

The Supremacy of the Party:

China's Weaponisation of Legislation and Policy
to Curtail Freedom of Religion or Belief

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1. Introduction

CSW’s previous reports on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in China, published in 2020 and 2022 respectively, documented the rapid and significant deterioration of the human rights situation in the country. Both reports focused on visible violations targeting religious or belief communities. The authoritarian posture of the Chinese government became even more apparent during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While much of the world gradually returned to normal, China maintained its harsh and deeply repressive ‘zero tolerance’ lockdown policy. In 2022, public frustration over the government’s extreme measures culminated in the peaceful White Paper protest. The movement was swiftly crushed and many participants were arrested, while others were forced into exile.

Three years on, and the pattern of suppression has not only persisted but, expanded. FoRB violations are no longer limited to the closure or demolition of community sites or the arrests of clergy. The violations have evolved into more subtle and systemic forms of control, extending across a wide spectrum that includes education, law, technology, international trade and cultural expression.

At the heart of this expansion lies the concept of ‘sinicisation’. While it may appear to be a benign effort to integrate religious practice with Chinese culture, the essence of religious sinicisation is not merely cultural assimilation; it is political domestication.

The objectives of this report are to inform policy makers, parliamentarians, researchers, NGOs, media, enterprises, and religious leaders of the repressive legal architecture underpinning FoRB violations in China, and to encourage them to consider further actions that could be taken to address this, and thereby assist victims. It also aims to elicit further academic research, and policy advocacy.

Chapter 3, ‘The Framework of Repression’, co-authored by a group of human rights lawyers from China, outlines the systematic and rapid increase in burdensome administrative legislation, which creates a complex legal

framework that entangles religious or belief individuals and communities. The authors highlight various cases that demonstrate how legislation is applied in different scenarios. This is followed in Chapter 4 by an in-depth examination of the plight of Linfen Covenant Home Church in the form of the personal testimony of a legal practitioner, who describes the deeply flawed process from detention to sentencing, exposing the weaponisation of legislation for political repression.

Under President Xi Jinping, there has been a codification of authoritarian control, where crackdowns often precede the formation of legislation, and ‘regulations’ function as administrative siege designed to suffocate dissent and subjugate religious expression. In Chapter 5, ‘Observations on the Evolution of Sinicisation’, the author, a Chinese scholar specialising in comparative politics and economics, details the shift in repression since 2020, from overt force to a slower, less conspicuous suffocation of religion and belief through administrative rules. He explains that the sinicisation strategy involves politicising the spiritual, distorting sacred texts with fabricated content, de-sanctifying beliefs to strip them of power and influence, and ultimately seeking to eradicate them altogether.

But how does economic power impact human rights violations? With limited interventions from the UK, US and the European Union, China has been able to grow its economy, largely without experiencing commensurate external consequences for its grave human rights violations.

In Chapter 6, ‘Human rights: EU-China trade relations’, the author, who specialises in EU relations, argues that the European Union, as China’s top trading partner, could leverage its trade policy to achieve foreign policy goals, including improvements in human rights. However, despite strong rhetoric, the EU has been hesitant to impose tough trade consequences on China, instead prioritising its economic and geopolitical interests. It is hoped that this stance will change, and that China’s economic influence will cease to intimidate key global actors into silence.

2. Recommendations

To the government of China

- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED); and the Optional Protocols to the Convention against Torture (CAT), to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).
- Protect the right of every individual to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, in accordance with Articles 18 of the ICCPR and UDHR. This should include amending Article 36 of the Constitution and revising all regulations and legislation pertaining to religion to ensure they align with international standards and avoid vague wording that allows for broad interpretation.
- Guarantee, in law and in practice, the right to publicly manifest one’s religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching without interference, as well as the right for religious or belief communities to choose their own religious leaders and teachers without state interference.
- Guarantee, in law and in practice, the freedom of religious and belief communities to establish seminaries or religious schools, and the freedom to prepare and distribute religious texts or publications.
- Ensure that the Measures for the Suppression of Illegal Social Organisations exclude gatherings of religious groups in accordance with Article 18 of the ICCPR and the UDHR.
- Repeal laws and regulations pertaining to xie jiao, including Article 300 of the Criminal Law.
- Refine vague wording in Criminal Procedure Law and other related legislation which allow broad interpretations.
- Ensure transparency in administrative and criminal detention and that these are handled in accordance with legal proceedings.
- Ensure that no citizen is detained incommunicado, and that family members of detainees are informed of their whereabouts and the charges against them in a timely manner, in accordance with international standards.
- Immediately release all prisoners of conscience detained in connection with their religion or belief, and the human rights defenders detained for upholding the rights of others.

To the United Nations and Member States

- Urge the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies to report on and address concerns regarding China’s targeted plan to sinicise religion in China.
- Call on the government of China to ratify and implement the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) immediately.
- Urge the government of China to implement recommendations given during the Universal Periodic Review and treaty body reviews.
- Call on the government of China to extend a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures, granting unhindered access to all parts of the country, including the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Tibet and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). In addition, ensure full and unhindered access to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, his office, and other international human rights bodies and experts.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on China, addressing the specific vulnerabilities and violations faced by religious and belief communities, and those seeking to defend their rights.
- Consider targeted sanctions against policymakers and others responsible for human rights violations in China.
- Ensure that individuals belonging to ethnic and/or religious or belief communities who seek refuge abroad are not forcibly returned to China, given the high risk of arbitrary detention and ill treatment.
- Urge the government of China, at every appropriate opportunity, to enact the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above ‘To the government of China’.

To the European Union and Member States

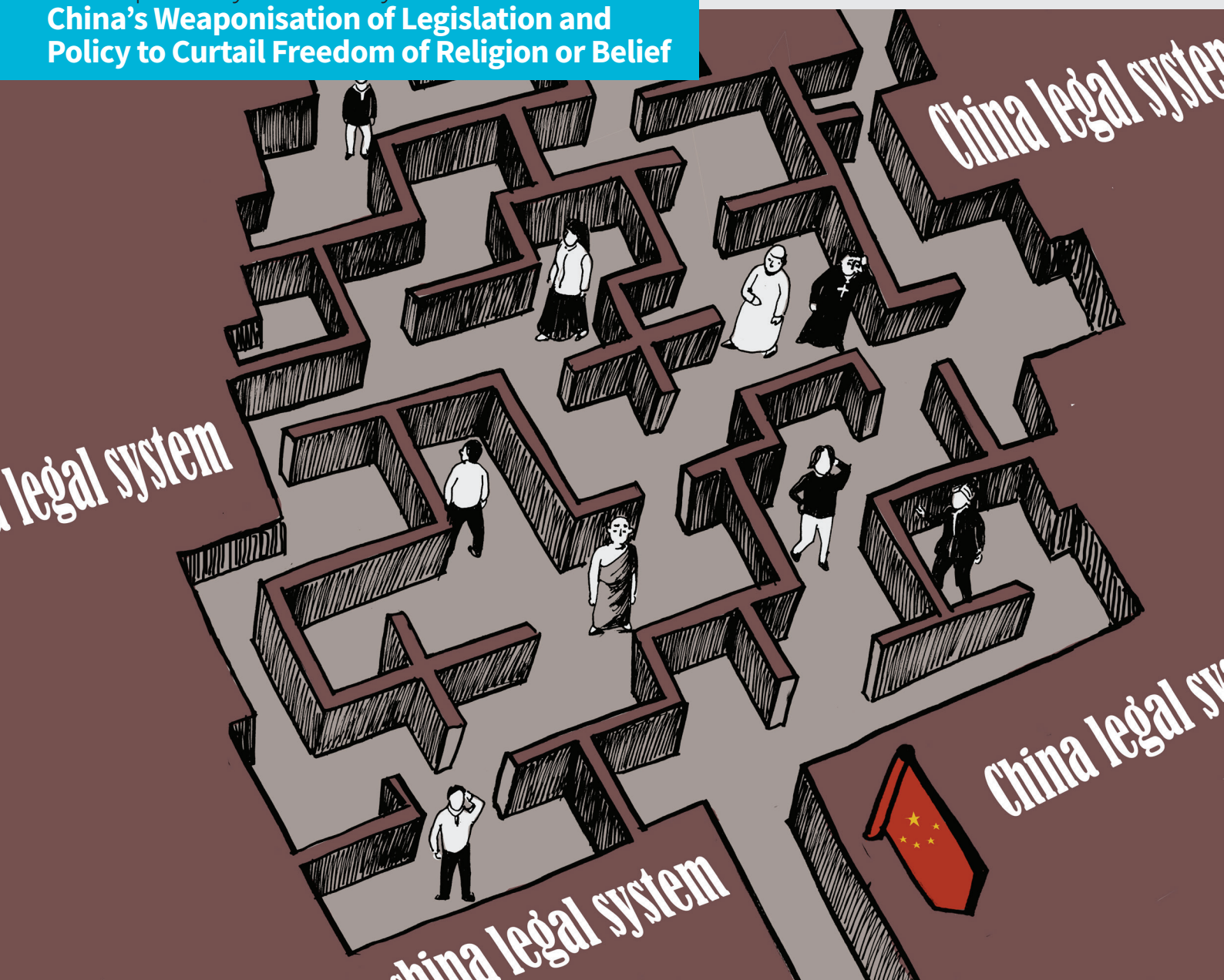
- Continue to evaluate the expediency of the EU-China human rights dialogue. In case of continuation, maintain the practice of including individual cases in the statement that the EU issues unilaterally following the annual human rights dialogue. This should continue to be shared on platforms with wide readership inside China such as Weibo, given that Embassy posts are not censored.
- Leverage EU-China trade and diplomatic relations, linking economic agreements, investment deals, and strategic partnerships to measurable improvements in FoRB.
- Demand transparency in administrative and criminal detention. Make urgent representations to the Chinese authorities regarding individual cases requesting clarification on both the wellbeing of prisoners and the reasons for detentions. Urge them either to proffer legitimate charges in line with international human rights standards or ensure immediate releases.
- The EU Delegation and Embassies should continue to monitor the FoRB situation closely, and request trial monitoring access and prison visits.
- Consider imposing further targeted sanctions on officials and entities directly responsible for severe FoRB violations.
- Provide funding for civil society groups and exiled communities documenting and campaigning on FoRB violations inside China.
- Urge the government of China, at every appropriate opportunity (including the regular Executive Vice-President level meetings), to enact the reforms highlighted in the Recommendation section above ‘To the government of China’.

To the government of the United Kingdom:

- Urge the government of China to cease the enforcement of sinicisation policies, and amend legislation, policies and practices that impinge on the full enjoyment of the right to FoRB by every religious and belief community.
- Demand the restoration of demolished religious buildings and the cessation of policies aimed at erasing religious and cultural identities.
- Back the establishment of a UN-mandated independent investigative mechanism on China. Collaborate with international partners to consider targeted sanctions against Chinese officials and institutions implicated in gross FoRB violations, and review UK trade engagement to avoid complicity in forced labour or religious persecution.
- Urge the government of China, at every appropriate opportunity, to enact the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above ‘To the government of China’.

To the government of the United States:

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in China and maintain the country as a Country of Particular Concern, as recommended by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF).
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and USCIRF should request an invitation to visit China with unhindered access to all parts of the country.
- Deny US travel visas to Chinese government and Communist Party officials directly responsible for FoRB violations.
- Support and engage with organisations dedicated to advancing FoRB in China at both the international and grassroots levels.



3. The Framework of Repression

Drafted by human rights lawyers living in exile – original text in Chinese

Introduction

China's religious policy, as the guiding principle for the China Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese government in handling religious affairs, reflects the state's basic attitude towards religion, its intentions to control, and its political goals. Religious laws and regulations are legal documents that concretise policies and provide an institutional basis for the management of religious affairs. Religious cases are specific examples of judicial or administrative organs handling religious affairs, truly demonstrating the effect of the application of policies and regulations in practice.

In mainland China, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is not protected in the manner stipulated in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). As a ruling party with atheism as its ideological

foundation, the CCP has always harboured latent hostility towards religion, viewing it as a political factor that could threaten national stability and ideological unity. Through policies, regulations, and judicial practices, the CCP implements multi-layered repressive measures, while also granting limited tolerance and exploiting religions when it serves their interests. This two-pronged strategy has been consistently applied in policies, regulations and legal cases, and shows how religious management has been applied in the post-pandemic era. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as pandemic prevention and control measures have been gradually relaxed, the CCP has not relaxed its control over religion. Instead, in the post-pandemic era, with the core concept of the

'sinicisation of religion', it has promoted policies and law enforcement practices in a more systematic, stringent and politicised direction.

On 7 January 2014, Xi Jinping stated in his speech at the Central Political and Legal Work Conference that 'The party's policies are the forerunner and guide of national laws, the basis for legislation and an important guide for law enforcement and justice. We must be good at using legal procedures to make the party's propositions become the state's will and form laws, and use laws to ensure the effective implementation of the party's policies, and ensure that the Party plays the role of a core leader that takes charge of the overall situation and coordinates all parties.'¹ The revision of the Regulations on Religious Affairs at the end of 2017, and the subsequent formulation of a large number of departmental regulations by the State Administration of Religious Affairs and other departments to further refine some of the provisions of the Regulations on Religious Affairs reflect the underlying characteristics of the 'rule by law' in the Xi era.

This chapter of the report focuses on the advancement of the sinicisation of religion in the post-pandemic era, analyses its specific manifestations in the legalisation of party policies and typical cases from 2020 to 2025, and explores its far-reaching impact on FoRB in depth. It refers to authoritative local and foreign materials, including the China Aid Association's 2019-2024 report² on Government Persecution of Christian Churches and Christians in Mainland China³ Freedom of Religion or Belief: The Untold Stories in combination with policy documents and data from legal cases. It strives to reveal the entire process of the sinicisation of religion from top-level design to grassroots enforcement, as well as the severe existential challenge caused by this to religious communities. This research finds that in the post-pandemic era, significant trends emerged through legal cases involving religious beliefs, activities, groups or venues, that conviction tactics have shifted from administrative penalties to criminalisation, and that the targets of crackdowns have expanded from ethnic minority religions to include Christianity and other religions. This not only reflects the highly politically driven nature of the policy of sinicisation of religion, but

also highlights the systematic suppression of religious independence and diversity.

Laws and Regulations: Implementing the Sinicisation of Religion

The Top-Level Design and Legal Foundation of the Policy of Sinicisation of Religion

In China, the legal system essentially serves the rule of the CCP. Although the Constitution claims to guarantee freedom of religious belief, namely in Article 36, the will of the party supercedes this and the CCP maintains absolute control over religion through the entire legislative, judicial and executive process.⁴ Legal authority comes from the party's authorisation, and the courts are subject to the Political and Legal Affairs Commission system. Legal cases involving religious beliefs, activities, groups or venues are particularly sensitive and are often characterised as 'stability-related issues.' Although the Regulations on Religious Affairs are called laws, they are in essence a legalised shell for a united-front political strategy. Through the post-pandemic era, the strategy of the sinicisation of religion has become the most representative form of governance.

In 2015 Xi Jinping first proposed the 'Four Musts'⁵ at the Central United Front Work Conference, clearly stating that 'we must adhere to the direction of sinicisation of religion'. This, for the first time, elevated the sinicisation of religion to a core principle of national religious governance. In April 2016 the National Religious Work Conference further emphasised that religion must adapt to socialist society and made it clear that religion should serve the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics.⁶

In 2017 the 19th National Congress of the CCP incorporated the sinicisation of religion into Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, marking its official inclusion as part of the national ideological system. At the end of 2020 the Regulations on the United Front Work of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China were revised to incorporate the sinicisation of religion into party regulations, emphasising the management of religion through 'guidance' and the establishment of

1 'This assertion captures the key point of the relationship between the Party and the law', *Qiushi*, 10 December 2020 https://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanku/2020-12/10/c_1126845971.htm

2 China Aid Association annual reports are available at: <https://chinaaid.org/annual-persecution-reports/>

3 'China: Freedom of Religion or Belief: The Untold Stories', CSW, July 2022 <https://www.csw.org.uk/untoldstories>

4 The decision of the Central Committee of the CCP on several major issues concerning the comprehensive promotion of the rule of law (adopted at the Fourth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee on October 23, 2014): 'We must uphold the Party's leadership in legislation, ensure law enforcement, support the judiciary, and take the lead in abiding by the law.'

https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-10/28/content_2771946.htm

5 'Xi Jinping: Consolidate and develop the broadest patriotic united front', *Xinhua News Agency*, 20 May 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-05/20/c_1115351358.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com

6 'National Religious Work Conference Held in Beijing; Xi Jinping Speaks, Li Keqiang Presides', *Central Government Portal*, 23 April 2016, https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2016-04/23/content_5067281.htm

religious relations under the full control of the state. This evolutionary process demonstrates that the sinicisation of religion is no longer an initiative for cultural integration, but a political project for the party to strengthen its overall leadership over religion, as well as ideological unity.⁷

The sinicisation of religion is widely interpreted as a modern version of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Church, the official government organ for the supervision of Protestant Christianity that was founded in the 1950s, but its connotations are quite different from its predecessor’s concepts of ‘mutual adaptation’ or a ‘harmonious society’. Some scholars pointed out that its main goal is not simple cultural assimilation, but political domestication, ensuring that religions fully obey the leadership of the CCP. The ambiguity of sinicisation of religion provides flexible space for interpretation: First, the term ‘China’ is used in contrast with ‘foreign’, which means that foreign religions (such as Christianity and Islam) must conform to what the CCP defines as ‘Chinese tradition’; second, ‘China’ represents an atheist regime, requiring religions that promote theism to carry out activities without threatening the regime; third, ‘China’ represents Han culture, and exercises strict control over ethnic minority religions in Inner Mongolia, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang and other places to prevent the risk of a ‘split’; fourth, ‘China’ represents authoritarian rule, and views universal values such as religious freedom as a hostile ideology; fifth, ‘China’ represents Xi Jinping’s personal authority, and that religious activities must not ‘make Xi Jinping unhappy’, otherwise they will be regarded as insufficiently sinicised. This multifaceted approach has made the sinicisation of religion a ‘placeholder’, similar to the parking spaces in front of stores that are occupied by cones, with the purpose of marking the territory and preventing other ideas from entering, while also serving as a ‘basket’ that can be filled with political content (such as patriotism and core socialist values) at any time. The ultimate goal is to infringe upon FoRB and eliminate the independence of religion. Those in authority have the power of interpretation, and law enforcement officials at the grassroots level are secretly encouraged not to stick to the legal provisions but to strictly enforce the sinicisation process. The subtext conveyed is ‘No matter how you wish to enforce it, you can always find a ‘legal basis’ for doing so.’

The Ambiguity and Complexity of Legal Design

In China, one of the core characteristics of the religious legal system is the uncertainty and ambiguity of the legal text itself, which provides law enforcement officials with great flexibility in interpretation when dealing with different religious groups and individuals. With the CCP’s

strong emphasis on ideology and social control, this legal ambiguity is not accidental, but a systematic institutional strategy aimed at achieving different levels of control and political filtering of religious behaviour through opaque regulatory language, complex administrative procedures, and highly politicised law enforcement practices.

Taking the Regulations on Religious Affairs and its series of supporting administrative regulations as an example, the Regulations widely use terms such as ‘harming national interests’, ‘disrupting social order’, ‘illegal religious activities’, ‘religious extremism’, ‘inciting secession of the country’, and ‘obstructing the implementation of the system’, but these terms lack clear definitions, specific boundaries and any unified judicial interpretation. This uncertainty allows law enforcement agencies to make differing or even opposing decisions and treatments of the same religious behaviour based on current political agenda. As the terms are not clearly defined in law, the legality of the same religious behaviour can be arbitrarily judged in different regions, at different times, and in different contexts. For example, an unregistered ‘house church’ may be allowed to exist for years in one province, but in another region it may be considered to be holding ‘illegal gatherings’ or ‘disturbing public order’, and criminal charges may even be brought against the church leaders. The judgment criteria behind law enforcement often do not come from the legal provisions themselves, but are based on the party and government’s goals in maintaining stability and the political sensitivity of local governments.

In addition, the Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services (2022), which strengthen the Chinese government’s control over religious expression in the digital space, further reflect the institutional development of this ambiguity. The measures require that to disseminate any religious information online, an ‘Internet Religious Information Services License’ must be obtained, but the measures do not clearly specify what content qualifies as ‘religious information’ or define the criteria for ‘obstructing the implementation of the system’,⁸ effectively making it equivalent to ‘pocket crimes’, a term referring to vaguely defined and broadly applicable offenses that can be used to target virtually any behaviour, in the realm of policy. Articles 15 to 17 clearly impose restrictions on individuals and groups that are not officially certified: Unlicensed entities are prohibited from conducting missionary work, organising religious education, or publishing sermons on the internet, and are even prohibited from forwarding related links. At the same time, live broadcasts or recordings of religious rituals in the form of text, pictures, audio and video are also strictly prohibited. Only religious groups and religious schools that have obtained permission and whose content is ‘conducive to social harmony, progress of the times, and healthy civilisation’

are allowed to carry out online religious dissemination within a specific scope. Article 33 empowers law enforcement agencies to impose administrative penalties or even criminal prosecution on individuals or organisations that violate the above provisions.

Local refinements, such as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region Religious Affairs Bureau’s Notice on the Implementation of Internet Religious Information Services Licensing (2022), further raises the licensing threshold, requiring applicants to submit a Certificate of No Criminal Record issued by a public security department within the past three years, a Property Ownership Certificate or Lease Contract of the service venue, and for competency tests to be administered to assess information reviewers’ familiarity with relevant policies. These regulations fully incorporate cyberspace into the state’s ideological surveillance framework, enforce digital control over the sinicisation of religion, and prohibit any dissemination of beliefs not officially sanctioned.

Loopholes in the Criminal Procedure Law

Although China’s Criminal Procedure Law (CPL) provides for procedural rights such as lawyers’ visits, rules of evidence, and the prohibition of self-incrimination, these provisions are often not observed or respected in religious or political cases.

First, lawyers’ intervention is severely restricted. In cases involving charges of ‘endangering national security’ (such as ‘inciting subversion of state power’), public security organs and national security departments often deny lawyers access to suspects on the grounds that the cases are ‘confidential’, and even delay approval for months, leaving suspects in solitary confinement for long periods without legal assistance. This practice undermines the defendant’s right to defence and procedural justice.

Secondly, ‘Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location’ (RSDL) is often abused as a de facto secret detention tool. Although Article 75 of the CPL allows the use of RSDL in cases of ‘endangering national security’, in practice this system is widely used to suppress religious figures and dissidents. Under RSDL, detainees are usually held in secret locations, isolated from the outside world for up to six months. During this period, they are unable to contact their families or meet with lawyers, and are in a legal black hole. Some religious leaders reportedly suffer enforced disappearances, mental abuse and even torture during RSDL.

Third, the trial process lacks openness and transparency. Many cases involving religious beliefs are classified as

‘endangering national security’ or ‘disturbing social order’ and are therefore excluded from public trials. Even if a court session is held, family members, the media and the public are often not allowed to attend. The trial process and basis for the verdict are rarely made public, and the case is hastily closed with only a brief notice from the court. The judicial process as a whole lacks fundamental transparency, preventing any form of societal oversight.

The Political Use of Vague Charges

Given the absence of judicial independence in China, political and religious cases are in practice managed by the Political and Legal Affairs Commission, meaning that interpretations of legal concepts are centred on political stability and maintaining control. The formulation of these charges is intentionally vague, enabling greater scope for arbitrary interpretation of the law and selective enforcement. Some provisions of China’s Criminal Law have long been criticised as ‘pocket crimes’, serving as instruments for suppressing dissent and restricting FoRB.

For example, the crime of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ stipulated in Article 293 of the Criminal Law and originating from the former crime of ‘hooliganism’ is used to punish acts that disrupt social order, with a maximum sentence of up to ten years in prison. Due to the vague wording of the provisions and the wide range of behaviours covered, it has become a common tool used by public security organs in dealing with sensitive groups and rights-defending individuals, and has long been criticised by the legal community.

Another similar example, the crime of ‘illegal business operations’ should, under strict legal principle, have clearly defined boundaries. However, the catch-all provision, ‘other illegal business activities that disrupt market order’, grants the judicial authorities expansive discretion in interpretation. This has resulted in it becoming one of the so-called ‘all-purpose charges,’ frequently used to target individuals or groups whose views conflict with official ideology⁹

This ambiguity is particularly evident in the management of religious affairs. All religious personnel are required to hold an officially issued Religious Clergy Certificate in order to preach publicly. Preaching without certification, particularly when accepting offerings from believers, may be treated as a criminal offense under the charge of ‘fraud’. Article 36 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs clearly stipulates that only registered religious venues and clergy can legally carry out religious activities. Unregistered ‘house churches’ or underground churches may be held criminally responsible for

7 Regulations of the CCP on the United Front Work, revised at the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee meeting on 30 November 2020, and issued by the CCP Central Committee on 21 December 2020
8 Article 14 of the Internet Religious Information Services Management Measures.

9 ‘Pocket Crimes of Illegal Business Operations: Who Can Set Up “Pockets”?’, Sina, 23 June 2017, https://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5036bc980102xzn0.html

‘illegal fundraising’ or ‘fraud’ even if the donations are voluntary¹⁰.

These institutional loopholes enable the unlawful suppression of religious practitioners and believers under the guise of legal enforcement.

The Refinement of the Regulations on Religious Affairs and the Implementation of Sinicisation of Religion

The Regulations on Religious Affairs, as pivotal regulations for religious management in China, have been the legal cornerstone for religious affairs management since their promulgation in 2004. The 2017 revision further incorporated the principle of sinicisation of religion, providing an institutional basis for the refinement of administrative regulations in the post-pandemic era. Using the Regulations on Religious Affairs as a blueprint, relevant administrative regulations and rules have been implemented in areas such as internet information management, political constraints on clergy and religious groups, centralised control over religious venues and finances, standardisation of religious education and human resource development, targeted governance of Islam and Tibetan Buddhism, and strict oversight of cross-border activities and publications, primarily manifested in the following aspects:

1. Licensing and Content Control for Online Religious Information

The aforementioned Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services (implemented on 10 March 2022) further refine the management of religious information dissemination stipulated in Article 47 of the Regulations. Article 3 explicitly requires that internet religious information services must uphold core socialist values, adhere to the principle of independence and self-management of religions in China, comprehensively advance the sinicisation of religion, and actively guide religion to adapt to socialist society. Article 4 proposes the management principles of ‘protecting the legal, stopping the illegal, curbing extremism, resisting infiltration, and combatting crime’. Article 6 stipulates that any service that provides the public with information on religious doctrines, religious knowledge, religious culture or religious activities in the form of text, images, audio or video through websites, applications, forums, blogs, microblogs, public accounts, instant messaging tools, live broadcasts, etc. must obtain an Internet Religious Information Services License and employ content reviewers familiar with national religious policies, regulations and relevant religious knowledge.

Articles 15-17 further restrict individuals or non-licensed groups from conducting, preaching, religious education and training, publishing sermons or forwarding related links online. The live broadcast or recording of religious ceremonies such as worshipping Buddha, burning incense, taking vows, chanting scriptures, worship, mass, baptism, etc. in the form of text, pictures, audio or video are prohibited. Only licensed religious groups and religious schools are allowed to disseminate sinicised religious content that is deemed ‘conducive to promoting social harmony, societal progress and a healthy civilised society’ within a specific scope. Violators face administrative penalties or criminal liability in accordance with Article 33.

2. Political Constraints on Clergy and Religious Groups

The Measures for the Management of Religious Clergy (effective from 1 May 2021) further detail the management requirements for clergy in Article 36 of the Regulations. Article 3 stipulates that religious clergy must ‘love the motherland, support the leadership of the CCP, support the socialist system, abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations and rules, practice core socialist values, adhere to the principle of independence and self-management of religions in China, adhere to the direction of sinicisation of religion in China, and maintain national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability.’ Article 6 adds new obligations such as ‘safeguarding national interests and social public interests’, ‘accepting management by religious affairs departments in accordance with the law’, ‘resisting illegal religious activities and religious extremism’, and ‘resisting infiltration by foreign forces using religion’. Article 12 prohibits endangering national security, interfering in administrative, judicial or educational affairs, accepting foreign commissions, unauthorised missionary activities, or conducting commercial propaganda in the name of religion.

Article 5 of the Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups (effective from 1 February 2020) requires religious organisations to ‘uphold the leadership of the CCP, abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules, and policies, adhere to the principle of independence, self-reliance, and self-management, adhere to the direction of sinicisation of religion in China, practice core socialist values, and safeguard national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and social stability.’ Article 14 restricts organisation branches from using words such as ‘China’ or ‘National’ in their names. Article 17 clarifies that the functions of religious groups include the ‘promotion of the principles and policies of

the CCP as well as national laws, regulations, and rules to religious clergy and believers, educating and guiding religious clergy and believers to support the leadership of the CCP, uphold the socialist system, adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, comply with laws, regulations, rules, and policies, correctly handle the relationship between state laws and religious doctrine, and strengthen their awareness of the country, the rule of law, and citizenship.’ Article 22 requires ‘research to be conducted on religious culture and religious texts, promoting religious ideological construction, thoroughly exploring the elements of doctrines and rules that support social harmony, society progress and healthy civilised society’. It also calls for interpreting religious doctrines and rules in a way that aligns with the developmental needs of contemporary China and with traditional Chinese culture. These detailed measures transform clergy and religious groups into tools of the CCP’s united front, ensuring that religious activities fully serve the party’s political goals.

3. Centralised Management of Religious Venues and Finances

The Measures for the Management of Religious Activity Venues (effective from 1 September 2023) further detail the management of venues in Articles 20-23 of the regulations. Article 12 stipulates that an application to establish preparatory organisation must be reviewed by the county level Religious Affairs Bureau, and that temples, monasteries and churches must be approved by the provincial ethnic and religious affairs committee. Article 24 requires that the management body be composed of religious clergy, representatives of believers and other religious figures. and be filed for the record. Article 29 lists seven circumstances under which members of the management organisation may be removed, including interference in administrative or judicial matters, being subject to foreign control, and organising unauthorised activities outside the designated religious venue. Articles 41-42 prohibit unauthorised religious activities outside the designated religious venue. Article 53 prohibits the construction of large outdoor religious statues outside temples, monasteries and churches. Article 58 requires the establishment of a security management team to perform the duties of stopping illegal activities, resisting extremist ideas, and preventing foreign infiltration.

The Measures for the Financial Management of Religious Activity Venues (effective from 1 June 2022) refine the financial supervision described in Article 53 of the regulations, deleting the word ‘supervision’ and replacing it with ‘direct management’, and adding a chapter on ‘Financial Management of Institutions and Personnel’. The measures stipulate that religious venues must pay taxes in accordance with the law,

and donations must be acknowledged with an official, serial-numbered receipt issued by the provincial religious affairs authority. They also stipulate that major financial matters must be approved by the Religious Affairs Bureau, financial and accounting reports must be submitted annually and are subject to inspections and audits, and donations through internet payment platforms such as Alipay and WeChat are prohibited. These measures ensure, through centralised control of venues and finances, that religious activities and resources comply with the requirements of the sinicisation of religion, effectively eliminating any external influence or independent operation.

4. Standardisation of Religious Education and Human Resources Development

The Measures for the Recognition of Teacher Qualifications and Professional Title Evaluation in Religious Schools and the Measures for the Awarding of Academic Titles in Religious Schools (implemented from 1 January 2025) further refine the supervision of religious education in Article 10 of the regulations. They clarify that education in religious schools does not fall under the national education system, and that the awarding of teacher qualifications and academic titles must be subject to dual approval from both religious organisations and the government authorities, so as to ensure political reliability and not merely religious competence.

Article 11 of the Regulations on the Management of Tibetan Buddhist Temples (implemented from January 1, 2025) requires temple management organisations to ‘unite and educate believers to love the motherland, support the leadership of the CCP, practice core socialist values, forge a strong sense of community for the Chinese nation, and adhere to the direction of sinicisation of religion’. Article 18 prohibits the admission of children of compulsory education age to study scriptures in temples. This refines the control over Tibetan Buddhist education. By means of the standardisation and politicisation of education, these regulations ensure that religious traditions produce successors that conform to state ideology.

5. Special Provisions on the Sinicisation of Tibetan Buddhism and Islam

The Measures for the Administration of the Reincarnation of Tulku in Tibetan Buddhism (implemented on 1 September 2007)provided. Article 4 stipulates that if a reincarnation of a tulku is explicitly prohibited by a people’s government at municipal-level or higher, the application for reincarnation shall be denied. Articles 5-9 require that applications for reincarnation and the identification of reincarnated tulku be reported to the

10 198 Court Document No.: (2019) Jin 0602 Criminal First Instance No. 191, Cause of Action: Fraud, Summary: The defendants regularly collected ‘donations’ and ‘tithes’ from believers, which were then transferred through layers of funds to the Korean General Association’s account. This operating system violated China’s ‘Three Self’s’ principles of religious self-propagation, self-governance, and self-support... The defendant, Cui Hong, did not possess religious clergy status... The donations and tithes were all voluntarily paid by believers...

State Council for approval. Article 12 regulates a training plan after¹¹ succession takes place, reflecting political interference in the sinicisation of Tibetan Buddhism. Article 5 of the Regulations on the Management of Tibetan Buddhist Temples prohibits the restoration of religious feudal privileges and foreign interference. Articles 15 and 20 respectively stipulate that the number of personnel and the key religious clergy must be reviewed by the state-sanctioned Buddhism Association and filed for the record, serving the goal of ‘strengthening the sense of community for the Chinese nation’.

For Islam, ‘Selected Passages from the Quran with Brief Annotations’ (published by the Commercial Press in September 2024) and the ‘Five-Year Working Plan for Deepening the Sinicisation of Islam in China’ (2023-2027) have detailed the interpretation of doctrine and human resource training, emphasising the use of socialist core values and traditional Chinese culture to permeate religion. At the publishing symposium on 29 October 2024 the Deputy Minister of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China Chen Ruifeng pointed out that Selected Passages from the Quran with Brief Annotations is an important achievement of the sinicisation of Islam, and mandates outreach within mosques, Islamic institutions, and traditional religious education to guide Muslims toward ‘correct belief’ and to ‘stay away from extremism and resist radicalism’. In places such as Guyuan City in Ningxia, Document No. 57 (2018) issued by the local government revoked the use of terms like ‘halal’ and ‘Islamic culture’ in official documents, replacing them with terms like ‘tourism’ and ‘Belt and Road countries’ to promote cultural assimilation. These detailed measures reflect the deepening implementation and political transformation of the sinicisation of religion in ethnic minority areas.

6. Strict Scrutiny of Cross-Border Activities and Publications

The Implementation Measures for Some Administrative Licensing Projects in Religious Affairs (implemented on 1 February 2018) further refined Article 48 of the regulations on the supervision of cross-border and publication-related activities, covering licensing projects such as conducting religious education and training, building large-scale outdoor religious statues in temples and churches, renovating buildings, holding large-scale religious activities, compiling and distributing internal religious publications, accepting foreign donations, hiring foreign professionals, foreigners bringing religious supplies into the country, and inviting foreign religious clergy to preach. Articles 31-32 stipulate that the compilation and printing of religious publications must be subjected to approval by both the provincial religious affairs department and the publishing administrative department. Articles 38-41 stipulate that the acceptance of foreign donations exceeding 100,000 yuan must be reported to the State Administration of Religious Affairs. Article 44 requires that foreign personnel must have no ‘anti-China’ record. Articles 63-64 stipulate that invitations for foreign lectures must be reported to the national or provincial religious affairs department for approval. These details are strictly reviewed to ensure that religious activities comply with the principle of ‘independence, self-reliance and self-management’, so as to eliminate external influences, and to ensure the sinicisation of religion.

Cases Studies



Ji Xiaolong - Credit ChinaAid

Ji Xiaolong

Ji Xiaolong, a Christian and human rights defender from Zhangjiagang City, Jiangsu Province, was administratively detained for 10 days by Pudong New Area police on charges of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ in June 2015 for promoting democratic ideas. On 20 July 2018, he was sentenced to three years and six months for calling for a ‘toilet revolution’ (a government campaign aimed at improving the sanitary conditions in mainland China) online and writing anti-government slogans (such as ‘Down with the Communist Party’ and ‘Overthrow Xi’) in public toilets.

He was released on 9 February 2022 after serving his sentence. In the same year, he continued to speak out for citizens during the lockdown of Shanghai. On 31 August 2022 he was taken away by Meiyuan Xincun Police Station. On 27 October 2023, he was sentenced to four years and six months by police in Pudong New Area, again on charges of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’.

The punishment of religious figures for political criticism reflects the intertwining of the sinicisation of religion and the suppression of freedom of speech, consistent with Article 12 of the Measures for the Management

of Religious Clergy, which prohibits interference in social affairs, and Article 17 of the Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups, which mandates the promotion of party policies.

The case shows that the boundaries between belief and political expression are being artificially blurred and criminalisation is becoming more severe. In terms of trend, the political participation of religious figures has become the target of suppression, indicating that FoRB will face further politicised suppression.

Kan Xiaoyong

Kan Xiaoyong is the founder and full-time pastor of the Home Discipleship Network, an online church based in Dailan, Lioaning Province. He established the church with his wife Wang Fengying in 2018. On 20 October 2021 he was arrested by the Shahekou District police on charges of ‘using superstition to undermine law enforcement’ for his continued preaching of the gospel. Valuable items in his home were looted, and his co-worker Chu Xinyu and three female believers Zhao Ganjiao, Zhang Songai and Liang Dongzhi were also arrested. They were tortured during interrogation and were later criminally detained and arrested.

In November 2022 the Dalian Ganjinzi District Procuratorate added ‘fraud’ and ‘illegal business operations’ charges. On 12 January 2024 the first trial sentenced Kan Xiaoyong to 14 years, Chu Xinyu to ten years, Wang Fengying to four years, and the three others to three to seven years in prison.

Online churches are classified as ‘exploiting superstition’, in accordance with Article 15 of the Internet Religious Information Services Management Measures, which prohibits online missionary work, and reflects the strict suppression of emerging forms of religion under the policy of religious sinicisation. The addition of charges shows a trend toward the expansion of judicial enforcement, in line with the mandate to ‘crack down on illegal activities’. In terms of trends, digital repression has intensified and the space for online religious activities has shrunk, foreshadowing the possibility of more extensive surveillance and conviction.

11 A tulku (Chinese: ‘huófó’, literally ‘living Buddha’) is an individual recognised as the reincarnation of a previous spiritual master (lama), and expected to be reincarnated, in turn, after death.



Ma Yan - Credit ChinaAid

Ma Yan¹²

Ma Yan is a preacher of the Yinchuan House Church in Ningxia. On 9 August 2024 he was arrested by the Jinfeng District police while studying the Bible in a home with ten other Christians. Two of the group were administratively detained for seven days, while Ma and another person were detained for ten days. On 20 August they were criminally detained for ‘organising an illegal gathering’.

Ma was arrested on 29 September, prosecuted on 27 January 2025, and his trial began on 10 February. He was sentenced to nine months in prison on 24 March 2025. His sentence was offset by 32 days of previous administrative detentions and hence he was released from prison and reunited with his family on 17 April.

The key point in Ma Yan’s case is that he and other Christians were only holding ordinary Bible study meetings and were not disturbing social order, but they were convicted of ‘organising an illegal gathering’. This shows that the government has fully included unauthorised religious activities in the category of ‘illegal behaviour’, and that even religious communication may lead to criminal charges. Bible study being deemed as illegal is consistent with Article 41 of the Measures for the Management of Religious Activity Venues which prohibits religious activities outside the approved venue, reflecting the sinicisation of Christianity. As a pilot region for religious sinicisation, Ningxia has in recent years extended its control measures from Islam to Christianity, escalating from administrative regulation to criminal enforcement, in accordance with the directive to ‘strengthen the Party’s leadership over religious affairs.’ As a broader trend, criminal risks are increasing, and the house churches are facing a deepening survival crisis

Semkyi Dolma¹³

Semkyi Dolma, a female Tibetan originally from Qumarlei County, Jieguduo (now Yushu), Tibet, moved to Dangxiong County in 2019 as a bride. According to

sources who spoke to exiled Tibetan media, in October 2023, she was arrested by the Dangxiong County police. It was not until 2 December 2023 that Dolma’s family received a notice that she had been sentenced to one year and six months in prison for leaking state secrets. Dolma’s sentence expired in April 2025, however there has been no news of her release.

Although the authorities have not yet stated the specific reason for her arrest, sources indicate that Dolma was likely detained due to her frequent participation in religious related WeChat groups.

This legal case once again exposes the grim reality of the human rights situation in Tibet, especially the continued restrictions on freedom of speech and religious belief. Dolma’s experience is not an isolated case, but a reflection of the Chinese government’s intensifying of its control over Tibetan society in recent years. Since the 2008 Lhasa protests, Chinese authorities have tightened their surveillance of Tibet, particularly in cyberspace, where they have exercised high-pressure control over Tibetan speech and information dissemination.

In recent years, the Chinese government has stepped up internet censorship and social media monitoring in Tibet, and it is not uncommon for Tibetans to be arrested for posting, forwarding or discussing political or religious topics in WeChat groups or on social media platforms. Dolma’s legal case shows that participating in religious WeChat groups can be deemed a criminal act. This situation not only deprives Tibetans of their right to freedom of expression, but also makes them live in fear. The government also enforces monastery internet surveillance, and monks’ social activities are strictly restricted. Even ordinary Tibetans who share the Dalai Lama’s teachings, information around the Dharma, or even simply forward religious images on social media, may face serious consequences.

The restrictions on online activities aligns with Article 15 of the Administrative Measures of *Internet Religious Information Services* which prohibit personal preaching, highlighting the policy orientation toward the sinicisation of Tibetan Buddhism. At the same time, Article 5 of the Regulations on the Management of Tibetan Buddhist Temples strictly limits overseas influence, while the broad interpretation of the crime of ‘leaking state secrets’ provides a legal tool for suppressing religious activities. Overall, internet surveillance continues to intensify and the space for religious expression is shrinking, indicating that the right of Tibetans to freedom of religion or belief will be further restricted



Sun Chenghao - Credit ChinaAid

Sun Chenghao

Sun Chenghao is a Korean pastor from Zhangye City, Gansu Province. In August 2023 he travelled to Jeju Island, South Korea through normal channels, established a ‘Jeju Island Free Travel’ WeChat group to coordinate his itinerary, and returned under normal circumstances. On 15

December 2023, the Zhangye Municipal Public Security Bureau criminally detained him on charges of ‘organising for others to illegally cross borders’ and he has been held in the Ganzhou District Detention Centre ever since. His wife and daughter were warned not to contact other church members, leading to severe hardship in their daily lives.

In this case, legitimate cross-border travel has been criminalised, reflecting how the judicial interpretation of Article 318 of the Criminal Law has been linked to the religious sinicisation policy of ‘resisting infiltration.’ In 2022 an opinion issued by the Supreme People’s Court and other authorities expanded the scope of conviction by including ‘fabricating facts to obtain exit permission’, thereby breaching the principle of legality in criminal law.

The use of WeChat Groups violates the restrictions of Article 15 of the Internet Religious Information Services Management Measures. Restrictions on cross-border activities and intensified internet surveillance indicate that international religious connections are likely to be completely severed.

Wang Honglan

For many years, Wang Honglan and others in Inner Mongolia purchased Bibles from the Three-Self Church at the original price or a 5% discount, and then sold them to Christians and the public at a 25% discount, sometimes even giving them away for free. In essence, they subsidised the purchases out of their own pockets.

On 15 April 2021 Wang was detained by the Huimin District Public Security Bureau of Hohhot City alongside nine others and charged with ‘illegal business operations’.

On 20 November 2023 a legal case was heard in the Huimin District Court, two years after it was transferred to the court and two years and seven months after the defendants were detained.. The prosecution asserted that the sales volumes had exceeded 40 million yuan and proposed a sentence of 10-15 years for the four main defendants including Wang, and a lighter sentence for the other six. Sentencing has not yet been enacted.

Subsidising the redistribution of legal publications was deemed an ‘illegal business operation’, violating the principle of ‘exhaustion of distribution rights’ and aligning the strict approval requirements for publication set out in Articles 31-32 of the Implementation Measures for Some Administrative Licensing Projects in Religious Affairs.¹⁴

The case reflects the systematic suppression of religious publications under sinicisation of religion, aligning with the ‘resistance to infiltration’ policy aimed at cutting off believers’ access to uncensored religious materials. As an overall trend, the control of publications has been intensified, and freedom of speech and religious expression have been restricted, signalling a probable further expansion.

12 ‘Evangelist Ma Yan from Yinchuan, Ningxia, was charged with “organizing an illegal gathering” and sentenced to nine months in prison’, *Radio Free Asia*, 26 March 2025 <https://www.rfa.org/mandarin/shehui/2025/03/26/china-suppress-christianity-mayan/>

13 ‘A Tibetan woman from Dangxiong County, Tibet, was illegally sentenced to one year and six months in prison by the Chinese Communist Party’, *Voice of Tibet*, 11 December 2023 <https://cn.vot.org/2023/12/11/%E8%A5%BF%E8%97%8F%E5%BD%93%E9%9B%84%E5%8E%BF%E4%B8%80%E5%90%8D%E8%97%8F%E4%BA%BA%E5%A6%87%E5%A5%B3%E9%81%AD%E4%B8%AD%E5%85%B1%E9%9D%9E%E6%B3%95%E5%88%A4%E5%A4%84%E4%B8%80%E5%B9%B4%E9%9B%B6%E5%85%AD/>

14 Implementation Measures for Administrative Licensing of Religious Affairs

Article 31: Applications for the compilation and distribution of internal religious publications must meet the following conditions:

(1) The purpose of the compilation and distribution is limited to work guidance and information exchange consistent with the applicant’s business;

(2) The distribution must be confined to to the applicant’s industry, system, or unit;

(3) The application must comply with relevant provisions such as the “Regulations on Religious Affairs,” the “Printing Industry Management Regulations,” and the “Management Measures for Internal Publications”;

(4) The principal editors must possess a high level of religious knowledge.

Personal collections of essays and albums of paintings do not qualify as internal publications and will not be approved.

Article 32: Applications for the compilation and distribution of internal religious publications must submit the following materials:

1) Application, detailing the purpose of the compilation and distribution, summary, word count, print run, and distribution scope;

(2) A clean sample of the manuscript intended for printing.

(3); A statement describing the qualifications or background of the editors / authors

(4) Review opinion issued by a national religious group or a provincial, autonomous region, or municipality-level religious group.



Wang Yi - Credit ChinaAid

Wang Yi
Pastor Wang Yi of Chengdu’s Early Rain Covenant Church and over one hundred of his church members were arrested in a large-scale crackdown in the early morning of 9 December 2018. After a secret trial on 28 December 2019, Pastor Wang was sentenced to nine years in prison on charges of ‘inciting subversion of state power’ and ‘illegal business operations’.

Prior to his detention, Pastor Wang wrote a statement entitled A Declaration for the Christian Faith, which was signed by hundreds of Chinese pastors and which publicly condemned the CCP’s persecution of Christians. Pastor Wang is still serving his nine-year prison sentence, and Early Rain Covenant Church has suffered ongoing harassment for the past seven years.

The crime of ‘inciting subversion of state power’ of which Pastor Wang was convicted does not require the perpetrator to commit any actual violent acts, and can be constituted solely based on speech, writing, or preaching content. In Pastor Wang’s case, statements in his sermons, such as ‘If you do not repent, you will perish’, which were derived from Christian doctrine, were interpreted by the authorities as ‘offensive speech’ against state power and then used as evidence of ‘incitement to subversion.’ This shows the state’s tendency to politicise religious expression and criminalise theological language.

At the same time, the application of the crime of ‘illegal business operations’ also presents a high degree of uncertainty. Pastor Wang was accused of publishing and distributing sermon materials and religious publications without the approval of the State Administration of Religious Affairs. The logic behind this accusation is that the state subjects all religious propagation to an approval and licensing system, and anything without approval is deemed ‘illegal’, effectively denying religious groups not recognised by the state the right to legally exist.

From investigation and prosecution to trial, Pastor Wang’s case was marked by a serious lack of due process. First, the trial was not heard in public. The court did not allow the media or the public to attend, and the verdict was not fully released to the public, making the judicial process completely opaque. Secondly, the defence

lawyer hired by Pastor Wang at the beginning of the case was denied access to crucial information by the authorities and forced to withdraw. Pastor Wang was also denied his right to meet with his defence lawyer, resulting in him being interrogated for long periods of time without effective legal assistance.

What is even more noteworthy is that the court’s conviction was based primarily on the content of his sermons and pastoral letters, rather than any violence, incitement or action plans. This shows that the judicial authorities are essentially criminalising ‘expression of belief’ and bringing freedom of speech and freedom of thought into the scope of a criminal crackdown. This practice of convicting people based on their thoughts fundamentally violates the principles of rule of law and international human rights standards.

Yang Xibo and Wang Xiaofei



Yang Xibo and Wang Xiaofei - Credit ChinaAid

Yang Xibo is a fourth-generation preacher of the Xunsiding Church in Xiamen. His aunt Yang Xinfei and father Yang Yuanzhang were imprisoned for 15 and five years respectively for refusing to join the Three-Self Church. On 19 May 2019, the Xunsiding Church was banned by the Xiamen Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau for insisting on its position as a house church and fined 25,000 yuan. After that, the church’s venue was placed under long-term surveillance. Despite changing its gathering venue several times (residential buildings, office buildings, hotels, and the seaside), it was still being attacked and its branches were shut down one after another.

During Sunday gatherings, the police repeatedly forcibly assaulted and arrested church members, demolished their private homes, and forced them to send their

children to public schools. On 29 July 2021 the Siming District Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau imposed a fine of 200,000 yuan on Yang Xibo and his wife Wang Xiaofei on the grounds of ‘facilitating illegal gatherings’. The original verdict was upheld through administrative reconsideration, first-instance trial, and appeal.

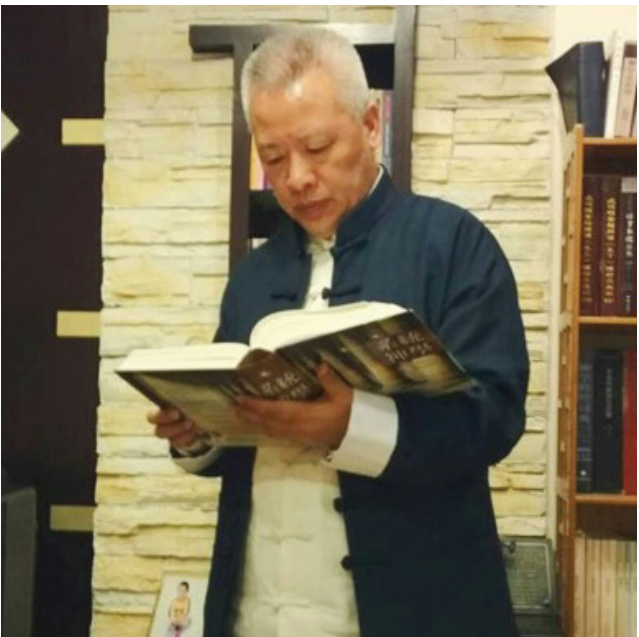
The punishment was based on Article 71 of the Regulations on Religious Affairs, which identified the couple as helpers who ‘provided support’ rather than organisers; this is a malicious distortion of the law. The case reflects the zero-tolerance of the sinicisation of religion towards house churches, consistent with the prohibition of activities outside venues in Article 41 of the Measures for the Management of Religious Activity Venues, and Article 58 mandating resistance to illegal activities.

The increase in fines from 25,000 to 200,000 shows a significant escalation in economic suppression, consistent with the policy direction of ‘curbing illegal activities’. As a trend, the operational space for house churches is being systematically squeezed. Administrative penalties are shifting toward criminal risks, signalling that more severe judicial measures may soon follow.

Yao Xilin

From 2019 Yao Xilin and ten others set out to reinvigorate multiplate activities of the All Range Church in Linzhi, Tibet, including holding gatherings and prayer meetings over social platforms such as WeChat and Zoom. They were arrested in 2024, and their possession of a publication entitled Draft of Basic Construction of the Church which advocates for the evangelisation of China was identified as evidence of a ‘cult’, with Yao Xilin considered the person in charge.

The All Range Church has been suppressed due to the ‘three-fold vision’, highlighting that religious sinicisation is interpreted as ‘Party-isation’, consistent with Article 17 of the Administrative Measures for Religious Groups, which mandates the promotion of party policies. Political sensitivity in Tibet has led to intensified controls on Christianity, with this case reflecting local efforts to implement the central government’s ‘resistance to extremism’ policy. In terms of trends, the use of the “cult” label is increasing, and non-sinicised religions are being systematically eliminated.



Zhang Chunlei - Credit ChinaAid

Zhang Chunlei

Church elder Zhang Chunlei established the Guiyang Ren’ai Reformed Evangelical Church in December 2014, but the church was banned by the Nanming District Civil Affairs Bureau on 12 August 2019. From March 2018 to February 2021, Zhang reposted articles on Facebook criticising China’s religious policies. He was arrested in February 2021 on charges including ‘inciting subversion of state power’ and ‘fraud’ for collecting 14,400 yuan in donations.

Zhang’s sharing of articles was classified as ‘inciting subversion’, and his collection of religious offerings were labelled as ‘fraud,’ reflecting the dual repression of freedom of expression and church finances under the policy of religious sinicisation. This aligns with Article 17 of the *Administrative Measures for Religious Groups*, which requires the promotion of party policies, and with the Implementation Measures for Certain Administrative Licensing Items in Religious Affairs, which prohibit unlicensed religious activities. The case demonstrates how judicial measures are being used to eliminate independent churches. As a trend, such convictions may become normalised, posing a serious threat to the legitimacy of religious organisations.



Zhang Zhan - Credit ChinaAid

Zhang Zhan

Christian human rights defender and citizen journalist Zhang Zhan was detained by Shanghai police on 14 May 2020 for her reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan. She subsequently spent seven months in pre-trial detention, during which time she was forced by officials after beginning a hunger strike and was handcuffed and had her hands bound for 24 hours a day for more than three months.

On 28 December 2020 Zhang was sentenced to four years in prison by the Pudong New Area Court in a closed trial that lasted less than three hours. In August 2021 Zhang’s health was reported to be critical due to her ongoing hunger strike protesting her detention and imprisonment. On 2 August prison authorities informed her parents by phone that Zhang had been hospitalised on 31 July with symptoms indicative of serious health conditions due to severe malnutrition, including rapid weight loss and oedema.

Zhang was released on 13 May 2024, after completing her sentence, but was initially still subjected to restrictions on her freedom and was re-detained in August 2024 for assisting a young pro-democracy activist. She has remained in detention ever since.

Zhang reportedly began a hunger strike on 25 January 2025, and was force-fed in the detention centre. On 19 September 2025, she was tried by the People’s Court in the Shanghai Pudong New Area and was sentenced to four more years of imprisonment on the vague and ill-defined charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”. This is the second time Zhang has been convicted and subjected to a custodial sentence for this offence.

The charge of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ was originally used to regulate acts that seriously disrupted public order. However, due to its extremely broad legal structure and vague wording, it has become a typical catch-all charge widely used in Chinese judicial practice to suppress dissidents, human rights activists, religious adherents and independent journalists.

In the first case in 2020, Zhang was accused of ‘fabricating false information’ and ‘disturbing social order’ for reporting on the pandemic and exposing the chaos in pandemic prevention at the grassroots level, despite the fact that her actions should have been protected by Article 35 of the Constitution, which guarantees the right to freedom of expression. However, in the application of law as practiced by law enforcement agencies, free expression is considered to be an ‘illegal information release’. This accusation does not point to specific illegal facts, but blurs the boundaries of behaviour through generalised language, turning legal tools into a means of maintaining stability.

The more recent accusation against Zhang lacks any actual victim statements or specific harmful consequences, and its application remains vague.

Zhang’s case also demonstrates serious deficiencies in procedural justice. After her first arrest in 2020, she was held for seven months in pre-trial detention. She was also deprived of the right to meet with her lawyer on the grounds that ‘the case involves state secrets’ as permitted by Article 37, Paragraph 3 of the CPL. This system was originally designed to protect national security, but in practice it has been generalised as a tool to suppress dissent.

In addition, the trial of this case was conducted completely behind closed doors, violating the basic principle of Article 13 of the CPL that ‘People’s Courts should conduct trials in public’. The court did not publish the trial records, and the judgment did not explain the applicable law or factual basis to the public, resulting in a completely opaque judicial process and the cutting off of public supervision.

These two cases against Zhang show that in China, the protection of rights in legal cases involving religious beliefs, activities, groups or venues under the CPL is often systematically undermined. Through the use of vague charges and the selective application of procedures, the state has been able to legalise and normalise the suppression and erosion of FoRB.

Summary of Trends

Legal cases involving religious beliefs, activities, groups or venues in the post-pandemic era show the following trends and characteristics:

The number of cases has surged. From 2020 to 2025 legal cases involving religious beliefs, activities, groups or venues escalated from individual cases to systematic suppression, involving sensitive areas such as Gansu, Hebei, Ningxia and Tibet. The number and geographical distribution of cases also expanded significantly, reflecting the full implementation of the sinicisation of religion.

The shift from administrative penalties (such as fines and detention) to criminal convictions (such as for ‘illegally crossing borders’, ‘illegal gatherings’, ‘engaging with cults’, and ‘inciting subversion’), and the strengthening of judicial means show the deep penetration of the ideology of the Central Committee into daily life, placing religious activities under a more stringent legal control framework.

The targets of suppression have expanded from minority religions such as Islam and Tibetan Buddhism to include Christian house churches, unregistered Catholic groups and online churches, encompassing a wide range of unofficial or uncontrolled religious groups, and demonstrating the breadth of the goal of the sinicisation propaganda.

WeChat groups (such as those used by Sun Chenghao and Semkyi Dolma) and cross-border activities (such as those of Sun Chenghao) have become the target of suppression. Echoing the Internet Religious Information Services Management Measures and the ‘resistance to infiltration’ policy, digital surveillance has become a core tool for the sinicisation of religion.

The local implementation in regions such as Gansu, Hebei, Ningxia, Tibet and other places closely aligns with the central government’s mandate of ‘maintaining national unity, ethnic unity, and social stability’. The enforcement of religious sinicisation is particularly harsh in ethnic minority and politically sensitive areas, where local policies serve as direct extensions of central directives.

The surge in fines (such as the Yang Xibo case), publication controls (such as the Wang Honglan case), and the destruction of religious symbols demonstrate the two-pronged strategy of economic sanctions and cultural assimilation, aimed at weakening religious influence both materially and spiritually.

These trends indicate that the sinicisation of religion, through legal and judicial practices, not only restricts the freedom of religious activities but also attempts to fundamentally transform the nature of religion so that it fully serves the CCP’s ideology and national stability goals.

4. In Focus: The Case of Linfen Covenant Home Church

An in-depth examination of legal repression through the testimony by Xiangui (Daniel) Fang, a Christian lawyer who was the legal representative of Linfen Covenant Home Church member Wang Qiang. Fang was detained during the infamous ‘709 crackdown’¹⁵, and was eventually obliged to flee China after the authorities threatened him with further imprisonment for continuing to defend human rights cases.

Background

Linfen Covenant Home Church is a large, unregistered church¹⁶ in northeast China’s Shanxi province. Between 2012 and 2013, Li Jie, Han Xiaodong and others started a Bible study group called ‘Covenant Home’. In February 2017, the group officially became known as the Linfen Covenant Home Church, with Li and Han leading the church as pastors.

The Case

On 19 August 2022 police stormed Linfen Covenant Home Church’s family summer camp held in Shigao Mountain in Lingshi County and detained more than 30 adults and 40 children. While most were released the following day, Li Jie and Han Xiaodong were placed under a form of secret detention known as Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location (RSDL) on 23 August. During their time in RSDL, they were subjected to torture and deprived of sleep and food. They were forced to stay awake for four nights and five days, and given only a steamed bun and a cup of water for the first three days. Although some food was provided later, they had already suffered from constipation and rectal bleeding. They were allowed to sit only in the hallway, and at times were forced to stand while enduring verbal humiliation.

On 30 September 2022 the Linfen Municipal Sub-Bureau formally arrested¹⁷ Li and Han. On 1 November 2022 another church member, Wang Qiang, was also detained for refusing to renounce his faith and for not fabricating testimony against Li and Han. Wang was initially placed under RSDL, where he was subjected to severe torture

and forced interrogation. He was denied sleep, made to sit on a ‘tiger bench’¹⁸ for seven days and nights, struck on the head with books by public security officers, and denied adequate food. His detention status was changed to criminal detention¹⁹ only after he filed complaints and charges with the procuratorate.

On 26 May 2023 the Yaodu District Procuratorate indicted Li, Han and Wang on charges of ‘fraud’, accusing them of illicitly obtaining 789,591 Yuan (RMB).

While Li and Han remained in prison, Wang was released into RSDL on 30 September 2024 and later released on bail on 28 March 2025.

On 8 May 2025 the Yaodu District Court held a public trial which lasted from 1pm until around 6pm. On 17 June 2025 the court issued the first-instance verdict; Li and Han were each sentenced to three years and eight months in prison while Wang received a sentence of one year and 11 months. Wang’s sentence reflected time already served and he was not returned to prison.

Flagrant Violation of Religious and Legal Rights

By examining the process from the charges to the judgement, one can see how the authorities manipulate the parties and the situation.

Their logic for the prosecution was that:

- (i) The church is considered an illegal organisation because it did not register with the relevant authorities,
- (ii) it engaged with unauthorised activities and operated in venues that were not officially registered,
- (iii) Li and Han lacked the necessary qualifications to act as pastors.

In other words, the prosecutor painted the picture that Li and Han, knowing the church was unregistered and that they themselves were not officially qualified, intentionally created the false impression that the church was legitimate and compliant with regulations. They



Wang Qiang - Credit Linfen Covenant Home Church



Li Jie and his wife Li Shanshan - Credit Linfen Covenant Home Church



Han Xiaodong - Credit Linfen Covenant Home Church

allegedly misled the public into giving them money under false pretences. However, there was no evidence presented in the indictment to support claims of financial misconduct, aside from the fact that the three defendants faced religious persecution.

Unfortunately, this is a common reality for house churches across China.

Deliberate Obstructions by Authorities during the Defence Process

I was first contacted by Li’s wife, Li Shanshan, to take on their case when Li and Han were detained in August 2022. Due to personal reasons, I was unable to do so at that time. I later became involved in defending Wang from March 2023.

On 8 January 2023 the State Council issued a notice lifting mandatory pandemic controls, though implementation varied by region. Between March and April 2023, after the lifting of these restrictions, I attempted to meet with Wang. However, I was obstructed by the Linfen Municipal Sub-Bureau of Public Security, which claimed that I could not meet with him without a negative COVID test. I publicly voiced my complaints on Weibo, which pressured the deputy director of the sub-bureau and leaders from the Linfen Public Security Supervision Team to respond. Eventually I was permitted to meet with him.

During this period, I also filed formal complaints against the sub-bureau for fabricating charges. These complaints were submitted to central authorities, as well as to the public security, procuratorate, and political-legal committees at both the provincial (Shanxi) and municipal (Linfen) levels. I also posted these complaints publicly on Weibo.

From that point onward, whenever I visited other clients in that area, I would submit materials and legal opinions to the relevant authorities. Each time I encountered various forms of resistance: Linfen Procuratorate refused to accept documents, Linfen Municipal Political and Legal Affairs Commissions declined to accept complaints, courts obstructed access to case files, and some judges even resorted to aggressive behaviour such as slamming tables during meetings with lawyers. I documented and publicly exposed each of these incidents on Weibo.

These persistent legal efforts inspired the defendants’ families, Li’s wife Li Shanshan, Han’s wife Chen Ying, and Wang’s wife Wen Huijuan, to begin participating actively in the defence campaigns. They regularly visited public security officers, procuratorates, courts and political-legal departments, sometimes protesting with banners, other times making public statements.

Through our joint efforts, the case quickly gained traction from both the domestic and international communities. It has since become a symbolic example of how Chinese authorities use fraud charges to suppress churches.

‘During their time in RSDL, they were subjected to torture and deprived of sleep and food. They were forced to stay awake for four nights and five days, and given only a steamed bun and a cup of water for the first three days.’

¹⁵ An event that occurred on 9 July 2015 in which the Chinese authorities launched an extensive crackdown on activists, lawyers, human rights defenders and their friends and family members. Dubbed the ‘709 Crackdown’ after the date on which it began, the campaign saw over 300 people detained, interrogated or imprisoned.

¹⁶ Registered churches in China belong to what is known as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which operates with the sanction of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and under restrictions dictated by the government.

¹⁷ Under China’s Criminal Procedure Law, if the accused is under residential surveillance, the public security organ has up to 30 days to request formal arrest.

¹⁸ During this torture method, police tie the victim’s legs tightly to the tiger bench using belts. They then put bricks or some other hard objects under the victim’s feet, and keep adding layers of bricks until the belts break. Victims endure unbearable pain and often pass out.

¹⁹ Administrative detention is governed by the Public Security Administration Punishments Law, where public security organs have broad discretion and can detain without judicial review. Criminal detention is governed by the Criminal Procedure Law, and involves prosecutorial oversight and more legal safeguards. The detention must be followed by either formal arrest or release within the set timeframe.

Manipulation of the Trial

Another high-profile case involving a large, unregistered church in Linfen - Golden Lampstand Church - was being tried at the same time. From the beginning of 2025, the Linfen authorities became increasingly aggressive in handling the cases of both churches.

For Linfen Covenant Home Church, a pre-trial conference was originally scheduled for mid-to-late February 2025. However, it had to be rescheduled after the defence lawyers pointed out issues with the prosecution's letter and the presentation of new evidence.

As for Golden Lampstand Church, its pre-trial conference and trial took place in mid-April. Notably, two of the lawyers representing Linfen Covenant Home Church were also serving as the defence attorneys in the Golden Lampstand case. At the start of the hearing, the Yaodu District Court unlawfully demanded that all lawyers surrender their phones and undergo security checks and prohibited them from bringing personal laptops into the courtroom. The Linfen authorities also deployed a large number of special police to monitor and suppress the church members and family members, effectively preventing them from attending or observing the trial.

Personnel from the local justice bureaus were sent to monitor and intimidate the defence lawyers. When the defence team failed to reach an agreement with the authorities, the lawyers withdrew from the case. However, despite their withdrawal, the trial had posed significant professional risks to the lawyers and its impact lingered.

After the Golden Lampstand trial, the two lawyers representing Linfen Covenant Home Church were summoned by the court to discuss their defence strategy. The procuratorate promised to reduce the charges and lower the amount of money involved in the indictment. In return, the court asked the lawyers to cooperate by remaining silent during trial, making no statements or objections, submitting to security screening, and refraining from bringing phones or personal laptops into the courtroom. Still shaken by their previous experience with the Golden Lampstand trial, the two lawyers agreed and submitted written pledges to the court. However, the procuratorate made no guarantee about the final sentence regardless of the defendants' pleas.

The families, following the lawyers' recommendations, agreed to remain silent and advised church members to stop issuing public prayer requests.

'At the start of the hearing, the Yaodu District Court unlawfully demanded that all lawyers surrender their phones and undergo security checks and prohibited them from bringing personal laptops into the courtroom.'

At the end of April 2025, the procuratorate issued a revised indictment, reducing the total amount charged to approximately 180,000 RMB. The trial was held on 8 May. The lawyers complied with the court's conditions. The hearing, attended by the three defendants and five lawyers, lasted about four to five hours. Some lawyers adopted a compromised defence strategy: while maintaining not-guilty pleas, they made arguments for leniency in sentencing. One lawyer even asked the defendants if they were willing to pay an additional 30,000–40,000 RMB, effectively implying guilt. Reportedly, upon hearing this, both the prosecutor and the judge laughed in satisfaction.

Since the sentencing, both the families and the defence lawyers have remained silent.

The outcome was particularly painful for Wang, despite not needing to return to prison. He had steadfastly refused to provide any statement impacting Li and Han while under administrative detention, an act that led to him being formally charged and criminally detained. Even after being released on bail, he maintained his integrity and did not make any statement against Li or Han. Yet, at the most crucial stage, the defence team surrendered. Wang was deeply hurt, feeling that his perseverance had been in vain. If surrender had been an intended outcome, he could have cooperated with the police from the beginning, and spared himself the detention, the sentence, and all the suffering that came with it.

5. Observations on the Evolution of Sinicisation

By Ansel Li, a Chinese columnist and new-media creator specialising in comparative analysis of politics and economics.

Since 2016, when mass internment camps were erected in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and in 2018, when a sweeping crackdown struck the Early Rain Covenant Church, China's assault on religion has shifted from sporadic repression to a comprehensive campaign. Churches and mosques have been demolished or repurposed for secular use, across the country. The persecution is not subtle – it is violent, targeted, and meant to be seen. The state-driven campaign was designed to draw global attention, not despite its brutality, but because of its deliberate and conspicuous display.

By the time the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, Beijing had already neutralised any religious groups capable of mounting public resistance. Christianity and Islam – outside state control – were driven underground. Open defiance was no longer an option.

Yet this was not the end. After the pandemic, the Chinese regime did not loosen its grip; it simply changed tactics. The blunt force of the police baton gave way to the slower, quieter choke of administrative rule. Bureaucracies like the civil affairs and religious affairs offices – once secondary players – became the new instruments of suppression. Control became more thorough precisely because it became more mundane.

The party has wrapped itself around civil society and faith, not striking, but tightening – slowly, patiently, relentlessly. This is not a beginning, nor a mere escalation. This is the persecution in its perfect tense – a process concluded, awaiting only the final silence of the religious voice.

To understand this phase of China's religious persecution is to glimpse the deeper machinery of communist control. It is a world away from any constitutional order – and all the more chilling because of how alien it feels to those who still live in one.



The Sinicisation of Religion

'Sinicisation of religion' is not a new phrase, but beginning in 2023, the term took on a sharper edge – it moved from rhetoric to policy. According to Xi Jinping's definition at the 2021 National Religious Work Conference²⁰ sinicisation means:

'Guiding and supporting religions in China to align with core socialist values, and cultivating in religious figures and believers a recognition of the motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the communist party, and socialism with Chinese characteristics... promoting patriotism, collectivism, and socialism, as well as education in party history, the history of the People's Republic, the reform era, and socialism's development.'

In plain terms: regardless of your faith, you must first believe in China – more specifically, in the party and its ideology. The party's creed comes before your religion's creed.

20 'Xi Jinping attended the National Conference on Religious Work and delivered an important speech', *Xinhua News Agency*, 4 December 2021 https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-12/04/content_5655877.htm



In 2023 every national religious association rolled out a ‘Five-Year Plan for Deepening the Sinicisation of [X Religion], 2023–2027’, marking the official launch of this campaign. But what exactly does sinicisation entail? A few examples illustrate the point.

Take the Catholic Patriotic Association. It introduced a program to train so-called ‘dual-proficient’ clergy – those versed both in doctrine and in Chinese traditional culture. In Shanghai, this effort is run jointly by the Catholic Church and Fudan University’s philosophy department.²¹ The stated goal? To ‘raise the political consciousness and cultural literacy’ of priests, nuns and key laypersons. In short: the purpose of studying traditional culture is not spiritual enrichment, but political alignment.

For Catholics and Protestants, another front is ‘sinicised theology’ – in effect, rewriting and distorting sacred texts. The Catholic Association calls for new, ‘China-themed’ annotated Bibles, model sermons, and standardised textbooks.²² Across the country, churches are fabricating crude fusions of local folk culture with biblical teaching: ‘Theology of the Eight Blessings’ in Fujian (a riff on local fortune traditions),²³ ‘Thanksgiving Theology’ in the northeast, and ‘Reverence Theology’ in Shandong. These are not developments in theology – they are its disfigurement.

And it doesn’t stop with doctrine. Traditional hymns are being replaced by party-flavoured ‘sinicised sacred music,’ which praises the communist party in religious cadence. Wedding and funeral rites now carry state-sanctioned ‘Chinese characteristics.’

Islam faces even tighter restrictions. Pilgrimages to Mecca are subject to strict dual-approval systems – one digital, one bureaucratic.²⁴ Believers must register through official local online portals, and in some areas, only in person at county-level religious affairs offices. Each applicant is vetted, not just for piety, but for political loyalty.

Mosques too are under ideological renovation. Sermons must follow preapproved outlines. Teaching materials are purged of anything deemed too ‘Arabised’, too ‘Salafist’, or too ‘Islamic’ in its cultural expression.²⁵

One should not overstate the actual reach of sinicisation. It is, at its core, a hyper-bureaucratic project – one that seeks to refashion faith through communist ideological moulding. Many of its directives dissolve into mere formalism. The party doesn’t have the manpower to monitor every sermon, nor the theological literacy to enforce total control. But that is not the point.

By reshaping and de-ideologising the very foundations of belief – sacred texts, clergy training, customs – the state aims to rewrite religion itself. What remains is a shell: a form stripped of its spiritual substance and, therefore, its moral power. A religion that no longer inspires does not resist. That is the goal.

Xi Jinping’s Version of Rule of Law

Xi Jinping speaks often of ‘governing the country according to law’, but the phrase is a sleight of hand. What sounds like a commitment to legality is in fact the codification of authoritarian control. In Xi’s model, the law is not a shield that protects citizens from the state – it is a tool that grants the state procedural legitimacy to do whatever it pleases. ‘Rule of law’, in this context, means the party dresses its repression in legal robes.

In the realm of religious affairs, we are now seeing a flood of regulations – a bureaucratic crescendo.

On 1 January 2025, two new administrative rules came into force: Measures for the Qualification and Title Evaluation of Teachers in Religious Colleges and Measures for Granting Academic Ranks in Religious Colleges.²⁶ These rules impose rigid certification exams, political loyalty tests, and require regular re-approval of both teachers and institutions. Noncompliance results in automatic disqualification.

The run-up to these rules was marked by heavy-handed actions. On 1 July 2024 authorities shut down the Jimeijianzhan National Vocational School in Qinghai’s Golog Prefecture. On 6 October a Christian-affiliated school for special-needs children in Beijing, called the ‘Deep Breath Learning Center’, was forcibly closed by police. On 18 December an imam in Yuxi, Yunnan – Ma Yuwei – was arrested along with his entire family for running a Quranic school out of the Daying Mosque.



This is a pattern: first the punishment, then the legislation. In China’s version of ‘rule of law’, enforcement precedes lawmaking. Crackdowns come first; legal frameworks are drafted later to retroactively justify the repression.

And it doesn’t stop there. On 1 May 2025 China implemented Detailed Rules for the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners Within the Territory of the People’s Republic of China.²⁷ The document drastically limits the activities of foreign religious personnel. Article 13, for instance, states that any venue involving foreigners can only be a ‘temporary site’:

Within a county-level administrative area, collective religious activities by foreigners of the same faith and common language may be approved at only one temporary site.

The temporary status is valid for a maximum of two years. To continue, an application must be submitted 30 days before expiry.

Activities at these sites are under the direct supervision of the local county-level Religious Affairs Department.

This is not legal oversight – it is administrative siege. These so-called ‘regulations’ are built to suffocate. By weaponising location approvals, personnel vetting, and institutional registration, the party creates a labyrinth that blocks religious practice at every turn. These rules are not neutral guardrails; they are roadblocks with ideological intent.

21 ‘The first phase of the Shuangtong Talent Course in the Diocese of Shanghai in 2025 will be taught’, Catholic Diocese of Shanghai, 12 May 2025 <https://www.chinacatholic.cn/ccic/report/2505/0037-1.htm>

22 ‘Interpretation: Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Further Promoting the Sinicization of Catholicism in our country (2023-2027)’, *Skylight*, 26 April 2024 <https://tg.catholic-bj.cn/content/43715>

23 ‘The two Christian associations of Fujian Province held an expert demonstration meeting on “Beatitudes Theology”, *Gospel Times*, 26 June 2023 <https://gospeltimes.faithinlove.cn/article/index/id/68584>

24 ‘Guidelines for the identity review of Hajj participants’, Public catalogue: Administrative law enforcement guidelines and flow charts, 28 March 2024 http://cxshb.gov.cn/info/egovinfo/1001/xxgkxt_content/11532300MB0U31496X-/2024-0328013.html

25 ‘Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Thoroughly Promoting the Sinicization of Islam in Our Country (2023-2027)’, *China Law Translate*, 19 August 2024 <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/%E6%B7%B1%E5%85%A5%E6%8E%A8%E8%BF%9B%E6%88%91%E5%9B%BD%E4%BC%8A%E6%96%AF%E5%85%B0%E6%95%99%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%8C%96%E4%BA%94%E5%B9%B4%E5%B7%A5%E4%BD%9C%E8%A7%84%E5%88%92%E7%BA%B2%E8%A6%81%E7%BC%8820/>

26 ‘The “Regulations on the Qualification Certification and Professional Title Evaluation for Religious School Teachers” and the “Measures for the Awarding of Academic Titles in Religious Schools” announced implementation from January 1, 2025’, *Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs*, 20 December 2024 <https://mzj.sh.gov.cn/zcfg/20241220/4bbe00ace97b4ba18415672114c76772.html>

27 ‘The Detailed Rules for the Implementation of the Regulations on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners in the People’s Republic of China will come into force on May 1, 2025’, *United Front New Language at the National Religious Affairs Administration*, 1 April 2025 <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/ywdt/qtyw/2025-04-01/1356550603266883584.html>

What emerges is a distinctly Xi-style 'rule of law': one that provides just enough paperwork to claim legitimacy, while ensuring that the true direction – total control – remains firmly in the hands of the state.

The De-Sanctification of Religion

If sinicisation is the party's attempt to conscript religion into its political agenda, and if 'religious regulations' are the machinery to restrict its operation, then 'de-sanctification' is the mechanism to hollow it out from within – to drain it of power and meaning.

Religion, by its nature, points beyond the mundane. It creates sacred space – through ritual, architecture, and reverence. The communist party, ironically, understands this well. It pours lavish resources into constructing its own sacred aesthetic for party members – red temples of ideology. At the same time, it systematically strips religious institutions of their own sanctity.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the 'touristification' of Buddhist temples.²⁸ Under state-owned tourism companies, temples are managed like theme parks. In 2025 China's 'temple economy' reached a market scale of 80 to 90 billion yuan.²⁹ In this process, the religious function of temples is quietly sidelined. Devotion is replaced by ticket sales. Monks become staff. Incense becomes branding.

Tibetan Buddhism faces the same fate – dressed up as hospitality. In the name of tourism services, the Potala Palace is being disfigured.³⁰ Its traditional Tibetan architecture has been torn down and replaced with sterile, Han-style reconstructions. Security checkpoints, mass tourism flows, and promotional banners intrude into spaces once meant for meditation. The aim is twofold: profit and erasure.

When tourism isn't an option, destruction follows. Outside Chanang monastery in Shara Than in Nyimo

Township, a 45-foot statue of the eighth-century Indian Tantric master Guru Padmasambhava was demolished in November 2021. Crescent moons and domes have been stripped from mosques. Crosses pulled off churches. Sacred inscriptions torn down and replaced with quotations from Xi Jinping.

In some cases, the insult is direct: demolished mosques are replaced with parking lots and cafés. Christian house churches are seized and repurposed as neighbourhood 'community service stations'.³¹ No prayer, just paperwork.

This is de-sanctification – the conversion of religion into something banal, ideological, or invisible. It is not merely repression. It is transformation: to erase the transcendent and replace it with the party. Post-pandemic, this has become a central tactic of control. Strip religion of its awe, and what is left is manageable. Or so the party believes.

Cultural Eradication by Generation

While de-sanctification strips religion of its sacred power in the present, true erasure – the kind that buries a faith for good – comes by severing its link to the next generation. The most effective way to kill a religion is not through force, but through silence: make sure the young never hear its voice.

The Chinese Communist Party has pursued this with disturbing clarity. Under the pretext of 'protecting minors from religious influence', it has implemented policies that isolate children from their own cultural and spiritual heritage. The approach hinges on three core tactics:

1. Boarding Schools

For most children, culture and religion are first learned at home. To break that link, the Chinese government has imposed policies to force children aged between six and 18 into a vast network of colonial boarding schools. There, they are taught exclusively in Mandarin, under tightly controlled, militarised conditions. The aim is not education, but reprogramming – an environment engineered to erase familial and cultural memory.



‘While de-sanctification strips religion of its sacred power in the present, true erasure – the kind that buries a faith for good – comes by severing its link to the next generation’

28 'Faith in Finance? China's Temples Embrace Consumer Culture', *Sixth Tone*, 26 June 2025 <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1017275>

29 'Sanctified but State-Run: How China's Temples Funnel Profits to the CCP', *The Asian Age*, 18 July 2025 <https://dailyasianage.com/news/340247/sanctified-but-state-run-how-chinas-temples-funnel-profits-to-the-ccp/>

30 'ICT urges UNESCO to designate Potala Palace Ensemble as "World Heritage in Danger" amid cultural heritage violations in Tibet', *International Campaign for Tibet*, 2 June 2025 <https://www.savetibet.eu/ict-urges-unesco-to-designate-potala-palace-ensemble-as-world-heritage-in-danger-amid-cultural-heritage-violations-in-tibet/>

31 'Christian group and family raise outcry over detention of another 'house church' elder in China', *AP News*, 21 December 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/china-house-church-ding-zhongfu-arrest-crackdown-febc146361f390211ebdbc31dafc846a>



‘Where once the police and security forces were the blunt instruments of control, now the pressure flows through subtler channels: civil affairs bureaus, education departments, cultural tourism agencies.’

2. Inland Relocation

To ensure cultural disconnection, children are not only removed from their homes but moved far beyond them. Tibetan students are shipped in bulk to ‘Inland Tibet Classes’ in Hebei or Jiangsu – hundreds of miles from their homeland.³² Uyghur youth are sorted into ‘relocation classes’ and sent to faraway high schools. In Inner Mongolia, herder communities are emptied of their young, relocated to county-level boarding schools, far from grasslands or home dialects. The strategy is blunt: remove the soil, and the roots will wither.

3. Language Erasure

Language is the backbone of memory. And so, it too must go. In every corner of the party’s ethnic education system, the use of native languages is banned. Mandarin is not just the medium – it is the message. Classrooms preach a materialist worldview, framing religious belief as a ‘harm to youth development’. Religion becomes not just alien, but dangerous.

If these policies persist, the outcome is not theoretical. In one or two generations, entire cultures – and the faiths they carry – will vanish within China’s borders. Not by dramatic confrontation, but by systematic forgetting. This is not assimilation. It is extinction by design.

Persecution in its Final Phase

The crackdown did not begin with the pandemic. Long before 2020, the Chinese state had already entrenched a system of religious control – and that system endures. It includes, among other things, the subjugation of religious leadership, seen most clearly in the Vatican-China agreement on bishop appointments, and Beijing’s audacious claim to dictate the next reincarnation of the Dalai Lama. Religious figures are no longer spiritual leaders but political subjects – their existence tied not to faith, but to national security.

This logic justifies nearly anything: stripping believers of legal protections, branding dissent as subversion, even pursuing exiles abroad. Uyghur Muslims fleeing to Thailand have been forcibly repatriated. Surveillance and censorship online have only grown more suffocating.

But since the pandemic, the machinery has become more sophisticated. Where once the police and security forces were the blunt instruments of control, now the pressure flows through subtler channels: civil affairs bureaus, education departments, cultural tourism agencies. The crackdown has crept into the capillaries of everyday life.

We now see the strategy in full:

- Rewriting belief itself through sinicisation;
- Suffocating its space to exist through Xi-style pseudo-legalism;
- Corroding its spiritual core through de-sanctification;
- Severing its future by cutting youth off from language, culture and memory.

What emerges is not just suppression – it is erasure, calibrated and continuous. The Chinese Communist Party appears to believe it has moved past the need for open confrontation. The battle is over. Religion has been tamed. Now comes the quiet dismantling – not by fire, but by acid. A slow, confident disintegration.

What it seeks is not control of religion, but its absence. To build, in the end, a nation without gods.

³² ‘UN Human Rights Experts alarmed by separation of 1 million Tibetan children from families and forced assimilation at residential schools’, *International Tibet Network*, 6 February 2023 <https://tibetnetwork.org/un-human-rights-experts-alarmed-by-separation-of-1-million-tibetan-children-from-families-and-forced-assimilation-at-residential-schools/>

6. Human Rights and EU-China Trade Relations

Jonathan de Leyser, CSW Senior EU Advocate

While recent events in the Middle East have put a spotlight on the limits of Europe’s capabilities to project its values and interests, trade policy remains one area in which it can wield considerable agency and power. Despite low growth rates, collectively the European Union (EU) still represents about a sixth of global GDP, and with its general commitment to open markets and rules-based international trade, it remains a major trading partner for many countries. In the case of China, for example, the EU is its top trading partner; and China in turn is the EU’s second biggest trading partner.

Geopolitically, this interconnectedness brings a certain vulnerability. This is true in terms of supply chains, in areas where Europe’s market has a high level of dependency and exposure to China. In early 2025, China imposed export restrictions on rare earth materials, which are critical for production in many strategic sectors, including the defence sector. Exposure is also true in terms of Chinese embeddedness in critical European infrastructure, such as mobile networks.

While this brings vulnerability that should be avoided, a by-product is that integration potentially also brings a certain amount of leverage, which if used correctly, could be exercised for human rights purposes. The question, however, is how willing Europe is to instrumentalise its trade policy for its foreign policy goals, including for human rights.

In certain cases of EU bilateral trade relations, we have seen this play out to some effect in positive, though limited ways. Pakistan is a good example, as it is a beneficiary of generous trade terms with the EU, which it enjoys in exchange for certain commitments and implementation on democracy and human rights, which are monitored by a formal process. Sometimes this process seems to amount to genuine pressure – as can be seen in prominent national media coverage, if not often in terms of concrete human rights reforms.

In the case of China, too, trade and investment relations have been a realm in which – albeit to a limited extent – the EU has asserted its values in terms of human rights. The most obvious example was the suspension of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. Having been agreed upon in principle in December 2020, by March 2021 it had been suspended after a series of tit-for-tat sanctions. This began with the EU imposing targeted sanctions on five officials involved in human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which China retaliated to by sanctioning five Members of the European Parliament. This led to an indefinite ‘freezing’ of the agreement by the European Parliament, with no prospect for its revival.³³

This was one of a series of steps that the EU took in terms of ‘putting its money where its mouth is’ with its economic relations with China. Since then, at least two new EU directives have introduced new rules regarding the responsibilities of EU companies in terms of their supply chains: the Forced Labour Directive, and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. While both are global in effect (pertaining to all international trade conducted by EU companies) it seems that their genesis and design very much had China in the crosshairs.³⁴

For many years, the EU has used a tricolon to describe its relations with China: ‘a cooperation partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival’. The latter of the three refers of course to their different views on the role of government, and its relation to markets, and individuals, and their rights. Measures like the above, while not perfect, and presumably partially informed by economic interests, do at the same time reflect a willingness to pay towards posing its systemic rivalry – by, for example, weakening incentives for social dumping practices (such as forced labour) that are not in line with international human rights law.

‘For many years, the EU has used a tricolon to describe its relations with China: ‘a cooperation partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival.’

Despite these positive advances, it is still the case that the EU and other European countries such as the UK have at times factored in economic and other interests in a manner that dampened their messages on human rights issues. It is interesting here to consider the rebuttal of Lord Patton, the last Governor of Hong Kong, who reflected in a podcast recently: ‘look at the figures and there is very little relationship between having a kow-towing relationship with China and getting lots of investment [...] If you look at the export figures from the UK to China while I was governor, they went up steadily, and by the end we had the best ratio of exports to GDP in the G7’.³⁵

On the other hand, we have seen China introduce trade barriers against Australia following its call for an inquiry into the origins of COVID-19; and also allegedly against Lithuania following its decision to upgrade diplomatic ties with Taiwan. As is often the case with foreign policy action on human rights, making the perpetrator state pay a price for its behaviour (either economically or reputationally), will often induce a response. But perhaps in the case of China, in trade terms at least, it is not so grave a response as might be commonly imagined. This deserves further analysis, as it is a fundamental assumption of European engagement with China.

We consistently see from China an attempt to compartmentalise human rights, so that it does not interfere in other aspects of relations (one of the reasons why human rights CSOs have raised doubts about the expediency of the annual EU-China human rights dialogue). This is a strategy that the EU must resist. One of the official channels that continue between the EU and China are the high-level executive vice-president meetings – while these are often environmental and economic in focus, the European Commission should also include in these meetings considerations relating to human rights in China.

In terms of using trade policy to leverage change in other countries, CSW is in the company of most human rights organisations in not necessarily calling for the actual removal of preferential tariffs or other trade concessions, as very often this will primarily affect ordinary people, rather than the key decision makers. However, we do encourage the EU and others to wield their trade policy as a credible threat. As has been shown here, the EU has been willing to use its trade and investment policy toward China to a certain extent. In the ways described above, however, there is room for improvement.

33 ‘MEPs refuse any agreement with China whilst sanctions are in place’, *European Parliament*, 20 May 2021 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20210517IPR04123/meps-refuse-any-agreement-with-china-while-sanctions-are-in-place>

34 At the time of writing, some of these rules may be subject to reform, under the so-called ‘Omnibus package’.

35 ‘This Is How To Deal With China: The China Expert (Chris Patten)’, *The Rest is Politics: Leading*, 2 December 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fbRoJjomFg&t=3716s&ab_channel=TheRestisPolitics%3ALeading

In plain terms: regardless of your faith, you must first believe in China – more specifically, in the party and its ideology. The party's creed comes before your religion's creed.

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