



## Church of Almighty God

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### Introduction

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The Church of Almighty God, a Chinese millenarian movement, is also known as Eastern Lightning. This name was originally given to the group by outside observers. It came to be accepted by the movement, and refers to a passage in Matthew 24:27: "For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man." This "lighting that comes from the east," according to the Church, is Jesus Christ returning as Almighty God, from a country in the east, China, to inaugurate the third age of humanity. While its theology is certainly different from the doctrines of traditional Christian churches, American scholar Holly Folk believes it is one among several new contemporaneous movements presenting themselves as "authentic Christian traditions," "and its intellectual and theological lineage within Christianity is very rich" (Folk 2018).

Although the movement never mentions her name nor any biographic details, and cautions that any information supplied by outside sources may be wrong, most scholars believe it identifies the incarnated Almighty God with a Chinese woman, Yang Xiangbin (b. 1973), who was born in northwestern China. In 1989, a revival took place in the Chinese independent churches (i.e., the Protestant churches that are not part of the government-controlled Three Self Church, and are also known as House Churches or Underground Churches). In the same year, the person identified by the movement as Almighty God formally entered the House Church movement. In 1991, she began to utter words, that followers later compared for authority and power to those expressed by Jesus Christ, while attending meetings of the group founded by Witness Lee (1905–1997), known as the Local Church in the West and as Shouters in China. Many Christians in the Chinese House Church movement believed that those words were from the Holy Spirit and started to read them in their gatherings from 1991, when the Church of Almighty God emerged, and subsequently when the person who was the source of these messages was recognized as Christ, the incarnate God and the only one true God.

Among those converted to the message and the person of Almighty God was Zhao Weishan (b. 1951), a native of the Heilongjiang Province in China, who was at that time a leader in an independent branch of the Shouters movement. He was later recognized as the Man Used by the Holy Spirit, and the Priest of the Church of Almighty God. The Church of Almighty God is personally led and shepherded by the person it

recognizes as Almighty God, while Zhao Weishan is cooperating with the work of Almighty God, and is in charge of the administrative affairs of the Church. There are only a handful of photographs of both Yang and Zhao, allegedly taken many years ago and whose authenticity cannot be proved.

In the mid-1990s, the government targeted both the Shouters and the Church of Almighty God, whose theological differences were not necessarily clear to the Chinese authorities. Both were included in the first list of *xie jiao*, published in 1995. The Chinese expression *xie jiao* is translated in Chinese official documents into English as “evil cults” or “destructive cults.” The translation, however, is disputed, and is connected to an attempt to argue that the problem of “destructive cults” is not only Chinese, but international. In fact, the notion of *xie jiao* was born in the Ming period, and a conventional translation is “heterodox teachings.” What teachings were “heterodox” was determined by the Emperor, and lists of *xie jiao* were based on both theological and political grounds. For example, Christianity as a whole was classified as a *xie jiao* in 1725, but taken out of the list in 1842, due to Western political and military pressure. The Republican and Communist governments inherited this old notion and policy.

Article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code makes proselyting and being otherwise active on behalf of a *xie jiao* a crime, punishable with jail penalties from three to seven years and more. Definitions of *xie jiao* are, however, vague. The most recent attempt to date resulted in Rule 1 of the *Interpretations on the Issues Concerning the Application of Laws in Criminal Cases Relating to Organizing and Utilizing Evil Organizations to Destroy Law Enforcement*, issued on January 25, 2017, by the People’s Supreme Court and the Office of the People’s Supreme Attorney. *Xie jiao* were defined as “illegal organizations, which, through fraudulent use of religion, *qi gong*, or any other name, by deifying and promoting their ringleaders, or by fabricating and spreading superstitious fallacies and other means to confuse and deceive others (...), control group members and harm society.”

In practice, groups that are regarded as *xie jiao* are those which are included in the lists periodically updated by the Chinese authorities. In 1995, both the Shouters and the Church of Almighty God were included in the list. The Church of Almighty God has appeared in all lists of *xie jiao* ever since. Its inclusion was also supported by some leaders of both the State-controlled Three Self Church and some House Churches, which regarded the fact that the Church of Almighty God believes that a living person is the Second Coming of Christ as heretical.

Since 1996, the Church of Almighty God has been severely persecuted in China. In 2000, Zhao and Yang went to the United States, which they entered on September 6, and in 2001 they were granted political asylum. Since then, they have lived and directed the movement from New York. In early 2009, He Zhexun, who used to be in charge of the work of the Church in Mainland China, was arrested by the Chinese authorities. On July 17, 2009, Ma Suoping (female, 1969–2009), who took over He Zhexun’s role, was also arrested by the Chinese police and died while in custody. The Church of Almighty God releases periodical statistics and claims that between 2011 and 2013 more than 300,000 members were arrested. These figures are impossible to verify, but do not appear unbelievable if one considers the frequent references to “successful” campaigns against the Church of Almighty God in Chinese anti-*xie-jiao* propaganda and other official sources. The Church also reports that many of its members were tortured in China, and some died while in custody in suspicious circumstances.

Despite governmental repression, and hostility by some leaders of the mainline Christian churches, the

Church of Almighty God grew in China and, according to Chinese official sources, had reached four million members in 2014. The figure is disputed by scholars, and the situation in China makes statistics difficult. Since the Zhaoyuan McDonald's murder of 2014 (discussed in the "Controversies" section), the repression in China has intensified, and several thousand members have escaped abroad, where they have founded churches in South Korea, the United States, Italy, Canada, and other countries, in addition to those established in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

As happened with Tibetan Buddhism, the persecution in China and the international diaspora of the Church of Almighty God had two unintended consequences. First, it led to a globalization of the movement, as non-Chinese started joining it in South Korea, the United States, and elsewhere, although ethnic Chinese still form the majority of the communities in most diaspora countries. Second, it also caused an unexpected flourishing of artistic activities within the communities outside of mainland China (see Introvigne 2017b). Although in China, because of the persecution, the Church was limited in its possibility of promoting and organizing artistic activities, its theology did include a doctrine of beauty. After 2014, members of the Church of Almighty God were able to practice their religion freely and openly outside China, and a number of important artistic productions followed. Between 2014 and 2017, members of the Church of Almighty God produced some 2,000 paintings and fifty movies (as well as more than 600 religious videos). While the paintings are mostly intended for use in the movies and videos, or are used to beautify the places of worship of the Church of Almighty God, the movies have a larger audience. Some of them entered the circuit of the Christian film festivals, the theology of which is undoubtedly far removed from that of the Church of Almighty God but, nonetheless, they have honored some of the movies, including the musical *Xiaozhen's Story* and the docudrama *Chronicles of Religious Persecution in China*, with several significant awards.

## Beliefs

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The beliefs of the Church of Almighty God derive from *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, first published in 1997, which is a collection of the utterances of Almighty God, amounting to more than 1,000,000 words, considered by the Church as normative and including "what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17; 3:12) and the truths to be expressed by "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13) in the last days, as they claim is prophesied in the Bible (The Church of Almighty God 2017a).

The Church defines as its members anyone who truly believes in God, has "good humanity," and is certain that Almighty God is the returned Jesus in our days from China, a country that, according to the Church, represents at the same time the place where the evil dragon of the book of Revelation manifested itself in the semblance of the Chinese Communist Party and the place where the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the "Eastern Lightning," must manifest himself.

Almighty God came to inaugurate the third age of humanity, the Age of Kingdom, which follows the Age of Law, i.e., the time of the Old Testament and the Age of Grace, which went from the birth of Jesus to the advent of Almighty God in the twentieth century.

The Age of Law lasted for 4,000 years, from humankind's fall (believed to have occurred 6,000 years ago,

according to the traditional literalist interpretation of the Bible) to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. During this period, God revealed himself as Jehovah and gave to the Israelites his Ten Commandments. Although the sinful nature of humans justified God's wrath, from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden to the Flood and beyond, God also revealed and manifested his love. In this respect, the Church of Almighty God emphasizes some details of the biblical narrative. For example, in the story of Adam and Eve, the Church notes the importance of the clothes with which they will be able to cover themselves, overcoming the newly discovered shame of being naked. According to the book of Genesis (3:21), God made them with his own hands. Although humans sin, God loves them to the point of taking personal care of their clothing. After the Flood, the rainbow that appeared to Noah's family symbolized the promise of God that he would not destroy his people with a flood again. The Church of Almighty God teaches that even today rainbows appear to remind us of God's love.

The Age of Grace was inaugurated by the birth of Jesus. Before starting his ministry, Jesus was God incarnate in the form of a "normal man." His divinity was made manifest only after he formally started his ministry. With Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, the sins of humans were forgiven, but their sinful nature was not eradicated. Thus, "although people saw that God had gained great glory, this was not the entirety of His glory; it was only one part of His glory, which He had gained from Jesus" (The Church of Almighty God 2015). "Although Jesus was able to endure every hardship, to be humble and hidden, to be crucified for God, God only gained one part of His glory, and His glory was gained in Israel. God still has another part of glory: coming to earth to actually work and make perfect a group of people" (The Church of Almighty God 2015).

In the Age of Kingdom, God becomes flesh in China and achieves the other part of his glory. This work is final, and there will not be another incarnation of God after the present Almighty God. In the last days, the work of Almighty God has the main aim to eradicate the humans' sinful nature. When a group of believers will have been made perfect, and the righteous will have been acknowledged and the evildoers exposed, the work of Almighty God will come to an end and God and humans will enter into eternal rest (see below, under "Millennial Beliefs.")

An important, if often overlooked, aspect of the beliefs of the Church of Almighty God is its doctrine of beauty. Beauty is, first, an inherent feature of the words of Almighty God, described as uniformly "beautiful and moving" (The Church of Almighty God 2017a: 3). The presence of Almighty God on Earth is not only momentous and decisive: it also creates unprecedented beauty. One of the distinctive characteristics of the new kingdom of God is "beauty" (The Church of Almighty God 2017a: 46, 88). *The Word Appears in the Flesh* also mentions the "piteous state" of those who, remaining outside the new kingdom, are deprived of this beauty, "watching the beautiful scenes within the kingdom but unable to enter" (The Church of Almighty God 2017a: 166).

Believers respond to this divine beauty by producing beauty on Earth. This beauty manifests first in the life itself of the believers. The testimony and the strenuous activities of the followers of Almighty God are in themselves "beautiful" (The Church of Almighty God 2017a: 9). A miracle follows: nature itself reacts to the efforts and prayers of the believers and becomes more beautiful. "When people give great praise before Me," Almighty God revealed, "I am exalted among all things, and thus the flowers on earth grow more beautiful beneath the hot sun, the grass becomes more verdant, and the clouds in the sky seem more blue" (The Church of Almighty God 2017a: 121).

Beauty, however, is also produced by those who “give great praise” to Almighty God in an artistic form. God’s utterances mentioned the “most beautiful songs” (The Church of Almighty God 2017: 34), but the production of significant works of the visual arts would soon follow in the experience of the believing community.

## Millennial Beliefs

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### *Words of Almighty God about the Millennial Kingdom*

The Church of Almighty God is a millenarian movement, but its brand of millennialism is often misunderstood by critics. A video posted on the movement’s website in 2015 distinguishes between the Age of Kingdom, in which we now live, and the Age of the Millennial Kingdom:

How do you see the vision of the Millennial Kingdom? Some people think about it a lot, and say that the Millennial Kingdom will last for a thousand years on earth, so if the older members of the church are unmarried, do they have to get married? My family has no money, should I start making money? ... What is the Millennial Kingdom? Do you know? People are purblind, and suffer a great ordeal. In fact, the Millennial Kingdom has yet to officially arrive. During the stage of making people perfect, the Millennial Kingdom is merely a microcosm; at the time of the Millennial Kingdom spoken of by God, man will have been made perfect (The Church of Almighty God 2015, from which the following quotations are also taken).

The slogan “The Millennial Kingdom Has Arrived” is used by the Church of Almighty God, but described as a “prophecy,” which is “analogous to the foretelling of a prophet, one in which God prophesies what will happen in the future.”

According to the Church of Almighty God, the current Age of Kingdom is not to be confused with the Age of the Millennial Kingdom. In the Age of Kingdom, Almighty God speaks “to make people perfect, to purify that which is dirty within them, and to make them holy, and righteous before God.” During this necessary purification period, the Millennial Kingdom “is merely a microcosm,” living as a prophecy in the believers who are being made “perfect” by the words of God. In fact, God’s glorification on earth is not yet complete. Only “when the day comes on which people are made perfect by God, and are able to surrender before Him, and can completely obey God, and leave their prospects and fate in the hands of God, then the second part of God’s glory [the first having been achieved by Jesus] will have been entirely gained.”

At this stage, God’s “work on the China mainland will come to an end; in other words, when those who were predestined and chosen by God have been made perfect, God will be glorified.” The Church does not believe that the person it worships as Almighty God would live on earth forever. The return to Heaven of Almighty God would mean that the purification work had come to an end. The disasters prophesied in the book of Revelation will follow, in the shape of earthquakes, wars, and famines. Planet Earth, however, will not be destroyed. It will become the eternal home of God’s purified followers. Not all members of the Church of Almighty God will survive the disasters and live forever, only those purified by God’s work.

<iframe width="709" height="398" src="

" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe> *The Church clarifies its teachings about the Millennial Kingdom*  
The disasters are prophesied in the Bible, but we do not know the details. Nor do we know exact dates. Although some members of the Church of Almighty God developed an interest in the so-called Mayan prophecies predicting the end of the world in 2012 (see below, under “Controversies”), they were rebuked by the leaders, as their position was not deemed consistent with the theology of the Church. Almighty God does not announce the end of the world, but its transformation. And this will not occur before the work of Almighty God on Earth is completed.

In the Age of the Millennial Kingdom, “people will have already been made perfect and the corrupt disposition within them will have been made pure. At that time, the words spoken by God will guide people step by step, and reveal all of the mysteries of God’s work from the time of creation until today, and His words will tell people of God’s actions in every age and every day, how He guides people inside, the work He does in the spiritual realm, and will tell man [*sic*] of the dynamics of the spiritual realm.” The visible sign that the Age of the Millennial Kingdom has arrived will be that “all nations will come under God’s name, and all come to read God’s words,” a situation obviously not yet realized in the present Age the Kingdom. With their sinful nature truly eradicated, the “saints” made perfect by God will live forever in the Kingdom, surrounded by peace and beauty. As Almighty God revealed, all that is beautiful and pure in this world will survive: “This life, this beauty, from time immemorial and forevermore, will not change. This is life in the kingdom” (The Church of Almighty God 2017a: 92). The Church of Almighty God believes that this millennial scenario will fulfil the prophecy in the book of Revelation, “And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever.” (Revelation 22:3-5).

Some of the millennial beliefs of the Church of Almighty God are presented in the musical movie *New Heaven and New Earth*, completed and released in 2016, yet another award-winning production of the Church’s audiovisual department.

*The musical New Heaven and New Earth*

## Practices

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There is no formal liturgy in the Church of Almighty God, nor sacraments such as baptism or eucharist. The Church of Almighty God believes that its members now “must worship him in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24) in their meetings, and that traditional Christian sacraments were practices of the Age of Grace, which have no place in the Age of Kingdom.

This, however, does not mean that gathering together is not important for the members of the Church of Almighty God. They “fellowship” by meeting and discussing Almighty God’s words, hearing a sermon as well as meeting to sing hymns, share testimonies, and listen to preaching. The richness of the religious life contrasts with a minimalist style of worship. There is no pattern of the religious life’s frequency or

duration, which depends on the needs and situations of the members of each local community.

Sometimes, families and opponents complain that the routine of “fellowshipping” takes too much time and distracts believers from their secular pursuits. Some believers may decide to serve as full-time missionaries. They answer the criticisms by claiming that, in fact, the teachings make them better Christians and better family men and women, and help them learn how to treat their family and relatives more appropriately.

#### *A Church's video about family life and worship*

Fellowshipping today is often done by Internet, and it may happen that believers from different countries and even different continents fellowship together. This is described as an exciting experience by members. They also note that they have frequent occasions to speak and express their views, contrasting this with the “passive” attitude towards the pastor's or priest's sermons in the mainline churches.

## Controversies

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Accusations of serious crimes against the Church of Almighty God come from two sources: the Chinese Communist Party and other Christian churches. The Chinese government and media periodically accuse the Church of Almighty God of crimes. Other incidents are also mentioned, but the most frequent accusations concern the Zhaoyuan McDonald's murder of 2014, which was at the centre of a BBC World Service news item (BBC World Service 2014). Other alleged incidents were connected, according to critics, to announcements that the end of the world would occur in 2012. Some scholars believe that the accusations are grossly exaggerated, and, in some cases, claim that fake news has been fabricated by the Chinese government (Introvigne 2017a; Introvigne and Bromley 2017; Folk 2017b).

The Zhaoyuan McDonald's murder was the brutal homicide, on May 28, 2014, of 37-year-old salesgirl Wu Shuoyan (1977–2014), in a McDonald's diner in the city of Zhaoyuan, in the Chinese province of Shandong. Six “missionaries” entered the McDonald's and asked for the cell phone numbers of the customers. Wu refused to supply hers, was identified as an “evil spirit,” and killed.

Chinese authorities claimed that the perpetrators were members of the Church of Almighty God, and used the claim to justify their increasing public repression of the Church. The claim was also repeated by mainline media in the West. However, scholars who studied the documents of the subsequent trial, where two of the assassins were sentenced to death, concluded that the group, although using the name “Almighty God,” was not part of the Church of Almighty God and in fact believed in a different Almighty God, a dual deity incarnated in the two female leaders of the movement: Zhang Fan (1984–2015), who was executed, and Lü Yingchun.

At trial, Lü Yingchun clearly explained:

The state labeled Zhao Weishan's fake “Church of Almighty God” as a *xie jiao*, and we label them as “evil spirits.” Only Zhang Fan and I, the “firstborn sons,” could represent the real “Church of Almighty God.” Zhang Fan and I are the unique spokeswomen for the real “Almighty God.” The government has been

cracking down on the Almighty God that Zhao Weishan believes in, not the “Almighty God” we mention. They are fake “Almighty God,” while we are the real “Almighty God.” (*The Beijing News* 2014)

In turn, Zhang Fan declared:

Up till now, only my father, my younger brother, my younger sister, Lü Yingchun, Zhang Qiaolian and me are adherents of the real “Almighty God.” In 2010, I was the “firstborn son” of “Almighty God.” I became “God Himself” because I obtained the authority from the heaven to kill evil spirits this May [2014]. Speaking of “God Himself,” that is to say, I am God in substance. Lü Yingchun is also God in substance. (*The Beijing News* 2014)

On August 24, 2013, a woman pulled out the eyes of a young boy called Guo Bin in Shaanxi. The boy later became internationally famous for a successful ocular prosthesis surgery performed on him in Shenzhen. Some Chinese media attributed the crime to members of the Church of Almighty God. However, an examination of available sources supports the conclusion that the crime was perpetrated by Guo Bin’s aunt, a mentally disturbed person who later committed suicide, and had nothing to do with the Church of Almighty God. In fact, Chinese anti-cult sources started associating the crime with the Church of Almighty God only in June 2014, after the McDonald’s murder, and ten months after the local police had closed the case by concluding that the aunt was the sole perpetrator (Folk 2017b).

The Church of Almighty God has also been accused of predicting the end of the world for 2012, within the global framework of the 2012 phenomenon, based on prophecies attributed to the Maya civilization, causing riots and even crimes around China. This was another justification used by Chinese authorities to arrest a great number of members of the Church. Australian scholar Emily Dunn, in what was the first scholarly book devoted to the Church of Almighty God in 2015, noted that, like many Chinese, some “members of Eastern Lighting embraced the Mayan prophecy” but they “appear to have done so without sanction from the group’s self-proclaimed authorities,” who in fact declared “Mayan” and other theories about the end of the world as theologically and factually “mistaken” (Dunn 2015b: 95). As mentioned earlier, the belief that the world would end in 2012 was inconsistent with the Church of Almighty God’s theology. The Church also maintains that some flyers and brochures depicted in Chinese anti-*xie-jiao* websites as evidence of its 2012 prophecies were in fact either fabricated or derived from alterations with Photoshop and other techniques of existing materials of the Church of Almighty God. Certainly, opponents of the Church of Almighty God resort at time to such tactics. In the UK, for example, a false website “Church of Almighty God UK” has been created at the address [www.chinesetouk.co.uk/](http://www.chinesetouk.co.uk/). Attempts by the Church of Almighty God to have it removed have been so far unsuccessful. A “Declaration Concerning Websites Imitating the Church of Almighty God” was issued by the Church denouncing the incident (The Church of Almighty God 2017c).

Other Christian churches have accused the Church of Almighty God both of “heresy” and of “sheep-stealing” through devious strategies. Accusations include the claim that, in 2002, the Church of Almighty God kidnapped thirty-four leaders of the China Gospel Fellowship, one of the largest House Churches in China, in order to convert them (Shen and Bach 2017). While a number of Christians in the West found the accusations believable, the Church of Almighty God published a rebuttal noting inconsistencies in the story, finding it strange that nobody was arrested or committed to trial for the crime, and concluding that, by inventing the story of the kidnapping, the China Gospel Fellowship simply tried to find a justification for



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## Note

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## Article information

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