

CSW is pleased to announce the return of China Voices, a quarterly update on the situation of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) in China. Since the last issue was released in October 2025, CSW published *The Supremacy of the Party*, a report on China's weaponisation of legislation and policy to curtail FoRB. In the last year the FoRB landscape in China has been progressively deteriorating. This update will include cases, trends, and concerns that have been followed by CSW over the past year.

Legal update

On 1 July 2026 China brought the Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress into effect. This law marks a significant change in China's approach to religion. Over the past decade, President Xi Jinping has been systematically advancing the Sinicisation of religion through every aspect of daily life. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) recognises only five religions and the others, including Judaism and Hinduism, are not legally tolerated, considered illegal and officially targeted by the government.

This new ethnic unity law marks a shift in that the ideological principles that have underpinned China's recent administrative measures and policies concerning religion have now been passed into law. This law codifies Sinicisation of religion in Article 46 which requires religious groups, religious schools, and places of worship to promote a sense of community for the Chinese nation including adaptation to socialist society with Chinese characteristics. This gives the CCP legal impunity to increase control on religious communities across China.

Another primary concern is the effect the law will have on the assimilation of minority groups which could amount to eradication of culture and ethnic expressions of religion or belief.

The law presents itself as a defensive measure to counter separatism, extremism, or terrorism. In reality, this is a proactive measure to homogenise Chinese culture to the Han majority and further marginalise ethnic minorities, particularly in the predominantly Islamic Xinjiang Uyghur and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Regions, and the majority Tibetan Buddhist counties and provinces in southwest China.

China continues to be the world's largest perpetrator of transnational repression (TNR). Article 63 of this law states that, 'Organizations and individuals outside the territory of the People's Republic of China that commit acts aimed at the People's Republic of China that undermine ethnic unity and progress or create ethnic division shall be pursued for legal responsibility in accordance with the law'.

The article gives the CCP's 'long arm of repression' legal grounds to continue intimidation, threats, and surveillance in other countries, including the UK.

Case study: Zion Church

Zion Church is an unregistered Protestant house church which is estimated to serve at least 5,000 members and has faced hostility from the authorities for several years. In September 2018 officials in Beijing shut down the church's main building after it refused to install 24 closed-circuit cameras.

On 10 October 2025 a sweeping crackdown saw 28 Zion Church leaders, including the church's senior pastor Ezra Jin Mingri, detained in 11 cities across the country. On 18 November Pastor Jin and 17 others were formally arrested on charges of 'illegally using information networks' for operating a hybrid, online and in person, church model nationwide.

On 18 June 2026, nine of the detainees were released on bail pending trial. The remaining nine detainees, including Pastor Jin, were transferred to the Yinhai District People's Procuratorate in Beihai City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, to face prosecution, with the charges against them reportedly having been escalated to 'illegal business operations' and 'fraud'.

On 4 July Pastor Jin was released from detention and transported to the United States. He is currently publicly advocating for the release of the remaining six Zion Church pastors, one Elder, and a pastor's wife who remain in detention. Court hearings ran from 14-18 August, but it was not possible to reach a verdict, given the unusually accelerated procedure, and the trial has been delayed. Their legal representative fled to Taiwan with her family on 2 September 2026.



Pastor Jin reunited with his daughter Grace in the United States.

Grace Jin, daughter of Pastor Ezra, has told CSW that Zion church is still operating at the same level, despite the detention of so many key leaders. This is due to foundation work laid down many years earlier. Zion Church encourages its members to 'walk and worship' whereby a congregant listens to prerecorded sermons and hymns in the park with friends, or alone on the way to work. These online materials can be prepared anywhere, and the church remains resilient as it does not rely on a physical space.

Furthermore, it is conceivable that Pastor Ezra may soon rejoin his role as lead pastor of the church. Acting senior

pastor, Pastor Sean Long Fei, likely only avoided arrest as he was in the US at the time the detentions were made. Other pastors are based in South Korea and Thailand. Advocacy efforts continue but the church remains a success story for its innovation and buoyancy of religious groups under pressure.



Top (L-R): Pastor Wang Lin, Pastor Yin Huibin, Pastor Lin Shucheng and Pastor Wang Cong. **Bottom (L-R):** Elder Wang Zhong, Pastor Liu Zhenbin, Wu Quiyu and Pastor Gao Yingjia.

News

London Embassy

On 20 January 2026 plans were approved for a China mega-embassy in London, set to be the largest in Europe, despite debates about diplomatic immunity, espionage and security. At protests on 17 January at the proposed Royal Mint site, UK opposition leader Kemi Badenoch alleged that MPs had been 'harassed and sanctioned' by China in the lead up to approval of the plans. The protests were attended by MPs and NGOs focusing on Hong Kong, East Turkistan, and Mongolia. A High Court challenge failed on 31 July. It is unclear whether the Burnham administration will uphold this decision.

Falun Gong

On 31 December 2025 the Falun Dafa Information Center reported documentation of at least 5,290 deaths of Falun Gong practitioners in China from torture or abuse, excluding cases of forced organ harvesting, since 1999, and over 4,000 cases of arrests and detentions in 2025 alone. From March 2024 to July 2026 the centre also tracked over 200 cases of violent threats against Falun Gong practitioners internationally. Shen Yun Performing Arts, a global dance troupe united by Falun Gong spiritual practice, has been repeatedly subject to lawfare, the misuse of lawsuits to inhibit and delay religious events and movements, with theatres often cancelling performances due to false bomb threats from Chinese linked actors, for example.

Taoism

Taoism is the only religion of the five organised by the state to have originated in China. Taoism and Han-Chinese Buddhism suffer the least violations of FoRB as the CCP seeks to present a positive facade to the international community and tourists. On 1 July 2026 the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA) organised a live broadcast of Xi Jinping's speech on

the 105th anniversary of the CCP. CTA President Li Guangfu directed 'the Taoist community to comprehensively advance the construction of a strong nation and the great cause of national rejuvenation'. This shows how the TAC has been ideologically compromised by Xi Jinping Thought.

Buddhism

On 27 December 2025 the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) adopted the Measures for the Appointment of Principal Positions in Han Buddhist Religious Venues, which effectively exclude non-Han Buddhists from leadership. Han-Chinese temple abbots and monks are required to 'persist in immersing the country with outstanding traditional Chinese culture'. The Five-Year Plan for the Sinicisation of Buddhism adopted in 2023 and running to 2027 tasks the BAC with forging a strong sense of community among Han, Theravada and Tibetan Buddhists in ethnic minority areas to 'deepen the anti-secession struggle'.

Tibetan disaster relief

The Nepal-Tibet floods have raised serious concerns about censorship and the lack of freedom of the press in China when reporting on emergency situations. The CCP has restricted all media in the region after the flash floods hit on 26 August 2026. This is a problem because of the controversial hydropower development projects that threatens Tibetan heritage sites. The region is also being used for AI datacenters. If a similar event were to reoccur in the politically sensitive Tibetan Autonomous Region, global aid would be delayed. The impact of regionalised FoRB restrictions would compound disaster for marginalised Tibetan Buddhist groups as information is suppressed and controlled to fit Party narratives of strength in response.



Credit: Red Cross Nepal.

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

In January 2026 UN experts warned that state-imposed forced labour in the XUAR and across other parts of China 'may amount to forcible transfer and/or enslavement as a crime against humanity'. While some camps have been dismantled, the World Uyghur Congress reports that the government strategy throughout 2025 was to increase the intake of residential schools to obstruct children from receiving religious traditions through their parents and mosques. One million people are still believed to be held in forced labour and re-education camps in Xinjiang. Yet cotton produced by persecuted Muslim-majority people groups, including Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks and Uzbeks, is

still making its way onto shelves and into wardrobes around the world. The UK reportedly imported £809 million of goods from Xinjiang between July 2024 and June 2025, including T-shirts, toys, toothbrushes and Christmas decorations.

Linfen Covenant Home Church

In August 2022 the authorities raided a summer retreat of Linfen Covenant Home Church in Shanxi Province. Church leaders Pastor Li Jie and Elder Han Xiaodong were detained, while a third leader, Elder Wang Qiang, was detained the following November, reportedly because he refused to give false evidence against Li and Han. Pastor Li and Elder Han were released on 19 April 2026 upon completion of their sentences both of which were for three years and eight months in prison while Elder Wang's was one year and eleven months. His sentence was mitigated by time already served and he was not returned to prison.



L-R: Elder Han Xiaodong, Pastor Li Jie and Elder Wang Qiang. Credit: ChinaAid

Hong Kong

On 2 September 2026, 29-year-old pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong pleaded guilty to charges of collusion with foreign entities, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison, for his role in anti-extradition protests in 2019 and singing the protest anthem 'Sing Hallelujah to the Lord'. He has already been in detention for six years. At the time of writing, no date has been set for sentencing.

As of 1 August 2026, 415 people have been pro or retroactively arrested in cases which 'endanger national security' under the National Security Law introduced in 2020. The number includes Catholic pro-democracy activist Jimmy Lai, a British citizen who was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment on 9 February 2026 at age 78, which amounts to a life sentence. This has created an atmosphere of self-censorship.

In May 2022 Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong Diocese was arrested for failing to register the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, which aided protestors against the 2020 National Security Law. He was released on bail the same day and the Hong Kong Court of Appeal only heard his case in December 2025 in an unlawfully delayed trial, with the cardinal then

aged 93. He was targeted as a long-time supporter of FoRB in Hong Kong.

Warning from Taiwan

China's continued military presence in the South China Sea and intimidation of the democratic self-governing island of Taiwan weaken human and sovereign rights protection. Japanese-born Taiwanese citizen Akio Yaita has been vocally critical of Beijing's new ethnic unity law and outspoken on FoRB. His assault on 6 July 2026 in Taichiung, during which he was hit in the face by a suspect from Guangdong Province, China, was described as the 'first case of transnational repression' in Taiwan since the law was introduced.

Urgent and ongoing cases

Pastor John Cao

Pastor John Cao, now in his late 60s, served a seven-year prison sentence linked to his work establishing 16 schools in poverty-affected areas on the China-Myanmar border, which he established in 1986. He worked with churches from a range of denominations in the US and took an interdenominational approach. He was charged with 'illegal border crossing' in March 2017 upon return to Yunnan Province from Myanmar.

Despite his release in 2024 on completion of his sentence, Chinese authorities continue to withhold his passport, preventing him from leaving the country. The exit ban is thought to be linked to his detention on 14 October 2024 in Zhenxiong, Yunnan Province when he was held for questioning after 20 police raided a meeting of new unregistered church (Peace Reformed Church) and accused him of 'illegal evangelism' and conducting public baptisms.

Pastor Cao was recently diagnosed with, and has undergone chemotherapy treatment for, prostate cancer which has now spread to his bones and spine. Nevertheless, he is reportedly well enough to travel. His wife and two adult sons, all of whom hold US citizenship, live in North Carolina.

Pastor David Tang

On 5 August 2026 Pastor David Tang, the founder and senior pastor of Wenzhou's Purpose Driven Church, a church financial administrator and five church workers, were detained. They are reportedly being held at Chongming Detention Centre, Shanghai, in a cross-provincial police operation. Authorities have not disclosed the reasons for their detention. Purpose Driven Church has reportedly refused to join the TSPM.

CSW's sources suggest that Pastor David had been maintaining a positive relationship with the local police in Wenzhou, who disapprove of Shanghai police operations in Zhejiang province without communication. This confirms that the arrests have been ordered from the highest level of government irrespective of standard police procedures.

Pastor Wang Sanyuan

All aspects of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church operation are closely monitored by the state, and freedom to worship independently is repressed. On 17 March 2026, for example, 73-year-old Pastor Wang Sanyuan was detained; officials are yet to make a statement on his location or criminal charges, and there is no indication that he has been able to meet with a lawyer. Pastor Wang is the lead pastor of Changchunli church, which has registered with the Religious Affairs Bureau in Jinan, Shandong Province. He is known to suffer from cardiovascular health problems for which he has been hospitalised several times.

Min Zin

China's economic-first posture in Myanmar effectively provides cover for the military's systematic destruction of churches, places of worship, and Christian minority settlements across Kachin and Chin States. On 20 August 2026 the US State Department designated Min Zin, a Myanmar-born American citizen, as wrongfully detained by China in Kunming, Yunnan, on 3 June 2025. Min is the founder of the Institute for Strategy and Policy (ISP) Myanmar, a leading independent research body documenting China-Myanmar border dynamics and military violence. He faces charges of espionage. In July 2026 China intensified its efforts to deport hundreds of migrant workers back to Myanmar where they face arrest or serious harm.

Pastor Sun Chenghao

Pastor Sun Chenghao, a 44-year-old ethnic Korean Christian pastor, is serving a four-and-a-half-year prison sentence after participating in Christian exchange activities in South Korea in 2023. His family disputes the charge of organising illegal border crossings, noting that the group travelled using valid passports and regular procedures. His wife, Jin Hua, has reported a serious deterioration in his health, including frailty, exhaustion and a temporary loss of consciousness in August 2026, raising urgent concerns about his access to medical care since the sentence began in 2025. His family has also required financial support to assist with prison visits and subsistence costs after authorities imposed a 10,000RMB fine on Pastor Sun.

Further reading

[The Supremacy of the Party](#), CSW's report on China's weaponisation of legislation and policy to curtail FoRB, October 2025

The UK Government's Country Policy and Information Notes on China:

- [Falun Gong](#), November 2025
- [Opposition to the State](#), January 2026
- [Christians in China](#), June 2026

ChinaAid's [2025 Annual Persecution Report](#), January 2026

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF): [Issue Update on the On Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress](#), May 2026

The [Tibet Leadership Report](#) by the International Campaign for Tibet focuses on assimilation in TAR, August 2026

[Bitter Winter](#) publishes news and focus articles on recent developments in China

**CSW everyone
free to believe**