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Faith, hope, and power

Corporatism, ideology, and religious freedom in China from Mao to Xi

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Abstract
Xi Jinping's renewal of authoritarianism in the People's Republic of China (PRC) highlights the way in which patterns of repression change over time. Xi's effort to reinvigorate party rule hearkens back to earlier periods of repression but has not reached levels common during the early years of the PRC. This pattern holds for the regulation of religion in the PRC. This article considers the PRC's management of religion, in particular Christianity, over the past seven decades. Whilst authoritarianism has taken diverse characteristics, one permanent feature of government repression in the PRC is the pursuit of state corporatist management of religion.

Keywords
China, religion, state corporatism, religious freedom.

1. Introduction

Persecution and intolerance of people of faith in China, particularly Christians, have waxed and waned since the declaration of the People's Republic in 1949. While on the surface there remains significant institutional permanence, the informal politics of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has shaped the broader contours of political life. Today, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has experienced a profound shift away from a long period of liberalization toward renewed repressive authoritarianism. The regime now led by President Xi Jinping is commonly compared to the Maoist period of arbitrary party control from 1949 to 1976. How has this had an impact on the religious freedoms of Christians?

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Under Xi's leadership, the CCP has sought to upgrade its control over Chinese society. Xi himself has consolidated permanent leadership of the party and has also bolstered central party control of every aspect of Chinese economic and social life. Xi's approach hearkens back to the prior age of "mass line" control, "returning to the Mao-era playbook for governance."[2] This involves the cultivation of ideological dogma among the masses that allows the regime to burnish its populist credentials. As Xi himself has noted, dedication to party dogma gives "faith," "hope," and "power" to the nation – all terms that resonate with religious significance. Indeed, one might argue that the mass line has never been fully repudiated despite several decades of reassessment of the Maoist era.[3] A significant aspect of the CCP's mass line was the condemnation of foreign (neo-)colonial threats to the Chinese regime, with which Chinese Christianity was often conflated.

The renewal of authoritarianism, including increasing reliance on the cult of personality, ideological conformity, state repression, and a protectionist and assertive foreign economic policy, suggests that the PRC is reverting to the form of highly regulated and arbitrary rule that characterized the state during the Maoist period. This should not be overstated; as one scholar notes, "Xi is not Mao," in the sense that he does not seek to perpetuate a social revolution so much as to promote the interests of the CCP elite and Chinese state and economic power.[4] Nevertheless, Xi has demonstrated a desire to go beyond mere management of Christian institutions toward enforcing an ideological conformity with Communist dogma that is reminiscent of the Maoist era.

In their wide-ranging survey of the global context of religious persecution against Christians, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah argue that Christians respond in three general ways. They may seek simply to survive, preserving their mere existence through flight or adaptation to their external circumstances. They may seek to associate with other actors, to find allies or forge partnerships with other groups. Or they may engage in direct confrontation with governing authorities or persecutors, usually in the form of non-violent challenges to their legitimacy.[5] Although these internal choices reflect the political theology and dynamics of the religious groups in question, external dynamics of the permissive environment, especially the government's management of groups, also shape the opportunities and choices available to people of faith.

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2 Steven P. Feldman, *Dictatorship by Degrees: Xi Jinping in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 41.

3 Lin Chun, "Mass Line," in Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere, eds., *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (Canberra: ANU Press/Verso, 2019), 121-126, 126.

4 Rebecca E. Karl, "Xi Is Not Mao," *Dissent* 69, no. 2 (Spring 2022), 75-76.

5 Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, "Introduction," in Philpott and Shah, eds., *Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 14-19.

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In this article, we demonstrate that a key feature in the enforcement of party control under both Mao and Xi is the application of state corporatism to the management of religion. Dictatorships that deal with religious groups often prefer to engage in corporatist organization of religion, if religion is tolerated at all. As it is used here, corporatism implies the cultivation of religious groups under the aegis of state authorities. In single-party states such as China, this means the incorporation of the religious movement in some way under the leadership of the ruling party. Preference for corporatist organization aligns with the ideological discipline of a Communist, one-party state.

The PRC has intermittently tolerated the practice of Christianity under tightly regulated corporatist organizations, or "patriotic movements." It has frequently demanded ideological control over the political theology of the officially tolerated religious sects. Given this corporatist preference, the PRC government takes a dim view of religious heterodoxy and pluralism. The spread of religious innovation, welcomed in pluralist environments, is problematic in a corporatist space. Groups that exist outside the officially tolerated forms of religious practice are therefore commonly viewed as dangerous sects, which are then repressed and persecuted. Chinese Christians most typically conform when possible or pursue mere survival when the regime veers toward more totalitarian control of religious belief. Direct confrontation is undertaken only by the boldest of non-conformist religious sects.

With regard to state management of these choices, we find that while Chinese corporatism is a persistent theme, the depth of ideological colonization of the Christian religion has ebbed and flowed over time. CCP rule in the 1950s and 1960s introduced a corporatist structure that was dismantled under the extremist ideology of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. It was resurrected during a more tolerant ideological period from the 1980s to the first decade of the 21st century, but at the same time the regime allowed informal, pluralist church organizations to emerge and even subvert the corporatist religious sector. The advent of a more ideological and nationalist turn under Xi Jinping suggests that the choices for Christians will once again be constrained, but so far there remains little reason to presume that it constitutes a return to the bitter Maoist era, or the extreme repression of the Cultural Revolution.

2. Christianity under Mao

In the 20th century, indigenous believers and foreign missionaries were responsible for the spread of the Christian faith in China. Christian missionaries arrived in China in increasing numbers beginning in the late 1800s, spurred on by the founding of the China Inland Mission in 1865. They established highly reputable

educational institutions and promoted access to lucrative foreign contracts for enterprising Chinese. Chinese nationalism was cultivated in part by the growing embrace of Christianity; notably, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT), was a convert to Christianity, as was his ultimate successor, Chiang Kai-Shek. From the late 1800s until the 1930s, the number of Chinese Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, grew dramatically.[6] So did the number of foreign Christian missionaries active in China, reaching a high point of 8,325 in the year 1928 – a year after the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-Shek began his nationwide offensive against the CCP.[7] Ian Johnston notes that both nationalists and Communists sought to marginalize or shut down traditional religion, though the Communists more broadly condemned religion as a whole.[8] The polarizing rivalry that emerged between the KMT and the CCP, along with KMT leaders' embrace of Christianity, doubtless had an impact on the CCP's policy toward Christianity in particular.

The CCP took the view that Christianity was largely a foreign colonizing religion, and when it took power over all of mainland China in 1949, foreign missionaries were expelled and the party instituted direct management of church activities. One CCP demand was that Christian leaders demonstrate their patriotic credentials and disavow foreign influence over Chinese Christianity. While this was especially difficult for the Roman Catholic Church, which maintains a global hierarchy out of the Vatican, it was also problematic for many Protestants, who relied on foreign support. Nonetheless, many Chinese Protestants shared the desire to reduce foreign ties and establish more independent Chinese denominations. In May 1950, Chinese theologian Y. T. Wu composed the "Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China," popularly known as "The Christian Manifesto." The Manifesto declared the Chinese church's intent to disavow imperialism and to support the political goals of the government, "opposing war and upholding peace, and teach[ing Christians] thoroughly to understand and support the government's policy of agrarian reform."[9]

With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, Chinese authorities raised the intensity of their efforts to monitor and control the activity of Christians. In 1951, the government established the Religious Affairs Bureau and compelled Protestant Christian leaders to embrace the "three-self" principles that had been articulated in the Christian Manifesto. Churches were to be self-governing, self-supporting

6 Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 75-77.
7 David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), 43.
8 Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017), 22-23.
9 Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 164.

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and self-propagating, the stated intention being to detach Christian churches from foreign influence. This led to the establishment of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association in 1954. To this day, these corporatist patriotic churches are the only officially registered and tolerated forms of organized Christianity in China.

Application of the Christian Manifesto went beyond the governance and independence of the Chinese churches and embarked upon a wholesale revision of Christian teaching and public theology. Public denunciation meetings were *de rigueur* in post-revolutionary China, including among Chinese Christians. Christians were compelled to accept a reformulation of their faith that conformed with CCP ideological dogma, whereby "political ideology confronted and then transformed traditional Christian belief so that the latter was in accord with the more fundamental ideological narrative."[10] This meant a redrafting of essential Christian beliefs to conform to Communist Party teaching. For example, under the CCP regime, three-self theology taught that "sin is the failure to denounce, exclude, and punish the enemies of the state."[11]

For the better part of the Maoist era (1949-1976), Christian churches were highly regulated and persecuted, and finally their doors were shut by public mandate. Church survivors recall the depth of persecution against Christians. In the words of a Christian leader from Yunnan province, "The revolutionary masses had been mobilized to attack Christians. The slogan was 'hurting their flesh to change their souls.' As a result, people left the church in droves."[12] Moreover, the creation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was opposed by independent church leaders who rebuffed government efforts at control.

The most notable opponent of the Three-Self principles was Wang Mingdao, whose resistance to the unification of Christians led to the establishment of the first independent (or "house") churches in 1955. Wang was arrested in that year for his supposed counterrevolutionary activities and was imprisoned for over 20 years. With the announcement of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, some 90 percent of churches were shut down and a large proportion of the clergy were sent to re-education camps in the rural hinterland. The Great Leap was primarily an economic plan to accelerate the collectivization of Chinese industry and agriculture through "improvisation and mass spontaneity," with spectacularly ambitious goals for levels of production.[13] The plan reflected the personal ambi-

10 Harvey, *Acquainted*, 65.
11 Harvey, *Acquainted*, 66.
12 Liao Yiwu, *God Is Red: The Secret Story of How Christianity Survived and Flourished in Communist China* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 46.
13 Alfred L. Chan, *Mao's Crusade: Politics and Policy Implementation in China's Great Leap Forward* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

tions of CCP Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, who imposed unattainable demands on the Chinese people throughout the two years of the Great Leap. Internal exile proved paradoxically to promote Christianity, as Chinese Christian leaders were exposed to a new and receptive audience among their compatriots.[14] Some found that exile sheltered them from the more severe repression meted out against supposed counterrevolutionaries in the larger cities.[15]

Mao had launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, seeking to root out any possible threats to his direct authority over the CCP and Chinese society. The Cultural Revolution's chief purpose was to undermine the authority of reformists within the Party, but it took the form of a diffuse attack on Chinese traditional culture as well as influences associated with Western capitalism. Mao "made sure that much violence and humiliation was carried out in public," subjecting the entire country to mass terror cloaked in an ideological mantle.[16] Numerous stalwarts of the CCP and its societal allies were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and in some cases executed during the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution sought to eliminate all forms of religion in China as well. The Religious Affairs Bureau of the United Front Work Department, which had been tasked with supervising approved forms of religion, was shut down. Even the Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches were compelled to close, and leaders such as Y. T. Wu were sent to labour camps.

> Persecution of religious believers during the Cultural Revolution era was as extensive as it was severe: celibate clergy were forced to marry; Muslims were forced to eat pork; Christians were compelled to renounce their faith; stubborn clerics were beaten or even executed; residences of religious leaders were ransacked; recalcitrant believers were imprisoned, exiled, or put to death.[17]

But state repression of official forms of religion paradoxically strengthened the role of house churches, which already operated underground.

Throughout the Maoist era from 1949 to 1976, Christians survived through perseverance and adaptation, though public worship and displays of religiosity were eliminated step by step. The sudden resurgence of Chinese Christianity that occurred in the decade following Mao's death suggests that persecution masked the natural incidence of Christian worship. Indeed, by the year 2000, the number

14 Bays, *New History*, 176.
15 Liao, *God Is Red*, 174.
16 Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 512.
17 Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 171.

of Christians in China had grown to 50 times that in 1950.[18] Yang notes that "The irreligiousness of the masses under Communist rule was superficial, illusory, or temporary at best."[19] Christianity grew primarily due to the underground, pluralist church movements that had been repressed since the mid-1950s.

3. The relaxation of government control and the spread of Christianity

The end of the Maoist era brought about a gradual reform of the economy and society that accelerated after the late 1980s. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping rose to become paramount leader of the CCP. He established a new form of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and cultivated a new generation of CCP leaders. Beginning with his resignation from key leadership positions in 1992, there was regular turnover in the Chinese leadership, including the paramount leader. From 1993, Jiang Zemin served as President of the PRC, General Secretary of the CCP, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. He was succeeded ten years later by Hu Jintao, who retained his position until November 2012, when Xi Jinping assumed central leadership of the state and party. Throughout this period, the Chinese economy increasingly accepted integration into the global economy and rising levels of foreign investment. Nevertheless, predictions that economic restructuring would lead to greater democratization and political liberalization proved to be in error.[20] What followed instead was a very gradual loosening of ideological control and some liberalization of social life, coupled with a refusal to embrace more democratic forms. The dramatic proof of the latter came with the regime's violent clampdown on protestors at Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

Although democratization was not in the cards, gradual societal liberalization and a highly limited acceptance of societal pluralism created a significant break from the Maoist regime. By the 1980s, the CCP was allowing some interrogation and criticism of the Maoist past. From 1978, practice of the Christian faith was once again allowed in public and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was able to open new churches, the first in Ningbo, Zhejiang. The next year, the Religious Affairs Bureau resumed its operations.[21] In 1982, the CCP introduced Document Number 19, its official statement on the legal practice of religion, which authorized only five patriotic religious movements – Buddhist, Daoist, Muslim, Protestant, and Roman Catholic. This reinforced the traditional corporatist manage-

18 Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 206.
19 Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.
20 Bruce J. Dickson, *The Dictator's Dilemma: The Chinese Communist Party's Strategy for Survival* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 262-71.
21 Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 162.

ment of religion. Tsai notes that "narrowing religion down [to these categories made it] easier to define and more expedient to control."[22] He acknowledges that the regime offered some level of religious freedom.[23] Nevertheless, official toleration was not extended universally to all Christians, particularly those deemed likely to disrupt public order or CCP rule.

In 1983, the government cracked down on independent members of "heretic cults" who had been denouncing Christian worship in Three-Self churches.[24] Since that time, the government has issued further ordinances that mandated the growth of Religious Affairs Bureaus at the local levels and registration requirements for places of worship. Their expansion provides an opportunity to monitor developments in the religious arena. Sometimes, the rapid rise of religious fervour is perceived as an existential threat. In 1999, the government banned the practice of Falun Gong as an "evil cult" and engaged in widespread repression of the movement.[25]

While the house church movement suffered periodic persecution, it has grown substantially in numbers and scope.[26] By 2007, the total number of Protestant Christians in China was likely well over 60 million, most of whom worshipped in independent "underground" churches.[27] More recent Pew Research figures indicate that the number of people who claim Christianity in China lies somewhere between 3 and 7 percent, or around 42 to 99 million.[28] The growth of Christianity paralleled a wider embrace of faith, if not formal religious adherence.[29] In other words, spirituality has become popular in post-Mao China, a lesson that the CCP has learned in both cultivating cultural forms of spirituality and condemning non-conformist religious groups. While the government persecuted independent forms of religion, it largely refrained from efforts to shape the political and ideological commitments of the faithful, merely ensuring that practicing Christians were not offered membership in the CCP.

The spread of Christianity from the 1980s to the 2000s can be related at least in part to the relative costs of repression to the CCP government. In her study of informal house churches in China, Marie-Eve Reny argues that the dramatic ex-

22 Yen-zen Tsai, "'We Are Good Citizens': Tension between Protestants and the State in Contemporary China," in Cheng-tian Kuo, ed., *Religion and Nationalism in Chinese Societies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 309-338, 326.

23 Tsai, "Good Citizens," 331.

24 Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 218.

25 Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Gray, and Black Markets of Religion in China," *Sociological Quarterly* 47, no.1 (2006), 93-122, 101.

26 Yang, "Red, Gray, and Black," 102.

27 Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 230, indicates over 50 million Chinese Christians in 2007. Rodney Stark and Xiuhua Wong argue that there were about 61 million Chinese Christians in 2007 and that at historic rates of growth, that number would have reached 149.7 million in 2020. Stark and Wong, *A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015), 115-16.

28 Pew Research Center, "Measuring Religion in China: Christianity," *Pew Research Center*, 30 August 2023. Available at: https://bit.ly/3SKoIXn.

29 Ian Johnson, "China's Great Awakening," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2017), 83-95.

pansion of religiosity arose as a result not only of the regime's retreat from totalitarianism, but also of the expansion of the Chinese economy and its concomitant consumerism and rising inequality.[30] In such an environment, public toleration of some forms of religiosity helps to shield the regime from criticism. She relates how many house churches have been allowed to thrive due to the limited threat they pose to the governing authorities. In many cases, Christian house churches have goals that are "reconcilable" with those of the government: they promote economic growth and social discipline, and they do not encourage democratization at the expense of the CCP.[31] They remain small, and in most cases they are not strongly networked with other churches so as to pose a nationwide pole of resistance to the CCP (with the exception of Roman Catholic institutions, which have suffered far greater official interference). In the case of independent house churches, the regime seeks merely to contain their institutional growth rather than intervening to persecute and eliminate the house church phenomenon.

As a result, regulation of religion in China has created multiple layers of approved, banned, and tolerated forms of worship, forms that Fenggang Yang refers to as "red, black, and gray" religious markets. Government regulation created a massive religious black market during the Maoist period, which emerged in the 1980s to the 2000s. However, CCP regulation of religion has been erratic, and the boundaries of government approval and toleration "are constantly shifting."[32]

As mentioned above, government repression extended only rarely to efforts at ideological indoctrination or steering the theology of indigenous churches. Up to the 2010s, their primary means of promoting Communist orthodoxy within the church was by monitoring teaching from the pulpit and through indoctrination of pastors in state-approved seminaries.[33] Although foreign missionaries were not welcome in China, large numbers of foreign workers began to arrive in the 1990s as businesspeople, contractors, instructors, and English language instructors.[34] Many of these served unofficially as Christian missionaries.[35] At the same time, many Chinese have explored Christianity as a way of enjoying a sort of intellectual freedom otherwise denied to them.[36]

While Christians may be identified throughout China, the community is especially notable and influential in the country's southeast, in the provinces of Zheji-

30 Marie-Eve Reny, *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 47-49.

31 Reny, *Authoritarian Containment*, 14-15.

32 Yang, "Red, Gray, and Black," 115.

33 Reny, *Authoritarian Containment*, 70-74.

34 Li Ma and Jin Li, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 38-44.

35 Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 278.

36 Yang, *Religion in China*, 57.

ang and Fujian. The coastal city of Wenzhou in Zhejiang has the reputation of being "China's Jerusalem," in view of the number of churches that have arisen since the Maoist era.[37] By the early 2000s, Western scholars and journalists marvelled at the numerical growth of Christianity in China. In addition to the burgeoning numbers of underground and independent churches, the official Three-Self churches were seeing remarkable growth, indicating patterns of both alliance and deviance among Christians.[38] Some even began to speculate about the possibility of a "Christian" China emerging, as perhaps 30 percent of the population embraced the faith.[39] But as the country entered the 2010s, the CCP demonstrated increasing concern to restore centralized control over aspects of Chinese governance. This implied reforms that would rein in subaltern and regional power centres to maintain the rule of the central party apparatus and the President.

4. Christianity and renewed authoritarianism under Xi

Each year, Open Doors assesses the status of religious freedom for Christians in various nations around the world in its World Watch List. During the period from 2017 to 2022, the PRC moved from 43rd to 17th place, ranked by the severity of concern over repression of religion.[40] This rise coincides with the increasingly restrictive rule of Xi Jinping, who has sought to restore the central position of the CCP and its corporatist institutions in Chinese society. What policies have reversed the trend of the 1990s and 2000s?

Since taking power in 2012, Xi Jinping has moved dramatically to change the socio-economic system and foreign policy of China. He has combined economic and strategic nationalism with deepening societal repression. Xi has fused "dramatic centralization of authority under his personal leadership" with increased state penetration of civil society, tight controls on economic and cultural flows into the country, and an ambitious and expansionist Chinese foreign policy.[41] Xi has asserted the need to strengthen CCP discipline – meaning the purging of putatively corrupt poles of opposition within the party. During his first term in office, Xi introduced an anti-corruption campaign which led to the official discipline of over 1.4 million CCP members, including important rivals for party leadership.[42]

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37 Ian Johnson, "Church-State Clash in China Coalesces Around a Toppled Spire," *New York Times*, 29 May 2014.
38 Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003), 317-337, 333-35.
39 Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 241-42.
40 Open Doors, *World Watch Research – China: Full Country Dossier*, March 2021, 5. Available at: https://bit.ly/3SBlsgD.
41 Elizabeth Economy, *The Third Revolution: Xi Jinping and the New Chinese State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10.
42 Susan L. Shirk, "China in Xi's 'New Era': The Return to Personalistic Rule," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018), 22-36, 22-24.

He has dismantled the model of collective leadership introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, centralizing leadership in the person of the President and General Secretary of the CCP.[43] His efforts to personalize his regime and drive out his rivals resemble some of Mao's tactics, but he has never descended to the level of terror and arbitrary authority employed in the Cultural Revolution.

Even so, Xi's innovations have gone beyond mere institutional restructuring and a crackdown on corruption. He has stationed himself in the long line of ideological visionaries who have defined the Chinese political system. Since 2017, the Chinese constitution has enshrined Marxist-Leninist and Maoist thought alongside "Xi Jinping Thought." This is notable as it arguably stands as the first official revision of Marxism-Leninism in China since the time of Mao.[44] The formulation of such thought is somewhat amorphous, but it affirms socialism with Chinese characteristics, combined with "ensuring Party leadership over all work" and "adopting a new vision for development," all the while "exercising full and rigorous governance over the Party."[45] Since that time, Xi has demonstrated a higher propensity to speak in terms of a nationalistic form of Chinese socialism. He combines a grandiose nationalism that vaunts Chinese culture with the socialist legacy of the CCP.

Moreover, Xi has fastened onto Deng Xiaoping's socialism with *Chinese* characteristics to celebrate the "spiritual" aspects of Chinese civilization. His promotion of "the construction of spiritual civilization" raises the profile of traditional Chinese Confucianism, with the slogan "The people have faith, the nation has hope, the country has power."[46] Xi's embrace of spirituality in an officially atheist country comes without any note of irony.

A crucial aspect of this process for religious practice in China has been an insistence on the "Sinicization" of Chinese religion. Xi initially called for the Sinicization of Chinese religion at a meeting of the United Front Work Department in 2015. Since that time, the PRC has pursued a program of Sinicization, by which the CCP might *inter alia* "provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society."[47] While it most certainly includes efforts to

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43 Jonathan Tepperman, "China's Great Leap Backward," *Foreign Policy*, 15 October 2018. Available at: https://bit.ly/46coIPQ.

44 The preamble to the Chinese constitution mentions only Mao Zedong Thought and Xi Jinping Thought, establishing a sense of equivalence between the two. At the same time, each paramount leader has added elements to Chinese socialism in the preamble. See the English language version of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, available at: https://bit.ly/47x6YCC.

45 Goh Sui Noi, "19th Party Congress: Xi Jinping Outlines New Thought on Socialism with Chinese Traits," *Straits Times*, 18 October 2017. Available at: https://bit.ly/3QZbZid.

46 Kerry Brown and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Çerenkova, "Ideology in the Era of Xi Jinping," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23 (2018), 323-339, 336-37.

47 Richard Madsen, "Introduction," in Madsen, ed., *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1.

impose Han Chinese culture in regions with national minorities, such as in Tibet and Xinjiang, it also requires deepening institutionalization of party control of religion. The vague articulation of Sinicization policies leads Kuei-min Chang to argue that it amounts to little more than an attempt to deepen party and state control over Chinese religions.[48] However, as early as 2011, leaders of the Early Rain Reformed Church were protesting that Sinicization violated the principles of the Christian faith by insisting that there are specifically Chinese means by which to enjoy salvation.[49]

Sinicization has been communicated with an increasingly positive attitude toward Buddhism over other Chinese religions.[50] For other religions, it involves the greater imposition of regulatory control, especially those that appear to threaten Chinese national unity. It also implies deepening the CCP's dominance over religious teaching, something that Fenggang Yang prefers to call "Chinafication."[51] For Uighurs and Tibetans, Sinicization may suggest the erasure of unique cultural traits and practices. In Xinjiang and Tibet, Muslim and Vajrayana Buddhist religious practice is associated with a national belonging that resides outside the Han-dominated PRC and CCP leadership. Furthermore, both regions witnessed widespread demonstrations against Chinese dominance in 2008-2009. However, in the cases of both Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, there is good reason to consider the mixed motives of the regime, including both the repression of civil forms of religion and the desire to persist in the colonization of China's western regions[52] – motives that do not apply to the Christian minority. While many Chinese Christians support the development of an authentic Chinese Christianity, the intimate association of the nation with the dictates of the CCP is unnerving.

One might also understand Sinicization as a reflection of the nationalist policy of restoring control over every square inch of territory claimed by the PRC. For example, the PRC claims sovereignty over the disputed Nansha (Spratly) Islands in the South China Sea and the de facto independent state of Taiwan. It has also deepened its commitment to integrating the politics of Hong Kong and Macau, areas that previously enjoyed more liberal regimes concerning press freedom and religion.

As noted, Christians do not form an ethnoreligious group that threatens to divide the People's Republic, nor has religious practice among Christians been the

48 Kuei-min Chang, "New Wine in Old Bottles: Sinicisation and State Regulation of Religion in China," *China Perspectives* 1-2 (June 2018), 37-44, 43.
49 Tsai, "Good Citizens," 322.
50 Johnson, "Church-State Clash."
51 Fenggang Yang, "Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond," in Madsen, ed., *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions*, 16-43, 16.
52 Dibyesh Anand, "Colonization with Chinese Characteristics: Politics of (In)security in Xinjiang and Tibet," *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019), 129-47.

central focal point of Xi's interventions into religious affairs. Even so, "the insight that Communism is a faith – and therefore faces competitors – is not new, but it is likely to have far-reaching consequences for the future."[53] For Christians, the primary consequence appears to be heightened scrutiny and monitoring – the deepening of institutional controls that have been in place for decades. China's declining scores on religious freedom in the Open Doors World Watch List relate mainly to the increasing pressure faced by church leaders, who have seen church structures destroyed, forcibly closed, or pushed into mergers with other church organizations.[54] Persistent forays into arbitrary closure of churches and church buildings or detention of Christian leaders may have increased in number, but they fit into the long-term policy of promoting corporatist partners over the regime as opposed to heterodox house churches or "evil cults." However, there have been occasional indications that Xi Jinping Thought might involve a deeper dive into totalitarian control of religious doctrine and practice.

Beyond Xi's efforts to consolidate his control over the party, the first indications that his regime wanted to increasingly limit the influence of Christianity came in the state of Zhejiang in 2014. Provincial governor Xia Baolong, a close ally of Xi, oversaw the destruction of numerous crosses dotting the skyline of the city of Wenzhou, including the monolithic 180-foot cross at the Sanjiang Church.[55] Over the next three years, approximately 1,700 crosses were removed from public display.[56] Citing concern over the resort to superstition over party innovation as a means of alleviating poverty and illness in a remote community, in November 2017 the CCP demanded the removal of Jesus icons and their replacement with images of Xi.[57] This insistence that the CCP offered the panacea for health and social ills previewed later draconian restrictions applied after the emergence of the COVID-19 virus two years later.

Protestant seminaries have been encouraged by the government to dismantle core Christian religious doctrines under the demand for Sinicization. In 2014, the head of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs announced an initiative to manage Christian theology, noting that "the construction of Christian theology should adapt to China's national condition and integrate with Chinese culture."[58] The effect of this effort to promote new forms of theological construction is to advance state and party authority over that of religious authorities and texts. Simi-

53 Open Doors, *World Watch Research – China*, 24.
54 Open Doors, *World Watch Research – China*, 31.
55 Johnson, "Church-State Clash."
56 Ma and Li, *Surviving*, 96.
57 Nectar Gan, "Want to Escape Poverty? Replace Pictures of Jesus with Xi Jinping, Christian Villagers Urged," *South China Morning Post*, 14 November 2017.
58 Wang Hongyi, "China Plans Establishment of Christian Theology," *China Daily*, 7 August 2014. Available at: https://bit.ly/46dfi9P.

lar efforts are afoot to promote the rescripting of Muslim and Buddhist texts.[59] At the end of 2019, the CCP announced an official undertaking to rewrite the Bible in Chinese to reflect Party doctrine. Wang Yang, a member of the Politburo Standing Committee, among the most powerful institutions in the PRC, hosted a meeting at which party appointees were commissioned to make "accurate and authoritative interpretations of classical doctrines to keep pace with the times."[60] Some time later, the Chinese government demanded that Apple remove the Olive Tree Bible and Qur'an Majeed apps, citing that these apps violated Chinese laws governing the hosting of religious texts. Apple complied.[61] In perhaps the most egregious act of revisionism aimed at distorting Christian teaching, a report emerged in September 2020 that an officially approved ethics textbook had altered the story of Jesus forgiving an adulterous woman. In the revised version of the story, Jesus executes the woman by stoning in order to uphold the superiority of law over grace.[62] The incident appeared to be a single, unauthorized publication indicating how a zealous application of Sinification would alter Christian tradition.

By 2021, Xi's ambitions went beyond the need to deepen corporatist control over religious organizations. In December 2021, Xi attended the first national conference of the CCP to concentrate on religious affairs since 2016. At the meeting, he doubled down on his demand for Sinicization. He indicated that the program involved "alignment with the CCP's principles, goals and directions," and that the process of disciplining religious organizations had not proceeded fast enough.[63] He argued that bureaucrats needed to increase surveillance of online communications that promoted proselytization or criticism of the government's religious policy. He went even further by arguing that religious leaders themselves needed to be schooled in "Marxist religious studies," so that they could articulate religious defences of socialism with Chinese characteristics.[64]

China's highly draconian measures to control the spread of COVID-19 from 2020 to 2022 also affected public displays of religion. As religious organizations were among the most active civil groups seeking to mitigate the pandemic, including donations of money, face masks, and disinfectant, in early 2020, the government

59 Cook, *Battle*, 17.
60 Matthew Taylor King, "The Gospel According to Xi," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 June 2020. Available at: https://on.wsj.com/3QATSOa.
61 Anugrah Kumar, "Apple Takes Down Bible App in China to Appease Communist Regime," *Christian Post*, 23 October 2021. Available at: https://bit.ly/3VWNK6U.
62 UCA News, "Chinese Catholics Angry Over Book Claiming Jesus Killed Sinner," *UCA News*, 22 September 2020. Available at: https://bit.ly/477R5Dd.
63 "China: Xi Jinping's Sinicization, the new Cultural Revolution Dear to Mao," *Human Rights without Frontiers*, 4 January 2022. Available at: https://bit.ly/3ugcBag.
64 Hu Zimo, "China: First CCP National Conference on Religion Held Since 2016," *Bitter Winter*, 8 December 2021. Available at: https://bit.ly/3QWh7DB.

viewed such public engagement as a threat to state control over health policy.[65] In May 2021, the government issued a new law governing the Administration of Religious Clerical Personnel, which reinforced the role of "national religious groups" in qualifying "religious professionals," whose role was to support the CCP and the Sinification of religion.[66] This was immediately followed by a new law governing the financial management of venues for religious activities.[67] The new rules disregarded the existence of house churches, which were deemed illegal by definition, and supported the more general clampdown on social gatherings that attended the pandemic. Yet despite the restrictive attitude taken toward civil society during the pandemic, some scholars have suggested that the experience has caused an uptick in interest in religion within the PRC.[68]

5. Conclusions

Many observers today compare contemporary China to the Maoist period during the formative years of the PRC. The rise of Xi Jinping to the position of President, General Secretary of the CCP, and Chair of the Central Military Commission in 2012 has ushered in a period of rapid acceleration of government centralization, repression and restriction of social activity and liberties. A period of relative liberalization of civil society that arose from the 1990s to the early 2000s has come to an end. What began with an anti-corruption drive led by President Xi has extended to an effort to entrench more deeply the CCP's ideological control over Chinese society. The government's often draconian response to the COVID-19 pandemic has justified even more sweeping restrictions on the normal conduct of civil society. These initiatives do not reflect the deep repression of the Cultural Revolution, but they may be compared in some ways to the earlier imposition of party dictatorship in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Xi's ideological program, reflected in the constitutional recognition of "Xi Jinping Thought," certainly has profound implications for freedom of religion in China. It flirts with religious terminology, cast in nationalist and Confucian guise. Xi may be responding to a malaise of purpose whereby "hundreds of millions of Chinese are consumed with doubt about their society and turning to religion

65 Ian Johnson, "Religious Groups in China Step into the Coronavirus Crisis," *New York Times*, 23 February 2020. Available at: https://nyti.ms/3ulwTin.

66 Yang Ming, "New Chinese Decree Tells Religious Leaders to 'Support the Communist Party,'" *Voice of America* [online], 24 April 2021. Available at: https://bit.ly/49C5yso; China Law Translate, "Measures on the Management of Religious Professionals (Draft for Solicitation of Comments)," 18 November 2020. Available at: https://bit.ly/3ubdfG2.

67 John Wang, "Recently, the State Administration of Religious Affairs Launched the 'Measures for the Financial Management of Venues for Religious Activities,' Which Will Come into Force on June 1," *China Christian Daily*, 11 April 2022. Available at: http://chinachristiandaily.com/article/11367.

68 Rongping Ruan, Kenneth R. Vaughan, and Dan Han, "Trust in God: The COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on Religiosity in China," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 62, no. 3 (2023), 523-548.

and faith for answers."[69] So far, however, he has engaged in only limited efforts to control religious practice. State corporatist management of religion was introduced in the early years of the PRC and has remained government policy since its inception. It forms a sort of policy floor for government control over religion. This limited toleration of religious organizations was suspended under the totalitarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 until the return of institutional tolerance in 1978-1979. While arbitrary changes and reversals of official policy – as well as somewhat erratic periods of persecution – characterized the religious arena of civil society during the 1980s to the 2000s, the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement churches and unregistered house churches have grown and even thrived. Xi's return to a more ideological program aimed at nationalizing and rescripting Christian doctrine is an alarming shift toward a more totalitarian program of party control over the *content* of religion. Nevertheless, it has not assumed the level of persecution exhibited by the Maoist state.

On its face, Xi Jinping's slogan that "the people have faith, the nation has hope, and the country has power" might suggest that Xi aspires to renewing spirituality in 21st-century China. However, the last phrase may equally be translated to indicate that "the state has power." Indeed, faith and hope in Xi's China are intended primarily to strengthen the position of the CCP and the state institutions that it controls, including the corporatist religious movements that it tolerates. In this context, Christians may continue to find convenient means by which to present their faith as a patriotic partner of the regime, one that has natural resonance with its aspiration to cultivate faith and hope (which are, after all, Christian virtues) without destabilizing the party-state. However, to the extent that Xi's vision of Sinicization requires compromising Christian principles, it would force Christian groups to confront the CCP regime more deliberately. So long as CCP governance extends mostly to the extension of corporatist control, it will mean that most harassment of believers will remain at the institutional level. If China faces a more concerted effort to return to cultural revolutionary standards, it will usher in a dark period for both Chinese civil society and the Christian church in particular.

69 Johnson, *Souls*, 16.

IJRF 17.1 (2024) | doi.org/10.59484/HOLC5744 | 13-28