

# The Battle for China's Spirit

Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping



## CONTENTS

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Executive Summary	1
Overview	4
Evolving Mechanisms of Religious Control and Persecution	15
Chart: Key Religious Controls	24
Map: Religious Persecution by Province	25
I. Chinese Buddhism and Taoism	26
II. Christianity	42
III. Islam	66
IV. Tibetan Buddhism	86
V. Falun Gong	108
Recommendations	130

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## ON THE COVER

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Chinese soldiers amass outside of Labrang Monastery in Gansu Province to prevent protests during Losar, the Tibetan lunar New Year festival, in February 2016 (Christophe Boisvieux/Getty Images).

## Executive Summary

# The Battle for China's Spirit

A Taoist disciple joins the order without knowing when he will be admitted to priesthood. Dozens of Christians are barred from celebrating Christmas together. Tibetan monks are forced to learn reinterpretations of Buddhist doctrine during a “patriotic reeducation” session. A Uighur Muslim farmer is sentenced to nine years in prison for praying in a field. And a 45-year-old father in northeastern China dies in custody days after being detained for practicing Falun Gong.

These are a small sample of the obstacles that Chinese believers encounter when they seek to peacefully practice their faith—products of the ruling Communist Party's multifaceted apparatus of control. Combining both violent and nonviolent methods, the party's policies are designed to curb the rapid growth of religious communities and eliminate certain beliefs and practices, while also harnessing aspects of religion that could serve the regime's political and economic interests.

Since Xi Jinping took the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, the authorities have intensified many of their restrictions, resulting in an overall increase in religious persecution. But believers have responded with a surprising degree of resistance, including in faith communities that have generally enjoyed cooperative relationships with state and party officials.

This escalating cycle of repression and pushback illustrates a fundamental failure of the Chinese authorities' religious policies. Rather than checking religion's natural expansion and keeping it under political control, the CCP's rigid constraints have essentially created an enormous black market, forcing many believers to operate outside the law and to view the regime as unreasonable, unjust, or illegitimate.

The present study is a detailed examination of the dynamics of religious revival, repression, and resistance in China today, as well as their recent evolution and broader implications. The report focuses on seven communities that together account for over 350 million believers: the country's officially recognized religions—Buddhism (Chinese and Tibetan), Taoism,

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, religious persecution in China has increased overall.



Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam—as well as Falun Gong, the largest of several banned *qigong* practices, new religious movements, and quasi-Christian sects.

As China experiences a spiritual revival across a wide range of faiths, the Chinese government's religious controls have taken different forms for different localities, ethnicities, and denominations. In many parts of China, ordinary believers do not necessarily feel constrained in their ability to practice their faith, and state authorities even offer active support for certain activities.

## The Communist Party's efforts to impose its will on a wide spectrum of religious practice and thought are failing in important ways.

At the other extreme, Chinese officials have banned holiday celebrations, desecrated places of worship, and employed lethal violence. Security forces across the country detain, torture, or kill believers from various faiths on a daily basis. How a group or individual is treated depends in large part on the level of perceived threat or benefit to party interests, as well as the discretion of local officials.

Nonviolent forms of control are more prevalent, but they are also deeply offensive to many believers, directly intruding on the internal functions of religious organizations. They include vetting religious leaders for political reliability, placing limits on the number of new monastics or priests, and manipulating religious doctrine according to party priorities. Extensive surveillance, "reeducation" campaigns, and restrictions on private worship affect the spiritual lives of millions of people. And increasingly, economic reprisals and exploitation have become a source of tension and a catalyst for protests.

Under Xi, many of these practices have expanded. New legal mechanisms have codified previously informal restrictions. Crackdowns on unregistered and even state-sanctioned places of worship and religious leaders have increased, with several clerics receiving long prison terms. Constraints on children's ability to participate in religious life have multiplied. Four communities examined in this study have experienced an increase in persecution: Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and both Uighur and Hui Muslims.

Yet there have also been a number of positive developments in unexpected quarters. Sino-Vatican relations have warmed, raising the possibility of an agreement on the appointment of Catholic bishops. Such a pact would remove a major source of division in the Chinese church. Falun Gong practitioners, though still subject to severe abuses, are experiencing reduced persecution in many locales, as top officials driving the campaign have been purged in intraparty struggles, and years of grassroots outreach by adherents and their supporters have won over some lower-level authorities.

Indeed, members of all faith communities have responded to official controls with creativity and with courage, at times scoring significant victories. Whatever the outcome of each contestation, it is clear that the CCP's efforts to impose its will on a wide spectrum of religious practice and thought are falling short or backfiring in important ways.

Religious groups, beliefs, and practices that the CCP has devoted tremendous resources to extinguishing have survived or spread, representing a remarkable failure of the party's



repressive capacity. Meanwhile, official actions are generating resentment, assertiveness, and activism among populations that might previously have been apolitical and largely content with CCP rule.

The impact of these dynamics reaches far beyond the realm of religious policy alone, deeply affecting China's overall legal, social, political, and economic environment. Looking toward the future, Xi and his colleagues face a critical choice: Do they recognize their errors and loosen religious controls, or do they press ahead with a spiraling pattern of repression and resistance that might threaten the regime's long-term legitimacy and stability? Their decision will be critical in determining the ultimate cost of the ongoing battle for China's spirit.

## Overview

# Marxist Materialism Confronts Religious Reality

Religion and spirituality have been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and identity for millennia. This fact posed a challenge for the avowedly atheist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) when it came to power in 1949, and its strategies for dealing with religiosity in Chinese society have fluctuated in the decades since.

Under Mao Zedong—and particularly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76)—the party took extreme measures to stamp out religion. Thousands of monasteries, churches, and mosques were destroyed, monks were disrobed, and untold numbers of religious leaders and believers were imprisoned, tortured, and killed.

In 1982, after Mao's death, the CCP Central Committee under Deng Xiaoping rejected the Cultural Revolution-era policy of eradicating religion.<sup>3</sup> Instead it favored a more regulatory approach, seeking to manage religion, harness its influence to achieve other party goals, and suppress any threat it may present to the party's authority. In the background was the Marxist assumption that with further economic development, "feudal" religious beliefs would inevitably fade.

Yet 35 years later, party leaders face a conundrum: Such Marxist predictions have proven remarkably inaccurate. Although the Chinese economy and per capita incomes have grown exponentially since the early 1980s, religiosity in Chinese society has not dissipated. On the contrary, it is undergoing a period of extraordinary revival and expansion across multiple faiths. Today, China is home to at least 350 million religious believers and tens of millions of others who engage in various spiritual meditation practices and folk-religious rituals. Many believers report that they seek divine comfort and guidance specifically to cope with life in the new environment of hypermaterialistic modernity.

Each generation of CCP leaders has responded to this predicament with a combination of regulations, accommodation, and repression. The current Politburo Standing Committee led

**"[Communist Party cadres must be] unyielding Marxist atheists.... We should guide and educate the religious circle and their followers."**

—Xi Jinping, April 2016<sup>1</sup>

**"The world is won by those who let it go. But when you try and try, the world is beyond winning."**

—Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism<sup>2</sup>

by Xi Jinping, which took power in November 2012, is no different. In fact, in his words and actions, Xi has elevated the prominence and importance of “religious work” on the party’s agenda.<sup>4</sup>

The present study takes stock of these dynamics, which are critical to understanding today’s China. It assesses the current state of religious revival, the regime’s multifaceted system for controlling religious practice, and the various responses mounted by religious communities. The report places a particular emphasis on the first four years of Xi Jinping’s rule and on seven major religious groups—Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Falun Gong—while seeking to shed light on the following questions:<sup>5</sup>



A banner at a Buddhist temple and scenic park in Jiangsu Province: “Study, propagate, and implement religious regulations, maintain harmony in religion, promote social harmony.”

*Credit: Kuei-min Chang*

- What are the main obstacles and opportunities that spiritual leaders and believers encounter in China today?
- What have been the main changes in the party-state’s religious policies, methods of control, and patterns of implementation since November 2012?
- What factors are driving these changes, and to what extent has the CCP been effective at achieving its aims for each religious community?
- What are the implications of these dynamics for broader political, economic, and social developments in China?

In preparing this report, Freedom House analysts examined hundreds of official documents and speeches, judicial verdicts, media accounts, and research studies by scholars, think tanks, and human rights groups in Chinese and English. The report also draws on roughly 30 interviews with lawyers, religious leaders, monastics, grassroots activists, commentators, and scholars both inside and outside China, as well as observations from fieldwork conducted in China by contributing researchers and academic advisers.<sup>6</sup>

### The pillars of the CCP’s religious policy

As CCP leaders have come to terms with the enduring existence and apparent expansion of religion in Chinese society, they have pursued a complex policy designed to maximize the benefits to party rule while minimizing the risks. Four key pillars of the strategy are evident in its implementation:

- **Opportunistic exploitation:** Harnessing the benefits of religion to advance broader CCP economic, political, cultural, and foreign policy goals
- **‘Rule by law’:** Developing legal and bureaucratic instruments to control religious practice and institutions



- **Selective eradication:** Fiercely suppressing religious groups, beliefs, and individuals deemed to threaten party rule or policy priorities, often via extralegal means
- **Long-term asphyxiation:** Adopting measures to curb religion's expansion and accelerate its extinction among future generations

Party authorities have combined these basic elements to create a diversity of conditions for different faith groups and subgroups, leading to seemingly contradictory government actions. On the one hand, party leaders regularly cite the constructive role that religion can play in society, encourage charity work, and fund renovations of important pilgrimage sites, tourist attractions, and international conferences. On the other hand, a multibillion-dollar bureaucratic and security apparatus monitors and suppresses—sometimes with brute force—a wide range of religious practices that would be considered benign and routine in other parts of the world.

Party leaders have pursued a complex policy designed to maximize religion's benefits to party rule while minimizing the risks.

Each new set of CCP leaders has followed this general pattern, with certain shifts in emphasis and implementation. Jiang Zemin stressed in his speeches the potentially "positive" contributions of religions in achieving the party's social and economic goals. But in 1999, he initiated what one scholar termed "the worst instance of religious persecution since the Cultural Revolution"<sup>7</sup>—a massive campaign to eradicate the popular Falun Gong meditation and spiritual practice.

Jiang's successor, Hu Jintao, saw state-sanctioned religion as a means of promoting a "harmonious society." During his tenure the government began funding the World Buddhist Forum to promote Chinese "soft power," while construction of new churches and Hui mosques flourished as many local officials took a lenient approach or sought to reap economic benefits from religious expansion. But Hu also oversaw the adoption of restrictive national regulations on religious affairs, a pre-Olympic crackdown on thousands of believers, and a significant uptick in religious repression in Tibet and Xinjiang following major protests.

### **Trajectory under Xi: Intensified restrictions, unexpected improvements**

Since November 2012, Xi Jinping and his colleagues have largely maintained the CCP's stance on religion and continued specific policies initiated by their predecessors. Nevertheless, certain distinctions and points of emphasis have emerged.

Rhetorically, Xi has been even more vocal than Hu in his effort to harness China's religious and cultural traditions to shore up CCP legitimacy, linking them to his own signature concepts of the "China Dream" and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. At the same time, in the context of a broader ideological campaign to limit the influence of so-called Western values, Xi has warned against foreign infiltration of the religious sphere. Together, these two messages have reinforced the perception that the CCP favors Asian religions like Buddhism and Taoism, particularly if their expansion might help contain the spread of faiths like Christianity and Islam, of which the party has traditionally been more wary.

Xi has also presided over the general closure of civic space in China, and religious groups

have not escaped the increased repression. Indeed, one of the main findings of this study is that religious persecution has increased overall, with four communities in particular experiencing a downturn in conditions—Protestant Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, and both Hui and Uighur Muslims.

Religious policy under Xi can be distinguished from that of the Hu Jintao era in four key ways:

- More restrictive legal environment:** A series of new, largely restrictive legal instruments have been introduced at both the national and local levels, in some cases codifying what were previously informal political directives. These include items directly linked to religious policy, such as an update to national religious affairs regulations, harsher penalties in a key provision of the criminal code, local rules banning religious attire in Xinjiang, and judicial guidelines regarding self-immolations in Tibet. New laws on national security and counterterrorism have also incorporated provisions that are could be used to justify suppression of peaceful religious practice.
- Expanding targets of repression:** The targets of religious persecution have broadened compared with the Hu period, affecting previously tolerated activities and individuals. Most notably, state-sanctioned religious leaders and places of worship have faced penalties—including long prison sentences and demolitions—that are typically reserved for unregistered or banned groups. Routine acts of religious expression like praying in a field or hospital, lighting incense, or viewing a religious video have drawn harsh punishments. Repression has also intensified in certain geographical areas where it had once been rare, or against those who aid persecuted religious believers, such as human rights lawyers and family members.
- Increased state intrusion in daily religious life:** The state’s controlling presence is felt in aspects of religious practice and identity from which it was previously absent. Party cadres and security forces—including armed police—are more directly involved in the daily management of monasteries, mosques, and churches in certain parts of the country, with some positioned permanently in places of worship. For lay believers, popular festivals have been banned, children’s religious education and participation are constrained, and deeply personal decisions like wearing a headscarf, growing a beard, or fasting are dictated by state authorities.
- Adaptation to new technological environment:** Various modes of electronic surveillance—from video cameras and drones to monitoring of online activity—have expanded dramatically at sites of worship and public spaces frequented by believers, supplementing a vast network of human informants. As the use of smartphones and social media applications has increased, authorities have responded with localized blocks on particular apps, imprisonment of users for sharing religious content on platforms like QQ or WeChat, and prosecution of believers for merely downloading or consuming unofficial religious content or information about violations of religious rights.



A police van with surveillance equipment stationed outside a mosque in Urumqi, Xinjiang, in 2012.

*Credit: Graham Adams*

Despite this overall trajectory of tightening controls, a number of developments have spurred optimism among certain faith communities, reflecting the complexity of China's political environment. Some Buddhist scholars have welcomed Xi's rhetoric about the importance of traditional Chinese culture and his specific references to Buddhism. Beijing's relations with the Vatican have warmed considerably since Pope Francis assumed his position within days of Xi's installation as state president. As of late 2016, the two sides appeared to be very close to reaching an agreement on the appointment of bishops, although some prominent figures in the church remained skeptical about how much such a deal would reduce repression of underground Catholics.

More surprising given the party's ongoing 17-year campaign to eradicate Falun Gong, repression of the group appears to have declined in practice in some locales. Xi has offered no explicit signal that he plans to reverse the CCP's policy toward Falun Gong, but cracks in the party apparatus appear to have given lower-level officials leeway to choose not to persecute local Falun Gong residents. Incidents that would have been unimaginable a few years ago—the release of a practitioner after only a few days' detention, police permitting adherents to meditate in custody, or officers actively protecting individuals from punishment—have occurred across the country and do not appear to be isolated.

### Factors driving change

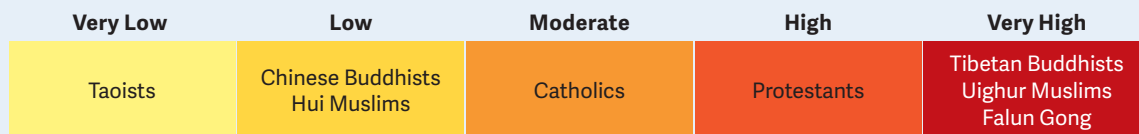
A constellation of factors appear to be driving these changes, for better or worse, at both the national and local levels. Religious groups have been swept up in a **broader tightening of CCP control** over civil society and an increasingly anti-Western ideological bent under Xi Jinping. The party is essentially bracing itself for the potential political impact of an economic downturn while seeking new sources of legitimacy. The new religious restrictions bear markers of Xi's particular mode of governance, including the "rule by law" emphasis on legislation, an expansion of party-state representation in various social entities, and dedicated efforts to rein in social media activity.

At the same time, certain government initiatives appear to be **responses to developments in particular religious communities**. Judicial guidelines and collective punishment tactics have been introduced to suppress Tibetan self-immolations, a particularly desperate form of protest that peaked in 2012 after other avenues of redress or escape were blocked. Restrictions on Hui and Uighur Muslims seem motivated by concerns over increased violent attacks and the spread of Salafism, an ultraconservative form of Islam, as well as rising anti-Muslim sentiment among the Chinese public. As Falun Gong practitioners devise new means of disseminating information about the group and the abuses they have suffered, security forces have tried to adapt by increasing electronic surveillance and deploying geolocation capabilities to find and arrest them.

In the case of Christianity, the traits and priorities of **individual officials** seem to have been especially influential. The party secretary of Zhejiang Province, who had worked closely with Xi in the past and reportedly has a strong aversion to the public display of Christian symbols, has overseen a cross-removal campaign that has affected over 1,500 churches in the region. Separately, serendipitous attributes of the new pope—his developing country origins and Jesuit roots, for example—may make him a more palatable interlocutor for the CCP and help clear the way for an agreement on bishop appointments. From the Vatican's perspective, the unprecedented number of bishop vacancies in China may be motivating Pope Francis to



**Figure 1. Spectrum of Religious Persecution**

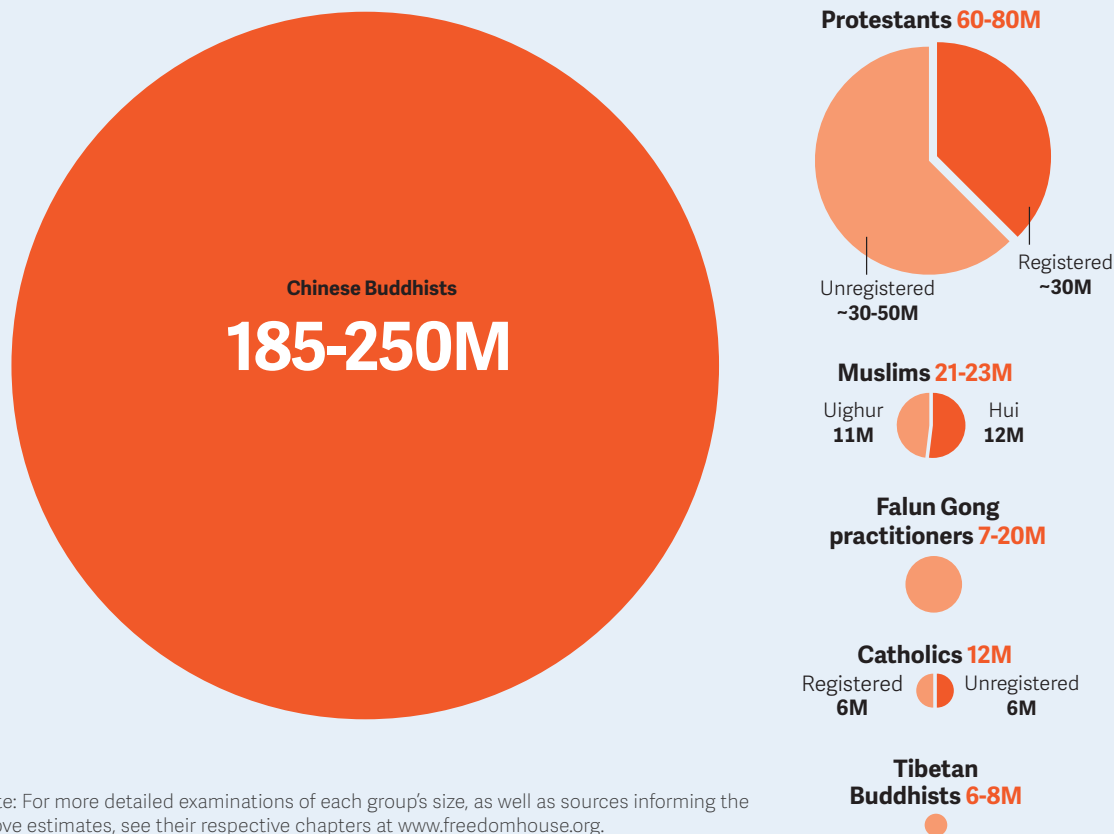


Note: Freedom House researchers and academic advisers assigned these designations based on the situations described in the chapters devoted to each group, as well as the breakdown provided in the Key Religious Controls chart on page 19.

**Figure 2. China's Religious Communities**

China is home to over 350 million religious believers and hundreds of millions more who follow various folk traditions. Determining the precise size of religious communities in China is notoriously difficult, even for officially recognized groups. Government statistics exclude those who worship at unregistered temples or churches and believers under the age of 18, and many Chinese engage in a mixture of religious and folk practices. Official figures for Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists are based on ethnicity, embedding the assumption that all members of an ethnic group adhere to a particular religion. And for banned groups like Falun Gong, no contemporary official figures exist.

Nevertheless, having some sense of the overall and relative size of these communities is important for understanding the nature of religious revival, repression, and resistance. The following are informed estimates for the communities examined in this study (with the exception of Taoism, for which no figures were available), drawing on official figures, public opinion surveys, academic studies, media reports, and religious groups' own reporting.



Note: For more detailed examinations of each group's size, as well as sources informing the above estimates, see their respective chapters at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).



A woman sings hymns with fellow congregants from Beijing's unofficial Shouwang church, who were meeting outdoors in 2009 after being evicted from their place of worship. By 2016, years of official harassment had led to the congregation's dispersal.

Credit: Beijing resident

make his own exceptional overtures to Xi.

**Internal party struggles** add another layer of complexity. As cadres pushing for a more assimilationist ethnic policy edge out those favoring relative cultural autonomy, restrictions on Tibetan Buddhism and Islam have increased. More positively, after former security czar Zhou Yongkang and other officials overseeing the anti-Falun Gong effort were purged and imprisoned as part of Xi's anticorruption campaign, the crackdown on the spiritual group suffered from a bureaucratic leadership gap, opening space for sympathetic local officials to adopt a more lenient approach. Local leaders have displayed tolerance toward other faith groups as well, often after forging a cooperative relationship with the head of a local monastery, church, or mosque, contributing to an uneven landscape of policy implementation.

Nevertheless, several **long-standing attributes of the CCP's authoritarian rule** influence the cost-benefit calculations that officials make when considering how to handle religious affairs or respond to a particular incident. The resulting tendency is to rely on repressive rather than progressive policy options. The party remains deeply anxious about religious believers who could form an allegiance to an authority outside its control. When a particular faith or institution becomes especially popular, this often triggers an official backlash, as demonstrated by growing restrictions on Protestant churches and demolitions taking place at the influential Larung Gar Tibetan Buddhist academy. Intraparty incentives—such as formal criteria for promotions and de facto impunity for violence against perceived party foes—generally reward repressive actions and empower parts of the party-state apparatus that engage in violations of religious freedom. Finally, the party has long mobilized its security forces around politically sensitive anniversaries or international events hosted in China, leading to extreme measures aimed at preventing outbursts of religious expression that might be perceived as damaging the CCP's reputation.

## The impact and limits of CCP policies

The party's apparatus of religious controls and its repressive actions since late 2012 have been effective in many ways. Tibetan self-immolations have been stifled. Crosses on churches in Zhejiang Province are much less visible. Harassed house churches have been forced to disperse. And many fewer Uighurs are appearing in public with headscarves or long beards.

More broadly, a corps of politically loyal religious leaders has been established, and a new generation is being trained at official seminaries and Buddhist academies. A sizable contingent of religious believers feel that they can practice their faith largely unhindered. In a coup for the government's "soft power" initiatives, China hosted the general conference of a long-standing international Buddhist organization for the first time in 2014.

But even as varied controls and intensifying repression have achieved some concrete results, the CCP is facing serious policy failures and constraints on the effectiveness of its strategy. Billions of dollars and an untold number of ruined lives later, the party's concerted efforts to change people's actual beliefs have largely proven futile.

Many Tibetans continue to deeply revere the Dalai Lama. Uighur Muslims very much want to fast during Ramadan, teach their children to recite the Quran, and go on the Hajj pilgrimage. Christians continue to worship at underground "house churches" across the country. And millions of Chinese still practice Falun Gong, including hundreds of thousands who have reportedly rescinded denunciations made under torture.

In fact, the problem with CCP religious policies goes beyond simple inefficacy. Government actions—like intentional bottlenecks in official clergy training, intrusive bans on benign expressions of piety, increased harassment of state-sanctioned church leaders, and punishment of Tibetan monastics who try to take a conciliatory approach—appear to be counterproductive, driving more worshippers to unofficial congregations and signaling that a cooperative relationship with officials is not a viable tactic. Apolitical believers are forced to practice their faith outside the law, leading many to conclude that both the government and its regulations are unjust and even illegitimate.

In this environment, religious leaders and believers have sought to take advantage of cracks in the system to expand the space for religious practice, defy official bans, or actively oppose restrictive policies.

Millions of believers **defy official restrictions in their daily lives**, some openly and others with great secrecy. Staff and volunteers at religious charities incorporate religious symbols and spiritual meaning into activities that take place outside formal sites of worship. Uighur Muslims blacken their curtains to avoid detection when eating before sunrise during Ramadan. Tibetans pray for the Dalai Lama's long life. Falun Gong practitioners meditate at home in the dark with headphones. Christians interested in leadership training find help via a Hong Kong radio program or private mountainside workshops. And a wide range of believers access or disseminate unofficial spiritual texts via the internet, mobile phones, underground

The survival of groups and beliefs that the party has invested tremendous resources to crush reflects its difficulty confronting citizens who are willing to make sacrifices for higher principles.



publications, homemade DVDs, and satellite dishes.

An increasingly common form of resistance is **nonparticipation in official initiatives**. Monks in a Tibetan monastery have refused to attend “patriotic reeducation” sessions or fled into the mountains. Other attendees at political trainings feign participation while reading their own materials during sessions. Catholic seminarians boycotted their own graduation ceremony to avoid Mass with an illegitimate, CCP-backed bishop. Uighurs have treated some government documents or sponsored celebrations as *haram* (forbidden in Islam). Such actions risk punishment, but many believers engage in them nonetheless.

For some groups and issue areas, **advocating for change through the existing political-legal system** is an option. Taoist groups recently won a lawsuit over the commodification of a sacred deity, and Hui Muslims attempted to advance legislation governing halal foods. In other cases, religious leaders and believers have gained the cooperation or tacit approval of local officials via various means. Leaders of Buddhist temples have successfully employed a variety of arguments, points of leverage, and public pressure to negotiate with local government actors to secure open temple access, lower admission fees, a halt to demolitions, or greater priestly control over management of venues.

Some unregistered church leaders have made a point of alerting local authorities about upcoming meetings or showing kindness to local police tasked with monitoring them. As a result, officials have given de facto approval to “house churches” in their jurisdictions, and police have warned unofficial church leaders of coming raids. Falun Gong practitioners inside and outside China have contacted hundreds of thousands of judges, prosecutors, and security agents in a concerted effort to debunk CCP propaganda and encourage them not to participate in the persecution of innocent people. Over time, this massive effort has borne fruit, with some local police refusing to detain adherents and a judge, in 2015, granting the first-known de facto acquittal in a Falun Gong case.

In a sign of growing assertiveness and resentment of official policies among a wide range of believers, members of nearly every group examined in this study—including leaders in “patriotic” associations—have engaged in some form of **direct protest**. On several occasions, Chinese Buddhist monks have closed the doors of their monastery to visitors in a last-ditch attempt to foil a new government commodification project. Protestant and Catholic leaders from state-sanctioned churches in Zhejiang Province have published open letters urging an end to cross removals and demolitions, while their congregants have held sit-ins or created “human walls” in an effort to physically bar the desecration of their church.

In Tibet, solitary protesters have marched through marketplaces displaying images of the Dalai Lama, and hundreds of people defied a government ban to mourn a prominent lama who died in prison. Large numbers of Falun Gong torture survivors have taken advantage of a change in judicial guidelines to directly file criminal complaints inside China naming Jiang Zemin as the one responsible for their suffering.

Some of these efforts have yielded government concessions or other real-world changes,

It would appear that in the long-term battle for China's spirit, an unreformed Communist Party will ultimately lose.

even as many of those engaging in active protests or dissemination of banned information have been severely punished. Demolitions have been prevented, religious detainees have been allowed to go home, and vilifying propaganda has been debunked.

But perhaps the greatest achievement of these collective efforts is the spiritual resilience they demonstrate. The mere survival of groups, beliefs, and specific manifestations of faith that the CCP has invested tremendous resources to crush is incredibly impressive. It reflects the particular difficulties the party faces when confronting citizens who are willing to make sacrifices for higher principles and spiritual salvation.



Standing in front of a prison in Hebei Province in March 2014, Bian Xiaohui holds a banner reading "I want to see my father," who was detained for practicing Falun Gong. Bian, who does not practice, was sentenced to three years in prison after the photo circulated on social media.

*Credit: Epoch Times*

### Political, economic, and social implications

The human cost of the CCP's controls and abuses is overwhelming. Religious prisoners form the largest contingent of prisoners of conscience in China. With each passing day, more Chinese citizens are swept into the party-state's repressive apparatus for engaging in peaceful spiritual practice. Families are torn apart, injuries and psychological damage are inflicted, and lives are lost. In some parts of the country—like Xinjiang, Zhejiang, and Heilongjiang, for example—high levels of persecution cut across multiple groups, with police officers and judges potentially being asked to target members of several faiths.

Given the size, geographic dispersion, and socioeconomic diversity of the population directly affected, these human rights violations generate significant ripple effects on surrounding communities, Chinese society at large, and the CCP itself. These manifest in a number of ways:

- **Accelerating systemic corrosion:** Large-scale religious persecution reinforces the worst tendencies of China's legal-security apparatus—torture, impunity, corruption, and politicization of the judiciary—and undermines any efforts to establish genuine rule of law. It also strengthens hard-line elements within the apparatus, guarantees them resources, and provides opportunities for refining tactics of persuasion, censorship, "reeducation," and abuse that are then deployed against other religious and secular activists.
- **Exacerbating threats to social stability:** The intrusion of religious controls into routine and benign spiritual practices is generating growing resentment and risks radicalizing believers. It could result in more people engaging in direct protests, joining unofficial congregations, or sharing banned information. Some may even turn to violence against symbols of state authority—including government-affiliated religious leaders—or civilians, as has already occurred in Xinjiang. In either case, these dynamics undermine both the party's stated goals regarding religious affairs and its broader priority of preserving social stability.

- **Lost spiritual and economic opportunities:** The suppression of religious groups, individual leaders, and inspirational ideas, including efforts to strip officially recognized religions of significant theological meaning, deprives Chinese people and the world of valuable cultural and spiritual resources while harming China's ability to reach its full "soft power" potential. More concretely, the billions of dollars in taxpayer money that is currently wasted on futile or counterproductive religious persecution could be used instead for purposes that would benefit Chinese society, ranging from elderly care to environmental protection.
- **Undermining CCP legitimacy:** As the scope of religious repression expands, encompassing more members of state-sanctioned groups, these people's trust in the government appears to decline. And when nonbelievers have an opportunity to see through deceptive propaganda that underpins suppressive policies, their own faith in the party is fundamentally shaken. Some individuals within the party-state apparatus appear increasingly uncomfortable with their own participation in abuses against obviously innocent people, leading to internal resistance and aid to targeted believers.

These points highlight the degree to which the CCP's religious policies, as measured against the party's own goals and priorities, have failed in key ways even as they have succeeded in others. At the root of this failure is a more fundamental problem: China's rigid, anachronistic political system is ill-equipped, both structurally and ideologically, to govern a rapidly modernizing and diverse society and to address that society's challenges in a productive and humane way. Instead, the regime falls back on familiar repressive tools, perpetuating a vicious circle of violence and resistance.

### Future outlook

Xi Jinping and other party leaders have numerous options if they wish to extricate themselves from their policy failures. They could loosen registration rules to bring more believers into a realistic legal framework, though that may mean allowing registered groups to operate outside the confines of the "patriotic" associations. They could reverse past arbitrary decisions that have generated significant backlash from believers and damaged party legitimacy, such as prohibiting veneration of the Dalai Lama, banning Falun Gong, and removing crosses from state-sanctioned churches. And they could begin to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and acts of violence when prosecuting Uighur Muslims. Such steps would generate significant goodwill among multiple faith communities and would not infringe significantly on the party's ability to protect other core interests.

Unfortunately, these choices seem unlikely in the current political and economic climate. The findings of this report suggest that comprehensive, top-down liberalization will not be forthcoming in the next several years, though some groups may find themselves enjoying more favorable conditions for other reasons. The report underscores the pivotal role that bottom-up forces and geographic diversity play in protecting religious believers' lives, expanding the space for practice, and facilitating productive state-religion relations at the local level.

Given the trend of religious revival and evidence of believers' own perseverance, it would appear that in the long-term battle for China's spirit, an unreformed CCP will ultimately lose.

# Evolving mechanisms of religious control and persecution

Despite the diversity of the Chinese government’s approaches to management of different faiths, certain methods of control are evident across multiple groups examined in this study. Four dimensions of the party-state’s apparatus—and their recent evolution—are particularly notable for their profound impact on the lives of ordinary people in China and the insight they provide into how the Chinese authorities interact with believers:

## 1. Expanding controls over religious leaders and places of worship

The corporatist “patriotic” associations affiliated with each of the five officially recognized religions form the foundation of the CCP’s institutional controls. These entities are closely supervised and directed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) and the party’s United Front Work Department. Through the five associations—the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), and the Islamic Association of China (IAC)—as well as Religious Affairs Bureaus (RABs) at every administrative level, the party-state tries to exercise control over the full range of religious activities. Places of worship are registered, religious leaders are monitored, theological content is managed, and annual festivals or pilgrimages like the Muslim Hajj are organized under official auspices. As the number of religious believers in China has grown, these entities are experiencing difficulties in exercising the desired degree of control, sometimes due to self-imposed limitations. This results in even more intrusive bureaucratic interventions.

The authorities have not made sufficient adjustments to the regulatory framework to meet growing public demand.

One of the key functions of the patriotic associations is overseeing the selection, training, monitoring, and continuing education of politically loyal clerics. According to official speeches, the party hopes that by controlling the leaders of a religious group and guiding believers toward politically loyal preachers, it will ensure that religious teachings do not undermine CCP legitimacy or policy priorities. Religious leaders affiliated with the patriotic associations are often called upon to serve as spokespeople for the party’s policies or even assist in legitimizing persecutory campaigns against other believers.

However, the authorities have not made sufficient adjustments to the regulatory framework to meet growing public demand for religious leadership, even among seemingly favored



faiths like Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. The Chinese authorities continue to place strict numerical limits on religious training—authorizing extremely few Taoist ordinations, setting caps on how many monks can study at specific monasteries, and offering an inadequate number of Christian seminary openings. As a result, there are inevitably large numbers of believers who pursue further study extralegally.

Meanwhile, not all state-sanctioned clergy can be regarded as party mouthpieces. Some are respected by believers as knowledgeable religious practitioners who have tried to work within the system to defend the interests of their constituents. There are also numerous instances in which leaders whom the party sought to cultivate as loyal “models” subsequently “defected,” as their spiritual training or repressive government actions led them to conclude that they could no longer play the desired role in good conscience. In such cases, the authorities have responded by dismissing and sometimes imprisoning state-sanctioned leaders, as occurred in recent years with Catholic bishop Ma Deqin and Protestant pastor Gu Yuese.

## The result is a large, unofficial, and extralegal space of religious practice.

There are signs that the party-state is moving past religious intermediaries and taking matters into its own hands. Party cadres, RAB officials, or security forces are being dispatched to directly manage Tibetan monasteries, explain party policies from church pulpits, and closely monitor those who enter Uighur and even Hui mosques. A new government-run database confirms who is a “certified” reincarnated lama. And the upper echelons of the BAC are increasingly staffed with former government officials.

The government's effort to control registration of places of worship faces obstacles similar to those pertaining to clergy management. Registration of religious groups is not uncommon internationally, even in democratic societies, but the intrusiveness that accompanies it in China goes well beyond what is acceptable under international standards for religious freedom. Moreover, registration requirements and related procedures, such as financial reporting and accounting rules, are highly complex and burdensome, and may require paperwork that was destroyed in past political campaigns. As a result, small temples and churches that might be willing to register are unable to do so.

Other impediments of the authorities' own creation also discourage registration. Competing interests with nearby “patriotic” churches make it difficult for some “house churches” to register, but the state refuses to accept registration without TSPM or CPA affiliation. Church leaders are reluctant to report the names of congregation members as required, for fear that the members will be vulnerable to surveillance. And the recent trend of harassment against state-sanctioned churches suggests that registration will not bring relief from such interference, weakening one of the main incentives for unofficial churches to apply.

The result is a large, unofficial, and extralegal space of religious practice, encompassing not only the well-known phenomenon of “underground” churches, but also thousands of unregistered Buddhist and Taoist temples. In many locales, low-level officials may turn a blind eye to such activities, but during periods of political sensitivity or campaigns led by more senior officials, unregistered places of worship are at high risk of harassment, raids, and

destruction of property. Authorities routinely try to hinder the operation of unregistered sites and direct believers elsewhere, for instance by placing plaques to indicate registration status, barring donations, or threatening worshippers with fines if they do not shift attendance to a state-approved counterpart.

## **2. ‘Thought reform’: Doctrinal manipulation and ‘reeducation’**

Despite the CCP’s atheist roots on the one hand and its pledges to respect freedom of religious belief on the other, the regime devotes significant attention, resources, and coercive force to influencing the content of religious teachings, texts, and individual believers’ thoughts. And in a reflection of the ideological underpinnings and Maoist remnants of the party’s religious policies, these initiatives often require believers to renounce or actively violate core religious tenets.

In several instances, government-affiliated religious organizations or scholars have embarked on state-funded initiatives to parse theological teachings, identify elements deemed compatible with CCP ideology, and produce publications and guidance for dissemination and promotion among religious clergy and lay believers.

For Protestant Christians, a Theological Construction Movement has focused on weakening the traditional doctrine of “justification by faith,” thereby encouraging Chinese Protestants to place party-state authority above religious authority. For Muslims, a decade-old effort to analyze Sharia and dictate the content of sermons has produced a series of leaflets that are disseminated to state-approved imams across the country. And a new Uighur translation of the Quran reportedly features updates designed to emphasize loyalty to the state. A project launched in 2011 has reinterpreted Tibetan Buddhist doctrines, yielding pamphlets that are reportedly required reading in monasteries.

Such doctrinal manipulation seems likely to gain momentum in the coming years, as Xi Jinping has emphasized the need to “Sinicize” religions with foreign roots and specifically mentioned the importance of creed in party “religious work.”

Various forms of “patriotic reeducation” with religious components are integral to the vetting and training of religious leaders, the provision of permits for pilgrimage or foreign travel, and the receipt of government jobs or funding. Campaigns in Tibetan areas have expanded over the past decade and increasingly target not only monastics but also ordinary Tibetans. Such “reeducation” sessions typically include a requirement to denounce the Dalai Lama. In some areas of Xinjiang, Muslims who wish to receive welfare benefits or retain a government job must sign pledges not to don a veil or fast during Ramadan. Catholic leaders have been forced to attend ceremonies led by bishops who were appointed without papal approval.

In the case of Falun Gong, the party’s stated goal is total eradication of the group and its adherents’ beliefs, and official action has focused on “transformation.” This process of ideological reeducation employs any means necessary—including physical torture, psychological manipulation, and repeated writing of “thought reports”—to compel adherents to recant their beliefs and promise to cease practicing.

Various forms of “patriotic reeducation” with religious components are integral to the vetting and training of religious leaders.

Party-state demands to violate core religious tenets, enforced by potentially violent reprisals, present a heart-wrenching dilemma for religious leaders, monastics, and lay believers throughout China. Even when their actions are fully justified by self-preservation, many of those who have been forced to comply with such demands report a profound psychological impact, a sense that they have betrayed deeply held personal beliefs, their own identity, a revered spiritual leader, or a divinity. The scars of the experience last long after completion of reeducation sessions or release from custody. As a result, large numbers of believers have later renounced statements extracted under coercive conditions, decided to flee the country to avoid similar encounters in the future, or prayed for forgiveness.

### **3. Harsh penalties and deadly violence**









The punishments meted out to religious leaders and believers who evade or refuse to comply with official restrictions are among the harshest for any form of dissent in China. Legal provisions allow for sentences of up to life imprisonment, and judges regularly hand down terms of more than five years for clearly nonviolent acts, including in circumstances that would not have triggered such harsh repression several years ago.

Cases documented in this report include a Christian pastor from a state-sanctioned church who was sentenced to 14 years in prison for opposing the provincial government's cross-removal campaign. A Uighur teenager was punished with a 15-year prison sentence for watching a religious video on his smartphone.<sup>8</sup> A senior Tibetan monk received 18 years in prison after police found images and recorded teachings of the Dalai Lama during a raid on his monastery. And a Falun Gong practitioner was given a 12-year sentence for hanging banners affirming the practice's core values with phrases like "truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance are good."<sup>9</sup> Other benign expressions of religious faith or dissent that have drawn long prison sentences since Xi Jinping took power in November 2012 include disseminating leaflets, praying in public, opposing demolition of a place of worship, and growing a beard.

Religious prisoners in China form a significant proportion of the country's prisoners of conscience, likely numbering in the tens of thousands. Freedom House researchers were able to identify at least 1,400 cases of Chinese citizens sentenced to prison since November 2012 for exercising their right to religious freedom or rights like free expression, association, and information in connection with their faith. This figure includes a Chinese Buddhist monk, several dozen Protestant Christians, at least 75 Tibetans, over 400 members of banned quasi-Christian sects, and more than 900 Falun Gong practitioners. Even this total—based on media reports, human rights groups' documentation, and Chinese court verdicts—is likely the tip of the iceberg given the scale of extralegal detentions and disappearances. Moreover, isolating the number of Uighur detainees sentenced for nonviolent religious violations from among the thousands tried since 2012 on security and social-disturbance charges is nearly impossible due to the lack of transparency surrounding official statistics, but they probably number at least several hundred. The vast majority of these individuals remain anonymous internationally, leaving them at particular risk of torture and death.

Indeed, Chinese security forces systematically use violence with impunity against religious believers in custody and protesters in public, including deadly force. Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong practitioners are the most likely to face such treatment, with dozens of deaths in custody reported each year. Former prisoners who were interviewed for this report

**Figure 3. Trajectory of Religious Persecution in China across Faith Communities**

Religious community <i>Trajectory of persecution (Nov 2012–Nov 2016)</i>	Trend explanation
<b>Protestant Christians</b> <i>increase</i> 	<p>Since early 2014, local authorities have intensified efforts to stem the spread of Christianity amid official rhetoric about the threat of “Western” values and the need to “Sinicize” religions. As the larger of the two main Christian denominations in China, Protestants have been particularly affected by cross-removal and church-demolition campaigns, punishment of state-sanctioned leaders, and the arrest of human rights lawyers who take up Christians’ cases.</p>
<b>Uighur Muslims</b> <i>increase</i> 	<p>Controls on religion have deepened and expanded in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, where a majority of Uighur Muslims reside. Previously informal or local restrictions in Xinjiang—on issues such as religious dress—have been codified at the regional and national levels. Authorities have launched new campaigns to more closely monitor smartphone usage and force businesses to sell alcohol, while incidents of security forces opening fire on Uighur civilians have become more common.</p>
<b>Hui Muslims</b> <i>Minor increase</i> 	<p>Amid growing official and public anxiety about the spread of Islam and the threat of Islamist-inspired violence, Hui Muslims have experienced some intensified restrictions and Islamophobia since November 2012. In several provinces, bans on children’s religious study have been more strictly enforced, displays of halal signs restricted, and a crackdown on Salafi Hui Muslims launched.</p>
<b>Tibetan Buddhists</b> <i>Minor increase</i> 	<p>President Xi Jinping has largely continued the repressive policies and campaigns of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, while deepening and expanding certain controls. New measures include punishing assistance to self-immolators, canceling previously permitted festivals, increasing intrusive restrictions on private religious practice, and more proactively manipulating Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and the selection of religious leaders.</p>
<b>Chinese Buddhists</b> <i>Consistent</i> 	<p>President Xi has continued Hu-era policies, creating an environment of relatively low persecution for Chinese Buddhist practice. His actions and rhetoric portray Chinese Buddhism as an increasingly important channel for realizing the party’s political and economic goals at home and abroad. In a rare occurrence, a Chinese Buddhist monk was sentenced to prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges.</p>
<b>Taoists</b> <i>Consistent</i> 	<p>CCP leaders continue to view Taoism, an indigenous Chinese religion, as an attractive tool for building regime legitimacy on the basis of traditional Chinese culture and for improving relations with Taoist believers in Taiwan.</p>
<b>Catholics</b> <i>Minor decrease</i> 	<p>Although some Catholic churches have been subjected to forced cross removals, relations between Beijing and the Vatican have warmed since March 2013. The two sides appear to be on the verge of a breakthrough agreement governing the appointment of bishops in China at a time when more than 40 vacancies have opened. Nevertheless, some prominent figures in the church remain skeptical about how much any deal would reduce repression of underground Catholics.</p>
<b>Falun Gong practitioners</b> <i>Minor decrease</i> 	<p>Falun Gong practitioners across China continue to be subject to widespread and severe human rights violations. Nevertheless, repression appears to have declined in some locales. President Xi has offered no explicit indication of a plan to reverse the CCP’s policy toward Falun Gong. But the imprisonment of former security czar Zhou Yongkang and other officials associated with the campaign as part of Xi’s anticorruption drive, together with Falun Gong adherents’ efforts to educate and discourage police from persecuting them, have had an impact.</p>



offered detailed accounts of beatings, long-term shackling, electric baton shocks, and injection with unknown drugs. These and other testimonies point to remarkable similarities in the repressive tactics administered across different populations and geographic regions, including taking victims to secret extralegal torture centers and “outsourcing” abuse to criminal inmates.

Religious prisoners in China form a significant proportion of the country's prisoners of conscience, likely numbering in the tens of thousands.

Outside custody, hundreds of Christians have been beaten by riot police over the past few years, particularly when trying to prevent church demolitions and cross removals, and one pastor's wife was buried alive by a bulldozer. In Tibet and Xinjiang, police and other security personnel have opened fire in altercations with residents who were spontaneously opposing official efforts to restrict inter-village worship, pilgrimage, or religious appearance. These incidents have resulted in the death or injury of young children and elderly women, among other casualties.

**4. Economic punishment, commodification, and exploitation**

Given the increased consumerism in Chinese society and the role that economic development plays in Chinese officials' prospects for promotion, it is perhaps not surprising that various monetary incentives linked to religion emerged as a recurring theme in this study. At times they serve as a catalyst for state-religion cooperation, but more often they are a source of tension, punishment, and severe violations of believers' rights.

Almost as soon as the harsh suppression of the Cultural Revolution ended, local officials began to view religious sites as a source of revenue—a development encouraged by the slogan, “Build the religious stage to sing the economic opera.”<sup>10</sup> With incomes rising in tandem with public interest in spiritual matters, domestic tourists have joined foreign visitors as an attractive economic asset for locales with a prominent religious site, be it a historic temple, a major church, or a Muslim mausoleum. The result is a multibillion-dollar industry of renovations, new constructions, entrance fees, scenic parks, souvenir stalls, and tour guides, which at times encroaches on spaces that were previously the domain of monks and local religious believers.

In extreme cases of commodification, some Buddhist and Taoist temples or a newly built mosque in a cultural park are wholly devoted to their role as a tourist destination and house no religious clergy or ceremonies. It is more common, however, for a site to serve as both a tourist destination and a place for religious and monastic practice.

In some instances, religious leaders have successfully negotiated with local officials for beneficial terms, shared revenue, or open access, preserving their autonomy and reducing tensions. Examples can be found even in some ethnic minority areas, like a city in a Tibetan prefecture of Yunnan Province that was officially renamed “Shangri-la,” an allusion to the fictional paradise on earth.

However, efforts by local officials to impose commercial mechanisms on a site, such as the enclosure of a temple in a new scenic park with high entrance fees, have repeatedly fueled tensions and occasional protests, even from otherwise politically compliant communities like

Chinese Buddhist and Taoist monastics. Tourism-related transformations have also generated complaints from senior monks, local Muslim shrine visitors, Tibetan pilgrims, and others on the grounds that they hindered access for ordinary believers, infringed on monastic autonomy, and disrupted sacred religious rituals.

Monetary incentives also play a direct role in the enforcement of restrictions on religious practice. The authorities have offered lucrative rewards (up to \$30,000) to citizens who inform on fellow residents engaged in peaceful, private religious practices that are designated as problematic, from donning a Muslim veil or lighting incense for the Dalai Lama to performing Falun Gong meditation exercises. Within the party-state system, promotions and bonuses are available to officers who effectively crack down on targeted religious groups and behaviors.

On the punitive side, believers who try to skirt or oppose religious restrictions have been subjected to fines that amount to more than the average monthly income, threatened with loss of job or educational opportunities, penalized with withdrawal of welfare benefits, or banned from accessing vital sources of income like the caterpillar fungus harvest in Tibetan areas. In an atmosphere of impunity surrounding persecuted populations, local police have often taken advantage of raids on underground Christian churches or arrests of Falun Gong practitioners to extort money from families or steal private property. Other victims have suffered an indirect cost, as many of the dozens of churches demolished in recent years were built with donations from local congregants, in some cases amounting to millions of dollars.

The authorities have also combined revenue generation with punishment by systematically exploiting religious prisoners for economic purposes. Untold numbers of religious prisoners across China—Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and Falun Gong practitioners—have over the past decade been a key source of forced labor while in custody, manufacturing products for both domestic consumption and foreign export under oppressive, unsanitary conditions. Even after the abolition of the country's notorious "reeducation through labor" (RTL) camp system in 2013, large numbers of religious detainees have been redirected via the judicial system to formal prison facilities, where forced labor remains routine, sometimes on a scale even larger than that of an RTL camp.

Lastly, there is evidence suggesting that religious prisoners have been killed extrajudicially to provide organs for China's booming organ transplant industry. Numerous circumstantial facts, expert analyses, and eyewitness accounts point to the victimization of Falun Gong practitioners in particular.<sup>11</sup> Large numbers of transplants continue to be performed with short waiting times, despite a shrinking number of judicial executions and a still miniscule number of voluntary donors. In this context, the large-scale disappearance of young Uighur men, accounts of routine blood-testing of Uighur political prisoners, and reports of mysterious deaths of Tibetans and Uighurs in custody should raise alarm that these populations may also be victims of involuntary organ harvesting.<sup>12</sup>

The authorities have combined revenue generation with punishment by systematically exploiting religious prisoners for economic purposes.

## NOTES

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4. "China Focus: Xi calls for improved religious work," Xinhua.
5. The study does not cover Confucianism, which has experienced a resurgence in recent years but is typically viewed more as a system of social and ethical philosophy than as a religious faith. Also excluded are smaller religious communities like Jews, Bahá'í, or Jehovah's Witnesses, who periodically encounter restrictions in China.
6. The findings presented in this essay and the following section on evolving mechanisms of religious control are based on detailed research in five chapters that examine the seven listed religious communities. Notes are included here for clarity, quotations, or points not addressed in the other portions of the report. The complete report and supporting citations are available at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).
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11. For an examination of available evidence, see the Falun Gong chapter of this report at [www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org).
12. For example, a Uighur Muslim released from an Urumqi prison in 2011 gave Freedom House a detailed account of monthly blood tests administered to Uighur political and religious prisoners and not to Chinese criminal inmates. He and two Tibetan interviewees cited reports of mysterious deaths of fellow believers in custody. Interview with Uighur refugee now living in Turkey who wished to remain anonymous, October 2016.





## Key Religious Controls (November 2012–November 2016)

#	Control	Chinese Buddhism/ Taoism	Christianity (Protestants + Catholics) <sup>a</sup>	Tibetan Buddhism	Islam (Uighurs) <sup>b</sup>	Falun Gong <sup>c</sup>
<b>Total</b>		<b>8/24 (33%)</b>	<b>18/24 (75%)</b>	<b>22/24 (92%)</b>	<b>21/22 (95%)</b>	<b>18/18 (100%)</b>
1	Oversight by “patriotic association”	●	●	●	●	n/a
2	Control over religious leader recruitment/training	●	●	●	●	n/a
3	Numerical limits on ordination/training	●	●	●	●	n/a
4	Closure/destruction of place of worship	●	●	●	●	n/a
5	Imprisonment of state-approved religious leader/monastic	●	●	●	●	n/a
6	Imprisonment of unofficial religious leader/monastic		●			n/a
7	Doctrinal interference/manipulation		●	●	●	●
8	Ban on core religious tenet		●	●	●	●
9	Study of religious scriptures punished		●	●	●	●
10	Religious celebration restricted or punished		●	●	●	●
11	Imprisonment of lay believer	●	●	●	●	●
12	Imprisonment of 50+ believers		●	●	n/a	●
13	Imprisonment of 500+ believers				n/a	●
14	Detention for religious engagement online		●	●	●	●
15	Restrictions on children's participation	●	●	●	●	●
16	Political “reeducation” campaigns		●	●	●	●
17	Widespread torture			●	●	●
18	Extrajudicial killing		●	●	●	●
19	10+ extrajudicial deaths			●	●	●
20	New restrictive legal change			●	●	●
21	Restrictions on movement / passport allocation			●	●	●
22	Vilification in state media		●	●	●	●
23	Economic exploitation	●	●	●	●	●
24	Online censorship of religious communication			●	●	●

## Notes:

a. Imprisonment figures for Christians also include individuals held for belonging to banned quasi-Christian sects.

b. Due to insufficiently clear data, treatment of Hui Muslims is not included here, and no assessment is made on whether 50+ or 500+ Uighurs were detained.

c. Several forms of control are not applicable to Falun Gong because it is neither a formally organized religion nor officially recognized and therefore lacks ordained clergy, places of worship, and state-sanctioned leaders.

## Religious Persecution by Province

Many religious controls in China are imposed nationwide, and instances of persecution have been recorded in every one of China's 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and province-level municipalities since November 2012. Still, the degree of persecution and the primary groups targeted vary from region to region.



Note: Several sources informed the provincial ratings for this map, including data on incidents of persecution and detention available from Chinese court documents, the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China's Political Prisoner Database, and reports by Human Rights Watch and China Aid.

# I: Chinese Buddhism and Taoism

## Degree of persecution:

Chinese  
Buddhism

**LOW**

Taoism

**VERY LOW**

## Trajectory of persecution:

Chinese  
Buddhism



Consistent

Taoism



Consistent

## Key findings

- 1 Revival:** Chinese Buddhism and Taoism have revived significantly over the past 30 years from near extinction, but their scale and influence pale in comparison to the pre-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) era. With an estimated 185 to 250 million believers, Chinese Buddhism is the largest institutionalized religion in China.
- 2 Intrusive controls:** A large body of regulations and bureaucratic controls ensure political compliance, but unfairly restrict religious practices that are routine in other countries. Unrealistic temple registration requirements, infrequent ordination approvals, and official intervention in temple administration are among the controls that most seriously obstruct grassroots monastics and lay believers.
- 3 Under Xi Jinping:** President Xi Jinping has essentially continued the policies of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, with some rhetorical adjustments. For CCP leaders, Chinese Buddhism and Taoism are seen as increasingly important channels for realizing the party's political and economic goals at home and abroad. In a rare occurrence, a Chinese Buddhist monk was sentenced to prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges.
- 4 Commodification:** Economic exploitation of temples for tourism purposes—a multibillion-dollar industry—has emerged as a key point of contention among the state, clergy, and lay believers.
- 5 Community response:** Religious leaders and monks are becoming increasingly assertive in trying to negotiate free or relatively inexpensive access to temples, and are pushing back against commercial encroachment, often with success.



Visitors walk past the statue of a bodhisattva in a scenic park in Zhejiang Province. Such parks, which encircle temples and charge entrance fees, are a growing source of tension between local Buddhist religious leaders and government authorities.

*Credit: Kuei-min Chang*

**“The values of Buddhist ideals and the China Dream agree and understand [each other].... Together they achieve the ideological foundation of the struggle and the dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”**

*—Fang Litian, professor of Buddhist philosophy, Renmin University, 2013<sup>1</sup>*

**“Many local governments look at temples as a source of revenue. The prefectural government developed the surrounding areas as an attempt to encircle the temple so they could collect an admission fee. But the Master will never agree. He says that the moment we have to collect an entrance fee to survive is the moment we close the temple.”**

*—Monk at a temple in Jiangsu Province<sup>2</sup>*



### Revival and expansion since the Cultural Revolution

Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, along with various folk religions, have been an integral part of Chinese culture and society for thousands of years.<sup>3</sup> Although the CCP perceived them as relics of feudalism, it allowed some degree of state-sanctioned religious practice during the first 17 years of its rule, establishing corporatist associations to govern these and other faiths. Still, government agencies took over the management of temples, Buddhist and Taoist monastic clergy were forced to participate in manual labor, and performing religious rites became increasingly dangerous.

This limited degree of tolerance disappeared during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Aggressive eradication efforts became the norm. Temples were destroyed. Spiritual texts were burned. Monks and nuns were disrobed, imprisoned, and beaten. And the vast majority of lay believers ceased public and even private displays of faith in an atmosphere of harsh repression and political turmoil.

After Mao Zedong's death and Deng Xiaoping's ascension as paramount leader in 1978, the CCP largely returned to its pre-Cultural Revolution stance on religion, beginning a period of greater tolerance for Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, and even state support for temple reconstruction. As surviving religious leaders resumed their activities, it soon became evident that the party's efforts to eradicate these faiths—and Chinese religiosity generally—had failed.

A strict regulatory framework, extensive political controls, and economic exploitation continue to limit unchecked growth. Nevertheless, Chinese Buddhism has emerged as the country's largest institutionalized religion, while Taoism has experienced its own gradual revival on a smaller scale.

Today, more than 38,000 registered Chinese Buddhist and Taoist temples of varying sizes are in operation,<sup>4</sup> and there are at least 120,000 Chinese Buddhist monks, nuns, and Taoist priests.<sup>5</sup> For various reasons, including the fact that many Chinese practice a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion and do not affiliate with any formal religious organization, precise tallies of lay believers are nearly impossible to determine. Nevertheless, hundreds of millions of Chinese are believed to self-identify as Buddhists and Taoists. A 2007 Chinese Spiritual Life Survey estimated that there were 185 million Buddhists in China and 12 million adults who clearly identified with Taoism. Many more people (173 million) reported participating in some Taoist practices, although these may overlap with folk religions.<sup>6</sup> More recently, the Pew Research Center estimated that as of 2010 there were 244.11 million Buddhists in China, representing 18.2 percent of the population.<sup>7</sup>

Day-to-day practice is diverse and influenced by spiritual lineage, geographic location, and other factors. But a significant proportion of Chinese Buddhist and Taoist religious rituals revolve around the temple, where Buddhist monks and Taoist priests perform services for devotees or offer spiritual guidance. Although large temples are those best known to both Chinese and foreigners, much more common across China are small venues that typically house one to five monks or nuns. These monastics focus their days on private practice and meditation, temple upkeep, and provision of spiritual services to lay believers in the surrounding community, and they face limited interference from local authorities.<sup>8</sup> Much lay practice in both Buddhism and Taoism centers on the idea of merit, which one can

amass by performing good deeds and following the Tao, in addition to making offerings at temples. A person's stock of merit is believed to bring benefits in this life, the afterlife, and future rebirths. Anthropological studies indicate that such teachings play an increasingly important role in the lives of many urban Chinese, who may take guidance from concepts of merit or karma in their daily life even if they do not regularly participate in temple services or rituals.<sup>9</sup>

There are strong indications that this revival and expansion of Buddhism and Taoism will continue, if permitted. First, the current size of the monastic community and the population of lay believers pales in comparison to the pre-Cultural Revolution era, suggesting that the two faiths have further potential for growth.<sup>10</sup> Second, temples are increasing their outreach by holding ritual assemblies, running religious knowledge workshops, celebrating holidays, and engaging in charitable work, often with the active assistance of lay believers. Third, demand for religious services and guidance is outstripping supply, particularly in terms of registered temples. If the estimates cited above are accurate, there is one sanctioned temple for every 6,400 believers, representing an extraordinary shortage.<sup>11</sup> As a result, even among the two religions that have the most cooperative relationship with the party-state, there is a large degree of extralegal religious practice taking place. For example, in 2014, Fujian Province reportedly had over 20,000 unregistered Taoist sites—more than 15 times as many as its 1,263 registered sites.<sup>12</sup>

### **Promoting Chinese Buddhism and Taoism to serve party goals**

The CCP's religious policy has evolved since the end of the Cultural Revolution from a focus on accelerating the disappearance of religion toward identifying ways in which certain religious communities and leaders can help advance a range of CCP political and economic goals. While this attitude applies to all officially recognized religions, it has been especially evident with regard to Chinese Buddhism, and to a lesser extent, Taoism.

The CCP has tried to tap into the influence of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism to build its "soft power."

There are various ways in which these religions can serve to advance CCP policy goals at home and abroad. Domestically, CCP leaders have adopted them as a means of shoring up party legitimacy and Chinese nationalism in an era when Marxist ideology has lost its popular cachet. Faith-based Buddhist charity organizations or temples themselves are increasingly involved—often with official encouragement—in providing social services to vulnerable populations like orphans, the elderly, or victims of natural disasters. Party leaders reportedly perceive them as less politically threatening than, and even a possible replacement for, secular nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or Christian charities that play a similar role.<sup>13</sup> And growing interest among foreign and domestic tourists in visiting religious sites with historical, artistic, or spiritual significance has fueled a multibillion-dollar industry, contributing to economic growth.

Externally, the CCP has tried to tap into the influence of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism to build its "soft power" and improve relations with Taiwanese society. The party's attempts to project soft power abroad gained prominence during the Hu administration as China emerged as the world's second-largest economy. A central dimension of the campaign has been to present the Chinese government as a standard-bearer and benefactor of traditional Chinese culture, a term almost synonymous with the legacies and influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In the realm of religious policy, this has manifested as support for international conferences.

For example, between 2006 and 2015, China organized and hosted four World Buddhist Forums, a previously nonexistent conference of 1,000 religious leaders, monks, nuns, and lay believers from over 30 countries.<sup>14</sup> Besides the content of the conferences themselves, the robed monks gathered under Chinese auspices provided compelling images for state media to share globally, displaying the government's ostensible religious tolerance.<sup>15</sup> In 2011, the CCP provided support for a major international Taoist conference.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, in a sign that the CCP sees Chinese Buddhism as more useful and less politically threatening than other faiths,<sup>17</sup> it has hosted no similar international conferences for Christianity or Islam, and officially disfavored Tibetan Buddhist figures like the Dalai Lama are excluded. The first overseas NGO allowed to establish nationwide branches in China was a Taiwanese Buddhist charity, which received approval in 2010, again underscoring the greater trust that the CCP places in Buddhist groups relative to both secular activists and other religious charities.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the most noticeable example of the party's use of Buddhism and Taoism to serve its political goals was the Hu-era association between the CCP campaign to promote a "harmonious society" and Buddhist or Taoist religious teachings. An April 2006 article by the official Xinhua news agency, posted on the CCP's own website, spelled this out explicitly. It stated that the first World Buddhist Forum sent the "message that the doctrines of Buddhism are officially recognized by the atheist government as a conducive vehicle to help with the creation of a harmonious society."<sup>19</sup> In 2010, then Politburo Standing Committee member Jia Qinglin made a similar appeal at a meeting with leaders of the Chinese Taoist Association. According to Xinhua, Jia urged "the association to promote and adapt the ideals of harmony embodied in classic Taoist works to socialist society."<sup>20</sup>

Scholars cite several factors that make Chinese Buddhism an especially appealing governing instrument for the CCP as it seeks to guide Chinese religiosity in directions it perceives as politically safe:

- There is a history of regime support and political complicity among Chinese Buddhist religious leaders and monastics. Chinese Buddhism features fewer theological barriers to professing loyalty to the emperor or ruling party compared with some other religions, and the temples that are so central to Buddhist practice are inherently immovable and irreplaceable, meaning religious leaders would risk incurring grave damage to their faith if they engaged in overt political resistance.<sup>21</sup>
- Chinese leaders believe that the spread of Buddhism helps promote civility, encourages the development of a more compassionate citizenry, and provides a safety valve for social tensions, but without provoking demands for political reform.<sup>22</sup>
- Buddhist leaders are receptive to cooperation with the party-state. They respond to government demands related to charity work,<sup>23</sup> employ official rhetoric to urge Buddhism-friendly policies,<sup>24</sup> and proactively prove their political loyalty, for instance by aiding crackdowns on other spiritual communities.<sup>25</sup>
- The extensive presence of Buddhism in neighboring countries represents a source of common cultural heritage and a unifying factor with Taiwanese society.<sup>26</sup>

- Chinese leaders are wary of Christianity and Islam due to their association with foreign cultures, holy sites, and authorities, as well as their long histories of resistance to political repression. By contrast, although Buddhism originated in India, it gradually Sinicized over the course of centuries.

Several of these factors apply to Taoism as well (its indigenous character, close association with Chinese culture, and popularity in Taiwan, for example), rendering it another attractive partner for the CCP.

### Chinese Buddhism and Taoism under Xi Jinping

Since assuming the helm of the CCP in November 2012, Xi Jinping has primarily continued Hu-era policies on Buddhism and Taoism. He met with the head of a Taiwanese Buddhist organization in 2013,<sup>27</sup> and in October 2015 a fourth World Buddhist Forum was hosted in Jiangsu Province.<sup>28</sup> In an important victory for such soft-power initiatives, in 2014 China for the first time hosted the general conference of a long-standing international Buddhist organization, the World Fellowship of Buddhists, founded in Sri Lanka in 1950.<sup>29</sup>

“On the basis of traditional Chinese culture, nurture, and promote core socialist values.”

– Signs throughout Beijing, 2014

Nevertheless, there have been a number of minor changes since the Hu era, particularly with regard to the rhetoric on these religions and ways in which certain aspects of the party’s approach have become more explicit and strident:

- 1. Rhetorical shift from ‘harmonious society’ to ‘China Dream’:** As noted above, it was common in the last decade to see official statements on how Buddhism could serve the cause of achieving a “harmonious society,” a term that emerged as a propaganda centerpiece under Hu’s leadership. Since Xi coined the phrase “China Dream” to capture the party’s goal of realizing the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” Buddhism and Taoism have been held up as resources that can be deployed toward this end. The quote at the opening of this chapter, taken from a 2013 article titled “Buddhism and the China Dream,” is one example of such rhetoric.
- 2. Greater emphasis on using Chinese religion to shore up CCP legitimacy:** Xi himself and the party’s propaganda apparatus in general have increasingly employed references to traditional Chinese culture—of which the Buddhist and Taoist religions are a key component—as the basis for upholding CCP values and political leadership. Signs displayed throughout Beijing in the summer of 2014 reportedly promoted exhortations like “On the basis of traditional Chinese culture, nurture and promote core socialist values.” In a March 2015 speech to the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Xi devoted a paragraph to acknowledging Buddhism’s positive contributions to Chinese culture and China’s own influence on Buddhism. Writers in various Buddhist publications interpreted the speech as confirmation that Buddhism would not be left out of the “China Dream” and optimistically heralded a new era for Buddhism in China.<sup>30</sup>
- 3. More explicit concern over ‘foreign’ religious influences:** The CCP has long sought to separate religious believers inside China from spiritual authorities based outside the country, citing the principle of independence from foreign influence and self-governance as a core dimension of its religious policy. Nevertheless, in an important speech on

religious affairs that Xi delivered to top party cadres in April 2016, he emphasized that “we must resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means and prevent ideological infringement by extremists,”<sup>31</sup> a likely reference to the growth of Christianity, Tibetans’ continued reverence of the exiled Dalai Lama, and fears of extremist violence among Uighur Muslims. The statement also matches party leaders’ broader hostility toward “Western” values under Xi. And it implies a more favorable view toward the “indigenous” religions of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism.

Despite these rhetorical shifts, there is little evidence of concrete changes in policy or implementation. Chinese Buddhism and Taoism appeared to benefit from this discourse mainly by omission: They were not subjected to the noticeably harsher treatment experienced by some other religious groups and secular activists under Xi.

### Key methods of political control

Although Chinese Buddhism and Taoism have a relatively cooperative rapport with the party-state, there is an important coercive dimension to the relationship. The regime proactively seeks to exercise control over the leadership and development of these religions in an effort to ensure political loyalty and protect the benefits they offer to party goals. In the process, the authorities constrain Chinese citizens’ ability to practice their faiths as they see fit, violating their right to religious freedom.

While many of these restrictive measures predate Xi’s rise to power, they have played out in four key ways over the past four years:

- 1. Bureaucratic and interventionist state oversight:** Buddhist and Taoist leaders and believers are subject to three layers of oversight: the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) and the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), ostensibly nongovernmental entities that work very closely with state agencies to guide the development of the religions and mobilize the religious community to support official policies; the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA); and the CCP’s United Front Work Department, responsible for managing relations with nonparty entities such as religious groups. Branches and representatives of all three bodies have networks that reach down to the village, district, and temple level.

For example, many temples are run jointly by monastics and a temple administration committee connected to the local Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB).<sup>32</sup> More commercialized temples may also be administered by other state agencies involved in preserving and promoting cultural or historical heritage. Since 2010, the influence of state representatives at the upper echelons of the BAC appears to have increased, a contrast to previous periods when religious believers or leaders held more senior positions. A 2015 leadership rotation reinforced this trend, as the secretary general of the BAC and the director of SARA’s first division—Liu Wei and Wang Jian—essentially swapped places. Similar transitions have occurred in recent years among leaders of the Chinese Taoist Association.<sup>33</sup>

- 2. Unrealistic registration requirements:** Under the 2004 Regulations on Religious Affairs, a religious site seeking official registration must demonstrate a stable lawful income, it must be a regular place of worship for a congregation led by qualified clerics, and the



application must be filed by one of the patriotic religious associations. Unfortunately, many small temples cannot meet these criteria, due to a lack of official property records or the absence of clerics certified by the relevant patriotic religious association, for instance. This has contributed to the large number of unregistered sites of worship.

Given the challenges of registering all such sites, in recent years the authorities have taken measures to guide visitors away from unregistered monasteries and temples to registered alternatives. In October 2012, SARA and nine other government agencies issued a directive prohibiting unregistered religious sites from conducting religious activities and collecting donations.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, SARA has been taking steps to distinguish registered and unregistered sites via placard campaigns in various regions,<sup>35</sup> and it has created a website listing sanctioned venues.<sup>36</sup>

**3. Restrictive clergy certification:** The BAC has centralized the issuance of ordination certificates since 1994. It has also limited ordinations to at most 10 ceremonies per year and no more than 350 novices per ceremony, thereby creating a maximum annual quota of 3,500 ordinations, although in many years the actual total has been smaller.<sup>37</sup> Novices who seek ordination require approval from their monastery as well as the local branches of the BAC and the state RAB, embedding a test of political reliability into the process. Since 2000, admissions of new disciples have been limited to officially registered monasteries with at least five monks or nuns who are ordained and listed in a BAC registry.

Only three ordinations for the Taoist Zhengyi school have been performed since 1949, with the most recent one occurring in 2011.

For Taoism, the CTA also maintains a monopoly on the printing and issuing of all Taoist certificates, but it has held far fewer ordinations. For example, only three ordinations for the Zhengyi school have been performed since 1949, with the most recent one occurring in 2011. By contrast, the ordination of overseas Zhengyi Taoists (particularly from Taiwan) has been permitted annually since 1991 at Mount Longhu, to help advance “the unification of the fatherland.”<sup>38</sup> The Chinese disciples are at a disadvantage because, in Taoist belief systems, an individual may become a monk or nun, but without ordination he or she is not included in the master’s lineage or privy to the full benefits of the discipline’s spiritual power.

**4. Isolated instances of violent repression:** In recent years, there have been periodic reports of either partial or full destruction of temple properties by Chinese authorities, either due to lack of registration or to serve broader economic development goals. In a particularly violent episode in February 2014, more than 100 urban management officers (chengguan) were reportedly deployed in Xiamen, Fujian Province, to demolish an allegedly “illegally constructed” Buddhist temple, resulting in violent clashes with local residents.<sup>39</sup>

On a more individual level, monastics who express criticism of the political system or solidarity with human rights causes have faced surveillance, travel restrictions, and even imprisonment. In April 2016, a court in Wuhan sentenced Buddhist monk Shengguan (also known as Xu Zhiqiang) to four years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power,”<sup>40</sup> a charge often used to imprison political dissidents.<sup>41</sup> He had been detained in May 2015 while giving a Dharma lecture amid a broader clampdown on Chinese citizens suspected of commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Although imprisonment of a Chinese Buddhist monk is extremely rare, Shengguan's punishment was viewed among human rights lawyers and his disciples as a serious violation of religious freedom. It also sends a clear signal to other Buddhist monastics on the potential consequences of allowing social consciousness and personal interpretations of religious principles to override political loyalty to the CCP.

### **Economic exploitation of temple property**

Almost as soon as temples began to be reopened after the end of the Cultural Revolution, local officials started to prey on them as a source of economic development. Over time, commodification of temple property has intensified as the economy has grown and the number of Chinese and foreign tourists has increased.

Commodification can take several forms. In some instances, temples have been converted wholly into tourist destinations and do not house religious clergy, a process one scholar termed the "museumification" of temples.<sup>42</sup> This is the case at sites such as Beijing's White Pagoda Temple or Yangzhou's Tianning Temple, which are run by various government departments focused on tourism and preserving cultural heritage.<sup>43</sup> In many other settings, however, local officials and developers have sought to enclose a temple that is home to monastics inside a scenic park, charge high entrance fees, and compel the clergy to collect and share the revenue received. The temple leadership itself has little control over the admission fee.<sup>44</sup>

The clergy at some temples have voluntarily imposed visitor fees, a relic of the period immediately following the Cultural Revolution when the community of lay believers and religious donations that could support the temple had not yet been reestablished. Such temple fees are typically quite low, however.

By contrast, once a temple is enclosed in a scenic park, the cost for visitors increases significantly. For example, at 162 temples of "national importance" that were open to the public in 2013, the average admission fee to the temple alone was 6 yuan (\$0.90). But for the 61 temples that were located inside a scenic park with an additional admission fee, the average total entrance cost rose nearly tenfold to 59 yuan (\$8.80). At popular sites, such fees can quickly add up to significant revenue. For example, the sacred Buddhist site Mount Putuo received 6.64 million visitors in 2015. With an admission fee of 160 yuan (\$23) per adult, the total income from admissions reached just over 1 billion yuan (nearly \$150 million) that year.<sup>45</sup> Tourists also contribute to the local economy through transportation services, lodging, restaurants, and souvenir shops.

As with other exploitative development practices in China, such as illegal land confiscation or forced demolition, the commodification of temples is driven in large part by the incorporation of economic growth figures into the formal performance evaluations of local officials, which determine their promotion potential.<sup>46</sup> In addition, because local party cadres are frequently reassigned to different geographic locations, many seek short-term ways to increase government revenue and development statistics with little regard for the long-term effects on the local population.

Enclosing a temple and charging admission is an attractive method, particularly because it does not entail the kind of environmental damage other initiatives might. As a result, according to

Kuei-Min Chang, who conducted fieldwork on the topic in recent years, “the pressure to put a price on temple access and religious services is constant.”<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, central authorities have—on paper, at least—attempted to discourage such practices. But with little action taken to alter the underlying incentives or penalize officials who pursue this strategy of career advancement, rhetorical condemnations have had a limited impact in curbing the phenomenon.

A study of 23 historic temples conducted between June 2012 and May 2015 found that given a choice, grassroots religious leaders would prefer free and open temple access for visitors.<sup>48</sup> From their perspective, charging a high—or any—admission fee is problematic for several reasons. First, it decreases the opportunity for low-income individuals to obtain religious services, including important rituals in both Buddhism and Taoism that are believed to confer great merit on devotees. Even for believers who can afford it, a high admission fee may reduce how frequently they visit the temple to pray, light incense, or seek spiritual guidance. Second, the fee represents a form of involuntary offering, violating the concept of free will that is essential to Buddhist enlightenment or the Taoist core principle of nonintervention. Third, high fees undermine the spiritual authority of the temple clergy that traditionally comes from the active consent of followers. Such authority is further harmed when local officials employ fake monks in the scenic park to provide unauthorized (but lucrative) religious services.

As a result of these dynamics, economic exploitation and the commodification efforts of local officials have become a key source of tension in the party-state’s relationship with Buddhist and Taoist clergy at the grassroots level.

### Community response and resistance

As noted above, Buddhist leaders at the upper echelons of the bureaucracy demonstrate a high degree of political loyalty to the CCP and its governing agenda. Nevertheless, even for this relatively politically compliant faith community, relations with the party-state apparatus are not without tension, particularly at the grassroots level. For the most part, grassroots resistance to official controls among Chinese Buddhist and Taoist religious leaders has manifested in two key ways:

- 1. Exploiting gaps in enforcement to expand the space for religious practice:** This trend is exemplified by the wide range of activity at the country’s many unregistered temples, as well as in the area of religious charities. Scholar Susan McCarthy notes in her research on Buddhist charities that they effectively create a platform for lay believers to implement Buddhist teachings, experience spiritual awakening, and introduce concepts like compassion to the broader populace outside the confines of a formal site of worship, which Chinese regulations designate as the only location where practice and preaching are supposed to take place.<sup>49</sup>
- 2. Pushing back against commodification efforts:** As part of the revival of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, the social influence and financial resources of monastics at temples has increased significantly since the early period after the Cultural Revolution. This change in power dynamics vis-à-vis local officials has apparently fueled greater

Economic exploitation has become a key source of tension in official relations with grassroots Buddhist and Taoist clergy.

assertiveness among monastics to protect temple assets from new economic encroachment or even reverse previously implemented commodification.<sup>50</sup>

Chinese Buddhist and Taoist communities' pushback against commodification has taken several forms at both national and local levels of government, ranging from legal activism to mild acts of protest:

- 1. Advocating reforms to allow temples to acquire legal personhood:** Religious entities do not match any of the four types of legal person allowed under Chinese law: enterprise, official organ, institution, and social organization. Without legal personhood, they cannot sue or be sued and have to depend on the relevant religious association to represent them in court and negotiate on their behalf with government organs. This has contributed to the phenomenon of widespread commercial exploitation, prompting demands from temple leaders for the addition of a fifth category of "religious person."

Alongside individual abbots like Shi Yongxin of Shaolin Monastery, who raised the issue during the plenary sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) in 2007 and 2015,<sup>51</sup> official religious bodies and their representatives have also taken up the cause. Shi Chuanyin, president of the BAC, proposed to solve the problem of temples' lack of legal personhood during the 2013 and 2014 meetings of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).<sup>52</sup> SARA's Research Center took up the issue in a thorough 2013 investigation published in its periodical, *China Religion*.<sup>53</sup> Such official support makes the campaign for the reform more likely to succeed.

- 2. Using the courts to protect religious trademarks:** In 2014, the CTA won a landmark case on behalf of the Shanghai City God Temple that led to the cancelation of the registered trademark "Chenghuang" (the name of the Taoist city god), which was being used by a jewelry company. The decision, which acknowledged that the name's use for commercial purposes would "hurt the religious sentiment of those who observe Taoism," was widely seen as a victory against the trend of commodification.<sup>54</sup> Encouraged by its success, the CTA, supported by SARA and Taoist delegates to the NPC and CPPCC, stated that they would continue to request the cancelation of other such trademarks.<sup>55</sup>

- 3. Verbal negotiation, public pressure, and appeals to local officials:** Local temple leaders have successfully employed a variety of arguments, points of leverage, and public pressure in recent years to negotiate with local government actors for open temple access, lower admission fees, averted demolition, or greater priestly management of venues. These have included outlining the relative loss of income and increased public frustration that follow enclosure of a temple;<sup>56</sup> threats that visitors could shift to a competing temple should prices increase or remain static after the other temple lowered its fees;<sup>57</sup> and demonstrating that allowing religious leaders to manage a property as they see fit would help certification of the site as part of an important lineage, thereby promoting more tourism and economic development for the town.<sup>58</sup>

In keeping with broader trends in civic activism in China, monks have also used social media to publicize threats to temple assets and put pressure on local officials to abandon certain plans. One such instance occurred in 2013, when local authorities

announced a plan to demolish monks' living quarters at Xingjiao Temple and establish a scenic park around it. The temple is famous for housing the remains of Xuanzang, the monk whose pilgrimage to India to seek Buddhist teachings inspired the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West*. When the plan was exposed on social media, it drew strong public opposition, as well as criticism from the BAC and SARA, due to the significance of Xuanzang to Chinese Buddhism. As a result, the local government canceled the demolition and abandoned the enclosure plans.<sup>59</sup>

**4. Non-cooperation protests:** When negotiation efforts have failed, monks at several temples have resorted to more assertive tactics in recent years. One particularly common one has been the temporary closure of the monastery to visitors. On numerous occasions in provinces such as Hebei, Shaanxi, and most recently Yunnan, this has served as a kind of “trump card” for the monastics.<sup>60</sup> It signals to the local authorities that without the monks' consent to allow visitors to enter, the local government cannot make any money. The subtle act of protest also hurts the officials' reputation among local residents and the broader faith community when word of the incident is posted online.

Such actions have forced officials to recalculate the costs and benefits of enclosing a temple or charging higher fees. In the documented incidents Freedom House identified, the officials took a much more conciliatory stance within weeks, days, or even hours of the monks' closed-door protest. Another quiet form of protest used to remind officials of the importance of monastic cooperation has been nonparticipation of prominent religious leaders in official ceremonies.<sup>61</sup>

### Future outlook

As the country's largest institutionalized religion, Chinese Buddhism plays a particularly important role in Chinese society, while Taoism is a truly indigenous Chinese faith. Both are seen as a potential governing partner for the CCP. Given Xi Jinping's rhetorical emphasis on traditional Chinese culture and instances of support for activities like international conferences and charitable work, Chinese leaders' preference for these religions over other faiths may be expressed in more concrete—and financial—ways in the coming years.

Despite such official preference, Chinese Buddhism and Taoism are subject to a variety of official controls and encroachments on autonomy that are viewed negatively by many grassroots religious leaders. This is particularly true in the realm of economic commodification. As China experiences a slowdown in economic growth, religious commodification may evolve in two possible directions. On the one hand, pressure to commodify temples may increase if local officials perceive it to be a fruitful source of consumer-driven income at a time when other revenue sources are dwindling. On the other hand, as the economic downturn affects middle-class Chinese, they may have fewer resources to tour religious sites, reducing the impetus for economic development of such venues.

Regardless of the precise trajectory that takes hold under the new economic conditions,

Monks have used social media to publicize threats to temple assets and put pressure on local officials to abandon certain plans.



it is clear that at least some commodification initiatives will continue. As temples' social capital in the community grows further with the ongoing revival of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, and monastics take note of which tactics have achieved success at other sites, new examples of assertiveness in pushing back against local government commodification efforts are likely to emerge. Eventually, they may also attract a fiercer official response.

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  45. Control of the temple and its revenue have been a source of contention among Buddhist monks, the temple organization, and the BAC. "2015 Nian 12 Yue Putuoshan Lüyou Zhuyou Tongji Shuju" [December 2015 Major Tourist Index of Mt. Putuo], Official Website of Mt. Putuo, January 6, 2016, <http://www.putuoshan.gov.cn/Detail/322/114392.html>; David L. Wank, "Institutionalizing Modern 'Religion' in China's Buddhism: Political Phases of a Local Revival," in *Making Religion, Making the State*, ed. Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank (Stanford, 2009).
  46. Sarah Cook, *The Politburo's Predicament: Confronting the Limitations of Chinese Communist Party Repression* (Freedom House, January 2015), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/china/politburo-predicament>.
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  48. Chang, "Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China."
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  55. Ibid.
  56. See Temple West example in Chang, "Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China."
  57. See Temple Buddha example in Chang, "Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China."
  58. See Temple South example in Chang, "Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China."
  59. Shihui Zhang, "Shelai Baohu Xingjiaosi" [Who Would Protect Xingjiao Temple], *China Ethnic News*, April 16, 2013, <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/Home/report/392721-1.htm>.
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  61. E-mail communication with Kuei-min Chang.



## II: Christianity

### Degree of persecution:

Catholicism

**MODERATE**

Protestantism

**HIGH**

### Trajectory of persecution:

Catholicism



Minor  
Decrease

Protestantism



Increase

### Key findings

- 1 **Revival:** Christianity in China has expanded rapidly since 1980, reaching an estimated population of 58 million Protestants and 12 million Catholics as of 2014, split evenly between registered and unregistered churches. Growth has been evident among urban educated professionals and wealthy entrepreneurs.
- 2 **Key political controls:** The Chinese authorities seek to monitor and control Christians by encouraging them—sometimes forcefully—to join state-sanctioned churches that are affiliated with “patriotic” associations and led by politically vetted clergy. Religious leaders and congregants who refuse to register for theological or practical reasons risk having their place of worship shuttered and face detention, beatings, dismissal from employment, or imprisonment.
- 3 **Under Xi Jinping:** Since early 2014, local authorities have increased efforts to stem the spread of Christianity amid official rhetoric on the threat of “Western” values and the need to “Sinicize” religions. They have resorted to forms of repression that were previously rare, such as targeting state-sanctioned churches and leaders, arresting human rights lawyers who take up Christians’ cases, and obstructing Christmas celebrations. A renewed crackdown on quasi-Christian groups designated as “heterodox religions” has resulted in the imprisonment of over 400 religious leaders and lay believers.
- 4 **Catholicism at a crossroads:** Relations between Beijing and the Vatican appear on the verge of a positive breakthrough. The two sides are reportedly working toward an agreement on the appointment of bishops acceptable to both the papacy and the Communist Party at a time when more than 40 vacancies have opened.





Sanjiang Cathedral, which belonged to an officially recognized church, in Zhejiang Province before and after its demolition in April 2015.

*Credits: Shanghaiist/China—in His image (blogs)*



**5 Response and resistance:** Increased repression has triggered a correspondingly assertive response from church leaders and believers, including influential members of the official “patriotic” associations. Christians have published joint letters, boycotted ceremonies, worshipped outdoors, asserted their legal rights, and physically blocked demolitions or cross removals. Many Christians also employ more subtle tactics to reduce the impact of state controls, such as incorporating religious outreach into charity work, attending private mountainside trainings, or cultivating cooperative relations with local officials to reduce the likelihood of persecution.

**“We must resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means.”**

*—President Xi Jinping, April 2016 speech<sup>3</sup>*

**“We hereby request that you [the provincial government]... immediately cease this mistaken policy of removing crosses that is tearing the Party and the masses apart.”**

*—Open letter from the state-affiliated Christian Council of Zhejiang Province, July 2015<sup>4</sup>*

## Historical evolution

Christianity is believed to have first come to China in the seventh century, but it was suppressed and largely disappeared by the end of the Tang Dynasty in 907. It reemerged in the 13th century under the Yuan Dynasty and experienced periodic cycles of growth and suppression, depending on the nature of Christian relations with imperial rulers and China's ties with foreign powers.<sup>3</sup> During the Republican period (1911–49), top Chinese leaders like Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek were Christians.

After the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rose to power in 1949, the government deported foreign missionaries. During the 1950s, "patriotic" associations were created to link the party, the government, and China's several million Christians while severing ties with foreign churches. These included the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM),<sup>4</sup> established in 1954, and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), established in 1957.<sup>5</sup> During the Cultural Revolution period, even the government-affiliated entities were dismantled and all public religious practice was banned. However, beginning in the early 1980s, paramount leader Deng Xiaoping presided over a comparative religious opening. The patriotic associations were revived, and state funding was provided for the rebuilding of churches and key pilgrimage sites.

Even in this more tolerant environment, the relationship between Chinese Christians and the state has been characterized by periodic crackdowns, particularly against unregistered churches and religious leaders. Given the CCP's concern that Christianity is a form of Western influence and a conduit for the infiltration of foreign values and democratic ideals, clampdowns on Christian groups have often been triggered by events with international links. This was true in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In other instances, certain groups were banned as "heterodox religions,"<sup>6</sup> usually after their influence spread across provinces.<sup>7</sup>

Repressive campaigns typically featured raids on unregistered Bible study meetings or religious ceremonies and the detention of hundreds of religious leaders and lay believers. During the presidency of Hu Jintao, most detainees were released after short stints of administrative detention, though each year several dozen would be sentenced to "reeducation through labor" camps or prison.<sup>8</sup>

The three decades after the end of the Cultural Revolution were also characterized by growing bureaucratization and regulation. Following the 2005 adoption of new Religious Affairs Regulations, some observers in China and abroad were optimistic that the rules might enable more house churches to register, perhaps without affiliating themselves with the TSPM. However, church leaders and lawyers who tried to help them soon found that registration was practically impossible to achieve and even dangerous to attempt. As a result, by 2010, only a handful of congregations had registered, and Beijing alone had an estimated 2,000 house churches, compared with five TSPM churches and eight affiliated meeting points.<sup>9</sup>

Christian clergy and congregants who have avoided joining state-sanctioned churches provide both principled and practical reasons for their hesitation:

- **Theology:** For Catholics, the point of contestation is their belief in the authority of the Vatican. As Pope Benedict XVI noted in a 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics, "the proposal for

a Church that is ‘independent’ of the Holy See, in the religious sphere, is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.”<sup>10</sup> Some Protestants cite similar concerns, arguing that “their [TSPM] head is the Communist Party, our head is Jesus Christ.”<sup>11</sup> Others find TSPM doctrinal adjustments, made to align with CCP priorities, to be contrary to their own understanding of the Bible.

- **History:** Some religious leaders and believers in unofficial churches resent the role that TSPM leaders played in the persecution of Christians during the Mao Zedong era, and therefore refuse to affiliate with them.<sup>12</sup>
- **Bureaucracy:** The administrative requirements related to registration are burdensome and unrealistic for many unofficial churches.<sup>13</sup> Once a church is registered, the state often involves itself in managing church activities and even topics for preaching. In some cases, the permitted number of TSPM churches within a geographic jurisdiction is restricted, meaning an unofficial church would have to merge with a larger TSPM church rather than simply registering on its own.<sup>14</sup> The limited number of official churches also leads to overcrowding, spurring the formation of unofficial congregations.<sup>15</sup>
- **Security concerns:** One of the requirements for registration is providing membership lists to religious affairs officials. Given past campaigns of persecution, many unofficial church leaders are reluctant to take this step, credibly fearing that such information could be used by the authorities to harass their congregants.<sup>16</sup>

“Their [TSPM] head is the Communist Party, our head is Jesus Christ.”

### Christianity in China today

Despite sporadic and at times severe persecution in certain locales, the overall trajectory for Christianity in China has been one of remarkable growth since 1980, including during the decade of Hu Jintao’s leadership. In many parts of the country, cooperative or at least tolerant relations developed between local officials and churches, both registered and unregistered.

Estimates on the number of Christians in China vary widely, partly because people worshipping at unregistered churches are unlikely to confess their true faith in a census or during public opinion surveys. In 2014, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) reported that China was home to 29 million Protestants and 5.7 million Catholics who were part of congregations registered with the state.<sup>17</sup> Available surveys and scholarly research indicate that at least as many people worship in unofficial churches, resulting in estimates of 58 million Protestants and approximately 12 million Catholics.<sup>18</sup>

These totals, which are regularly cited by observers, bring the overall population of Christians to 70 million, making Christianity the second-largest institutionalized religion in China after Chinese Buddhism. Some scholars and evangelical organizations believe the true number of Christians may be as high as 100 million, with a greater proportion involved in unofficial churches.<sup>19</sup> Estimates of Christians are further obscured by an increasingly blurred line between official and unofficial churches, as leaders from both tacitly cooperate in some locales, and individual believers may worship at multiple sites.<sup>20</sup>

Chinese Christian practices include standard activities such as Sunday worship services, small

group Bible study and prayer meetings, holy communion, and baptism. Chinese Catholics hold special observances (high mass) for Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the Feast of the Assumption of Mary.<sup>21</sup> Chinese Protestants observe Christmas and Easter as well. Some Chinese Christians, particularly in rural areas, also engage in “syncretized” practices that meld Christian and Chinese folk traditions, such as ancestor worship or geomancy (*feng shui*).<sup>22</sup>

The spread of Christianity is evident even from official figures, which tally only believers over age 18 who worship at registered churches. These figures show Protestants growing from 3 million in 1982 to 29 million in 2014,<sup>23</sup> a nearly tenfold increase. Perhaps the most visible growth in Christianity over the past decade has occurred among urban Chinese. This has led to the emergence of what some scholars have termed “boss Christians”—wealthy, well-educated professionals and entrepreneurs.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Christianity is also prevalent in rural areas.<sup>25</sup>

### Many higher-income Chinese view Christianity and its association with the prosperous West as a symbol of modernity.

The growth of Christianity can be attributed in part to the broader spiritual revival that followed the loosening of controls after Mao's death, greater personal freedoms and economic prosperity, and the sense of a moral vacuum as Communist ideology loses its attractiveness for many Chinese. But there are also factors specific to Christianity that have contributed to its expansion, possibly at the expense of more “indigenous” religions like Buddhism and Taoism. Some experts argue that the fierce suppression of all religions during the Cultural Revolution reconfigured the “religious market” and created an opportunity for Christianity to gain a foothold where Chinese religions' influence had dwindled.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, as the country opened up to the world and embarked on an enormous project of economic development,

many university students and higher-income Chinese came to view Christianity and its association with the prosperous West as a symbol of modernity. Lastly, given China's politically hostile environment for religion, the organizational flexibility of Protestant “house churches” has facilitated expansion and recruitment of new believers.<sup>27</sup> This contrasts with Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, whose practice is closely tied to physical temples that, as immovable and often ancient sites, are vulnerable to political control and restrictions.

Beyond socioeconomic and structural factors, discreet outreach efforts have also directly driven the exponential growth of Christianity, though proselytizing is technically forbidden. For example, Chinese Christians are increasingly initiating and involved in charity work. Some large foundations and organizations operate with government approval; the Amity Foundation was able to collect millions of dollars in relief funds following the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Other efforts are smaller in scale, with local churches sponsoring health clinics, cultural performances, or social events. These projects provide Chinese Christians with personal spiritual fulfillment and an outlet for “good works.” But they also indirectly demonstrate to nonbelievers the positive impact that the religion could have on individuals and Chinese society, and give Christians an opportunity to interact with strangers and discreetly share the principles and benefits of their faith.<sup>28</sup>

### **Christianity under Xi Jinping**

When Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP in November 2012, Christianity in China had experienced extensive growth over the previous decade, but international advocacy groups also noted a trend of moderately escalating persecution for several years.<sup>29</sup> Relations



between the Chinese government and the Vatican were particularly tense after the appointment of several bishops unapproved by the papacy, and “house churches” were facing intensified pressure to register, merge with TSPM churches, or shut down.<sup>30</sup>

Initially, there appeared to be no significant change under the new leadership. Nonetheless, dozens of incidents of suppression were recorded throughout the country in 2013, particularly in Beijing, Henan, and Shandong.<sup>31</sup> By the end of 2014, persecution against Christians—particularly Protestants and various quasi-Christian groups—had intensified dramatically.<sup>32</sup> Areas of China that had previously featured a relatively relaxed atmosphere for Christianity became new sites of significant clampdowns and thousands more Christians than before directly encountered state persecution. This higher degree of suppression persisted throughout 2015 and early 2016.<sup>33</sup>

Over the course of 2014, persecution of Christians intensified dramatically.

In the general context of intensified persecution, several new phenomena have emerged under Xi:

- 1. Cross removal and demolition campaigns:** Beginning in March 2013, authorities in Zhejiang Province launched a three-year campaign called “Three Rectifications and One Demolition” that in practice has focused mainly on church buildings. By mid-2016, crosses had been removed from the rooftops or façades of at least 1,500 churches, and over 20 churches had been demolished.<sup>34</sup> Initially implemented in large cities like Wenzhou, the campaign soon spread across the province, even to rural villages. Most of the structures targeted have been Protestant churches, but several dozen Catholic sites of worship have had their crosses removed as well. The campaign was continuing apace as of early 2016, with 49 cross removals reported as of March 3.<sup>35</sup>

The authorities have retroactively sought to justify the demolitions by citing illegal construction or zoning violations. In some cases, churches do appear to have expanded beyond the permits granted by the government,<sup>36</sup> but internal government documents reveal the selective targeting of churches and a focus on cross removals, pointing to other motivations.<sup>37</sup> Although not as systematic as in Zhejiang, church demolitions have also been reported in Fujian, Henan, and Anhui Provinces, which have relatively large Christian minorities.<sup>38</sup>

The scale of the campaign and its contrast with past tolerance have contributed to a sense of alarm in China’s Christian community. Prior to 2014, Zhejiang was a relatively open place for Christianity. Authorities managed the religion with a light hand, and even unregistered groups were able to obtain permission to build places of worship. Reported incidents of persecution were few and far between.<sup>39</sup> Over the past two years, as congregants have tried to resist the official campaign, tensions have escalated, with sit-ins, mass detentions, and deployment of riot police becoming more frequent.<sup>40</sup> Some acts of resistance have ended tragically. In April 2016, a pastor’s wife was killed in Henan when bulldozers buried her and her husband as they attempted to block the demolition of their church.<sup>41</sup>

- 2. Repression of state-sanctioned churches and leaders:** One of the most notable aspects of the anti-cross campaign in Zhejiang has been the large-scale targeting of TSPM-



affiliated churches. As pastors from state-approved churches and even leaders from the government-affiliated “patriotic” religious associations have sought to fend off official intrusion, they too have faced punishments like detention and imprisonment that were previously reserved for their “house church” counterparts.

Pastors from state-approved churches have faced punishments like imprisonment that were previously reserved for their “house church” counterparts.

The most prominent cases were those of Bao Guohua, a member of the government-affiliated China Christian Council and a pastor at a state-approved church who was sentenced to 14 years in prison in February 2016,<sup>42</sup> and Gu (Joseph) Yuese, president of the Zhejiang Christian Council and pastor for a state-approved megachurch that the government had touted as a model of religious freedom in China, who was removed from the Christian Council and TSPM and detained from January to March 2016.<sup>43</sup>

The government alleged financial impropriety in both cases, but the men’s public opposition to the cross-removal campaign and the timing of their punishments led many observers to believe that the allegations were trumped up and retaliatory. Harsh punishments for TSPM pastors have been reported outside Zhejiang as well, including the 2014 sentencing of Zhang Shaojie to 12 years in prison in Henan.<sup>44</sup> Prior to 2013, it was exceedingly rare for TSPM church leaders to be subject to such treatment.<sup>45</sup>

**3. Large-scale imprisonment for membership in ‘heterodox religions’:** Since early 2014, the Chinese authorities have intensified efforts to suppress, and even eradicate, various quasi-Christian sects with tangential links to mainstream Protestantism. Hundreds of religious clergy and lay believers have been detained and sentenced to prison. The assault was in part catalyzed by a May 2014 incident in which alleged followers of the Almighty God (or Eastern Lightning) sect beat a woman to death in a McDonald’s restaurant in Shandong Province after she refused to provide her phone number for their recruitment drive.<sup>46</sup>

However, an analysis of Chinese court verdicts indicates that the groups targeted in the campaign have included eight other quasi-Christian sects that are unrelated to the McDonald’s incident.<sup>47</sup> The majority of people sentenced in these verdicts, including members of the Almighty God sect, appear to have been imprisoned for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of belief and expression rather than for engaging in violence against other Chinese.

Individuals swept up in this campaign are typically prosecuted under Article 300 of the Criminal Law, which punishes “using a heterodox religion to undermine implementation of the law” with terms of up to life in prison. The provision was created in late 1999 for use in the campaign against the Falun Gong spiritual group (see Falun Gong chapter). Court documents show that at least 439 individuals from quasi-Christian groups were sentenced under this article to prison terms of up to 10 years between January 2014 and May 2016, in cases spanning 28 provinces and major municipalities.<sup>48</sup> The prosecutions peaked in 2014–15 and slowed in early 2016, with approximately 80 percent linked to the controversial Almighty God sect.<sup>49</sup>

These findings help explain data published by the U.S.-based group China Aid that noted a sharp increase in Christians sentenced to prison in 2014.<sup>50</sup> But mainstream Protestant

leaders and congregants from underground “house churches” have reportedly been charged and sentenced under Article 300 as well, illustrating again how a repressive legislative tool created to persecute one religious group can be quickly and easily applied to others. Indeed, several local government representatives reportedly explained to a human rights lawyer that any unofficial religious group in their jurisdiction could be considered a “heterodox religion” and punished accordingly, whether or not it is on the government’s list of banned groups.<sup>51</sup>

**4. Crackdown on lawyers who assist churches:** For years, Chinese lawyers who represent persecuted religious believers have faced official reprisals in the form of disbarment, surveillance, and physical assaults. Prior to 2012, a small contingent of rights attorneys, such as Gao Zhisheng and Wang Yonghang, were even detained and imprisoned, but this appeared to have been triggered by their defense of Falun Gong adherents rather than Christians. Under Xi Jinping, the number of rights lawyers imprisoned has increased overall. As part of a crackdown launched in July 2015, several lawyers and legal activists who had been assisting persecuted Christians were arrested, held in custody for months, abused, and forced to make confessions to media outlets in which they denounced their human rights work. Prominent cases include those of attorney Zhang Kai and legal assistant Zhao Wei.<sup>52</sup> Others, like Li Heping, remained in custody as of September 2016, facing charges of “subversion of state power.”<sup>53</sup> All three are reportedly Christian believers themselves.

**5. Increased obstruction of Christmas celebrations:** Christmas is becoming a popular commercial holiday in China,<sup>54</sup> but since 2013 authorities in different parts of the country have stepped up efforts to prevent Christians from worshiping or celebrating together.<sup>55</sup> Unofficial churches report greater obstacles to organizing large events for prayers or parties.<sup>56</sup> Authorities in Xi’an and Wenzhou took specific steps to limit children’s exposure to Christmas or to bar university students from celebrating the holiday in 2014.<sup>57</sup>

Together, these trends reflect a significant shift in the unwritten rules surrounding the relationship between Protestant groups and the state. An April 2013 article by scholars Teresa Wright and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu outlines various patterns of church-state engagement since the 1980s, including greater tolerance for registered churches, more autonomy for unofficial groups in provinces like Zhejiang and Guangdong, and less use of violent repression in urban areas.<sup>58</sup> As is evident from the above analysis, these patterns have changed in key regions of China since 2013, provoking greater conflict between the Chinese authorities and both official and unofficial Protestant groups.

[Authorities in Xi’an and Wenzhou took specific steps to limit children’s exposure to Christmas.](#)

There are several factors behind the increased repression and the forms it has taken. First, the growing popularity of Christianity may have provoked a backlash from certain party leaders. Credible estimates of 70 to 100 million believers place Christianity at precisely the same level of popularity as Falun Gong in 1999, when the CCP launched a nationwide crackdown on the spiritual practice, and make it nearly as large or larger than the CCP’s own membership, which stood at almost 88 million in 2015.<sup>59</sup> Although the leadership, doctrines, and practices of Christians in China are more fragmented than Falun Gong’s, the sheer

number and visibility of believers may have stoked anxiety among Chinese leaders.

Moreover, the ways in which Christianity has spread across the country among ethnic Han, reaching every stratum of society from poor farmers to wealthy entrepreneurs, and cultivated cross-provincial and transnational networks (including via the internet and human rights lawyers) match qualities that experts argue contributed to the CCP's crackdown on Falun Gong.<sup>60</sup> One internal government document cited in media reports stated explicitly that the cross removals in Zhejiang were aimed at regulating "overly popular" religious activities.<sup>61</sup>

The second factor contributing to increased repression is a growing official emphasis on "Sinicizing" Christianity and "adapting" it to China's "socialist society." Such efforts predate November 2012, but the rhetoric has since gained momentum and Xi's imprimatur. In a May 2015 speech and again in remarks in April 2016, Xi laid out the "Four Musts" of CCP religious work, one of which is Sinicization, including of religious doctrine.<sup>62</sup> It remains somewhat unclear what party leaders mean by Sinicization in practice, but some superficial changes have been observed. One of them involves "localizing" the architecture of churches, in effect reducing their public visibility. This was listed as an element of a pilot campaign launched in Zhejiang at the end of 2014, referred to as the "Five Introductions and Five Transformations" for Christian communities in the province.<sup>63</sup> The focus on architecture helps explain the cross removals and other changes to the exterior appearance of churches. Other aspects of Sinicization evident as of mid-2016 range from nationalistic measures like requiring a Chinese flag to be flown on church property,<sup>64</sup> to more eccentric initiatives like promoting Chinese tea culture among congregants.<sup>65</sup>

A third factor behind the repressive trend relates to the anti-Western political environment and ideological retrenchment that have taken hold under Xi, including official warnings against the influence of foreign values and the infiltration of overseas "hostile forces" into the religious sphere. Such comments, along with the increased restrictions on Protestant Christians in particular, seem to reflect CCP anxiety over the growing influence of a decentralized religion whose leaders have personal ties to coreligionists in democratic countries like the United States or South Korea, even if Christianity has in fact been quite Sinicized already.

With respect to escalating tensions in Zhejiang specifically, the initiative of provincial party leaders and the hosting of an international political summit appear to have played a critical role. Zhejiang Party Secretary Xia Baolong, who assumed his position in December 2012, has been closely associated with the cross-removal campaign, having reportedly stated in an October 2013 tour of Wenzhou that the large number of visible church buildings and crosses may not be "appropriate" for the landscape.<sup>66</sup> China's hosting of the Group of 20 summit in the provincial capital Hangzhou in September 2016 triggered another acceleration in efforts to curb the visibility of Christianity in the city.<sup>67</sup>

Xia had been Xi Jinping's deputy when Xi served as party secretary in Zhejiang from 2002 to 2007.<sup>68</sup> The close association has prompted speculation that Xi himself may have had a hand in initiating the crackdown.<sup>69</sup> Absent access to internal party sources, it is impossible to know whether this is the case. But the campaign has continued for two years, triggering domestic backlash and international criticism, and Xi has made no move to stop it.

## Catholicism at a crossroads

Although China's Catholics have been affected by some of the dynamics described above, particularly the cross removals in Zhejiang,<sup>70</sup> the overall trajectory of the government's policies toward Catholicism is distinct from the situation for Protestantism and appears to have serious potential for positive change. After a notable deterioration in Sino-Vatican relations from 2010 to 2012, by mid-2016 there was a sense of optimism surrounding the relationship and hope for some kind of breakthrough, especially regarding the appointment of bishops.

Pope Francis assumed his position in March 2013, just three days before Xi became China's state president. Almost immediately, the new pope began making overtures to China and Xi personally. He sent a congratulatory letter to Xi that month, appointed someone with China experience as the Vatican's senior diplomat, and sought to meet with Xi during the leaders' simultaneous visits to the United States in September 2013. The pope's efforts to get into Beijing's good graces have also been evident in his rhetoric. During a January 2016 media interview, he expressed admiration for China's great culture and age-old wisdom, and sent a Lunar New Year greeting to Xi and the Chinese people, the first known example of such a gesture by a pope to a Chinese leader.<sup>71</sup>

Beijing has taken notice of these efforts. Between June 2014 and January 2016, the Chinese government held three rounds of informal talks with Vatican representatives,<sup>72</sup> while state media coverage of Pope Francis has been quite positive.<sup>73</sup> Beijing has avoided appointing any bishops unilaterally, and in August 2015 a bishop approved by both sides took his post in Henan, the first case of its kind in three years.<sup>74</sup> In August 2014, China permitted the pope to fly through Chinese airspace on his return from a visit to South Korea, the first time such permission has been granted.

The timing of the apparent thaw in relations is especially meaningful given the large accumulation of bishop vacancies in China, which stems in part from the retirement or death of an older generation of bishops who were appointed before 1949. Should Beijing decide to appoint its own bishops to even some of these positions without Vatican approval, the number of illegitimate bishops could rise from fewer than 10 to more than 30. This would deepen rifts among Catholic leaders recognized only by the Vatican, those approved by both authorities, and those appointed only by CCP entities. Pope Francis is probably motivated to avoid such an outcome, though his recent efforts are in keeping with the Vatican's policy of reaching accommodations with Communist-led governments around the world.

From Beijing's perspective, several factors make Pope Francis a more attractive interlocutor than his predecessors. First, as a native of a developing country (Argentina) rather than a Western European power, Pope Francis may be perceived as less of a political tool for Western "hostile forces," which the CCP fears might use religious authority to undermine China's political stability.

Second, as the first Jesuit pope, Francis has expressed a strong sense of special connection to China. The Jesuits played a central role in introducing Catholicism to the country, and some of the order's representatives, like Matteo Ricci in the 16th century, developed close relations with the Chinese imperial court.<sup>75</sup>

Third, Pope Francis's stated admiration for the greatness of Chinese history and civilization

matches Xi's own "China Dream" of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." The overtures appear to have engendered some goodwill, with leaders of state-affiliated Catholic institutions urging that an agreement on bishop appointments be reached and that the pope be permitted to visit China.<sup>76</sup>

Lastly, with only 12 million followers spread throughout the country, Catholicism is perhaps the least politically threatening organized religious group in China in terms of size and geographic distribution, despite its ties to a foreign spiritual authority. Taking advantage of the opportunity to ease tensions, especially with a pope perceived as less likely to use his power to spur anti-CCP sentiment, would improve Xi's reputation at home and abroad.

As behind-the-scenes negotiations move forward, observers believe that three options for ordination arrangements are likely on the table:

- The Vatican provides a list of acceptable candidates to Beijing, which makes the final selection. A similar model is used in Vietnam.
- The Vatican makes a specific selection that must then be confirmed via official Chinese channels.
- Beijing takes the initiative, but allows candidates enough time to try to win Vatican approval. This process has been used for several ordinations over the last decade.<sup>77</sup>

### Several factors make Pope Francis a more attractive interlocutor for Beijing than his predecessors.

Despite a sense of hope and optimism in the Vatican and among some Catholics in China, others in Hong Kong and on the mainland remain wary of a rapprochement.<sup>78</sup> They fear that Beijing will force the Vatican into a compromise that would increase state control, but may not necessarily reduce instances of violent persecution or detentions. Still, a change would resolve the moral dilemma facing many Catholics who want to be loyal to Rome but also avoid official persecution, while enabling greater unity between the approved and unapproved parts of the church.

Developments on the ground since March 2013 reinforce the skeptics' concerns. Even in the context of improved Sino-Vatican relations, the occasional detention of underground bishops and priests has persisted,<sup>79</sup> and Shanghai bishop Ma Daqin remains under house arrest at a seminary after disassociating from the CPA at his 2012 ordination. In June 2016, a blog entry posted under Ma's name recanted that decision as an "unwise move," explained that he had been "tricked by outside elements," and praised the CPA.<sup>80</sup> Some observers questioned the post's authenticity. They noted the likelihood of coercion and "political education" if it was Ma's writing,<sup>81</sup> and expressed consternation at the Vatican's silence on the matter.<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, in April 2013, the government adopted new, more restrictive regulations on appointment of bishops, replacing those in place since 1993.<sup>83</sup> The new rules explicitly require support from the CCP and give central authorities—particularly the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC) and the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB)—the final say over appointments, making it more difficult for dioceses to negotiate leeway via good relations with local officials.



It is important to note that this is not the first time hopes have been raised. The same proposals for bishop ordination that are now being considered were discussed in 2007, only to have relations sour again three years later.<sup>84</sup>

### Key methods of political control

The Chinese authorities employ several major tactics to influence the development of state-sanctioned churches and reduce the prevalence and growth of unofficial churches:

- 1. Bureaucratic oversight and registration pressures:** The foundation of the party-state's control over Christianity is the government's network of local RABs and the "patriotic" associations, including the CPA and the BCCCC for Catholics and the TSPM for Protestants. The charters of these entities relay their clear political priorities. Scholar Pitman Potter notes that the TSPM charter "underscores its submission to Party leadership, support for the authority of the state and the socialist motherland."<sup>85</sup>

Churches and religious leaders aligned with these associations receive government funding and permission to train in official seminaries, but must commit to "three fixes"—fixed meeting place, fixed leader, and fixed area of coverage—and to excluding congregants under the age of 18.<sup>86</sup> Many church leaders and congregants prefer to operate outside state controls and retain greater autonomy, even if this comes with risk.

Meanwhile, the party's own bureaucratic restrictions have made it effectively impossible for official churches to meet the needs of all of the country's Christians, and the rules do not allow churches to register without joining the TSPM or CPA.<sup>87</sup> The result is a large extralegal arena of worship, with local officials using various methods to pressure unregistered groups to disband or merge with official churches nearby.

- 2. Restrictions on places of worship:** Many reported instances of persecution involve measures taken by local authorities to restrict the use of a particular location for Christian worship, meetings, or trainings. Periodic raids disperse unregistered church Bible trainings, and pressure on landlords to cancel rental agreements prevents unofficial churches from meeting at their chosen location.<sup>88</sup> In more extreme cases, security agents turn off the water and electricity of a church site, physically bar believers' access, or demolish a church building.

Until recently, such measures were typically focused on unregistered churches, particularly large, urban congregations like Beijing's Shouwang, in an effort to force worshipers to join a TSPM church or disband into smaller and less influential groups.<sup>89</sup> However, over the past three years, a growing number of TSPM churches have also encountered restrictions on their places of worship, demolitions, or property disputes with local authorities.<sup>90</sup> The trend of TSPM churches being subject to harassment and demolitions undercuts any incentives for unofficial groups to register.

- 3. Controlling religious clergy:** A key function of the "patriotic" associations is to train, ordain, appoint, and manage religious clergy. The party hopes to cultivate "patriotic" religious leaders who can teach believers to "love the country" and "protect the leadership of the Communist Party."<sup>91</sup> Training occurs at a network of 24 national, regional, and provincial TSPM seminaries and 13 CPA seminaries.<sup>92</sup>

Aspiring students face a number of hurdles, including a preference for young applicants (aged 18–25), academic tests, and political vetting through a background check by the local RAB. A surplus of applicants and the limited openings allow the seminaries to be very selective in their admission criteria. Graduates must complete another set of steps to become TSPM pastors, including an apprenticeship and ordination, all with close supervision by the RAB and approval from various levels of TSPM leaders.

## Efforts to train and ordain politically loyal clergy have failed to keep pace with the expansion of Christianity in China.

For Catholics, the BCCCC is the agency through which bishops are selected and ordained, including those without Vatican approval. In a practice that has stoked discontent among government-approved clergy in recent years, officials have sometimes forced bishops who had been ordained with Vatican approval to participate in the ordination of others without papal consent. The participation of such “illegitimate” bishops in various other ceremonies or seminary graduations has also raised tensions.<sup>93</sup>

Efforts to train and ordain politically loyal clergy have failed to keep pace with the expansion of Christianity in China, undermining the CCP's goals. Indeed, fieldwork by scholar Carsten Vala indicates that some of the party's own controls—including rigid training curricula, political vetting for seminary applicants, and government intervention in church appointments and theology—have led to a dearth of TSPM pastors. By contrast, leadership training in unregistered churches is more diverse, flexible, simple, and autonomous. It provides greater opportunities for lay believers or even TSPM-trained pastors to become leaders, despite the greater risk of harassment.<sup>94</sup>

- 4. Doctrinal manipulation and political education:** The CCP recognizes that theology is central to determining believers' political tendencies and has sought to downplay certain aspects of the Christian faith while promoting others. In 1998, top TSPM leader Bishop Ding Guangxun launched the Theological Construction Movement. He advocated “diluting” the traditional doctrine of “justification by faith” with an emphasis on being a “law-abiding, good citizen,” essentially encouraging Chinese Protestants to obey party-state authority over religious authority. Ding also backed interpretations that adhered to other party priorities, such as maintaining national unity and providing social welfare.<sup>95</sup>

This theological approach has since come to underpin the training curriculum at seminaries and sermons at many TSPM churches.<sup>96</sup>

Seminary training is supplemented by periodic “political education” campaigns among clergy. In July 2015, for example, authorities in Shanghai mandated that Catholic priests and nuns undergo “reeducation” classes on the themes of the CCP's most recent National Congress plenary session.<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile, extensive resources are dedicated to controlling the publication of religious texts and punishing individuals who produce unofficial versions, imprisoning them on charges of engaging in “illegal publication.”

- 5. Detentions and violent repression:** Those who persist in leading or worshipping at unregistered churches or otherwise opposing or circumventing government controls risk detention, imprisonment, and some torture. Most detained Christians are subject to relatively short periods in custody, ranging from several hours of interrogation

to administrative detention of up to 15 days. This is particularly true for ordinary congregants who make up the majority of detained Christians. However, each year a number of mainstream Protestants and Catholics are placed in long-term custody, “disappeared,” or sentenced to prison.

Many of the cases of arrest and imprisonment that receive international attention involve church leaders or clergy members, and their proportion among the overall number of Christians detained has reportedly risen since 2014.<sup>98</sup> This may indicate that officials are making a more concerted effort to control lay believers via the clergy, but it could also be a reaction to greater outspokenness on the part of church leaders in their interactions with the authorities.

Lawyers and family members of imprisoned Christians periodically relay reports of torture,<sup>99</sup> though such abuse appears to be less common than with some other religious minorities. Instead, in recent years, Christians seem more likely to encounter brutality outside of custody, particularly in confrontations with riot police or demolition crews.

### **Economic incentives and reprisals**

In contrast to Buddhist temples, local officials have not traditionally viewed Christian churches and seminaries as potential vehicles for generating income. However, as Christianity’s popularity has grown, some party-state officials are encouraging or pressuring leaders of Christian institutions to shift resources toward projects that might attract tourists and build the local economy. In a 2013 article, Carsten Vala cites an example of RAB cadres in Hunan convincing the leaders of the provincial Protestant seminary to change their plans for the campus’s design. The revised design incorporated a pedestrian street with snack carts, a collection of life-size sculptures depicting Bible scenes, and one of the largest churches in China.<sup>100</sup>

Given the increasingly hostile political environment for Christianity, such encouragement by local officials has been known to backfire. In one of the most publicized demolitions of recent years, the Sanjiang Church in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, was destroyed in April 2014 after a lengthy standoff between the government and congregants. Some officials attempted to justify the demolition by arguing that the cathedral-like building had been constructed beyond the permitted size. However, according to a pastor familiar with the details of the case, “It was not the original plan to build such a large church, but the government gave encouragement for a larger building because ... the authorities wanted it to become a tourist attraction.”<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, local officials pronounced it a “model building,”<sup>102</sup> but their plan went awry when provincial party secretary Xia Baolong toured the area in late 2013 and voiced concern over the church’s prominence on the landscape, with some sources reporting that he personally ordered the demolition. Five bureaucrats were then punished for failing to stop the construction.<sup>103</sup> In other cases, local officials themselves have ordered demolitions of urban churches because they wish to use the land for more lucrative projects.<sup>104</sup>

Besides physical destruction of property, Chinese officials often impose significant financial costs on Christian believers. Many of the dozens of official churches demolished in recent

years—including Sanjiang—were built with donations from local congregants, in some cases amounting to millions of dollars. This creates a particularly close personal connection between believers and their place of worship, intensifying frustration with the government when the edifice is arbitrarily destroyed before their eyes.

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In a more direct form of penalty, the government fines congregants to deter participation in unofficial churches. Christians affiliated with the TSPM have also been fined to prevent public resistance by other state-appointed religious leaders. For example, TSPM Pastor Zhang Shaojie was fined 100,000 yuan (\$16,000) in addition to a 12-year prison term in prison in 2014, prompting authorities to pressure his family to vacate their home so it could be auctioned off.<sup>105</sup> Extortion and confiscation of property—including valuable personal items—are customary in crackdowns on unofficial churches, pastors, and members.<sup>106</sup> Government employees found to be involved in underground religious activities are subject to economic reprisals ranging from forced unpaid leave to dismissal.<sup>107</sup> Since 2014, some families in Sichuan and Guizhou have had welfare assistance suspended for attending underground church services,<sup>108</sup> or been warned that their children's future educational opportunities would be restricted if they accompanied their parents.<sup>109</sup>

### Community response and resistance

Christians in China have responded to the strict regulatory framework, corporatist controls, and periodic campaigns of persecution in a variety of ways. The responses straddle registered and unregistered churches, further blurring the distinctions between the two. As official hostility has increased in recent years, mistrust of the government among state-sanctioned church leaders and believers has correspondingly grown, leading them to adopt more confrontational approaches.

Still, perhaps the most common form of Chinese Christian resistance to official controls is simply to expand opportunities for religious practice outside of state-designated spaces, sometimes with tacit official approval, rather than directly challenging religious policy or seeking to alter the political system. Such efforts include:

- 1. Quietly circumventing restrictions:** Many Christian leaders and lay believers discretely take steps on a daily basis to expand the space for autonomous religious practice while avoiding reprisals from authorities. Unofficial church congregations and Bible study groups meet in private homes, office spaces, or hotel conference rooms when denied an officially sanctioned place of worship. In a 2013 article, scholar Susan McCarthy describes how the priests, nuns, and lay volunteers at the state-sanctioned Catholic Jinde charity in Beijing insinuate religious symbols and spiritual meaning into its projects.<sup>110</sup> Mundane activities—like joining a marathon, hosting a Christmas charity party, or providing earthquake relief—take on spiritual significance for the organizations' staff personally and as a means of demonstrating the positive role that Christianity can play in Chinese society.

In another example, hundreds of Christians from both registered and unregistered congregations across China take part in training programs run by the Hong Kong-based Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) at any given time. The radio-based

program, conducted with TSPM approval, provides an alternative, low-risk avenue for training outside the complex, politicized official seminaries.<sup>111</sup> Other opportunities for autonomous study include online seminary courses offered outside of China, unofficial seminars by overseas pastors and scholars during visits to China, and the sharing of religious media content via applications like WeChat.<sup>112</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, many Christians engage in activities that are banned by the government and go to great lengths to maintain secrecy. They participate in rural mountainside training workshops, equip their homes with soundproofing and hiding spaces to accommodate underground church meetings, produce and disseminate unofficial religious publications, or flee the country by land to Southeast Asia.<sup>113</sup>

- 2. Developing cooperative relations with local officials:** Many unofficial churches have sought to cultivate positive relationships with local cadres, police, and RAB personnel. They attempt to be polite to officers assigned to monitor them, openly notify them of meeting times, and otherwise try to demonstrate that they are good people with no interest in sowing social discord.<sup>114</sup> In response, some officials have given tacit approval to the existence of a “house church” in their jurisdiction, and police have warned unofficial church leaders of coming raids or crackdowns.<sup>115</sup> Such dynamics have greatly contributed to the growth of Christianity and enabled the construction of formal church buildings for unregistered congregations. It remains unclear how much the space for these kinds of relationships has dwindled in recent years as the overall political environment for Christianity has soured.
- 3. Legal activism and education:** When confronted with arrests or property disputes, both registered and unregistered church leaders and members have worked with human rights lawyers to file administrative lawsuits or defend their innocence and religious freedom in court. Such efforts continue despite the risk of reprisals—including against the lawyers themselves—and the slim chance of success.<sup>116</sup> Over the past decade, one Christian activist has also conducted a series of trainings for believers across China, particularly those from unregistered churches, to educate them about their rights under Chinese law and help them identify official actions that are illegal. The sessions and a broader increase in legal awareness among Chinese Christians have reportedly provided grassroots believers with negotiation strategies and talking points that can be employed in communications with local police, which in some cases have fended off arbitrary acts of persecution.<sup>117</sup>

Some police have warned unofficial church leaders of coming raids or crackdowns.

While the above approaches have at times proven effective, in the face of intensified assaults or as a matter of principle, some Christian leaders and believers have turned to more public and confrontational tactics to resist encroachment or press for more liberal registration policies. Notably, since 2013, more Christians from state-sanctioned churches and even the “patriotic” associations themselves have resorted to these avenues of appeal. In many instances, the greater assertiveness has been met with repression from authorities, including detention, imprisonment, and beatings. The main forms of public resistance are as follows:

- 1. Publishing written objections to official actions:** Either prominent individuals or a coalition of church leaders or congregants have submitted open letters and petitions to relevant official organs; the documents are then published online and circulated



via social media. Many such documents have been written and publicized since 2014, appealing to provincial and national authorities to cease the campaign of cross removals and church demolitions in Zhejiang. Remarkably, a number of open letters have come from individuals and entities affiliated with state-sanctioned churches, including the province's "patriotic" Zhejiang Christian Council and Catholic clergy in Wenzhou led by the government-approved bishop, Zhu Weifang.<sup>118</sup>

2. **Boycotting the religious rituals of clergy deemed illegitimate:** Some Catholics have refused to attend or participate in ceremonies involving the eight bishops who have not received papal approval. At his 2012 ordination, Shanghai bishop Ma Daqin deftly embraced three illegitimate bishops rather than let them perform a "laying on of hands" ritual on him.<sup>119</sup> In July 2014, when an official seminary in Beijing announced that a bishop who had been excommunicated by the Vatican would celebrate graduation Mass, the class boycotted their own graduation.<sup>120</sup>
3. **Worshipping outdoors:** When unregistered churches have been evicted from their meeting sites because of official pressure on landlords or other government obstruction, some have taken to worshipping in public spaces instead. The most prominent case in recent years was that of the Shouwang Church in Beijing. Once one of the largest unofficial congregations in the country, it was forced out of its meeting location in 2009, and congregants and church leaders began to meet in public plazas and parks to pray. After several rounds of arrests, however, repressive efforts appeared to have succeeded by 2015, with the church's followers dispersing into smaller "house church" groups or other congregations.<sup>121</sup>
4. **Physically blocking demolition efforts, replacing crosses:** On numerous occasions over the past few years, large numbers of congregants—sometimes hundreds at a time—have met at a threatened site of worship, held hands to create a "human wall," conducted a sit-in while chanting hymns, or piled up stones to block access to the site.<sup>122</sup> In some instances riot police and demolition crews dispersed the gatherings by force, but particularly in smaller villages or with lower-profile churches, believers have succeeded in fending off destruction.

According to one pastor in Zhejiang, "quite a few" cross removals have been prevented using these methods. In other cases, he says congregants "put up new crosses right after they are torn down." In a more indirect response, some Christians have taken to manufacturing large numbers of smaller crosses that can be placed on cars, on homes, or by the side of the road in an effort to foil the government campaign's core aim of rendering the region's Christian presence less visible. The activists then maximize the impact by documenting their efforts in photographs or videos and circulating them in China and abroad.

### Future outlook

The Chinese authorities' intensified repression of Christians and particularly Protestants since November 2012 appears to have achieved several goals. Crosses atop churches are significantly less visible across Zhejiang than four years ago, many fewer members of quasi-Christian groups are spreading their faiths, and some human rights lawyers and state-sanctioned church leaders may be thinking twice before defying government orders.

Yet official actions have also produced negative effects, from the CCP's perspective. While the lines between registered and unofficial churches had been blurring for some time, the increased persecution has fueled greater solidarity between these two parts of China's Christian community, as well as between Catholic and Protestant groups. The cross-removal campaign has been especially pivotal as a unifying force for China's Christians. This may be one reason, along with factors related to individual officials, why the removal campaign has not spread from Zhejiang to other provinces.

Nevertheless, other elements of increased control and coerced "Sinicization" may appear nationwide in the coming years. Should the current trajectory of harassment and imprisonment of TSPM churches and leaders continue, unofficial congregations will have less reason to register, and TSPM leaders and members may even choose to "defect" to unregistered churches in larger numbers.

For Catholics, at the time of writing, an agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese government regarding the appointment of bishops seems imminent. Should this breakthrough occur, the most significant question for both sides will be whether the pact reduces the grassroots persecution of Catholics in China. If it does not, the Vatican will face the dilemma of how to respond in a principled manner without risking the dissolution of its new agreement. This is perhaps the most disconcerting scenario among skeptics of a deal like Hong Kong's Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun.

Increased persecution has fueled greater solidarity between the official and unofficial parts of China's Christian community, as well as between Catholics and Protestants.

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## III: Islam

### Degree of persecution:

Hui Muslims

**LOW**

Uighur Muslims

**VERY HIGH**

### Trajectory of persecution:

Hui Muslims



Minor Increase

Uighur Muslims



Increase

### Key findings

- 1 Revival and growth:** Islam, with about 21 million believers in China, has experienced visible expansion over the past decade. Hui Muslim communities have constructed thousands of new mosques, while many Uighurs are adopting religious practice in part to assert an independent identity from the Han Chinese majority. The influence of the ultraconservative Salafi strand of Islam has also expanded, even attracting a small number of Han converts.
- 2 Bifurcated controls:** Chinese government treatment of Muslims differs significantly across ethnic and geographic lines. Hui Muslims have much greater leeway than Uighurs to practice core elements of the Islamic faith like praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, going on the Hajj pilgrimage, or donning a headscarf. Uighurs who engage in such acts increasingly face job dismissal, fines, and imprisonment.
- 3 Under Xi:** Both Hui and Uighur Muslims have experienced intensified restrictions and Islamophobia since Xi Jinping became leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in November 2012, with controls deepening and expanding in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region especially. Previously informal or local restrictions in Xinjiang—on issues such as religious dress or children's education—have been codified at the regional and national levels, and authorities have launched new campaigns to more closely monitor smartphone usage and force businesses to sell alcohol.
- 4 Increased violence:** Restrictions on religious practice and their intrusive implementation have been linked to a growing number of violent clashes or premeditated attacks by some Uighurs against police, pro-Beijing religious leaders,



A Hui mosque in Linxia, Gansu Province, also known as “Little Mecca,” where restrictions on Islam are more lax than in Xinjiang.

Credit: Wikimedia

and civilians. Central authorities have prioritized “maintaining stability,” launched a “strike hard” campaign, armed more police, and meted out harsh punishments even for peaceful religious practice. Incidents of security forces opening fire on Uighur civilians have become more common.

**5 Economic incentives:** The economic priorities of the Chinese government have contributed to greater repression in some circumstances, but have also encouraged government actors to invest funds in projects that promote Islam or the export of related goods. Authorities in Xinjiang make extensive use of economic rewards and punishments when enforcing controls on religion.

**6 Adaptation and resistance:** Hui Muslims have traditionally adapted their religious practice to Chinese thought and worked through the existing political system to influence policymaking. Many Uighurs, facing more restrictive conditions, have chosen to secretly circumvent official controls, access unapproved religious publications, privately affirm their faith, or refuse to participate in official celebrations. Others have acted more defiantly, growing beards or donning headscarves even where it is forbidden, or confronting police when they try to enforce intrusive regulations.

**“After 2009, everything changed. Now the rule is, if I go to your house, read some Quran, pray together, and the government finds out, you go to jail.”**

—Barna, Uighur woman from Xinjiang now living in the United States, 2015<sup>5</sup>

**“This video [of a young Hui girl reciting Quran verses] has drawn a gasp from the public.... The Education Department of Gansu Province strongly condemns the act that harms the mental health of the youth, and demands education agencies... strictly ban religion from campuses.”**

—Education Department of Gansu Province, May 2016<sup>6</sup>



## Islam in China: Past and present

Islam first came to China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), not long after the prophet Muhammad's death, as Muslim traders arrived via the Silk Road. Under the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), some of whose leaders were themselves converts, Islam's influence and the number of Muslims in China expanded, particularly in Uighur-populated areas.<sup>3</sup> After the CCP came to power in 1949, China's Muslims were brought under the authority of the "patriotic" Islamic Association of China (IAC), established in 1953. During the Cultural Revolution, many mosques were destroyed and any public displays of faith were fiercely suppressed and punished.<sup>4</sup>

Following the death of Mao Zedong, religious practice was permitted again, the IAC was reestablished, and the rebuilding of mosques and Muslim shrines was allowed. According to the 1982 Central Committee Document No. 19 on CCP religious policy, there were 10 million Muslims in China.<sup>5</sup> The figure has more than doubled since then.

China's current population of 21 to 23 million Muslims outnumbers the Muslim populations in many Middle Eastern countries and features great ethnic diversity.<sup>6</sup> Approximately half of China's Muslims (10.5 to 11 million) are Hui,<sup>7</sup> descendants of Arab and Persian traders who have assimilated into Chinese society and culture. Their physical appearance closely resembles that of the country's Han majority, and while parts of Ningxia, Gansu, and Yunnan Provinces have high concentrations of Hui, many have settled elsewhere in China. The second-largest contingent of Muslims are Uighurs, a Turkic minority of approximately 10 million people with its own language, customs, and Eurasian appearance that is largely concentrated in the northwestern region of Xinjiang.<sup>8</sup>

The country's remaining Muslims are members of various Central Asian ethnic groups—including Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Tajiks—or migrants from Middle Eastern or African countries who reside in Beijing and other major cities.<sup>9</sup>

China is home to over 35,000 mosques, half of them in Xinjiang, and 45,000 imams dispersed across multiple provinces.<sup>10</sup> There are important pilgrimage sites in Kashgar and Turpan in Xinjiang, as well as in Gansu Province's Linxia, a heavily Hui Muslim city that is often referred to as "Little Mecca."<sup>11</sup>

This ethnic and geographic diversity is also reflected in the practice of Islam. Most of China's Muslims are Sunni, with some Uighurs also following Sufi traditions. Some practices are common to all Chinese Muslim communities, such as abstention from pork and celebration of Ramadan, but the degree to which individual worshippers pray five times a day or regularly attend Friday services at a mosque varies widely. In addition, certain practices related to marriage or funeral rites are common in Uighur areas as part of their cultural heritage, but absent among other Muslim communities. Meanwhile, a unique dimension of Hui Muslim practice is the existence of women-only mosques led by female imams.<sup>12</sup> Uighur women traditionally avoid attending mosque services with men, instead congregating informally in one another's homes to pray, read the Quran, and socialize, though some mosques have spaces for women to pray.<sup>13</sup> The diversity of practice among Muslims in China is such that even within the same ethnic community and province, the manifestation of Islamic identity can vary significantly.<sup>14</sup>

Like other religions in China, Islam has experienced a revival over the past decade. For

many Uighurs, increased religiosity and adoption of religious symbols or attire are ways of asserting an independent identity from the Han Chinese majority. Among the Hui, people are often seeking spiritual and moral guidance in a commercialized and materialistic society, and newly affluent Muslim entrepreneurs have more resources to contribute to religious institutions. One visible sign of this revival is the growing number of newly constructed mosques and Sufi shrines even in small villages, particularly in parts of Gansu and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region that are sometimes referred to as the Quran Belt.<sup>15</sup>

A small number of Han Chinese have converted to Islam, either for spiritual reasons or to facilitate marriage to a Hui spouse. But most of those becoming more devout are rediscovering their own Islamic heritage. Government statistics do not necessarily provide an accurate tally of the country's practicing Muslim community because they are based largely on counts of ethnic minorities, embedding an assumption that all Hui or Uighurs are Muslims, and that all Muslims are not Han.<sup>16</sup>

Other factors are also fueling the Islamic revival, such as increased translation of texts from Arabic to Chinese, the rise of social media for sharing religious content, and a growing number of Dawa missionaries from the Middle East and South Asia.<sup>17</sup>

### **Bifurcated policy and implementation**

The nature of Muslim communities' interaction with the Chinese authorities varies greatly. Non-Uighur believers encounter significantly fewer government restrictions on religious practice, attire, and media consumption than their Uighur coreligionists. Routine elements of Muslim practice that are common around the world are quite visible among Hui, but severely restricted and even criminalized for Uighurs. These include mosques using loudspeakers to summon Muslims to Friday prayers, believers fasting during Ramadan, adolescents studying at madrassas, children accompanying parents to prayers, individuals watching educational videos on Islamic teachings, or men growing beards and women wearing headscarves.

In addition, Hui government employees—including civil servants, teachers, police officers, and workers at state-owned enterprises—are permitted to openly practice their faith and wear headscarves, while for Uighurs this has become strictly forbidden. Non-Uighur Muslims are also much more likely to obtain a passport and permission to go on Hajj to Mecca, a core Islamic obligation that has become increasingly rare and difficult for Uighurs to fulfill.

Similarly, within Xinjiang, restrictions tend to be tighter and repression more violent in the region's southern prefectures (such as Aksu, Hotan, and Kashgar) than in the north. The vast majority of the population in the south is Uighur, and these areas have also been the site of more violent altercations or attacks than the north, with the possible exception of Urumqi.

After a period of relative openness and religious resurgence in Xinjiang in the 1980s, new regulations limiting religious practice emerged in the 1990s, alongside violent clashes between Uighur residents and the Chinese authorities. The tightening of religious management and the criminalization of peaceful religious activities accelerated following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. The CCP quickly expanded

Routine elements of Muslim practice are visible among Hui, but severely restricted and even criminalized for Uighurs.

its rhetoric on security threats involving Uighurs from a focus on separatism to a campaign against the “three evil forces” of separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism.<sup>18</sup> To date, the precise definition of “religious extremism” remains unclear, and there are numerous well-documented cases of Uighurs being harshly punished for seemingly benign religious or educational activities that the government arbitrarily labels “extremist.”

A second watershed moment for Chinese government relations with Uighur Muslims occurred in July 2009. On July 5, police forcibly suppressed a peaceful demonstration in Urumqi by Uighurs voicing frustration over a limited investigation into the deaths of Uighur factory workers in a brawl with Han employees in southern China.<sup>19</sup> The police action—which according to Amnesty International included the use of tear gas and live ammunition against crowds of peaceful protesters—sparked an outbreak of violence between Uighurs and Han residents.<sup>20</sup>

State-run media reported that 197 people were killed, but the details of events that day could not be fully verified due to tight government control of information and the intimidation of witnesses. The July 5 clashes were followed by a harsh crackdown that included large-scale “disappearance,” imprisonment, and execution of Uighurs in questionable legal proceedings, and an almost complete shutdown of internet access in the region for ten months.<sup>21</sup> Seven years later, hundreds of young Uighur men who were detained in the aftermath remain unaccounted for.<sup>22</sup>

### **Islam under Xi Jinping**

When Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP in November 2012, the space for peaceful religious practice or other expressions of Uighur Muslim identity had already shrunk considerably in the years since July 2009. By contrast, Hui Muslims enjoyed significantly greater leeway to practice core elements of their Islamic faith. Under Xi, both groups have experienced intensified restrictions, though the gap in treatment between Hui and Uighur Muslims remains wide.

The period since November 2012 has also featured an increase in violent attacks by Uighurs against police officers, symbols of official authority, fellow Uighurs who are seen as government collaborators (including religious leaders), and civilians. Several incidents have occurred in areas outside Xinjiang, most notably a March 2014 stabbing attack at Kunming train station in Yunnan Province that left at least 29 people dead.<sup>23</sup>

### **Codification and tightening in Xinjiang**

State control over Uighurs’ religious practice in Xinjiang has grown substantially since 2009, and the trend has only deepened and expanded under Xi. A wide range of routine and peaceful aspects of religious observance that were once permissible have been arbitrarily labeled as “illegal religious activities” or “religious extremism.”

One key feature of this pattern has been a shift toward codification. Since November 2012, the Chinese government has adopted laws and regulations that formalized local practices on restricting or punishing religious behavior. This is consistent with Xi’s broader effort to “rule by law.” The new measures have included national counterterrorism legislation that took effect in January 2016,<sup>24</sup> Xinjiang Religious Affairs Regulations that took effect in January 2015,<sup>25</sup> and Urumqi regulations on religious attire that took effect in February 2015.<sup>26</sup>

While the replacement of informal political directives with written laws could be a positive

development in theory, the trend has been problematic in practice. The provisions' vague wording has done little to restrict abusive and expansive interpretations of terms like "terrorism," "separatism," and "religious extremism," and their regional or national application has broadened the reach of certain rules that were once fairly localized. Meanwhile, the stricter legal environment and a "strike hard" campaign launched in May 2014 have increased pressure on local officials to enforce oppressive rules that they might otherwise implement laxly.<sup>27</sup>

The new legislation and additional informal directives have affected a wide array of Uighur religious practices:

- 1. Religious attire and appearance:** Under Xi, a campaign to discourage Uighur women from covering their faces or even heads and men (particularly young men) from growing long beards has intensified, expanded, and become more formalized. Previously, prohibitions on religious dress were enforced unevenly through local directives with no basis in law.<sup>28</sup> Today, signs in public places like hospitals, libraries, and banks explicitly deny service to veiled women and bearded men. In August 2014, city authorities in Karamay announced that such individuals would be barred from public transportation during a 14-day sporting event.<sup>29</sup> In January 2015, the Urumqi government announced a prohibition on "wearing items that mask the face or robe the body."<sup>30</sup> Government workers or university students who defy such bans risk dismissal or expulsion.

During Ramadan, authorities have launched programs requiring people to physically exert themselves to discourage fasting.

Police increasingly approach women to enforce the rules, search homes based on informant tips, and fine violators. In at least one case, a Kashgar man was sentenced to six years in prison for refusing to shave his beard, and his wife was given a two-year term for retaining her veil.<sup>31</sup> In an example of the ambiguity surrounding even codified restrictions, scholars James Liebold and Timothy Grose note that it remains unclear exactly which garments are prohibited, though the rules appear to include popular head coverings as well as more conservative burqas.<sup>32</sup> Veils and beards grew more common from 2009 to 2013, but as a result of the regulations, many fewer Uighurs appear to be expressing their religious identity in this way.

- 2. Ramadan:** Restrictions on Uighur fasting during Ramadan are not a new phenomenon, but have become more systematic since 2012.<sup>33</sup> Restaurants are required to stay open, police must monitor homes where the lights are turned on before dawn, students are forced to eat in front of their teachers, and opportunities to attend prayers are limited. Some civil servants and teachers have reportedly been forced to sign pledges affirming that they would not fast or have been "invited to tea" by security agencies to ascertain whether they were fasting.<sup>34</sup> The authorities have even launched programs requiring people to dance or otherwise physically exert themselves to discourage fasting.<sup>35</sup> These measures, which go beyond prohibitions by actually compelling individuals to perform certain actions, underscore the extreme intrusiveness of the government's religious controls.
- 3. Informal prayer:** It has become increasingly difficult—and even dangerous—to pray with other Muslims outside of a mosque. The Xinjiang Religious Affairs Regulations that came into effect in January 2015 state that religious activities can only take place in registered venues, while practice in government offices, public schools, businesses, and

## A town in Hotan Prefecture held a public trial for 25 people who had taught or participated in private religious lessons for local children.

"other places" is prohibited.<sup>36</sup> In September 2015, a group of eight farmers and a local imam from a village in Aksu Prefecture were sentenced to between seven and nine years in prison for praying together in a field. One of the farmers' wives said of the trial, "I did not hear anything that indicated that these eight people committed any crimes, but only prayed together outside the government-designated mosque. The whole neighborhood was shocked [by their arrest]."<sup>37</sup>

Prohibitions on unofficial prayer particularly affect Uighur women, who generally do not pray in mosques and have traditionally gathered informally at one another's homes to pray and read the Quran. Such meetings can now lead to arrest.<sup>38</sup> Unofficial preaching by lay believers and various other Uighur spiritual traditions, such as shrine festivals or wedding- and funeral-related ceremonies, are also more strictly forbidden than in the past.<sup>39</sup>

- 4. Children's religious participation:** Chinese authorities have long disapproved of religious education for young Uighurs, and like other faiths in China, Islam is subject to rules that attempt to limit the religious exposure of Chinese citizens under the age of 18. Nevertheless, the new 2015 Religious Affairs Regulations in Xinjiang include the most explicit and sweeping wording to date. According to Article 37, "Minors cannot participate in religious activities." Those who violate such rules are harshly punished. In March 2015, a town in Hotan Prefecture held a public trial for 25 people who had taught or participated in private religious lessons for local children. In addition to four teachers, those tried before a crowd of 15,000 included students as young as 6 and a 60-year-old woman who sent her grandchildren to attend the classes. The punishments handed down to the group remain unknown.<sup>40</sup> The home of the couple that hosted the lessons was demolished.<sup>41</sup>

While limits on the religious practices above have been evident for some time and simply escalated in recent years, four other forms of repression had previously been quite rare but have occurred repeatedly since 2012.

- 1. Promoting the sale of alcohol and cigarettes:** In 2015, notices that appeared in a village in Hotan Prefecture required restaurants and supermarkets to sell "five different brands of alcohol and cigarettes" and to create "eye-catching displays" to promote the products.<sup>42</sup> A local CCP cadre said this was part of a campaign to weaken religion in the area and a response to the fact that businesses had stopped selling the items since 2012 after many local residents quit smoking and drinking due to their Muslim faith. In June 2015, a village in southern Xinjiang held a beer festival and drinking competition, widely touted by state media as aiming to "squeeze the space for illegal religious promotion."<sup>43</sup>
- 2. Imprisonment for media consumption:** Uighurs have long received harsh prison sentences for publishing or circulating information on religious affairs or human rights abuses. In recent years, however, a growing number of Uighurs—including teenage boys—have been harshly punished for simply consuming banned religious content, in some cases without realizing it was even forbidden.<sup>44</sup> In a stark example of the disparate treatment of Uighurs and Hui Muslims, some Uighurs have been detained for watching videos about Islam that were legally produced in Chinese by Hui Muslims. Such incidents are part of a



broader official sensitivity to online content as smartphones proliferate. Security checks of people's phones have become more common,<sup>45</sup> blanket interference with social media applications has been reported in sensitive regions like Hotan,<sup>46</sup> and updated Religious Affairs Regulations have incorporated references to digital media.<sup>47</sup>

**3. Excessive use of deadly force by police:** On several occasions since November 2012, police have opened fire on Uighur civilians, both during clashes with protesters and while conducting house searches. The use of live ammunition has resulted in the injury or death of bystanders, including children.<sup>48</sup> Police have resorted to deadly force at the first sign of an altercation and in situations that would not draw such a heavy-handed response if they occurred in Han-populated areas.<sup>49</sup> Local tensions and further repression following such incidents often persist for years.

**4. Symbolic humiliation:** Many mosques have been required to fly the Chinese flag on their premises, an action that many Uighur Muslims find deeply humiliating. In at least one instance, officials positioned the flag in the direction of Mecca, creating the appearance that congregants are praying to it.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, while it is no longer permitted for Uighur men to engage in traditional forms of public religious dance after prayers, imams have been forced to participate in state-sponsored secular dance performances.<sup>51</sup> During state-supported theatrical performances, the individual playing the villain often wears a costume that identifies him as a religious believer, for instance by including a long beard.<sup>52</sup>

Taken together, these controls and their implementation represent a new level of state intrusion into the religious practice and daily lives of Uighurs across Xinjiang. Bans on religious dress, house searches, business interference, and extensive surveillance have expanded the range of individuals targeted, leaving few unaffected.

The result has been growing resentment and anger at the Chinese government among Uighurs, at times resulting in violence against representatives of the state and even some civilians. Such violence increased in the latter part of 2014 after the authorities launched a new "strike hard" campaign in May.<sup>53</sup> Some violent acts appear to have been spontaneous outbursts of public frustration or attempts to protect a fellow Uighur from arrest or humiliation. This seemed to be true of deadly clashes in Yarkand, near Kashgar, in July 2014. Riots and a corresponding crackdown were reportedly triggered by Uighur anger at Ramadan restrictions and security forces' killing of a family of five during a quarrel over the screening of women for headscarves in house-to-house searches.<sup>54</sup> Other incidents were clearly premeditated crimes. A state-sanctioned imam who headed one of the country's largest mosques in Kashgar was assassinated shortly after he expressed support for the government's actions in the Yarkand violence.<sup>55</sup>

The Chinese authorities have argued that their policies toward Uighur Muslims are necessary as part of the battle against the "three evils," and the rise in violence in Xinjiang poses legitimate security concerns. Moreover, some restrictions—such as banning veils that cover the face—have also been adopted or considered in democratic societies. But the steps being taken by the Chinese government go far beyond what might be required for security purposes and fail to differentiate between violent attacks and peaceful religious activity.

In fact, several other considerations appear to be driving the restrictions on clearly nonviolent religious practice and their intensification since November 2012:

- **Central government emphasis on stability over development:** While some new regulations appear to be experiments by local officials, others are clearly the initiatives of central or provincial authorities. The center also sends broad signals that indirectly influence the actions of local authorities. Under Xi, it has become obvious that the top priority for the region is “maintaining stability,” meaning even economic development is of secondary importance. This represents a shift from the Hu Jintao era and is evident from a comparison of rhetoric at the May 2014 Work Forum on Xinjiang with that from the 2010 Work Forum, as well as in Xi’s own speeches.<sup>56</sup> Government resources have been allocated accordingly, with the public security budget for the region growing from 7.57 billion yuan (\$1.16 billion) in 2011 to 10.72 billion yuan (\$1.6 billion) in 2015, an increase of 41 percent over four years.<sup>57</sup>
- **Bureaucratic incentives and personnel changes:** There are strong incentives for local officials to err on the side of punishing peaceful believers rather than taking the risk that a potentially violent perpetrator might slip through the cracks. Particularly during a “strike hard” campaign like the one launched in May 2014, local officials are typically given quotas for the number of “separatists,” “terrorists,” and “religious extremists” they must arrest.<sup>58</sup> Two other developments may have also contributed to lower quality policing and the tendency to use lethal force in recent years. Following the 2009 riots and crackdown, many Uighur police officers reportedly resigned on ethical grounds. They were reportedly replaced with less scrupulous individuals, including some who had been convicted of violent crimes.<sup>59</sup> In addition, as violent attacks against police increased in 2013, more officers were armed with guns and did not necessarily receive adequate training.<sup>60</sup>
- **Efforts to reduce Uighur solidarity and communal life:** Alongside their religious significance, holidays like Ramadan, shrine festivals, and informal female prayer gatherings are opportunities for Uighurs to socialize and reinforce a sense of communal identity.<sup>61</sup> However, the government sees such solidarity as a threat to national unity. During Ramadan, many Muslims traditionally seek to help the needy in their community, and the families facing hardship are often those with children or husbands in jail. The Chinese authorities view attempts to visit or assist them as an expression of antigovernment sentiment.<sup>62</sup> Ramadan has also become politically sensitive due to its timing, which has roughly coincided in recent years with the anniversary of the July 2009 protests and crackdown. Religious dress and appearance have similarly taken on new meaning as markers of Uighur solidarity and resistance. When Uighurs see others wearing veils or growing beards, a sense of unity is reinforced.<sup>63</sup> And by reducing their visibility, local authorities hope to demonstrate to superiors that their campaign against the “three evils” has achieved results.
- **Campaign to reduce the ‘religious consciousness’ of future generations:** The Chinese authorities’ ban on religious practice and education for children under the age of 18 and heavy restrictions on religious practice among university students are essential components in a systematic effort to dilute religiosity and Uighur identity among youth, particularly those with higher education.<sup>64</sup> Other aspects of this effort include the proactive promotion of atheism in school textbooks and controls on the presence of devout believers among the adults who might influence young people, such as public school teachers or university professors.<sup>65</sup> As restrictions have intensified, devout

believers have avoided teaching positions, depriving young Uighurs of role models who are both observant Muslims and respected, law-abiding state employees.<sup>66</sup>

Uighur Muslims living in other parts of China are not subject to the same degree of repression as their coreligionists in Xinjiang, but they often face discrimination, surveillance, or controls (particularly at universities) that do not apply to Muslims from other ethnicities. Those who take a more active part in opposing Chinese government restrictions on Uighurs, religious or otherwise, risk potentially severe reprisals. A prominent example is the case of Beijing-based scholar Ilham Tohti, who was sentenced to life in prison in September 2014. He and several of his students were jailed for their role in operating a website that promoted Uighur-Han interethnic understanding.<sup>67</sup>

### **Shadows over the relative freedom of Hui Muslims**

The intensified restrictions in Xinjiang and individual cases like Tohti's have increased the divergence of experience between Hui and Uighur Muslims. At the same time, Hui have not been completely spared amid the tightening of controls over religious affairs under Xi or the growing official and public anxiety about the spread of Islam and the threat of Islamist-inspired violence.

Following the knife attack in Kunming in 2014, authorities in nearby Shadian Township engaged in a crackdown on Salafi Hui Muslims that included the detention of a well-known imam.<sup>68</sup> During Ramadan in 2015, police were visibly deployed at mosques in Beijing.<sup>69</sup> And in May 2016, authorities in Qinghai launched a campaign to stem the spread of Muslim and halal signs and symbols,<sup>70</sup> while their counterparts in Gansu reiterated a ban on the teaching of religion in schools.<sup>71</sup>

A broader expansion of controls over religious education, including for Hui Muslims, was evident in updated amendments to nationwide Religious Affairs Regulations that were published in September 2016. One of the most noticeable changes is the addition of "schools" to the list of religious venues subject to controls in 16 of the document's 74 provisions.<sup>72</sup> Meanwhile, during a July 2016 visit to Ningxia, Xi Jinping met with Muslim leaders at a local mosque and issued calls to "resolutely oppose illegal religious infiltration activities." Some observers interpreted Xi's trip and comments as a sign that party leaders are increasingly concerned about the spread of extremism among Hui as well as Uighurs.<sup>73</sup>

Several factors appear to be contributing to a shift in the government's attitude toward Hui Muslims that could result in more restrictive policies:

- **Spread of Salafism:** This ultraconservative variant of Sunni Islam—often associated, fairly or unfairly, with violent extremism—has been spreading in China in recent years, enhancing government anxiety as well as concern among some Hui religious leaders. According to scholar Dru Gladney, Salafi imams have even attracted some Han Chinese converts over the past five years.<sup>74</sup> The number of Salafis in China is unclear, with estimates ranging from thousands to tens of thousands, making them a very small fraction of the Muslim population. Nevertheless, they have gained influence in certain communities, such as Shadian Township in Yunnan, or established their own mosques and religious schools in heavily Muslim towns like Linxia. These dynamics have increased

the political sensitivity of Chinese Muslim interactions with foreign coreligionists or organizations, particularly those from Saudi Arabia.

## The increasing violence in Xinjiang and inflammatory reporting by state media have fueled anti-Islamic sentiment among Han Chinese.

- **Internal power struggles over the direction of ethnic policy:**

Although behind-the-scenes CCP debates on ethnic policy have deep roots, according to scholar James Liebold, officials promoting a more assimilationist approach have been gaining the upper hand recently. Wang Zhengwei, a Hui official from Ningxia, was suddenly dismissed in May 2016 after helping to secure political space for the construction of mosques and other elements of Islam's revival in the autonomous region.<sup>75</sup> Wang had also been active in advocating for passage of national legislation to regulate halal food, a step that would have helped the growing halal food export industry and reduced concerns over mislabeling. The legislation was abandoned in April 2016.<sup>76</sup>

- **Growing anti-Islamic sentiment among Han citizens:** The increasing violence in Xinjiang, Uighur attacks in other parts of China, and inflammatory reporting by state media have contributed to a growth in anti-Islamic sentiment among Han Chinese in recent years, and those concerned often make little distinction between Muslim ethnicities. This is particularly evident in discussions on social media. During April and May 2016, numerous rumors and conspiracy theories regarding the "Muslimization" and "Arabization" of China circulated widely online without triggering censorship. These were further fueled by comments from former State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) director Ye Xiaowei, who asserted that "behind the spread of Islam there lurks a colossal menace."<sup>77</sup> When a 2014 video of a young female student in traditional Islamic dress reciting verses from the Quran resurfaced in May 2016, it provoked a round of Han netizen condemnation and cyberbullying of Hui bloggers, and contributed to Gansu Province's revived ban on religion in schools.<sup>78</sup>

### **Key methods of political control**

The Chinese authorities employ several major tactics to influence the development of Islam and reduce the opportunities for practice outside of state-supervised structures:

1. **Controlling religious leaders:** As with other religions in China, a central component of CCP attempts to control the practice of Islam is the recruitment, training, and appointment of imams. Muslims who wish to become imams must study at one of the 10 state-sanctioned Islamic institutes.<sup>79</sup> The curriculum reportedly includes as many courses on political education and Marxist theory as on the study of Islamic texts. Even study of the Quran is typically focused on recitation and memorization, rather than interpretation.<sup>80</sup> For Hui Muslims, some mosques are permitted to host unofficial seminaries where a greater emphasis is placed on comprehensive religious learning, but students who wish to preach to the public typically need to complete official seminary training as well.<sup>81</sup> After a student has graduated, been politically vetted by the IAC and the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), and been appointed to a mosque, he continues to periodically attend political training.<sup>82</sup>

In Xinjiang in particular, security personnel and undercover informants monitor imams closely. Those believed to be violating official regulations and directives—whether

by overseeing informal religious gatherings, providing private religious instruction, permitting Muslims from other townships to worship at the mosque, or failing to express sufficient support for government policies in public comments—risk dismissal, fines, or even imprisonment.

- 2. Interpreting Islamic scripture:** The Chinese government makes extensive efforts to influence the religious messages and scriptures that Muslim believers encounter. The content of sermons is dictated via regularly published leaflets, and implementation is closely monitored. The IAC and SARA have sought to parse Sharia (Islamic law) for aspects perceived to be congruent with CCP rule and Chinese nationalism,<sup>83</sup> and alter the Uighur translation of certain passages of the Quran to better match official narratives.<sup>84</sup> In 2013, officials reportedly disseminated compilations of state-prescribed Islamic teachings to every mosque in Xinjiang. The previous year, the IAC distributed a series of lectures to Islamic entities throughout the country.<sup>85</sup>
- 3. Tightly managing pilgrimage:** Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has permitted a growing number of Muslims to participate in the Hajj or Umrah pilgrimages to Saudi Arabia each year, with 14,500 making the trip in 2015, according to official figures.<sup>86</sup> However, the authorities exercise significant control over access. Muslims are only permitted to go via IAC-organized tours, which can be costly and sometimes require bribes. Since 2006, under an agreement with the Chinese government, the Saudi authorities have granted visas only to Muslims traveling with the official pilgrimage tour, further closing off options for believers to make the trip independently.

Participation is conditioned on approval from local RAB officials and completion of “patriotic education” classes.<sup>87</sup> An annual quota is assigned to each province, and strong preference is given to Muslims over the age of 50. The majority of IAC spots are provided to Hui Muslims, although they complain of having to wait many years before getting a passport and space on the official tour. It has become extremely difficult for Uighurs to obtain and keep passports, and very few meet the stringent political criteria for joining the IAC group. As a result, some Uighurs have attempted to use fake passports to travel to Saudi Arabia via Turkey. In 2016, a group of 98 Uighurs was intercepted at an Istanbul airport and likely returned to China.<sup>88</sup>

- 4. Pervasive surveillance:** The Chinese authorities impose extensive surveillance on lay Muslim believers in Xinjiang. Since 2009, the presence of security forces throughout the region has increased dramatically, with armed police becoming a routine sight in even small villages, and armored vehicles periodically patrolling the streets.<sup>89</sup> Over a two-month period in 2016, Urumqi alone built 949 “convenient policing stations” in a reported effort to create a “dense security net.”<sup>90</sup>

Intrusive steps such as house-to-house searches and demands that villagers sign pledges to report instances of “religious extremism” among their neighbors have become common. There also appears to be a large-scale official effort to construct a database of so-called “religious families,” tracking which Xinjiang residents have beards, wear veils, or pray regularly.<sup>91</sup> Human monitoring is supplemented by electronic surveillance, including close-circuit television systems in mosques, facial-recognition screening at Urumqi’s train station,<sup>92</sup> and mobile police stations with video cameras. As a result, it has become



more difficult for Uighurs to practice their religion as they see fit, even in the privacy of their own homes. Surveillance is significantly more lax for the Hui population or in large cities like Beijing, where the Muslim community is more dispersed.<sup>93</sup>

**5. Judicial prosecutions, disappearances, and violent repression:** When enforcing religious regulations in Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities have made extensive use of detentions, prosecution, and imprisonment, even to punish seemingly minor infractions. Those detained and sentenced since November 2012 range from teenage boys to middle-age imams and elderly women. The precise count of Uighur religious prisoners in Xinjiang is unclear given the lack of transparency surrounding court verdicts. However, large numbers of Uighurs have been taken into custody and prosecuted for security or criminal offenses that can include peaceful religious activities.

According to government sources cited by the Duihua Foundation, an estimated 592 Uighurs were tried on security charges in 2013–14.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, some 12,000 trials were held in Xinjiang during those two years for individuals accused of social order offenses that are often used to punish those who disseminate banned information, participate in peaceful protests, or challenge government bans on religious observance. In some communities, as many as one out of three families reportedly have a relative in detention.<sup>95</sup>

## Uighur Muslims detained and sentenced since November 2012 range from teenage boys to middle-age imams and elderly women.

Once in detention, Uighurs suspected of any crime, including religious offenses, are at severe risk of torture and death. One former political prisoner released in 2011 after 14 years in custody described routine beatings and long-term shackling at the Urumqi prison where he was held. He also reported witnessing numerous people beaten to death, and a high risk of disease and other health problems due to unsanitary conditions.<sup>96</sup> Violence and harsh treatment were sometimes meted out specifically to Uighur prisoners who asserted their Muslim faith when “tested” by prison authorities.<sup>97</sup>

Many families, possibly hundreds, have relatives who were taken away by security forces in July 2009 or in subsequent crackdowns and whose whereabouts remain unknown years later. The increasing likelihood of extremely harsh punishment for even minor violations has generated a chilling effect as well as deep resentment among Uighurs. By contrast, such harsh treatment is exceedingly rare for Hui Muslims, and even a Salafi imam detained in Yunnan in 2015 was released without charge after 27 days in detention.<sup>98</sup>

### **Economic investment, incentives, and reprisals**

The economic priorities of the Chinese government have contributed to greater repression in some circumstances, but have also led government actors to invest funds in projects that promote Islam. In Xinjiang, economic development initiatives related to the \$40 billion One Belt, One Road project—designed to build transportation and infrastructural links with the rest of the Eurasian landmass—and the valuable natural resources of the region have raised the importance of “maintaining stability” there, including with respect to religious practice.

Xinjiang authorities have taken steps to promote the region’s most sacred Muslim site—Apakh Khoja Mazar Mausoleum—and smaller shrines as tourist destinations. Some foreign

scholars and Uighur observers have raised concerns that these initiatives, combined with bans on traditional shrine festivals, risk commodifying Islam and further fueling ethnic tensions.<sup>99</sup> In several instances, shrine management has been turned over to Han tourism companies. According to scholar Alexandre Papas, “many holy sites [in Xinjiang] now ask for an entrance fee, which the majority of local citizens just cannot afford.”<sup>100</sup>

The government in Xinjiang makes extensive use of economic incentives and punishments to enforce controls on religion. Monetary rewards are routinely offered to those providing information to authorities about fellow Uighurs’ religious practice. In April 2014, a notice posted on a government website in Aksu Prefecture explained that informants could receive up to 50,000 yuan (\$8,000) for reporting on local residents who engage in any of 53 kinds of proscribed behavior. The list included 18 acts related to religious practice, such as underground preaching, praying in a public place, holding the Islamic Nikah wedding ceremony, or Ramadan fasting by certain categories of citizens (including students and civil servants).<sup>101</sup>

Economic reprisals include the potential loss of social benefits, dismissal from work, expulsion from universities, and fines. Social welfare payments have in some cases been conditioned on recipients signing pledges not to wear veils.<sup>102</sup> Several of the recently adopted regulations banning religious dress or beards prescribe fines of up to 5,000 yuan (\$800) for violators or those perceived to be condoning their appearance.<sup>103</sup> The average monthly income in Xinjiang in 2015 was 3,300 yuan (\$530), and even less for most Uighurs, especially in rural areas.<sup>104</sup>

Conditions are strikingly different in Hui areas. In Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the local government has invested billions of dollars to make the city more attractive to foreign Muslim visitors, particularly from the Middle East. Arabic has been added to street signs, and in May 2016 the Emirates airline inaugurated direct flights from Dubai.<sup>105</sup> A “World Muslim Folk Culture Street” has been built along with a lavish Hui Cultural Park, complete with an impressive golden-domed mosque that opened in 2005, though it appears to serve more as a poorly attended tourist attraction than a site of worship.<sup>106</sup> In cities like Linxia, officials have established special industrial parks for “Muslim products” that offer Hui entrepreneurs inexpensive land and low taxes. Several Hui businesses have benefited from such policies, becoming global leaders in the export of products like inexpensive Islamic headwear.<sup>107</sup>

### Community response and resistance

In the face of assimilationist pressures, Hui Muslims have traditionally adapted their form of Islam to Chinese thought, and some have served as senior officials. More recently, Hui representatives have worked through the political system to advance favorable legislation on issues such as halal food. Many Hui religious leaders have also adopted defensive practices to avoid provoking official persecution, distancing themselves from Salafi imams and funding mosque construction from within the community rather than accepting foreign donations. At the same time, they have engaged in active efforts to circumvent official restrictions. For example, many Hui defy limitations placed on children’s religious education, opening large numbers of madrassas and teaching even young children to recite from the Quran.

“Many holy sites [in Xinjiang] now ask for an entrance fee, which the majority of local citizens just cannot afford.”

– Scholar Alexandre Papas

Many Hui defy limitations placed on children's religious education, opening madrassas and teaching even young children to recite from the Quran.

For Uighurs, avenues of engagement like legal activism are not available given Xinjiang's judicial system, which is even more politicized than in other parts of China. Instances of public resistance, such as street protests or international exposure of abuses, are met with harsh repression. Underground religious schools and other more private initiatives can also draw violent crackdowns. Some Uighurs continue to openly ignore official restrictions, for example by wearing headscarves in forbidden public venues and choosing to pay the inevitable fine. Many others have turned to more subtle forms of resistance:

- **Secretly defying official restrictions:** Many civil servants, teachers, and students take various steps to try to visit mosques, fast during Ramadan, or pray five times a day, despite the risk of punishment if caught.<sup>108</sup> People return home during the day to pray in private, store food in their bags to be eaten at sundown, or cover the windows of their homes so as to eat undetected before sunrise. Restaurants that are required to remain open during Ramadan cook in advance and retain a minimal staff. Parents privately teach their children to read from the Quran.<sup>109</sup>
- **Protest by abstention:** In recent years, a growing number of Uighurs have quit smoking or drinking alcohol and refrain when possible from participating in officially sponsored celebrations.<sup>110</sup> One interviewee explained that some families have also chosen to stop dancing at private events like weddings, explaining that "our people are in a mood of mourning, such tragic things are happening. People feel it is not a time of celebration."<sup>111</sup> Some Uighurs have decided to treat certain official documents as "haram" (forbidden by Islam). The 2014 government notice in Aksu Prefecture cited proscribed practices including refusal to use the renminbi currency, rejecting or destroying other state documents, and avoiding applying for marriage licenses.<sup>112</sup>
- **Accessing banned information:** Many Uighur Muslims actively seek out information about Islam and local news events from unofficial sources. This can include a boarding school student searching for an unedited version of the Uighur Quran, a family gathering to watch a film about the prophet Muhammad's pivotal journey from Mecca to Medina,<sup>113</sup> or the growing number of people who reportedly circumvent internet blocking to access Radio Free Asia reports via their mobile phones.<sup>114</sup>

So long as the Chinese authorities continue to conflate violent acts of terrorism with peaceful religious practice, the tensions in the region and the cycle of violence will grow worse.

These examples highlight the difficulty Chinese authorities face in trying to stamp out peaceful and routine elements of Muslim religious practice in Xinjiang, as well as Uighurs' personal and communal faith. As more officials recognize the discrete political opposition embedded in such responses, they have reacted with ever more bizarre restrictions, such as arresting people for not attending a funeral,<sup>115</sup> or forcing stores to sell alcohol in areas where many residents have given up drinking.

The increased frequency of harsh punishments for benign religious activities has also put Uighur village officials, police, and others who work for the government in a deeply uncomfortable position. In interviews with overseas media since 2012, such officials have repeatedly expressed their

own surprise and confusion at the government's blatantly excessive punishments. After a farmer in Asku Prefecture was sentenced to seven years in prison in May 2016 for watching a film about Muslim migration with family members, the village security chief told Radio Free Asia: "I am having a hard time explaining these charges to the people in my village. None of this makes any sense. It is very unjust."<sup>116</sup>

## Future outlook

There is little sign that Xi and the CCP have any intention of changing the current trajectory of official policy toward China's Muslims. On the contrary, developments in late 2016—including the transfer of Tibet's former party secretary to Xinjiang and reported plans to build even more prisons outside Urumqi—suggest that hard-line tactics will expand further. But so long as the Chinese authorities continue to conflate violent acts of terrorism with peaceful religious practice, the tensions in the region and the cycle of violence will grow worse. Under such conditions, anti-Muslim sentiment among both officials and the broader populace is likely to increase. This would inevitably affect Hui Muslims, eroding the gap in treatment between them and their Uighur coreligionists.

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## IV: Tibetan Buddhism

### Degree of persecution:

Tibetan  
Buddhism

**VERY HIGH**

### Trajectory of persecution:

Tibetan  
Buddhism



### Key findings

- 1 **Revival and expansion:** Tibetan Buddhism has revived significantly since the rampant destruction of the Cultural Revolution. Over the past decade, it has gained millions of new believers from the urban Han elite across China, joining the widespread piety among roughly six million Tibetans.
- 2 **Extensive controls:** The Chinese authorities impose severe constraints on the religious practice of Tibetan Buddhists, particularly devotion to the exiled Dalai Lama, a core tenet for many believers. Intrusive official presence in monasteries, pervasive surveillance, routine reeducation campaigns, limits on travel and communications, and regulations discouraging religiosity among government employees and university students affect most monastics and many lay believers. Nevertheless, some controls are implemented unevenly across different geographic areas or schools of Tibetan Buddhism.
- 3 **Violent repression:** Chinese security forces in Tibetan areas are quick to employ coercive measures to suppress perceived religious dissent, including the use of live ammunition against unarmed civilians. Human rights groups and media reports indicate that at least 321 Tibetans have been detained since November 2012 in connection with religious activism or expression, of whom 75 were given prison sentences.<sup>9</sup> Several individuals die in police custody each year.<sup>10</sup>
- 4 **Under Xi Jinping:** President Xi Jinping has largely continued Hu Jintao-era policies and campaigns while deepening and expanding certain controls. Some new measures have escalated tensions with monastics and lay believers. These include criminalizing assistance to





The prominent Larung Gar Buddhist Academy before and during demolitions in 2016. The authorities reportedly sought to reduce the number of Tibetan and Chinese students in residence.

*Credit: Wikimedia/Jimmy Lee, Contact Magazine*

self-immolators, canceling previously permitted festivals, increasing intrusive restrictions on private religious practice, and more proactively manipulating Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and the selection of religious leaders.

- 5 Economic carrots and sticks:** Various rewards and punishments encourage local officials to use coercive rather than cooperative methods to handle disputes with Tibetan religious communities. Economic incentives are also increasingly being used as a form of collective punishment to deter acts of protest or resistance to religious repression, often affecting the livelihood of entire families or villages.



- 6 Resilience and resistance:** Tibetans' private devotion to the Dalai Lama has proved incredibly resilient despite over two decades of suppression efforts. The constant denunciation and vilification of the Dalai Lama by Chinese officials and state media remains one of the most offensive aspects of the government's religious policy. The expansion of campaigns forcing monastics and lay believers to denounce him has been a key factor motivating protests, including 140 self-immolations since 2009. Many Tibetans also employ more subtle forms of resistance, creating avenues to discreetly engage in forbidden religious practices or share information.

**"The central party committee is the real Buddha for Tibetans."**

—Zhang Qingli, former party secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, March 2007<sup>7</sup>

**"The [government's] propaganda efforts don't work, as everybody knows these are false. His Holiness means the world to all Tibetans. Everyone in Tibet hopes to meet His Holiness one day."**

—Nyima Lhamo, recently exiled refugee from Sichuan Province, August 2016<sup>8</sup>



## Tibetan Buddhism in China today

For centuries, Tibetan Buddhism and its vast network of monasteries and nunneries have been a central component of economic, social, political, and religious life in Tibet. Many of the region's religious sites date back to the seventh century. Political and religious authority have been closely intertwined, particularly since a Dalai Lama began ruling the Tibetan Plateau in the mid-17th century.

### Restrictions have intensified in most Tibetan areas over the past decade, but enforcement has varied among different monasteries and lay communities.

The unique religious traditions of Tibetan Buddhism—its religious texts, dances, tantric practices, and the philosophical debates that are central to monastic education—differ significantly from the form of Mahayana Buddhism practiced widely in other parts of China. Lay practice typically involves making offerings at temples, reciting prayers, maintaining a home shrine, celebrating annual festivals, and completing pilgrimages to sacred sites in Lhasa or elsewhere on the plateau.<sup>5</sup> These activities are quite common and visible in Tibetan areas of China. Also visible, however, are the heavy paramilitary and police presence surrounding key monasteries and video surveillance cameras installed within or near religious sites.

According to official statistics, as of 2014 there were 3,600 active Tibetan Buddhist monasteries or temples and 148,000 Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns throughout China, far exceeding the number of Chinese Buddhist monastics and illustrating the particularly important position that religious institutions hold in Tibetan communities.<sup>6</sup> Of these, 1,787 religious sites and over 46,000 monks and nuns are reportedly located within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).<sup>7</sup> Although no specific figures are available on the number of lay believers, the vast majority of the 6.28 million Tibetans living in China are thought to engage in some kind of Tibetan Buddhist practice, unless they are members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or government officials.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to public displays of both devotion and control, there is an array of behind-the-scenes restrictions on religious practice for monastics and many lay believers, and security forces regularly engage in severe—and at times fatal—acts of repression. Restrictions have intensified in most Tibetan areas over the past decade, but enforcement has varied among different monasteries and lay communities and fluctuated at particular moments in time. Several factors account for this variation:

- **Geography:** Conditions are significantly worse in the TAR compared with Tibetan prefectures in surrounding provinces, although the gap has been shrinking in recent years. Controls appear to be tighter in areas of Sichuan, Qinghai, and Gansu Provinces that are home to major monasteries, and looser in more rural areas and in the only Tibetan prefecture in Yunnan Province.<sup>9</sup> Thus while some villages have undergone repeated rounds of “patriotic reeducation” that include obligatory denunciation of the Dalai Lama, other areas have been largely spared.<sup>10</sup> Adherents of Tibetan Buddhism from China's ethnic Han majority often practice a hybridized version of the faith, combining its elements with Chinese Buddhist traditions; their practice may not include veneration of the Dalai Lama, meaning they encounter fewer official constraints.
- **Attitudes of local officials:** Despite hard-line policies that emanate from the central CCP,

local officials have some flexibility in governing their jurisdictions. In a small number of prefectures, certain officials, particularly those of Tibetan origin, tend to be more familiar with religious practice and retain a more cooperative relationship with local monasteries. They employ fewer hostile measures or turn a blind eye to infractions unless pressured by central authorities or forced to respond to high-profile protests.<sup>11</sup> Even in the TAR, distinctions in the degree of repression have been evident over time under different party secretaries.<sup>12</sup>

- **Schools of Tibetan Buddhism:** The Dalai Lama heads the largest school of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelugpa school, although Tibetans from other schools also revere him. Many religious restrictions are also applied to monasteries and believers affiliated with the Nyingma and Karma Kagyu schools. Nevertheless, particularly in relations with local officials, it may be easier for senior monastics from non-Gelugpa schools to push back against restrictive measures. Meanwhile, worshippers of Shugden, a Tibetan Buddhist deity, have their own historical animosity toward the Dalai Lama. In recent years, the Chinese authorities have sought to exploit this internal division, providing funding and other support to Shugden monasteries and religious leaders, and even encouraging monks at Gelugpa institutes to adopt worship of the deity.<sup>13</sup>
- **Size of monastery:** Monasteries range in size from quite small institutions housing just 10 to 20 monks or nuns to enormous city-like complexes with thousands of people in residence. Large monasteries are more likely to draw government attention and generate political dissent, leading to security crackdowns and intrusive controls.
- **Sensitive dates or incidents:** The deployment of security forces, imposition of communications blackouts, and restrictions on large gatherings are not necessarily permanent in nature. Instead the authorities often resort to these measures ahead of politically sensitive dates—such as the March anniversaries of past Tibetan uprisings or the Dalai Lama’s birthday in July—or in response to incidents such as a self-immolation or a small protest at a marketplace.

Many of these variations have flattened out in recent years, as authorities have expanded intrusive restrictions, patriotic reeducation campaigns, and surveillance to more areas outside the TAR and to smaller monasteries.

While the number of practicing Tibetan Buddhists among ethnic Tibetans has remained more or less constant, one significant change to the religion over the past decade has been the growing number of Han Chinese followers, particularly urban elites. Several million are believed to have adopted the religion.<sup>14</sup> Some observers attribute the rising popularity of Tibetan rather than Chinese Buddhism in this population to the more extensive spiritual guidance that Tibetan Buddhist monastics provide directly to lay believers, and to an interest in obtaining supernatural abilities.<sup>15</sup>

This change has had both positive and negative repercussions for religious practice in Tibetan areas. On the one hand, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries or temples with affluent Han Chinese devotees have greater access to donations and funding from nongovernmental sources, as well as greater political influence in Beijing. Such supporters may be able to

intervene in times of crisis, mitigate repressive actions, and encourage negotiated solutions to conflicts between local officials and monastic leaders.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, the increase in Han devotees may be motivating new state interference. For example, some experts interpret the Chinese government's publication of a database of approved reincarnated lamas in January 2016 as an effort to guide the growing number of Han Chinese followers of Tibetan Buddhism, since such pronouncements carry little legitimacy for Tibetan believers.<sup>17</sup> One scholar also attributed a series of demolitions at the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy that began in the summer of 2016 to official concerns about its influence on Han believers, after at least 10,000 reportedly completed studies there and a senior religious leader garnered over two million followers on Chinese social media platforms.<sup>18</sup>

### **The ups and downs of Communist Party policy**

In 1950, Chinese Communist forces entered ethnographic Tibet and easily defeated the Tibetan army. The region was formally incorporated into the People's Republic of China the following year. Initially, the CCP-led government tried to cultivate a cooperative relationship with Tibet's spiritual and political leader—the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. But this approach quickly unraveled.<sup>19</sup> In 1959, Chinese troops suppressed a major uprising in Lhasa, reportedly killing tens of thousands of people. The Dalai Lama was forced to flee to India with some 100,000 supporters.<sup>20</sup>

## The increase in Han devotees may be motivating new state interference.

In 1965, much of Tibet's territory was reorganized into the TAR, while eastern portions of the plateau were incorporated into neighboring Chinese provinces as autonomous prefectures. Before and during the Cultural Revolution, nearly all of the region's monasteries were shuttered or destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were disrobed, and any displays of religiosity were strictly forbidden and harshly punished.<sup>21</sup>

Under reforms introduced in 1980, limited religious practice was allowed again, as was the gradual reconstruction of monasteries. The scale and pace of the revival soon alarmed party leaders, who attempted to impose some intrusive controls on monasteries in the late 1980s. Between 1987 and 1989, these and other grievances spurred some 200 mostly peaceful demonstrations in Lhasa and surrounding areas. After antigovernment protests escalated in March 1989, martial law was imposed until May 1990, a period when Hu Jintao, who would later head the CCP from 2003 to 2012, was party secretary of the TAR.

The 1990s featured a steady escalation of CCP efforts to control Tibetan Buddhism and undermine the influence of the exiled Dalai Lama. The 1994 Third Forum on Tibet, at which party leaders identified the Dalai Lama as an enemy, proved pivotal. State media subsequently stepped up their vilification of him, and bans on possessing his image or worshipping him were soon reported, though their legal basis remains unclear and implementation has been uneven.<sup>22</sup> Over the following years, the party's United Front Work Department (UFWD) launched campaigns of patriotic reeducation in monasteries. These coercive study sessions routinely include requirements that monks and nuns denounce the Dalai Lama verbally and in writing.<sup>23</sup>

By the mid-2000s, conditions were already highly restrictive in the TAR, but more open in

surrounding provinces, and travel across provinces and out of the country was permitted. As recently as 2007, thousands of Tibetans took advantage of opportunities to travel to Lhasa, and even to India, for pilgrimage or to listen to religious teachings.<sup>24</sup> Beginning around 2005, however, the Chinese authorities started expanding patriotic reeducation and other aggressive measures to reduce the influence of the Dalai Lama in Tibetan areas outside the TAR.

Scholars say this expansion was a crucial factor contributing to unrest that began on March 10, 2008, with a march by monks from Lhasa's Drepung monastery to mark the anniversary of the 1959 uprising.<sup>25</sup> After security agents suppressed the monks' protest, a riot erupted. Some Tibetans attacked Han Chinese residents and burned Han- or Hui-owned businesses and government offices. Over 150 other predominantly peaceful protests soon broke out in Tibetan-populated areas of the TAR and other provinces.

After initial hesitation, apparently to avoid a high-profile confrontation just months before the Beijing Olympics, the government responded with a massive deployment of armed forces. Security personnel opened fire on protesters on at least four occasions.<sup>26</sup> The authorities reported that 19 people were killed in Lhasa, primarily in fires,<sup>27</sup> but overseas Tibetan groups claimed that at least 100 Tibetans were killed as security forces suppressed the demonstrations.<sup>28</sup> After the initial clampdown, monasteries were inundated by security forces for months, while hundreds of both monastic and lay Tibetans suspected of involvement in the protests or of relaying information overseas were arrested and imprisoned.<sup>29</sup>

The many large-scale protests by Tibetans across the plateau reportedly caught officials by surprise, as many had assumed that the absence of mass demonstrations in the previous nine years was the result of Tibetans accepting Chinese rule and reduced devotion to the Dalai Lama.<sup>30</sup> In their aftermath, party leaders reexamined policies in the region, but rather than easing restrictions that were fueling grievances, they reinforced them. Monks and scholars interviewed for this report repeatedly pointed to 2008 as a turning point in the government's management of Tibetan Buddhism. The years since have featured greater restrictions on travel, intensified political education campaigns, and enhanced deployments of security personnel at religious ceremonies and institutions.<sup>31</sup>

### **Tibetan Buddhism under Xi Jinping**

When Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP in November 2012, he inherited a particularly tense situation across the Tibetan Plateau. A series of self-immolation protests that began in 2009 were reaching their peak.<sup>32</sup> The desperate acts were reportedly fueled by a sense of resentment and helplessness among both monastics and lay Tibetans as they faced long-term encroachment on Tibetan cultural space and growing restrictions on religious belief, travel, children's education, and day-to-day life in the wake of the 2008 protests.<sup>33</sup> During November 2012 alone, human rights groups reported 28 self-immolations, indicating that at least some Tibetans were hoping to draw Xi's attention and encourage him to adopt a less heavy-handed policy.<sup>34</sup>

"Efforts should be made to promote patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle, encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society."

– Xi Jinping, 2015

During the first half of 2013, there was a brief, rare political moment when a handful of Chinese intellectuals studying Tibet published articles calling for a more tolerant policy in the region. One expert at the Central Party School suggested that the Dalai Lama no longer be viewed as “an enemy” and even be permitted to visit Hong Kong as a “religious leader.”<sup>35</sup> Some observers thought that the January 2015 arrest of Ling Jinghua<sup>36</sup>—a former aide to Hu Jintao and head of the UFWD, which has played a central role in promoting hard-line policies in Tibet—might also create space for a “softer” policy.<sup>37</sup>

Such optimism has gone unrewarded to date. Xi has not renewed talks with representatives of the Dalai Lama; the last known dialogue took place in 2010. Chinese authorities under Xi’s leadership have largely continued the approach taken under Hu Jintao, including severe, large-scale infringements on religious freedom and human rights more broadly, sometimes with fatal results.

During 2015, CCP policy regarding Tibet appeared to be high on the official agenda, with a series of senior-level discussions taking place. In April, the Chinese government released a white paper on the region,<sup>38</sup> and in August the CCP held its Sixth Forum on Tibet, led by Xi himself. State media reports on both signaled the Chinese government’s intent to maintain a hard-line position while intensifying indoctrination campaigns. Official statements explicitly rejected the Dalai Lama’s proposed Middle Way of genuine Tibetan autonomy within China, and asserted that the CCP would select his successor. Importantly, a top-level Strategy Forum in July focused on coordinating measures to ensure “stability” in both the TAR and Tibetan areas of surrounding provinces, which could signal more restrictions in the latter.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the overall policy continuity, authorities have deepened and expanded the reach of a number of existing restrictions. Some of the measures cited below—including judicial guidelines on self-immolation cases and programs to alter Tibetan Buddhist doctrine—are directly driven by central authorities. At the Sixth Forum on Tibet held in August 2015, for example, Xi declared that “efforts should be made to promote patriotism among the Tibetan Buddhist circle ... encouraging interpretations of religious doctrines that are compatible with a socialist society.”<sup>40</sup> Other measures appear to be the initiatives of various lower-level authorities.

- 1. Collective punishment to stem self-immolations:** Beginning in late 2012, officials in some areas employed tactics such as canceling public benefits for the households of self-immolators or ending state-funded projects in their villages.<sup>41</sup> In December 2012, central judicial and public security agencies unveiled guidelines indicating that engaging in self-immolations and organizing, assisting, or gathering crowds related to such acts should be considered criminal offenses, including intentional homicide in some cases.<sup>42</sup> In 2013, the government implemented the new policy by arresting relatives and friends of self-immolators and handing down lengthy prison sentences.
- 2. Frequent festival bans:** Although some religious commemorations, such as the Dalai Lama’s birthday, had been previously banned, since 2012 local authorities have restricted a wider range of observances. In May 2014, a travel ban was issued for those attempting to visit Mount Kailash, a principal pilgrimage site for Tibetan Buddhists. The following month, a local regulation in Driru County severely restricted Tibetan Buddhists’ ability to celebrate the Great Prayer Festival, one of their most important religious ceremonies.<sup>43</sup> Some nonreligious events—like a June 2015 horse race in Gansu Province—have also



been canceled due to indirect expressions of reverence for the Dalai Lama.<sup>44</sup> Even when festivals are permitted, they are frequently accompanied by a heavy paramilitary presence, disturbing the serene atmosphere that believers prefer and creating conditions in which even minor altercations could rapidly escalate into fatal clashes.<sup>45</sup>

**3. Intensified reprisals for lay religious practice:** While CCP members across China are required to be atheists, all government employees, students, and teachers in Tibetan areas are barred or actively discouraged from participating in routine elements of Tibetan Buddhist practice that are generally permitted for others, such as making offerings at temples or maintaining a private shrine at home.<sup>46</sup> In an apparent bid to enforce this ban during 2015, authorities in the TAR moved to punish disciplinary violations among both CCP cadres and civil servants. The effort partly targeted “those who act like they don’t believe in religion but covertly do,” according to a media interview with then TAR party secretary Chen Quanguo.<sup>47</sup> Separately, in early 2015, officials in Qinghai Province’s Malho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture circulated a document outlining various activities that would draw harsh penalties because they were construed as support for Tibetan independence; the list included ordinary religious activities like reciting prayers and burning incense.<sup>48</sup>

**4. Doctrinal manipulation:** One Hu-era initiative that has gained momentum under Xi aims to alter Tibetan Buddhist doctrine so that it better conforms to “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and acceptance of CCP rule.<sup>49</sup> In his 2016 book *Buddha Party*, professor John Powers describes this program in detail. Among other elements, it has included hosting Tibetology conferences since 2012 to identify favorable elements of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine and producing annual pamphlets with titles such as “Outline for the Work of Interpreting Tibetan Buddhist Doctrines” (published in 2011). The pamphlets are reportedly required reading in monasteries and have become a central focus of patriotic reeducation sessions.

In a parallel development, a new government-supported Tibetan Buddhist Institute opened in Lhasa in October 2011, and its first graduating class completed training in 2013; a partner nunnery is under construction.<sup>50</sup> One scholar linked such efforts to the 2016 demolitions at Larung Gar after years of relative tolerance of the Buddhist academy.<sup>51</sup> In recent years, monastic leaders there have played a central role in promoting an ethical Buddhist Reform Movement that has gained tens of thousands of Tibetan followers and may be viewed by authorities as competition for their own attempts to transform Tibetan Buddhist beliefs.<sup>52</sup>

A number of factors may account for the leadership’s continued pursuit of a hard-line approach that has clearly stoked resentment and achieved little success in curbing the Dalai Lama’s influence.

First, the CCP’s underlying anxieties about religion generally and Tibetan Buddhism in particular remain unchanged. As scholar Ben Hillman notes in a recently published book, “Organized Tibetan Buddhism is widely perceived as the greatest potential threat to Communist Party rule in Tibetan areas.”<sup>53</sup>

Second, these policies reflect a core Marxist assumption that religious belief—and with it

religiously rooted ethnic identity—will fade in the face of further economic development. Chinese leaders remain confident in their ability to achieve this long-term goal with the tools at their disposal, despite occasional setbacks in the form of unrest.<sup>54</sup>

Third, individual leaders have played a role. TAR party secretary Chen Quanguo assumed his post in August 2011 and remained in his position until August 2016. He almost immediately began implementing projects to monitor the populace and inculcate CCP doctrine among monastics and lay believers alike. For that portion of Tibet, the regional leadership change seems to have had more of an impact on day-to-day government actions than the broader transition that occurred in Beijing over a year later.

Fourth, despite the purge of Ling Jinghua, the UFWD remains a powerful entity within the CCP and key driver of tactics of control and co-optation in Tibet, such as patriotic reeducation. It is currently overseen by Politburo Standing Committee member Yu Zhengsheng, who also chairs the committee's Tibet Leading Small Group.

Lastly, structural incentives related to official promotions and centralized sources of funding for Tibetan areas encourage local officials to focus on short-term economic growth and suppressing unrest, rather than community needs or developing a cooperative relationship with monastics.

Meanwhile, the billions of yuan being channeled to local government for “maintaining stability” have fueled the growth of a security apparatus that has an institutional interest in continuing repressive campaigns.<sup>55</sup>

### **Key methods of political control**

The Chinese government imposes a wide array of controls on Tibetan monastics and lay believers. They have become increasingly intrusive, encroaching on areas of life that had previously been left unmolested. Travel restrictions and an extensive apparatus of surveillance—via security forces, informants, closed-circuit television, internet and mobile phone monitoring, and even drones<sup>56</sup>—have created a stifling and intimidating environment for many Tibetans' religious practice. Ubiquitous propaganda posters and slogans in public places and monasteries remind clerics and laypeople of official regulations on religious management, demands to prioritize loyalty to the state, and penalties for violating rules like carrying prayer beads or other religious symbols into government buildings or schools.<sup>57</sup>

Taken together, such measures, along with the other major controls enumerated below, appear to serve several CCP goals with regard to managing Tibetan Buddhism:

- Weakening the bond between monasteries and the surrounding community
- Severing residents' bond with the Dalai Lama and other exiled religious leaders
- Promoting the influence of politically loyal religious leaders and doctrinal interpretations, most notably the government-appointed Panchen Lama
- Cultivating a Tibetan socioeconomic elite with a weaker religious identity
- Limiting the size of the monastic community and the quality of monastic education
- Discouraging protests motivated by spiritual beliefs or loyalty to the Dalai Lama

Travel restrictions and an extensive apparatus of surveillance have created a stifling and intimidating environment for Tibetan religious practice.

**1. Controlling religious leadership, including reincarnated lamas:** The government and affiliated organizations such as the Buddhist Association of China go to great lengths to dictate the appointment of religious leaders and use them to relay the government's positions to their followers. In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, however, this task is uniquely complex—and even absurd—because of the important role that reincarnation plays in the selection of top religious figures (the Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama) and senior monks (such as abbots of major monasteries). The avowedly atheist CCP, which rejects a belief in reincarnation, insists on managing the selection process and approving its outcome based on its own criteria of political loyalty.

In 2007, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) issued a document called “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas,” asserting that state approval was required for reincarnations.<sup>58</sup> In January 2016, authorities launched a new online database of officially approved reincarnated lamas (tulkus), which notably excluded the Dalai Lama. In recent years, monastic leaders who have attempted to provide guidance regarding their future incarnation or consult the Dalai Lama have been detained, expelled, and barred from future communication with the monks at their monasteries.<sup>59</sup>

**2. Extensive control over monasteries and nunneries:** A long list of government regulations affect life in monasteries, including quotas on the number of monastics permitted, rules requiring official approval for religious activities within the monastery and in the surrounding community, and demands for detailed accounting of monastery finances and monthly reports on the progress of patriotic reeducation.<sup>60</sup>

Extensive surveillance, via video cameras or the physical presence of police agents inside the monastery, intimidates monks into compliance and provides avenues for identifying gaps in implementation. Punishments for noncompliance range from expulsion and excommunication to imprisonment and the total closure of religious sites. An escalation in the form of permanent stationing of government officials in monasteries began in August 2011 and was formalized through regulations published in January 2012.<sup>61</sup> Previously, official work teams would reside in monasteries only temporarily, although such visits could last several months; the routine management committees were led by politically reliable monks and nuns. According to government statistics published in August 2015, there were over 7,000 officials working in 1,787 monasteries in the TAR, an average of nearly four per site.<sup>62</sup>

There were over 7,000 officials reportedly working in 1,787 monasteries in the TAR in 2015.

**3. Expanded ‘patriotic reeducation’ campaigns:** Ideological education campaigns have been conducted sporadically since the 1990s, but they have become more frequent and lengthy since 2008. They have increasingly been extended beyond monasteries to Tibet's general population, forcing students, civil servants, farmers, and merchants to participate in discussions, singing sessions, and propaganda film screenings.

Beginning in 2011, over 21,000 cadres were reportedly sent to villages across the TAR. In addition to political monitoring and other tasks, they reportedly carried out “patriotic reeducation” sessions at religious sites and among lay believers.<sup>63</sup> The program typically requires denunciation of the Dalai Lama, recognition of the government-selected Panchen

Lama, and pledges of allegiance to CCP political authority. The expansion of the campaigns to a greater number of monasteries outside the TAR and to nonmonastics represented a change from the past and reportedly generated resentment in many Tibetan communities.

Although the Dalai Lama has given permission for believers in Tibet to denounce him if forced, since it is a matter of self-preservation, many devotees remain uncomfortable doing so.<sup>64</sup> Those who have complied speak of suffering psychological devastation and long-term disruption to their monastic studies as a result.<sup>65</sup>

- 4. Restricting travel within and outside Tibet:** Over the past decade, it has become increasingly difficult for Tibetans to leave the country, either to seek asylum or on temporary visits to India or elsewhere. The flow of refugees to Nepal shrank dramatically from over 2,000 in 2007 to about 100 in 2014. A 2015 Human Rights Watch report found that Tibetans were often denied passports or interrogated upon return from travel to India.<sup>66</sup> TAR party secretary Chen Quanguo took pride in the effectiveness of the restrictions, announcing in a media interview, "In 2015, not one person from the Tibet Autonomous Region has gone to the 14th Dalai Lama's prayer sessions [in India]."<sup>67</sup>

Within Tibetan areas, monks and nuns are increasingly constrained in their ability to travel outside their counties. Recent visitors have also reported an informal ban, in place since 2012, on any Tibetan outside the TAR visiting that region, including for religious pilgrimage.<sup>68</sup> Scholars note that the increased travel restrictions and particularly the inability to flee the country have exacerbated feelings of desperation among Tibetans, contributing to the extreme act of self-immolation.<sup>69</sup>

[Security forces reportedly opened fire on 1,000 people who had gathered to mourn a prominent lama's death in custody.](#)

- 5. Tightening information controls:** Localized blackouts on internet and mobile phone communication, especially in locales where a self-immolation has occurred, began growing more frequent in early 2012 and continued in 2016.<sup>70</sup> A 2016 Human Rights Watch report analyzing 479 cases of politically motivated detentions of Tibetans from 2013 to 2015 identified 71 individuals arrested for distributing images or information.<sup>71</sup> Nearly a third of those cases involved information related to self-immolations, and defendants received up to 13 years in prison.<sup>72</sup> Monks and activists in exile who previously maintained close contact with counterparts inside Tibet have reported that by early 2016, it had become much more difficult and dangerous to obtain information, so that in some cases they ceased contacting individuals inside China.<sup>73</sup>

- 6. Using violence, sometimes with fatal outcomes:** Security forces in Tibetan areas frequently use violent means to suppress and punish perceived political dissent, including nonviolent acts of religious faith. Since 2012, Tibetans have been detained or sentenced to long prison terms for possessing or sharing an image of the Dalai Lama, calling for his return to Tibet, or producing and disseminating other banned information about religion or religious repression.<sup>74</sup> Former detainees consistently relay accounts of torture, such as beatings, electric baton shocks, and restraint in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time.<sup>75</sup> Such abuse, along with various forms of medical neglect, contribute to the reported deaths in custody of several Tibetan prisoners of conscience each year, including religious leaders.<sup>76</sup>

In addition to abuses that take place inside police stations, extralegal detention centers, and prisons, security forces have been known to open fire on unarmed civilians, in some cases during religious celebrations. The officers involved rarely receive punishment. In one high-profile case in July 2015, prominent lama Tenzin Delek Rinpoche died in prison,<sup>77</sup> and security forces reportedly opened fire to disperse a group of 1,000 people who had gathered to mourn his death; at least 15 people were taken to the hospital with gunshot wounds.<sup>78</sup>

### **Economic incentives: Carrots, sticks, and souvenirs**

With a rising middle class, more convenient transportation links, and growing interest in Tibetan Buddhism among Han Chinese, the number of domestic tourists joining foreigners in Tibet has increased over the past decade. Not surprisingly, local officials across the plateau have sought to capitalize on this source of revenue. As restrictions increase in the TAR, including periodic tourist bans, Tibetan prefectures in surrounding provinces have gained popularity.

In Yunnan Province's Diqing Prefecture, local officials have forged meaningful relations with Tibetan Buddhist leaders and provided funding for refurbishing prominent monasteries. Both sides benefited from a tourism boom after Diqing's main city formally changed its name to Shangri-la, the fictional earthly paradise. The revenue has reportedly enabled the monastery to sponsor young monks' studies at other Buddhist institutes. Lay believers also saw benefits from the tourism-based economic development, as it supplied private-sector jobs that are not constrained by religious restrictions for government employees. According to scholar Ben Hillman, the fruitful cooperation was possible in part because Diqing had already adopted "one of Tibetan China's most liberal approaches to Tibetan Buddhism."<sup>79</sup>

Tourism at other Tibetan Buddhist sites has reportedly had a more adverse effect on religious freedom. For example, monks at Labrang Monastery complain that an increase in visits by Chinese tourists has disrupted daily religious activities.<sup>80</sup> Within the TAR, one foreign observer raised concerns that areas inside and around a monastery that were previously populated by Tibetan pilgrims have been replaced with parking lots or souvenir booths for Chinese tourists.<sup>81</sup>

Separately, the Chinese authorities have used a variety of "carrots and sticks" to motivate Tibetans to comply with government directives or report on their compatriots. Officials have offered monetary rewards of up to 200,000 yuan (\$31,500) for information on monks connected to a self-immolation or other acts of dissent. Noncompliant monasteries may see their government funding redirected to more politically loyal sites, to secular providers of social services, or to new infrastructure projects.<sup>82</sup>

In recent years, local governments have threatened to withdraw state aid from families or villages that do not comply with religious regulations or restrictions.<sup>83</sup> And some families or villages have been barred from participating in the caterpillar fungus harvest—a lucrative source of income for many Tibetans that is available for only several weeks each year—for engaging in acts of political or religious dissent.<sup>84</sup>

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### Community response and resistance

The Chinese government's multilayered apparatus of control over Tibetan Buddhism has generated significant resentment among both monastics and laypeople across the Tibetan Plateau. Notably, the official actions that generate offense or trigger unrest are not just egregious acts of violence, but also mundane and pervasive controls like travel restrictions, bans on private worship of the Dalai Lama, and propaganda inside monasteries.<sup>85</sup> Such measures affect a wide array of Tibetan Buddhists who may or may not have previously engaged in any kind of political dissent.

The interference, combined with the typically patronizing tone of official rhetoric, engenders a strong sense among Tibetans that the state disrespects and willingly desecrates key elements of their religious faith. The more extreme uses of violence further convey a lack of respect for Tibetan lives on the part of Chinese officials and security forces. Golog Jigme, a monk and torture survivor who arrived in exile in 2014, expressed this sentiment in a recent interview, declaring, "The authorities consider us Tibetans worse than animals. They do not value us as humans."<sup>86</sup> Scholarly research and accounts by Tibetan protesters have repeatedly pointed to such factors, rather than instigation by exiled activists or the Dalai Lama himself, as the motivation for acts of resistance, contrary to Chinese government claims that the influence of "hostile foreign forces" and the "Dalai clique" provoke unrest.<sup>87</sup>

Because of the harsh reprisals inflicted on those who openly challenge official policies and the limited prospect of seeking justice through the politicized legal system, the majority of Tibetans have responded to restrictive religious policies in one of four ways—"exit,"<sup>88</sup> cooperation, avoidance, and subtle resistance.

- **'Exit':** Until 2008, thousands of Tibetans fled into exile each year. Monks and religious leaders who have done so explain in interviews that they were motivated by a desire to obtain a proper monastic education, something that has become increasingly difficult or even impossible inside the TAR in particular.<sup>89</sup> With increased police checkpoints throughout the plateau and a military buildup along the Nepalese border, the "exit" option has been largely closed off, though a trickle of refugees continue to escape each year.
- **Cooperation:** A sizable contingent of Tibetan Buddhist leaders actively cooperate with the Chinese authorities, while others seek to negotiate with local officials in order to balance their responsibility to followers and compliance with official directives to minimize repression.<sup>90</sup> The most prominent example of active cooperation is the 26-year-old government-approved Panchen Lama, Gyaltzen Norbu, who gives speeches at government-sponsored conferences, offers teachings on special occasions, and in 2010, at the age of 20, became the youngest member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). State media reports and articles on the website of the UFWD frequently feature photos and quotes from other monks, abbots, and officially recognized reincarnated lamas who toe the party line and thank the government for its support of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>91</sup> While many Tibetans view such individuals with skepticism, other religious leaders who are well respected in their communities have attempted to develop a cooperative relationship with local officials to mitigate conflict and fend off persecution, with mixed success.<sup>92</sup>

- **Avoidance:** This tactic is particularly common among monastics facing patriotic reeducation campaigns in their monasteries. According to one exiled monk from a monastery outside the TAR, when officials came to host a series of sessions in 2012, many monks simply avoided attending, despite repeated requests that they join. He indicated that officials chose not to force their attendance for fear of sparking protests at the monastery, which was known for its past resistance, because such unrest would reflect badly on the officials themselves.<sup>93</sup>

For those forced to attend patriotic reeducation sessions, many try to veil their statements, acknowledging certain aspects of official propaganda that require recitation, such as respect for official religious policy, while avoiding more sensitive comments, like condemnation of the Dalai Lama.<sup>94</sup> In other cases, monks and nuns have been known to temporarily flee their monasteries and hide among the local community or in surrounding mountains for the period of a patriotic reeducation campaign or other official inspection—for example to verify that no monks under the age of 18 are present or that all have received official approval to study at the monastery.<sup>95</sup>

- **Subtle resistance:** Private acts of resistance among Tibetans are nearly as widespread and diverse as the official controls they seek to undermine. They occur in physical and mental spaces that remain beyond the reach of the Chinese state. Many monastics and laypeople secretly retain images of the Dalai Lama or other representations of the spiritual leader that may not be immediately visible to Chinese inspectors. These may be hidden inside a box, behind a picture frame, on an electronic device, or under blankets. In localities where officials are seen as sympathetic or likely to turn a blind eye, banned images are displayed openly.<sup>96</sup> Many Tibetans also educate their children in the privacy of their own homes about the Dalai Lama or other principles of Tibetan Buddhism that they might not otherwise encounter.<sup>97</sup>

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A growing trend since 2010 has been the celebration of Lhakar (also known as White Wednesday) by Tibetans inside and outside China. While the main focus of the movement is on displaying one's cultural identity (by speaking Tibetan or wearing traditional dress, for example), there is also a strong religious component given the close connection between ethnic and religious identities.<sup>98</sup> A greater number of lay Tibetans may choose to make offerings at temples on that day relative to others, or display prayer flags at their home or local religious site.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, in the context of bans on displays of certain religious symbols, some Tibetans have taken to wearing discreet "Amulets for Peace" that represent their personal commitment to follow a set of 10 Buddhist virtues in their day-to-day lives and avoid acts of violence against fellow Tibetans, an indirect and nonconfrontational way of affirming their religious values and dedication to Tibetan unity.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the risks of imprisonment, torture, and death, each year dozens of Tibetan clerics and laypeople engage in active, politicized forms of protest against repressive government policies on religion.<sup>101</sup> These have been predominantly nonviolent. The region has also witnessed periodic outbursts of spontaneous riots, such as those in Lhasa in 2008, or clashes with security forces, as occurred in Driru in 2013. But these are relatively rare.

**Self-immolations:** The most dramatic, extreme, and controversial form of protest to appear in Tibetan regions in recent years has been a series of over 140 self-immolations since March 2011.<sup>102</sup> Although many of the first cases involved monks or nuns, an increasing number of laypeople also committed the act; by mid-2016 more laypeople than monastics had self-immolated. Geographically, the vast majority of documented incidents (nearly 95 percent) have occurred outside the TAR, with the largest number taking place in Sichuan Province. This difference may reflect both the stricter controls on movement and information in the TAR and a stronger reaction to repressive policies in regions that enjoyed comparative freedom until the late 2000s.

## Evidence of Tibetans' resilient reverence towards the Dalai Lama comes from the government's own constant campaigns to suppress signs of devotion.

Although a variety of official policies appear to have provoked the self-immolations, at least some seem to have a religious tint, with the protester calling out phrases like “long live the Dalai Lama,” asking for the Dalai Lama to be allowed to return to Tibet, or demanding the release of the Panchen Lama who was originally recognized by the Dalai Lama. The rise in self-immolations has been largely interpreted by knowledgeable observers as a sign of the desperation of Tibetans living under Chinese rule, particularly given that escape abroad has become increasingly difficult. Nevertheless, the tactic—and the Dalai Lama's reluctance to actively condemn it—has proven controversial among Buddhist believers and scholars of Tibet, with some treating immolators as martyrs and others arguing that suicide should not be condoned or glorified even under extreme circumstances.<sup>103</sup>

**Public protests:** As authorities have expanded punishments for self-immolation to include friends, family, and even whole villages, fewer individuals appear to be engaging in that form of protest, with only two self-immolations documented during the first half of 2016. Instead, solitary protests in marketplaces or other public venues have gained prominence. Such demonstrations typically involve a single monk, nun, or layperson walking through town while holding a photo of the Dalai Lama or an image representing Tibetan independence, such as the Tibetan flag. Security forces usually pounce on the protesters almost immediately and take them into custody. Larger gatherings that violate official bans continue to be reported occasionally.

### **Defining victory**

Against difficult odds and in the context of increasing repression, the responses described above have yielded some success. Most notable is the resilience of devotion to the Dalai Lama inside Tibet more than 50 years after his escape to India, despite the Chinese government's extensive efforts to demonize him, delegitimize his religious authority, and force believers to denounce him.

Indeed, some of the strongest evidence of this resilience comes from the government's own comments and constant campaigns to suppress signs of devotion. For example, one high-level official from the UFWD argued that the new state-supported Tibetan Buddhist Institute was necessary “to resist the Dalai clique's religious infiltration,” among other reasons.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, if clerics and laypeople were no longer participating in prayer services for the Dalai Lama or displaying his image in public, authorities in Qinghai would likely not have included specific provisions in their 2015 regulations that ban such activities and reiterate the related penalties.<sup>105</sup>

With regard to other acts of resistance, much depends on how one defines success. For lone demonstrators or even self-immolators, the mere fact that they were able to carry out their protest and have others witness it before police moved in might be deemed a victory. Golog Jigme, a monk who escaped police custody and fled the country, explains that his safe arrival in India was itself a triumph, but that his forced departure from his homeland, where he would have preferred to remain, is a loss. His case received international attention, and he says that the outside pressure on his behalf contributed to his two earlier releases from detention and the fact that he was not sentenced to prison.<sup>106</sup>

For Tibetan religious leaders who take a more cooperative stance in their negotiations with Chinese authorities, even small concessions or approvals of religious activities are victories. However, attempts to mitigate rifts with the authorities are not always successful. In Driru in 2014, monastic leaders paid for the medical treatment of injured Tibetans after security forces opened fire during clashes at a sacred mountain, but authorities still ultimately shut down the monastery later that year. More recently, in Larung Gar, large-scale demolitions proceeded during 2016 despite academy leaders' perception of a good relationship with local officials.<sup>107</sup> Such failures make it more difficult to avoid conflict in the long term because they show that conciliatory approaches are not rewarded.

### Future outlook

Political and religious authority in Tibet have long been intricately and explicitly intertwined in a manner that is unique among the major religions in China today. This has presented distinct challenges to CCP policy as officials attempt to permit some degree of religious practice while strongly suppressing any actions perceived to be politically subversive. Restrictive measures have intensified over time to address the latter priority, encroaching on routine and peaceful religious practice and stoking resentment among a growing number of monastics and lay believers.

The Dalai Lama handed over all remaining political authority to the prime minister of the Tibetan government in exile in 2011, but the Chinese government continues to regard him as a political threat rather than a purely religious figure. In fact, the CCP is looking ahead to the current Dalai Lama's death and intensifying its efforts to control his reincarnation. It has made statements insisting that the next Dalai Lama will be born inside Tibet.

Given the evident resilience of Tibetans' devotion to the Dalai Lama and their reluctance to genuinely embrace the government-backed Panchen Lama, such rhetoric seems guaranteed to create more friction. By contrast, if CCP leaders were to decide on a more conciliatory approach and accept the Dalai Lama's role as a religious figure, they might be able to reap political and economic benefits while significantly reducing social tensions. Robert Barnett, a leading scholar on Tibet, argued in a recent interview that "if Xi had time to sort out Tibet policy, stopping the attacks on the Dalai Lama would solve 50 to 60 percent of the problem."<sup>108</sup>

"If Xi had time to sort out Tibet policy, stopping the attacks on the Dalai Lama would solve 50 to 60 percent of the problem."

– Scholar Robert Barnett

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73. Tibet Watch, "Tibet's 'Intolerable' Monasteries."
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  81. Interview with researcher from International Campaign for Tibet, April 2016; International Campaign for Tibet, "The Communist Party As Living Buddha."
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  85. Terrone, "Propaganda in the Public Square: Communicating State Directives on Religion and Ethnicity to Uyghurs and Tibetans in Western China."
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  92. Some observers have cited the Larung Gar Buddhist Academy as one such example of developing positive relations with local officials, but that example lost some relevance with authorities launching demolitions of students' residences in late 2016. Hillman, "China's Many Tibets."
  93. Interview with Tibetan monk.
  94. This approach has not always met with success, as officials have adapted accordingly and required more direct denunciations. See International Campaign for Tibet, "The Communist Party As Living Buddha."
  95. Ibid.
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- 97.** Interview with Nyima Lhamo
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- 99.** Tsedo, "Lahakat," *American Himalayan Foundation* (blog), March 9, 2012, <http://www.himalayan-foundation.org/blog/114374>.
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- 101.** A growing number of protests in recent years have been triggered by Chinese government policies or actions unrelated to religion, such as the language of instruction in schools or development projects that harm the local environment. Those have not been taken into consideration here given the report's thematic focus on religion.
- 102.** One self-immolation took place in 2009, but it was isolated in terms of the timeline and therefore excluded from this count.
- 103.** Interviews with Robert Barnett and an overseas Tibetan researcher who wished to remain anonymous, July 2016.
- 104.** Zhu Weiqun, Executive Deputy Head of the Communist Party United Front Work Department (UFWD), and Director of the Party's General Office of the Central Coordinating Group for Tibet Affairs. See Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "2012 Annual Report", October 10, 2012, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2012-annual-report;>
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## V: Falun Gong

### Degree of persecution:

Falun Gong

**VERY HIGH**

### Trajectory of persecution:

Falun Gong



Minor  
Decrease

### Key findings

- 1 **Survival:** Despite a 17-year Chinese Communist Party (CCP) campaign to eradicate the spiritual group, millions of people in China continue to practice Falun Gong, including many individuals who took up the discipline after the repression began. This represents a striking failure of the CCP's security apparatus.
- 2 **Ongoing large-scale persecution:** Falun Gong practitioners across China are subject to widespread surveillance, arbitrary detention, imprisonment, and torture, and they are at a high risk of extrajudicial execution. Freedom House independently verified 933 cases of Falun Gong adherents sentenced to prison terms of up to 12 years between January 1, 2013, and June 1, 2016, often for exercising their right to freedom of expression in addition to freedom of religion. This is only a portion of those sentenced, and thousands more are believed to be held at various prisons and extralegal detention centers.
- 3 **Cracks in the crackdown:** Despite the continued campaign, repression appears to have declined in practice in some locales. President Xi Jinping has offered no explicit indication of a plan to reverse the CCP's policy toward Falun Gong. But the purge and imprisonment of former security czar Zhou Yongkang and other officials associated with the campaign as part of Xi's anticorruption drive, together with Falun Gong adherents' persistent efforts to educate and discourage police from persecuting them, have had an impact.
- 4 **Economic exploitation:** The party-state invests hundreds



Falun Gong practitioners meditating in public in Guangzhou in 1998, before the Communist Party banned the spiritual group in 1999. Such sessions remain forbidden.

*Credit: Minghui*

of millions of dollars annually in the campaign to crush Falun Gong, while simultaneously engaging in exploitative and lucrative forms of abuse against practitioners, including extortion and prison labor. Available evidence suggests that forced extraction of organs from Falun Gong detainees for sale in transplant operations has occurred on a large scale and may be continuing.

- 5 Response and resistance:** Falun Gong practitioners have responded to the campaign against them with a variety of nonviolent tactics. They have especially focused on sharing information with police and the general public about the practice itself, the human rights violations committed against adherents, and other content aimed at countering state propaganda. In recent years, a growing number of non-Falun Gong practitioners in China—including human rights lawyers, family members, and neighbors—have joined these efforts.

**“[The Communist Party initiated] the worst instance of religious persecution since the Cultural Revolution, with the clampdown against Falun Gong.”**

—André Laliberté, *Ottawa University, leading scholar on religion in China, 2015*<sup>11</sup>

**“Orders for arrests continue to come down from high-level authorities, but sometimes the Public Security Bureau agents will say no, they are only exercising to be healthy.”**

—*Chinese human rights lawyer, 2013*<sup>12</sup>

### Fierce crackdown on a popular qigong

Falun Gong is a spiritual practice whose key features are five meditative *qigong* exercises and teachings reminiscent of Buddhist and Taoist traditions, with particular emphasis placed on the tenets of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance (*Zhen-Shan-Ren* in Chinese). Adherents perform the exercises, study spiritual texts, and attempt to conform to these values—believed to be in harmony with the spiritual nature of the universe—in their daily lives, with the understanding that doing so leads to better physical health, mental well-being, and spiritual enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> While Falun Gong includes some spiritual attributes of religion, it is loosely organized and lacks a professional clergy, formal membership, acceptance of donations, and specialized places of worship.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the early and mid-1990s, Falun Gong, its practitioners, and founder Li Hongzhi enjoyed substantial government support and positive coverage in state media. Li first introduced the practice to the public in China in 1992.<sup>5</sup> For the next two years, he traveled the country under the auspices of the state qigong association, giving lectures and teaching the five Falun Gong exercises.<sup>6</sup> State media reports from that period laud the benefits of Falun Gong practice and show adherents receiving “healthy citizen awards.” In an event that would be unimaginable today, Li gave a lecture at the Chinese embassy in Paris in 1995, at the government’s invitation.<sup>7</sup>

After Li completed his formal lecture series, the practice continued spreading by word of mouth and through an informal network of local volunteers who would teach the exercises and share copies of the spiritual texts with friends and at public exercise sites. Chinese people from every stratum of society—doctors, farmers, workers, soldiers, intellectuals, Communist Party members—began taking up the practice. Though students of Falun Gong would gather in groups to practice exercises, many saw the discipline as a personal rather than a collective endeavor to enhance their physical and mental well-being. There were no signs of a political agenda or even criticism of the CCP, as now appears in Falun Gong literature years after the persecution began. By 1999, according to government sources and international media reports, at least 70 million people were practicing; Falun Gong representatives claimed that the community had reached 100 million.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1990s, Chinese people from every stratum of society—including Communist Party members—began taking up Falun Gong.

In July 1999, the spiritual discipline was abruptly banned. Prominent adherents were arrested, and anyone who continued practicing was pursued as an enemy of the state. Reports began emerging of Falun Gong believers being abducted, tortured, and even killed. The name of the practice, the name of its founder, and a wide assortment of homonyms became some of the most censored terms on the Chinese internet. Any mention in state-run media or by Chinese diplomats was inevitably couched in demonizing language.

### What went wrong?

The CCP’s dramatic about-face regarding Falun Gong was unusual, even in the context of the party’s restrictive religious policies. Observers have consequently speculated about why it happened and whether it could have been avoided.

The CCP generally displays low tolerance for groups that place any spiritual authority above

their allegiance to the party. Still, scholars, eyewitnesses, and other knowledgeable observers point to a constellation of processes and factors specific to Falun Gong that probably contributed to the particularly harsh assault against the group:

- **Popularity:** With over 70 million followers, Falun Gong exceeded the CCP's own membership of 63 million as of 1999,<sup>9</sup> and represented the second-largest faith community in China after Chinese Buddhism.
- **Ideological competition:** Falun Gong's emphasis on the values of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance as part of its spiritual worldview appears to have attracted the party's ire, as it conflicted with principles underpinning Marxist ideology and the legitimacy of CCP rule, like materialism, political struggle, and nationalism.<sup>10</sup> Falun Gong effectively offered an alternative moral compass, and its spread came to be seen as a fundamental challenge to the party's authority.<sup>11</sup>
- **Party-state 'infiltration':** Falun Gong was becoming popular within parts of the party-state apparatus that were critical to maintaining CCP rule, including the military, internal security forces, state media, and the party disciplinary inspection committee.<sup>12</sup> Fear that these Falun Gong adherents could place their allegiance to the discipline's principles above loyalty to the CCP leadership apparently began to take hold.
- **Independent civil society network:** The CCP has long sought to co-opt and suppress independent civil society organizations and other forms of grassroots collective activity.<sup>13</sup> The party attempted to bring all qigong groups under closer control in the mid-1990s. In 1996, the state-run qigong association, with which Falun Gong was linked, called for the establishment of party branches among the practice's followers and sought to profit from Falun Gong teachings. Li Hongzhi chose to part ways with the association, intending for Falun Gong to remain a personal practice without formal membership and shared free of charge.<sup>14</sup> Falun Gong continued to spread through a loosely knit network of meditation sites and volunteer coordinators across the country.
- **A period of escalating repression:** From 1996 to 1999, many in the party-state still held favorable views of Falun Gong, publicly citing its benefits for health and even social stability.<sup>15</sup> But several top cadres began perceiving it as a threat, resulting in periodic acts of repression. State printing presses ceased publishing Falun Gong books in 1996. Attempts to register with various government organizations were denied. Articles that appeared sporadically in state-run news outlets smeared Falun Gong. Security agents monitored practitioners and occasionally dispersed meditation sessions.<sup>16</sup>
- **High-profile appeal to the leadership:** In April 1999, the escalating harassment culminated in the beating and arrest of several dozen practitioners in Tianjin. Those calling for their release were told that the orders had come from Beijing. On April 25, over 10,000 adherents gathered quietly outside the national petitions office in Beijing, adjacent to the Zhongnanhai government compound, to ask for an end to abuses and recognition of their right to practice. Some observers have argued that this very public demonstration took party leaders by surprise and triggered the crackdown that followed.<sup>17</sup> However, the mass petition itself was a response to growing persecution led by central



officials—including then security czar Luo Gan—suggesting that repression was already being implemented by parts of the party apparatus before the incident.<sup>18</sup>

- **Jiang Zemin's personal role:** Then premier Zhu Rongji took a conciliatory stance toward Falun Gong after the April 25 demonstration.<sup>19</sup> He met the petitioners' representatives and orchestrated the release of the adherents in Tianjin, after which those in Beijing voluntarily dispersed. But Jiang Zemin, then the CCP general secretary and state president, overruled Zhu, calling Falun Gong a serious challenge to the regime's authority, "something unprecedented in the country since its founding 50 years ago."<sup>20</sup> In a circular dated June 7, Jiang issued an unequivocal order to "disintegrate" Falun Gong.<sup>21</sup> The decision was unusually abrupt and ran contrary to earlier investigations by domestic intelligence agencies that concluded Falun Gong posed no threat.<sup>22</sup> Some experts have claimed that Jiang was unsettled by the evident enthusiasm for Falun Gong at a time when he saw his own standing with the public was flagging.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese state media and officials have offered their own explanation for the crackdown, seeking to frame the campaign as a necessary move against an alleged "evil cult" that had a nefarious influence on society. But such claims run counter to internal party documents and the lack of harmful outcomes in other countries where Falun Gong has spread. International scholars have repeatedly concluded that Falun Gong does not have the attributes of a cult.<sup>24</sup> Even in China, the label only appeared in party discourse in October 1999, months after the crackdown was launched, as the propaganda apparatus seized on a manipulated English translation of the Chinese term *xiejiao*. This suggests that the term was applied retroactively to justify a violent campaign that was provoking international and domestic criticism. David Ownby, a leading scholar on Chinese religions, notes:

The entire issue of the supposed cultic nature of Falun Gong was a red herring from the beginning, cleverly exploited by the Chinese state to blunt the appeal of Falun Gong and the effectiveness of the group's activities outside China.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of China's authoritarian political system, once Jiang made the arbitrary and arguably illegal decision to ban Falun Gong and asserted his will over other members of the Politburo Standing Committee, there were few institutional or legal obstacles to stop what came next. Over the following months, Jiang created a special party leadership group with an extralegal, plainclothes security force to lead the fight. Established on June 10, 1999, it came to be known as the 6-10 Office.<sup>26</sup>

In July 1999, the campaign began in earnest, and the full weight of the CCP's repressive apparatus was brought down on Falun Gong. Demonizing propaganda flooded the airwaves, thousands of people were detained, and millions were forced to sign pledges to stop practicing. Zhao Ming, a former Falun Gong prisoner of conscience from Beijing, explained that "the party's machinery of persecution was there—Jiang pushed the button."<sup>27</sup>

Falun Gong had been allowed to grow in part because it operated in the grey zone of qigong, outside the scope of the broader restrictions on organized religion that were already in place in the 1990s. It essentially slipped through a tenuous loophole in the CCP's ideological defenses, and from that perspective, a conflict between the loosely organized, independent-



minded spiritual group and the authoritarian, atheist regime may have been inevitable. Still, under another paramount leader, the party's belated response might not have been as violent or deadly, or even taken place at all.

### **The Falun Gong community in China today**

Given the force of the CCP's crackdown, few observers inside or outside China would have expected Falun Gong to survive. Indeed, the conventional wisdom among many scholars, journalists, and policymakers is that it was successfully crushed inside China.<sup>28</sup> In an environment of long-standing repression, it is nearly impossible to know how many people practice Falun Gong in China today. Yet 17 years after it was banned, there is reason to believe that the number remains in the millions,<sup>29</sup> and possibly the tens of millions.<sup>30</sup>

Several points of information suggest that a reasonable estimate of the minimum number of people in China practicing Falun Gong today would fall in the range of 7 to 10 million, while overseas Falun Gong sources have estimated that the total is 20 to 40 million.<sup>31</sup>

As part of nationwide campaigns launched since 2010 to reduce the number of Falun Gong practitioners, local government websites often refer to adherents who have yet to renounce the practice and to "relapses," in which individuals resume practice following release from custody.<sup>32</sup> In some cases, government directives provide quotas to low-level officials regarding these populations. For example, an April 2009 work plan in Jiangxi Province called for officials to reduce by 50 percent the number of people who had not renounced Falun Gong and to keep the proportion of "recidivists" within 10 percent of the local Falun Gong practitioners who had renounced the practice.<sup>33</sup> Applying a 10 percent return rate to the 70–100 million who were practicing in 1999 yields an estimated 7 to 10 million remaining adherents, though not all have been forced to recant in the first place, while others abandoned the practice voluntarily.

Minghui, a Chinese-language, overseas-based Falun Gong website with a robust network of contacts in China, reported in May 2009 that users uploaded and downloaded material on the site through approximately 200,000 secure internet connections in China. Official documents indicate that the sites remain active throughout the country.<sup>34</sup> Freedom House interviews with Falun Gong activists involved in coordinating such sites found that each one typically relays printed materials or discs to several dozen adherents.<sup>35</sup> This information similarly produces a minimum estimate of 7 to 10 million people practicing and sharing Falun Gong–related information, particularly since not all people practicing are necessarily engaged in such risky activity.

In terms of trajectory, lawyers interviewed by Freedom House noted numerous cases of individuals taking up the practice in recent years, long after the 1999 ban.<sup>36</sup> Documents published in mid-2013 on local government websites in Zhejiang and Hunan Provinces also speak of Falun Gong's "resurgence" and "expansion" in the area.<sup>37</sup>

Given its rapid growth in the 1990s, the Falun Gong community in China might have expanded well beyond 70 million if the practice had not been banned. Accounts by adherents

Over 17 years after Falun Gong's ban, there is reason to believe that millions, and possibly tens of millions, in China continue to practice.

point to the combination of its reputed effectiveness in improving physical health and its offer of spiritual advancement without the requirement of a monastic lifestyle as a key factor that makes it attractive vis-à-vis other qigong disciplines or religious faiths.<sup>38</sup> As described in more detail below, repression has apparently eased in some locales despite the continuation of severe abuses nationally. If the perceived risk of punishment ultimately wanes in the coming years, many in China could resume their practice or take it up for the first time.

### Falun Gong under Xi Jinping

After the launch of the crackdown in 1999, it became clear that Falun Gong adherents would not simply cease practicing on government orders, and the party began intensifying its efforts in 2001. A new round of demonizing propaganda flooded the airwaves in January,<sup>39</sup> and by midyear a *Washington Post* investigation found that central authorities had sanctioned the systematic use of violence to force people to renounce their belief in Falun Gong.<sup>40</sup> When Hu Jintao took over as general secretary of the CCP in 2003, Jiang retained significant influence as head of the military. Meanwhile, a number of Jiang's associates—including Luo Gan and later Zhou Yongkang—were placed in top positions that enabled them to continue Jiang's Falun Gong campaign after his full retirement in 2004.

[Since November 2012, at least 900 people have been imprisoned for practicing Falun Gong or disseminating information about it.](#)

As a result, during the period of Hu's leadership, hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong adherents were sent to labor camps and prisons, where they were subjected to horrific forms of torture.<sup>41</sup> Many were detained and punished for simply possessing spiritual texts in the privacy of their homes.<sup>42</sup> Central authorities periodically launched new rounds of arrests, including around the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai.<sup>43</sup> In 2006, the first allegations emerged of Falun Gong prisoners of conscience being killed so that their organs could be used in transplant operations.<sup>44</sup>

Since November 2012, when Xi Jinping took the helm of the CCP, the party-state's relationship with Falun Gong has been marked by two seemingly contradictory dynamics—ongoing severe and large-scale violations on the one hand, and reduced persecution in some locales on the other.

### Ongoing violations, some escalation

Xi has made no official change to the party's policy toward Falun Gong and its stated aim of eradicating the practice. Falun Gong practitioners throughout China continue to be detained, imprisoned, tortured, and sometimes killed in what is still a massive campaign of religious persecution.

In 2013, the central 6-10 Office launched a two-year nationwide campaign titled the "final battle on education and transformation."<sup>45</sup> Notices of the campaign appeared on government websites throughout China and included quotas on the percentage of local Falun Gong residents who "must undergo education-study classes" each year.<sup>46</sup> Despite the abolition of the "reeducation through labor" (RTL) camp system in 2013, large numbers of Chinese citizens known to the authorities to practice Falun Gong remain at risk of incarceration, either through the normal court system or in extralegal detention facilities where forced renunciation sessions are conducted.<sup>47</sup>

Freedom House analysis of Chinese court documents found evidence of at least 597 Falun Gong adherents sentenced to prison by a first instance court between January 1, 2014, and June 1, 2016, with punishments of up to 12 years.<sup>48</sup> In addition, the Duihua Foundation reported documenting the trials of 336 Falun Gong prisoners of conscience in 2013,<sup>49</sup> bringing the total to at least 933 Falun Gong practitioners imprisoned since Xi assumed leadership of the CCP. Cases of imprisonment were found in 29 out of China's 31 provinces and provincial-level municipalities.

This total is not comprehensive, however. According to Duihua, Chinese government sources suggest that the number of Falun Gong practitioners tried in 2013 could reasonably be three times the number it was able to document.<sup>50</sup> Falun Gong sources like Minghui have recorded over 2,500 practitioners sentenced to prison during that time period, and at least 22,000 individuals arrested since January 2013, although at least a third were later released.<sup>51</sup> Thousands of Falun Gong practitioners are also believed to be held at extralegal "legal education centers," "black jails," and pretrial detention centers, and many others sentenced during the Jiang and Hu eras remain imprisoned.<sup>52</sup>

Once in detention, Falun Gong adherents—young and old, male or female—are routinely subject to various forms of psychological and physical torture in an effort to break their will. The most prevalent methods are being forced to watch videos slandering Falun Gong and its founder, sleep deprivation, beatings, stretching in awkward postures for long periods of time, and shocks with electric batons, including to the breasts and genitals.<sup>53</sup> Such abuse has been known to cause long-term disability and sometimes death. In one high-profile case in Heilongjiang Province, 45-year-old Gao Yixi died in police custody in April 2016, just 10 days after he and his wife were taken from their home under apparent suspicion of practicing Falun Gong and disseminating information about it.<sup>54</sup> Minghui recorded another 292 deaths of Falun Gong practitioners as a result of abuse in custody or other forms of persecution between January 2013 and November 2016.<sup>55</sup>

A thorough online search of references to the 6-10 Office and its work found evidence that as of June 2016, the extralegal security force remained active in all of China's provinces, autonomous regions, and provincial-level municipalities, with the exception of Tibet. A key aspect of the agency's work appears to be monitoring local residents known to practice Falun Gong and being vigilant around politically sensitive dates, such as May 13 (the anniversary of Falun Gong's introduction), April 25 (the date of the 1999 appeal at Zhongnanhai), and July 20 (marking the launch of the persecutory campaign), when Falun Gong adherents may attempt to gather together privately or engage in a public display of resilience and community education, for instance by hanging banners or disseminating literature. Indeed, interviewees repeatedly noted that large-scale arrests often occur around such dates.<sup>56</sup>

Two developments could indirectly exacerbate conditions for Falun Gong practitioners:

- 1. Harsher penalties under Article 300 of the criminal code:** An amendment to the criminal code that came into effect in November 2015 raised the penalty under Article 300 from 15 years to life imprisonment.<sup>57</sup> The article, which punishes "using a heterodox religion to

[45-year-old Gao Yixi died in police custody in April 2016, just 10 days after he and his wife were taken from their home under apparent suspicion of practicing Falun Gong.](#)

undermine implementation of the law," was added to the criminal code in October 1999 in a retroactive attempt to legalize the ban on Falun Gong.<sup>58</sup> Chinese judges have used the article as the basis for sentencing thousands of Falun Gong adherents, a small number of human rights lawyers, and members of various other banned faiths to prison. As of November 2016, Freedom House found no evidence that the amended article had been employed to sentence a Falun Gong practitioner to life in prison.

**2. Crackdown on rights lawyers who defended Falun Gong clients:** In July 2015, Chinese security agencies launched an aggressive assault on the country's contingent of human rights lawyers and the broader "rights defense" movement, detaining over 300 lawyers and their assistants. Most were subsequently released, but others remain in detention and face serious political charges of "subversion." Several of the detained—including Wang Yu, Wang Quanzhang, and Li Heping—had assisted detained Falun Gong practitioners, including in the period shortly before their own arrests. Obtaining a lawyer has become slightly more difficult for Falun Gong practitioners as a result, but hundreds of attorneys still appear willing to take up the sensitive cases.<sup>59</sup> This is a stark contrast to the early 2000s, when finding a lawyer who would enter a "not guilty" plea for a Falun Gong defendant was nearly impossible.

### Cracks in the crackdown

Considering the CCP's track record regarding Falun Gong, a trajectory of rigid or endlessly escalating persecution might be expected. In a 2015 article, scholar Stephen Noakes and researcher Caylan Ford argue that the party is caught in a path-dependency dilemma when it comes to the group.<sup>60</sup> Billions of dollars have already been invested, the party's legitimacy would be seriously undermined if it were to suddenly announce a reversal of its policy, and such a change would generate pressure to loosen its grip on other religious groups. Meanwhile, one of the underlying factors that contributed to the ban—the party's deep-seated fear of any large, independent civil society group—remains firmly in place.

Surprisingly, however, there is now evidence of cracks in the repressive apparatus that have allowed some local officials to refrain from persecuting Falun Gong residents. Dynamics that were unimaginable a few years ago—the release of a veteran practitioner after only a few days detention,<sup>61</sup> police permitting adherents to meditate in custody,<sup>62</sup> or officers actively protecting people<sup>63</sup>—have emerged across the country and do not appear to be isolated incidents.

The trend may have begun to affect judicial decisions, a remarkable development for a repressive campaign that has epitomized the "rule by man" attributes of China's legal system. In June 2015, a judge in Shaanxi Province issued the first known "exemption from punishment" verdict for a Falun Gong practitioner, Pang You, who was immediately released after an intense campaign on his behalf.<sup>64</sup> More adherents have apparently been sentenced to regular prisons since the 2013 abolition of the RTL camp system removed that alternative form of incarceration,<sup>65</sup> but available data indicate that the total number of people incarcerated remains far lower than when the RTL system was in place.

Several overlapping factors appear to be driving these changes:

- **Purge of key officials affiliated with the anti-Falun Gong campaign:** As part of Xi's crackdown on corruption, several high-ranking "tigers" who played a pivotal role

in promoting and implementing the anti-Falun Gong effort have been purged and sentenced to prison. The two most important are former security czar Zhou Yongkang and former 6-10 Office chief Li Dongsheng. On June 11, 2015, state media announced that Zhou had been sentenced to life imprisonment; this was almost the same day that the Shaanxi practitioner was effectively acquitted in the case mentioned above. Falun Gong activists who interact with security forces have been adept at capitalizing on such events to encourage lower-level cadres to distance themselves from the persecutory campaign.<sup>66</sup>

- **Bureaucratic weakening of repressive institutions:** The purge of Zhou and Li, along with the abolition of the labor camp system, appears to have weakened the influence of institutions that had been critical to the campaign. Since Li's initial arrest in 2013, the central 6-10 Office has had three different leaders in as many years, with the most recent appointee—Huang Ming—assigned to the post in May 2016.<sup>67</sup> Such turnover, with periods of vacancy, stands in contrast to Li's four-year tenure. Meanwhile, since the conclusion of the 2013–15 "transformation" campaign, Freedom House found no evidence of a new centralized push against Falun Gong. By comparison, almost as soon as the 2010–12 effort ended, the next mobilization was launched in 2013.

In an additional sign of dwindling enthusiasm, the CCP's powerful central disciplinary inspection committee initiated a first-ever, two-month inspection tour of the central 6-10 Office in July 2016.<sup>68</sup> Local branches of the agency continue to function throughout the country, but with uncertainty and weaker leadership at the upper echelons, there is more room for foot-dragging by local police who find the task of persecuting Falun Gong distasteful, or are concerned that they could later be punished for any abuses.

- **Long-term impact of direct outreach to legal-security apparatus:** For over a decade, Falun Gong practitioners inside and outside China, along with their lawyers and family members, have been directly communicating with security agents and judges by phone and in person, urging them not to arrest local Falun Gong residents or arguing that the campaign is illegal and the defendant innocent. Gradually, these efforts appear to be bearing fruit. One interviewee who has made thousands of such calls reflected that "in places all over China, [police] are clearer about the true situation; there are many cases of police secretly helping Falun Gong."<sup>69</sup> A lawyer who has represented Falun Gong clients made a similar observation that "because Falun Gong practitioners have talked to local officials, some of them have changed their attitude and realize that Falun Gong members are not that threatening, so they won't arrest them."<sup>70</sup>

A new set of Supreme People's Court guidelines to ease filing procedures came into effect on May 1, 2015, and adherents in China and abroad have taken advantage by initiating an even more daring effort: filing criminal complaints with the Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Procuratorate regarding the abuses they have suffered, and naming Jiang Zemin as responsible for the crimes (see below).<sup>71</sup> While many factors appear to drive torture victims to file such complaints, one motivation repeatedly raised by interviewees was the desire to inform those at the highest echelons of the legal system as to Jiang's culpability, with the hope that they will make "the right choice" and either "bring Jiang to justice" or at least avoid participating themselves.<sup>72</sup>



### Key methods of political control

Since July 1999, the full array of CCP suppression tactics have been deployed against Falun Gong. In the first days and months of the campaign, the party's methods were very public, reminiscent of a Cultural Revolution–like “struggle”: a state media propaganda blitz, public book burnings, mass detentions in stadiums, televised show trials, beatings of protesters on Tiananmen Square.<sup>73</sup> Over time, especially once it became apparent that Falun Gong would not be so easily crushed and that public displays of repression were hurting China's international reputation, the tactics became more discreet.

Seventeen years into the campaign, measures like detention, imprisonment, torture, and censorship remain routine in the party's handling of Falun Gong. However, a number of trends in the past five years provide additional insight into Chinese officials' evolving priorities and methods:

[Falun Gong practitioners have been jailed for leaving voicemail recordings, posting messages to WeChat or QQ, or circumventing censorship to access blocked websites.](#)

**1. Electronic surveillance to supplement physical monitoring:** Chinese citizens known to practice Falun Gong have long been under intensive surveillance by both security forces and neighborhood committee members, who track their movements and make periodic home visits to determine whether they continue to practice. Authorities have also monitored targets' phone and internet use since the early days of the persecution, but the Chinese government's surveillance capabilities have expanded significantly over the past decade. Today, Chinese security forces also draw on video cameras in public places and geolocation data to identify Falun Gong practitioners and catch those disseminating information. Court documents and anecdotes provided by Falun Gong refugees illustrate the varied and detailed types of evidence that authorities collect to convict adherents, from video footage on a bus to internet browsing histories and mobile phone records.<sup>74</sup>

**2. Continuing focus on ‘transformation’ as a key goal:** In 2008, the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China defined “transformation” as “a process of ideological reprogramming whereby practitioners are subjected to various methods of physical and psychological coercion until they recant their belief in Falun Gong.”<sup>75</sup> From the start, it has been a central goal of the anti-Falun Gong campaign, a way of “eradicating” the practice by forcing its believers to renounce it, often in writing. Authorities use any means necessary to achieve this aim, including physical torture, punishing family members or fellow inmates, and administering drugs to weaken adherents' mental resolve.<sup>76</sup>

Government websites refer to “transformation quotas” and the need to check on those who have been released to make sure they do not resume practice.<sup>77</sup> Though recanting one's beliefs is often a precondition for early—or any—release from custody, submitting to such pressures does not necessarily put an end to a detainee's persecution. Many “reformed” adherents are simply moved to another section of the prison to focus on forced labor, and some are required to prove the sincerity of their own transformation by pressuring other Falun Gong detainees to recant. Former prisoners who have recanted under pressure speak about the long-lasting psychological impact of having been forced to betray deeply held beliefs.

**3. Countering Falun Gong information efforts:** Censorship and propaganda have been critical

components of the anti-Falun Gong campaign since its inception, as the CCP had to convince the majority of Chinese people that a popular qigong was suddenly a threat. Studies of online censorship in China have consistently found that terms related to Falun Gong are among the most heavily restricted.<sup>78</sup> Practitioners have responded with their own massive, multifaceted, and sophisticated public education campaign, both online and offline.<sup>79</sup>

Making headway in the resulting cat-and-mouse game has become a core element of routine anti-Falun Gong work in the Chinese security services. In a sample of 59 available court verdicts from 2016 analyzed by Freedom House, all of the Falun Gong activists sentenced to prison were punished for exercising their right to free expression or access to information. Their alleged “crimes” included leaving voicemail recordings, posting messages to the social media platforms WeChat or QQ,<sup>80</sup> using a virtual private network (VPN) to download content from Minghui,<sup>81</sup> or simply possessing large numbers of leaflets or discs for apparent dissemination.

Meanwhile, local 6-10 Office websites across the country constantly reference the need to clean up Falun Gong literature circulating in their district,<sup>82</sup> encourage residents to turn in currency notes with pro-Falun Gong messages printed on them,<sup>83</sup> and prevent installation of satellite dishes that allow viewers to access otherwise blocked foreign and Chinese dissident stations.<sup>84</sup> On the propaganda side, authorities in Shaanxi Province have engaged in their own innovations, commissioning the April 2016 production of an apparent anti-Falun Gong “microfilm”—a short online video of the kind that has become increasingly popular in the smartphone era.<sup>85</sup>

**4. Isolating Falun Gong from societal support:** In recent years, a growing number of nonpractitioners have taken steps to support Falun Gong, including human rights lawyers who defend practitioners in court and ordinary citizens who sign petitions to free a detained Falun Gong neighbor.<sup>86</sup> In response, Chinese authorities have employed various tactics to drive a wedge between Falun Gong believers and their existing or potential supporters. Lawyers who take Falun Gong cases or challenge abusive practices have been beaten, disbarred, harassed, and imprisoned. Collective punishment tactics threaten landlords, colleagues, and fellow inmates if someone in their midst is found to be practicing Falun Gong.<sup>87</sup> And anti-Falun Gong propaganda initiatives have encouraged the public to participate, for instance by signing “pledge cards” or writing essays for a school contest.<sup>88</sup>

Wherever known Falun Gong practitioners go and whatever they do, they are at risk of detention simply for self-identifying as a believer.

Taken together, these repressive activities seep into every corner of life and society—schools and workplaces, supermarkets and public transportation, passport requests and *hukou* residency registrations, laptops and smartphones. Wherever known Falun Gong practitioners go and whatever they do, particularly if it involves interaction with official agencies, they are under constant surveillance and at risk of detention simply for self-identifying as a believer.

Many of these measures and the way they are implemented are also illegal. They contravene China’s international human rights commitments, many Chinese laws, and even the CCP’s own stated policies, like the declaration that “any action which forces a believer not to believe” is an “infringement of freedom of religious belief.”<sup>89</sup>

### **The money trail: Expenditures, exploitation, and organ harvesting**

The campaign against Falun Gong is very expensive, requiring significant investments of material and human resources. Determining the full annual cost is arguably an impossible task. Nevertheless, some official data are available online, including the annual reported expenditure calculations of 13 local 6-10 Office branches in various counties and districts across nine provinces in 2014 and 2015. The total expenditure for these branches, covering a population of some 14 million, was 8.9 million yuan (\$1.37 million). If that per capita investment is applied to China's total population of 1.37 billion, the estimated annual budget for all 6-10 Office branches nationwide is 879 million yuan (\$135 million).<sup>90</sup> And this is only for one part of the party-state apparatus involved in the suppression of Falun Gong.

The role of money in the CCP's campaign goes beyond simple expenditures, however. Various forms of economic incentives and exploitation have given individuals within the party-state apparatus a financial interest in continued repression. They include:

- Opportunistic extortion, bribe taking, or theft of property by local police<sup>91</sup>
- Officially sanctioned bonuses or financial demerits for security personnel, rewards for residents who report Falun Gong activities, and fines imposed on adherents by the courts<sup>92</sup>
- Systematic forced labor by detained Falun Gong adherents, a phenomenon that continues at prisons and transitional detention centers even after the abolition of RTL camps<sup>93</sup>

It is in the context of dehumanizing propaganda, severe abuse in custody, and economic inducements that the ultimate form of financial exploitation has been reported: the killing of Falun Gong detainees and the extraction of their organs to be sold at high prices to Chinese patients and foreign "transplant tourists" as part of a multibillion-dollar industry. The allegations first surfaced in 2006, and several investigations by foreign journalists and legal specialists have found them to be credible;<sup>94</sup> some members of the medical community have voiced their own concerns.<sup>95</sup>

The estimated annual budget for all 6-10 Office branches nationwide is 879 million yuan (\$135 million).

There are indubitably serious problems surrounding the sources of organs for transplants in China.<sup>96</sup> A thorough investigation into these sources is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, Freedom House reviewed available evidence compiled by other investigators (including phone calls made to Chinese doctors), interviewed former Falun Gong prisoners of conscience who provided detailed accounts of blood tests in custody, spoke to a Taiwanese doctor whose patients have traveled to China for transplants, and met with the friend of a military hospital employee who had firsthand knowledge of organ extraction from a Falun Gong detainee as recently as 2011.<sup>97</sup> The above review found credible evidence suggesting that beginning in the early 2000s, Falun Gong detainees were killed for their organs on a large scale.

There are reasons to believe that such abuses continue. The organ transplant industry in China remains enormous and growing, even as the number of judicially executed prisoners has declined over the past decade.<sup>98</sup> After admitting that extracting organs from executed prisoners was problematic, the Chinese government has initiated a voluntary organ-donor

system, but its capacity remains small. Moreover, in 2014, a top health official announced that organs from prisoners would be embedded within the same database, even though prisoners are not in a position to provide free consent for “voluntary” donations.<sup>99</sup>

A detailed June 2016 study of publicly available data on the number of transplants being conducted at medical institutions in China found that the scale is many times greater than the 10,000 transplants per year often cited by officials.<sup>100</sup> This would indicate that the discrepancy between known supply and actual transplant volume may be even larger than previously appreciated, increasing the risk to Falun Gong practitioners, other prisoners of conscience, and criminal detainees.

### **Community response and resistance**

Falun Gong believers in China have responded to CCP persecution with tenacity, nonviolence, and creativity. In the first days and weeks of the ban, many picketed local government offices. When these lower-level officials proved unreceptive, adherents began writing letters to higher authorities or petitioning directly in Beijing. They shared their positive experiences with the practice in an effort to convince officials that Falun Gong posed no threat to society. By 2000, practitioners unfurling banners and performing qigong exercises were a daily presence on Tiananmen Square, though most were immediately arrested.

Falun Gong believers in China have responded to CCP persecution with tenacity, nonviolence, and creativity.

In 2001, as it became clear that a top-down reversal of the ban was unlikely, adherents turned their focus to the Chinese public and local police, engaging in a proactive effort to educate them about Falun Gong and urge them not to participate in the persecution. Printed leaflets and homemade videos were produced and disseminated en masse in a form of activism that one scholarly account likens to a “Chinese samizdat.”<sup>101</sup> Falun Gong devotees in the diaspora designed censorship circumvention software, produced videos for dissemination inside China, and developed newspaper, radio, and satellite television outlets to relay uncensored news about Falun Gong and other human rights issues to audiences inside and outside China.

The Minghui website has itself played a critical role, serving as a communications channel between overseas and Chinese practitioners, a clearinghouse for accounts of persecution, and an activist resource. One section of the website serves as something of a toolkit, replete with the latest versions of circumvention tools, videos for download, and instructions for hanging banners and making automated phone calls.<sup>102</sup>

These distribution channels and content have evolved as practitioners gauge what might resonate with Chinese audiences, and as many lost faith in the CCP’s willingness—or even ability—to reverse the campaign. Some types of content have been consistent: personal accounts of the benefits of the practice, examples of rights abuses occurring nationwide and locally, evidence of Falun Gong’s spread around the world, and specialized content to debunk claims in party propaganda.<sup>103</sup>

Over the past decade, a broader array of information has joined this regular repertoire for circulation in China, including DVDs of classical Chinese dance performances and the *Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party (Jiuping Gongchandang)*, a book-length series

of articles first published in 2004 that offers a critical narrative of the CCP's history and a moral vision for how the country might recover from decades of violent political campaigns, including the one against Falun Gong. Such content suggests that Falun Gong activists are no longer focused simply on clearing the practice's name and ending the persecution, but are also seeking to help revive traditional culture and prepare the Chinese population for a future without the CCP.

Falun Gong practitioners' grassroots resistance and advocacy efforts in China since 2012 can be sorted into five major categories:

**1. Campaigns to win the release of detained practitioners:** When a Falun Gong practitioner is detained, particularly if the person is well known within the community, adherents inside and outside China have developed various tactics for applying grassroots pressure on local officials to secure the detainee's release. For example, several teams of volunteers outside China make phone calls to local police, 6-10 Office agents, prosecutors, and judges, using numbers obtained from inside China (sometimes from sympathetic police). According to the coordinator of one such team, over 3,000 calls might be made on behalf of 350 detained individuals in a given week.<sup>104</sup> Within China, adherents write letters to local authorities, hire human rights lawyers to represent the detained believer, and increasingly circulate petitions among nonpractitioners calling for the individual's release.<sup>105</sup>

Although it is difficult to track the impact of these efforts, there have been cases in which the detainee was released, as with Pang You in Shaanxi, noted above. Pang's lawyer reported that when he met with an officer to gain access to his client, a stack of letters was handed to the officer and phones were constantly ringing; the policeman said the calls were from friends of the detainee.<sup>106</sup> At least 1,000 residents in Pang's hometown of Beijing also signed a petition calling for his release.<sup>107</sup>

**2. Adapting public education to new technology and censorship:** Increases in mobile phone and internet penetration in China have created both challenges and opportunities for Falun Gong practitioners' public education efforts. Certain types of media, like video discs, have become less prevalent and therefore less effective. Some activists have switched to social media applications like QQ or WeChat, which allow them to share links to videos or other content in a manner that does not trigger automated keyword filtering.<sup>108</sup> Yet increased government censorship, tighter surveillance, and more consistent enforcement of real-name registration have created new obstacles, requiring constant innovation. For example, rather than making individual calls, it is now safer and more efficient to obtain a large number of registered phone cards and devices, then use them to make simultaneous calls with automated recordings. After a Beijing adherent was tracked down by authorities via geolocation technology, activists in that city began urging practitioners to move from place to place while making the calls.<sup>109</sup>

**3. Using legal channels to challenge persecution:** The Chinese legal system, with its institutionalized political control, is better suited to serve as a tool of repression than as a guarantor of justice. Nonetheless, as a matter of principle and with the hope of giving those within the system a chance to play a positive role, Falun Gong adherents have regularly engaged in legal activism. As a larger number of human rights lawyers have been willing to take Falun Gong cases, more adherents and their families have



been hiring attorneys to enter not guilty pleas and appeal convictions. Court documents analyzed by Freedom House found that between January 2014 and June 2016, second instance courts had issued at least 275 decisions in Falun Gong cases, indicating that a certain percentage of jailed adherents decided to appeal despite the extremely slim—or even nonexistent—chances of a reversed decision.

**4. Lodging legal complaints against Jiang Zemin to seek accountability:** Since May 2015, large numbers of Falun Gong torture survivors have gone on the offensive, taking advantage of a change in regulations to lodge criminal complaints that name Jiang Zemin as the one responsible for their suffering. New Supreme People’s Court guidelines that took effect on May 1, 2015, require judicial authorities to accept criminal complaints submitted by individual citizens; previously, they had the leeway to reject the complaints. A number of articles on Minghui raised awareness of the change and proposed that adherents take advantage of Xi’s anticorruption drive—which had brought down key Jiang allies—by submitting their accounts of persecution and calling for Jiang to be investigated.

Victims of persecution inside and outside China began drafting complaints and mailing them to the Supreme People’s Court and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, either individually or jointly. One interviewee who had done so reported that he was able to track the package and received confirmation that it had arrived at its destination and was signed for, though he had received no further news of its processing.<sup>110</sup> As of July 2016, Minghui reported that over 200,000 practitioners had submitted complaints, often sharing a copy for publication on the website. Although unable to verify such a large number of cases, Freedom House researchers obtained copies of several complaints and spoke to individuals from Beijing, Shanghai, Heilongjiang, and the United States who had submitted complaints and personally knew dozens of others who had done the same. Many noted that while some plaintiffs had been imprisoned, the vast majority had not experienced retribution or had been quickly released.

**5. Encouraging fellow citizens to renounce the CCP:** Since late 2004, a centerpiece of content disseminated by Falun Gong practitioners has been the *Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party* mentioned above, including text, video, and audio versions. Noakes and Ford explain that the book’s publishers also “encourage citizens to issue ‘tuidang’ [‘withdraw from the party’] statements, symbolically severing their affiliations with the Party, youth league, or young pioneers as a form of catharsis and a way to clear the conscience.”<sup>111</sup> Freedom House interviews with Falun Gong activists and references in Chinese official documents indicate that this has become a focus of outreach efforts in China.<sup>112</sup>

A 2011 study of the phenomenon found that the aim of those involved was not to overthrow the CCP. Rather, the campaign stems from the belief that the CCP is on its last legs, but that in order to ensure a peaceful transition to a less repressive form of government, the Chinese people must undertake a process of moral awakening and a commitment to nonviolence.<sup>113</sup> As of November 2016, the overseas website tracking the tuidang movement claimed that over 255 million people inside and outside China had published statements. Although this figure could not be verified, Chinese court documents from early 2016 identify multiple cases in which Falun Gong adherents were sentenced to prison for possessing tuidang literature, indicating that the CCP itself is taking the movement seriously.<sup>114</sup>

Falun Gong outreach efforts and advocacy campaigns appear to have had at least some success, despite the harsh environment in which Falun Gong adherents in China operate. The sheer scale of information sharing is evident from court documents, in which a single defendant is often accused of possessing hundreds of leaflets, DVDs, or phone cards. Some practitioners have been released after intense campaigns on their behalf, and some proportion of police who receive phone calls have reportedly changed their attitudes and committed to treat detained practitioners more humanely.<sup>115</sup>

Perhaps most impressive is the large contingent of nonpractitioners who have joined Falun Gong initiatives. Despite the 2015 crackdown on human rights lawyers, hundreds continue to represent Falun Gong clients.<sup>116</sup> Tens of thousands of people around China have signed petitions, not only for the release of detained neighbors, but more recently in support of Jiang Zemin's prosecution.<sup>117</sup> The aforementioned 2011 study of tuidang statements and accounts from Freedom House interviewees indicate that the majority of people making such commitments are not Falun Gong adherents. Meanwhile, a number of high-profile human rights and democracy activists have published their own separation statements over the years, including Gao Zhisheng, Hu Jia, Wei Jingsheng, and Yang Jianli.

The simple fact that Falun Gong has survived the CCP's onslaught is impressive and amounts to a genuine failure of the party's repressive apparatus.

#### **Future outlook**

In today's China, Falun Gong remains a taboo subject. Many Chinese still believe party propaganda that leads them to fear or even hate Falun Gong practitioners. And on a daily basis, large numbers of judges, prosecutors, and police play an active role in the arrest, imprisonment, and torture of Chinese citizens who persist in their devotion to Falun Gong. Nevertheless, in July 1999, few people inside or outside China would have suspected that 17 years later, millions might still be practicing Falun Gong, neighbors would be signing pro-Falun Gong petitions, and Jiang Zemin would be the subject of a wave of criminal complaints.

The simple fact that Falun Gong has survived the CCP's onslaught is impressive and amounts to a genuine failure of the party's repressive apparatus. When one considers this reality and the factors that led to the ban, it is hard not to conclude that Jiang and the CCP have created a self-fulfilling prophecy, generating the very threats they feared by turning tens of millions of politically loyal citizens and party members into an army of dedicated activists at odds with the CCP.

The contradictory trends evident since Xi became general secretary make it difficult to predict how the party will treat Falun Gong in the future, but this very uncertainty represents a change from the previous outlook of unrelenting repression. Given how unimaginable it was a few years ago that powerful figures like Zhou Yongkang would be imprisoned, it is not entirely outside the realm of possibility that Jiang Zemin might also come under fire, if only on corruption charges rather than for his pivotal role in the anti-Falun Gong campaign.

Absent such a move, which could clear the path for a top-down reversal of the campaign, the choices of individual local officials will continue to be both critically important and widely divergent, sometimes making the difference between life and death.<sup>118</sup>

## NOTES

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  64. Interview with Wang Youqun and interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Beijing who wished to remain anonymous, June 2016.
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  76. Interview with Chen Zhenping, August 2016.
  77. Noakes and Ford, "Path-Dependence and the Management of Political Opposition Groups."
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  80. Noakes and Ford, "Path-Dependence and the Management of Political Opposition Groups"; Shandong Province Guan County People's Court, "Ni Mou Liyong Huidaomen Xiejiao Zuzhi Liyong Mixin Pohuai Falv Shishi Yishen Xingshi Panjueshu" [Judgement of the first trial of Ni for undermining the practice of law by organizing and using superstitious sects and heretical organization, and using feudalistic superstition], *China Judgements Online*, April 28, 2016, <http://wenshu.court.gov.cn/content/content?DocID=ab6a7014-6396-4450-b5af-41f8973eb734>.
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  87. Donghai County Niushan Street Office, "Niushan Zhashi Tuijin Wu Xiejiao Chuangjian" [Niushan Steadily Promotes the Achievement of Zero Heretical Organization], November 3, 2014, <https://archive.is/U6Re8>.
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  89. Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, "Zhonggongzhongyang Guanyu Yinfa 'Guanyu Woguo Shehuizhuyi Shiqi Zongjiao Wenti De Jiben Guangdian He Jiben Zhengce' De Tongzhi" [Notification from Central Committee of the Communist Party of China about distributing 'The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period'], State Administration of Religious Affairs of PRC, March 31, 1982, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/zcfg/zc/497.htm>. An English translation is available here: Donald MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 8–26, [https://www.purdue.edu/crcs/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Document\\_no\\_19\\_1982.pdf](https://www.purdue.edu/crcs/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Document_no_19_1982.pdf).
  90. See the following link for example; the remaining 12 are on file with the author. Zhangzhou Municipal Government, "2015 Niandu Zhonggong Zhangzhou Shiwei 610 Bangongshi Yusan Shuoming" [2015 Budget Introduction of the Communist Party of China Zhangzhou Municipal Committee 610 Office], May 27, 2016, <http://archive.is/8OP8e>.
  91. Falun Gong adherents and their families often report small-scale extortion or theft by local police. Relatives are asked to pay various "fees" to cover the food and lodging costs of a family member taken away to an extralegal "forced conversion" center, or must bribe police to secure the release of a loved one. Refugees report that when police raid a home in search of evidence of Falun Gong-related activism, personal property, cash, and electronic devices are often seized and never returned. Court documents corroborate this, often listing multiple computers, phones, and printers that were taken from the defendants' home. Driving these dynamics is the need to cover the costs of the campaign, an air of impunity for harassing a demonized minority, and general corruption in China's law enforcement bodies.
  92. Some monetary rewards and demerits have an official imprimatur. Court documents indicate that alongside prison sentences, judges imposed fines ranging from 1,000 to 20,000 yuan in early 2016 on Falun Gong practitioners who were caught engaging in personal practice, outreach, or activism. Local websites have been found to advertise rewards for residents who report a Falun Gong practitioner to the police. Promotions and monetary bonuses are offered to officers who effectively crack down on or "transform" adherents. By contrast, journalist Ian Johnson recorded in detail how a provincial party secretary in Shandong imposed fines on lower-level officials if a Falun Gong adherent from their area lodged an appeal in Beijing, creating incentives for torture that led to numerous deaths in custody in 1999–2000. Ian Johnson, "Death Trap: How One Chinese City Resorted to Atrocities to Control Falun Dafa," *Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2000, <http://www.pulitzer.org/winners/ian-johnson>.
  93. Forced labor in custody has been a common experience for many detained Falun Gong adherents and has received international attention when detainees' hidden notes appear in products purchased by foreign consumers. Although many of China's prisoners (criminal and political) are forced to engage in such work, the connection to Falun Gong has been especially

- notable given the large influx of prisoners from among the group's believers following the 1999 crackdown, particularly at RTL camps. This exploitative dimension of the anti-Falun Gong campaign has not subsided with the recent abolition of the RTL system, however. Both judicial prisons and transitional detention centers are sites of forced labor, sometimes on a scale even larger than at an RTL camp. With larger numbers of Falun Gong cases being handled by the courts following the RTL abolition, adherents have inevitably become a larger contingent of the workforce at formal prisons.
94. Kilgour and Matas, "Bloody Harvest," Ethan Gutmann, *The Slaughter: Mass Killings, Organ Harvesting, and China's Secret Solution to its Dissident Problem* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2014).
  95. See for example A. Sharif, M. Fiatarone Singh, T. Trey, and J. Lavee, "Organ procurement from executed prisoners in China," *American Journal of Transplantation* 14, no. 10 (2014): 2246–2252, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajt.12871/pdf>.
  96. A lack of transparency is exacerbated by Chinese officials' vacillating explanations of their sources. For example, after years of denying that executed prisoners were used to supply organs for transplant, officials admitted in November 2006—shortly after the emergence of the more damning allegations regarding Falun Gong—that the majority came from prisoners. Anna Schecter, "China Admits Selling Prisoners' Organs," *The Blotter* (blog), ABC News, November 27, 2006, [http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2006/11/china\\_admits\\_se.html](http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2006/11/china_admits_se.html).
  97. Interview with Taiwanese urologist who wished to remain anonymous, March 2016; interview with a technologist and Falun Gong practitioner from Beijing who wished to remain anonymous, June 2016. The Beijing interviewee's friend apparently relayed the highly sensitive incident to him as a warning, knowing that he was a Falun Gong practitioner.
  98. Duihua Foundation, "China Executed 2,400 People in 2013," October 20, 2014, [http://duihua.org/wp/?page\\_id=9270](http://duihua.org/wp/?page_id=9270).
  99. A. Sharif, M. Fiatarone Singh, T. Trey, and J. Lavee, "Organ procurement from executed prisoners in China,"
  100. David Kilgour, Ethan Gutmann, David Matas, "Bloody Harvest/The Slaughter: An Update," June 22, 2016, [http://endorganpiling.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Bloody\\_Harvest-The\\_Slaughter-June-23-V2.pdf](http://endorganpiling.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Bloody_Harvest-The_Slaughter-June-23-V2.pdf).
  101. Noakes and Ford, "Path-Dependence and the Management of Political Opposition Groups."
  102. See "Basic Technologies of Information Spot," Minghui, <http://www.minghui.org/mh/fenlei/79/>.
  103. Noakes and Ford, "Managing Political Opposition Groups in China: Explaining the Continuing Anti-Falun Gong Campaign"; interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Shanghai who wished to remain anonymous, June 2016.
  104. Interview with overseas Falun Gong practitioner who wished to remain anonymous, June 2016.
  105. Interview with Wang Youqun; interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Beijing; see also Sarah Cook, *Politburo's Predicament*.
  106. Interview with Wang Youqun, who helped hire the lawyer for Pang.
  107. Interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Beijing, June 2016. See also Frank Fang, "Once an Official, Now a Target in China," *Epoch Times*, January 25, 2015, <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n3/1220423-once-an-official-now-a-target-in-china/>.
  108. Interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Shanghai, June 2016.
  109. Interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Beijing, June 2016.
  110. Interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Shanghai, June 2016.
  111. Noakes and Ford, "Managing Political Opposition Groups in China."
  112. Interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Shanghai, June 2016; interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Tianjin now living in the United States, April 2016; Shandong Province Junan County People's Court, "Wangmou Zuzhi Liyong Huidaomen Xiejiao Zuzhi Liyong Mixin Pohuai Falv Shishi Yishen Xingshi Panjueshu" [Judgement of the first trial of Wang for undermining the practice of law by organizing and using superstitious sects and heretical organization, and using feudalistic superstition], *China Judgements Online*, May 20, 2016, <http://wenshu.court.gov.cn/content/content?DocID=7e68a163-05c4-4e67-9b1b-c63bb7bafdde>.
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  114. See for example this case of a Falun Gong practitioner from Shandong Province who was sentenced to three years in prison in April 2016 for possessing, among other items, copies of the *Nine Commentaries* for apparent dissemination to others. Shandong Province Junan County People's Court, "Wangmou Zuzhi Liyong Huidaomen Xiejiao Zuzhi Liyong Mixin Pohuai Falv Shishi Yishen Xingshi Panjueshu" [Judgement of the first trial of Wang for undermining the practice of law by organizing and using superstitious sects and heretical organization, and using feudalistic superstition], *China Judgements Online*, May 20, 2016, <http://wenshu.court.gov.cn/content/content?DocID=7e68a163-05c4-4e67-9b1b-c63bb7bafdde>. See also this case of a Falun Gong adherent from Shandong who was sentenced to three years in prison in January 2016 for possessing, among other items, instructions on how to renounce the party: Shandong Province Mengyin County People's Court, "Zhangmou Jia, Zhangmou Yi Zuzhi Liyong Huidaomen Xiejiao Zuzhi Liyong Mixin Pohuai Falv Shishi Yishen Xingshi Panjueshu" [Judgement of the first trial of Zhang A and Zhang B for undermining the practice of law by organizing and using superstitious sects and heretical organizations, and using feudalistic superstition], *China Judgements Online*, January 30, 2016, <http://wenshu.court.gov.cn/content/content?DocID=bc33df52-ab28-46b9-804a-30f5db18fbc2>.
  115. Interview with overseas Falun Gong practitioner who wished to remain anonymous, June 2016.
  116. "Minghui Human Rights Report 2015: 501 New Trials of Falun Gong Practitioners," Minghui, January 20, 2016, <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2016/1/20/154880.html>.
  117. Interview with Falun Gong practitioner in Beijing, June 2016.
  118. One interviewee described variation in official attitudes even among districts within the same city. Interview with Falun Gong practitioner from Shanghai, June 2016.

## Recommendations

The developments described in this report entail both costs and opportunities for Chinese society and the international community. On an almost daily basis, injuries are suffered, families are shattered, and lives are lost, but new avenues for practicing religion, reducing repression, and benefiting fellow citizens are also discovered.

Nearly one-third of China's population is affected by the Chinese Communist Party's religious policies. Within this group, an estimated 80 to 120 million believers belong to faith communities rated in this study as suffering from "high" or "very high" levels of persecution, highlighting the urgency of their plight.

As noted in the report's overview essay, the party-state's relations with religious groups have implications far beyond this particular policy area, influencing China's political, economic, and social development in critical ways. And in an increasingly interconnected world, the same dynamics have repercussions outside China's borders.

The findings of this report show that the Chinese authorities cannot make meaningful advances toward the rule of law, enhance free expression, reduce corruption, ensure social stability, or cultivate genuine interethnic harmony unless they begin to loosen their control over religion, end impunity, and release religious prisoners. Indeed, continued repression seems likely to undermine a variety of policy goals shared by the party, foreign governments, and international human rights advocates.

Meanwhile, although this study has attempted to provide a comprehensive assessment of religious revival, repression, and resistance in China, various aspects of the topic deserve further investigation.

In this context, Freedom House urges the Chinese government, foreign policymakers, international civil society and religious organizations, journalists, and researchers to promptly implement as many of the following recommendations as possible.

### A. For the Chinese government

- **Adopt a more inclusive regulatory framework.** Expand the space for religious practice within the law by taking steps such as establishing legal personhood for religious venues and loosening registration rules. One possible change would be to eliminate the requirement of affiliation with a "patriotic association" so that more Christian "house churches," Buddhist and Taoist temples, and informal groups like Falun Gong can operate legally and openly.

- **Lift limitations on the practice of religion for certain populations.** Remove restrictions on children’s religious participation to bring conditions in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which China has ratified. Remove restrictions on the ability of lay believers in Xinjiang and Tibetan areas, particularly government employees like civil servants and teachers, to observe the five pillars of Islam and routine elements of Tibetan Buddhist practice.
- **Reverse arbitrary decisions that significantly restrict religious space.** Several party policies regarding religion have an especially weak legal basis and have generated significant levels of repression and backlash from believers. The party should consider reversing these decisions. For example:
  - Allow Tibetans to revere the Dalai Lama as a religious figure. Cease vilifying him in state media, conflating religious belief with political separatism, and punishing believers for possessing copies of his image or teachings.
  - Repeal the ban on Falun Gong and abolish the extralegal 6-10 Office.
  - Cease the campaign in Zhejiang Province to remove crosses from church buildings and permit places of worship to replace crosses that were taken down.
  - Lift restrictions on believers wishing to travel to other parts of China or abroad, including for religious study or pilgrimage. End limitations on journalists’ and researchers’ access to sites of religious conflict, such as Uighur- and Tibetan-populated areas.
- **Release all religious prisoners.** Release from custody all individuals imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of belief and religious expression, including those documented in the Political Prisoner Database maintained by the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) or mentioned by name in this report. When prosecuting future cases involving religious believers, grant judges greater authority to distinguish between peaceful religious practice and acts of violence.
- **Take steps to end impunity.** Encourage judges to reject evidence obtained from torture in cases involving religious violations, in accordance with broader judicial reform efforts. Investigate allegations of torture and all suspicious deaths of religious believers in custody or at the hands of security forces, and prosecute those responsible for any unlawful deaths mentioned in this report. Implement the relevant recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture, in line with China’s commitments as a party to the Convention Against Torture.
- **Cease organ transplants from prisoners.** End all organ transplants from prisoner populations and facilitate an independent international audit of organ sources to verify that the system is fully voluntary and transparent and does not victimize death-row or religious prisoners. Provide visas, freedom to travel, and access to medical files and relevant personnel to international experts investigating this issue.

## **B. For policymakers in the United States, Europe, and other democracies**

- **Make religious freedom a priority in relations with the Chinese government.** Considering the scale and severity of violations of religious freedom and the presence of concerned

coreligionists in many countries around the world, the issue is worthy of particular attention in democratic governments' interactions with Chinese officials.

- Press the Chinese government to implement the recommendations listed above.
- Ensure that officials at all levels of government, including the president or prime minister, and across agencies raise human rights generally and religious freedom specifically in all meetings with Chinese officials (in the United States, this should include officials from the White House, the Department of State, the Treasury Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Congress).
- Appoint religious freedom ambassadors with expertise in Chinese affairs. The Chinese government is one of the world's worst—and most extensive—violators of religious freedom, but it is also a sophisticated diplomatic interlocutor. Past performances indicate that appointees with previous experience in China are more effective in gaining access to and raising these sensitive topics with Chinese officials.
- When raising the issue, incorporate it into discussions of other critical human rights areas (like judicial reform or free expression), address all relevant religious groups, and avoid using language that inadvertently reinforces Chinese government rhetoric justifying restrictions or vilifying believers.
- **Draw attention to abuses and their link to the national interests of other countries.**
  - Highlight the cases of specific individuals imprisoned or persecuted for their faith. Former political prisoners have consistently reported that when foreign officials raised their cases, their treatment in prison improved; in some instances they were even released after such interventions.
  - Make public statements and private diplomatic demarches in a timely manner in response to events on the ground.
  - Take parliamentary action, including holding hearings; delivering floor speeches; issuing press releases; sending open letters to U.S., Chinese, and other government officials; and drafting legislation.
- **Put foreign trips to good use.** Before traveling to China, foreign officials (including presidents, prime ministers, other ministers, secretaries, assistant secretaries, UN special rapporteurs, ambassadors, and legislators) should do the following:
  - Meet with Chinese religious believers who have recently fled China to hear their accounts of persecution firsthand and learn about pressing problems.
  - When preparing to meet with provincial or city-level Chinese officials, make use of publicly accessible resources to determine local conditions for religious freedom and the names of persecuted local believers. Such resources include the Freedom House map attached to this report, the CECC Political Prisoner Database, and human rights groups' individual prisoner alerts.
  - Be ready to respond forcefully if news emerges that persecution increased in the



relevant region during or after the trip, as was the case for Christians surrounding the Group of 20 summit in 2016.

- **Increase penalties for violations of religious freedom.**

- **Impose entry and property sanctions on officials** who have committed or been complicit in the abuse, torture, or persecution of religious believers. Many officials travel to the United States and Europe for personal matters and hold funds in foreign bank accounts. Penalizing perpetrators through the blocking of visas and freezing of foreign-based assets is an effective way to ensure that these individuals face some measure of justice and to deter future abusers. In many countries, including the United States, this can be done without enacting additional laws. Under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), for example, foreign government officials who have engaged in “particularly severe violations of religious freedom” and their spouses and children can be denied entry to the United States.
- **Promptly delay or cancel official visits or exchanges**, with both central government and local or provincial officials, in response to egregious incidents of religious persecution.
- For the United States government, **retain China’s designation as a country of particular concern (CPC)** under the International Religious Freedom Act and **impose additional penalties available under the law**. China has been designated as a CPC—a country which “engages in or tolerates systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom”—every year since 1999, but the executive branch has typically chosen not to impose a broad range of economic penalties available under IRFA.

- **Engage in multilateral action.**

- **UN Human Rights Council:** Democratic countries on the council should issue a joint statement condemning the persecution of religious believers in China and worsening conditions for some groups, following the example of a recent joint statement on human rights in China more generally. Diplomatic resources should be devoted to encouraging participation by governments that may have constituencies interested in these issues but that do not typically criticize China’s human rights record, including India, Indonesia, and South Korea.
- **Interparliamentary initiatives:** Lawmakers in democratic states should undertake joint trips, coordinated resolutions, public statements, or letters on religious freedom in China.

- **Fund programs, policies, and research that will aid China’s religious believers.**

- Short-term emergency financial assistance allows religious believers to receive medical care, obtain legal counsel, leave the country, or meet other urgent needs.
- Longer-term financial assistance is necessary for individuals forced to flee China for indefinite periods, many of whom are unable to work due to their status as refugees.
- Donors should support programs that address challenges to religious freedom in

China, including projects that are based outside China for security reasons but affect conditions on the ground.

- Research efforts by government bodies (including annual reports), ad hoc interagency task forces, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, and scholars all require funding. Priorities could include the comprehensive documentation of victims and perpetrators of religious persecution or other areas of investigation listed in the sections below.

- **Resist Beijing's attempts to export its mistreatment of religious minorities.**

- Meet with the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama, especially at the level of head of state or head of government.
- Ensure full protection of the freedoms of association and expression for activists from religious communities, particularly during visits by senior Chinese officials.
- Resist pressure to repatriate religious refugees to China, a troubling practice that some governments have engaged in repeatedly in recent years, particularly in South and Southeast Asia.

### C. For international civil society and religious organizations

- **Adopt coreligionists in China for advocacy and moral support.** Religious institutions and congregations outside of China should "adopt" verified individual prisoners, offering spiritual, advocacy, and even financial support for persecuted members of their own faith, or building solidarity by doing the same for members of other religions. Such assistance might include weekly prayers on behalf of the individual, letter-writing campaigns to foreign governments and Chinese officials, and collection of monetary or in-kind donations for a detainee's family members.
- **Unify disparate advocacy efforts and share best practices.** While specialized advocacy is important and effective, diverse constituencies can magnify their impact through collective action on themes of common interest. Overseas groups supporting Christians, Tibetans, Uighurs, and Falun Gong adherents in China should develop collaborative projects and advocacy campaigns. They should also share tactics that have proven successful in reducing persecution of coreligionists in China, such as training grassroots believers on how to assert their legal rights when negotiating with officials or having overseas activists call police stations, courts, and prosecutors to urge the release of a religious detainee.
- **Improve documentation of religious prisoners and perpetrators.** Several human rights groups and overseas websites monitor cases of detention and imprisonment of religious believers in China, but these efforts are incomplete, uneven across different faiths, and sometimes lacking in international credibility. Some initiatives have begun to identify Chinese officials who have engaged in egregious abuses, but their databases are also disparate, may need independent verification, and are not always accessible in English. International civil society groups should fill these gaps and make full use of available Chinese government sources, including court verdicts, to complement reports from grassroots

believers. A joint documentation center could consolidate, research, and publicize such information. Better documentation of both prisoners and perpetrators would improve conditions for detainees in China by reducing their international anonymity; inform policymaking, civil society advocacy, academic exchanges, business dealings, and training programs; highlight individual responsibility for gross human rights violations; and provide some deterrence to members of the repressive apparatus in China.

- **Conduct joint investigations of forced labor and organ harvesting.** These two topics affect multiple faith groups and economic sectors, and involve strong transnational elements and serious human rights ramifications. As a result, they would benefit from an investigation by researchers with diverse areas of expertise, including on specific religious or ethnic groups, criminal justice, labor rights, and medicine. An investigation into forced labor by religious prisoners should focus on changes since the abolition of the “reeducation through labor” camp system in 2013 and seek to identify products manufactured by prisoners of conscience in China for export abroad, which would be illegal to import in some countries. An investigation into organ transplant abuse should trace the sources used in China’s expanding transplant industry, determining the extent to which organs are taken involuntarily from different communities of religious prisoners and the level of involvement by party-state officials.
- **Provide nongovernmental funding for these and other projects.** Private foundations, individual philanthropists, and donor organizations should provide funding for the above initiatives, as well as other projects that aim to expand religious freedom in China, document abuses, and counter repressive tendencies. Given the dangers many groups face inside China and the informal organizational structure of some religious networks, donors should establish funding mechanisms that allow for flexibility, including support for projects based outside of China that directly influence conditions inside the country.

#### D. For scholars and journalists

- **Choose words and sources with care.** When writing about religion in China, scholars and journalists should take care in their use of official rhetoric so as not to inadvertently legitimize misleading and vilifying propaganda about persecuted groups. They should consult a variety of sources on these topics, including accounts by refugees and research by overseas groups. While sources may vary in credibility, there are many skilled professionals, reliable eyewitnesses, and providers of valuable information among members of persecuted religious communities living outside China and their foreign supporters. Dismissing their perspectives and publications out of hand as inherently biased is itself prejudicial and risks significantly limiting the international community’s understanding of events on the ground.
- **Explore topics for further research.** In addition to those noted in the section above, subjects for research and investigative reporting include:
  - **Religious policy:** Any changes occurring in the realm of religious policy and persecution at the provincial and local levels following the introduction of updated national religious affairs regulations in 2016.
  - **Economic tensions:** The intersection of financial incentives and exploitation with religious restrictions and resistance, particularly as China’s economic growth slows,

and whether this increases official tensions with local Chinese Buddhist and Taoist leaders.

- **Catholics:** The treatment of Catholics from official and unofficial churches in the context of an apparently imminent agreement between the Vatican and the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops.
- **Protestants:** The degree to which the Chinese government's changing approach to Protestant churches, including increased harassment of state-sanctioned places of worship, spreads beyond Zhejiang Province and negatively affects church-state relations in other locales where restrictions were once relatively lax.
- **Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims:** How restrictions on religious practice affect daily life in Tibetan and Uighur areas, whether such infringements continue to increase, and how local populations respond.
- **Falun Gong:** The evolving situation of Falun Gong inside China, including ongoing large scale abuses, new trends such as uneven enforcement, and the campaign to lodge legal complaints against Jiang Zemin.
- **New religious movements:** The possibility of persecution against members of new or smaller religious groups that are often invisible to foreign observers because of their unfamiliarity and isolation.











Freedom House is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that supports democratic change, monitors freedom, and advocates for democracy and human rights.

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