

**Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights  
and International Organizations, House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

**“China’s Political Prisoners: Where’s Gao Zhisheng”**

**April 20, 2023**

**Testimony of Dr. Bob Fu, Founder and President of China Aid Association**

Thank you to the Chairman and the Members of the Foreign Affairs Committee for allowing me to speak regarding the renowned human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng. His forced disappearance exemplifies some of the most disturbing conditions of human rights and rule of law in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). I hope this hearing will show that lawyer Gao’s case is not in isolation; many prisoners of conscience suffer at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Christian human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng tirelessly advocated for Falun Gong practitioners and house church Christians. In 2005, authorities shut down “Zhisheng Law Firm” in Beijing and revoked his lawyer’s license. This led to nearly 20 years of persecution for Gao, including house arrest, imprisonment, and torture.

The CCP involved Gao’s family in their persecution, including Geng He, another witness at this hearing. In one instance, the PRC government froze his bank account. During his house arrest, guards told him they would give him some yuan so he could buy formula for his nursing son as long as he praised the CCP. His family ended up fleeing China in 2009. It has been nearly 15 years since they have seen him.

Lawyer Gao suffered immense and gruesome torture at the hands of the CCP, which he recorded in his book *Unwavering Convictions: Gao Zhisheng's Ten-Year Torture and Faith in China's Future*. Due to his resilience against the Communist Regime, PRC authorities detained him many times, even sentencing him to three years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power” in 2006. They placed him in and out of house arrest and residential surveillance. However, on August 13, 2017, he was forcibly disappeared from his home in Shaanxi Province. It has been nearly 6 years since anyone has heard from lawyer Gao, with no indication of his well-being or whereabouts.

While Gao Zhisheng’s case should be highlighted and addressed extensively, other prisoners of conscience continue to suffer.

The Communist Party cracks down harshly on Christian house church leaders, imprisoning many who advocate for religious freedom. For example, Pastor Wang Yi led Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan province. Before his arrest, he wrote a joint declaration of faith in response to the Religious Affairs Regulations in 2018. He was arrested in 2018 and sentenced to nine years for “inciting subversion of state power” and “illegal business operations.”

Pastor John Cao crossed the China-Myanmar border frequently to build bible schools for minority children. He always followed legal procedures for his trips, but in March 2017, authorities arrested him for “organizing illegal border crossings.” He was sentenced to seven years in a Yunnan prison. Pastor John Cao was arrested due to his religious beliefs and punished arbitrarily.

A Lincang court in southern Yunnan Province sentenced Ju Dianhong and Liang Qin to 13 years and 10 years, respectively, for alleged “cult activity.” Authorities claimed both worked with “Three Grades of Servants,” a group neither of the women was aware of. In the final verdict, *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Streams in the Desert* were considered “evil cult materials.”

Furthermore, 12 leaders of Golden Lampstand Church in Linfen, Shanxi province, were arrested on charges of “fraud.” Pastor Wang Xiaoguang and his wife Yang Rongli previously suffered three and seven years in prison, respectively, for a previous round of persecution in 2009.

Meanwhile, the CCP continues to eliminate all forms of dissent like Niu Tengyu a 24-year-old who was sentenced to 14 years in prison for allegedly posting a photo of Xi Jinping’s daughter on a Chinese website. At the time of his arrest, CCP police rounded up over 20 young people from across China, torturing them for a confession. According to reports, Niu suffered torture during his detention, resulting in no movement in his right hand.

Wu Yanan is an associate professor at the School of Philosophy of Nankai University. She publicly called on the school to protect students involved in the recent “white paper movement.” In November 2022, because of her online comments, university leadership asked her to delete her posts. She was forcibly sent to a mental hospital for examination in mid-December. Nankai University sent her there under the pretext of nucleic acid testing, but Wu Yanan forcibly disappeared soon after.

Zhang Haitao is an activist in Xinjiang, also known as East Turkistan. Authorities sentenced him to 19 years for “inciting subversion of state power” and “providing intelligence overseas.” He forwarded messages on social media covering the repression of Uyghurs in the region, including 69 posts, 205 tweets, and 13 photos. According to some reports, Zhang has been handcuffed and beaten upside down, enduring torture and mistreatment during his incarceration.

Within the same vein of free speech, the CCP intensified its persecution of whistleblowers of COVID-19 and corruption. Li Chuanliang, born on September 27, 1963, served as deputy mayor of Jixi City and deputy mayor of Hegang City in Heilongjiang Province before resigning from public office in May 2014. In 2020, he joined the Chinese Democratic Party. Li repeatedly reported corruption in public among CCP leaders and cadres. He also insisted on freedom of speech and made statements revealing the CCP's concealment of COVID-19 from very early on, long before the world came to know about the CCP's leaking of the virus.

Since September 2020, in response to Li's whistleblowing activities regarding COVID-19 and his criticism of the CCP, the Xi Jinping regime targeted and persecuted him and his family in China. Authorities illegally arrested Li's pregnant daughter and son-in-law, confiscating their personal belongings and charging his daughter with fabricated charges. They even threatened his elderly mother and arrested his sister and brother. Former colleagues and innocent business partners were arrested as well. Additionally, those in custody were tortured to make false confessions against him to prepare false charges and seize private property. Authorities announced a case against Li for investigation and a cross-border manhunt.

Officials confiscated the personal belongings of Li's pregnant daughter, Li Jiyang, and his son-in-law, Xiu Jianying. They arrested them on false charges and tortured Xiu. Authorities persecuted, falsely prosecuted, and imprisoned both Li Chuanhua, Li's younger sister, and Li Chuangang, his younger brother. In addition to arresting and torturing them on fabricated charges, they confiscated their personal belongings and houses as well.

Along with his immediate family, the CCP also targeted and persecuted Li's former colleague, Kong Lingbao, former Party Secretary of Hengshan District, Jixi City, Heilongjiang province for simply speaking up against the CCP top leadership's effort of deceiving the world about the beginning and origin of COVID-19. Before Xi Jinping decided to disclose the existence of COVID, the pandemic already spread and caused massive death in cities like Jixi in Heilongjiang province. Out of human conscience, Kong complained about the CCP top leaders' concealment of COVID-19 during policy-making meetings in his city government and took precautionary actions by saving lives against the virus. Kong and his whole family were arrested for "speaking improperly" about the Party's COVID policy and taking early actions before top Party leadership permitted.

This is the worst time since the Cultural Revolution. Xi Jinping continues to quench religious freedom and human rights in China. Why has the international community not yet seen a single meeting between the President and Vice President with any one of the Family members of the Chinese prisoners of conscience? Will the USA be an example to other free countries in the

West? The recent visit by the President of France Emmanuel Macron showed nothing but surrender and appeasement to the CCP. His silence disregarded all prisoners of conscience in China. Will our leaders follow in his footsteps?

Considering the dire human rights situation in China, exemplified by the aforementioned cases, I have several recommendations for the Committee and the US government. First, the President, Vice President, and Secretary of State should publicly meet with family members of the prisoners of conscience. Second, like what President Ronald Reagan had done, the President, Vice President, and Secretary of State should publicly request the release of these prisoners of conscience when they meet with their counterparts. Finally, the US Ambassador in PRC should request to attend relevant judicial hearings of the POC and meet regularly and publicly with POC family members if possible.

I also request for ChinaAid's Annual Persecution Report for 2022 to be added to the congressional record. It contains the most comprehensive study of Christian persecution in China, as well as well-documented cases concerning prisoners of conscience. Below is an excerpt from the report's summary:

### **III. Summary**

This annual report draws its content from ChinaAid's exclusive news sources and the public Chinese records. In 2022, ChinaAid has felt day by day the CCP's escalated persecutions against Christian churches and Christians in mainland China, which explains why churches and Christians in China became increasingly afraid of exposing their lived persecution experiences to the outside world. Therefore, the persecutions documented in this report are just the tip of the iceberg. Overall, based on all the facts above, ChinaAid believes that the CCP's persecution of Christianity and Christians in 2022 demonstrates the following trends and characteristics.

#### **a. The growth of religious Sinicization**

The CCP's top leaders continued to tout platitudes about religious Sinicization, such as "forge and unite positive energy to help realize the Chinese Dream, adhere to the path of religious Sinicization, submerge all religious beliefs in Chinese culture, adhere to the right political direction, resolutely support the CCP's leadership, voluntarily resist the infiltration of overseas forces," etc. The authorities also continued its routine practices of targeting college students, who are perceived as a special social group by the government. Officials also asked education departments to screen and investigate college students' religious beliefs; imposed "two mustn'ts" and "five prohibitions"; and prohibited faculty and students from attending or organizing religious activities both on and off campuses, thereby blatantly depriving college students and faculty of their religious freedom.

The "Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services" led to the institutionalization of the government's control of religious information on the internet, making

it more and more challenging for religious people in China to express their religious beliefs and practices. Meanwhile authorities used COVID-prevention as an excuse to limit or ban in-person religious activities.

The updated "Measures for the Financial Management of Religious Activity Venues" criminalized the assets of unauthorized underground churches and believers' offerings and donations to these churches via online platforms. Authorities can even use this new law to fabricate charges against unauthorized religious groups, especially Christian house churches, and punish their leaders with "fraud."

Last but not least, Xi Jinping secured a precedent-breaking third term as the head of the CCP at the 20<sup>th</sup> National Congress. Before, during, and after the opening of the Congress, China's state-run religious groups lavished compliments and praise on Xi with more extravagant words and phrases than China's state-run media, showing that religious Sinicization is evolving from supporting the CCP to worship and allegiance to Xi Jinping".

## **b. Tools used to escalate Sinicization**

State-authorized churches across China hosted various activities to "joyfully celebrate the CCP's 20th National Congress." They organized believers to watch the opening ceremony and used various rhetoric to hype a stream of events for believers to "study the spirit of the 20th National Congress."

National Security Education entered into churches. April 15, 2022 is China's 7th National Security Education Day. State-run churches hosted all kinds of activities around national security before and after April 15.

Local governments continued to focus on trainings and seminars to integrate theological interpretations with Chinese cultural traditions while seeking to demonstrate unique local features: Fujian province proposed "three loves" (love the CCP, love China, love Socialism); "three scriptures"(interpret scriptures, preach scriptures, apply scriptures); "three advancements" (advancements in canon interpretation, theological thoughts, and religious rituals); and "dual experts" (expertise in both religious doctrines and great traditional Chinese culture). Shandong province proposed "Qilu theological system" and "Shandong's Christianity"; Guangdong province proposed the establishment of "pilot sites for Christianity's Sinicization." Anhui province and Henan province proposed focusing on the so-called "great traditional Chinese culture"; and Jiangsu province hosted the so-called "Itinerant Exhibition of Innovative Ways for Adhering to the Path of Sinicization".

## **c. New trends in persecution in 2022**

### **Use of new criminal charges**

Under the charge of “organizing and funding illegal gatherings (worship service),” Preacher Geng Zejun and two others of Church of the Rock in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region were sentenced in prison. Similarly, authorities of Sichuan province arrested Lin Xuesui and two other Christians, and the authorities of Yunnan province arrested Wang Shunping, Nusangdeng, Sanboluo and two other Christians.

Five members of Zion Reformed Church in Shanxi province (namely Zhang Ligong, Wang Runyun, Wang Shiqiang, Zhang Yaowen, and Song Shoushan), along with Preacher An Yankui and church coworker Zhang Chenghao, were all charged with “secretly crossing the national border” for legally traveling abroad to attend a gospel conference.

Zhao Weikai, also a leader of Zion Reformed, was charged with “illegally possessing terrorism and extremism items” and sentenced to two-years’ imprisonment and a 30,000 yuan (~\$4,390) fine.

### **Frequent use of “fraud” charges**

Under the fabricated charge of “fraud,” many Christians faced harsh persecution. Pastor Hao Zhiwei of Hubei province’s Ezhou House Church was sentenced to eight years in prison. Also, Elder Hao Ming and Elder Wu Jiannan of Qingcaodi Church in Sichuan province faced heavy sentences of more than 10 years in prison. Preacher Han Xiaodong, Li Jie, and church co-worker Wang Qiang of Linfen Covenant House Church in Shanxi province were arrested. Authorities criminally detained Preacher Chen Lijun of Luanchuan County House Church in Henan province. Meanwhile, Pastor Lian Changnian and Pastor Lian of Xi’an Church of Abundance were placed in RSDL. On top of “fraud,” Elder Zhang Chunlei of Ren’ai Reformed Church was also charged with “inciting subversion of state power.” Persecution against Linfen Golden Lampstand Church in Shanxi province, recurred. In 2009, Pastor Wang Xiaoguang and his wife Yang Rongli were sentenced to prison on charges of “unlawfully appropriating farmland” and “gathering a crowd to disrupt traffic.” In 2021, authorities arrested nine leaders again for “fraud.” According to some sources, they were tortured in prison in 2022.

### **Cyberspace crackdown**

Evidence shows that since the implementation of the "Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information and Services" in 2022, Christians have suffered unprecedented censorship on the internet expanding from church website, organizational websites, and phone apps to online chat groups, personal devotional material, and even lay Christian professionals. Authorities outlawed Shanghai Ziguang Presbyterian Church and shut down their website, media accounts and associated links. Jonah’s home, 21-year-old Christian website, was shut down; and China’s first Catholic phone app “CathAssist” was forced to stop its operations. Meanwhile, WeChat group chats suffered more strict censorship on Christian content, and words like “Jesus”, “Savior”, and “Amen” became taboo. A Christian professional was denied access to Alibaba’s career network platform (DingTalk) for a year.

### **Harsher sentences than suggested by prosecution**

In the case of persecution against Church of the Rock in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the prosecutor suggested 11 months for Preacher Geng Zejun. However, the Court delivered a verdict of 15 months. This is extremely confusing and unusual because it was unheard of by ChinaAid in its years of collection of persecution cases in mainland China that the court's sentence exceeds in severity the punishment suggested by the prosecutor.

### **Harassment beyond regular church meeting**

In addition to raiding and interrupting regular church gatherings, authorities extended such harassment to baptism, church's anniversary celebration, church members' wedding ceremony, online prayer meeting, and special church events such as Early Rain Covenant Church's online event called "Testimony conference on the 4th anniversary of the December 9th crackdown."

### **Adding fines to prison terms**

A typical case is Zion Reformed Church. Although the alleged charges were "secretly crossing the national border" and "illegal possession of terrorism and extremism items" which do not concern money, the eight defendants were all sentenced to a fine on top of a prison term with no exception. Likewise, in the case of Church of the Rock, authorities charged Preacher Geng Zejun and two others with "organizing and funding illegal gatherings." The Court handed an additional 250,000 yuan (~\$36,625) fine to two defendants on top of prison terms.