

China's Official Church Members 'Admonish' Shouwang Group

☒ Police last weekend detained a further 16 members of Beijing's Shouwang house church and placed several more under house arrest, while members of China's government-approved churches have gone to police stations to "admonish" detained house church members, according to a statement issued yesterday by church leaders.

Of those detained, police held two in protective custody in hotels, beginning on the evening of June 10, while another 14 who turned up at Shouwang's designated outdoor worship site on Sunday morning were taken away and sent to 10 different police stations. Of those detained Sunday, 13 were released by midnight while the last was released the next day.

Police at Haidian station also locked into a basement three Christians who had come to visit detained church members, the statement said.

The church reported that members of government-approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches had in the previous two weeks come to many local police stations to "educate" and "admonish" detained Shouwang congregants, urging them to leave Shouwang and join TSPM churches.

"Half a century ago, this practice failed for those who have gone before us; they would rather be put into jail for holding on to their position," the statement said. "We believe that for our generation, this practice will fail as well."

Following a series of evictions from rented facilities and denial of access to a property they purchased late last year, Shouwang church in April decided to meet outdoors as a form of

protest against the government's restriction of their right to worship.

On their first attempt to meet in a public plaza in Zhongguancun, northwestern Beijing, uniformed and plainclothes police arrived in droves, filming and interrogating bystanders, waving journalists away and herding church members into waiting buses, according to the China Aid Association (CAA). Church leaders said 169 people were detained, and most were then taken to a nearby school where they were fingerprinted and had their names recorded, *The New York Times* reported.

Similar confrontations have occurred every Sunday since, with church members determined to continue their peaceful protest despite many of the leadership team, including Senior Pastor Jin Tianming, being confined to house arrest. All key leaders, including four pastors and three elders, have been under house arrest almost constantly since April 9, said one source who spoke to Compass on condition of anonymity.

The number of people turning up to the outdoor venue has dwindled as members of the highly educated and influential church face consequences in their personal lives.

"Some church members have lost their jobs or rented homes or both," the same source said.

International media agencies have followed events closely, particularly on Easter Sunday, April 24, when CNN reported that police had detained at least 36 church members and blocked more than 500 from leaving their homes.

By early June, police had detained some 300 people. During the same period, police held many church members under house arrest, preventing them from traveling to the outdoor venue.

As the weeks progressed, police officers also asked church members to refrain from attending Shouwang's evening prayer

meetings, held in a room rented from the New Tree Church in Zhongguancun.

Toward the end of May, the church was shocked by the departure of Pastor Song Jun, fellow minister Jian Lijin, and deacons Ji Cheng and Yuan Yansong, who left because they disagreed with plans to continue outdoor worship, the source reported.

Petition for Religious Freedom

While some house churches also disagree with Shouwang's approach, claiming their "confrontation" with the government can only bring harm for house churches in general, others have chosen to stand in solidarity with them.

On May 11, 17 pastors or church workers from almost 20 house churches in six Chinese cities delivered a petition to the National People's Congress, China's top legislature, asking that the keys of Shouwang's property be handed over to them, and that the national Regulations on Religious Affairs be dropped and replaced by a more favorable law governing religious freedom, CAA reported.

Titled, "It Is for our Faith: A Citizen's Petition to the National People's Congress on the Church-State Conflicts," the petition made oblique reference to an article titled, "We do everything for faith," written by renowned Christian Wang Mingdao years earlier, defending the church before Communist officials.

In a recent program dedicated to Shouwang, Radio Free Asia (RFA) interviewed several of the petitioners, including Wang Wenfeng of the Wenzhou China Theology Forum.

"I hope the government can see that the Shouwang incident is not an isolated case; rather, many churches in China want the same thing," Wang told RFA. "The most basic request is, 'Let us meet in public, and let us register.'"

“We Christians have nothing to hide,” he continued. “At the same time, our faith itself requires us to be open with non-Christians, society and the state.”

‘City on a Hill’

Shouwang first made global headlines in November 2009, after President Barack Obama visited China. *The Wall Street Journal* ran a piece titled, “The China President Obama Didn’t See,” recounting Shouwang’s first outdoor meeting in a snowstorm on Nov. 1 after officials pressured their landlord to evict them from an office space in northwest Beijing’s Huajie Mansion.

Founded in 1993 as a simple Bible study in the home of Senior Pastor Jin, the church soon grew into 10 separate fellowships throughout Beijing. In 2005 the church made an application for registration, soon rejected by officials. They then formed an integrated church with a vision to be like a “city on a hill,” broadcasting the light of the gospel. At this point they began to rent office buildings for Sunday worship.

The most serious direct crackdown prior to 2011 came on May 11, 2008, when the armed forces broke into Shouwang’s Sunday meeting and ordered the church to stop meeting. The church then realized that government pressure on landlords was a detriment to its survival and began gathering funds to purchase its own property.

The church eventually bought the second floor of the Daheng Science and Technology Tower in Zhongguancun in late 2010. Officials warned the property developer, however, not to hand over the keys and pressured the owners of their then-meeting place, the Old Story Club, not to renew a 2010 lease, leaving Shouwang “no choice” but to worship outdoors.

Evictions are not confined to Shouwang or to Beijing; several other large house churches, including the All-Nations Alliance Church in Shanghai and Liangren Church in Guangzhou, have resorted to outdoor worship after being driven out of rented

facilities, according to the Rev. Liu Tongsu, a California-based Chinese pastor and scholar.

“The ‘outdoor’ in the outdoor worship is not a means to an end, but a stand,” Shouwang’s senior pastor Jin stated in a letter issued to church members on April 23. “It is a stand when we face our Lord of glory and the authorities—in this period of time it is a worship that is more precious than any hymn or sermon.”