

Congressional-Executive Commission on China
Hearing on the Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism

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Chair Merkley, Co-chair McGovern, and distinguished Members of the Commission. I am honored to participate in today's hearing on the control of religion in China through digital authoritarianism.

In my remarks today, I will focus my attention on three strategies used to assert Chinese government control over religion and the implications for religious life. These strategies are part of a long-term and coordinated effort to contain and transform religion in China.

Background

Contemporary China represents one of the most restrictive environments for religion and religious communities around the globe.¹ This is not by accident, but by design. Since coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has promoted state atheism, viewed religion as an impediment to the advancement of socialism, an ideological competitor, and vehicle for foreign influence.

The CCP's approach toward religion has been guided by twin goals of containment and control. Religious life has been tolerated, so long as it stays within tightly defined parameters and serves the interests of the party-state. The Chinese government recognizes only five religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism), ritual and worship are restricted to registered sites, religious communities are channeled into religious patriotic associations, and clergy must be trained in government-sanctioned seminaries where 30 percent of the curriculum is devoted to patriotic and ideological education.²

The reach of the Chinese state into religious life is extensive.

STRATEGY 1: DIGITAL & SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGIES

Under General Secretary Xi Jinping, strategies of religious management have expanded with the development of digital and surveillance technologies. These technologies facilitate systematic and

¹ Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China," August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>; Office of International Religious Freedom, "2020 Report on International Religious Freedom," US Department of State, May 12, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>; Samirah Majumdar and Virginia Villa, "Globally, Social Hostilities Related to Religion Decline in 2019," *Pew Research Center*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/09/30/globally-social-hostilities-related-to-religion-decline-in-2019-while-governments-restrictions-remain-at-highest-levels/>.

² "Order of SARA No. 16, Measures for the Administration of Religious School [in Chinese]," Chinese Government Web, April 23, 2021, http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5623053.htm.

coordinated efforts to collect information, monitor, and target religious groups and practitioners, especially those perceived as operating outside of state-set parameters or viewed as security threats.

The Chinese surveillance state monitors social media to identify and collect information on religious believers and their networks; it tracks phone apps that transmit information on user activity and location; it utilizes facial recognition technology to follow movement; and relies on an impressive array of CCTV cameras at temples, churches, and mosques to keep tabs on attendance and the content of religious services.

Recent measures regulating religious information online bring religious communities in compliance with other laws on Internet security. Religious associations, schools, and monasteries must obtain a license for maintaining websites and online religious content must be approved by government representatives at provincial religious affairs departments.³

Religious life is ostensibly monitored at every level—in public, in private, and virtually.

Implications

- **Expanding digital technologies accelerates the crackdown on unregistered religious groups.** Religious communities not formally affiliated with the government-sponsored religious patriotic associations operate with no legal protections. These communities meet in private homes, hotels, factories, fields, and in virtual communities; they include Protestant house churches, members of the underground Catholic Church, unregistered Buddhists, Daoists, and Muslims and practitioners of popular and folk religions. The growing sophistication of the Chinese surveillance state means it is increasingly difficult for unregistered communities to operate under the radar.
- **Control of online religious expression is increasing.** Religious online forums, microblogs, and instant messaging platforms run by individuals face increased censorship (e.g., WeChat, Weibo, QQ, RenRen). These online tools and virtual communities are seen as a vehicle of “religious infiltration” and source of religious growth on college campuses⁴

STRATEGY 2: SINICIZATION

Under General Secretary Xi, religious communities have been asked to sinicize (中国化). Sinicization is a long-term strategy to insulate religious life from foreign influence by making it “more Chinese” and ensuring fealty to the party-state.⁵ Specifically, Sinicization prioritizes the integration of political ideology and support for the CCP. A handbook for Chinese government officials outlines the Sinicization of religion as:

Religious personnel and believers must identify and agree with politics, love the motherland, support the socialist system, support the leadership of the CCP, and abide by the laws,

³ “Regulations on Religious Affairs,” SARA, Chinese Government Web, February 1, 2018, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm; “Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services,” Chinese Government Web, March 1, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2022/content_5678093.htm.

⁴ Ge Chengguang, “An Analysis of the Influence of Internet on College Students’ Religious Beliefs,” *Gong Wu Yuan*, <https://www.21ks.net/lunwen/zjxylw/76485.html>.

⁵ Xinhua, “Xi Calls for Improved Religious Work,” April 24, 2016, China.org.cn, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-04/24/content_38312410.htm.

regulations, and policies of the country; Integrate culturally, meaning to interpret religious teachings according to the requirement of contemporary China's development and process and in line with the excellent traditional Chinese culture; Adapt to society, adjust religious concepts, systems, organizations, etc.⁶

Put simply, Sinicization is the “partyfication” of religion.

It is important to note that Sinicization is not new to China nor to the CCP. Xi's predecessors from Mao to Hu all took steps to adapt Marxism-Leninism to a Chinese context, which led to the development of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Sinicized Marxism.⁷ Foreign missionaries also attempted to root churches locally to make them more acceptable. Matteo Ricci dressed in Buddhist robes and introduced Catholicism through Confucian concepts.⁸ However, the CCP's Sinicization of religion is distinctive from earlier efforts in that it puts the party-state at the center of religious life.

At present, there is no central policy articulating how Sinicization should develop. Instead, the national religious patriotic associations have introduced five-year plans to answer Beijing's call. It is within these plans we clearly observe the political direction.

The Catholic plan asserts that Sinicization “requires conscientious approval of politics. Love of the motherland and obedience to the national regime is the responsibility and obligation of every Christian.”⁹

The Protestant plan calls on pastors to harmonize Biblical teachings with the ideology of the party-state and to preach Core Socialist Values¹⁰ and patriotism from the pulpit and in seminaries.¹¹ It recommends displaying expressions of faith in forms such as traditional melody, calligraphy, and paper cutting. Pastors should blend notions of love and respect attributed to Mencius with Biblical teaching that focus on loving others as yourself.

⁶ Zhong Ji, *Key Words for Party Members and Cadres to Study in the New Era* [in Chinese], (Beijing: Party Building Books Publishing House, 2019), 62.

⁷ Hu Jintao, “Hu, Jintao's Report at the 17th National Congress of the Communist Party of China [in Chinese].” The State Council Information Office of the PRC, October 26, 2007, http://www.scio.gov.cn/37231/Document/1566887/1566887_11.htm; Wang Qi, “Why Does the General Secretary Place So Much Emphasis on the Sinicization of Religion in Our Country? [in Chinese]” December 6, 2021. UFWD of CPCCC, <http://www.zyztz.gov.cn/202112qwpl/364882.jhtml>; Yang Fenggang, “The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below,” *Religion in Chinese Societies* 18(2021): 16-43.

⁸ Matteo Ricci, Douglas Lancashire and Hu Guozhen, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven = Tianzhu Shiyi* Chinese-English ed. by E.J. Malatesta, (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources in cooperation with the Ricci Institute, 1985).

⁹ “Five-Year Work Plan for Advancing Adherence to the Direction of Sinicization of Catholicism in Our Country [in Chinese],” CPA and BCCCC, October 8, 2018, <https://www.chinacatholic.cn/html/report/18100224-2.htm>.

¹⁰ Core Socialist Values have been articulated as a set of moral values to guide China's national rejuvenation, and include prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, friendliness, and integrity; see, e.g., https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpnationalcongress/2017-10/12/content_33160115.htm.

¹¹ “Five-Year Plan for Promoting the Sinicization of Christianity in Our Country (2018-2022)[in Chinese],” CCC and TSPM, March 27, 2018, <https://www.ccctspm.org/cppeinfo/10283>.

The Buddhist plan for Sinicization prioritizes the study and implementation of Xi Jinping Thought. Religious personnel are urged to accept and support the leadership of the party-state and promote Buddhist teachings in line with Core Socialist Values.¹²

The Islamic Association's Sinicization plan highlights the integration of Chinese aesthetics and patriotism into religious and cultural life. This includes adopting Chinese styles of clothing to correct the practice of imitating foreign Islamic dress, promoting architectural styles in mosques that highlight Chinese elements, using "Confucianism to interpret scripture," and teaching Core Socialist Values in mosque curriculum.¹³

Even Daoism—an indigenous religion to China—has developed a plan to Sinicize. The Daoist plan calls for incorporation of Xi Jinping Thought into the traditional Daoist canon and the promotion of patriotism and political education in religious circles.¹⁴

The takeaway from these plans is that Sinicization centers on the partyfication of religion.

Implications

- **Sinicization is a strategy to politically reorient China's faithful, not embrace traditional Chinese culture or values.** Sinicization seeks to subdue religion so that it aligns with the ambitions and interests of the party-state. Beijing is planning for a long-term coexistence with religion, and Sinicization is one answer to managing religious growth.
- **Sinicization efforts remain uneven.** Religious communities have some flexibility and are interpreting Sinicization in different ways. Some religions have incorporated Chinese folktales or Confucian parables into religious services. Others have embraced traditional clothing for clergy or integrated Chinese traditional architecture into building renovations. Still others have held flag-raising ceremonies, organized patriotic speech contests, or added photographs of Xi Jinping next to sacred objects. Thus far, the party-state seems content to allow flexibility, so long as Sinicization efforts show necessary reverence.
- **The long-term impact of Sinicization is uncertain.** It remains to be seen whether the Sinicization campaign will reign in religion, cultivate love and loyalty toward the CCP, or divide religious communities and foster resentment among China's faithful. Historically, processes of Sinicization have nourished religious growth in China, as external faiths have become more familiar and embedded in local traditions and social fabrics. Therefore, it is within the realm of possibility that Sinicization may increase religiosity, an outcome that Beijing is likely not anticipating.

¹² "Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Adhering to the Sinicization of Buddhism (2019-2023) [in Chinese]," Buddhist Association of China, November 14, 2019, <https://www.chinabuddhism.com.cn/e/action/ShowInfo.php?classid=506&id=40672>.

¹³ "Outline for the Five-year Year Work Plan for Adhering to the Sinicization of Islam in China (2018–2022) [in Chinese]," <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yqRjy1eNTNZdEqq8n12MKg>.

¹⁴ "Outline for the Five-Year Work Plan for Adhering to the Sinicization of Daoism (2019-2023) [in Chinese]," http://dao.china.com.cn/2019-11/14/content_40959194.htm.

STRATEGY 3: “THREE TROOPS”

The third strategy of religious management is outward facing. General Secretary Xi has called for the development of “Three Troops” (三支队伍) to address major religious issues at home and abroad.¹⁵ The Three Troops initiative brings together party and government officials, prominent religious representatives, and academic researchers to improve China’s ability to implement the Sinicization of religion, and, more importantly, to counter what is perceived as US-led, international freedom of religion initiatives.

Implications

- **Chinese strategies of religious management are shifting from defense to offense.** The Three Troops initiative is intended to counter and quiet foreign advocacy for religious freedom in China.
- **Beijing is harnessing religion for soft power purposes.** There is growing recognition that religion is a beneficial form of soft power and can be used to enhance relations with countries and win public opinion, especially through infrastructure initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

RECOMMENDATIONS

International advocacy for Chinese religious communities and calls to protect religious freedom and human rights can backfire in China because it is seen as evidence of external forces seeking to divide China, foment instability, and challenge CCP rule. However, there are steps that can and should be taken to support freedom of religion and belief.

Bilateral Engagement

Consistently raise the issue of religious freedom and human rights in China in public and in private meetings with Chinese counterparts;

- Urge Chinese authorities to release prisoners of conscience who have been detained, placed under house arrest, or imprisoned for their religion or beliefs;
- Press Chinese authorities to refrain from conflating peaceful religious activity with extremism and terrorism;

Work with US allies and partners to take similar action, especially Muslim majority partners.

Pathway for Registration

Encourage Chinese officials to create a pathway for registration of unregistered religious communities that includes direct registration with the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), not through religious patriotic associations.

Build Expertise

Prioritize funding to maintain US expertise on China. It is a national security imperative that we invest and increase support for training American students and scholars in China and Chinese

¹⁵ See, e.g., Xu Yihua, “The Background and Current Tasks of Cultivating the “Three Teams” of Religious Work: Learning from the Spirit of the 2021 National Conference on Religious Work,” *The World Religious Culture* 1 (2022): 6-11, https://fdi.fudan.edu.cn/_t2515/b0/a3/c21257a438435/page.htm; “Welcome to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Opening a New Situation for Religious Work in a New Era,” *China National Daily*, <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/report/22082392-1.htm>.

language. Federal support of DOE International Education programs, including Title VI and Fulbright-Hays is crucial.

In closing, I would like to thank the commission for your attention to this important set of issues. I look forward to answering any questions that you may have.