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Family Networks and the Growth of The Church
of Almighty God

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Abstract

Although reliable statistics do not exist, there is little doubt that The Church of Almighty God (CAG), one of the largest contemporary new religious movements born in Mainland China, experienced a phenomenal growth since its origins in 1991. Some critics explain this growth through unique tactics of recruitment, including kidnapping members of other churches to convert them. They also allege that CAG members conceal their religious affiliation from their families and that the movement has a low opinion of the role of the family in general. An analysis of CAG teachings about the family do not support this conclusion, however. A survey conducted in 2018 with responses from more than 500 CAG members in South Korea, the United States, and the Philippines, more than 60 percent of whom were refugees from China, led to the conclusion that most devotees *who converted in China* were recruited by members of their family and in turn tried to convert family members to the CAG, while the majority of the non-Chinese who joined the CAG abroad were *not* converted by their relatives, although they later tried to convert them. Sociologists such as Rodney Stark and Roger Finke warned against underestimating the role of doctrines in the growth of religious movements, and clearly a key factor explaining the CAG's success is that many regard its holy scripture, *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, as persuasive. Family networks, however, are also a factor in the rapid expansion of CAG in China.

The Church of Almighty God (CAG) is one of the largest new religious movements born in Mainland China in the 20th or 21st centuries (Introvigne 2017b; Zoccatelli 2018). The CAG's main belief is that the same one true God who manifested himself as Jehovah in the Old Testament and later as Jesus Christ has appeared again in the flesh and is called Almighty God (Luke 17:24–25; Rev 1:8, 22:20), who expresses the religious truth for the last days and performs the work of thoroughly purifying and saving humans. This time, Almighty God incarnated as a female in China, whose name CAG's official documents never mentions but whom several scholars believe to be Yang Xiangbin (b. 1973). Quite a few members of Chinese Christian house churches started accepting her utterances as “the words spoken by the Holy Spirit to the churches” (Rev 2:17) in 1991.

The Chinese authorities severely persecute the CAG and have included it in their lists of *xie jiao*, “heterodox teachings” whose propagation is a crime, since they began publishing these lists in 1995 (Irons 2018). Because of the persecution, it is impossible to assess the number of members in China in any reliable way. Reporters, governmental agencies, and scholars have evaluated CAG membership from the tens of thousands to the millions (Dunn 2015; Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2014) but have rarely provided rationales for these figures. The Chinese authorities offer figures between three and four million (see e.g. Ma 2014). While these numbers may be inflated to justify the need for harsh repression, the Chinese police and intelligence are among the only agencies equipped to collect data on clandestine organizations in China, and their opinion should not be dismissed lightly.

My purpose here is not to discuss statistics. There is little doubt that, in the short span between its origins in 1991 and the second decade of the 21st century, CAG's growth has been phenomenal. What reasons explain such rapid growth?

When explaining the growth of a religion, the emic perspective of the members and the etic point of view of scholars are normally different. Members believe that their religion grew because of divine guidance and its roots in divine truth. Scholars deal with the “human side of religion” (Stark and Finke 2000) and look for more mundane factors. Sociologists such as Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, however, note that emic and etic explanations are different but not opposed. It would be wrong for social scientists to dismiss doctrine as irrelevant, while in fact the persuasiveness of doctrine is the key factor for the growth of a religion (Stark and Finke, 2000: 257–58).

The emic perspective of the CAG is that it originated from God's work and developed under the guidance of Almighty God's words. Adherents insist that converts joined the CAG because they came to believe, through reading Almighty God's words, that Almighty God is the returned Lord Jesus, the only

true God who appears in the last days, and that the rapid growth of the CAG fully demonstrates the authority and power of God's word. The doctrine of the CAG, mostly expressed in its holy scripture book known as *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, is thus seen as the basis of the church's development.

Following Stark and Finke, we need not dismiss these claims as merely theological and, as such, indemonstrable. On the contrary, the two American sociologists maintain that, in order to grow, a new religion should offer persuasive conceptions of an "active supernatural," and one that takes care of humanity (Stark and Finke, 2000: 258). Obviously, the doctrine that Jesus Christ has returned to Earth and that Almighty God's words guide humanity in its present crisis towards a better future appears as persuasive to thousands of converts to the CAG and is a crucial factor in its growth. This recognition, however, should not prevent the etic perspective of scholars from looking for other factors that may also play a role in the growth of the CAG, although the emic point of view of the brothers and sisters of the CAG may regard the persuasiveness of the doctrine as perfectly sufficient to explain the church's progress.

There is a large literature on conversion to religion in general and new religious movements in particular (for a survey, see Introvigne 2011). While anti-cultists have accused new religious movements of using sinister recruitment tools such as brainwashing, mind control, and massive deception, scholars have found very little evidence of unusual missionary techniques, and much less of their allegedly "magic" effectiveness (Barker 1984; Kilbourne and Richardson 1984, 1986; Lamb and Bryant 1999; Richardson 1996; Robbins 1988). Perhaps less excitingly, they have concluded since their earlier studies that, with rare exceptions, new religions convert new members and grow very much as the old ones do: by using pre-existing family and friendship networks (Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980, 1983). Most religions are usually joined through families and friends (Stark and Roberts 1982).

Exceptions do exist, and it is occasionally argued that the CAG may be one, since its doctrine is accused of having a very low opinion of the family as an institution. A BBC 2014 service, which relied heavily on Chinese anti-cult sources, reported that, according to somebody who claimed to be a relative of a CAG member, and whose attitude was obviously hostile, "the cult is anti-family... [i]t throw[s] away family relationships and encourage[s] each other to do the same... Whoever is more resolute in rejecting their family is given a higher rank" (Gracie 2014).

Other hostile sources, as is common in the anti-cult literature in general, attribute the CAG's growth to devious tactics, including "brainwashing" and even kidnapping members of other Christian churches to convert them. Some

scholars have argued (Introvigne 2018) that evidence in support of these accusations is not persuasive.¹

I will first examine here whether the CAG's doctrine and literature confirm its alleged "anti-family" position and, second, present the results of a survey conducted in 2018 with responses from more than 500 CAG members in South Korea, the United States, and the Philippines, most of them refugees from China, from which the traditional scholarly model predicting that religious conversion would normally happen *along*, rather than *against*, family networks appears to receive some additional support.

CAG DOCTRINE AND THE FAMILY

The CAG believes that God's management for saving humankind is divided into three stages: the Age of Law (of Jehovah and the Old Testament), the Age of Grace (of Jesus Christ and the New Testament), and the Age of Kingdom (of Almighty God and *The Word Appears in the Flesh*). The Age of Millennial Kingdom will begin after the end of Almighty God's earthly ministry, the great disasters of the last days predicted in the Bible, and the transformation of Earth into a paradise where those purified by Almighty God will live forever. Since 1991, we have lived in the Age of Kingdom (Dunn 2015; Introvigne 2017b; Folk 2018).²

One basic truth, however, remains through the different ages: God loves humanity. Since humankind was corrupted, God has been leading them by his words and teaching them how to live a good, moral life on Earth and how to worship God properly. His teachings include specific requirements for the family, expressed in The Ten Commandments (which include "Honor your father and your mother," "You should not commit adultery," and "You should not covet your neighbor's wife") and reiterated by Jesus. The Ten Commandments are God's requirements and norms for humans in the Age of Law and kept a validity in the Age of Grace and Age of Kingdom. With the passage to a new era, God has made higher practical requirements for humans, so that The Ten Commandments are somewhat less important in the Age of Kingdom, yet they are not entirely superseded. God's new requirement, based on the commands of the previous two Ages, is that families shall allow

¹ Interestingly, until 2017 the accusations of kidnapping leaders of other churches were not used by the Chinese authorities in their campaigns against CAG; they came only from evangelical Christians (see Introvigne 2018).

² A discussion of CAG's dispensationalist theology is beyond the scope of this paper and is found in Folk (2018).

themselves to be governed by God’s words and truth and leave themselves in the charge of Christ.

In the words of Almighty God:

Today, what is required of you is not only limited to The Ten Commandments, but are commandments and laws that are higher than those of before, yet this does not mean that what came before has been abolished, for each stage of God’s work is carried out upon the foundation of the stage that came before. That which Jehovah introduced to Israel, such as giving sacrifice, honoring your father and mother, not worshiping idols, not assaulting others, not cursing others, not committing adultery, not smoking, not drinking, not eating the dead, and not drinking blood, is it not the foundation for your practice even today? It is upon the foundation of the past that the work has been carried out up until today. Though the laws of the past are no longer mentioned, and new requirements have been made of you, these laws have not been abolished, and instead, they have been uplifted. To say that they have been abolished means that the previous age is outdated, yet there are some commandments that you must always honor (The Church of Almighty God, 2017a: 790).

Among the latter, there are God’s requirements concerning the family. Almighty God teaches that the family exists because of God’s sovereignty and arrangement and is a positive feature of human society:

Were it not for the Creator’s predestination and His guidance, a life newly born into this world would not know where to go or where to stay, would have no relations, belong nowhere, have no real home. But because of the Creator’s meticulous arrangements, it begins the journey of its life with a place to stay, parents, a place it belongs to, and relatives (The Church of Almighty God, 2017a: 1822).

The context of the last quote is one where Almighty God explains that all the course of human life—birth, growing up, independence, marriage, progeny, death—is fully dominated and preordained by the Creator. In the words of Zhao Weishan, the main CAG administrative leader, referred to in the church as The Man Used by the Holy Spirit³:

³ Although Chinese sources often identify Zhao Weishan as the “founder” of the CAG, this conclusion appears to reflect a prejudice against the idea that a large religious movement may have been founded by a woman. There is no reason to doubt CAG’s claim that the CAG was founded by the person it recognizes as Almighty God.

marriage and giving birth originated from God's creation and preordination, It's God who created man and woman and caused them to be fruitful and multiply. It's an undisputed fact. Marriage and giving birth is from God, so it is a positive thing, which is undeniable (The Church of Almighty God n.d.).

Some members of the CAG leave their home and devote their lives to a full-time missionary career. Some criticize this choice as "breaking family ties," but it is hardly unique to the CAG (see Matthew 10:38; Luke 9:62; 14:26; 18:29–30).⁴

While some critics claim that CAG leaders interfere with the choices of devotees about their marriages, and whoever refuses marriage is given a higher rank, this claim is contrary to the teachings of Almighty God, who insists that:

when God acts, He does not coerce people. For example, whether you get married should be according to your own actual situation; the truth has been clearly spoken to you, and I do not restrain you. Some families oppress people to the extent that they're unable to believe in God unless they get married—so marriage, conversely, is to their advantage. For some people, marriage not only brings no benefits, but costs them what they originally had. This must depend on your actual circumstances and your own resolution. I do not come up with rules by which to make demands of you. (The Church of Almighty God, 2017a: 982).

During the previous age, what was the principle behind when people were used? Whoever could sing and dance, or was oldest and unmarried, had pride of place. ...We don't care about that. We look at man's substance, because the key to believing in God is what a person's substance is like, and whether they are able to worship God. (The Church of Almighty God 2018a).

Sexual immorality is denounced harshly, in terms that are not dissimilar from traditional Protestant evangelical preaching on sexual sins. Almighty God admonishes:

⁴ Jesus himself expressed this ideal in a radical way: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. ...So likewise, whoever he be of you that forsakes not all that he has, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26–27, 33).

Sexually immoral, lascivious men always want to pull those coquettish harlots to them for their own enjoyment. I will not save such sexually immoral demons, I hate you filthy demons, your lasciviousness and coquettishness have plunged you into hell—what have you to say for yourselves? You filthy demons and evil spirits are so heinous! You’re disgusting! How could such trash be saved? Could those ensnared in sin still be saved? These truths, this way, and this life hold no attraction to you; you’re attracted to sinfulness, to money, standing, fame and gain, the enjoyments of the flesh, the handsomeness of men and coquettishness of women. What qualifies you to enter My kingdom? (The Church of Almighty God, 2017a: 988).

The Man Used by the Holy Spirit also urges CAG believers to respect and honor marriage:

If the person has a husband (or wife), then you need to respect this person’s marriage. You cannot interfere with someone’s marriage; to respect others is to respect yourself, if you do not respect others then you do not respect yourself. If you respect others, then others will respect you. If in your heart you do not respect marriage, then you do not have humanity. If you are able to respect marriage, if you are able to love others and respect others, then you will not do things that harm others (The Church of Almighty God 2018b).

CAG Web sites often publish testimonies of devotees who claim that their family life has been made more harmonious by conversion to Almighty God, and old problems have been solved (see e.g. “Haohao” 2017; “Panpan” 2017; Xia 2017; “Xiaolin” 2016; “Zhien” 2017).

As happens in all missionary religions, members are counseled to share their faith with their families. One of the “Ten Administrative Decrees that Must Be Obeyed by God’s Chosen People in the Age of Kingdom,” proclaimed by Almighty God, states however:

Kin who are not of the faith (your children, your husband or wife, your sisters or your parents, and so on) should not be forced into the church. God’s household is not short of members, and there is no need to make up its numbers with people who have no use. All those who do not believe gladly must not be led into the church. This decree is directed at all people (The Church of Almighty God, 2017a: 1458).

There are family members who may be hostile to their CAG relatives, or others who do not share the choice of some CAG members to devote their lives

to a full-time missionary career. But these problems occur in all religions and are hardly unique to the CAG. Zhao Weishan insists that nobody should be forced to serve as a full time missionary:

Dedicating one's entire being to expend for God should be based on one's own choice. Some people dedicate themselves to spread the gospel, others serve in churches. Some people dedicate their entire being to expend for God full time. Others can only expend themselves for God part of the time. This all depends on the choices people are willing to make; God's family does not force people to do things (The Church of Almighty God, 2017b: 1048).

Obviously, it is a different situation when families are separated because CAG members are arrested or forced to flee China. Media of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claims that the CAG separates the families, yet CAG's literature notes that it is the same CCP that in many cases is responsible for the separation. In one of the movies produced by the CAG in South Korea, *Red Re-Education at Home*, a devotee forcefully makes this point with his mother:

Many Christians were displaced and rendered homeless. So many people were arrested and imprisoned and some were even persecuted to death! The CCP government is the culprit behind the ruination of countless Christian families. But it counterclaimed that the families of these people were ruined by their belief in God. Isn't this a distortion of the facts and turning black-and-white on its head? Had it not been for the CCP's lunatic suppression, arrest and torture of Christians, would it have led to such an outcome? Isn't this the sin committed by the CCP through its persecution of Christians? (Chen, Yin, and Wu 2017).

Producing quality movies is one of the most remarkable developments in the recent history of CAG. In the diaspora outside China, CAG members, many of whom have artistic talent, were able to produce significant works of art, including paintings and movies (Introvigne 2017a). These movies promote family values, and some of them focus on the crisis of contemporary families and problems such as the consequences of divorce (*Where Is My Home*: Huang, Zhang, and Zhang 2017) and teenagers' Internet addiction (*Child, Come Back Home*: Zheng and Li 2017). The fact that CAG movies won awards in international Christian film festivals, usually organized by evangelicals whose theology is very much different from the CAG's (Introvigne 2017a), confirms that the orientation towards traditional Christian family values is easily recognizable.

That CAG's theology is "anti-family" does not seem to find any support in the church's scriptures, which teach that the family exists because of God's sovereignty and orchestration, and reiterate that God's requirements of honoring parents and respecting marriage are still very much in force in the Age of Kingdom.

SURVEY RESULTS

Methodology

In 2017, I conducted oral interviews of CAG members in several countries (Italy, United States, and South Korea). Most of them were Chinese refugees, and most reported they had been converted (or rather had "returned to Almighty God," in CAG's language) through members of their families. I also interviewed some American (non-Chinese) converts who, on the contrary, had started interacting with CAG members on Facebook, then met them in person and joined the church.

I decided to conduct a more systematic survey by administering questionnaires to CAG members in countries other than Mainland China (where, because of persecution, any survey would be impossible). I used a computer-assisted anonymized survey through one of the simplest programs, Google Forms, considering that some of the refugees who had just escaped China might be less comfortable in using more sophisticated tools. Four Google Form addresses were set up, respectively for the large Chinese-speaking congregation in Seoul, Korea, for the Korean-speaking congregation also in Seoul, for the congregations in the United States, and for the congregations in the Philippines. The websites allowed respondents to answer in English, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and Tagalog (Filipino).

Flyers with invitations in the different languages to participate voluntarily and anonymously in a sociological survey were distributed at the largest CAG meetings, called "fellowships," in the following locations:

- Seoul, Korea (Chinese language fellowship)
- Seoul, Korea (Korean language fellowship)
- Flushing, New York
- Lebanon, Virginia
- Grand Marais, Michigan
- Golden Valley, Arizona
- Los Angeles, California
- Manila, Philippines

- Cebu, Philippines
- Davao, Philippines
- Iloilo, Philippines

Flyers were distributed in South Korea on January 21, 2018; in the Philippines on January 24, 27, and 28, 2018, and in the United States on January 27, February 3, and February 4, 2018. The flyers indicated that the survey should be completed by February 28, 2018.

In South Korea and in the United States (except in Grand Marais and Golden Valley), I distributed the flyers personally, and I was allowed to explain shortly the aims of the survey. In Golden Valley and in Grand Marais, and in the Philippines, local Church members distributed the flyers.

Since the Chinese-speaking members in Korea, the Korean-speaking members there, the members in the United States, and the members in the Philippines acceded to four different websites for answering the survey, I was able to determine how many answered for each subgroup, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Responses to the Survey

Country	Submitted Forms	Complete and Usable Forms
United States	70	66
South Korea (Korean)	37	34
Philippines	71	69
South Korea (Chinese)	351	347

The system, on the other hand, did not allow me to determine of which congregation, or in which city in Korea, the Philippines, or the United States the respondent was a member. Some congregations are small, and I decided that tracing only the country (although differentiating between Korean-speaking and Chinese-speaking communities in the country with the largest number of CAG members outside China, South Korea) would better protect the respondents' anonymity. As Table 1 shows, a few forms were incomplete or not compiled according to the instructions and, consequently, not usable.

Participants of the fellowship meetings where the flyers were distributed were counted. Therefore, the ratio of respondents among participants to those specific fellowship meetings may be calculated: 57.5 percent among Chinese-speaking congregations in Korea, 69 percent among Korean-speaking

congregations in Korea, 68 percent in the Philippines, and 69.3 percent in the United States.

Survey Results

The questionnaires asked respondents to identify themselves as:

- A Chinese who returned to Almighty God in China (A)
- A Chinese who returned to Almighty God abroad (B)
- A non-Chinese who returned to Almighty God abroad (C).

The answers confirmed that CAG communities overseas currently include a majority of refugees from China. Three-hundred thirty-seven of 516 respondents (65.31 percent) returned to Almighty God in China, and only 10 were Chinese who converted abroad (1.94 percent). The percentage of non-Chinese new converts—169, or roughly one-third of the sample (32.75 percent), was not insignificant. This group included thirty-four Koreans, sixty-six Americans, and sixty-nine Filipinos. It is probably too early to refer to the CAG as a global rather than a Chinese movement. At the same time, old studies ignoring non-Chinese converts are becoming rapidly outdated.

Before converting, respondents should have heard somewhere positive information about the CAG, as distinguished from plentiful hostile news and reports that abound in Chinese official media. Possible answers included:

- Brochure or book (1.1)
- Internet (1.2)
- Member of my family (1.3)
- Friend (1.4)
- Missionary of the CAG (1.5)
- Other (1.6)

Table 2 below presents the answers to Question 1.

Table 2: Sources of First (Positive) Information about the CAG

Groups	Converted in China	Chinese, converted abroad	Non-Chinese	Total
Literature	5	0	0	5
Internet	0	0	68	68
Family member	255	4	17	276
Friend	52	1	72	125
Missionary	24	4	11	39
Other	1	1	1	3
Total	337	10	169	516

Keeping in mind that the table is not about conversion but about the sources where respondents firstly found some positive information about the CAG, a significant difference between Chinese who converted in China and non-Chinese who converted abroad starts to emerge. The third group, Chinese who converted abroad, is small, but missionaries for them were exactly as important as family members. For those Chinese who converted in China, however, where Internet was not an option as authorities block CAG websites and most international social networks, it was overwhelmingly family members who first supplied the future convert with positive information about the CAG: 255 out of 337, or 75.67 percent. Friends came second (52), at a distant 15.43 percent, and CAG missionaries (24) were the first source of positive information in only 7.12 percent of the cases. Internet, on the other hand (68), was a significant source for those 169 non-Chinese who converted abroad (40.24 percent), even if friends (72) were more important (42.60 percent), exceeding family members (17; 10.06 percent) and missionaries (11; 6.51 percent), although it is well possible that in some cases respondents met missionaries on the Web.

It is also interesting to note, as detailed in Table 3, the prevailing role of the Internet among non-Chinese converts in the United States, while in South Korea and the Philippines networks of friends appeared to be more important. Based on previous in-person interviews, these networks often consisted of members of the same congregations of other Christian churches, who converted en masse to the CAG, in at least one Filipino case following their pastor.

Table 3: Sources of First (Positive) Information about the CAG among Non-Chinese Converts

Non-Chinese Converts	South Korea	United States	Philippines	Total
Literature	0	0	0	0
Internet	1	54	13	68
Family member	7	7	3	17
Friend	20	0	52	72
Missionary	6	5	0	11
Other	0	0	1	1
Total	34	66	69	169

Question 2 of the survey asked, “Who was the most influential person (apart from Almighty God) helping you in returning to Almighty God?” Possible answers included:

- A member of my immediate family (parent, brother or sister, son or daughter) who already believed in Almighty God (2.1)
- Another relative who already believed in Almighty God (2.2)
- A CAG missionary I met personally (2.3)
- A CAG missionary I met via the Internet (2.4)
- A friend who already believed in Almighty God (2.5)
- Other (2.6)

Table 4 presents the distribution of these responses.

Table 4: Agents of Conversion

Groups	Converted in China	Chinese, converted abroad	Non-Chinese	Total
Family	212	1	8	221
Relative	24	1	3	28
Missionary	63	2	16	81
Internet	0	6	89	95
Friend	31	0	52	83
Other	7	0	1	8
Total	337	10	169	516

As shown in Table 4, the sample of Chinese who converted abroad is too small to support conclusions, although Internet seems to play a significant role in these conversions. Again, we find a difference between Chinese and non-Chinese members. In China, a solid majority (212; 62.91 percent) was converted by members of their immediate family, and another 7.12 percent (24) by more distant relatives. Missionaries, although operating under the threat of persecution, did play a role (63; 18.69 percent), as did friends (31; 9.20 percent), but most members were converted in their families. Opposite to these results, family members (8; 4.73 percent) and relatives (3; 1.77 percent) were not very significant for the conversion of non-Chinese members abroad, where Internet (89; 52.66 percent) accounted for the majority of conversions. Table 5 below shows Internet more prevailing in the United States and friends more important in the Philippines, probably for the reason I mentioned above.

Table 5: Agents of Conversion for Foreign Converts

Non-Chinese Converts	South Korea	United States	Philippines	Total
Family	5	1	2	8
Relative	2	0	1	3
Missionary	11	5	0	16
Internet	16	60	13	89
Friend	0	0	52	52
Other	0	0	1	1
Total	34	66	69	169

It is possible, as suggested in some of my interviews, that conversion through the family in China is over-represented among CAG members who escaped overseas, the only ones who were able to participate in the survey. The case of whole congregations who converted to the CAG led by their pastors is not unique to the Philippines but also happened in China. These large communities of CAG believers are somewhat less likely to flee en masse abroad than single individual members. Certainly, I do not argue that the CAG relies *only* on family networks for its growth, although data show they play a significant role.

The above comments on foreign converts are supported by in-person interviews I did before the survey. Typical of these foreign converts was a couple of Americans from Arizona, consisting of a middle-aged small businessman and his wife. The wife started interacting with CAG members on Facebook, then met them in person, converted, and persuaded her husband to

join the church. After reading passages of Almighty God's words in *The Word Appears in the Flesh*, he concluded that those words "were all from God," because, "It's very touching. It's deep words that, you know, only God could speak to you through. It's very powerful to know that of this time, He is speaking to my heart through His words. And nobody's able to do that." His wife tried unsuccessfully to do the same with her adult daughter, who was influenced by negative information on the CAG she had found on the Internet.

Again, it should be reiterated here that the etic study of how conversions happen should remain in dialogue with the emic perception of conversions by believers. They insist that, although different ways of spreading the Gospel are used, whether one converts or not is entirely voluntary and ultimately depends on his or her readiness to listen to the voice of Almighty God and recognize Almighty God as the returned Jesus Christ, the only one true God.

Once converted, CAG members, as is typical of most converts, tried to convert others to their newly discovered faith. Question 3 asked, "Did you ever try to help members of your family return to The Almighty God?" with "yes" (3.1) or "no" (3.2) as possible answers. The CAG is an intensely missionary religion, and only a small portion of the respondents (67; 12.98 percent) indicated that, after joining the CAG, they did not try to convert their families. The majority (430; 83.33 percent) claimed that they tried to convert members of their family (see Table 6). Not all these conversion attempts were successful, either in China or overseas. Chinese family members may have been afraid of being subject to CCP's persecution or influenced by CCP propaganda against the church. The problems of my Arizona couple with their daughter indicate that converting family members seems also difficult in the United States because of the negative information. Families of converts find on the Web a good deal of negative information about the CAG.

Table 6: CAG Devotees Who Tried to Convert Family Members

Converted Family Members	Converted in China	Chinese, converted abroad	South American Koreans	American	Filipino	Total
Yes	278	6	33	44	69	430
No	40	4	1	22	0	67
Other	19	0	0	0	0	19
Total	337	10	34	66	69	516

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of both CAG's literature and the utterances of Almighty God, which are normative for the church, and of the survey responses demonstrated that the CAG is not "against the family."

Conversion to the CAG is not dissimilar from conversion to many other new religious movements. According to the survey, the overwhelming majority of those who converted in China (70.03 percent) did so because of a family member or relative, although other forms of conversion may be under-represented among CAG members who escaped overseas and participated in the survey. In turn, 82.49 percent of those who converted in China and 83.33 percent of the total sample tried to convert their family members. Conversion, as usual, was a process that often worked among family networks, and rumors that the CAG grew through unusual or sinister tactics appear to be just another instance of the usual stereotypes targeting "cults."

There is, however, an area where the CAG appears to grow through novel strategies, including a liberal use of the Internet: the West. Outside China, and particularly in the United States, the CAG is too new and too small to make use of pre-existing family networks. Most of its members are refugees from China with little or no connections in their host country. The CAG manages to grow, however, by approaching potential converts on social networks such as Facebook. The CAG's approach in the United States may be compared to the one by the early ISKCON, the Hare Krishna movement. When its founder, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Srila Prabhupada (1896–1977), arrived in New York in 1965, he did not know anybody there and spoke only basic English. He started chanting the movement's mantra in Central Park and, little by little, attracted some young followers. He could not use family networks, since in America he did not know any (Wallis and Bruce, 1982: 104). Newly arrived CAG refugees from China to New York find themselves very much in the same situation today: they are not in a position to utilize family networks to seek American converts. The only difference is that today, they can sing today the attractive CAG songs on Facebook rather than in Central Park.

The strategy of privileging the Internet has so far elicited good results in the United States. It is too early to say whether it will continue to be used or, as the church grows outside of Mainland China, more traditional methods of conversion will become more important than the Internet, when local communities will be consolidated in new countries.

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