

Christian Cults in China

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28 January 2014

It has become an all too common event in China: the government raids a meeting at a house church. People are arrested, homes are ransacked, and materials are taken hostage by the authorities. But are those groups Christian or cult? Numerous pseudo Christian cults have taken China by storm since the 1960s. The Disciples, All Ranges Church, the Spirit-Spirit Sect, the New Testament Church, Goddess of Mercy Doctrine, Established King, Unification Church, Three Grades of Servants, True Buddha School, Family International, the Dami Mission, World Elijah Evangelical Mission, the Shouters, and *The Local Church* are all designated by the Chinese government as official cults. For the purpose of this essay we will focus on comparing two of the most widely discussed church groups – the Shouters and *The Local Church*.

The Chinese spiritual world is complex and plagued by conspiratorial activities. A brief note about Eastern Lightning, a *sinister cult*, demonstrates this situation and shows why the controversy between the Shouters and *The Local Church* has become both intense and often confusing. Eastern Lightning believes Jesus has been reincarnated as a woman living in Chinatown, New York. They have violent forms of evangelism such as seducing men with attractive women and kidnapping 34 Christians from house churches in the surrounding areas and holding them captive for nearly two months. Because of these illegal and dangerous activities the Chinese government seeks to uncover the group and bring its members to justice. Because it hides under a cloak of Christianity though, true churches suffer from raids as well, as the government seeks to discern one group from the other.

During 1966-1976 there was a cultural revolution in China wherein there was an attempt to eliminate the four *olds* – old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. During this decade Christianity was condemned and many Christians were sent to camps to be “re-educated.” All Christian literature, including Bibles, were destroyed. Despite this persecution, house churches soon reappeared all over China.

While individual communities of believers were associated with each other, leadership was very loose and unable to produce literature to guide their adherents. As a result, heresies were increasingly common and the groups lacked coherent dogma to guide their teachings and liturgies.

The Shouters began in the Henan province in the 1960s. They are called the Shouters because they cry out to God during their worship services. They are among one of the fastest growing underground churches in China with their numbers allegedly around 500,000. As mentioned in a *Time* magazine article about the group, “The Shouters.... rewrote the Lord’s Prayer to read simply, “Oh, Lord Jesus,” and taught followers to holler the phrase while stamping their feet in unison.”

In the early 1980s, Witness Lee, an apprentice of the great Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee, began to disseminate literature throughout the home churches. His unorthodox view of the trinity caused some

members of these churches to elevate him to the position of Christ. This, combined with their aggressive evangelism and their bellicose shouting of Bible verses, caused clashes with the state led Three Self Church. The group was driven underground, declared counter revolutionary by the government, and saw its leaders arrested. However, the group still seems to grow and get along while concealed. Eastern Lightning, a cult mentioned earlier in this essay, is a splinter group from the Shouter church.

The Local Church is seen by some to be a cult and by others just to be different from traditional evangelical Christianity. There has been much controversy and even litigation over this matter in connection with a lawsuit for slander which they brought against a rival group. These misunderstandings happened when Witness Lee brought his movement out of China and into to the Western world. Lee's style of teaching was radically different than what Western evangelicals were used to – mainly that Lee would make radical theological statements to get your attention and then balance them out elsewhere in his texts. However, his statements come across not just as attention grabbing but sacrilegious. He made statements that denigrated the trinity, deified the nature of man, questioned the legitimacy of evangelical churches, and maintained that denominations were meaningless.

The Local Church has had serious conflicts with evangelical churches that have led to legal disputes. In 1976 and 1977 two books were written by religious leaders who lost members of their congregations to *The Local Church*. They accused *The Local Church* of cult activity, an accusation that may or may not have been true. *The Local Church* sued them for libel. They won both suits and were awarded 11.9 million dollars in one of the two cases, the largest award for libel in US history at that time.

Yet, when dealing with *The Local Church* it is advisable to be cautious. First of all, there are still contradictory reports on the internet from ex-members maintain that the group is in fact a cult and not an orthodox religious organization. Also, why would a group espouse confusing theology about key issues such as the trinity and the nature of man when they surely know about the damage this can cause? If they really embraced another belief why would they not state that belief clearly?

The conflict between the Shouters and *The Local Church* will go on. Each group is convinced that they have the key to heaven. And with so many discrepancies from one house church to the next it is nearly impossible to call out an individual church on a specific heresy.

Sources: Jesus Is Back, and She's Chinese, TIME Asia, Nov. 5, 2001

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