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Please pray

1. That Chinese believers will be rooted and grounded in scriptural truth and not taken in by cultic teachings.
2. For pastors and church leaders as they instruct their congregations in the scriptures and in refuting false teaching.
3. That false teaching will be quickly discerned, rooted out, and not disrupt or destroy congregations.
4. That additional instructional materials exposing cults, teaching how to identify them, and how to not become entangled in them will be...
The War against Cults in China

By Tony Lambert

Last year a lady was queuing in McDonald’s in Shandong Province in eastern China. While she was waiting, she sent a text message to a friend saying she had just seen some rather strange people who had rudely accosted her. Moments later she was beaten to death by these same people before horrified onlookers as they shouted: “She has a demon!” Her “crime” was she had not wanted to give them her mobile number and other private details.

Her attackers were members of the ultra-secretive cult formerly known as Eastern Lightning but now calling itself The Church of Almighty God. The Chinese government acted swiftly; the perpetrators were arrested and two were later sentenced to death. At the same time, a massive nation-wide swoop arrested hundreds of other cult members. The action was reminiscent of the similar crack down in 1999 when Beijing ruthlessly crushed the Falungong cult whose members had dared to demonstrate by the thousands outside the very gates of the top leaders’ residential compound.

China has been experiencing a major revival of religious faith—especially Buddhism and Protestant Christianity—since the Mao days when all religious expression was completely suppressed. However, at the same time there has been an upsurge in cults, many of them quite bizarre.

This is nothing new. For centuries, going back as far as the Han dynasty two thousand years ago, when the Red Eyebrows cult was a major force, China’s ruling elite have struggled to contain and, if necessary, suppress fanatical religious movements. Many have proved a serious threat to the ruling dynasty. It should not be forgotten that it was the support of the Buddhist White Lotus societies which helped the first Ming Emperor to overthrow the hated Mongol Yuan dynasty in 1368. On assumption of power, he turned against the secret societies, but they survived for centuries to come.

China’s Communist Party is officially atheist, but persecution of religion and sectarian activity can be traced back many hundreds of years to Confucian scholar-officials who had a deep, and well-founded, suspicion of Buddhist and Daoist cults. In times of famine, official corruption, and oppression from harmless benevolent societies, these easily turned into foci for armed revolt against the ruling dynasty. China’s rulers have a long historical memory which is foreign to newer nations such as the United States. China’s present Communist bureaucrats have not forgotten the devastating effects of the pseudo-Christian Taiping Rebellion in the mid-19th century which came near to overthrowing the reigning Qing (Manchu) dynasty. Hong Xiuquan was a failed Confucian scholar who had visions of God and Jesus and formed a movement which destroyed all idol temples and viewed the Qing dynasty as demonic. It conquered Nanjing, nearly took Beijing, and was only crushed with foreign aid. Some 20 million people perished in the process. It is little wonder that today local Communist officials view unregistered house churches with suspicion, and that at the highest level Christianity is still often viewed as subversive. This may explain the sudden, vicious campaign of demolitions of churches and crosses in the heartland of Protestant revival in Zhejiang Province since early last year (2014). The persecution is inexcusable, but it may at least be based partly on the deeply embedded fear that Christianity, and more particularly pseudo-Christian cults, may become tools of political subversion for which the Taiping Rebellion is the all too real prototype.

What exactly constitutes a “cult” in China? For centuries, Confucian bureaucrats were on the lookout for groups which were seen as xie—heretical or unorthodox. This included, as we have seen, extreme Buddhist and Daoist sects and secret societies as well as Christianity at times. The Communist Party is the heir to this tradition. The Party’s religious policy is based on the dubious assumption that there are only five tolerated and acceptable religions in the country—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism (but only the state-controlled variety—not the genuine Vatican-based Roman Catholicism), and Protestantism. As China has opened her doors over the last three decades, pragmatic adjustments have been made to allow adherents of Russian Orthodox and perhaps Judaism to also worship. However, this Party-imposed straitjacket hardly allows room for manoeuvre for the myriad religions of the many people now legally entering China on business, or as tourists or teachers, or for the many other faiths already existing or springing up at grassroots level.

“Feudal superstition” has been a target for officialdom since the days of Mao. Yet how in practice can illegal superstition be differentiated from “orthodox,” state-tolerated Daoism and Buddhism which also contain many superstitions and magical practices? “Cults” in China are generally seen by the government as subversive, anti-Party, secretive groups which are led by charismatic charlatans given to immoral womanizing and fleecing their flocks out of money and property. Once labelled, such groups and leaders find it virtually impossible to assert their innocence. The arbitrariness of the state’s actions regarding cults can be seen in its attitude to Falungong. For years, this syncretistic movement gathered millions of supporters quite legally, holding mass rallies in stadiums which thousands attended, including top Party officials. Millions of cassettes and DVDs were distributed across the country. Yet a few months after supporters peacefully (if unwisely) demonstrated in the heart of Beijing, the movement was savagely suppressed and driven underground. What caused this dramatic volte-face? The main reason was that Falungong was now seen to be a political threat with the ability to infiltrate the Communist Party itself. It can be argued the Party took a sledge-hammer to crack a nut and actually helped create the very underground movement it feared.

The difficulties of applying these unclear and subjective definitions of what constitutes a cult are illustrated by what happened some years ago in regard to the Mentuhui—the Disciples Church (or cult). The Three Self Patriotic Movement sent out two investigative
teams at government bequest. One group returned and reported the group was a harmless house-church movement. The other report-
ed back that they were a highly dangerous cult. In another case, when many house churches in Inner Mongolia were infiltrated and
taken over by the dangerous Eastern Lightning cult, it was the “orthodox” house-church Christians who had to flee from local offi-
cialdom who bizarrely turned a blind eye to cultic activities. The central government periodically issues regulations calling for a
breakdown on cults, but in practice, how this is implemented depends on the attitudes of local officials.

With the growth of house-church Christianity in Henan, Anhui, and other largely rural areas in the 1980s, there was simultaneously a
growth of cults and sects. This can be explained by the rural poverty of many peasants, to whom apocalyptic messages about the
destruction of the Communist Party, painted as Satan or the Red Dragon, and the coming of a new heaven on earth, were attractive.
The last 30 years have seen vast upheavals economically and socially all over China. Millions have moved to the cities seeking their
fortune. Many now enjoy a middle-class lifestyle, but there are still hundreds of millions of people in rural villages and city slums
who have failed to get rich as promised by the Party. These people are ready fodder for bizarre cults. Some charismatic preachers
have formed their own cults from a mishmash of Christian truth, only half-digested, and deep-rooted folk religion and superstition.
Marxism and Maoism have failed, and although intellectuals often despise religious expression, many ordinary people are still deep-
ly influenced by astrology, witchcraft, animism, and syncretistic superstitions taken from Buddhism, Daoism, and local cults.

According to some accounts, the Party itself was to blame when in 1983 it launched a massive “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign.”
Hundreds of house-church leaders were arrested and detained leaving a vacuum which was quickly filled by less well-educated or
biblically taught leaders. Thus, the mid- and late-eighties saw the rise of several dangerous cults such as the Established King (Bei-
l Wang), Disciples (Mentuhui), Lord God cult (Zhusenjiao), Three Grades of Servant (Sanban Purén), and others. In all these cases,
charismatic leaders invented their own scriptures, maintained a cast-iron grip on their followers and often were sexually immoral and
milked their devotees of cash and property. The Chinese government has suppressed these cults ruthlessly, executing several of their
leaders. Wu Yangming, the founder of the Established King cult, was arrested in April 1994 and executed in September 1995. Liu
Jiaguo, the founder of the Lord God cult, was executed in October 1999. Xu Shengguang, the founder of the Three Grades of Servant
cult, was tried for the murder of rival cultists and executed in November 2006.

The cult which today has the most influence is without doubt Eastern Lightning or as it now calls itself, “The Church of Almighty
God” (Quanzhongshen). Over the last three decades it has frequently changed its name. It has devotees in virtually every province and
over the last decade or more has spread its influence overseas to North America and Europe. Last year it even took out a full-page
advertisement in The Times in London.

Eastern Lightning was founded by Zhao Weishan, from Heilongjiang in northeast China, in the early 1990s. However, he soon
moved the centre of his operations to Henan where he proclaimed the coming of the “Female Christ”—a woman believed to live near
Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan. He later sought asylum in the United States from where he appears to control the cult. Its theology
is simple: there are three ages in God’s timetable: the Age of Law, the Age of Grace and the Age of Judgement. The Bible is effec-
tively dismissed as out of date, and the work of Christ to have largely failed. The focus is on calling people to escape God’s wrath
poured out on China and the Communist Party and place their faith in the Chinese female Messiah. Salvation is by keeping God’s
Law as expressed in the voluminous writings of the cult which are full of diatribes and cursing against unbelievers.

From the United States, where Zhao gained asylum in 2001 on the specious grounds of religious persecution in China, he appears to
successfully mastermind the cult worldwide. Eastern Lightning is well-funded and prolific in its propaganda—several of its books
contain over 1,000 pages. According to its own internal documents, this cult particularly targets leaders of evangelical house church-
es in preference to other Christians. It is condemned by both Christians in the registered and the unregistered church and is widely
regarded by Chinese believers to be demonic in inspiration.

Its practices go far to bear this out. It specializes in intimidation, blackmail, physical violence and murder—as seen most recently in
the case of the woman murdered in McDonald’s. People are lured into the cult by monetary incentives but find it almost impossible to
leave.

Cult members are trained to infiltrate orthodox house churches as “moles.” For weeks or months they give every evidence of being
devout Christians—praying, singing and using all the right, pious language. However, when they deem the time to be ripe, they tar-
get house-church leaders, inviting them to their own Bible studies to reveal “higher truth.” The revelation of the female Messiah is
then gradually introduced. Christians have been kidnapped and brainwashed by the cult. Those who have resisted have been drugged
and had compromising photos taken of them. They have then been threatened with blackmail and beaten.

Both Three Self (official) churches and house churches have circulated materials to counter Eastern Lightning. The cult has had a
negative effect in other ways, apart from its sheep stealing. First, it has helped create a climate of fear and mistrust in some house
churches which goes against the traditionally warm atmosphere of close fellowship they usually engender. Secondly, it and other
cults have given an excuse to local authorities to crack down on perfectly orthodox house churches under the pretense they are heretical
cults. In 2014, it seems that there has been an increase in the number of house churches facing persecution from being wrongly
so labelled.

Chinese Christians agree that only sound biblical teaching can expose the cults. The recent action by the Chinese government will
only have forced Eastern Lightning further underground as has happened with Falun Gong. Criminal actions should be punished, but
only love and patient explanation of the true gospel can win back the thousands who have been led along this dark road.

Tony Lambert is the Director for Research, Chinese Ministries, OMF International and the author of several books including China’s
Christian Millions (Revised and Updated edition, 2006).
Combating the Cult “Almighty God Church”

By Ronald Yu

The murder of a woman last May by cult members of the Almighty God Church (AGC) at a McDonald’s restaurant in Zhaoyuan City, Shandong Province, shocked China and the world. Two of the five criminals were sentenced to death in October, and the rest received prison terms. Back in December of 2012, the cult staged over 40 antigovernment riots throughout China, announcing judgment on the “Red Dragon,” by a returning Christ, as a Mayan prophecy of doomsday on December 21, drew near. The red dragon, mentioned in Revelation 12:3, was interpreted by the cult as referring to the communist government. Since then, the Chinese government has cracked down on aggressive members of the group. As recently as December 10, 2014, twenty-one members of the group were sentenced to jail in Liaoning and Jilin provinces.

The house churches in China have suffered much under cultic infiltration, especially from AGC, (formerly known as Eastern Lightning or EL), now the largest and most powerful heretic cult in China. While the government has the power and means to restrain AGC’s criminal activities quickly, we want to explore how the vulnerable house churches are able to protect themselves against their crafty infiltration and evil attacks. The purpose of this essay is to examine the impact on, and response of, house churches to AGC’s activities.

Exposing Erroneous Biblical Interpretation

The first time I heard of the heretic sect Eastern Lightning was in 1992 at Pastor Samuel Lamb’s house church at Damazhan, Guangzhou Province. I had visited his house church regularly after he restarted it in 1979 soon after his release from 25 years of labor camp confinement. When he discovered EL members penetrating his congregation, he preached against the cult from the pulpit. To serve house churches nationwide, he recorded his weekly messages on audio cassettes (later on CDs and DVDs) and printed his sermons in booklets. They were distributed to, and by, his members and visitors. I had the privilege of obtaining, firsthand from Pastor Lamb, his teaching on EL doctrines and initial practices. As one of two pillars of China’s house churches in the “open-door” era of Deng Xiaoping, Pastor Lamb was an excellent Bible interpreter.

Pastor Lamb exposed false biblical interpretations used to support heretical doctrines purported by EL. This cult taught that the creation of humankind in God’s image, as male and female, (Genesis 1:27), and the surrounding of a man by a woman (Jeremiah 31:22), were taken to mean that Christ’s first coming as man would be followed by his second coming as a woman. Her name was lightning from the “east” as implied in Isaiah 41:2 and Matthew 24:27. Pastor Lamb corrected their errors by interpreting these verses in their redemptive, historical contexts. As far as I know, he was the first leader of China’s house churches to have responded with correct biblical interpretation to the false doctrines of EL, even before its heyday.

Revival within the house church movement after the Cultural Revolution saw a rapid increase of believers and churches in the 1970s and 80s. Although house churches had started Bible training courses of one to three months before 1984, the quantity and quality of trained evangelists fell far behind the actual need. As EL targeted house churches and their leaders, they were successful in “snapping up” church members and coworkers creating widespread fear. By 1998, EL had spread its net from Henan in central China to coastal and southwest China, mainly among rural house church networks. As I traveled to Shanghai, Chengdu and Nanning, increasing numbers of house-church coworkers shared with me their actual encounters with the sect and stories of members who had disappeared.

Developing a Biblical Christology against Counterfeit “Christs”

While teaching theology at the Chinese Mission Seminary in Hong Kong, I also did leadership training with house churches in China. I found that both Lamb’s biblical interpretive approach and the Western Christological approach seemed insufficient to equip Christians in China against false Christology. Because of this, I began to develop a biblical Christology to meet this need.

I found a rich biblical Christology contained in Jesus’ genealogies in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Luke’s gospel traces the ancestry of Jesus back to Adam, and Matthew’s to Abraham. Key ancestors such as Adam, Abraham, Jacob and David prefigured Christ in various ways. Christ, incarnated as a Jew, was to become the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45) through death and resurrection on the cross; he is also called the “second man” (1Corinthians 15:47). He came to redeem the human race with common ancestry in Adam. He will lead the redeemed race as its head and representative (Romans 5:12-21) to manage the new heavens and new earth (Hebrews 2:5-15). His role is to replace the first Adam who failed in managing the present earth according to God’s will.

As the second man, there is no other person between the first Adam and the second Adam—the Jewish Jesus. Whether a philosopher like Confucius (551-479 BC), or a religious leader like Siddhatta Gotama (around 400 BC), there is no other person appointed by God to be head of the redeemed race. Since Jesus is the last Adam, there is no one between his first coming and second coming to take up the role as final judge in God’s Kingdom.

Jesus’ genealogy was a qualification for him to become Christ, the Redeemer King. In modern terms, anyone who claims to be the returned Messiah (Christ) needs to show an Israeli passport (a descendant of Jacob, who was renamed “Israel” in Genesis 32:28) and
blood lineage that connects to King David. There were numerous prophecies and typologies in Old Testament history that foretold or prefigured Christ. Chinese Christians should challenge a counterfeit Christ like EL to show how her ancestry excels Jesus’ and whether Chinese history or religions have foretold her coming if she pretends to be the Messiah of the Chinese people.

With updated material on EL, I integrated my theological approach with Lamb’s interpretive approach to produce a one-hour PowerPoint VCD in Mandarin. House churches receiving the VCD found it helpful. One house church in Chengdu discovered that their pastor was an EL convert when he preached with EL-specific terms. He was asked to leave before he brought the church captive under EL. One of our seminary graduates living in Shanghai told me that the VCD acted as a preventive inoculation for ignorant Christians against the deadly virus of a heretic cult. This study also equipped me to face the cult’s penetration in Hong Kong beginning in 2001.

2002 Kidnapping: Defeat Results in Exposure

On April 26, 2002, thirty-four top leaders of China Gospel Fellowship (CGF) were kidnapped by EL for over fifty days. It was EL’s first evil act that shocked Christian churches in China and worldwide. CGF was one of five, large, house church networks in Henan province with several million members. In spite of their knowledge and experience, they fell prey to EL. They were the first to encounter and fight against EL.

In retrospect, a detainee considered this tragic event God’s blessing in disguise. This was indeed true. First, a website was set up during the kidnapping event. The entire story, describing EL’s deviant doctrines and evil practices in graphic detail, became available after that. In addition to the internet, it was later published in a book: Exposing Eastern Lighting. Second, family members of detainees sought help from the government to find the captives. As a result, CGF was able to build a courteous relationship with government officials for the first time. While the government helped house churches to combat EL, CGF helped the government to discern between heresy and orthodox Christian beliefs.

The success of the kidnapping in 2002 increased EL’s confidence to capture church leaders worldwide. Within CGF, the event stirred up united and fervent prayers that led to more revival. Their experience helped other house church groups respond to EL’s attacks quickly including reporting to government authorities. Documentation of this event enabled churches in Hong Kong, and later Taiwan, to respond to EL’s increasing activities.

The Last Ticket after 2012: Strategic Changes and New Challenges

In the new millennium, EL switched its name to Almighty God Church (AGC). They began outreach efforts in Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas by first whitewashing their horrific background in China. In 2012, the cult revived its doomsday tactics by presenting to the general populace talks of the Mayan Apocalypse. The “end of the world” was prophesized by Mayan mythology to take place on December 21, 2012 and would include a tsunami that would reach the height of Mount Everest.

Although the prophecy went unfulfilled, AGC stepped up its propaganda by publishing full-page advertisements in more than fourteen weekly magazines and daily newspapers in both Hong Kong and Taiwan. Street stalls were set up in over eighty crowded locations such as subway stations and shopping malls to distribute their booklet, The Last Ticket after 2012. This endeavor persisted for several months and was shocking to churches considering the huge financial expenditure and manpower involved. Coupled with the global success of the Hollywood disaster film, 2012 (produced in 2009), the doomsday message, for a while, engendered fear in Chinese society in general and churches in particular.

A house church pastor in Shenzhen used a RMB one dollar bill to show me how an AGC cult member told him the message of God’s hidden work in Chinese currency. On one side was Chairman Mao’s photo belonging to the previous era of China with 12 stripes on the right border pointing to the Old Testament era of twelve Israeli tribes. On the other side of the dollar bill, there are three stone pagodas standing for the three era’s of God’s dispensations: the era of law when God was called Jehovah; the era of grace when God appeared as the Jewish man, Jesus, replacing Jehovah; and now the era of the kingdom when God appears as a Chinese lady, replacing Jesus.

The dollar bill story provides the key to their interpretation of the 2012 movie: God’s hidden work is also to be found in the movie. To escape the tsunami, a limited number of people could board arks on the China border. They each paid one billion euros in advance for the construction of nine arks, each accommodating 100,000 passengers. This was done on Chinese soil with help from China’s Liberation Army. The failure of the mythical prophesy did not hinder the AGC in exploiting the prediction as massive propaganda afterwards. By implication, God was doing a hidden work in the Hollywood movie as Christ had returned on Chinese soil.

While the Last Ticket propaganda was planned by top leaders of AGC, the McDonald’s murder took place at the grass-root level. Seemingly unrelated, there are common threads in AGC’s peculiar activities—The Last Ticket publication, the MacDonald’s murder and dollar bill message. They all exhibit a strategic switch of their target from churches and their members to the marketplace and people on the streets, as well as using media items like a dollar bill and movies rather than Bible verses to entice ordinary people into their net.

Conclusion

Since the 2002 kidnapping event, house churches have emerged stronger than previously in combating AGC. Over the past decade, full-time theological training became readily available to house-church pastors. New phone technologies such as texting and WeChat...
Discerning a Cult
By SALT

The following article is excerpted from a course being developed for use in China that teaches about cults. It deals with the characteristics of cults that will help a believer in Christ to discern between an orthodox church and a cult.

Doctrine can serve as a definitive plumb line to discern and identify whether a teaching or a group is a cult or not. In addition, since cults exhibit some common characteristics, these characteristics can serve as warning signals that can alert us to investigate further. A doctrinally orthodox church may display a few of the extreme practices or characteristics listed here; however, when a group exhibits a number of or most of the following characteristics, we need to pay special attention to it and be on our guard.

Authority and Exclusivity
The first thing to observe is the attitude of the followers towards their leaders. Cults strongly emphasize the status of their leaders. Cult leaders usually have strong to near absolute authority over their followers. Their position in the organization is definitive and unchallenged. Below is one example.

A cult, active in Shanghai, claims that complete submission to the leader can overcome sin. When followers are criticized or wronged by the leader, they must not answer for themselves but only say “Amen”; they must obey the leader absolutely. The leader’s authority can rival or equal that of God. Moreover, followers are expected to serve the leader: wash his clothing, prepare his meals, clean his residence, and so forth. These tasks are typical ways that the cult advocates the follower can deal with his or her sin, especially pride.

To support this assertion of absolute authority and power within the cult, the leader may claim that he is God or Christ, or that he is the sole spokesman (prophet or apostle) for God in this age. Therefore, he is the only means by which believers can know the truth; only he can discern what is, and is not, truth. Since he claims his words are revelations from God, no one is allowed to raise questions, and he is not accountable to anyone for his teachings or actions.

Cult leaders also typically claim that their churches are the purest churches and the only true ones that belong to God. For example, one cult claims that it is the “church of the Son,” the only church that knows God. All other churches are “churches of the servant” (see Gal.4:22-23) and are secondary at best. One must join their church and obey their teachings in order to really know the truth and be saved. Some cult leaders may strongly criticize evangelical churches and accuse them of having gone astray. They do this to justify the necessity of their “new” teachings.

Control and Submission
Another characteristic of a cult is that it exercises undue control of its members and uses destructive, manipulative means to enforce their submission so they will remain obedient within the cult.

Mind control: Cults work hard to exercise control over the minds of their followers so they will follow their teachings and obey orders. Following is an example.

Pastor Zhang was the founder of a sect. Born and educated in China, he then left and studied at two well-known Bible seminaries in the United Kingdom. Although he taught believers to follow the teachings of the Bible, he also said he was the only one who had the authority to interpret and apply the Bible. He forbade believers to read biblical commentaries or books on theology or the church, and he kept them from attending any biblical institutions. He criticized famous theologians and insisted that his trainees write down his every word and master his teaching that denied the Trinity and deity of Christ. Since Pastor Zhang claimed he was a prophet who received direct revelation from God, everyone accepted his status as far superior to others and dared not raise any questions.

Cults use various means to control the minds of their followers.

- Although believers may be allowed to read the Bible, the cult claims divine authority for the writings or preaching of its leader to the extent that they are equal or superior to the Bible.
- Followers may be forced to listen daily, for long periods, to the designated sermons of the leader and study them intensely with others who make sure they come to the right conclusions.
- Followers may be forbidden to read anything but the designated publications of the sect; they may be discouraged or
forbidden to watch the news, read newspapers or books—especially theological books and Bible commentaries.

- If someone raises a question or a doubt, cults may respond by casting doubt on the questioner’s spiritual life by saying that this type of thinking is suspicious, hurtful to the one questioning or unnecessary since “this cannot be explained as it is on a higher level.” Questioners may be told to be humble, and that “they will understand after a while.” Raising questions about the leader is usually taken as persecution of the leader and often treated as a very serious offence.
- Followers often are required to report to their seniors their thoughts, feelings and actions.
- Sleeping time for followers is often short so that their bodies and spirit are subject to prolonged fatigue which prevents them thinking clearly.

Control of social life: Cults usually seek to control the social life of their followers who may be asked to leave home or quit their studies to receive intensive training at the cult’s designated centers. This will show their commitment and loyalty. All those who live in the centers must strictly follow the center’s schedule and take part in all activities and meetings. Below is a weekday schedule of a cult center in Shanghai.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5:30~6:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Get up and dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:00~7:30 a.m.</td>
<td>Morning meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30~8:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30~9:00 a.m.</td>
<td>Work in the cult’s language and computer school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 a.m.~5:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:00~8:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Have love-feast and sharing at the meeting place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00~11:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Pray and listen to sermons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Back to hostel to wash and sleep</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some cults control both the dress and diet of their followers and may arrange dates or marriages for them. They may announce these either openly or subtly and imply that adherence to these mandates is considered true self-renunciation and submission that leads to a higher level of spirituality. If members do not go to live in special centers, they arrange for them to attend many meetings every week; consequently, they will not have time for family, friends or anything else. All these practices are designed to isolate the members from their families, their friends and social networks. As a result, followers become emotionally dependent on the cult and easier to control.

Control of behavior: To bring about the level of submission they want, cults will use various means to control the behavior of their followers so they dare not disobey or leave.

- They start making decisions for the followers. In many cults, everything must be done collectively according to the instructions of the sect. Under group pressure, members will accept and do things that previously they would not. Individuals dare not act on their own unless they seek permission in advance.
- They laden followers with guilt and exaggerate their mistakes so that followers are convinced only the cult can help them. If followers express any lack of progress, the cult will say it is their own fault, they have not been serious about things, have not studied well, have not prayed enough, or are a mess—and thank goodness the cult is there to help them out.
- They implement legalism and set up a strict reward-punishment system. Disobedience is usually severely punished. For example, one cult insisted that its followers listen to a set of sermons for 40 days. Missing just one day meant that person would be forced to listen to the same set of sermons for 120 days. On the other hand, those that obeyed without hesitation or question were assigned positions of authority to increase their sense of belonging. Those who disobeyed were rebuked openly, then had to confess and repent openly before they could be accepted again.
- They intimidate followers. Cult leaders may claim that anyone who disobeys or leaves the cult will experience disaster, fall into the hands of the devil, lose their salvation or their family members will suffer hardship and be cursed—the list is almost endless.
- They reject those who leave. Cultic groups never let a person leave with a blessing; those who leave pay a price. The cult may ruin the person’s reputation, go after their loved ones, hassle and stalk the person leaving, or even physically hurt that individual. Death threats are not uncommon. At a minimum, they may shun and shame the individual, pronounce accusations, announce he or she has fallen, is worse than an infidel or should be shunned and so on.
Secrecy and Darkness
We also need to evaluate a sect’s transparency and whether it bears the fruit of light or of darkness. Cults usually want to hide their identity and not work openly. Accountability and transparency are foreign to a cult. Truthfulness is at best a selective virtue. The individual must be totally truthful to cult leaders, but it is permissible to lie to parents, to other authority figures, or in order to lure people to their meetings.

Some evangelical groups are secretive because they must be careful about authorities breaking up their meetings and arresting them. However, for a cult, the purpose of secrecy is to keep others from knowing what its true intentions are. Secrecy is used as a tool to lure followers and maintain control over its members. Below is an example.

This sect, that conducts its meetings at night, is skillful in organizing ad hoc meetings but never tells participants specifically the venue, only giving a rough indication of the location. Before each meeting, it reminds the participants repeatedly not to tell anyone—including spouses, parents and children—where they are going. Their preachers never tell people their real names and addresses saying they are not home during the day or it is inconvenient to give out their contact information. If they should provide addresses, information or family background, the details are false.

When asked about this secrecy, they say it is because now is the time God acts in secret. They also say that in order to protect themselves, it is not necessary for others to know much about them. They claim they are Christ’s apostles in the new age and they must be as shrewd as snakes. Therefore, it is all right to tell lies as long as one intends to lead someone to the right way.

This sect is very careful in their communication which runs only from top to bottom. The higher one’s position, the more people one can connect with. However, people cannot communicate directly with those in authority over them and have no idea about the situation of their superiors.

Abnormal Changes in Goal and Conduct
If we are watching the effect of a cult on a church member, we need to pay attention to any sudden or abnormal changes in the life goals and conduct of the cult member. Since cults seek to exercise comprehensive control in the lives of their followers, the goals and conduct of their members will undergo dramatic change. Following are some examples.

Life Goals
- Lack of enthusiasm for work or study; suddenly giving up a business, job, or study.
- Sudden canceling of a wedding with a weak or lame excuse.
- Sudden lose of interest in normal hobbies and activities with a focus on things the individual does not want to talk about. Using phrases such as, “You won’t understand,” or similar ones.
- Sudden abandonment of normal routine with an announcement that he or she is going to a secretive center to learn to preach.

Conduct
- Spends all his or her savings and sells all personal valuables such as mobile phones and computers.
- Borrows money from family or friends expressing a monetary need without specifying the purpose (or lying about it).
- Becomes very quiet and secretive, or may continually boast about his or her church and its leaders.
- Behaves secretly; goes out very early and comes back very late; avoids people he or she was once close to; refuses to speak of activities or with whom he or she is spending time.
- Sudden decision to move out and live with others (with no details given).
- Feels tired and gives evidence of sleep or food deprivation.

Summation
It does not necessarily follow that people showing the above changes are cult members while those who do not are orthodox. As mentioned earlier, some of these things can apply to some evangelical house churches; nevertheless, these things can serve as warnings to alert us if we need to make a further examination of a church or group. If someone observes a number of these characteristics in a group, or if a person undergoes some of the changes mentioned above, it would be good to take a closer look at the group or individual using the plumb line of doctrinal truth.

This article is adapted from “Guard Against and Refute Heresy, Revised,” a course developed by the Curriculum Department of SALT( Systematic Asian Leadership Training). Copyright ©2015 by SALT. Used with permission.
In early 2013, China’s official media first labeled “Eastern Lightning,” more recently known as “The Church of Almighty God,” as a cult. Thus, the group entered the public arena and began to gain public awareness. However, due to the difficulties and risks involved in doing a field study of such a secretive organization, researchers have found it problematical to study. Following are the findings of a research study on this cult that we conducted over several years that concluded in 2012.

Background
The suppression of local churches by the government in the 1980s led to the rise of new religious sects, among which was Eastern Lightning. Following the government’s suppression of unregistered churches as well as new religious groups, these churches and some of the new religious organizations split into additional sects. To avoid government suppression, these groups became secretive. These factors contributed to Eastern Lightning’s ability to attract and absorb some of the new religious groups.

In the early 1990s, China’s economic transformation resulted in a great migration into the cities resulting in the spread of Christianity to city dwellers. The increasing number of Christians in urban areas became the major source of growth for the total number of Christians. About the same time, Eastern Lightning, in rural Henan, began its expansion into China’s cities. Its main tactic was not to convert individuals as new members; rather, it aimed at absorbing an entire group into its organization. It continues to achieve this by targeting the leader of an unregistered Christian church. Using persuasion, violence and other means, it gets the leader to become a member and then absorbs the entire group. In field interviews, some willing adherents were found; however, due to the cult’s extreme secrecy, even the gatherings of its members are sealed in secrecy. This contributes to its estimated number of followers varying from millions to over ten million.

Eastern Lightning’s Faith Texts
The faith texts of Eastern Lightning primarily come from the sayings of the “Female Christ.” However, it is evident that a great deal of official propaganda language is included in her discourses. An example of this is the use of the phrase, “into the new era.” Following are examples of language usage taken from doctrinal text found in The Scroll That the Lamb Opened.

You should learn to be more practical. There is no need to use high sounding speech that never formulates ways to work things out. Who actually has done something? You say you know God’s word, but that does not reflect your true stature. At most, that says you were born smart and talented. But it is empty talk when you cannot map out a path; you are useless—rubbish! Without action there is no truth.

What value is there to rant on for praise and favor from others? We need to speak relevantly and artfully. We must act justly, work sensibly, and speak realistically in whatever we do, always thinking of how to benefit God’s church. Do not repay good with evil. Don’t forget gratitude that is due others. Don’t act superior—God does not want that.

Besides using both official governmental and Christian phraseology, a crude colloquial style is used in the texts to make them more acceptable to believers in farming villages. There are also some special terms used within the organization. “Big Red Dragon” represents the regime of the anti-Christ in Christianity. “Inside story” and “pave the way” along with other terms are used when insidiously infiltrating an unofficial church. Their texts and music reflect the relatively low cultural level of the members. A number of tunes for their songs are from international songs and other popular music.

Secrecy and the Folk Religion Element
In our interviews, many Christians mentioned their contact with Eastern Lightning, yet few knew its concrete organizational structure.

The secrecy of the organization makes it hard for anyone to get into it. Usually, someone of the opposite sex tells you about a place for spiritual learning that is better than your present church. I went because it sounded good, and the people were very familiar with Christian terminology. Later on, they showed paper cuts, almost like witchcraft, that demonstrated some symbols, such as sickles, to prove their teachings. M, Jan. 9, 2007

My father and aunt attend but I don’t know when they have meetings. They won’t tell and aren’t allowed to tell. Even the family doesn’t know. LL, Dec. 3, 2010
While conducting our field study in Hai City,* almost every leader of the unofficial church talked about Eastern Lightning. They believe the unofficial church in Hai City should do a more in-depth understanding (three months of observation) of every new visitor before allowing them to join the Sunday worship. One reason is that since early 2000, Eastern Lightning has mass-kidnapped the leaders of unofficial churches and thus established a precedent.

In Shan City, one church leader recalled the conflict between her church and Eastern Lightning.

Upon our return, we engaged in a face-to-face battle with the Eastern Lightning cult. Initially, I had a slight suspicion and began observing some individuals who were preoccupied and inattentive during sermons. They introduced an Eastern Lightning believer to us. When this lady attacked our church, I was the first to recognize her deceit, but a number of people had reservations, including my husband. He said to me, “You just don’t know, peasants are like that.” I responded: “Didn’t you notice that every word she said flatters you? When in the afternoon we went to serve in the village, I felt that she consistently tried to please you every time you spoke.”

I discovered this woman’s deceit in small things—cults can easily be recognized by their untruthfulness. One day, I was by myself and she took me out to eat, but she did not pay the bill. From that you can see she had ulterior motives.

Eastern Lightning people will target the weaknesses of each coworker. If you are straightforward, they will provoke you to anger. If you are soft and caring, they will use something else. Even an older sister in the Lord was deceived. I confronted her and said, “What you are doing is evil.” She wept in front of me and was utterly repentant. However, several days later, someone told me she had converted someone who then deceived yet another. Eventually, I realized this was not just a simple problem—this was the spirit of anti-Christ.

Eastern Lightning’s tactics are very nasty, involving intimidation, and its encroachment affected my coworkers. I witnessed one sister being seduced by a male claiming that he was a seminary graduate from England. He said he would take her to different parts of the world to serve the Lord. Not many days later, she came in tears saying that he had also had relationships with other sisters.

This has a great deal to do with Chinese education. People lack basic discernment. Later, we realized that money and sex, as well as intimidation, are used to get people to join such an organization. We found that people did not dare leave because they were intimidated by threats that once they left, they would be killed by a car. If you do not have a solid knowledge of God, it is impossible to leave.

Sometimes in our battle with Eastern Lightning people, some of our coworkers wanted to give up. However, I felt that certain things needed to be clarified because this was, and is, spiritual warfare. What is this claim that Jesus came as a woman? Yet people believed this, and they were not foolish in their reasoning; rather, they were just too self-centered. Most of those deceived by the cult were deceived by their own lusts. With one woman, I explained word by word who Christ was and that he had not returned. She had to repeat back to me what I said, and then we prayed together.

This is a long, fierce, battle—and has involved even my own relatives. I could notice that something was inside one of them, similar to a drug addict. Sometimes, he would say there is no meaning in life, and he would rather be killed. At times, I felt sorry for him; however, I could sense this was a spirit influencing him. I tried reading the Bible to him, but he refused to listen claiming that his life had been tough. In fact, he hates God.

Nevertheless, the fruit after a battle is so rewarding. I lost my best friend because I talked to her aunt, and my friend felt I was too harsh with her. It was only after her aunt deceived a number of people that my friend wrote me a letter. So, I am very careful. Sometimes I see someone acting a little odd, and I think, “Could that person be…?” T, Nov. 4, 2009

Open or Closed?
The unofficial churches in various places respond differently to the impact of Eastern Lightning on the church. The experience of the unofficial churches in Shan City, coupled with other factors, led them to adopt a “closed” policy. Some churches think this will help Christian churches dodge government suppression as well as prevent an invasion (termed “stealing the sheep”) by Eastern Lightning.

When asked if the church should be open to others, one leader of an unofficial church in Hai City commented as follows.

It is understandable that a ruling party would not like any united force among its people. The church happens to be such a force. Furthermore, the church is not submissive; therefore, naturally it wants to supervise it. This is also its responsibility. If there is good supervision, then it is good. I do not want to see total alienation between the church and the government because this is not good for the church. Unlike during the fifties and sixties, things are now lax in both Hai city and North City. When things get lax, I would expect bad things to happen; that is, cults and large-scaled cult
activities would emerge. An environment that is seemingly tense, and yet occasionally lax, puts pressure on the cults.

Discernment by the church members is the most important defense against a cult as is submission to church authority. When in danger, one will not take any risk if one has submitted to the protection of one’s elders. Membership also can help us confirm one’s commitment and submission to the church. It is very beneficial. JuMin, Sept. 2, 2009

* Names of all cities have been changed for security reasons.

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Translation by Ping Ng

Combating the Cult “Almighty God Church”

have helped to connect church members with their pastors, and pastors with their theological professors. They can respond quickly to suspicious activities of cult members penetrating their churches. However, the challenge now is cultic penetration of the marketplace. Chinese churches need to help the ignorant populace resist enticing cultic propaganda. Since the McDonald’s murder, AGC has gone into hibernation, keeping under the radar. They have multiplied their names and mutated into other forms. Thus, Jesus’ warning must be heeded: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves…. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.” (Matthew 7:15, 24:5)

2 EL’s recent activities are summarized by Sun Zhao and Huang Jin in “Inside China’s ‘Eastern Lightning’ Cult,” at http://en.people.cn/n/2014/0603/c90882-8735801.html.
4 His sermon in Cantonese on EL can be found at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABiI8qID3mM.
5 There was a well-known saying among house churches: “In North China there was Wang Mingdao (1900-1991), and in South China there was Samuel Lamb (1924-2013).”

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Peoples of China
Chinese Cults, Sects, and Heresies

By Peregrine de Vigo

The selections below of new religious movements in the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) all claim a Christian heritage. The following details are a distillation of information from an internal document of the Chinese Public Security Bureau published in 2003, unless otherwise noted.

1. Shouters (呼喊派 hūhǎnpài)

Other Names: Local Church or Local Assembly (地方教会 dìfāngjiàohuì); The Lord’s Recovery
Leader/Founder: Li Changshou (李常受 1905-1997)

Background: Li comes from a Baptist background with later Brethren influence and was a close companion of Watchman Nee for some time before they separated in 1949 when Li left mainland China for Taiwan. He later moved to the United States in 1962. A prolific writer, he oversaw a new translation of the New Testament, called the Recovery Version. His major work is Life-study of the Bible, a 25,000 page tome commenting on every book of the Bible. In the PRC the group is commonly referred to as the “Shouters,” and in the U.S. they are known as the Local Church.

Concerns: The “Shouters” are so called because of their practice of shouting Bible verses and “Jesus is Lord” in a mantra-like fashion. However, this may be more of a phenomenon in the PRC than elsewhere. Li’s mystical reading of Scripture led to a number of theological detours for which the Local Church is often criticized, including strict views of “one church, one city” and denunciation of Western Christendom, particularly denominationalism. His view of the Trinity comes very close to modalism, and his view of man shares much with the Eastern Orthodox view of theosis. Despite attempts in the PRC to defame them, they have made great efforts to exonerate their reputation, including court cases in the U.S. against “Christian” book publishers where they have fought hard to be removed from lists and publications of Christian “cults” with some success. Some people may find some of their practices unusual, but they do not seem to be socially dangerous either in the PRC or the U.S., despite claims by the internal document that otherwise. However, a number of more dangerous offspring have resulted, as shown below.

2. Disciples Society/Association of Disciples (门徒会)

Other Names: In Hubei, known as The Narrow Gate in the Wilderness (旷野窄门)
Leader: Ji Sanbao (季三宝, b. 1939/1940; or 季三保, 季忠杰)

Background: Founded in 1989 by Ji, a farmer from Shanxi, this movement spread to fourteen provinces in the PRC and by 1995 had an estimated following of 350,000 people, primarily in rural areas. In 1999, OMF estimated their numbers closer to 500,000. Little is known about the group apart from the official internal document of 2003.

Concerns: Ji claims to be the “Christ established by God.” As “God’s son,” he also claims the power of miracles including healing and resurrecting the dead. The group has a very strong eschatology, encouraging followers to drop out of school or abandon their farms to pray and await ascension to heaven; they predicted the world would end in 2000. They are accused of committing heinous crimes such as abducting women, rape, and fraud. In addition, they are accused of attacking the Party, instigating riots, and resisting family planning policy.

3. Full Scope Church/All Sphere Church (全范围教会)

Other Names: Born-Again Movement (重生派); Word of Life Church
Leader: Xu Yongze (徐永泽, b. 1940); English name: Peter Xu

Background: Reports on this group offer widely conflicting accounts. Christianity Today reports that it was founded in 1968 and identifies it as one of the popular, fast-growing house church movements—even identified with the Back to Jerusalem Movement. The number of followers in 1998 was estimated at 20 million. The internal document of 2003 dates its beginning to 1984 and estimates thousands of followers.

Concerns: Early reports indicated the movement required repentant persons to weep for three days to be saved; however, Xu denies
this and says we are saved only by Jesus’ grace. Following Xu’s arrest in 1997, the PRC state media branded Xu as having similarities to David Koresh. At that time two notable, conservative, Chinese house church pastors, Samuel Lamb (1924-2013) and Allen Yuan (1914-2005), as well as registered church pastors criticized Xu, although it is unclear for what “doctrinal aberrations” other than the three-day weeping claim. The internal document of 2003 identifies only minor social concerns, one of which was the loud cries that disturbed neighbors. The Three-Self Church clearly was concerned that members would be drawn away from the Three-Self fold. Social discord caused by evangelists being away from home too long was also mentioned.

4. The Spirit Sect (灵灵教；属灵教、灵灵派)
*Leader:* Hua Xuehe (华雪和 1940-2000)

*Background:* Reportedly formed in 1983, Hua, a farmer from Jiangxi, claimed to be a “second Jesus Christ the Lord,” and his hometown of Huaiyin, in Jiangxi, to be Jerusalem. The internal document of 2003 states that his influence has spread to 13 provinces with more than 15,000 members.

*Concerns:* In addition to his messianic claims as leader, Hua also made eschatological claims of imminent disaster that led people to forsake daily life. Within this cult there is blessing-based fraud and healing/exorcisms with aberrant practices that include whipping and withholding medicine.

5. New Testament Church (新约教会)
*Other Names:* Christian Charismatic Evangelistic Band, (基督灵恩布道团)
*Leader:* Jiang Duanyi (江端仪 1923-1966)

*Background:* Jiang, a movie actress, founded this group in 1963 and died of cancer not long after establishing a second branch in Taiwan in 1965. Hong Sanqi (洪三期) was appointed the leader of the Taiwan region that covered more than 30 established churches. Jiang’s daughter, Ruth Zhang (张路德), and Hong now lead the movement.

*Concerns:* Jiang believed she was reestablishing the church as known in the New Testament with herself as God’s “great prophet of the East.” They seem to pose little social danger apart from the internal document of 2003 that claims they attack the authority of the state.

6. The Established King (被立王)
*Leader:* Wu Yangming (吴扬明 1945-1995)

*Background:* Wu founded this group in 1992 in Anhui along with Liu Jiaguo (see #7). It has spread to 23 provinces and regions.

*Concerns:* Wu believed he was God’s son and claimed he would establish a new heaven and new earth in the year 2000. He called himself the “Father King” and reportedly abducted more than 130 girls claiming they would be saved through their union with him.

7. Lord God Sect (主神教)
*Leader:* Liu Jiaguo (刘家国 1964-1999)

*Background:* One of the founding members of The Established King (see #6), Liu left the group to found his own in 1993, claiming to be “Lord God” (主神). His group grew rapidly, spreading to 23 provinces and regions, numbering in the tens of thousands. The turning point for growth seems to have come when the leader of the Established King sect died and Liu “inherited” his followers. Liu embezzled large amounts of money and is reported to have raped 19 women. He was sentenced to death in 1999.

*Concerns:* Liu claimed to be God, and wrote at least nine works explicating his doctrine. His influence ended with his life. However, the group continues to show some threat to society with occasional arrests appearing in the news, the most recent in 2014.

8. Unification Church (统一教)
*Other Names:* Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (世界基督教统一神灵协会)
*Leader:* Sun Myung Moon (文鲜明)

*Background:* Founded in South Korea in 1954 by Sun, this cult, widely recognized among newer religious groups, is known for its bold media presence and especially for its mass marriages. Members have unofficially been called “Moonies.” The group is extremely well funded and is known for humanitarian gifts and aid to numerous causes. It is not clear how widespread the Unification
Church is in the PRC but they are reported to be very active.

**Concerns:** Moon based his teachings on the Bible and *The Divine Principle*, a book cowritten with an early disciple, which has gained the status of sacred scripture. Other concerns include: communication with deceased spirits; a form of sin-payment called “indemnity”; and claims that Jesus did not achieve full perfection because he never married. Although accused of brainwashing its members, scholars of religion have absolved the Unification Church of these claims.

9. **Three Grades of Servant Sect (三班仆人)**  
*Leader:* Xu Wenku (徐文库 b. 1946)

**Background:** Founded in the 1980s, this cult reportedly has over a million members in numerous provinces. Xu’s mother was a Christian, and he grew up with church influence, eventually taking the lead in his home church in Henan, prior to the Cultural Revolution.

**Concerns:** Numerous twisted interpretations of Scripture, rejection of grace in Christ, emphasizing salvation only through joining “Sanban,” and doomsday predictions characterize this group. They have been known to engage in abduction, defraud members, and even hold training courses on how to kill people. They apparently have some cooperative ties to Eastern Lightening.

10. **The Children of God (天父的儿女)**  
**Other Names:** The Family of Love (爱之家); Family International (家庭国际); The Family (家庭)  

**Background:** David founded the movement in 1968 in Huntington Beach, California, calling himself Moses David and God’s prophet among other names. The group publicly identifies itself with conservative Christianity. David’s second wife, Karen, took full leadership at his death. The Chinese Wikipedia article mentions that this cult entered China in 1980 and spread to many major cities, but little is known about the success of the group.

**Concerns:** This group advocates a form of “evangelism” known as “flirty fishing,” where sex is used to draw in new members. All forms of human sexuality, except male homosexuality, are acceptable, including sex with minors until it was forbidden 1986. David’s letters, called Mo Letters, as well as later writings by David and Karen are the main source of heretical doctrine and considered equal with the Bible. Child abduction has been reported, mainly of children of former members based on the group’s child custody policy.

1 “Notice on Various Issues Regarding Identifying and Banning of Cultic Organizations,” reprinted in *Chinese Law and Government* 36:2 (March/April 2003), 26-35. Some groups have Wikipedia pages in Chinese and/or English, though there are noted inconsistencies. In 2014, *Duihua Research*, a web site devoted to research on the PRC’s criminal justice system and activities, following a page from a Chinese news site, posted a list of active groups in the PRC. The *Duihua* list seems to follow the group listings in the 2003 internal document. However, the material on the *Duihua* page and the Chinese news site includes unique information regarding prison sentences of group members and leaders along with brief descriptions of each group. See: [http://www.duihuaresearch.org/2014/07/identifying-cult-organizations-in-china.html](http://www.duihuaresearch.org/2014/07/identifying-cult-organizations-in-china.html).
2 See *Christian Research Journal* 32:6 (Special Edition, 2009). The entire issue is devoted to saying, “We were wrong.”
4 Ibid., 32.
5 David Koresh, an American, was a Christian who joined a splinter group of the Seventh-day Adventist Church which took the name Branch Davidians. Eventually he became its leader believing he was to be its final prophet. Revelations of child abuse provoked a raid by the United States government in 1993 that ended with the burning of their center where Koresh and 75 others were found dead after the fire.
6 There are conflicting reports on the dates.

*Peregrine de Vigo, MA, lived in central China for nine years and is a student of philosophy, sinology, and several other “-ologies.”*
Book Review
Refuting False Teachings by Untwisting the Scripture
Reviewed by Joann Pittman


A few years back, I was riding in a taxi across Beijing with a very chatty driver. He asked me all the questions that talking foreigners are required to answer: Where are you from? Why are you here? Are you married? Why not? I will be honest and say that how I answer that last question often depends on my mood. Sometimes I just say that my standards are too high (which is true), and other times I respond that I’m a Christian and therefore whether I have a husband or not is up to God. That usually elicits a funny look, but in this case, he told me that he was a Christian as well.

I asked him to tell me more. “I don’t go to a regular church,” he said. “I go to a house church.” “And,” he continued, “our church is different from other churches. We don’t believe that Jesus is the Son of God!”

As I kept asking him questions, my mind was searching its language files for the Chinese term for Jehovah Witness. As we neared my house, it came to me. “Is your church Yehehua Jianzheng (耶和华见证)” I asked. “Yes, that’s it!” he replied. While I had heard that Jehovah Witness churches were in China, this was my first encounter with someone who was a member of that church.

As these, and other foreign and homegrown sects and cults gain traction in China, it is important to have a better grasp on some of the teachings of these groups. Correcting the Cults: Expert Responses to Their Scripture Twisting is such a book.

While it is not the type of book you are likely to curl up with in front of a fireplace and read all the way through, it is a helpful reference tool for someone looking for help in refuting various false teachings. As authors Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes write in the introduction, it is written “to help you, the reader, lovingly turn the table on the cultists and ’untwist’ the Scriptures so the cultist can see what Scripture really says.” (p. 18)

In the introduction, the authors set out to first give a definition of a cult. While acknowledging that there is no universally agreed-upon definition, they provide an overview of the doctrinal, sociological, and moral characteristics of cults.

Regarding the doctrinal characteristics, they write: “One will typically find an emphasis on new revelation from God, a denial of the sole authority of the Bible, a denial of the Trinity, a distorted view of God and Jesus, or a denial of salvation by grace.” (p. 10)

Regarding the sociological characteristics, they write: “These included authoritarianism, exclusivism, dogmatism, close-mindedness, susceptibility, compartmentalization, isolation, and even antagonism.” (p. 11)

Regarding the moral characteristics, they write: “Among those that crop up most often are legalism, sexual perversion, intolerance, and psychological or even physical abuse.” (p. 13)

Unfortunately, the book does not directly address any of the cults that are unique to China, such as Eastern Lightning. However, it does address some of the false teachings of foreign cults and religions such as Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness, Baha’i, all of which have a growing presence in China.

The format of the book is a simple and straightforward look at specific passages in Scripture that are often twisted by cults. There is a Scripture reference that raises an important question; an explanation of the common misinterpretation of the passage; then an explanation of the correct interpretation. Here is an example:

Genesis 1:26-27: Does this passage support the idea that God has a physical body?
Misinterpretation: Mormons argue that, because humans were created with a body of flesh and bones, God the Father must have a physical body, since humanity was created in God’s image. (Smith, 1975, 1:3)

Correcting the Misinterpretation: A fundamental interpretive principle is that Scripture interprets Scripture. When other
Scriptures about God’s nature are consulted, the Mormon understanding of Genesis 1:26-27 becomes impossible. John 4:24 indicates that God is spirit. Luke 24:39 tells us that a spirit does not have flesh and bones. Conclusion: Since God is spirit, he does not have flesh and bones. Moreover, contrary to Mormonism, God is not (and never has been) a man (Numbers 23:19, Isaiah 45:12, Hosea 11:9, Romans 1:22-23). (p. 22)

Using that format, the authors march from Genesis 1:1 right through to Revelation 22:18. The table of contents is laid out so that each chapter is a book of the Bible. This means that it is very easy to find a particular verse or passage as needed. Another feature that makes the book useful is the indexes at the back, which include a 15-page bibliography, as well as a Scripture index and an index of religious groups.

While the title of the book identifies cults and cult teachings as the subject, in reality, it is not just about erroneous teachings of cults. The authors also address what they consider to be false teachings of groups and sects that do not normally fall within the definition of cults, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Word of Faith Pentecostal movement, even while acknowledging that they do not view those groups as cults.

This prompted two questions for me: 1) If they do not view these sects as cults, then why include them in a book about cults? 2) If “untwisting” the misinterpretations of these groups is important, then why label the book as being about cults?

So, while this is a book about cults, and a helpful one at that, it is not a book about cults exclusively. In this sense, then, I feel that a more accurate title of the book would not include the word “cults” in it.

That said, if you find yourself in conversations with those who are twisting Scripture, but you are not ready with enough information to refute them, then you will find this a very helpful resource.

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Resource Corner

中港異端之全能神邪教 (東方閃電)
China and Hong Kong’s Heresy: Church of the Almighty God (Eastern Lightning)

A Mandarin Language PowerPoint Course

This course, written by a Chinese seminary lecturer with extensive experience working with churches in mainland China and Hong Kong, deals with the background, growth, teachings, and tactics of the Church of Almighty God (Eastern Lightning).

Two PowerPoint presentations each with an accompanying audio tape in Mandarin

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