



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on March 3, 2016

Married Chinese Pastors Sentenced to Years in Prison for Opposing Cross Removal

In a move widely seen as payback for opposing the communist Chinese government's removal of crosses from churches, on February 26 a court in southeastern China sentenced a husband-and-wife team of pastors to significant jail time and heavy fines, according to the [New York Times](#).



The *Times*, citing the state-run newspaper *Zhejiang Daily*, reported that Protestant pastors Bao Guohua and Xing Wenxiang, his wife, were sentenced to 14 years and 12 years in prison, respectively. In addition, Bao was fined \$15,300, and Xing was fined less than \$14,000. The government, claiming the pastors had misappropriated funds donated to the church by the congregation, said it confiscated about \$92,000 from each of them. Ten other church members were given suspended jail sentences, congregants told [Radio Free Asia](#).

The pastors, the church members said, were found guilty of "encroachment," "running an illegal business," "disturbing public order," and "concealing financial records." Their real "crime," however, appears to be publicly opposing the government's ongoing policy of removing crosses from the outside of church buildings — over 1,200 have been removed thus far — or, for the less fortunate congregations, demolishing their buildings entirely.

Bao and Xing are pastors of the government-authorized Holy Love Christian Church in Jinhua, a city in Zhejiang Province. About 23 million of China's estimated 60 million Protestant Christians belong to the official churches; the rest meet illegally in house churches.

"The government restricts religious practice to five officially recognized religions and only in officially approved religious premises," Human Rights Watch noted in its [annual report](#). "The government audits the activities, employee details, and financial records of religious bodies, and retains control over religious personnel appointments, publications, and seminary applications."

The campaign to remove church crosses, the organization explained, "is publicly described as an effort to remove 'illegal structures' that do not comply with zoning requirements, but according to an internal provincial directive, it is designed to reduce the prominence of Christianity in the region," which is one of the most Christian in the nation. It is part of a larger program of persecution that has intensified in recent years, with the number of incidents increasing by 300 percent from 2013 to 2014, according to [China Aid](#), a Christian human-rights organization.

"The Chinese government has intensified its persecution against practitioners representing all religions in China," wrote China Aid. "In the case of Christianity, both the government-sanctioned Three-Self church and the house church movement experienced unprecedented persecution. The Chinese government's persecution campaign included forced demolition of churches and crosses, the detention and imprisonment of pastors and church members on criminal charges, forcing churches into bankruptcy by confiscating church property and imposing fines, and manipulating state-run media to label house churches as 'cult' organizations." Being convicted of organizing or participating in a "cult"



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carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

Thus far, over 100 Christians have been “briefly detained” for resisting the cross removals and church demolitions, reported Human Rights Watch. At least one church leader who opposed the policy was sentenced to a year in prison for “gathering crowds to disturb social order.” But the sentences meted out to Bao and Xing, who had spoken out against the removal of their church’s cross, “were among the harshest imposed recently on clergy members and their associates,” observed the *Times*.

“If they had actively cooperated with the demolition of the church’s cross, there would not be any case today,” Chen Jiangang, a lawyer for one of the detained Holy Love Christian Church members, told [Reuters](#) in August, adding that the charges that the pastors had spent church funds on personal luxuries were part of a “smear campaign.”

Besides cracking down on folks who don’t worship at the altar of Marxism, the communist government’s persecution of religious believers is also aimed at curbing the influence of foreign nongovernmental organizations, which officials “have increasingly been accusing ... of trying to foment political dissent among ordinary Chinese and overthrow the party,” penned the *Times*. It is no coincidence that the night before Bao and Xing were sentenced, Zhang Kai, a Christian lawyer who had defended some of the churches facing persecution, was forced to confess his sins against the state on television — “the latest in a series of prominent televised confessions by detained men, both Chinese and foreign, that were apparently made under police coercion,” the paper said.

In his televised statement, Zhang accused China Aid of trying to “change China’s political system,” saying the group paid him to defend Christian churches and organizations.

“I will strictly abide by the national law and break with foreign forces completely,” Zhang said. “I also warn other so-called human rights lawyers: Do not take money from overseas. Do not do things that violate national security and interests.”

“[Zhang] was one of the most courageous lawyers in defending Christian churches in Wenzhou [another city in Zhejiang] whose rooftop crosses were facing forceful removal by the authorities,” Purdue University sociology professor Fenggang Yang said in a [statement](#) posted on the China Aid website. “It is apparent that all Zhang Kai did was providing legal counsel to the willing churches, encouraging their leaders to use the existing law and regulations to defend their own rights. He urged both Christians and government officials to abide by the law and do not do anything beyond legal boundaries.”

While Zhang may have abided by the law, his captors apparently have not — hardly a surprise in an authoritarian state, where the law is whatever officials say it is at any given moment. Zhang was detained in August just one day before he was scheduled to meet with a U.S. State Department official to discuss religious freedom — or the lack thereof — in his home country. An attorney hired by his family told the *Times* that Zhang has not yet been charged with a crime, making the broadcast of his confession illegal. He also said lawyers had been unable to see Zhang.

Persecution of Christians is, of course, nothing new. The founder of their faith, after all, was put to death by the Roman Empire; and his resurrection gives them a “blessed hope” that, no matter what men may do to them, they have a bright — and eternal — future ahead of them. But as long as they remain on this side of heaven, Chinese believers can take comfort in the knowledge that Christians around the world are praying for them, and some are actively working to relieve their suffering.



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Photo of pair of crosses on church in Zhejiang Province, China, July 29, 2015: AP Images



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