

The Persecution of *Bitter Winter* Reporters in China

Bitter Winter is a daily magazine, published in five languages (English, Chinese, Spanish, Italian, and Korean) and covering religious liberty and human rights in China. As reported in December 2019 by the *Evangelical World* magazine.

Since *Bitter Winter* launched in May 2018, the website has been a thorn in the side of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Published by the Center for Studies on New Religions in Italy, *Bitter Winter* uses leaked government files and on-the-ground informants to document the Chinese government's persecution of religious groups. Its articles are available in five languages, including Chinese, making the site dangerous in the eyes of the Chinese government. Chinese citizens can read the reports if they use a virtual private network to circumvent the government's internet censors. The Chinese government has called *Bitter Winter* an "overseas hostile website" and instructed its intelligence agency, the Ministry of State Security, to investigate the group (Cheng 2019).

The annual report of the U.S. Department of State on religious liberty for the years 2018, published in 2019, quoted *Bitter Winter* 15 times as a reliable source about religious persecution in China (U.S. State Department 2019).

Bitter Winter publishes both op-eds and commentaries by Western scholars and journalists, and news from China, together with exclusive videos and photographs, sent by Chinese reporters (some professional and some "citizen journalists"), who sign with pseudonyms. *Bitter Winter* was quoted by many international media when, in 2018, it was the first media outlet to publish pictures and videos shot inside a "transformation through education camp" in Xinjiang (Li 2018); and again in 2019, when it published an exclusive video of the destruction of the largest cliff-carved Guanyin statue in the world in Hebei, despite the authorities' attempt to seal the area to prevent videos and pictures to be shot (Shen 2019). The video made frontpage news in Taiwan and Hong Kong, where the devotion to Guanyin, the Chinese female version of the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, is widespread.

Chinese authorities issued in 2018 and 2019 specific regulations instructing the police to arrest anybody sending articles, images, and videos to *Bitter Winter*.

From August to December 2018, 45 *Bitter Winter*'s contributors were arrested in China. 22 were arrested in Xinjiang, and 23 in Henan, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanxi. As reported by the U.S. Department of State in its Human Rights Report about the year 2019, "Police arrested the Fujian contributors in October 2018 and prohibited family members from visiting them. Online media reported that police tortured them" (U.S. Department of State 2020). 25 have since been released, after

serving short periods of administrative arrest, but are kept under strict surveillance. The others remain in jail, 20 out of 45. 18 are incarcerated in Xinjiang, a vast territory that the CCP is transforming into an archipelago of detention facilities. One was transferred to a transformation through education camp in Hami city after one year of detention. Nothing is known of the remaining 17. Xinjiang is in fact an off-limits territory, and obtaining information on those detained there is almost impossible.

One of the four people who were arrested in 2018 in the Shanxi province, in the north of China, was released in 2019. He had been subjected to more than six months in jail “on suspicion of illegally providing state secrets overseas,” which in the Orwellian language of the CCP means forwarding independent information to Western media. He was freed on bail as evidence against him was scarce. Now he is at home, but he is obliged to remain in his city and should be ready to report to the police on call 7/24.

The reporter who made it possible for *Bitter Winter* to publish the above-mentioned video from inside one of the transformation through education camps in Xinjiang is still among those missing in action, who disappeared leaving no trace. Given the situation prevailing in Xinjiang, fearing the worst is unfortunately justified.

We understand that the religious groups on whose persecution *Bitter Winter* reports more often (Uyghur Muslims, members of The Church of Almighty God, Falun Gong practitioners, Tibetan Buddhists, House Church Christians) are submitting their own reports for this inquiry.

We would however emphasize that *all religions* are persecuted in China. Even the five “official” religious bodies increasingly see their local communities harassed and subject to limitations. And the persecution involves groups that may not report to you, as they are less organized, including dissident Catholic priests who refuse to join the Catholic Patriotic Association after the Vatican-China deal of 2018, Muslims outside Xinjiang, and thousands of independent Buddhists and Daoist temples that have seen their statues and often their buildings destroyed within the framework of the increased crackdown on religion President Xi Jinping launched in 2018. *Bitter Winter* documents this persecution daily.

Another subject we would like to emphasize is *xie jiao*. This Chinese expression is often translated as “evil cults,” but the translation is inaccurate. Lists of *xie jiao*, “heterodox teachings,” were compiled since the late Ming dynasty, and included

religious groups perceived as hostile to the government. The official list currently includes 22 groups (Irons 2018). However, Chinese courts are applying a principle of analogy to enforce legislation against the *xie jiao* by extending it to groups *not* included in the list. One case is Jehovah's Witnesses, who are not in the list but since 2019 are prosecuted under the anti-*xie-jiao* legislation (Introvigne 2019).

In 2019, the editor of *Bitter Winter*, together with well-known American scholar of religious liberty, James T. Richardson, and Rosita Šorytė, a former Lithuanian diplomat who served as chairperson of the European Union Working Group on Humanitarian Aid, published a scholarly article analyzing decisions enforcing Article 300, i.e. the provision of the Chinese Criminal Code criminalizing *xie jiao*, against 200 members of The Church of Almighty God. All the decisions were published in the official Chinese data base of court decisions. We concluded that, contrary to disinformation spread by Chinese embassies throughout the world, Art. 300 is enforced to issue heavy jail penalties to members of groups banned as *xie jiao* who commit such “serious crimes” as gathering for worship, preaching their faith to relatives and co-workers, or being found in possession of religious literature (Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytė 2019). They are not sentenced for any “crime” other than practicing their faith as believers normally do. The same is true for decisions about Falun Gong, the Shouters (a large house church listed as *xie jiao*), and others.

We applaud the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission's initiative, and hope that the United Kingdom may continue advocating for religious liberty and human rights in China, including the freedom of the media.

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