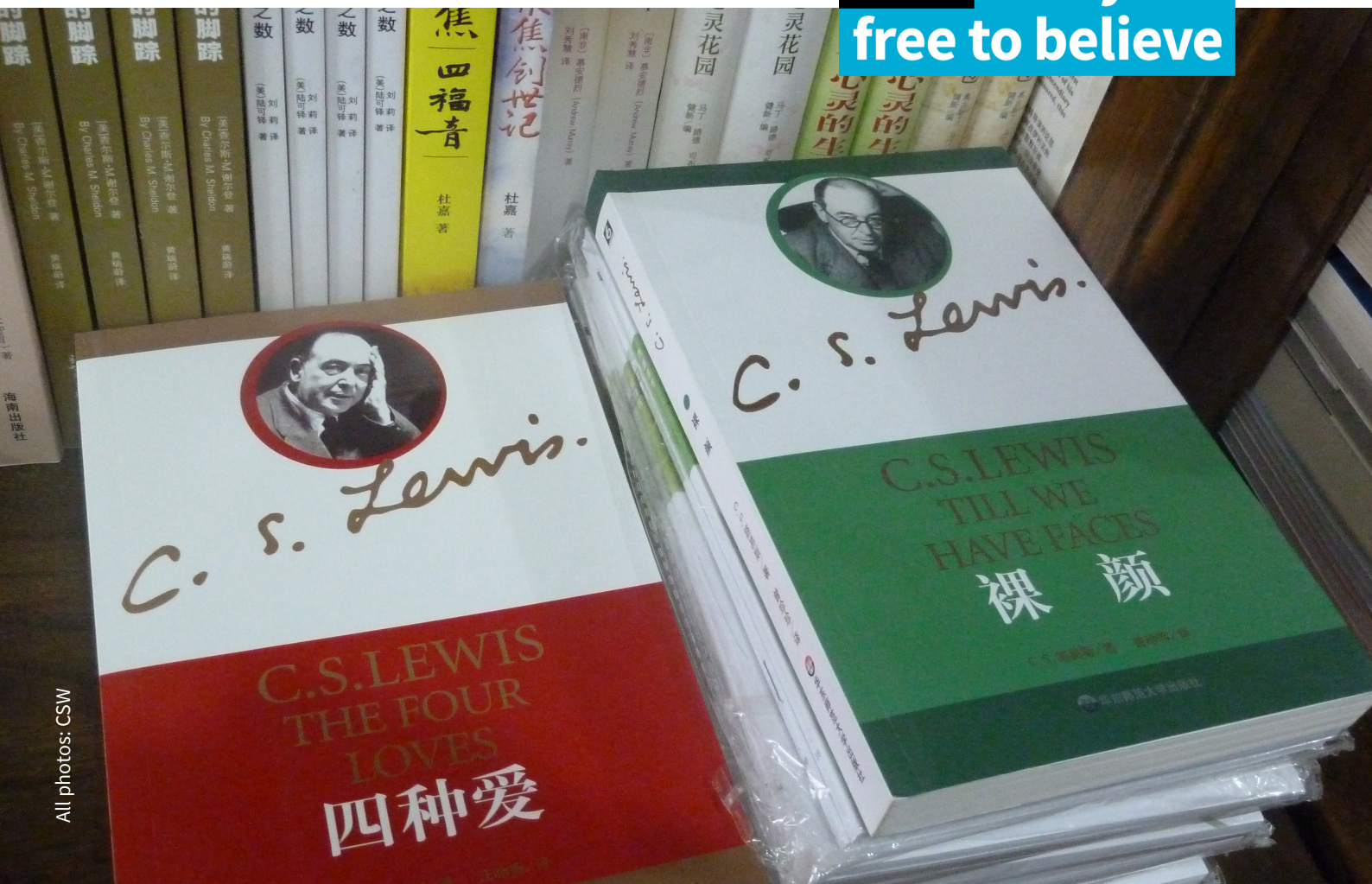


China

Nationwide crackdown on reading, writing and religion

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The removal of crosses from Christian buildings, the demolition of churches, and the arrest of Christians in China over the past few years has been widely reported. Alongside these violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief, there are a number of new developments which indicate that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has tightened its grip not only on religious symbols, venues and believers, but also on religious publications and information.

Traditionally, the Chinese authorities have maintained tight control over the spread of ideas, especially those they consider to be a challenge to Party ideology. The publishing and dissemination of religious materials are strictly managed by the state, and control over the publication and sale of religious books has increased significantly under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

The rise of e-commerce made it possible for people to buy religious books online. Online publishing and thriving church networks were able, for a time, to facilitate the spread of Christian literature and materials, including foreign language books translated into Chinese. As the cases below illustrate, the authorities are now cracking down on religious materials, thereby restricting access to religious information.

Publishing and dissemination of religious materials: background

Under Xi Jinping there have been increasing restrictions on freedom of expression and freedom of the press, which extend to the publishing of books and other materials. This includes religious books. In March 2018, the state-sanctioned China Christian Council and Three-Self Patriotic Movement launched a five-year plan to 'sinicise' Christianity, which reportedly includes plans to write a 'secular' version of the Bible, revise other religious materials, and include teaching on 'socialism and patriotism' alongside religious study. No revised text of the Bible has been released yet, but sales of Bibles and other religious texts are strictly controlled.

A number of publishers and booksellers have been sentenced in connection with Christian literature. On 27 March 2017, for example, Li Hongmin¹ was sentenced to ten months in prison and a 10,000 Yuan (approximately GBP1,133) fine for 'illegal business activities' after the authorities discovered 110,000 copies of Christian literature during a raid on both his residence and printing

facility. After his arrest the authorities put pressure on Li's landlord to evict his wife from their home.²

In February the same year, Christians began reporting the removal of religious programmes from Ximalaya FM, a mobile app which at the time had 200 million users. Xiaodelan Bookstore had three of its programmes deleted. In response to their request for an explanation they were informed by Ximalaya FM: 'Since your uploaded files contained content from overseas religions, the platform currently is not qualified to review. You are recommended to produce and upload other types of programs in the future.' One user, surnamed Lu, had uploaded 31 programmes which included the word 'gospel' in the title. She had 40,000 followers on the site. On 27 February 2017 she also received a message from Ximalaya FM informing her that all her uploads had been deleted. She was later informed that 'audio files related to Buddhism, Christianity were all removed because religious content could only be propagated in religious venues.'³

In December 2020, ChinaAid reported that four Christians in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province who had been arrested in July that year were awaiting their second trial on charges of illegal business operations. Fu Xuanjuan, Deng Tianyong, Han Li and Fu Qunhao were employees of Shenzhen Tree of Life Technology Development Co., Ltd. where they sold audio Bibles. According to the ChinaAid article, Bao'an District Procuratorate had recommended sentences ranging from 18 months to five years in prison for each defendant. In a separate case from Shenzhen reported by ChinaAid, Christian entrepreneur Lai Jinjiang was detained for more than a year and a half for producing electronic Bible players. He was accused of illegal business operations. His trial was set for 7 December 2020; the outcome is unclear. Two other Christians were arrested in November and December 2019 for printing children's Bibles.⁴



1 Congressional - Executive Commission On China, Political Prisoner Database (PPD), Li Hongmin <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=11693>

2 ChinaAid, 'Christian handed 10-month sentence for selling religious books', 31 March 2017 www.chinaaid.org/2017/03/christian-handed-10-month-sentence-for.html

3 UCA News, 'Online Christian programs get deleted in China', 9 March 2017 www.ucanews.com/news/online-christian-programs-get-deleted-in-china/78592

4 ChinaAid, 'Guangdong Christians arrested for printing children's Bibles and face penalties', 3 April 2020 (Chinese) www.chinaaid.net/2020/04/blog-post_43.html

Case study: Xiaomai ('Wheat') Bookstore, September 2019⁵

Name: Chen Yu (also known as Zhang Xiaomai)
 Sex: Male
 Location: Zhejiang Province
 Date of arrest: September 2019
 Charge: Illegal business operations
 Sentence: Seven years in prison, plus 200,000 RMB fine (approximately GBP22,250) 27 September 2020

In September 2019 Chen Yu⁶ was detained on suspicion of 'illegal business activities' and accused of buying religious publications from overseas and illegally selling them. The store has reportedly sold over 20,000 items to more than 10,000 people. After the initial arrest officials began a nationwide investigation of those who bought Christian texts from the online bookstore, using shipping receipts as evidence. In some cases clients were asked to bring their books to police stations, where their Christian texts were confiscated. In other instances, police obtained warrants and entered houses to confiscate books from private homes and churches. Across China many of those interviewed as part of the investigation have subsequently been monitored. Officials also demanded that customers who purchased 'Transformation of the Gospel' by Pastor Wang Yi return it. Overall authorities confiscated over 12,000 publications.

In September 2020, Chen Yu was sentenced to seven years in prison by the Ninghai City People's Court for 'illegal business operations.' Chen Yu was also fined 200,000 RMB (approximately GBP22,250). In November 2020 the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office said they were aware of reports that a Christian bookseller had been arrested, and were deeply concerned about religious persecution in China.⁷

The crackdown on Muslim publishers and Islamic materials

The authorities' crackdown on the writing, publishing and dissemination of religious materials is by no means restricted to Christianity. In November 2020 NPR reported on a number of cases in which Muslim scholars and writers were interrogated and detained in connection with Islamic literature. According to the article, 14 men in Yiwu were detained simply for buying Islamic books, while in 2017 publisher Ma Yinglong was arrested on charges of illegal publishing and terrorism. Another publisher was imprisoned for selling illegal books in 2015. The article also cites new religious restrictions from 2018 as shuttering 'hundreds of Arabic language and Islamic schools across Ningxia and Zhengzhou'.⁸

The most well-known and egregious violations against Muslims are occurring in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR; also referred to by many Uyghurs as East Turkistan), where over one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and members of other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups have been detained without charge in political re-education camps since 2017. Others have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms, sometimes in connection with peaceful religious activities.

A February 2020 report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project cites a leaked document from Qaraqash in the Uyghur Region, which 'provides documentary proof that people in East Turkistan are detained or deemed suspicious for legitimate and reasonable actions, verifying the claims of the Uyghur diaspora and internment camp survivors'. The leaked document lists reasons for internment in the camps, and one of the reasons given is 'possessed or watched illegal media'. A breakdown of this type of reason includes, 'kept illegal religious books/illegal books hidden in the home', 'watched illegal religious videos with others', and even 'accidentally clicked on an overseas website on their phone'. According to the report, 'local officials decide and record these judgments, demonstrating wide-ranging arbitrary power over residents and their entire families'.⁹

5 See also Congressional - Executive Commission On China, Political Prisoner Database (PPD), Chen Yu <http://ppdcecc.gov/QueryResultsDetail.aspx?PrisonerNum=13635>

6 ChinaAid, 'Follow-up, Breaking News: Zhejiang Province Court Sentences "Xiaomai Bookstore" Owner', 3 October 2020 www.chinaaid.org/2020/10/follow-up-news-zhejiang-province-court.html
 Radio Free Asia, 'Zhejiang "Wheat Study Room" sells religious books, shopkeeper sentenced to seven years in prison', 2 October 2020 www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/shehui/gf2-10022020082752.html

7 UK Parliament, Written questions, answers and statements, China: Christianity, Question for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, UIN 112162, tabled on 6 November 2020 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-11-06/112162>

8 NPR, 'China Targets Muslim Scholars And Writers With Increasingly Harsh Restrictions', 21 November 2020 www.npr.org/2020/11/21/932169863/china-targets-muslim-scholars-and-writers-with-increasingly-harsh-restrictions

9 Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Ideological Transformation": Records of Mass Detention from Qaraqash, Hotan', 18 February 2020 https://docs.uhrp.org/pdf/UHRP_QaraqashDocument.pdf

Recommendations

To the government of the People's Republic of China

- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (CED) and the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), and ensure their national laws and relevant policies are in line with these international conventions.
- Protect the right of all people in China to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, in accordance with Article 18 of the ICCPR and the UDHR.
- Protect the right of all people in China to freedom of opinion and expression in accordance with Article 19 of the ICCPR and the UDHR; this right includes freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

To the international community

- At every possible opportunity, in public and in private, urge the Chinese government to respect, protect and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief for all people in China, and to implement the recommendations provided above.
- Call for the immediate and unconditional release of all those arbitrarily detained in connection with the peaceful exercise of their human right including the right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Investigate and monitor cases of human rights abuses including violations of the right to FoRB.

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CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief, and as Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

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