Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

Research Response Number: CHN17523
Country: China
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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. The Applicant claims to be a Shouter from Hainan Province .Please provide information on the situation for Christians in Hainan, further to CHN13438 (1999).
2. Is there any further information on the treatment of Shouters, further to CHN16876 (August 2004), particularly in Hainan?
3. The Applicant referred to the Shouters in his statement, and yet has joined a Catholic congregation in Australia. Is the distinction between Protestant and Catholic churches recognised in China (including self-identity by underground church members)?

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources**:**
Google search engine

UNHCR	*REFWORLD*	UNHCR Refugee Information Online

Databases**:**

Public	*FACTIVA*	Reuters Business Briefing
DIMIA	*BACIS*	Country Information
	REFINFO	IRBDC Research Responses (Canada)
RRT	*ISYS*	RRT Country Research database, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, US Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.*
RRT Library	*FIRST*	RRT Library Catalogue *Jesus in Beijing;*

RESPONSE

1. Please provide information on the situation for Christians in Hainan, further to CHN13438 (1999).]

Hainan province consists largely of the island of Hainan at the southern tip of China. Reports indicate that there is a small but growing Christian community in Hainan. Few reports were found that indicate any serious harassment of Christians in the province, although there are instances of meetings being stopped and buildings closed down. Estimates of numbers vary considerably between reports, from a minimum of about 37,000 to a maximum of over 300,000. The population of Hainan is about 8 million.

The September 2004 and November 2004 issues of a Christian online journal called *Asia Harvest* provide recent information on the situation for Christians in Hainan. The articles concentrate on Protestant worship and provide optimistic estimates of the number of Christians in the province.

The September issue examines the history of Christian worship on Hainan, and looks at the Three-Self Patriotic Church, which is the government-controlled Protestant body. Points of note include:

- Four percent of the island's 8 million inhabitants are thought to be Christian (pp.2, 4).
- Contact with Christianity dates back to 1630, when Jesuit priests from Macau built a chapel in Fucheng town. The first known Protestant missionary arrived in 1881. From 1885 onwards, Presbyterian missionaries and other evangelists worked on the island (pp.5-7).
- The government-controlled Three Self Patriotic Movement claims that there are about 37,000 Christians in their churches on Hainan. In the mid-1990s two of their own pastors were pressured to be less zealous and to stick more closely to the Communist Party line. One was arrested and imprisoned, the other placed under house arrest (p.8-9).
- The article gives an account of the Three Self Church in the city of Nada from the time of its reopening after the Cultural Revolution in 1986. In 1993, the pastor was forcibly removed and government officials took charge of the church (pp.9-10) (Hattaway, Paul & Joy 2004, 'Hainan Island – Part 1 – Missions history & the Three-Self Church', *Asia Harvest, Newsletter #75,* September, http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/newsletters/75-Sept2004-HainanIslandPart1.pdf – Accessed 13 September 2005 – Attachment 1).

The November 2004 issue of *Asia Harvest* looks at house churches (unregistered churches) in Hainan.

The authors dispute the figure of 37,000 Christians which is given by the Three-Self Church, stating that there is credible evidence that there are about 360,000. However they point out that this still amounts to less than 5% of the population. They state that this large number is due to the "exponential growth" of house churches, which took place throughout the 1990s due to systematic training programmes in evangelism which were introduced at that time:

> By 1996, the number of house churches affiliated with this movement had grown to more than 100, with a combined membership of over 16,000 Christians.

> As a result of this amazing growth, by 1996 each of the 19 counties on Hainan Island contained at least two reproducing churches, and every Chinese language group and minority group except the Utsat Muslims had at least two churches from this movement in their midst also…
>
> …Practically all of the members of these churches were the result of new conversions, and not the transfer of members from existing churches.
>
> Because of the focus on evangelism and training, growth continued to be exponential. By 1998, the number of Christians on the Island had mushroomed to more than 80,000; and by the middle of 2000 a thorough survey put the number of all Christians on the island at 360,000…(Hattaway, Paul & Joy 2004, 'Hainan Island – Part 2 – The house church revival', *Asia Harvest, Newsletter #76*, November, pp.4-5, http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/newsletters/76-Nov2004-HainanIslandPart2.pdf – Accessed 13 September 2005 – Attachment 2).

The authors go on to state that they have done their best to verify this from different sources. They also state that "by 1998 every part of the Island had been impacted, but the highest concentrations of believers remained in the north, south and eastern areas. The areas with the weakest influence of Christianity could be said to be Baisha, Dongfang, Ledong and Changjiang counties – all located in the western part of Hainan" …(Hattaway, Paul & Joy 2004, 'Hainan Island – Part 2 – The house church revival', *Asia Harvest, Newsletter #76*, November, p.5, http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/newsletters/76-Nov2004-HainanIslandPart2.pdf – Accessed 13 September 2005 – Attachment 2).

The article does not mention any government harassment of the house churches on Hainan. The only violent incidents mentioned are in the context of evangelising missions, such as when members of the Li minority ethnic group beat up three evangelists who had come to convert them, killing one (Hattaway, Paul & Joy 2004, 'Hainan Island – Part 2 – The house church revival', *Asia Harvest, Newsletter #76*, November, p.6-7, http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/newsletters/76-Nov2004-HainanIslandPart2.pdf – Accessed 13 September 2005 – Attachment 2).

A 2003 survey of the Chinese Church by Tony Lambert includes a section on Hainan which put the number of Christians in the province at much lower than the previous sources:

> **HAINAN**
> **Population:** 7.9 million
> **Capital:** Haikou (570,000)
> Tropical Hainan island is a new province at China's southern tip. There are more than 21 registered churches and 41 meeting-points, but only 9 registered pastors. A large TSPM church, seating 2,000, has been recently opened in Haikou, the provincial capital. There are many house churches and church growth has been most apparent on the east coast in Wanning. Total number of believers was 37,000 according to a TSPM estimate, but reliable house-church estimates in 2002 also put the number not above 50,000. Reports that there are over 300,000 believers on the island have been denied as not credible by both local house-church evangelists and TSPM pastors. There are also about 6,000 Catholics, mainly in the northern half of the island.
> **Minorities:** There are large Li and Miao communities. Not many are Christians. However, there are several hundred Li Christians in the southern part of the island (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 3).

An older article by Paul Davenport, dating from 1998, is of relevance since it discusses the growth of house churches in Hainan through the 1990s; gives some examples of church

buildings being demolished and meetings being stopped; and provides details of local regulations on religion. It states:

> The house churches in Hainan have generally escaped the sharper persecution of the inland provinces further north. Despite the very real pressures related above, I found no evidence of Christians imprisoned or beaten for their faith. However, house church leaders in Haikou were certainly cautious. One young, well-educated evangelist questioned me as to whether it was safe to discuss matters in the hotel room, fearing "bugs." We then investigated the hotel coffee shop. Still, he was clearly uneasy when we could not find a quiet corner. He was only satisfied when we found an empty cafe down the street. Such reactions speak more eloquently than a thousand words of the real situation lurking behind the facade of "freedom of religious belief."
>
> This young preacher and an older colleague told me that the urban house churches in Haikou had come under increasing pressure in recent months. At the beginning of October 1997 the authorities took decisive action. The Public Security Bureau sent police to their house church and told them to stop meeting. On a second occasion, when the women were holding a weekday meeting, officials from the Religious Affairs Bureau turned up. They confiscated some Christian booklets said to be illegal, as the booklets had come from overseas. As a result of these pressures, the church split -- at first into six or seven smaller cell-groups. Because these were difficult to pastor, lacking trained leaders, they later regrouped into just three smaller house churches. One of these still has over 100 members. They meet together at different times each week to make discovery more difficult.
>
> The younger preacher said that the government's policy on religion was quite cunning and two-faced. At the central level in Beijing they published laws proclaiming religious freedom for the benefit of people overseas. However, all the time they were winking and conniving for the continued suppression of house church Christianity at the local level by local officials.
>
> It was interesting that this view of the real state of affairs was repeated to me a little later in Guangzhou (Canton) by the well-known house church leader Lin Xingao (Pastor Lamb). Pastor Lamb pointed out the difference between the government's "White paper" on religion, which seemed to grant some freedom for house churches, and the very detailed restrictions in the local provincial regulations. In Haikou I was shown a copy of the "Regulations for the Control of Religion in Hainan Province" published in the "Hainan Daily" on October 22, 1997. These 50 very detailed regulations declare, among other things, that:
>
> "Places of religious worship can only operate religious activities after registering with the Religious Affairs Bureau of the People's Government above County level." (No. 10)
>
> "All places of religious worship must submit an annual report of their situation in the first quarter of the year to the original organization with which they registered." (No. 12)
>
> "No religious organization or individual may propagate religion, evangelize, preach or distribute religious propaganda outside [registered] places of religious worship." (No.17)
>
> "With the agreement of the local People's Government Religious Affairs Bureau, religious personnel may undertake necessary religious rites for religious citizens according to religious custom, such as funerals, and in hospitals and at home." (No.27)
>
> "Self-appointed evangelists cannot undertake evangelism and preaching activities and other illegal evangelistic activities. If the management organizations of places for religious worship [e.g. Three Self or China Christian Council] discover illegal evangelistic and preaching activities undertaken by self-appointed evangelists, they must prohibit it and immediately report to the Religious Affairs Bureau of the People's Government." (No. 31)

> It is quite clear from these regulations that unregistered house-churches on the island are regarded as illegal. My friends' caution would appear to be justified (Davenport, Paul 1998, 'With the House Churches in Hainan: Church Growth Continues Despite Literature and Bible Shortage', *Compass Direct*, 20 March, http://www.missionreview.com/index.php?loc=kb&view=v&id=1357&fto=561&fty=6& – Accessed 13 September 2005 – Attachment 4).

A 2003 item from the Revival Chinese Ministries International website is of interest as it mentions that the churches in Hainan have come under attack from the Eastern Lightening cult, which operates by infiltrating house churches and trying to take them over:

> **EASTERN LIGHTNING CULT ATTACKING CHURCHES IN HAINAN ~ 21Aug03**
> The Eastern Lightning cult has ordered the seizure of Christian churches in the entire Hainan province within a year. It is said that 1,000 young workers from the cult have been planted in the Hainan churches as spies. They have been instructed to offer whatever help the churches needed with the ultimate aim of destroying them. The Wanning Hele Church sponsored by the Wanning Church is believed to have come under the attack of Eastern Lightning. The ploy was uncovered in time and corrective actions taken to protect most of the believers. The church had also terminated the services of all its co-workers. Pray for God's help to all the Hainan churches.
> Source: Wanning Church of Hainan province ('Eastern Lightning Cult Attacking Churches In Hainan' 2003, *Revival Chinese Ministries International***,** 21Aug, http://www.rcmi.ac/eng/html/updates/e_previous03.htm – Accessed 15 September 2005 – Attachment 5).

2. Is there any further information on the treatment of Shouters, further to CHN16876 (August 2004), particularly in Hainan?

No reports were found among the sources consulted that refer to the situation of the Shouters on Hainan particularly. The latest US Department of State report on China, and the latest report on religious freedom from the same source, indicate that the Shouters are still included in the Chinese government's list of illegal cults, and that the crackdown on such groups continues.

The 2005 US Department of State report on human rights in China states in the section on religion:

> **The authorities continued a general crackdown on groups considered to be "cults."** Premier Wen Jiabao, in his address to the NPC in March, stressed that government agencies should strengthen their anti-cult work. These "cults" included not only Falun Gong and various traditional Chinese meditation and exercise groups (known collectively as "qigong" groups) but also religious groups that authorities accused of preaching beliefs outside the bounds of officially approved doctrine. **Groups that the Government labeled cults included** Eastern Lightning, the Servants of Three Classes, **the Shouters**, the South China Church, the Association of Disciples, the Full Scope Church, the Spirit Sect, the New Testament Church, the Way of the Goddess of Mercy, the Lord God Sect, the Established King Church, the Unification Church, and the Family of Love. Authorities accused some in these groups of lacking proper theological training, preaching the imminent coming of the Apocalypse or holy war, or exploiting the reemergence of religion for personal gain. The Eastern Lightning group was accused by the Government and some other unregistered Christian groups of involvement in violence.
>
> Actions against such groups continued during the year. In April, over 100 members of the evangelical group the "Servants of Three Classes" were detained in Harbin, Heliongjiang Province. Most were released, but Gu Xianggao died in custody, allegedly as a result of beatings

> by police (see Section 1.c.) **Police also continued their efforts to close down an underground evangelical group called the "Shouters," an offshoot of a pre-1949 indigenous Protestant group**. In 2001, Gong Shengliang, founder of the South China Church, was sentenced to death on criminal charges including rape, arson, and assault. In 2002, an appeals court overturned his death sentence, and Gong was sentenced to life in prison. In the retrial, four women from his congregation claimed that, prior to the first trial, police had tortured them into signing statements accusing Gong of raping them. The four women, who were found not guilty of " cultist activity" in the retrial, were nonetheless immediately sent to reeducation-through-labor camps. In the retrial, the court also dropped all "evil cult" charges against the South China Church. During the year, elderly church member Chen Jingmao reportedly was abused in prison for attempting to convert inmates to Christianity (US Department of State 2005, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2004-China,* 28 February – Attachment 6).

The US Department of State report on religious freedom for 2004 contains little detail on the Shouters in particular, but does state:

> The Government continued its repression of groups that it categorized as "cults" in general and of the Falun Gong in particular. The arrest, detention, and imprisonment of Falun Gong practitioners continued. Practitioners who refuse to recant their beliefs are sometimes subjected to harsh treatment in prisons and reeducation-through-labor camps and there have been credible reports of deaths due to torture and abuse. **Christian-based groups that the Government considered cults were subjected to increased government scrutiny during the period covered by this report** (US Department of State 2004, *International Religious Freedom Report 2004: China,* 15 September – Attachment 7)

Also relevant is this extract from the same report, which indicates a hardening of government attitudes towards religious cults:

> In November 2003, the CCP Central Committee held a high-level meeting in Beijing attended by Politburo members and other high-ranking officials responsible for overseeing religion. In January, a national work conference on religion organized by SARA was held to outline concrete actions to "strengthen religious work." **The conference advised that officials should guard against Christian-influenced "cults"** and avoid negative influences, including "foreign infiltration under cover of religion." Conference attendees also raised concern about circulation of foreign religious materials addressing the growth of Christianity in the country, including a documentary film entitled "The Cross" and a book entitled "Jesus in Beijing." **Subsequently, many provinces convened their own local work conferences.** For example, in February the Fujian Province conference noted that unauthorized establishment of religious venues and icons "interferes with the Government's administration of religious affairs, affects the normal activities of patriotic religious groups, helps the development of evil cults and illegal religious powers, and gives foreign countries opportunities to conduct religious penetration." The 2004 national work conference was a contrast to a landmark 2001 conference at which President Jiang Zemin spoke about the sustained role of religion in society and raised questions about the traditional Marxist concept of opposing religion (US Department of State 2004, *International Religious Freedom Report 2004: China,* 15 September – Attachment 7)

Apart from these reports, no recent material was found on the Shouters.

A recent article for the New York Times is of general interest as it discusses the growth of religious cults in China in recent years (Kahn, J. 2004, 'Violence taints religion's solace for China's poor', *The New York Times,* 25 November – Attachment 8).

3. The Applicant referred to the Shouters in his statement, and yet has joined a Catholic congregation in Australia. Is the distinction between Protestant and Catholic churches recognised in China (including self-identity by underground church members)?

The 2004 US Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report* on China indicates that there is a clear distinction between Protestant and Catholic Churches both at the official and unofficial levels. The Chinese government runs an official umbrella organisation for registered Protestant churches called the Three-Self Patriotic Movement; separate to this is the official Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which is affiliated with the government rather than the Vatican. At the unofficial level, the "house churches" are unregistered Protestant churches which some experts claim may have as many as 90 million members, compared to the 15 million Protestants registered with the official churches. Similarly, the underground Catholic church, which maintains its allegiance to the Vatican rather than the government, is thought to have "some 37 bishops operating 'underground', some of whom are likely in prison or under house arrest" and "a membership far larger than the 5 million persons registered with the official Catholic church" (US Department of State 2004, *International Religious Freedom Report 2004: China*, 15 September – Attachment 7).

List of Attachments

1. Hattaway, Paul & Joy 2004, 'Hainan Island – Part 1 – Missions history & the Three-Self Church', *Asia Harvest, Newsletter #75*, September, http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/newsletters/75-Sept2004-HainanIslandPart1.pdf – Accessed 13 September 2005

2. Hattaway, Paul & Joy 2004, 'Hainan Island – Part 2 – The house church revival', *Asia Harvest, Newsletter #76*, November, http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/newsletters/76-Nov2004-HainanIslandPart2.pdf – Accessed 13 September 2005.

3. 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

4. Davenport, Paul 1998, 'With the House Churches in Hainan: Church Growth Continues Despite Literature and Bible Shortage', *Compass Direct*, 20 March, http://www.missionreview.com/index.php?loc=kb&view=v&id=1357&fto=561&fty=6& – Accessed 13 September 2005

5. 'Eastern Lightning Cult Attacking Churches In Hainan' 2003, *Revival Chinese Ministries International***,** 21Aug, http://www.rcmi.ac/eng/html/updates/e_previous03.htm – Accessed 15 September 2005

6. US Department of State 2005, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2004-China*, 28 February

7. US Department of State 2004, *International Religious Freedom Report 2004: China*, 15 September

8. Kahn, J. 2004, ‘Violence taints religion’s solace for China’s poor’, *The New York Times*, 25 November