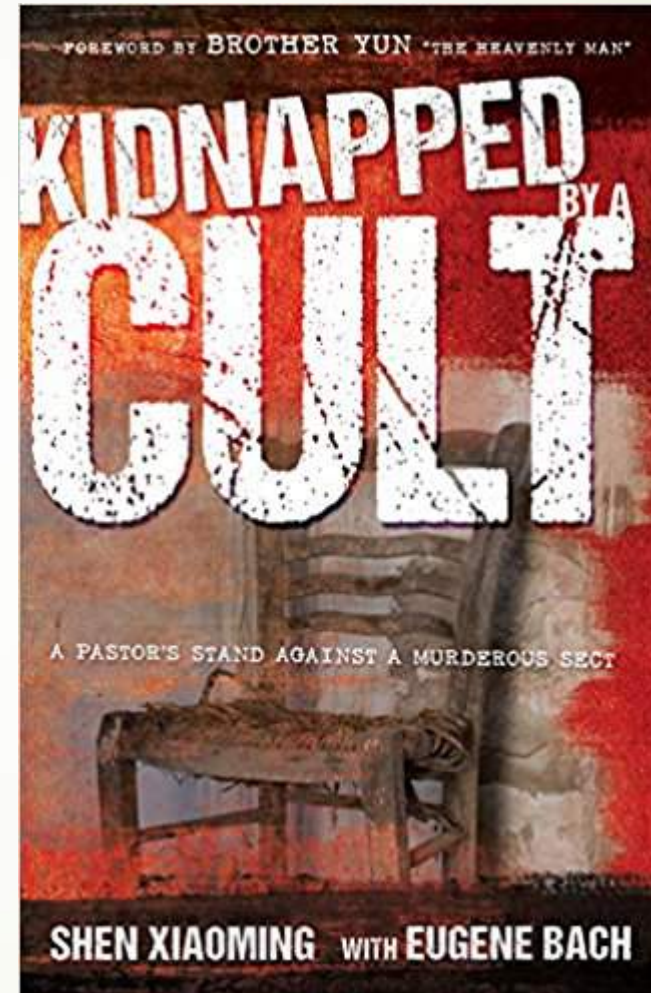
The Story of Guo Bin

- Another frequent accusation was that in 2013, in the Chinese province of Shaanxi, CAG members gouged out the eyes of a six-year old boy. American scholar Holly Folk studied the related documents and concluded that the crime was committed by the boy's aunt, 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

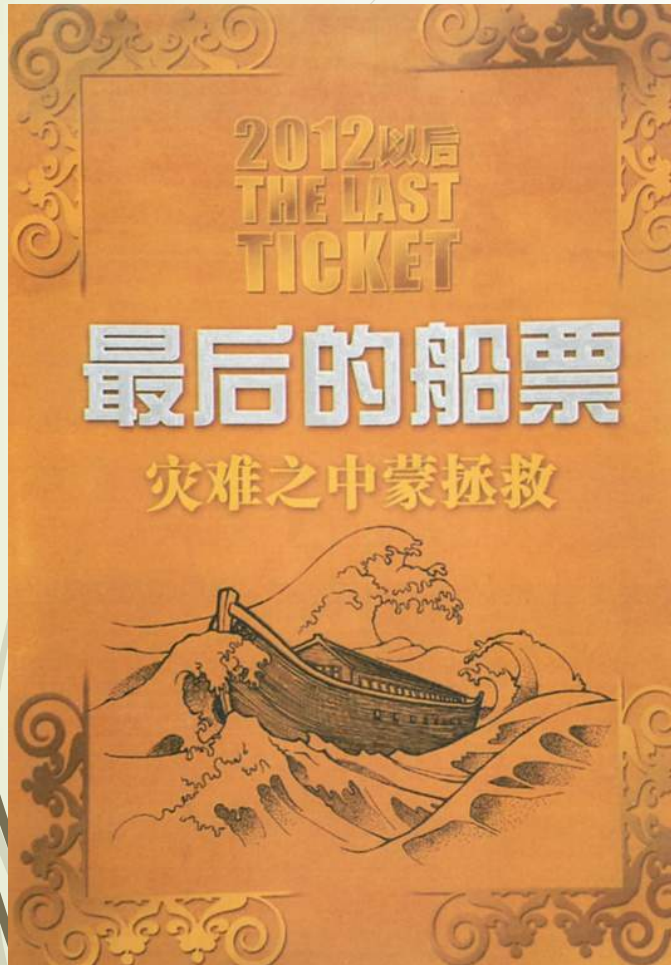
Kidnapping Christian Leaders?

- Some Christian opponents of The Church of Almighty God also claim that in 2002 it kidnapped 34 pastors and lay leaders of a large Christian House Church, the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF). The story was later told in two novelized accounts. When documents are studied, however, this story too becomes largely unbelievable*

*See my "Captivity Narratives: Did The Church of Almighty God Kidnap 34 Evangelical Pastors in 2018?," *The Journal of CESNUR* 2 (1) (2018)



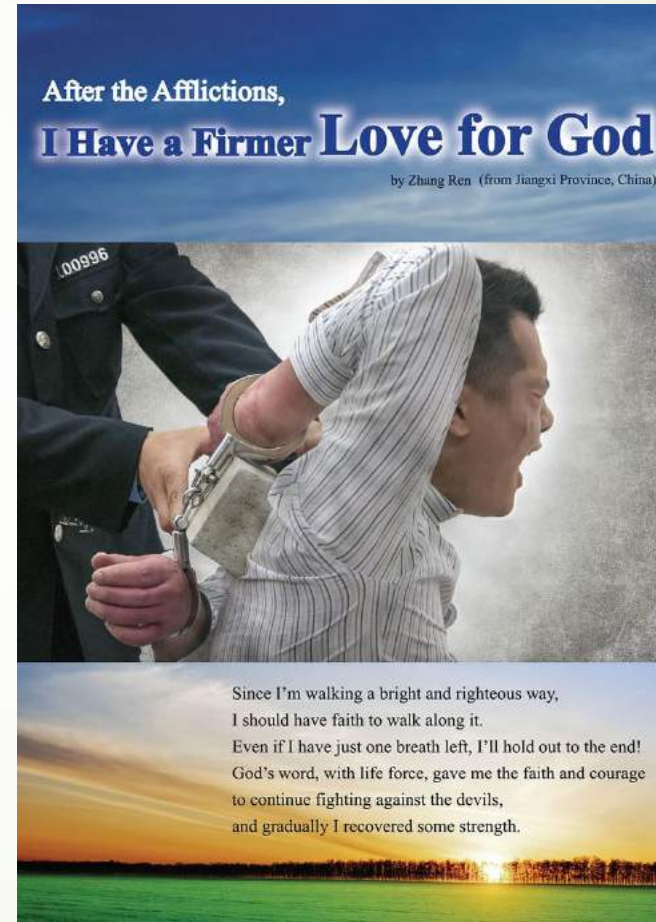
Predicting the End of the World in 2012?



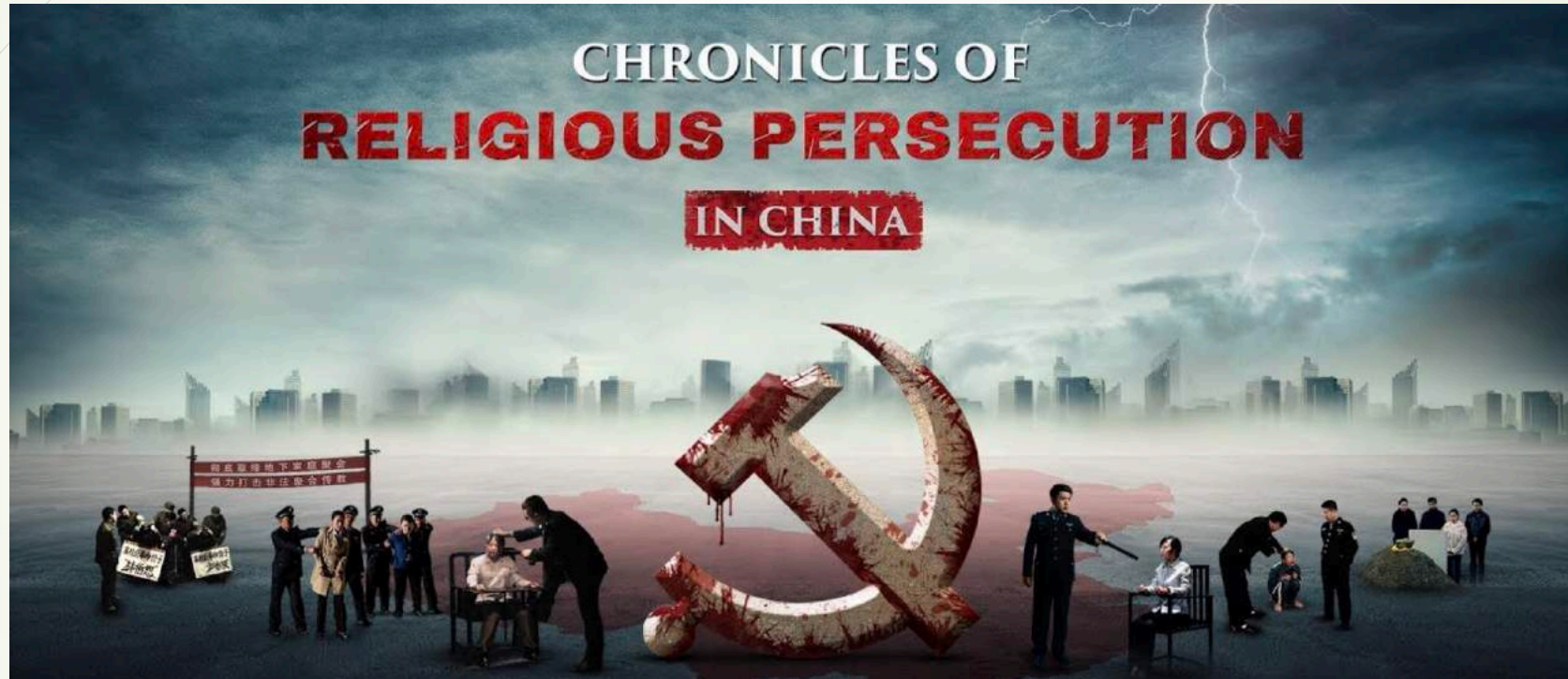
- CCP also accused CAG of having instigated riots in China based on the prediction of the end of the world in 2012. Fake covers of "CAG brochures" confirming the charge were posted on the Web by Chinese anti-cultists (left). However, there is no end of the world (rather, its transformation) in CAG's 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. Some CAG believers in China developed an interest in the so-called Mayan prophecies predicting the end of the world in 2012, but they were rebuked by the leaders and some were expelled

Refugee Status

- ▶ A serious humanitarian problem today is connected with CAG asylum seekers. 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 other countries are entitled to the status of refugees for reasons of religious 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



CHRISTIANS IN CHINA COMPLAIN OF PERSECUTION



- In this paper, I focused on The Church of Almighty God as one of the religions most affected by persecution in China. Clearly, there are similar problems for the other groups listed as *xie jiao*, including Falun Gong, and the situation of non-sinicized religions, even if not listed as *xie jiao*, became worse with the new religious regulations that came into force on February 1, 2018

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