

**Refugee Review Tribunal
AUSTRALIA**

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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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 advise on the Shouter church in the PRC, particularly in the above areas.**
- 2. Does the government harass members?**
- 3. Please provide me with info about the beliefs of the church, how they worship, do they use the same Bible as mainstream Christians?**
- 4. Do they observe Easter and Christmas?**
- 5. What of their beliefs are different to mainstream Christianity?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Please advise on the Shouter church in the PRC, particularly in the above areas.**

The US Department of State report for 2006 states that the Local Church, or “Shouters”, is among those groups which have been banned as cults in China:

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 Three Grades of Servants (also known as San Ba Pu Ren), 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 three to seven years in prison, while “cult” leaders and recruiters may be sentenced to seven years or more in prison. Under the new Public Security Administrative Punishment Law, which took effect March 1, 2006. Falun Gong adherents could face five to fifteen days of administrative detention and fines of up to \$125 (1,000 RMB) for using superstitious cults or qigong activities to disrupt public order or harm public health. Public security officials said the law would be used against Falun Gong (US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, September – Attachment 1).

The following reports discuss the Shouters/Local Church in Fujian and Guizhou provinces specifically. Further information about beliefs and practices will also be found in the answers to later questions.

For the Member’s information, Fujian and Guizhou are marked on the attached map (‘Guizhou and Fujian’ 1999, *Microsoft Encarta* – Attachment 2).

The Shouters/Local Church in Fujian Province

There are several reports which mention the situation of the Local Church in Fujian province. Sources indicate that there have been arrests of Local Church members there from time to time. One source suggests that the Local Church now operates legally in some parts of Fujian; but another suggests that it is still illegal in the province.

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

Since 1982, China’s government has tried to suppress the Shouter sect, which it views as an “evil cult” (as it does Falun Gong). There are some reports on Chinese-language websites of police raids on Shouter meetings and of leaders and practitioners being arrested and punished. There are several reports of raids on Shouter meetings in Fuqing (as well as in other areas) in 2002 – usually when the raid received some sort of international attention (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2006, *DFAT Report 515: RRT Information Request CHN30365*, 4 August – Attachment 3).

An October 2005 response discusses the fact that that Fujian Province is regarded as a stronghold of Shouter belief, and that the founder of the group, Watchman Nee, came from Fujian. Question 3 looks specifically at their treatment in Fuqing City, Fujian Province, and refers to reports of arrests of group members in 2002 and 2004 (RRT Country Research 2005, *Research Response CHN17561*, 7 October – Attachment 4).

A 2004 PhD dissertation by Jason Kindopp of George Washington University provides detailed and authoritative information on the Local Church’s beliefs and practices. The paper contains several references to the Local Church in Fujian Province. He states that in the late 1970s, the overseas branch of the church sent missionaries back into several areas in China, including Fujian province. Fujian and other “Little Flock” strongholds then experienced a rapid expansion of Local Church activity. In 2001, a Fujian case attracted worldwide attention, which led to a temporary easing of restrictions in the province

The church’s most recent political setback came in May 2001, when Hong Kong businessman and Local Church member Li Guangqiang and Fujian residents Yu Zhudi and Lin Xifu were arrested for smuggling 32,000 copies of Li Changshou’s Recovery Bible into China. The three were initially charged merely with importing books without a license, but the charge was later upgraded to “using a cult to undermine enforcement of the law.”⁵⁹⁸ Although the charge (filed under

China's Criminal Law 300, art. 1) carried a maximum penalty of a 15-year imprisonment,⁵⁹⁹ Local Church activists in Hong Kong told the press that Li had received a death sentence, which was reported widely abroad, evoking an international outcry on the eve of President Bush's February 2002 trip to China...President Bush personally championed Li's case, issuing a public call for his release...Members of Congress also took up Li's case, raising the issue in the International Relations Committee of the House of Representatives...Due largely to political pressure from abroad, Li's sentence was reduced to three years' probation, which he served in Hong Kong. Lin Xifu was sentenced to three years but released several months later for "health reasons." Yu Zhudi was last reported to be at a labor camp in Fujian...To appease the U.S., Party leaders in Beijing reportedly instructed authorities in Fujian not to touch the Local Church, resulting in at least a temporary period of unprecedented freedom from official repression for the group (pp.456-7) (Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', in *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May – Attachment 5).

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

By contrast, political authorities in other locales have agreed to register Local Church congregations within their jurisdictions, as they have with other autonomous house churches. Local Churches now operate legally in **Shanghai, Nanjing, Fuzhou**, and a number of rural counties in Zhejiang and **Fujian Provinces**. **The Local Church in Fujian's rural Longtian district, for example, recently built a massive church complex with a 4,000 person seating capacity and adjoining classrooms for Sunday school**, Registration has often occurred in the face of TSPM opposition, although *lianghui* officials have also found it expedient to forge a *modus vivendi* with Local Church leaders, particularly in areas where Local Church adherents constitute a sizable minority or even a majority of Protestants.⁶²³ Indeed, the practice has become sufficiently widespread that observers now refer to the phenomenon as a potential "third wave" of church-state relations, continuing with broader trends toward official relaxation of religious control from the Mao period through the reform era. If realized, such a "wave" would likely seal the fate of the unpopular TSPM, as the vast majority of congregations would undoubtedly opt to register independently with political authorities, rather than coming under the *lianghui*'s auspices (p.466) (Kindopp, Jason 2004, 'The Local Church: a Transnational Protestant sect', in *The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party State*, 16 May – Attachment 5).

The Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board refers to comments provided by the Executive Secretary of the Hong Kong Christian Council who stated:

Fujian and Guandong have the "most liberal policy on religion in China, especially on Christianity"...In cases where arrests have been made, the executive secretary pointed out that groups such as the Shouters and the Eastern Lighting, which are considered "heretical" by many Christians, have been targeted (1 Sept. 2005a) (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2005, *CHN100387.E - China: Situation of Protestants and treatment by authorities, particularly in Fujian and Guangdong (2001-2005)*, 7 September, IRB Website, http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/rir/index_e.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=449522 – Accessed 17 October 2006 – Attachment 6).

Mr Philip Yee, an Elder of "The Church in Melbourne" which follows the Local Church tradition, commented that "the local churches in Fujian province are considered as illegal gatherings and as such are not registered" and that "members there are still being arrested"

(Yee, Philip 2006, 'RE: Request for information from the Refugee Review Tribunal', 18 October – Attachment 7).

Christians in Guizhou

No information at all was found among the sources consulted on the Shouters/Local Church group in Guizhou Province. The following information discusses Christians in general in Guizhou Province, and mentions some arrests of members of unregistered churches.

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 8).

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

The 2006 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 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, and Macau)*, September – Attachment 1).

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 9).

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 10).

2. Does the government harass members?

As the material in the previous section indicates, the Shouters/ Local Church is banned in China, although there is some evidence that it operates relatively freely in some areas. There have been reports of arrests of members of the Local Church over the years. There are also reports of the arrests of members of other illegal “cults”.

Mr Philip Yee, an Elder of “The Church in Melbourne” which follows the Local Church tradition, made these comments on the situation of the church in China:

1. As we understand it, the local churches in China are viewed differently in each province. Certain provinces allow the local churches to register with the authorities and once they have done so, they are allowed to worship. However, in other provinces, including Fujian province, the local churches are regarded as illegal gatherings and members there are still being arrested.
2. As mentioned above, the local churches in Fujian province are considered as illegal gatherings and as such are not registered.
3. The same situation applies, as far as we understand from speaking to members who come from Fuqing city, that the government is still persecuting members of the local church there...
4. According to our understanding, local churches in China are generally considered as “shouters” by the Chinese government particularly in Fujian province. The local churches would like to be known simply as local churches but this was a designation given by the Chinese government. I would also like to point out again that not only are the local churches considered as “shouters” church, but also some other groups are considered as “shouters”. I guess one of the reasons why the Chinese government considered the local churches as “shouters church” is the practice of many members of the local churches to audibly praise God in their worship and also their carrying out the scriptural practice of calling audibly upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Yee, Philip 2006, ‘RE: Request for information from the Refugee Review Tribunal’, 18 October – Attachment 7).

Jason Kindopp’s PhD dissertation on Protestantism in contemporary China dated 16 May 2004 provides new information on the Local Church in China. According to Kindopp, there are an estimated 800,000 adherents in China today. Kindopp notes that the Local Church in China has shown “considerable resilience in the face of official repression.” Kindopp notes that official repression is not uniform throughout China and that Local Churches now operate legally in Shanghai, Nanjing, Fuzhou, and a number of rural counties in Zhejiang and Fujian Provinces. Despite this, Kindopp notes that most congregations remain unregistered:

At the time of my research, the Chinese government were blocking the Local Church’s website, but several urban church members claimed to have ways of accessing it anyway.

...Official repression of the Local Church continued throughout the 1990s and into the new century, although the regime’s tactics have evolved over time. For the most part, lengthy judicial sentences have given way to short-term administrative detentions and large fines – often repeatedly upon unrepentant church figures. Authorities have also employed increasingly sophisticated methods of implementing the PSB’s strategy of eradicating local congregations, in some cases dispatching moles who pretend to be Christians to infiltrate the groups to obtain information about

its leaders and members and then report their findings to the police. Official attempts to re-educate Local Church adherents have also continued.

...Despite official repression, the Local Church has continued to grow in China, swelling to approximately 800,000 adherents by the late 1990s. Most congregations remain unregistered with political authorities, and the few that have registered have resisted coming under TPSM [Three Patriotic Self Movement] control.

...Local Church publications – printed as near as South Korea and Taiwan – are smuggled into China through Hong Kong and Chinese ports along the eastern seaboard. Entire volumes are copied on to CD-ROMs, accessed to personal computers or even given to local private printing presses for mass reproduction. The materials are distributed through informal networks of Local Church adherents, many of who work full-time for the church and are willing to risk their personal freedom to achieve its objective.

...Official repression of the Local Church has not been uniform throughout the country, and the varied political environments have led to a divergence in the group's development.

...By contrast, political authorities in other locales have agreed to register Local Church congregations within their jurisdictions, as they have with other autonomous house churches. Local Churches now operate legally in Shanghai, Nanjing, Fuzhou, and a number of rural counties in Zhejiang and Fujian Provinces. ...Registration has often occurred in the face of TSPM opposition, although *lianghui* officials have also found it expedient to forge a *modus vivendi* with Local Church leaders, particularly in areas where Local Church adherents constitute a sizable minority or even a majority of Protestants (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).

An article dated 26 March 2006 on House-Church Networks in China edited by Tony Lambert, an expert on Christian groups in China and author of *China's Christian Millions* (2006), provides information on the Little Flock and the Local Church in China. The article notes that the Shouters have been "ruthlessly suppressed".

Lee's supporters flooded Local Church house churches with his booklets and tracts. In 1983 the Chinese government labeled his followers a sect called the "Shouters" because of their practice of shouting Bible verses or slogans. More seriously, it was declared "reactionary"—a serious political accusation which no doubt was partly earned by Lee's close Taiwan connections. **It has been ruthlessly suppressed, and there is little doubt that many genuine believers have been wrongly accused.** In general, older Little Flock leaders on the Mainland have kept to the milder ways laid down by Watchman Nee and denounced Lee's teachings as divisive, even heretical. Some younger followers have enthusiastically followed Lee and risk arrest and even imprisonment.

...According to Three Self statistics published in 2005, about 200,000 believers in 20 provinces were led astray by the Shouters' false teaching in the late 1970s and early 1980s. **The Shouters have been persecuted and their leaders imprisoned, so their influence may have lessened.** However, the Shouters have proved a fertile seed-bed for more extreme cults such as the Established King, The Lord God Cult and Eastern Lightning (Anderson, Stephen E & Lambert, Tony (ed.) 2006, 'House-Church Networks – An Overview (Part 1)', Cogitations Blog, 26 March <http://cogitations.typepad.com/cogitations/2006/03/index.html> – Accessed 7 July 2006 – Attachment 11).

Tony Lambert was asked by email whether there was any evidence of a particular PSB crackdown on Shouters in China. He advised that he is “unaware of a particular current drive by the PSB against the Shouters”:

The main cults under attack now are Eastern Lighting, and just recently Three Grades of Servants whose leaders face imminent execution. Shaanxi, particularly Ankang in the SW corner of the province may be a stronghold of the Mentuhui (Discipleship) group (Lambert, Tony 2006, Email ‘Request for assistance from Refugee Review Tribunal, Sydney Australia (RRT ref: CHN30336)’, 12 July – Attachment 12).

The 2006 report by the US Commission in International Religious Freedom does not discuss the Shouters, but does contain general remarks about unregistered churches, stating that:

...the Chinese government actively seeks to control and suppress the activities of “unregistered” religious organizations to prevent the rise of sources of authority outside the control of the government and the Communist Party...Chinese law bans unregistered religious organizations and provides severe penalties for engaging in unregistered religious activities (US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2006, *Annual report on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, May, p.22

<http://www.uscirtf.gov/countries/publications/currentreport/2006annualRpt.pdf#page=1>

– Accessed 18 October 2006 – Attachment 13).

The same report contains information on the treatment of groups classified as “evil cults”:

The campaign against “evil cults” has, in recent years, expanded beyond the Falun Gong and similar groups to those religious communities that have refused to register and become part of the system of officially-sanctioned religious organizations. This campaign has targeted leaders and members of newer, as well as long-established, Protestant and Catholic groups which, for various reasons, have not registered with the government. Religious leaders have been imprisoned and followers detained and fined for “cultist activity.” Many of the congregants of the unregistered South China Church, including its pastor, remain in jail facing serious charges and are allegedly subject to torture and other ill treatment in prison. In August 2005, about 40 members of the South China Church were reportedly detained in Hubei when they met to receive religious training from expatriate co-religionists. In March 2006, 17 leaders of the Three Grades of Servant Church, which the government has labeled an “evil cult,” were tried on charges of murder and fraud after authorities accused them of killing members of the Eastern Lightning Sect. Lawyers in that case claim that confessions from the 17 men were coerced through torture (US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2006, *Annual report on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, May, p.110

<http://www.uscirtf.gov/countries/publications/currentreport/2006annualRpt.pdf#page=1>

– Accessed 18 October 2006 – Attachment 13).

3. Please provide me with info about the beliefs of the church, how they worship, do they use the same Bible as mainstream Christians?

5. What of their beliefs are different to mainstream Christianity?

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” (*huhān pài*). 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. From the first, Ni rejected the idea of widespread or complex church hierarchies, seeking “to return to a simple New Testament pattern of worship and ministry, proposing a ‘one locale, one church’ formula. Also consistent with Chinese sensibilities, Ni’s proposal for church organization was at once localistic and universal” .
- 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.
- Li further developed “the Little Flock’s anti-bureaucratic principles and theological emphasis on subjective experience”. The Local Church re-translated the entire Bible and added extensive commentary by Li throughout the text; the new version is called the *Recovery Bible*. Li also authored study guides, commentaries and pamphlets, which are in use today.
- 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.
- Local Church communities become tightly knit “through frequent and highly participatory scheduled activities. Group rituals carefully follow Li’s prescribed

format, and are geared toward bringing adherents into total conformity with Li's dogma and into submission to his authority while eliciting total commitment to the church...Former members report that members are expected to attend from four to six scheduled meetings each week". In China, groups can meet up to ten times a week (p.461).

- “The two formal leadership positions within the local Church base group are deacon and elder. Elders oversee the group’s operations, assuming legal responsibility for church properties and supervising the service content and structure. Deacons assist the elders by taking leading roles in the services and administering the Lord’s Table. Some Churches have full-time workers to attend to building maintenance and manage church properties, supported through members’ ‘freewill offerings’”.
- The Local Church’s top leadership body is the Council of Elders. “Individual churches are linked to the local Church’s central leadership centre in Anaheim through an extensive training system and a mass media empire. Periodic leadership training seminars are held at the Local Church’s Anaheim headquarters and in regional offices around the world, ranging from short-term international conferences to ten-day leadership seminars to a 1 ½ year intensive training program for full-time workers”.
- Each year, the Living Stream Ministry (the Local Church’s publishing house) prints “millions of copies of the *Recovery Bible*, Li’s Life-Study series, the Local Church hymnal, and pamphlets covering every aspect of Local Church doctrine and practice”. The Living Stream Ministry website <http://www.lsm.org/> contains full-text versions of many core texts.
- The Local Church separates itself from the broader society as much as possible to maintain its spiritual purity; will “quarantine” church members who have expressed dissent; and will shun those who have left the church (p.448).
- In China the Local Church’s “highly associational organizational structure enables groups to form without any formal bureaucracy or clerical ties to the church hierarchy, facilitating their expansion” and allowing them to function in spite of official repression.
- Kindopp also feels that lately the Local Church has taken steps to “bring the group into greater conformity with the evangelical Protestant mainstream” and that this has led to the authorities taking “tentative steps” to recognise the group (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).

Mr Philip Yee, an Elder of “The Church in Melbourne” which follows the Local Church tradition, provided information on their practices to Melbourne Country Research in October 2006:

5. The Church in Melbourne has the same beliefs and similar practices to the local churches in China. We are Spirit regenerated believers who are redeemed by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus. We love to call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and to praise Him in our meetings. Sometimes we call loudly and sometimes softly (as during work so as not to disturb those around

us) . We have fellowship with all the local churches around the world. For more details of our beliefs, standing, mission and hope, you can visit www.localchurch.org.

6. Not all members of the local churches “shout” (or call loudly on the name of the Lord Jesus) and it is not a compulsory practice. We can call on the Lord Jesus’ name softly and still enjoy Him.

7. The format of our prayer meetings are flexible and varies according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we start with singing, at other times we pray over the verses and other times we call on the name of the Lord Jesus. The length of our prayer meetings is around 1 to 1.5 hours (Yee, Philip 2006, ‘RE: Request for information from the Refugee Review Tribunal’, 18 October – Attachment 7).

Mr Yee provided further information in another October 2006 email:

...in our prayer meetings, we usually have singing of hymns, calling on the name of our Lord Jesus, reading of the Bible, reading of some other Christian literatures, and prayers. Prayer would take most of the time. At these meetings, some members would bring out items for prayers and some would fellowship concerning what they have enjoyed of the Lord during the week...

... We read a wide range of Christian materials, covering subjects such as the Triune God, All Inclusive Christ, the Spirit, God’s complete salvation, the church, God’s plan, Christian life, Christian work and other matters of truth, life and practice.
(Yee, Philip 2006, ‘RE: Request for information from the Refugee Review Tribunal’, 31 October – Attachment 14).

The Elders of the Local Church in Sydney provided information on the structure of the church in Sydney` in an August 2006 email:

We are one of some 3,500 congregations outside of China who follow the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. We follow the biblical practice of meeting as one church in each city (referred to as a locality) and thus have been referred to as the local churches. While we do not by our belief have any official organization, we are ‘affiliated’ by fellowship with the other churches following this ministry. We certainly believe that we are those practising according to the ministry of Nee and Lee. We would, however, point out that the term ‘Shouters’ has been applied to various diverse Christian groups in China. Some of these groups have similar beliefs and practices to us. We cannot without checking on the particular congregation that your applicant attended, say whether this applies to them.

1. We have some 300 members, apart from children, in Sydney and meet in seven districts around the metropolitan area for the Sunday Lord’s Table meeting and speaking on the Sunday as well as prayer meetings, home meetings, young people’s meetings etc. Our postal address is PO Box 3133, Telopea, NSW 2117. We are registered as an Incorporated Association and as an income tax exempt charity.

2. Our main meeting places on Sundays are:

- A. The Baukham Hills Council Function Centre, Corner Carrington and Showground Roads;
- B. The Alpha Park Community Centre, Alpha Street, Blacktown;
- C. The Randwick Public School, Cowper Street, Randwick;
- D. Labour Council Building, Level 1 Unit 8/377-383 Sussex Street, Sydney

E. Our smaller districts meet in homes as follows:

- 237 Crooked Lane, North Richmond;
- 47 Claremont Circle, Glen Alpine;
- 108 Carlton Parade, Carlton.

4. Mr Tony Cheah is one of the six Elders, the others being, Dr David Foley, Richard Salmon, Terrance Tay, Testimony Kim and Professor Ron Topsom. Rick Gartside is a district responsible brother for the Blacktown District.

5. We are aware of one small group in Sydney who to some extent follow the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee but they are not in fellowship with us or the local churches worldwide (Elders of the Local Church in Sydney 2006, Email 'Re: Request for assistance from Refugee Review Tribunal, Sydney Australia (RRT ref: CHN30352)', 1 August – Attachment 15).

4. Do they observe Easter and Christmas?

Sources indicate that officially the Local Church does not celebrate Easter and Christmas, but that some church members may celebrate it individually.

Mr Philip Yee, an Elder of “The Church in Melbourne” which follows the Local Church tradition, provided information on their practices to Melbourne Country Research in October 2006. In answer to the question of whether they celebrate Easter and Christmas, he stated:

In the local churches we do not practice celebrating Christmas or Easter. The reasons for this are that the origin of these festivals are pagan – Christmas originally was the time of worship of the birth of sun god in Roman times until the Roman emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as his religion and forced his subjects to be “Christians”, and since they were celebrating the birth of the sun god in December, Constantine changed it to the celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly Easter’s original was the worship of the goddess of fertility. Also the way that Christmas and Easter are celebrated today have nothing to do with the incarnation and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We can and should remember, celebrate, enjoy and experience our Lord Jesus’s incarnation and resurrection daily not just once a year.

Although we do not practice celebrating these festivals, **this is not a legality, and some local church members individually do celebrate Christmas and Easter** (Yee, Philip 2006, 'RE: Request for information from the Refugee Review Tribunal', 31 October – Attachment 14).

A 2002 article on the Local Church in China describes a secret meeting of worshippers in a house in Fuzhou City, Fujian province. The article comments that as many as 200 “saints”, as the faithful are known, crowd into this same house at Easter and Christmas (Gittelson, John 2002, 'Living Stream/Secret passages', *The Orange County Register*, 13 October – Attachment 16).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine

Databases:

ISYS, CISNET

List of Attachments

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3. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2006, *DFAT Report 515: RRT Information Request CHN30365*, 4 August
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