

PRISONER PROFILE

Prisoner Name: **John Sanqiang Cao**

Location: **China**

Arrested: **March 2018**

Sentence: **Seven years imprisonment**



Arrest and background

The American-Chinese pastor, John Cao, who lived with his family in North Carolina, had made regular trips into Myanmar to visit the 16 schools he had set up there since 2014. Pastor John had also helped establish more than a dozen schools in China – and regularly brought volunteers from these institutions over to his schools in Myanmar.

Yet, on 5 March 2017, Chinese officials in Yunnan province detained John and his co-worker, Jing Ruxia – and later charged them both with ‘organising illegal border crossings’. This charge is more usually made against human traffickers. Pastor John’s family say this was to be his last visit to China before he retired.

His relatives also say that John made no attempt to hide his border crossings, taking a raft across a river in broad daylight and sometimes with support from Chinese officials. ‘My father claims that the authorities were aware of their operation in Myanmar and even helped them cross the border on occasion,’ John’s son Ben told the media.

Pastor John was held for a year before he was charged in February 2018 and later sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment. He was also fined 20,000 yuan (about £2,250). Teacher Jing Ruxia was given a one-year sentence and a lesser fine: she has since been released.

Pastor John’s subsequent appeal hearing was postponed seven times before the courts confirmed that they would treat the appeal as a “trial session on paper only” instead of actually hearing his case. On 25th July 2019 the appeal process concluded and Pastor John’s seven-year sentence was upheld by the court. Only his 83 year-old mother and his sister along with their lawyer were allowed to hear the verdict. Pastor John has since been moved to Kunming prison in Yunan Province.

In prison Pastor Cao appears to be in reasonable health although he has had some dental issues. Visits from his mother and lawyer have been restricted, but following a visit on 25 February 2021 Pastor Cao’s lawyer reported that his client was thankful for the prayers of Christian brothers and sisters, and that he reiterated his innocence. He also said that although he was not suffering too much in prison himself, he was sad for the pain that his mother was experiencing for him.

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During his time in prison Pastor Cao has written several poems, one of which entitled From Over the Mighty Waters includes the following verse:

*You can take away my freedom, but you can't take my prayers.
My prayers have wings and leap over the towering iron mesh wall.
Many brothers and sisters have heard them.
They fly freely every day and reach Heaven above the blue sky.*

Religious rights campaigners see Pastor John's arrest as part of a Chinese Government crackdown on house churches and their members. In February 2018, new Regulations for Religious Affairs were introduced, further curtailing religious freedoms and limiting Chinese nationals' opportunities to make faith-related trips outside the country without prior permission. It appears the Government is trying to restrict Chinese Christians' ability to have contact with Western believers.

Pastor John became a Christian in his 20s through an American family whom he met in China. He studied for the ministry in New York and later married an American, Jamie; they have two sons, Ben and Amos.

John ministered to Chinese congregations in North Carolina before he felt God calling him to serve in his homeland. He went on to found more than a dozen schools in central and southern China.

Then, in 2014, he became involved in humanitarian aid work in neighbouring Myanmar focusing on ethnic minority groups in mountainous parts of the Wa region. He also set up schools serving 2,000 children, in an area where educational opportunities were severely limited.

Pray:

1. That Pastor John and his family will experience God's presence and His peace in new ways, and grow in wisdom and faith through their ordeal.
2. For opportunities for Pastor John to show God's unconditional love to his fellow inmates and his prison guards.
3. That the Chinese Government will respond to international pressure to free Pastor John.

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