

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: CHN30727
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Keywords: CHN30726 – Local Church – Shouters – Guiyang, Guizong Miao ethnic group

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.

Questions

1. Please provide any information on a PSB crackdown on the Christian group, the Local church or Shouters, in or around Guiyang, Guizong province in January 2006.
2. Please provide any information on the activities of the Local Church – the Shouters – in Guiyang, Guizong province and the attitudes of the authorities to that group from 2004.
3. Please provide information on the Miao village in and near Guiyang, Guizong, including their beliefs.
4. Please provide any specific information on the Miao ethnic group and their following of Christianity and the Local Church in and near Guiyang, Guizong Province.

RESPONSE

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The province referred to by the Member appears to be **Guizhou Province**.

No information at all was found among the sources consulted on the Shouters/Local Church group in Guizhou Province.

However, the following reports may be of some use. They provide background information on Christians in general in Guizhou; and on the Shouters in China as a whole.

Christians in Guizhou

A survey of the Chinese Church by Tony Lambert for the *Global Chinese Ministries Newsletter* states:

GUIZHOU

Population : 35.3 million

Capital: Guiyang (3.3 million)

Christian Situation : Guizhou is one of China's poorest provinces. The many mountains make the tiny fields unsuited to mechanized agriculture. In 1993 TSPM leaders estimated 300-400,000 Protestants. A more recent TSPM estimate in 1998 estimated 360,000 of whom half were unbaptized. In 1991 there were 197 churches and 370 registered meeting-points. In 1996 these were served by 60 pastors, 100 elders and 100 teachers. Most of the Christians are situated in the northwest of the province where the CIM worked in pre-1951 days. Hezhang has seen growth from 4,000 to over 26,000 believers. Lupanshui has over 30,000 Christians. The Bijie district has over 100,000 believers. In contrast, the huge area of southeast Guizhou has only about 1,000 ' (Lambert, Tony 2003, 'Survey of the Chinese Church – Part II', *Global Chinese Ministries Newsletter*, April. <http://www.us.omf.org/content.asp?id=22860> – Accessed 15 September 2005 – Attachment 1).

A few reports were found of arrests of Christians in Guizhou.

The 2005 US Department of State report on religious freedom in China states that during the year the Chinese authorities “continued to harass and detain ‘house’ Christians, especially for attempting to meet in large groups”. One incident reportedly took place in Guizhou:

...In June 2004, the government-run Legal Daily newspaper reported that Jiang Zongxiu had died in police custody in Zunyi, Guizhou Province, after being arrested for distributing Bibles. A Legal Daily editorial comment condemned local officials for mistreating Jiang (US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 8 November – Attachment 2).

A 2000 report states that a full-time evangelist was arrested in Guiyang and sentenced to two years of hard labour (Buchan, Alex 2000 'Six More Chinese House Church Leaders Arrested and Sentenced', Christian Persecution website, 18 April, <http://worthynews.com/persecution.htm> - Attachment 3).

A 2000 report by Human Rights in China states:

The family of Kang Wenbi, a house church leader from Bijie District, Guizhou Province who was detained on June 30, 1999, fears that Kang will suffer the fate of at least two other local house church leaders, names unknown, who were reportedly tortured to death during interrogation by local public security officers. In these two cases, police authorities claimed that the deaths occurred at the hands of other prisoners, but no explanation was provided. The families were only given a few hundred yuan to help pay for the burials—an admission that the authorities were in some sense responsible for the deaths (Human Rights in China 2000, *Impunity for Torturers Continues Despite Changes in the Law*, April – Attachment 4).

The Shouters in China as a whole

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 the tagged pages 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.

- The Local Church grew out of the Little Flock movement founded by Ni Tuisheng (known as Watchman Nee) during the 1920s in Fuzhou. 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.
- 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".
- 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".
- 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. The very act of "pray-reading" is said to "kill the self", which is "the most subtle enemy of the Lord". 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". The "Calling on God" method consists of repeatedly shouting out "Zhuaaaaa!! (Lord aaaah)". The emphasis on vocal practices has led to the group acquiring the derogatory title of "Shouters" in China.
- "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'". The Local Church's top leadership body is the Council of Elders.
- 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.
- 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 (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 5).

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 2).

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 2).

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 2).

3. Please provide information on the Miao village in and near Guiyang, Guizong, including their beliefs.

The Miao are an ethnic group, rather than one village. Information found on an evangelical Christian website indicates that there are about 8 million Miao in China and about 1.5 million in other countries such as Vietnam. About half of those in China live in Guizhou Province, and the rest in Yunnan, Hunan, Sichuan, Guangxi and Hubei. Within the Miao there are several sub-groups and mutually unintelligible dialects. Many live in villages in mountainous regions. The majority of Miao are animists, but overall there are about 300,000 Christians, the result of missionary efforts during the 19th and 20th centuries. The Christian Miao in Guizhou Province, according to this report, are located near Anshun ('People Profile' (undated), The Miao Unreached People Group website, <http://www.miaoupg.com/profile.htm> - Accessed 29 September 2006 – Attachment 6).

A breakdown of Miao groups from the same website states that there are a number of different Miao sub-groups in Guizhou province. In Guiyang there are 190,000 Miao from the Western Hmongic group ('Miao Groups' (undated), The Miao Unreached People Group website, <http://www.miaoupg.com/miao.htm> - Accessed 29 September 2006 – Attachment 7).

Two *Encarta* maps are attached. One has Guiyang and Anshun marked, and the other shows Guizhou province within China ('Guizhou, China' 1999, *Microsoft Encarta* – Attachment 8).

4. Please provide any specific information on the Miao ethnic group and their following of Christianity and the Local Church in and near Guiyang, Guizong Province.

No information was found on Miao followers of the Local Church, either in Guizhou Province or elsewhere in China. As was mentioned in the previous question, a significant minority of Miao are Christians, and some of these are located near Guiyang in Guizhou Province.

The following reports provide some information on Christianity among the Miao.

- A 2005 report discusses the remote mountain village of Haima in Guizhou, where there are Miao Christians ('Rise of Christianity as phenomenal as economic boom' 2005, *Irish Times*, 9 November – Attachment 9).
- A 2004 report discusses the mountain village of Shimenkan, which is in Sichuan Province near the border with Guizhou, where Methodist missionaries had converted some Miao, who remained practising Christians even after the missionaries were expelled by the Communist Party (Sheridan, Michael 2004, 'Methodist ghosts take God to China', *The Sunday Times*, 8 August – Attachment 10).

Another report from The Miao Unreached People Group website is of interest. It states that “cults are on the rise in China, and the Miao are not immune. Because the Miao are mostly illiterate, they are particularly susceptible to cult activity”. The website lists several cults that are potential dangers to the Miao, including the Shouters, but does not go into any detail about their influence over the Miao, except for the Eastern Lightning group, which it states is “the biggest threat to the Miao and to the church in China in general”. It states that “in 2004 members of this cult made a major advance on a number of Miao churches that had recently come to faith, though many turned back to Christ” (‘Cults’ (undated), The Miao Unreached People Group website, <http://www.miaoupg.com/cults.htm> - Accessed 29 September 2006 – Attachment 11).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Search Engines

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

List of Attachments

1. Lambert, Tony 2003, ‘Survey of the Chinese Church – Part II’, *Global Chinese Ministries Newsletter*, April. <http://www.us.omf.org/content.asp?id=22860> – Accessed 15 September 2005
2. US Department of State 2005, *International Religious Freedom Report*, 8 November
3. Buchan, Alex 2000 ‘Six More Chinese House Church Leaders Arrested and Sentenced’, Christian Persecution website, 18 April, <http://worthynews.com/persecution.htm>
4. Human Rights in China 2000, *Impunity for Torturers Continues Despite Changes in the Law*, April
5. 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
6. ‘People Profile’ (undated), The Miao Unreached People Group website, <http://www.miaoupg.com/profile.htm> - Accessed 29 September 2006

7. 'Miao Groups' (undated), The Miao Unreached People Group website, <http://www.miaoupg.com/miao.htm> - Accessed 29 September 2006
8. 'Guizhou, China' 1999, *Microsoft Encarta* (Encarta CD-ROM)
9. 'Rise of Christianity as phenomenal as economic boom' 2005, *Irish Times*, 9 November (FACTIVA)
10. Sheridan, Michael 2004, 'Methodist ghosts take God to China', *The Sunday Times*, 8 August (FACTIVA)
11. 'Cults' (undated), The Miao Unreached People Group website, <http://www.miaoupg.com/cults.htm> - Accessed 29 September 2006