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SINICIZATION OF RELIGION: CHINA'S COERCIVE RELIGIOUS POLICY

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Sinicization of Religion: China's Coercive Religious Policy

Overview

Under Xi Jinping's rule as the paramount leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the government has implemented the coercive "sinicization of religion" policy, which has fundamentally transformed China's religious environment. Sinicization, or the complete subordination of religious groups to the CCP's political agenda and Marxist vision for religion, has become the core driving principle of the government's management of religious affairs. Through regulations and state-controlled religious organizations, authorities incorporate CCP ideology into every facet of religious life for Buddhists, Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, and Taoists. They also forcibly eradicate religious elements considered contradictory to the CCP's political and policy agenda with ultranationalist overtones. Government officials have installed CCP loyalists as leading religious figures, altered houses of worship with CCP-approved architecture, integrated CCP propaganda into religious doctrines, and otherwise criminalized non-CCP-backed religious activities, all with the goal to ensure the stability of CCP rule. These government measures have routinely violated the internationally protected right to freedom of religion or belief.

This report provides an overview of the Chinese government's sinicization policy and its use to repress religious groups in the country.

Background

Demographics

China is officially an *atheist state* and its government has historically viewed religion as a negative influence on society. During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, authorities *sought* the total eradication of religion, destroying thousands of houses of worship and imprisoning, torturing, and killing religious leaders and laypersons. However, changes in policy over several decades resulted in the revival of religion in China. While documenting religious demographics within the country has *proven* to be difficult, various sources have *estimated* that the number of religious adherents spans from roughly 350 million to over 850 million of the country's 1.4 billion population. In 2021, the U.S. government estimated that 18 percent of the population are Buddhist including Tibetan Buddhist; 5 percent are Christian; and 2 percent are Muslim. Other significant religious traditions include Taoism, Falun Gong, and folk religious practices.

State Control of Religion

Chinese authorities attempt to exert [total control](#) over religion through an extensive, complicated web of state laws, regulations, and policies that the CCP and various government agencies enforce. At the center of the CCP's institutional control of religion are seven state-controlled national religious organizations, often referred to as “patriotic religious associations,” and their local branches. These are the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC), the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and China Christian Council (CCC), and the Islamic Association of China (IAC).

The CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) and the government's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) oversee the state-controlled religious organizations, which are responsible for managing the religious affairs of the five officially recognized religions—Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism. Religious groups that belong to one of these five religions must register with the government in order to practice legally and submit to the intrusive supervision and control of the state-controlled religious organizations, the government, and ultimately the CCP.

The CCP and government also have attempted to stamp out other religious groups they consider as “cults”—such as Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God—that traditionally are not part of the state's “sinicization” effort. Through the CCP-linked [China Anti-Cult Association](#) (CACA), the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), and the use of the anti-cult provision ([Article 300](#)) of China's Criminal Law, the Chinese government has carried out campaigns to eliminate these religious groups, resulting in their mass [arrests](#) and [imprisonment](#). There are also reports of state-controlled religious organizations like the BAC and CACA working with the MPS to “[deprogram](#)” Falun Gong practitioners in an apparent effort to coerce them to change or renounce their faith.

Sinicization in Theory

Sinicization is a political indoctrination process that embeds the CCP and its political ideology into every aspect of religious life, from the religious beliefs themselves to the physical structure of places of worship. While the Chinese government has always imposed the values of the CCP upon its citizenry, President Xi's repeated calls for “sinicization of religion” have resulted in a systematic, explicit policy agenda targeting religious

groups nationwide. The goal of sinicization is to turn religious adherents and institutions into perfect vessels of the CCP, root out all perceived non-CCP influences—which the government often disparages as “foreign”—and subdue ethnic minority communities through forced assimilation. Sinicization and its so-called “patriotic values,” including Chinese socialism, national unity, and support for the CCP and its leadership, underpin every major government regulation for religious organizations, including the [Measures on the Administration of Religious Groups](#), [Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy](#), and [Measures for the Administration of Venues for Religious Activity](#). Even legislation not exclusively regulating religious affairs like the [Patriotic Education Law](#) explicitly [stipulate](#) patriotism for religious groups—a euphemism for political allegiance to the CCP.

February 2024 [amendments](#) to the [Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region \(XUAR\) Religious Affairs Regulations](#) showcase the all-encompassing scope of sinicization on religious life. Article 5 instructs religions to “practice the core values of socialism” and “adhere to the direction of sinicization of religions.” Article 6 calls for religious groups to manage their affairs free of “interference or control by foreign forces.” Article 11 instructs religious groups to interpret religious teachings in line with “traditional Chinese culture” and contemporary China's requirements for “development and progress,” which are nods to the CCP's cultural and economic vision for the country. Articles 14 and 15 call on religious schools to operate with “Chinese characteristics,” cultivate “patriotic religious talents,” and “correctly” interpret religious doctrine—meaning in line with CCP thought and policies. Article 26 dictates that houses of worship “reflect Chinese characteristics and style in terms of architecture, sculptures, paintings, and decorations.” Lastly, Article 7 empowers grassroots CCP members in “village committees” and “neighborhood committees” to report “illegal religious organizations, illegal preachers, illegal religious activities, or the use of religion to interfere in grassroots public affairs” to government authorities, including religious affairs bureaus. These and other articles of the XUAR Religious Affairs Regulations—like the national and many other provincial regulations on religious organizations—privilege CCP philosophy and policies and intrusive government interventions over the autonomy of religious groups and individuals.

State-controlled religious organizations produced and carried out new “Five-Year [Sinicization Work Plans](#)” (2023–2027) to bolster sinicization efforts for all five recognized religions. These work plans emphasize patriotism, loyalty to the CCP and China's political system, and conformity of religious doctrines, sermons,

rituals, and architectural styles of places of worship with the CCP's ideological requirements. For example, the 2023 [Work Plan for the Sinicization of Protestant Christianity](#) further ingrains the CCP and its sinicization policy into Christianity. It calls on the TSPM to deepen the sinicization of Protestant Christianity—most notably in terms of Protestant theology—and to “clarify political objectives, strengthen political convictions, and elevate political stance” in accordance with the CCP's political demands. The 2023 [Work Plan for the Sinicization of Taoism](#)—a religion native to China—similarly emphasizes the need to “strengthen ideological and political learning and continuously improve political consciousness.” Accordingly, Taoists must carry out political education, cultivate patriotic feelings, conduct patriotic activities, and raise awareness of the Taoist community's history of support for the CCP.

In addition to regulatory policies, CCP and government officials, including the leaders of the state-controlled religious associations, advocate for the government's sinicization agenda through speeches, seminars, forums, conferences, interviews, and lectures. BAC Chair Master Shi Yanjue has [lectured](#) on the need to adopt President Xi's ideology on religion and Chinese socialism. CTA Chair Master Li Guangfu has emphasized sinicization and [called](#) on Taoist communities to be “patriotic,” underscoring the importance of loyalty to the CCP and China's political system. Bishop Joseph Shen Bin—chair of the BCCCC and vice chair of the CCPA—too, has [urged](#) clergy and laypersons to strengthen their patriotism and political loyalty to the CCP as the foundation for sinicizing Catholicism. IAC Chair Imam Yang Faming has [stressed](#) the need to sinicize Islamic theology with Chinese characteristics and actively guide Islam to adapt to socialist society. Reverend Xu Xiaohong, chair of the TSPM, has [insisted](#) on the importance of patriotism and sinicization of Protestantism, even [saying](#) that “the marks of foreign religion must be mercilessly eradicated from Chinese Protestant Christianity.”

Overall, sinicization demands unequivocal loyalty to the CCP, including wholehearted acceptance of the CCP's conceptualizations of patriotism, national unity, the Chinese nation, the Chinese motherland, religion and socialism with Chinese characteristics, and Chinese culture. These ideological principles guide the state's approach to enforcing sinicization, resulting in severe repression and gross religious freedom violations for religious groups and individuals who neither espouse nor embody CCP ideology.

Sinicization in Practice

Muslims

China's ruthless enforcement of sinicization has resulted in egregious human rights abuses against religious groups, including predominately Muslim Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples living in Xinjiang. Since 2017, Chinese authorities have committed [genocide](#) and [crimes against humanity](#) against Uyghurs under the guise of sinicization and [combating](#) “religious extremism, terrorism, and separatism.” Authorities [placed](#) an estimated one million Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in political reeducation camps, forcing them to pledge support to the CCP and renounce their language, culture, and religious traditions. According to [human rights organizations](#), camp officials forced Uyghurs to learn Mandarin Chinese, recite national and local laws and policies, watch pro-government propaganda, sing political songs, study CCP speeches, chant “Long live Xi Jinping” before meals, and forsake their ethnic and religious identities. Officials also subjected detainees to many other abuses in the camps, including torture, forced labor, rape, forced sterilization, and forced abortion.

In addition, the government has eliminated religious aspects of public life in Xinjiang deemed inconsistent with sinicization in order to diminish the influence of non-CCP-endorsed Islam. Authorities have [closed](#) and destroyed religious sites, including mosques and shrines central to preserving Uyghur culture. They have removed iconic architecture from mosques, like domes and minarets, because of their perceived cultural ties to the Arab world and replaced them with CCP-approved Chinese-style architecture. Public security officers have detained and imprisoned [male](#) and [female](#) Muslim religious leaders and scholars. The government has [sought](#) to turn religious occasions into celebrations of communism and furthermore has [banned](#) traditional Islamic practices such as wearing beards and veils, using religiously significant Uyghur names, and [fasting](#) and [breaking](#) fasts collectively during Ramadan. It has also forcibly [separated](#) hundreds of thousands of Uyghur children from their parents and placed them in state-run boarding schools to forcibly assimilate them to Han Chinese culture and cut them off from their native familial, linguistic, cultural, and religious ties.

Chinese authorities have also [targeted](#) Hui Muslims with similar sinicization tactics, despite the fact that Hui Muslims speak Chinese and have adapted to Chinese culture over centuries. In both Ningxia and Gansu provinces, the government has [engaged](#) in mosque consolidation campaigns, resulting in the decommission, closure, demolition, and conversion of mosques for

secular use. Officials have [removed](#) domes and minarets from mosques and [replaced](#) them with pagodas and other Chinese-style architecture. According to media reports, authorities in Yunnan Province [completed](#) the sinicization of the country's last major Arab-style mosque, the Grand Mosque of Shadian. Authorities have moreover [displayed](#) CCP political slogans in place of religious imagery and texts at mosques, [raised](#) Chinese state flags above mosques, and in some cases [removed](#) mosque ablution halls. Authorities have [banned](#) children from entering mosques, replaced independent mosque committee members with government officials, and [forced](#) imams to integrate “core socialist values” into their sermons.

Other Muslim groups have had to [endure](#) restrictions on religious life as well, including the replacement of Arabic religious phrases with CCP mantra, removal of halal food signs, closure of religious schools, and barring of minors from learning Arabic.

Tibetan Buddhists

The Chinese government has perpetrated gross religious freedom violations in its campaign to sinicize Tibetan Buddhism. Over the years, authorities have [subjected](#) monks and nuns to political reeducation; [installed](#) CCP officials to run monastic affairs; altered or [removed](#) Tibetan Buddhist religious imagery, texts, statues, and architecture from monasteries and shrines; and [prohibited](#) pilgrimages and other religious activities during the Buddhist holy month of Saga Dawa. They have also [separated](#) one million Tibetan children from their families and placed them in state-run boarding schools to forcibly assimilate them to Han Chinese culture and sever ties to their native familial, language, culture, and religious traditions. However, the most distinct and troubling component of this sinicization effort is the government's interference in the reincarnation process of high-ranking Tibetan Buddhist religious figures.

For decades, Chinese authorities have [imposed](#) bureaucratic oversight and regulation of the reincarnation process, with government-approved Tibetan Buddhist figures [operating](#) on behalf of the government and [advocating](#) for sinicization. The most consequential reincarnation has been Beijing's elevation of a state-backed Panchen Lama. According to tradition, the Panchen Lama is the second-highest-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism who is tasked with finding the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, the highest-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism. In May 1995, the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso recognized six-year-old [Gedhun Choekyi Nyima](#) as the 11th Panchen Lama. Three days later, Chinese authorities abducted Nyima and his family. In November 1995, the Chinese

government oversaw the selection and installation of another child, Gyaltzen Norbu, as the Panchen Lama. Since then, no independent observers have been able to confirm the wellbeing and whereabouts of Nyima. Norbu, supported by the government, has pursued the CCP's agenda—including the policy of sinicization—among Tibetan religious communities and engaged in religious activities as the Panchen Lama, despite lacking legitimacy from Tibetan Buddhists themselves.

Norbu has spoken at conferences, meetings, and religious events in China, actively [promoting](#) the CCP's political rule and sinicization policy in Tibet. In a November 2023 speech, Norbu [referred](#) to the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”—the Xi Jinping administration's signature political slogan or vision, known as the “Chinese dream”—as an “inevitable historical trend” that requires the Tibetan Buddhist community to adapt by being patriotic, adhering to CCP leadership, protecting the unity of the motherland, and maintaining the trajectory of the sinicization of Tibetan Buddhism. Without such measures, he argued, Tibetan Buddhism risked being “eliminated by history.” In his travels to Tibet, Norbu has [pushed](#) Tibetan Buddhism to “adapt to socialist society and the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics”—that is, to be loyal to CCP rule and support China's political system—imploping Tibetans to study, promote, and implement the “spirit” of the CCP's 20th National Congress. In one instance, Norbu [ordained](#) monks in the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, the historic seat of the Panchen Lama, [instructing](#) them to “be grateful to the [Chinese Communist] Party, listen to the Party, follow the Party, [and] promote the Party.” Chinese officials have further imposed Norbu's government-backed spiritual authority by [paying](#) Tibetans to accept his blessings, with some receiving him under [duress](#) from security forces.

In addition, Chinese authorities have repressed all public and private references and reverence to the Dalai Lama, whom the Chinese government views as a political threat but the vast majority of Tibetan Buddhists recognize as the true leader of Tibetan Buddhism. A fundamental component of the government's sinicization project of Tibetan Buddhism is the eradication of the Dalai Lama's influence among Tibetans. Authorities have detained, imprisoned, and tortured Tibetans for [possessing](#) images of the Dalai Lama or [sharing](#) them on social media; [talking](#) about the Dalai Lama in public; [sharing](#) the Dalai Lama's teachings and writings with others; [organizing](#) celebrations of the Dalai Lama's birthday; holding religious ceremonies [praying](#) for the Dalai Lama; [sending](#) donations abroad to the Dalai Lama and other religious leaders; [singing](#) about the Dalai Lama; and [supporting](#) the Dalai Lama's positions on religious matters.

Chinese authorities intend to interfere in the Dalai Lama's own reincarnation by *installing* a CCP-obedient successor, *arguing* his reincarnation must comply with Chinese law. Reportedly, Chinese officials have secretly met in 2023 to start *planning* the selection process for the Dalai Lama's successor. Chinese state media has *spread* CCP propaganda on the issue. Authorities have reportedly *set up* museum exhibits in Beijing and Lhasa about the Dalai Lama's reincarnation process, emphasizing the government's narrative. They have also begun taking steps to *subdue* Tibetan Buddhist monks by prohibiting certain religious activities following the Dalai Lama's passing and the government's efforts to appoint his successor.

Catholic and Protestant Christians

Authorities target Catholic and Protestant Christians for sinicization. The government has *ordered* the *removal* of crosses from churches, *replaced* images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary with pictures of President Xi, *required* the display of CCP slogans at the entrances of churches, *censored* religious texts, *imposed* CCP-approved religious materials, and *instructed* clergy to preach CCP ideology. While the state-controlled Christian religious organizations have pushed and enforced the state's restrictions on religion, tens of millions of Christians have opted not to join these organizations and instead worship independently.

Underground Catholics do not recognize the spiritual authority of the government-backed religious clergy and instead view the Vatican as the sole legitimator of spiritual authority, which the CCP views as a *threat*. While the Vatican and China *signed* an undisclosed agreement in 2018 reportedly to cooperate on the appointment of bishops in the country, the government has unilaterally *installed* CCP-aligned bishops without the Vatican's consultation and approval. Furthermore, the government *continues* to forcibly *disappear* underground Catholic leaders who refuse to join the CCPA-BCCCC. Independent house church Protestants face similar *repression* for not joining the TSPM-CCC, with the government *detaining*, arresting, and incarcerating independent Protestant leaders and laypersons.

Chinese Buddhists and Taoists

The Chinese government has not spared perceived traditional and majority ethnic Han Chinese religious groups like Chinese Buddhists and Taoists from sinicization. Authorities have *destroyed* temples, *posted* CCP slogans on temple grounds, and *ordered* the removal or destruction of statues and religious architecture from temples. Any religious activity viewed as directly contradicting the CCP's vision for patriotic activity could lead to criminal and/or administrative punishments.

Conclusion

Sinicization entrenches the CCP's control and its vision for the modern Chinese state into every aspect of religious life by forcing groups from the five officially recognized religions to conform their beliefs, activities, expression, attire, leadership, language, houses of worship, and more to CCP ideology. The government creates policies and regulatory measures to sinicize religion and authorizes state-controlled religious organizations to oversee their implementation. Enforcement of such sinicization policies has consistently resulted in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom and related human rights, including genocide, crimes against humanity, mass incarceration, enforced disappearances, and the destruction of cultural and religious heritage.



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