

China

Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church

August 2021

‘There is no way back for us’

**CSW everyone
free to believe**



Pastor Pan leading a church service in Jeju, South Korea

Introduction

In 2019, Pastor Pan Yongguang and dozens of members of his church, Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church (SHRC), fled from China to Jeju Island in the Republic of Korea following years of harassment by the Chinese authorities. Facing increasing pressure from the authorities on their church and its associated school, as well as the rapidly escalating crackdown on churches across the country, SHRC members felt they had no option but to uproot their lives and seek safety and freedom overseas. Church members who remained in China or were sent back by Korean immigration officials have been placed under surveillance and interrogated by police, while at least one person who was denied entry to Jeju has been placed under 'Residential Surveillance' and is not permitted to leave her home.

All the church members who have sought asylum in the Republic of Korea have had their applications rejected, and there is evidence that the Chinese authorities are closely monitoring the church on Jeju Island. The Chinese Ministry of State Security has also interrogated the members of the church who remained in China about the individuals in Jeju.

This briefing concludes that Pastor Pan, his family and the other church members in Jeju must be protected from forcible repatriation to China, where they face grave threats to their personal safety and freedom, and offered asylum in a country where their right to freedom of religion or belief is protected in line with international standards set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18).

Background

Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church (SHRC) is an unregistered Protestant church originally based in Shenzhen City, Guangdong Province, China. The church was founded in 2012 by Pastor Pan Yongguang, a former doctor; by 2019 the church had over 120 members including children.

The church is passionate about Christian education, and runs its own Christian school named The Timothy School for children from elementary to high school age. The school was established by parents in the church who wanted to homeschool their children rather than send them to government-run schools which they say promote atheism and teach that religion is 'evil'. The school's curriculum includes science, maths, physical education (sports) and languages, as well as biblical teaching.

We don't like the Chinese government education because they teach atheism and also they teach children to love the government. In China you cannot speak out, you cannot share what you believe or think. If you say anything even on WeChat about religion, it will be shut down. Here, we can worship God freely. In China, every time we have fellowship we are scared.

Xie Jianqing, church elder and Timothy School teacher

CSW's research has found an increase in the number of Christian parents homeschooling their children in the 2000s, as well as the emergence of church-run schools or homeschooling groups made of up children from one or more unregistered churches. Many Christians in China are concerned about the direction of state education in the country and the increase in anti-religious 'patriotic education' in schools, as well as the use of schools and universities by the authorities to monitor students' beliefs and those of their parents. One teenager from SHRC who previously attended a government school told CSW they 'had to wear the red scarf and recite speeches about Mao'. Another student recalled, 'The government teaches that there is no god. In China, we can only hear one voice [of government], but here we can hear different voices.'

Pastor Pan estimates that before 2018 there were more than 1,300 Christian schools in China, many attached to unregistered house churches. Since 2018, however, the year that the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) were introduced, the government has ruthlessly cracked down on Christian education, closing kindergartens, forcing homeschooling groups to disband along with their affiliated churches, and arresting those who publish Christian educational resources.

阿列夫班 (三年级) 课程表 (2021年6月21日用)

课程 时间	礼拜一	礼拜二	礼拜三	礼拜四	礼拜五
8:00-8:30	读经、公祷				
8:30-9:10	韩语	韩语	韩语	韩语	韩语
9:20-10:00	背圣经	阅读	阅读	要理问答	要理问答
10:15-10:55	英文	英文	英文	英文	英文
11:05-11:45	英文	英文	英文	英文	英文
11:45-13:30	午餐、午休				
13:35-14:25	数学	语文故事	背圣经	数学	默圣经
14:40-15:30	数学	语文故事	背圣经	数学	默圣经
15:30-16:30	体育				

School curriculum for June 2021

One example is that of Xingguang Church in Xiamen, Fujian Province. In 2020 police and authorities raided the church's privately owned meeting space on at least two occasions, beginning in May, when approximately 200 police, urban management officers, and staff of the Bureau of Religious Affairs broke in to the property. Police beat several church members in the process and confiscated their mobile phones. Police also confiscated school books and educational materials.¹ At the time of writing, the school has no permanent meeting place.

Alarming, Christian parents who homeschool their children have also faced escalating harassment: in an extreme and unprecedented case, homeschooling parent Zhao Weikai of Xuncheng Reformed Church in Taiyuan, Shanxi province was officially arrested in July 2021 on charges of 'unlawfully possessing items that advocate terrorism or extremism,' in possibly the first such case involving a church leader in the country.² More information on this case is provided below.

Increase in government pressure

From its inception, Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church was closely watched by the Chinese authorities due to its connections with Christians in the US. According to Pastor Pan, US churches helped the congregation by providing theological teaching and ordaining Pan and other leaders, both in Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church and other churches with shared theological beliefs. The Chinese government is increasingly hostile to religious communities with foreign connections, especially those following Christianity or Islam: according to Article 5 of the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs which came into effect in February 2018, religious groups should be 'independent' and should not be 'controlled by foreign forces'.

From October 2012 the police began to question Pastor Pan about the church. At this point, they were 'polite'. From May 2013 onwards, the questioning became more frequent. Then on 18 September 2014, the police simultaneously interrogated the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church and two other churches in Guangzhou and Zhuhai which were branches of the same US group. The police questioned Pastor Pan, as well as other church leaders from affiliated

churches, about the whereabouts of some US missionaries; in fact the church had planned to invite some missionaries but the plan had been cancelled. Instead on 6 October 2014 Pan and nine other Christians from the same group went to Hong Kong where they were ordained by US missionaries.

Afterwards, the police began to interrogate Pan even more frequently, at a minimum of once every two weeks, sometimes inviting him to 'drink tea', other times turning up at his home. They also followed him wherever he went: the constant surveillance and interrogations severely disrupted Pan's daily life. At the interrogation sessions the police would try to persuade Pan to join the state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement, but he refused on the grounds that the TSPM was 'not a real church'.

According to Pastor Pan:

I was very afraid at that time. After that, we had to stop the Timothy Bible School because the landlord of the place we rented for the Bible school evicted us due to pressure from the police. We had no choice but to leave. We looked around for a new place but...if we said it was for a church no one would rent to us.

Eventually the church was able to rent an office for their church meetings and a separate training centre for the school. However, the police continued to monitor the group. CCTV cameras recorded everyone who entered and exited the training centre, and the police visited the centre three times.

On one occasion, a teacher saw that the police were coming to inspect the building and told the children to hide in a cupboard.

**The kids were really scared.
Because they were frightened,
they stayed quiet [inside the
cupboard]. Thankfully the police
didn't check too carefully.**

Wen Wensheng, church elder and Timothy School teacher

1 CSW, 'New research on China's urban house churches amid the COVID-19 pandemic', 21 September 2020 www.csw.org.uk/2020/09/21/report/4811/article.htm

2 CSW, 'Church leaders facing terrorism and national security charges', 26 July 2021 www.csw.org.uk/2021/07/26/press/5359/article.htm

Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs, 2018

In 2018, the police called Pastor Pan, and told him to come to the department of religious affairs. The police officer was there, also the security agent, and the education department officer. The police recounted to Pastor Pan everything we had done and were doing at our church. At that moment, we woke up to the truth: they knew everything...

Wen Wensheng, church elder and Timothy School teacher

On 1 February 2018 revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) came into effect. As CSW has previously reported, the revised RRA further tighten control over religious activities.³ They state that ‘religious groups, religious schools, and religious activity sites and religious affairs, are not to be controlled by foreign forces’ (Article 5) without clarifying the meaning of ‘control’ by foreign forces, and place fresh emphasis on the requirement that group religious activities take place in registered sites designated for this purpose, outlined in Chapter IV. Since the RRA came into effect, independent religious communities across the country that do not belong to the state-sanctioned religious bodies, including the TSPM, have been forcibly closed by the authorities.

The advent of the RRA marked a turning point for Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church and many other unregistered churches in China. Like many church leaders, Pastor Pan felt he could not accept the regulations. Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Church, a close friend of Pan, together with other church leaders issued a joint statement entitled *A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith* which condemned acts of ‘persecution, contempt, and misunderstanding from government departments’ following the RRA as actions which ‘infringe on the human freedoms of religion and conscience’.⁴

Pastor Pan and two of the church’s elders, Elder You and Elder Xie, were among the 400-plus Christian leaders who signed the declaration. After the regulations and the declaration, Pan says, the pressure on him and his church increased:

After I signed the declaration, the harassment became more frequent. They continuously disrupted my life. The police pressured my landlord to evict me and my family. When I tried to rent another place, I was rejected every time I showed my ID card. Anything I wanted to do, anywhere I wanted to go, the police always seemed to know about it. So I had to move house very often.

The escalation of human rights violations in Hong Kong also marked a turning point in the authorities’ treatment of the church: due to Shenzhen’s proximity to Hong Kong, police in the city placed various ‘sensitive’ individuals such as human rights lawyers and activists under ‘stability maintenance’ measures. This includes some religious leaders. According to Pan:

In June 2019, there was the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Everything changed. The police changed their attitude. They were no longer polite. They demanded that my church disband, and stop the Bible school. They insisted that I stop all contact with the US. They said they could catch me any time they wanted.

Pastor Wang Yi had already been detained in December 2018 along with over 100 church members. On 26 December 2019, Wang was sentenced to nine years in prison for ‘inciting to subvert state power’ and ‘illegal business operations’⁵; Early Rain Church elder Qin Defu was sentenced to four years in prison on 29 November 2019.⁶ Wang’s wife, Jiang Rong, was released on bail but remains under effective house arrest. Other members of the church continue to be subject to intrusive surveillance, police harassment, forced eviction and arbitrary detention. Under the relentless pressure from the authorities, some have fled and sought asylum overseas.

Numerous other church leaders who signed Wang’s Declaration, as well as other congregations, have been harassed, imprisoned or had their churches shut down, including the leaders of Living Stone Church, Beijing Zion Church, Beijing Shouwang Church, Guangzhou Bible Reformer Church and Guiyang Renai Reformed Church.

3 CSW, ‘Repressed, Removed, Re-Educated: The stranglehold on religious life in China’ www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report

4 The St. Charles Institute, ‘439* CHINESE CHRISTIAN LEADERS—AND COUNTING—SIGN JOINT STATEMENT AFFIRMING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM’, 5 September 2018 www.stcharlesinstitute.org/voices/2018/9/4/198-chinese-christian-leaders-and-countingsign-public-joint-statement

5 CSW, ‘Pastor Wang Yi Sentenced to nine years in prison’, 30 December 2019 www.csw.org.uk/2019/12/30/press/4507

6 CSW, ‘Early Rain Church elder sentenced to four years in prison’, 3 December 2019 www.csw.org.uk/2019/12/03/press/4499/article.htm

The RRA and the authorities' subsequent, often violent, attempts to forcibly close unregistered churches also had a profound effect on SHRC leaders' outlook on the future of freedom of religion or belief in China. In the words of one SHRC church elder, 'Then came the RRA, and I lost hope.'

Decision to leave China

In summer 2019, Pastor Pan bought a plane ticket to go to Thailand for seminary training. The police warned him not to travel, and on the morning of the flight, two police officers stationed outside his home prevented Pan and his wife, Wang Fang, from leaving the building.

From that time onwards, Pan began to discuss with the other church leaders the possibility of leaving China. They held a vote, open to every adult church member: the majority decided to leave China. Church members interviewed by CSW explained the enormity of this decision. Everyone who left had relatives including parents and siblings still living in China, some of whom were in poor health. Most of the members who left had stable, well-paying jobs in Shenzhen. None of the church members interviewed reported being in severe financial difficulty in China, and most had not previously considered travelling abroad for any length of time, much less permanent migration.

As one church member explained:

'Before I never even thought about going overseas... I didn't want to because [my husband and I] cannot speak any other languages.' However, the pressure on the church had become unbearable: 'Every time we had fellowship, we were scared that the guobao [National Security] would come. I heard many cases of churches having their crosses removed and being shut down by the authorities. Another church in the same building was caught and shut down... At the same time, Pastor Wang Yi's church was persecuted, and the pastor was put in prison. At that time, I was really scared. Every time we had fellowship, our hearts were squeezed with pressure. I was afraid of being arrested... If the guobao catch someone, they can do anything.'

Pastor Pan and one other church member visited South Korea (Republic of Korea) to look for a suitable location for the church members to live. They decided on the southern island of Jeju. Chinese passport holders can visit Jeju Island without a visa, making it a safer option for the church members because they would not need to apply for a visa while still in China, which could alert to the authorities to their plans to leave (religious leaders, activists and human right defenders in China are regularly subject to travel bans and prevented from leaving the country).

The remaining church members travelled to Jeju between October 2019 and January 2020, before the coronavirus pandemic made the journey impossible. South Korean immigration authorities refused entry to two families from the church, believing them to be



Pastor Pan leading a church service in Jeju, South Korea

economic migrants. In addition, some church members who initially moved to South Korea have since gone back to China to look after ill relatives. These church members are under police surveillance.

At least one person who was denied entry to Jeju was taken for interrogation by agents from China's Ministry of State Security, who confiscated her phone and computer. The agents informed her that she was being placed under 'Residential Surveillance' and was prohibited from travelling or contacting the church members in Jeju.

It is important to note that church members who have subsequently returned to China did so before they had formally sought asylum in South Korea and before the church's case was made public in June 2021. Pastor Pan has also met with US diplomats and publicly spoken about the situation of freedom of religion or belief for churches in China, the kind of actions the Chinese authorities has labelled as 'colluding with foreign forces' in other cases. If church members currently seeking asylum in South Korea are forcibly returned to China, they are likely to face much more serious penalties, amounting to serious threats to their safety and freedom, as outlined below.

Current status

'I feel lucky to have left, I'm lucky because I am free.'

Teenager from SHRC

'There is no way back for us. It is like the Red Sea closing behind the Hebrews when they fled Egypt.'

Luo Changcheng, church member

All the church members who have sought asylum in the Republic of Korea have had their applications rejected. They are now appealing with the assistance of a Korean lawyer. The majority of the church members hold G-1 visas which means they can legally work, but the language barrier means they are limited to low-wage jobs in farming and factory work.

There is evidence to suggest that the Chinese authorities are closely monitoring the church. Several church members, including Pastor Pan, have received threatening phone calls from unknown persons while in Jeju since their case was reported in the international media. Three church members have received calls from someone claiming to be from the local Chinese consulate, to inform them that they needed to collect a package, but the phone number did not match the Consulate's listed number so the recipients did not go to the Consulate as instructed. Other church members have been contacted by persons claiming to be for the Consulate telling them to immediately return to China. One church member in Jeju has also been contacted by the Korean Consulate in Guangzhou, claiming they were concerned that he had overstayed



Farmland near the accommodation where church members grow vegetables

his visa. The Chinese Ministry of State Security has also interrogated the members of the church who remained in China about the individuals in Jeju. 'We don't feel safe here,' said one church member in relation to the phone calls.

Conclusion

'The very important reason that I left China was that the church was being persecuted by the government.'

Pastor Pan Yongguang

SHRC leaders' account of pressure from the authorities, in particular following the introduction of the Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs, is consistent with CSW's research on the situation of unregistered churches in China and follows the pattern of state-orchestrated intimidation and harassment experienced by numerous congregations in Shenzhen and elsewhere.

Since the church left China in 2019 and early 2020, freedom of religion or belief has continued to deteriorate. Every week brings fresh reports of violations against both Catholic and Protestant Christians. A European Parliament resolution adopted in April 2019 stated that freedom of religion and conscience in China had reached a 'new low point', specifically noting that Christian religious communities were facing increasing repression in China through the harassment and detention of believers, the demolition of churches, the confiscation of religious symbols and the crackdown on Christian gatherings.⁷

SHRC's leaders specifically cited fear of arbitrary detention if they return to China:

'If we have to go back without a doubt it will be very dangerous and I could be arrested.'

Luo Changcheng, church member

Many of the church members cite the case of Early Rain Church, led by imprisoned Pastor Wang Yi, as an example of what their church would have faced if they had remained in China. In fact, the two churches had a close relationship and several church members received theological training from Early Rain Church. As mentioned above, members of Early Rain Church continue to face harassment and intimidation from the authorities, while two leaders are serving lengthy prison sentences.

Of particular concern to parents in the church is the forced closure of Christian schools by the authorities, and the harassment of parents who choose to homeschool their children. Zhang Xinyue, wife of Early Rain Church elder Li Yingqiang, has been repeatedly threatened with arrest unless she sends her eight-year-old daughter to a government school, causing severe distress to Zhang and her daughter.

As mentioned above, of particularly grave concern is the unprecedented case of Zhao Weikai of Xuncheng Reformed Church in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, who was officially arrested in July 2021 on charges of 'unlawfully possessing items that advocate terrorism or extremism'. Those close to him describe the charges as 'beyond imagination'. Mr Zhao and his wife have faced repeated harassment by the authorities in relation to their insistence on educating their three children at home rather than in a state school. In May, Taiyuan police officers raided their home without a warrant and confiscated their computer equipment and books before placing Mr Zhao in detention. The seriousness of the charges against Zhao demonstrates the marked escalation in measures used to stamp out homeschooling and gives an indication of what church members could face if forcibly returned to China.

Other cases of human rights violations against Christians perpetrated by the state also demonstrate the threat to safety and freedom that the church members could face if they are forcibly returned to China:

Arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance

Example: Wang Yi of Early Rain Church (see above); in August 2019 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention adopted the opinion that the detention of

⁷ European Parliament, 'China, notably the situation of religious and ethnic minorities', 18 April 2019 www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0422_EN.pdf?redirect

Pastor Wang and his wife Jiang Rong, who has since been released on bail, was arbitrary.⁸

Torture and ill-treatment; physical assault

Example: Pastor Yang Hua of Living Stone Church was attacked and beaten by a government official in a police station in Guiyang, Guizhou Province on 23 May 2021. The perpetrator of the attack was in plainclothes but claimed he represented the district level Committee of Political and Legal Affairs. The attack took place in front of three other local officials. Yang was taken to hospital following the attack with scratches to his ear and neck, and symptoms of tinnitus and stomach pains.⁹

Other arbitrary deprivation of liberty or restricted freedom of movement

Example: Zhang Chunlei, an elder of Love (Ren'ai) Reformed Church in Guiyang in China's southwestern Guizhou province, officially arrested and accused of fraud after nearly seven weeks in detention beginning on 16 March 2021. The Chinese authorities often target Christians with political or financial charges, including 'inciting subversion of state power', 'divulging state secrets', 'illegal business operation', and 'fraud'.¹⁰

Forced eviction

Example: On 24 December 2020, 'Pray for Early Rain' Facebook page¹¹ reported that two members of

Early Rain Church¹² had been harassed and threatened by police, while others were facing threats of eviction owing to police pressure on landlords.¹³

Police harassment and intimidation

Example: On 3 May 2020, more than 200 police and officials in Xiamen, Fujian Province broke into Xingguang Church's private rooms during a Sunday service. Christians blocking the door were forcibly dragged out and beaten on the ground, leaving one church member with broken ribs and chest contusions.¹⁴

Recommendations

Based on the accounts provided by Pastor Pan and other church members, alongside CSW's own findings on the situation of freedom of religion or belief in China and human rights violations against church leaders, ordinary members and homeschooling educators, we urgently recommend that:

- the church members in Jeju be protected from forcible repatriation to China, where they face grave threats to their personal safety and freedom, and
- they are offered asylum in a country where their right to freedom of religion or belief is protected in line with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18).

8 Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, Opinions adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention at its eighty-fifth session, 12–16 August 2019 www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session85/A_HRC_WGAD_2019_36_AdvanceEditedVersion.pdf

9 CSW, 'Pastor Yang Hua beaten by government official in Guizhou', 24 May 2021 www.csw.org.uk/2021/05/24/press/5276/article.htm

10 CSW, 'House church leader formally arrested on fraud charges after weeks in detention', 7 May 2021 www.csw.org.uk/2021/05/07/press/5245/article.htm

11 Facebook, 'Pray for Early Rain Covenant Church', accessed 6 August 2021 www.facebook.com/prayforearlyrain/

12 CSW, 'CSW marks anniversary of crackdown on Early Rain Church as conditions for Christians worsen', 9 December 2020 www.csw.org.uk/2020/12/09/press/4909/article.htm

13 CSW, 'Violations against religious communities continue over Christmas and New Year period', 6 January 2021 www.csw.org.uk/2021/01/06/press/4935/article.htm

14 CSW, 'New research on China's urban house churches amid the COVID-19 pandemic', 21 September 2020 www.csw.org.uk/2020/09/21/report/4811/article.htm

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CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief, and as Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

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