

## Refugee Review Tribunal

### AUSTRALIA

#### RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

**Research Response Number:** CHN30492  
**Country:** China  
**Date:** 21 August 2006

**Keywords:** CHN30492 – China – Shanghai – Christians – Local Church – Local Recovery Church

This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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#### **Background**

*The applicant claims to be a member of the Local Recovery Church or Local Church founded by Watchman Nee. He makes no reference to Shouters or Witness Lee in his statement.*

#### **Questions**

- 1. What characteristics are specific to members of this church as opposed to Christians or the Protestant religion in general, in the way they pray or practice their religion?**
- 2. How are Local Church members treated in Shanghai?**
- 3. How are Local Church members treated in Sanming City, Fujian?**

#### **RESPONSE**

- 1. What characteristics are specific to members of this church as opposed to Christians or the Protestant religion in general, in the way they pray or practice their religion?**

A 2004 PhD dissertation by Jason Kindopp of George Washington University provides detailed and authoritative information on the Local Church's beliefs and practices. A reading of pages 429-450 is recommended to provide a good understanding of the sect. Major points include:

- The church does not refer to itself as the "Shouter Sect" (*huhan pai*). This pejorative label was given to it by the Chinese authorities during their crackdown on the group, which was first banned in the early 1980s (p.430).
- The Local Church grew out of the Little Flock movement founded by Ni Tuisheng (known as Watchman Nee) during the 1920s in Fuzhou (432-3). From the first, Ni rejected the idea of widespread or complex church hierarchies, seeking "to return to a simple New Testament pattern of worship and ministry, proposing a 'one locale, one church' formula. Also consistent with Chinese sensibilities, Ni's proposal for church organization was at once localistic and universal" (p.434).

- One of Ni's associates was Li Changshou (known as Witness Lee), who fled to Taiwan in 1949, ahead of advancing Communist Party troops, and moved to the USA in 1962. He expanded the church in these and other locations, retaining the Little Flock's "one locale, one church" formula, and naming each church simply The Church in Anaheim, The Church in Austin and so on. This led to outside observers labelling the group as "The Local Church", and Li's movement ultimately itself embraced this title (pp.436-7).
- Li further developed "the Little Flock's anti-bureaucratic principles and theological emphasis on subjective experience". The Local Church re-translated the entire Bible and added extensive commentary by Li throughout the text; the new version is called the *Recovery Bible*. Li also authored study guides, commentaries and pamphlets, which are in use today (p.437).
- The Local Church tends to depict humanity as "totally sinful", and mainstream Protestant churches as corrupt. The Local Church sees itself as being "the 'Lord's recovery' of Christianity through Li's subjective interpretations of the Bible, unique worship methods, and exclusivist organizational form" (p.438).
- Li's theology depicts the human being as "divided into flesh, soul and spirit". The flesh is sinful, and the soul "has been corrupted into self-centredness". Salvation for the individual is through the spirit: it "occurs through the 'mingling' of man's spirit with God's" (p.440).
- This "mingling" is achieved through practices devised by Li. "Pray-reading" involves the group practice of reading aloud from passages of scripture, which are viewed as "not merely God-inspired, but literally as God's Spirit", which can be literally imbibed by the believer (p.441). The very act of "pray-reading" is said to "kill the self", which is "the most subtle enemy of the Lord" (p.442). Kindopp regards Ni and Li's theology as appearing to "meld the doctrines of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity with traditional Chinese notions of spirituality". The concept to "pray-reading", for instance is "similar to that of *qigong* masters who claim to tap into cosmic forces" and both have an emphasis on breathing as a way of "imbibing the divine or cosmic power" (pp.442-3). The "Calling on God" method consists of repeatedly shouting out "*Zhuaaaaa!!* (Lord aaaah)" (p.472). The emphasis on vocal practices has led to the group acquiring the derogatory title of "Shouters" in China (p.453).
- Local Church communities become tightly knit "through frequent and highly participatory scheduled activities. Group rituals carefully follow Li's prescribed format, and are geared toward bringing adherents into total conformity with Li's dogma and into submission to his authority while eliciting total commitment to the church...Former members report that members are expected to attend from four to six scheduled meetings each week" (p.444). In China, groups can meet up to ten times a week (p.461).
- "The two formal leadership positions within the local Church base group are deacon and elder. Elders oversee the group's operations, assuming legal responsibility for church properties and supervising the service content and structure. Deacons assist the elders by taking leading roles in the services and administering the Lord's Table.

Some Churches have full-time workers to attend to building maintenance and manage church properties, supported through members' 'freewill offerings'" (p.445).

- The Local Church's top leadership body is the Council of Elders. "Individual churches are linked to the local Church's central leadership centre in Anaheim through an extensive training system and a mass media empire. Periodic leadership training seminars are held at the Local Church's Anaheim headquarters and in regional offices around the world, ranging from short-term international conferences to ten-day leadership seminars to a 1 ½ year intensive training program for full-time workers" (p.446).
- Each year, the Living Stream Ministry (the Local Church's publishing house) prints "millions of copies of the *Recovery Bible*, Li's Life-Study series, the Local Church hymnal, and pamphlets covering every aspect of Local Church doctrine and practice". The Living Stream Ministry website <http://www.lsm.org/> contains full-text versions of many core texts (p.446).
- The Local Church separates itself from the broader society as much as possible to maintain its spiritual purity; will "quarantine" church members who have expressed dissent; and will shun those who have left the church (p.448).
- In China the Local Church's "highly associational organizational structure enables groups to form without any formal bureaucracy or clerical ties to the church hierarchy, facilitating their expansion" and allowing them to function in spite of official repression (p.460-1).
- Kindopp also feels that lately the Local Church has taken steps to "bring the group into greater conformity with the evangelical Protestant mainstream" and that this has led to the authorities taking "tentative steps" to recognise the group (p.466) (Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', in *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May – Attachment 1).

Recent RRT Research Responses are attached which examine various aspects of the Local Church.

- An August 2006 response contains information obtained from the Elders of the Local Church in Sydney. It discusses local branches and membership numbers, gives the names of the Sydney Elders, and states that they are "affiliated" by fellowship with the other churches following the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee (RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response CHN30352*, 2 August – Attachment 2).
- An October 2005 response looks at the "Shouters" in China, discussing the sect's relation to mainstream Christianity and to the Chinese authorities. It draws on material from Human Rights Watch, the US Department of State, Christian sources and news reports (RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response CHN17561*, 7 October – Attachment 3).

The US Department of State report on religious freedom for 2005 contains little detail on the Local Church in particular, but does reiterate that the group is still banned:

**The Government has banned all groups that it has determined to be “cults,” including the “Shouters” (founded in the United States in 1962),** Eastern Lightning, the Society of Disciples (Mentu Hui), the Full Scope Church, the Spirit Sect, the New Testament Church, the Guan Yin (also known as Guanyin Famin, or the Way of the Goddess of Mercy), the Servants of Three Classes, the Association of Disciples, the Lord God Sect, the Established King Church, the Unification Church, the Family of Love, the South China Church, the Falun Gong, and the Zhong Gong movements. (Zhong Gong is a qigong exercise discipline with some mystical tenets.) After the revised Criminal Law came into effect in 1997, offenses related to membership in unapproved cults and religious groups were classified as crimes of disturbing the social order. A ban on cults, including the Falun Gong spiritual movement, was enacted in 1999. Under Article 300 of the Criminal Law, “cult” members who “disrupt public order” or distribute publications may be sentenced to from 3 to 7 years in prison, while “cult” leaders and recruiters may be sentenced to 7 years or more in prison (US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005: China*, 8 November – Attachment 4).

Of the Chinese government’s treatment of religion in general, the report states:

The Constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and the freedom not to believe; however, the Government seeks to restrict religious practice to government-sanctioned organizations and registered places of worship and to control the growth and scope of activities of religious groups. The Government tries to control and regulate religion to prevent the rise of groups that could constitute sources of authority outside of the control of the Government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Nonetheless, membership in many faiths is growing rapidly.

**During the period covered by this report, the Government’s respect for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience remained poor, especially for many unregistered religious groups and spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong. Unregistered religious groups continued to experience varying degrees of official interference and harassment. Members of some unregistered religious groups, including Protestant and Catholic groups, were subjected to restrictions, including intimidation, harassment, and detention.** In some localities, “underground” religious leaders reported ongoing pressure to register with the State Administration for Religious Activities (SARA) or its provincial and local offices, known as Religious Affairs Bureaus (RAB). Some unregistered religious groups also reported facing pressure to be affiliated with and supervised by official government-sanctioned religious associations linked to the five main religions--Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Catholicism, and Protestantism (US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005: China*, 8 November – Attachment 4).

Of interest is the report’s discussion of the role of local officials in implementing religious regulations, which varies considerably in different parts of China:

Local officials have great discretion in determining whether “house churches” violate regulations. The term “house church” is used to describe both unregistered churches and gatherings in homes or businesses of groups of Christians to conduct small, private worship services. **SARA officials confirmed during the year that unregistered churches are illegal, but prayer meetings and Bible study groups held among friends and family in homes are legal and need not register. In some parts of the country, unregistered house churches with hundreds of members meet openly with the full knowledge of local authorities, who characterize the meetings as informal gatherings to pray, sing, and study the Bible. In other areas, house church meetings of more than a handful of family members and friends are not permitted.** House churches often encounter difficulties when their membership grows, when they arrange for the regular use of facilities for the specific purpose of conducting religious activities, or when they forge links with other unregistered groups or with co-religionists overseas. Urban house churches are generally limited to meetings of a few dozen members or less, while meetings of unregistered

Protestants in small cities and rural areas may number in the hundreds (US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005: China*, 8 November – Attachment 4).

## **2. How are Local Church members treated in Shanghai?**

Little detailed information was found on the recent treatment of Local Church members in Shanghai, but the following reports may be of some use.

Sources indicate that Shanghai is one of the main centres of the Local Church, and was a centre for Watchman Nee's Little Flock from the early days of the movement. Reports suggest that there have been crackdowns on Local Church members (and other Christians) in Shanghai from time to time over the years. However, according to one 2004 report, the Local Church has been able to operate legally there recently.

Kindopp states that the first assembly under Watchman Nee's leadership was formed in Shanghai in 1928, and the movement spread from there to other provinces (Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', in *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May, p.435 – Attachment 1).

Another recent paper states:

Watchman Nee went to Shanghai in 1928, where he built a three-thousand-seat assembly hall in the city center. He also published his most famous theological work at that time, *The Spiritual Man*, which shaped Chinese Christians' understanding of spirituality in the early twentieth century....His followers organized themselves into proselytizing communities and created a nationwide network of Little Flock assemblies with headquarters in Shanghai...(Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei 2005, 'Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China', *Church History*, Volume 74, Issue 1, 1 March – Attachment 5).

On the current treatment of the group in Shanghai, Kindopp comments that it is up to local authorities to decide whether to register churches legally; and that Shanghai is one of those that have agreed to register them, and the church operates legally in the province. Please note that Kindopp is the only source that was found for this statement (Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May, p.466 – Attachment 1).

No recent reports were found that mention harassment of Local Church members in Shanghai. Older reports mention campaigns against the group:

A 1994 Human Rights Watch report states:

In the winter of 1980, a disparaging letter from a Shanghai resident was sent to a former Beijing co-worker of Watchman Nee in the hopes of broadening a campaign already in force in Shanghai. The letter accused Shouters of "beating, smashing, looting, fighting with the police, and seizing assembly halls." In 1982, 90,000 copies of an article titled "A Critique of Li Changshou's Heretical Beliefs" were distributed among Christians all over China with the object of educating and warning them about the Shouters. Those who disagreed with its contents were sent to be educated, criticized, and even punished (Human Rights Watch 1994, *China: Persecution of a Protestant Sect*, Vol.6, No.6, June, p.4 – Attachment 6).

A 1995 US Department of State report on China mentions that “in February a Shanghai splinter group of the Henan-based Christian evangelical sect known as the “Shouters” was broken up and its members harassed” (US Department of State 1996, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 1995: China*, 15 September – Attachment 7).

A 1996 Human Rights Watch report the group was specifically labelled as a “cult” to be cracked down upon by the authorities:

One of the tactics by which the government limits religious organizations is by labeling some groups as cults or sects rather than as legitimate offshoots of any of the five officially recognized religions. A Public Security Bureau circular, issued sometime between April and August 1996, revealed that the central government had authorized a crackdown on rural cults. **The document specifically mentioned the “counterrevolutionary” Shouters (Huhan Pai), a Protestant group.** But other persecuted groups include the “counterrevolutionary” Daoist Yi Guan Dao and the Buddhist Self-Nature Association; the Blood and Water Holy Spirit, an “illegal infiltrating organization” founded by visiting Christians from Taiwan; the heretical Lingling, Wilderness (Kuangye Hui) , and Disciples (Mentuhui) ; and groups such as the Born Again (Cong Sheng). **An internal article puts the number of cultists at 500,000 spread across most provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Chongqing) and advocates that severe measures be taken.** It charges members with raving about breaking down central control in rural areas where party domination is weak, and raising the slogan, “seize church power first and then take over the political power.” The document goes on to accuse members of sabotaging production, creating “social panic,” and undermining “social order.” (Human Rights Watch 1997, ‘Suppression of cults’, in *China: State Control of Religion*, October – Attachment 8).

Johnstone and Mandryk give this profile of the general situation for Christians in Shanghai in their 2001 book *Operation World*:

Religion: Christian 9.6%; House Churches 5.7%, all Catholics 2.8%, TSPM 1.1%

...A large network of small house churches has developed – some estimate between 3,000 and 20,000. In a crackdown in 1999, 1,000 were forcibly closed. ... For years, Shanghai has been a base for Christian outreach to the whole country. One of the major house church networks is doing just that today (Johnstone, Patrick & Mandryk, Jason 2001, *Operation World*, 6th ed, Paternoster Lifestyle, Cumbria, ‘China’, p.177 – Attachment 9).

### **3. How are Local Church members treated in Sanming City, Fujian?**

No information was found specifically on the Local Church in Sanming City, but several reports mention the situation of the Local Church in Fujian province as a whole. Sources indicate that there have been arrests of Local Church members from time to time. One source states that the Local Church now operates legally in some parts of Fujian.

A 2006 DFAT report (which apparently was particularly looking at events in 2002) states:

Since 1982, China’s government has tried to suppress the Shouter sect, which it views as an “evil cult” (as it does Falun Gong). There are some reports on Chinese-language websites of police raids on Shouter meetings and of leaders and practitioners being arrested and punished. There are several reports of raids on Shouter meetings in Fuqing (as well as in other areas) in 2002 – usually when the raid received some sort of international attention (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2006, *DFAT Report 515: RRT Information Request CHN30365*, 4 August – Attachment 10).

An October 2005 response discusses the fact that that Fujian Province is regarded as a stronghold of Shouter belief, and that the founder of the group, Watchman Nee, came from

Fujian. Question 3 looks specifically at their treatment in Fuqing City, Fujian Province, and refers to reports of arrests of group members in 2002 and 2004 (RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response CHN17561*, 7 October – Attachment 3).

Jason Kindopp's 2004 paper contains several references to the Local Church in Fujian Province. He states that in the late 1970s, the overseas branch of the church sent missionaries back into several areas in China, including Fujian province (p.451). Fujian and other "Little Flock" strongholds then experienced a rapid expansion of Local Church activity (p.452). In 2001, a Fujian case attracted worldwide attention, which led to a temporary easing of restrictions in the province

The church's most recent political setback came in May 2001, when Hong Kong businessman and Local Church member Li Guangqiang and Fujian residents Yu Zhudi and Lin Xifu were arrested for smuggling 32,000 copies of Li Changshou's Recovery Bible into China. The three were initially charged merely with importing books without a license, but the charge was later upgraded to "using a cult to undermine enforcement of the law."<sup>598</sup> Although the charge (filed under China's Criminal Law 300, art. 1) carried a maximum penalty of a 15-year imprisonment,<sup>599</sup> Local Church activists in Hong Kong told the press that Li had received a death sentence, which was reported widely abroad, evoking an international outcry on the eve of President Bush's February 2002 trip to China...President Bush personally championed Li's case, issuing a public call for his release...Members of Congress also took up Li's case, raising the issue in the International Relations Committee of the House of Representatives...Due largely to political pressure from abroad, Li's sentence was reduced to three years' probation, which he served in Hong Kong. Lin Xifu was sentenced to three years but released several months later for "health reasons." Yu Zhudi was last reported to be at a labor camp in Fujian...To appease the U.S., Party leaders in Beijing reportedly instructed authorities in Fujian not to touch the Local Church, resulting in at least a temporary period of unprecedented freedom from official repression for the group (pp.456-7) (Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', in *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May – Attachment 1).

Kindopp also states that official repression is not uniform throughout China, and that in some areas of Fujian province the local authorities have allowed the Local Church to register legally. Please note that Kindopp is the only source that was found for this statement:

By contrast, political authorities in other locales have agreed to register Local Church congregations within their jurisdictions, as they have with other autonomous house churches. Local Churches now operate legally in **Shanghai, Nanjing, Fuzhou**, and a number of rural counties in Zhejiang and **Fujian Provinces**. **The Local Church in Fujian's rural Longtian district, for example, recently built a massive church complex with a 4,000 person seating capacity and adjoining classrooms for Sunday school**, Registration has often occurred in the face of TSPM opposition, although *lianghui* officials have also found it expedient to forge a *modus vivendi* with Local Church leaders, particularly in areas where Local Church adherents constitute a sizable minority or even a majority of Protestants.<sup>623</sup> Indeed, the practice has become sufficiently widespread that observers now refer to the phenomenon as a potential "third wave" of church-state relations, continuing with broader trends toward official relaxation of religious control from the Mao period through the reform era. If realized, such a "wave" would likely seal the fate of the unpopular TSPM, as the vast majority of congregations would undoubtedly opt to register independently with political authorities, rather than coming under the *lianghui*'s auspices (p.466) (Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', in *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May – Attachment 1).

## List of Sources Consulted

### Internet Sources:

Google search engine <http://www.google.com.au/>

### Databases:

FACTIVA (news database)

BACIS (DIMA Country Information database)

REFINFO (IRBDC (Canada) Country Information database)

ISYS (RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State Reports)

RRT Library Catalogue

RRT Library: *Operation World; China's Christian Millions*

## List of Attachments

1. Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', in *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May
2. RRT Country Research 2006, *Research Response CHN30352*, 2 August
3. RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response CHN17561*, 7 October
4. US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report 2005: China*, 8 November
5. Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei 2005, 'Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China', *Church History, Volume 74, Issue 1*, 1 March (FACTIVA)
6. Human Rights Watch 1994, *China: Persecution of a Protestant Sect*, Vol.6, No.6, June
7. US Department of State 1996, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 1995: China*, 15 September
8. Human Rights Watch 1997, *China: State Control of Religion*, October
9. Johnstone, Patrick & Mandryk, Jason 2001, *Operation World*, 6th ed, Paternoster Lifestyle, Cumbria, 'China' (RRT Library)
10. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2006, *DFAT Report 515: RRT Information Request CHN30365*, 4 August