



Persecuting the Church of Almighty God as a *Xie Jiao* in China

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Seoul Human Right Conference, October 23, 2017

China Defines *Xie Jiao*



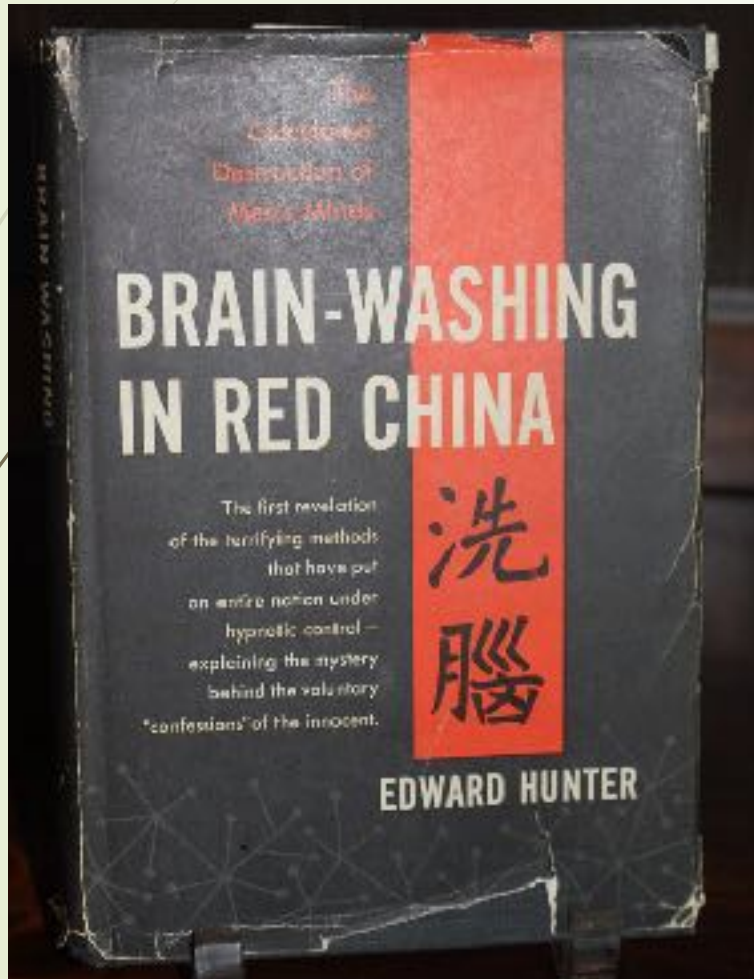
- *Xie jiao* is normally translated as “evil cults,” but the expression exists from Ming times, long before modern controversies on “cults”
- The People's Supreme Court and Supreme Procuratorate of China defined *xie jiao* on January 25, 2017 as “illegal organizations, which, through fraudulent use of religion, *qi gong*, or any other name, by deifying and promoting their ringleaders, or by fabricating and spreading superstitious fallacies and other means to confuse and deceive others (...), control group members and harm society”—obviously a vague, dangerous definition

In Practice: Three Definitions of *Xie Jiao*

- 1. Pastors of the State-sponsored Chinese Christian churches: *xie jiao* is an “unbiblical group,” whose *beliefs* contradict the mainline interpretation of core Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity or the role of Jesus Christ



Anti-Cult Definitions



- 2. CCP-connected Chinese scholars borrow their definitions from the Western anti-cult movement's notions of "cult" (unaware they have been truly discredited by scholars): "cults" are groups whose leaders control their member through "brainwashing" (ironically, a label coined by the CIA as a tool for its anti-Maoist propaganda in the 1950s)

Behavioral Definitions

- 3. China also invited Western scholars, who suggested to define *xie jiao* for their *behavior* (rather than belief) as *criminal religious movements* committing or advocating crimes punished by laws of general application (*not* special laws against “cults”), such as sexual abuse, violence, rape, homicide, etc.



Above: The Beasts of Satan, a small Italian Satanist “cult” that committed at least three homicides between 1998 and 2004

Avoiding Faulty Criteria



- In this case, for identifying “criminal religious movements” (CRM), China should not use the faulty notion of brainwashing, nor theological definitions based on questions of belief, doctrine, and heresy. Many groups within the Hindu or Buddhist, and some in the Christian, tradition, consider their leaders as “living gods” but, unless this is constructed as a license for the leaders to rape or beat the followers, the mere *belief* in the leader's divinity is not criminal per se

A Faulty Notion of “Extremism”

- In the 2017 decision “liquidating” the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia a faulty notion of “extremism” was mentioned, regarding as “extremist” any group that argues that its is the only true religion and way of salvation and that all other religions are false. We find similar affirmations in the holy books of most religions, and religion in general is not where we can expect to find pluralistic and relativistic ideas of truth



Xie jiao = “Criminal Religious Movements”

- I would propose a definition of CRM as a religious movement that either, or both, advocates or consistently engages as a group in major violent or criminal activities, including terrorism, homicide, physical violence against members, dissidents, or opponents, rape, sexual abuse of minors, or major economic crimes. Let's examine five key elements of this definition



Above: The fictional, criminal religious movement of Holy Blood in the 1989 movie *Santa Sangre*, directed by Alejandro Jodorowski

1. A Religious Movement

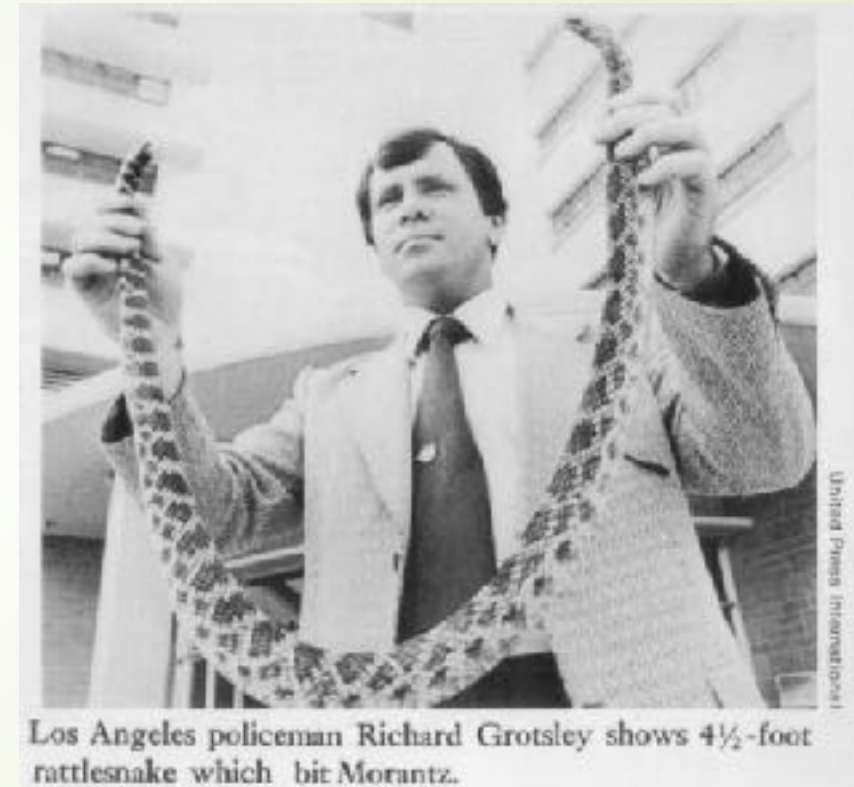


Above: A ritual in the Order of the Solar Temple, a CRM responsible for multiple suicides and homicides between 1994 and 1996 in France, Switzerland, and Canada

- The definition stays away from attempts to label CRMs as “pseudo-religious” groups, which would either be based on the naïve notions that all religions are by definition benign, or lead to very difficult questions about what is a religion. For the functional purpose of the definition, a religious group is a group characterized by religious beliefs and practices, without investigating their orthodoxy, quality, or “strangeness”

2. Advocates or Consistently Engages as a Group

- It is not enough that some members of the group commit crimes. That some Catholic priests are pedophiles does not make the Catholic Church a CRM, as the institution's doctrines do not condone pedophilia and the vast majority of Catholics and priests abhor it. The definition implies that the movement *as a group*, in its corporate capacity, either or both advocates in its doctrines and consistently (systematically) commit crimes



Above: Placing a rattlesnake in the mailbox of attorney Paul Morantz in 1978 was one of several crimes perpetrated by Californian CRM Synanon against its opponents

3. Major Crimes

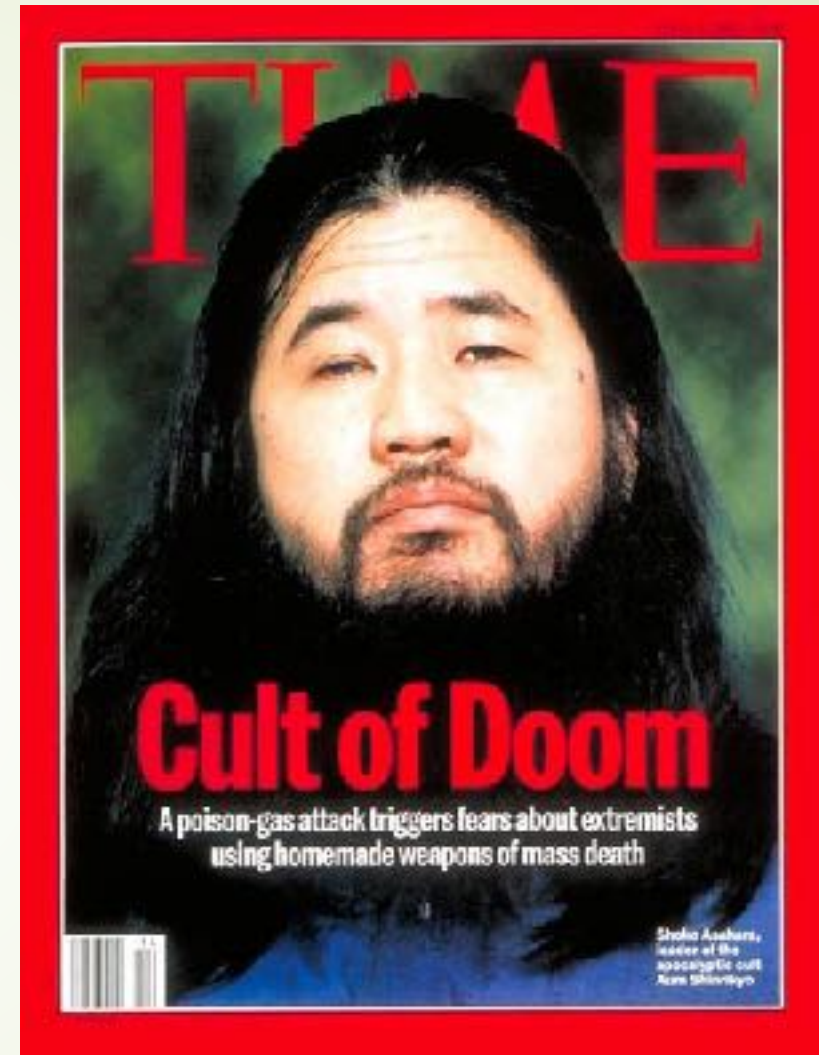


Above: Charred remains of members of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God, an Ugandan CRM that self-destructed itself in 2000 in a frenzy of homicides and suicides, which made more than 700 victims

- The definition implies that crimes should be major ones, such as terrorism, rape, homicide, child abuse, physical violence, and even serious and consistent economic crimes, such as international money laundering. Many religious groups are accused in some countries of tax elusion or evasion and administrative wrongdoings. This alone should not lead to the conclusion that the group is a CRM

4. Clearly Defined Crimes

- The definition insists on *well defined* crimes, punished by *existing laws* and not by new laws created for the specific purpose of acting against so called “cults.” As such, it focuses for example on *physical* violence rather than on elusive notions of *psychological* violence, on beating or murdering opponents rather than on threatening them with the flames of hell in the afterlife, and so on – although it recognizes that *advocating* physical violence and inciting others to commit violent acts is also a real form of violence



Above: Japan's Shoko Asahara had ordered the murder of opponents of his group Aum Shinrikyo before organizing a deadly gas attack with sarin gas in the Tokyo subway in 1995, although most members of his movements ignored his criminal activities



5. Court Decisions

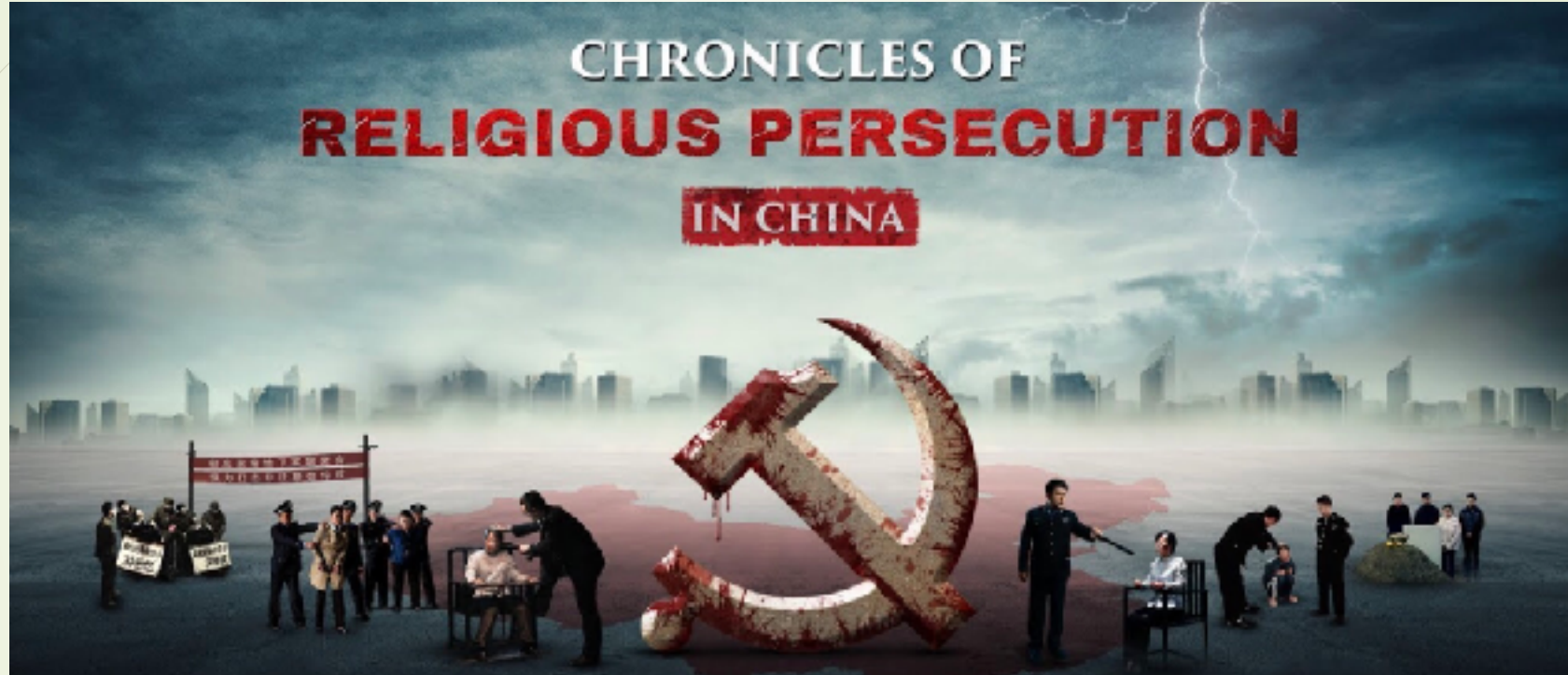
- It should be obvious, but it should perhaps also specified, that crimes should be ascertained by courts after a due process where defendants were represented by independent lawyers. Mere rumors or decisions of “kangaroo courts” are not enough

The Church of Almighty God



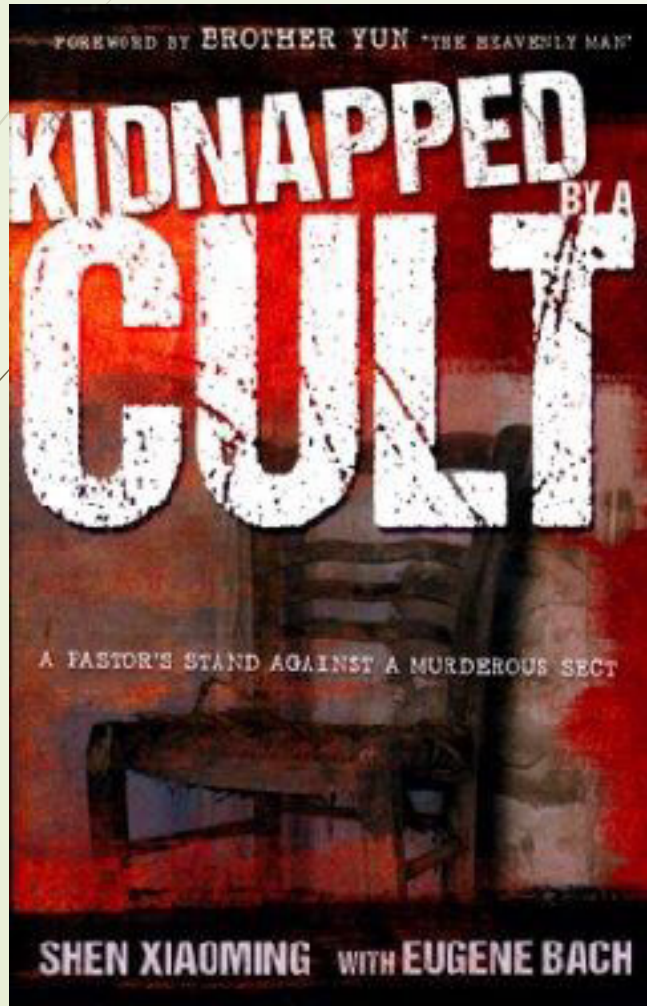
- The theology of the Church of Almighty God (CAG) is criticized by some Christian leaders for its differences with traditional Christianity. Nobody, however, should be punished for following a certain theology. The CCP has also accused CAG of conspiring to overthrow the Chinese government and of serious crimes such as violence and even homicide. Are these accusations authentic?

The Red Dragon



- Clearly the Church of Almighty God does not have a good opinion of the CCP and in fact identifies it with the Dragon of the *Book of Revelation*. However, if one reads its literature, the impression is that the Dragon would fall by itself, and there is no appeal to a revolution.

Violence against Other Churches?



- CCP and some Chinese Christian leaders have also accused CAG of violence against pastors and elders of other churches. There are reports of pastors kidnapped in 2002 and one can also find impressive pictures of a pastor with his ear cut, allegedly by CAG members in 1998. While further studies of these cases of 15-20 years ago are needed, they cannot be considered as proved because, as far as I have ascertained, **no member of CAG has been tried or convicted in China** for these crimes

A Critical Incident: The McDonald's Murder



- There are some 20,000 references on the Web attributing to CAG the murder of a woman in a McDonald's diner in Zhaoyuan, in the province of Shandong, in 2014. I agree that sometimes one "critical incident" of this kind may be so relevant to justify the definition of a movement as criminal **if it was really responsible for it**

A Horrific Crime

- On May 28, 2014, six “missionaries” entered the McDonald preaching their message and asked clients to leave their phone numbers for further contacts. Wu Shuoyan (1977–2014), a sales assistant working in a nearby clothing store, refused to give her number. She was declared a “wicked spirit” and beaten to death with a mop handle



But Who Did It?



- The scholars who have studied the case agree that the assassins were not CAG members. They said it very clearly at their trial, as reported by the same Chinese official sources: “The state labeled Zhao Weishan’s fake ‘Church of Almighty God’ as a *xie jiao*, and we label them as ‘evil spirits.’ (...) The government has been cracking down on the Almighty God that Zhao Weishan [the ‘Priest’ and administrative leader of the Church of the Almighty God] believes in, not the ‘Almighty God’ we mention. They are fake ‘Almighty God,’ while we are the real ‘Almighty God’”

Above: Zhang Fan (1984–2015), one of the group’s leaders, executed for the murder in 2015

An Independent Micro-Movement



- ▶ The assassins regarded as “Almighty God(s)” their two female leaders, Zhang Fan and Lü Yingchun—which clearly put them in opposition with CAG, for which there can be no other “Almighty God” than the person it recognizes as such. Once carefully studied, theirs appears an apocalyptic and violent micro-movement, **not** part of the Church of Almighty God

Post-Truth and “Mediabolization”



- While areas for further study still remain, the campaign attributing to CAG the McDonald murder belongs to the now very much studied categories of “post-truth” and “mediabolization”(a French word indicating demonization through the media),and it has been used to legitimize a persecution that started well before the incident in Zhaoyuan



Did You Say *Xie Jiao*?

- ▶ “The government’s anti-religion campaign is not borne of concern for public security stemming from a horrific murder. This is a concerted effort to bring independent churches and their followers into line. The clampdown is simply the government’s way of strengthening its control of society. [...On June 1, a CCTV report outlined the ‘six characteristics of evil cults,’ which a legal ‘expert’ said included the cult of personality, immorality, and restrictions of individual and spiritual freedom. [...] I realized that the name of the biggest cult is hidden in plain view: the Communist Party” (Chinese novelist Murong Xuecong, writing in *The New York Times*, June 18, 2014)