

**Faith Under Siege:**  
**Psychological Insights into The Church of Almighty God**

Yuti Ju

Harvard Secondary School Program

The Psychology of Cults

Bethany Burum

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## **Abstract**

This research paper looks into the psychological factors underlying the development and expansion of The Church of Almighty God (CAG), a controversial religious movement in China. By analyzing the group's recruitment strategies, the manipulation of incentives, and the creation of a strong religious identity, the paper explains the mechanisms that fostered a culture of obedience and extremism within CAG.

*Keywords:* The Church of Almighty God, religious movements, religious persecution, cult, psychological manipulation, religious identity

On May 28, 2014, a group of six CAG (The Church of Almighty God) members went into a local MacDonald restaurant in Zhaoyuan City, Shandong Province and demanded all people on site for their phone numbers in an attempt to convert them into a religious group. When a woman Wu Shuoyan refused, she was beaten to death by two members. The attack was captured and caught on mobile phones by customers in the restaurant, and the two perpetrators were executed on February 2, 2015. After this attack, Chinese authorities have detained hundreds of members of CAG. Banned by China's Ministry of Public Security since 1995, the religious group CAG has allegedly attempted religious conversions through kidnapping, assaults, and extortion. The shocking attack in 2014 brought CAG to the center of Chinese authorities and the world's attention.

The Church of Almighty God is a Christian-related new religious movement officially organized in 1991 by Zhao Weishan and Yang Xiangbin. Also called the Eastern Lightning, the group preached that Jesus has returned to Earth in the form of a woman named Yang Xiangbing, the "incarnated Almighty God," and all followers should adhere fully to CAG's sacred text written by the Female Christ, *The Word Appeared in the Flesh*. CAG was identified by China's Ministry of Public Security as a cult in 1995. Five years later in 2000, leaders Zhao Weishan and Yang Xiangbin immigrated to the United States and since then directed the movement from New York. In 2012, the group allegedly kidnapped thirty-four leaders of the China Gospel Fellowship.

Described by the Chinese media as "the nation's most dangerous cult" (Makinen, 2014), CAG fits into the majority's definition of "cult." As defined by Robbins and Anthony (1982), universally labelled cults are certain groups that are considered manipulative and authoritarian, and are said to use mind control, posing a threat to mental health. In their active years in Mainland China, most accounts of CAG have been their aggressive proselytizing. Though the suppression of the group in China and its secrecy in practice has resulted in limited first-hand materials, existing records of CAG raise questions regarding the development of a Christian-related group as a religious minority in China and the motivations behind religious extremism. Hence, this paper will

examine the psychological factors contributing to CAG's development. The first section of the paper acknowledges the attraction of CAG regarding its historical background and recruitment techniques. The second section explores how CAG used control over people's incentives and exploitation of psychological vulnerabilities as a means to change people's beliefs. The last part of the paper addressed the possible explanation for the motivation behind the group's violent tendencies.

## **1. THE ATTRACTION OF CAG**

### **1.1 Historical considerations**

In understanding the appeal of CAG, it is important to consider the effect of historical events on the general and specific population. Religious exclusivity was not part of the Chinese civilization. While Confucianism has dominated China ideologically and politically for decades, it is widely considered a moral and philosophical basis rather than a religion. Under the rule of Chairman Mao after the establishment of the PRC (People's Republic of China) in October 1949, the Chinese communist party greatly restricted religious beliefs and practices. Seeing religion as a hangover from dual and bourgeois societies, the party's intolerance toward religion intensified in the early 1960s and reached a peak during the Cultural Revolution. This movement, launched by Mao, aimed for a total extinction of religion as part of the effort to revolutionize the culture. The communist regime was especially hostile to Christianity, where during the Cultural Revolution, clergy and laity were imprisoned, tortured, and killed (Goldman, 1986). As religious associations were dismantled, believers retreated to secret worshipping and practicing. The leader of CAG, Zhao Weishan, born in 1951 and grew up religious, was a member of these religious believers. In the post-Mao era, restrictions on religion were loosened under the rule of Deng Xiaoping. Deng's leadership encourage public worship as a means to channel religious activities into Party-supervised organizations. Despite the effort, informal groups continued their underground practices.

The belongingness hypothesis proposed by Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggests that belongingness is a fundamental need and should motivate actions aimed at fulfilling it. The desire to form social attachments is intrinsic, and individuals who share common experiences often develop friendships or other connections. Additionally, people are generally reluctant to sever these connections or end social bonds, even when there is no practical or material benefit to maintaining them, and even if continuing the bond would be challenging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In response to the state's oppression, underground religious sects like CAG precisely provided religious believers a community to interact with similar individuals and form personal bonds, as the desire to belong is a powerful human motive. Seeking a community where one is safe to practice their beliefs with others, the CAG was organized on the basis of existing underground religious group, The Shouters.

In CAG's early years of development, the followers were predominantly middle-aged women. This gender ratio in CAG reveals the effect of the one-child policy on women and the appeal of the CAG to the population. After the founding of the PRC, the country's population went from approximately 540 million to over 800 million over three decades (Ebenstein, 2010). To control the population growth that risked a negative impact on the nation's modernization, the One-Child Policy was implemented in 1979 and has since shown success in reducing the fertility rate. However, this had exacerbated the distortion in the country's male-to-female ratio. Historically, Chinese parents have preferred large families, allocated family resources more toward sons, and in some circumstances discarded daughters upon birth. While this pattern was temporarily toned down in the 1960s due to the high fertility and each family was likely to have at least one son surviving, the policy brought back this pattern. The preference for sons is particularly pronounced in rural villages, particularly in the Northeastern part of China. This geographical feature corresponds to the root and early spread of CAG around Henan province which is in Northeast China. In rural China, sons are seen as permanent family members, while daughters are considered part of their husbands'

family after marriage. A common saying reflects this view: "Daughters leave once they can work and earn, but sons bring in labor (Junhong, 2001)." Along with the preference, sex-selective abortion was greatly facilitated by the introduction of ultrasound technology since the 1980s. Thus, sex preferences have manifested in the imbalance in sex ratio and gender inequality (Ebenstein, 2010). This significant imbalance in social dynamic easily resulted in women in rural areas growing up in a sexist environment and having low self-esteem. CAG with its Christian duty thus offer them a sense of purpose. This accurately demonstrates how CAG targeted the psychological vulnerability found among the female population as a recruit device.

## **1.2 Development and recruitment**

The unique family and social structure of rural China also contributed to the expansion of CAG. Fei, in his book *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (1992), described Chinese rural society as "consists not of organizations arranged systematically in society but, rather of 'webs woven out of countless personal relationships.'" In other words, the lineage networks, which center on household, family, and kinship, are the "medium through which all activities are organized (Fei, 1992)." Rural Chinese society's unique social network, which puts great emphasis on family connection, helps explain the rapid expansion of CAG. Research by Stark and Bainbridge (1980) shows that the majority of members of a cult were drawn to certain ideologies because of their pre-existing social ties to the group. Qualitative data from three cults have shown that interpersonal bonds play an important role in conversion to cults and sects, and in the case of Mormon recruitment, the receipt of entire nuclear families may make rapid growth of the group. The strong influence of family bonds thus played a crucial role in the conversion to the CAG. In a systematic survey collected by Introvigne (2018) on CAG member conversions, 70.03% of those who converted in China did so due to the influence from a family member or relative, and 82.49% of this group later attempted to convert their own family members.

Chinese culture aligns with the characteristics of a collectivistic culture, where relationships are evaluated based on their value to the group (Cialdini et al., 2012). In such an environment, compliance levels of individuals are affected by peers' prior compliance. Following the heuristic of social proof, individuals determine appropriate behavior by examining the behavior of others as shortcuts for effective decision-making (Cialdini et al, 2012; Rao, Greve, & Davis, 2001). In the CAG's attempt to amplify its influence and recruit by spreading the doomsday prophecy in 2012, reliance on social proof was the main psychological mechanism that drew people into the group. According to the account by an ex-member surnamed Tian, the individual first noticed CAG in the summer of 2012 and was driven to join due to a social panic (Poulson & Richardson, 2019). Though the individual defected after the 2012 doomsday prophecy failed, this example demonstrates the group's manipulation of people's tendency to rely on imitating others in decision-making. Furthermore, the heuristic rule can also explain why interpersonal bonds contribute to the group's expansion.

Proselytizing is presented as a core aspect of religious life and a duty common to all CAG followers. In understanding how the group managed their recruits, it is helpful to analyze the process through the lens of compliance. Compliance involves the acquiescence to requests, and cults often exploit the goal of accuracy by creating environments where targets are pressured to perceive reality through the lens provided by the group (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). A common tactic used by CAG is the "fear-then-relief" procedure, a strategy to intensify compliance through sudden withdrawal of the source of anxiety. In the group's 2006 publication "Typical Cases of Leaders in Catholicism and Christianity in Mainland China Who Resist Almighty God Being Punished", the experiences of 887 Christians whose illnesses or accidents, frequently fatal, are seen as divine punishment for rejecting the Eastern Lightning message (Dunn, 2008). By posing potential physical affliction as the manifestation of God's displeasure, the group introduced impending threats, the "fear." Consequently, the group indicated joining the CAG as a way to avoid

illness and accidents, presenting the onset of the threat, the "relief." Thus, such messages backed by their testimonials, make targets more likely to comply with the cult's requests.

## 2. CHANGE IN BELIEF

### 2.1 Forming religious identity

It is noteworthy that CAG has maintained active on social media platforms and countries outside mainland China to this day. After leader Zhao Weishan and the group's Almighty God Yang Xiangbin left the country to seek religious asylum in the United States in 2000, CAG maintained its membership in mainland China. This has a lot to do with the members' establishment of religious identity within the group. Religion exists as a belief systems that often function as social identities. Through identifying with a religious group, the group's membership becomes more important to one's self-concept. Subsequently, one would self-categorize and distinguish their group from others (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). This identification is empowering when one considers one's religion as the truth and an explanation to the worldly matter. It may shape one's worldview and largely influence one's actions as one adheres to the guiding beliefs of the group. In the case of CAG, members were promised eternity in heaven, a reward of identification. This value and elevation of the identity of members greatly increased people's self-esteem and prompted a higher degree of self-categorization. Additionally, individuals are also driven to be consistent with their prior commitments in order to maintain self-concept positivity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004).

However, only the elevation of in-group status is not enough to result in such a change in members' beliefs. Along with the worship of the Almighty God, are the anti-communist beliefs. Following the book of Revelation, *The Word Appeared in the Flesh* teaches that the devil Satan, the antithesis of the Almighty God, has taken the form of a "big red dragon." CAG has identified the big red dragon with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its suppression of the group, and that



"Heaven is to destroy the Communist Party of China" ("Expansion of the Work," 2006). This direction of the fear of uncertainty, discontent, and hate toward the CCP is likely to have resonated with the religious believers. The incorporation of anti-communist beliefs in what can be considered as CAG's "origin text" further legitimized the group's anti-communist reasoning that the CCP is the cause of their trouble and misfortune. This persuasion technique was especially effective among the religious believers in the post-Mao era because CAG's teaching provided the "evidence" for discontent individuals to confirm their beliefs. When responding to social issues, people are apt to accept "confirming" evidence and their attitude reflects their own biases (Led, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). CAG members' recognition of equating the CCP to the evil entity Big Red Dragon reveals their preconceptions and existing attitudes toward the CCP. Hence, the success of CAG in obtaining members and changing their beliefs demonstrated the effectiveness of exploiting members' psychological tendencies and vulnerabilities.

## **2.2 Asserting control**

Control over incentives can influence genuinely held beliefs. On a collective level, group pressure—both psychological and physical—can significantly influence an individual's decision to stay or leave. Asch's (1951) experiments demonstrated that the pressure exerted by the majority can strongly impact participants' perceptions, judgments, and actions. Participants that were with the majority during the experiment demonstrated great submission to group pressure where they chose to silence their own observations and voices. In relation to CAG, group pressure can largely alter members' decision-making. Physical control was also likely to be a method of CAG to prevent its members from defecting. The group posed the threat of harassment, violence, or death if members attempted to disassociate. Third-Party-Punishment is very likely to have been encouraged as a method to deter defection, promote cooperation, and display signs of trustworthiness (Jordan et al., 2016). These external pressures, whether psychological or physical, create an environment where individuals may feel compelled to conform outwardly. However, this conformity often extends

beyond mere behavior to influence internal beliefs. As demonstrated by Kelman (1953), when individuals conform to social norms or pressures, they may internalize the communicated norms and adjust their beliefs accordingly. During this process, the repetition of conforming behavior may result in the internalization of the communicated norms. Therefore, members' conformity to the CAG's control can be a surface-level conformity or one that gradually alters their beliefs.

A concept related to this notion, critical in understanding why members remain within high-demand religious groups, is the idea of exit cost. According to Zablocki (1998), exit cost for members is increased by "brainwashing," a strategy that is characterized by a manipulative sequence of psychological assaults and leniency, confession cycles, and the desensitization to previously held values, ultimately leading to a profound change in the individual's identity and preferences. This transformation creates a high exit cost, as leaving the group would not only involve the loss of community and support but also a significant disruption of the individual's newly formed identity. Brainwashing, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for cults to retain their members by making the cost of leaving prohibitively high (Zablocki, 1998).

### **2.3 Trapped in one's own prison**

In addition to the effectiveness in changing member's beliefs, external forces have a long-lasting effect of keeping members "trapped" in it. When CAG presented proselytizing as a religious duty of its members, the members' desire to persuade others increased. This desire can result in overconfidence, a response to environments where persuasion is an important part of success (Schwardmann & Van Der Weele, 2019). Motivated by the idea of deception being rewarding, this state of overconfidence will in turn deceive members themselves. Because an overly positive self-view helps with persuasion, they end up in an inaccurate perception of one's abilities, creating a loop of deception to self-deception (Schwardmann & Van Der Weele, 2019; Anderson et al., 2012).

## **3. RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM OF CAG**

Allegations have been made that CAG resorts to abduction and violence to win converts.

While there are no ways to verify or disprove them, the 2014 MacDonald attack was a solid mark of CAG's violent tendency. One of the attackers, Zhang, admitted to killing Wu and expressed no remorse. He said, "We are not afraid of the law. We have faith in God." Later when asked how he felt, Zhang said, "Great (Makinen, 2014)" In his disregard for the law, Zhang expressed the belief in the rule of God as a guide for their action. This behavior correlates to the finding in Milgram's Behavior Study Of Obedience (1963). In Milgram's experiment, 26 out of 40 participants fully obeyed the orders of the experimenter in punishing the "victim" until reaching the most potent shock. Despite expressing reluctance, participants followed the instructions of an authority (Milgram, 1963). This finding suggested that obedience to authority is a great determinant of behavior.

Human beings seek moral approval from their referent groups, with organizations influencing the attainment of this approval and moral approbation, which is critical in shaping moral decision-making and behavior (Jones, 2001). When applied to CAG, these findings explain why members are willing to commit the murder as they thought it is assured by the ultimate authority. While destructive obedience is one possible reason for aggression, oppression psychology can further explain the motivation for the group's violence.

The CCP's oppression of religious activities under Mao's leadership acted as a stimulus for religious violence. Grim and Finke (2011) demonstrated that when the state imposes restrictions on religious freedom, it frequently leads to religious persecution. The CAG's identification of the CCP as the big red dragon and themselves as victims is a consequence of such persecution, which a climate of resentment and alienation is fostered among the oppressed groups. Feeling marginalized and threatened, the group is easily proven to defend their beliefs through violence (Grim & Finke, 2011).

Building on this understanding, Gurr (1993) emphasizes that religious discrimination erodes a group's cultural and spiritual foundations and fosters deep-seated grievances that drive minority groups to engage in violent political actions as a means of safeguarding their religious identities. Besides, discrimination increases the salience of group identity(Gurr, 1993). The strong identification of the CAG as the victim of the CCP's religious persecution is portrayed in the group's multiple media propaganda ("Branded" 2021, Chronicles of Religious Persecution in China 2017).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The tragic event of May 28, 2014 brought to light a need to understand and address the underlying psychological drivers of religious extremism. This paper explored the psychological factors that contributed to the development of The Church of Almighty God (CAG) in China. It focuses mainly on the CAG's ability to attract and retain members, instill a strong religious identity and foster a climate of obedience and extremism.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, particularly the scarcity of primary accounts from current or former CAG members. Due to the group's secretive nature and the intense scrutiny from Chinese authorities, much of the available information is filtered through secondary sources.

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