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DECEIVED BY THE LIGHTNING

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Christians in mainland China's "underground" house churches have faced persecution from the country's Communist government for years. They now face another threat from one of the mainland's largest cults, which frequently uses deception and coercion to gain converts from among house churches.

The cult calls itself "The Church of Almighty God." The Chinese government refers to it as the "Real God" cult. Chinese Christians call it "Eastern Lightning." Its followers believe that Jesus has returned in the form of a Chinese woman, like "lightning that comes from the east," according to the description of His second coming in Matthew 24:27.

Estimates of the group's size vary. A November 2001 *Time* magazine article titled "Jesus is Back, and She's Chinese" said followers numbered themselves at 300,000, although observers estimated only tens of thousands. A 2002 report produced by the Center for Religious Freedom, which contained copies of seven confidential documents from a Chinese government report on religious cults, said that the group had active organizations in more than 10 provinces and cities and was deceiving thousands. China For Jesus, a Christian mission organization, estimates that the cult has more than a million members in 20 provinces. Fear of government persecution has driven religious groups in China underground, making an accurate head count of any group's followers virtually impossible.

According to the secret security documents, the public security minister, Jia Chunwang, called for increased action against the cult, saying, "We need to work more, talk less to smash the cult quietly." Security officials are concerned by the cult's declaration that China is the Great Red Dragon of the book of Revelation who faces destruction. Beijing police arrested more than 2,000 followers of the cult prior to 2002, but they were not able to destroy the group.

Scores of first-hand accounts received by Christian organizations working in China confirm the devastating effect that the Eastern Lightning cult is having on the house churches. A report titled "When China's Christians Wish They Were in Prison," by Paul Hattaway, director of the mission organization Asia Harvest, contains accounts of Christians being deceived, kidnapped, brainwashed, beaten, poisoned, and blackmailed by the cult. One worker in northwest China told Hattaway that the Chinese house churches that usually experience phenomenal growth had been declining due to the cult's activities. He explained, "In the past year many of our leaders were targeted by the Eastern Lightning cult. Some were attracted by their financial inducements and joined them. Later, when they discovered what they'd joined was not biblical, they were not permitted to leave. Dozens of our believers are missing, dozens more crippled. Some who have managed to escape the cult's clutches are in hiding, fearing for their lives. At least two of our people have been murdered. Others have simply vanished."

In April 2002, Eastern Lightning members kidnapped 34 leaders of the China Gospel Fellowship, a network of house churches. Cult members posing as representatives of Haggai Institute, a leadership training school in China, lured the leaders to attend a seminar where they were separated and held against their will. One woman managed to escape and alert the police. By June all the others had escaped or were released, although some who were drugged while being held captive continued to suffer physically.

Invisible Lightning. There are several versions of the cult's history. A number of Christian organizations cite the *Time* magazine article and the seven secret security documents that say that the cult was founded in 1989 by

a man named Zhao Weishan, a former member of a Christian sect called the Shouters. Weishan proclaimed that Jesus had returned in the form of a 30-year-old, plain-looking Chinese peasant woman named Deng from the province of Henan. This teaching is based on revelation that Weishan claims he received from God regarding Matthew 24:27. Asia Harvest reports that in 2000 Weishan was granted refugee status in the United States, where he continues to run the cult's activities in China. The report does not cite the source of this information.

Reports from other missions organizations do not mention Weishan as the founder but say, rather, that the woman Deng set herself up as the "female Christ." Several Chinese Christians who regularly visit the mainland and are familiar with the cult told the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL that although they had heard of Deng, they had not heard of Weishan. Chinese sources favor the theory that Deng hides herself, while Weishan runs the cult's operations.

An article dated January 2004 on one of the cult's Web sites (www.hidden-advent.org), however, denies as "rumor" the reports that Almighty God's Church believes in "a woman with the surname Deng who was once possessed by a demon in Zheng Zhou of Henan province." The article explains, "Actually, the place of birth and location where God became flesh is not in Henan province at all. Furthermore, the surname is not Deng." The article does not, however, identify someone other than Deng as the Christ; rather, it explains why "the flesh of the Almighty God" could not be demon possessed. The fact that no one has ever seen or photographed the woman they call the "female Christ" makes her identity or even her existence difficult to confirm.

The Second Incarnation. The group believes that the Bible is out-of-date and that those who limit God's revelation to just the Bible are like the Pharisees who held on to the Old Testament and rejected Christ. Followers are told to give up the truth of the past and build their foundation on the Holy Spirit's word for today: the writings of the "female Christ," which are "God's new word."

The cult has published numerous books, including *The Word Becomes Flesh* and *The Lightning Comes from the East*, and distributed hundreds of thousands of copies in China. Two of the books that are distributed among Chinese churches in America are titled *The Holy Spirit Speaks to All the Churches* and *God's Work through His Secret Appearing*. The content in these books is nearly identical. Much of it is written in first person, as if by their "female Christ," and is terse and threatening.

The "female Christ" states that Jesus was God's first incarnation, but that He did not complete His work; therefore, God needed to come again to finish the work, this time as a woman. This "appearing" ends the previous age and begins a new age in God's six-thousand-year plan to save all humanity.

God's plan, she says, has three ages (creation, salvation, and destruction) and three dispensations (law, redemption, and kingdom). She claims that she comes for the kingdom dispensation and therefore her work is judgment.

Her books are filled with explicit and horrific pronouncements of damnation and judgment on unbelievers. The only sin is not to accept her as the Christ, she says, and salvation is possible only by following her. She states that "God is inhumanly cruel" and she admits that she hates humankind.

She teaches that Christ died for our sins, but denies that He rose again physically. She ardently opposes the concept of the second coming of Jesus and tells followers not to wait for a "white cloud descension."

The "female Christ" doesn't prove her divinity to potential believers by healing the sick, casting out demons, or performing miracles; instead, she uses threats and intimidation to persuade converts. She says that she will punish or slay those who repudiate her, and even their family members will meet with misfortune. Another of the cult's Web sites (www.godword.org) lists 887 cases in which people allegedly died of sickness, accident, or unknown causes after rejecting the cult's evangelistic efforts.

The cult demands complete obedience and sacrifice. Adherents must turn their material possessions over to the organization and follow orders, otherwise they will be punished. They are urged to leave their families, to live in a commune, and to spread the message of the "female Christ."

Spying and Paving the Way. The cult is known for its deceptive evangelization practices. An article in *Tianfeng*, the magazine of the Chinese government-controlled Three Self Patriotic Church, says the cult entices people with money or gifts, but will turn to violence or even murder if a person accepts their gifts but fails to join.

A report from China for Jesus describes four stages of strategy that the cult has used. The first stage was simply to send books and money to Christian preachers. In the second stage they adopted aggressive tactics, including violence and coercion. In the third stage they used sexual temptation and entrapment as a means of blackmailing prospects.

The fourth stage is called “spying and paving the way,” the name the cult gives to their process of infiltrating a house church. Followers are instructed to mingle with church members in order to identify those who are strong Christians and core members of the church. Likely targets are those who arrive before a church meeting and stay after, and who can look up Bible passages efficiently. Cult members will try to befriend such people and to act like sincere truth seekers in order to gain their trust. Once the infiltrators have successfully “spied” these people, they begin to “pave the way” by asking questions to shake the Christian believer’s faith. They may invite the believer to a “Bible study,” for example, where instead of studying the Bible they badger the believer with questions such as, “Where is heaven? Is it on earth?” Or they will question the concept of the rapture of the church, a doctrine the cult ardently denies. Ultimately, they turn to preaching their message, which is the second incarnation of God. The author of the China for Jesus report predicted that they will begin to use an unknown fifth strategy now that this latest one has been exposed in recent years.

The cult denies that Almighty God’s Church kidnaps people and forces them to accept its message. An article on one of their Web sites (www.hidden-advent.org) states that regulations instruct followers not to pressure those who are not willing to believe in God, because the church doesn’t want “worthless” members who do not really believe. The article claims that in 1999 alone the church dismissed 70 to 80 thousand people “who were guilty of misconduct and disobedience to the church’s regulations.”

Eastern Lightning prefers to target orthodox Christian house churches rather than fringe or heretical groups. According to the cult’s own internal instructions, they are not to evangelize those who do not worship Jesus alone and do not study the Bible, such as Buddhists, Taoists, and Muslims, as well as many Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics in China. Non-Christians and even family members of Eastern Lightning followers are also excluded from being evangelized.

A book about heresies in mainland China, published in Taiwan by the Christian and China Research Center, contains the testimony of a Chinese house church member who escaped the cult. He says that the cult never acts in the open, but that their activities are always covert and organized. “Wherever they go, they destroy and scatter that church with incredible speed and unmatched means.”

Even though the central Chinese government denounces the cult, some Chinese Christians view the cult’s behavior and financial strength as indications that it is being supported by individual local Communist officials who are seeking to disrupt and destroy house churches. Other Chinese Christians see the cult as satanic and believe that the Satanic church in America is behind it.

Global Vision. The message of the “female Christ” of Eastern Lightning resembles that of Rev. Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church. Moon came to America in 1971 claiming that Christ had not completed His mission, and in 1992 he declared he and his wife to be the Messiah, the True Parents, who would usher in a “Completed Testament” age of world peace.

The “female Christ” declares that her appearance as the new Messiah ushers in the last stage of God’s plan. On one of the cult’s Web sites (www.hidden-advent.org) she confirms that its work has already expanded beyond the borders of China: “At the present time, the work is one of conquering the deeply corrupt people in the nations. Moreover, it is not merely a work of guiding people in China, but one of guiding the entire universe. You now only see the work being done in China, but actually it has already started to extend overseas.”

In a 2001 article titled “Lightning from the East” in the *China Insight Newsletter*, researcher Tony Lambert reported that the cult now has centers in New York and Toronto. The JOURNAL has received reports from Christians in Paris and Amsterdam that the cult has reached Europe as well. Sources in the West have reported that the cult has been distributing books, tracts, and CDs through the Internet and in the parking lots of Chinese churches. It has also advertised a paid position to translate their books into English.

— Lois Chan and Steve Bright