



Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

China: Christians

Version 3.0

November 2019

Preface

Purpose

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and analysis of COI for use by Home Office decision makers handling particular types of protection and human rights claims (as set out in [the basis of claim](#) section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into two main sections: (1) analysis and assessment of COI and other evidence; and (2) COI. These are explained in more detail below.

Assessment

This section analyses the evidence relevant to this note – i.e. the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw – by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment on whether, **in general**:

- A person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- A person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- A person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- Claims are likely to justify granting asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- If a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as ‘clearly unfounded’ under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case’s specific facts.

Country of origin information

The country information in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), dated April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation’s (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual, 2013](#). Namely, taking into account the COI’s relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

The structure and content of the country information section follows a [terms of reference](#) which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to this note.

All information included in the note was published or made publicly available on or before the ‘cut-off’ date(s) in the country information section. Any event taking place or report/article published after these date(s) is not included.

All information is publicly accessible or can be made publicly available, and is from generally reliable sources. Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion.

Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information, and
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

Multiple sourcing is used to ensure that the information is accurate, balanced and corroborated, so that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture at the time of publication is provided of the issues relevant to this note.

Information is compared and contrasted, whenever possible, to provide a range of views and opinions. The inclusion of a source, however, is not an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a brief footnote; full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

Feedback

Our goal is to continuously improve our material. Therefore, if you would like to comment on this note, please email [the Country Policy and Information Team](#).

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The [Independent Advisory Group on Country Information](#) (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to support him in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

5th Floor

Globe House

89 Eccleston Square

London, SW1V 1PN

Email: chiefinspector@icinspector.gsi.gov.uk

Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

Contents

Assessment	5
1. Introduction	5
1.1 Basis of claim	5
1.2 Points to note	5
2. Consideration of issues	5
2.1 Credibility.....	5
2.2 Exclusion.....	5
2.3 Refugee convention reason.....	5
2.4 Risk	6
2.5 Protection	9
2.6 Internal relocation.....	9
2.7 Certification	9
Country information	10
3. Religion in China	10
3.1 Religious demography.....	10
3.2 Legal framework.....	11
4. Christians	13
4.1 Registered and unregistered groups	13
4.2 Practices.....	14
5. State treatment of registered Christians groups	14
5.1 General state approach to Christianity	14
5.2 Treatment of Catholics	16
5.3 Treatment of Protestants	17
6. State treatment of unregistered Christian groups	19
6.2 Cults	23
6.3 Proselytising	26
Terms of Reference	27
Bibliography	28
Sources cited	28
Sources consulted but not cited.....	30
Version control	31

Assessment

Updated: 25 November 2019

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

1.1.1 Fear of persecution by the state due to the person's Christian faith and/or involvement with unregistered Christian churches.

1.2 Points to note

1.2.1 For the purposes of this guidance a person's Christian faith includes Catholics and Protestants.

[Back to Contents](#)

2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).

2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.2 Exclusion

2.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.

2.2.2 For further guidance on the exclusion clauses and restricted leave, see the [Asylum Instruction on Exclusion: Article 1F of the Refugee Convention](#) and the [Asylum Instruction on Restricted Leave](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.3 Refugee convention reason

2.3.1 The person's actual or imputed religion.

2.3.2 Establishing a convention reason alone is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question to be addressed in each case is whether the particular person will face a real risk of persecution on account of their actual or imputed convention reason.

2.3.3 For further guidance on Convention reasons see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.4 Risk

- 2.4.1 The exact number of Christians in China is unknown but is estimated by various sources to be between 100 and 130 million – perhaps 10% of the population (see [Religious demography](#)).
- 2.4.2 The Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religion for ‘normal religious activities’ but does not define what these include. Members of the 5 officially recognised religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism) must register with the government’s Patriotic Associations, which seek to regulate and monitor the activities of registered religious groups. Unregistered religious groups are illegal and risk having their places of worship closed down and members of the congregation arrested and detained (see [Legal framework](#) and [State treatment of unregistered Christian groups](#)).
- 2.4.3 In the country guidance case of [QH](#) (Christians – risk) (China) CG heard 6 June 2013 and promulgated March 2014 the Upper Tribunal found that:
- ‘In general, the risk of persecution for Christians expressing and living their faith in China is very low, indeed statistically virtually negligible... There has been a rapid growth in numbers of Christians in China, both in the three state-registered churches and the unregistered or ‘house’ churches. Individuals move freely between State-registered churches and the unregistered churches, according to their preferences as to worship.’ (para 137 (1 and 2))
- 2.4.4 With regard to Christians in State-registered churches the Upper Tribunal found:
- ‘Worship in State-registered churches is supervised by the Chinese government’s State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) under the [Religious Affairs Regulations] RRA’ (para 137(3i))
 - ‘The measures of control set out in the [Religious Affairs Regulations] RRA, and their implementation, whether by the Chinese state or by non-state actors, are not, in general, sufficiently severe as to amount to persecution, serious harm, or ill-treatment engaging international protection.’ (para 137 (3ii))
 - Exceptionally, certain dissident bishops or prominent individuals who challenge, or who are perceived to challenge, public order and the operation of the Religious Affairs Regulations 2005 – which set out the conditions under which Christian churches and leaders may operate within China – may be at risk of persecution, serious harm, or ill-treatment engaging international protection, on a fact-specific basis (para 137 (3iii)).
- 2.4.5 With regard to unregistered or house churches the Upper Tribunal found:
- ‘In general, the evidence is that the many millions of Christians worshipping within unregistered churches are able to meet and express their faith as they wish to do.’ (para 137 (4i))

- ‘The evidence does not support a finding that there is a consistent pattern of persecution, serious harm, or other breach of fundamental human rights for unregistered churches or their worshippers.’ (para 137 (4ii)).
 - ‘...in general, any adverse treatment of Christian communities by the Chinese authorities is confined to closing down church buildings where planning permission has not been obtained for use as a church, and/or preventing or interrupting unauthorised public worship or demonstrations’ (para 137 (4iii)).
 - There may be a risk of persecution, serious harm, or ill-treatment engaging international protection for certain individual Christians who choose to worship in unregistered churches **and** who conduct themselves in such a way as to attract the local authorities’ attention to them or their political, social or cultural views (para 137 (4iv) of the determination).
- 2.4.6 Since QH was heard the government has continued with a programme of sinicization of religion where religions are required to adapt religious practices and doctrines to conform to traditional Chinese culture and values. In February 2018 revised religious regulations came into effect which allowed state-registered religious organisations to possess property, publish state approved literature, train and approve clergy, and collect donations. The revised regulations also banned under 18s from religious activity, forced churches to install surveillance cameras, imposed restrictions of times and location of religious celebration and required some religious symbols, including crosses, to be removed from churches. In April 2018 the government introduced legislation which banned online sales of the Bible (see [Legal framework](#) and [State treatment of registered Christians groups](#)).
- 2.4.7 The Holy See has declared the Chinese CPA’s (Catholic Patriotic Association) method of appointment of bishops ‘incompatible with Catholic doctrine’ but the Vatican and the Chinese authorities have been negotiating over the system of bishop appointments and have reportedly reached a provisional agreement (see [treatment of Catholics](#)).
- 2.4.8 Since QH was heard the government has continued to put pressure on house churches by ordering protestant house churches to join the state sanctioned Three-Self Church. Those house churches which fail to comply are liable to be shut down or face increased restrictions on their ability to conduct their religious activities. Leaders and members of both registered and unregistered churches have faced increased harassment and arbitrary arrests; typically, leaders of house churches are more vulnerable to this type of treatment, but since 2014 pastors of sanctioned churches have also faced detention or arrest. Thousands of Christians and church leaders were reported to have been detained in 2018 although these were short term detentions and most did not lead to criminal charges (see [State treatment of registered Christians groups](#) and [State treatment of unregistered Christian groups](#)).
- 2.4.9 On 3 June 2014, the government published a list of 20 ‘cults’ including several Christian groups and began a crackdown against these organizations calling them ‘evil cults’. In September 2017 the China Anti Cult

website restated the list of banned groups and identified 11 of those as being 'dangerous'. Internet usage to disseminate information about cults is criminalized and involvement in a cult and can attract a maximum sentence of more than 7 years in prison. Offenses are considered more serious if they are aimed at minors or if the perpetrators are working with non-Chinese nationals (see [Cults](#)).

- 2.4.10 Members of banned 'cults' may be subject to police harassment, imprisonment, and torture, with leaders and some members being charged with 'organizing and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law'. However, if members have been coerced into joining or repent and leave the cult there is an option for punishment not to be imposed and it is more likely that the government's interest in cult activities is aimed at identifying and punishing leaders of those groups (see [Cults](#)).
- 2.4.11 Crackdowns on 'cults' have also affected unregistered mainstream churches, as officials sometimes have had difficulty distinguishing them from designated cults (see [Cults](#)).
- 2.4.12 The government of China has continued to impose restrictions on Christians, and these have intensified since QH was heard in 2013. However, the situation for most Christians has not changed significantly, with the risk of treatment amounting to persecution for expressing and living their faith still being very low. There are not 'very strong grounds supported by cogent evidence' to justify a departure from QH.
- 2.4.13 However, dissident bishops or certain individual Christians who worship in unregistered churches and who conduct themselves in such a way as to attract the local authorities' attention to them or their political, social or cultural views may face an increased risk of adverse state interest, including harassment and detention. Public worship or expressions of a person's faith are more vulnerable to adverse treatment than private worship (including in small groups). Religious practice that the government perceives as being in conflict with its broader ethnic, political or security policies is at high risk of adverse official attention. The onus will be on the person to show that how they observe and express their Christian faith will bring them to the adverse attention of the authorities and result in them facing treatment that amounts to persecution (see [State treatment of registered Christians groups](#) and [State treatment of unregistered Christian groups](#)).
- 2.4.14 Members of groups that are considered to be illegal cults may be at risk of persecution, however this will depend on their actions and activities and whether these are likely to attract the local authorities' attention. Cult leaders, however, may be able to demonstrate a real risk of persecution or serious harm. Each case will need to be considered on its facts, with the onus on the person to demonstrate that they are at risk of persecution (see [Cults](#)).
- 2.4.15 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.5 Protection

- 2.5.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state, they are unlikely to be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.5.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.6 Internal relocation

- 2.6.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state, it is unlikely to be reasonable to expect them to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.6.2 Where the person's fear relates to local officials, the Upper Tribunal in [QH](#) held that in the light of the wide variation in local officials' response to unregistered churches, individual Christians at risk in their local areas will normally be able to relocate safely elsewhere in China. The exception to this would be where the person is the subject of an arrest warrant, or their name is on a black list, or they have a pending sentence. Given the scale of internal migration, and the vast geographical and population size of China, the lack of an appropriate hukou alone will not render internal relocation unreasonable or unduly harsh (para 137 (v,vi and vii)).
- 2.6.3 Decision makers must give careful consideration to the relevance and reasonableness of internal relocation on a case-by-case basis taking full account of the individual circumstances of the particular person.
- 2.6.4 For further information on the hukou residence registration system and internal relocation see country information policy note on [China: Background including actors of protection and internal relocation](#).
- 2.6.5 For further guidance on considering internal relocation and factors to be taken into account, see the [Asylum Instruction on Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.7 Certification

- 2.7.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.7.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

Country information

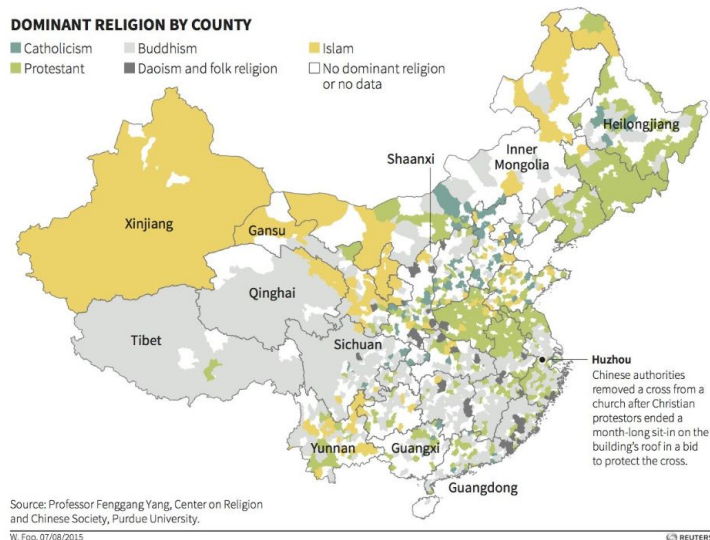
Section 3 updated: 23 October 2019

3. Religion in China

3.1 Religious demography

- 3.1.1 The Central Intelligence Agency's world factbook stated that China had an estimated population of over 1.38 billion¹. Chinese government statistics record approximately 100 million religious believers² however Freedom House notes, in a special report, that 'China is home to over 350 million religious believers and hundreds of millions more who follow folk traditions. According to them 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'.³
- 3.1.2 The estimated number of Christians living in China varies greatly. The Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) noted in October 2018 that 'the government tallies twenty-nine million Christian adherents, while outside organizations have placed their estimates substantially higher. In 2010, the Pew Research Center calculated sixty-eight million Christians in China, or approximately 5 percent of the country's population. Other independent estimates suggest somewhere between 100 and 130 million.'⁴
- 3.1.3 BBC News noted in December 2018 that the Christian population had grown steadily in recent years and estimated that it was now 100 million⁵.
- 3.1.4 The below diagram shows the dominant religions in China by province⁶.

Major religions in China



¹ CIA, 'World fact book, China- people and society', updated 14 May 2019, [url](#).

² CFR, 'Christianity in China', 11 October 2018, [url](#).

³ Freedom House, 'Special report- The Battle for China's Spirit', February 2017, [url](#).

⁴ CFR, 'Christianity in China', 11 October 2018, [url](#).

⁵ BBC News, China's pre-Christmas Church crackdown raises alarm, 18 December 2018, [url](#).

⁶ Purdue University's Centre on Religion and Chinese Society, undated, [url](#).

- 3.1.5 The Australian Government's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) 'Country Report for 2019' (the 2019 DFAT Report) noted that 'Discrepancies between official statistics and international estimates are due to the fact that China does not recognise worshippers who engage in religious activity outside of state-sanctioned organisations or believers who are under 18.'⁷

[Back to Contents](#)

3.2 Legal framework

- 3.2.1 Revised religious regulations came into effect in 2018. All religious establishments in China are bound by these regulations, which define the administrative framework around religious activities. An unofficial translation of the Religious Affairs Regulations 2017 can be accessed [here](#)⁸.

- 3.2.2 The Chinese government has continued with its programme of "Sinicization" (to make more Chinese in character or form) of religion and according to the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), 2018 Annual Report (the 2018 CECC annual report), published on 10 October 2018:

'Party and government officials continued to develop and promote policies aimed at shaping religious practice in China to promote and assimilate to a Chinese cultural identity. One policy document from the State Administration for Religious Affairs called for interpreting religious teachings and doctrines in ways that conform to "China's outstanding traditional culture," promoting patriotic education and activities within religious communities, and impelling the religious communities to exhibit Chinese "characteristics" and "style" in religious thinking, institutions, rituals, behavior, and architecture, among other aspects. Party and government officials also continued to develop policies to resist the perceived threat of foreign forces that use religion to "infiltrate" Chinese society. According to international experts on Chinese religion, officials view Christianity, Islam, and Tibetan Buddhism as retaining undue foreign influence while considering Chinese Buddhism and Taoism to be integrated with Chinese culture.'⁹

- 3.2.3 The Council for Foreign Relations (CFR), 'Christianity in China' report of October 2018 noted that:

'The State Council, the government's administrative authority, passed new regulations on religious affairs, which took effect in February 2018, to allow state-registered religious organizations to possess property, publish literature, train and approve clergy, and collect donations. Yet alongside these rights come heightened government controls. The revised rules include restrictions on religious schooling and the times and locations of religious celebrations, as well as monitoring of online religious activity and reporting donations that exceed 100,000 yuan.'¹⁰

⁷ DFAT, 'Country Report', 21 October 2019, [url](#).

⁸ China Law Translate, 'Religious Affairs Regulations 2017', 7 September 2017, [url](#).

⁹ CECC, '2018 Annual Report', 10 October 2018, [url](#).

¹⁰ CFR, 'Christianity in China', 11 October 2018, [url](#).

3.2.4 Freedom House, in its 'Freedom in the World 2019' report, (the 2019 Freedom House report), covering events in 2018, noted that: 'New regulations on religious affairs that took effect in February 2018 strengthened controls on places of worship, travel for religious purposes, and children's religious education. In May 2018, online retailers were barred from selling copies of the Bible'.¹¹

3.2.5 The US State Department's report on International Religious Freedom (IRF), covering events in 2018 (the 2018 USSD IRF report) stated that:

'The constitution states citizens have "freedom of religious belief," but limits protections for religious practice to "normal religious activities." The constitution does not define "normal." It says religion may not be used to disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system. The constitution provides for the right to hold or not to hold a religious belief. State organs, public organizations, and individuals may not discriminate against citizens "who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion." The law does not allow legal action to be taken against the government based on the religious freedom protections afforded by the constitution. Criminal law allows the state to sentence government officials to up to two years in prison if they violate a citizen's religious freedom.

'CCP members and members of the armed forces are required to be atheists and are forbidden from engaging in religious practice. Members found to belong to religious organizations are subject to expulsion, although these rules are not universally enforced. The clear majority of public office holders are CCP members, and membership is widely considered a prerequisite for success in a government career. These restrictions on religious belief and practice also apply to retired CCP cadres and party members. The law bans certain religious or spiritual groups. The criminal law defines banned groups as "cult organizations" and provides for criminal prosecution of individuals belonging to such groups and punishment of up to life in prison.'¹²

3.2.6 The 2019 DFAT Report noted that:

'Chinese law recognises five religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism), members of which must register with the government's Patriotic Associations [government affiliated organisations which seek to regulate and monitor the activities of registered religious organisations on behalf of the CCP]. These organisations must be independent of foreign associations (for example the Vatican). [...] The RRAs: restrict religious education in schools; restrict the times and locations of religious celebrations; impose fines for organising illegal religious events or fundraising; detail procedures for approval and monitoring of religious training institutions and monitoring online religious activity; detail a requirement to report all donations over RMB 100,000 (AUD 20,750); prohibit registered religious organisations from distributing unapproved literature, associating with unregistered religious groups, and accepting foreign donations (previously permitted); and prohibit foreigners from

¹¹ Freedom House, 'Freedom in the World 2019', 4 February 2019, [url](#).

¹² USSD, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2018', 21 June 2019, [url](#).

proselytising. Parallel provisions in the Foreign NGO Law also prohibit foreigners from donating funds to Chinese religious organisations or raising funds on their behalf.¹³

[Back to Contents](#)

Section 4 updated: 23 October 2019

4. Christians

4.1 Registered and unregistered groups

4.1.1 Freedom House's Special report on the Battle for China's Spirit (The Freedom House Special Report) published in February 2017 noted that:

'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, 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. Nevertheless, Christianity is also prevalent in rural areas

'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.'¹⁴

4.1.2 DFAT noted that 'Registered religious organisations may not distribute unapproved literature nor associate with unregistered religious groups.'¹⁵

4.1.3 The Council for Foreign Relations (CFR), Christianity in China report of October 2018 noted that 'Christianity in China is overseen by three major entities: The Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the China Christian Council, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. To register as a state-sanctioned Christian organization, religious leaders must receive training to "adapt" doctrine to government and CCP thinking. China does not differentiate among Christian denominations beyond Catholicism and Protestantism.'¹⁶

4.1.4 Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) noted that 'Religious groups in China must register with the government to be allowed to hold services and carry out every day religious activities [...].'¹⁷

4.1.1 The DFAT report from October 2019 stated in relation to Christians in China: 'unregistered churchgoers outnumber members of official churches nearly two to one. In addition to state-sanctioned Catholic and (non-

¹³ DFAT, 'Country Report', 3 October 2019, [url](#).

¹⁴ Freedom House, 'Special report- The Battle for China's Spirit', February 2017, [url](#).

¹⁵ DFAT, 'Country Report', 21 December 2017, [url](#).

¹⁶ CFR, 'Christianity in China', 11 October 2018, [url](#).

¹⁷ CSW, "Faithful disobedience' in the face of a relentless crackdown ...' 1 February 2019, [url](#).

denominational) Protestant churches in China, SARA historically permitted friends and family to hold small, informal prayer meetings without official registration. This, combined with the controlled nature of religious worship amongst registered Christian institutions, has led to the proliferation of sizeable unregistered Christian communities in both rural and urban China. Independent churches, otherwise known as ‘house’ or ‘family’ churches (for Protestant organisations), and ‘underground’ churches (for Catholic organisations) are private religious forums that adherents create in their own homes or other places of worship. ‘House’ or ‘underground’ churches vary in size from around 30 to several thousand participants/attendees. There has been an increase in state control of both registered and unregistered churches in recent years, including targeted campaigns to remove hundreds of rooftop crosses from churches, forced demolitions of churches, and harassment and imprisonment of Christian pastors and priests. Some churches deliberately restrict their numbers to avoid attracting adverse official attention. Government officials are more likely to scrutinise churches with foreign affiliations, or those that develop large or influential local networks, and house churches are under pressure to ‘sinicise’ their religious teachings.

‘Leaders of both registered and unregistered churches are also subject to greater scrutiny than ordinary worshippers are, and leaders of registered churches must obtain permission to travel abroad. Church leaders (registered or unregistered) who participate in protest activity on behalf of their congregations or elsewhere are at high risk of official sanction, but this is likely to relate more to their activism than to their religious affiliation or practice.’¹⁸

[Back to Contents](#)

4.2 Practices

4.2.1 The Freedom House Special Report noted that

‘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. 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).’¹⁹

[Back to Contents](#)

Section 5 updated: 23 October 2019

5. State treatment of registered Christians groups

5.1 General state approach to Christianity

5.1.1 The Freedom House Special Report stated that:

¹⁸ DFAT, ‘Country Report’, 2019, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

¹⁹ Freedom House, ‘Special report- The Battle for China’s Spirit’, February 2017, [url](#).

‘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.

‘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.’²⁰

5.1.2 CSW noted in their blog ‘Freedom of Religion or Belief in full’ that:

‘Since the revised regulations on religious affairs came into effect on 1 February 2018, reports have emerged of the removal of over 7,000 crosses in Henan province alone.

‘[...] in the wake of the revised regulations authorities across China continue to harass worshippers and restrict religious observance at state-approved churches by removing religious symbols from buildings, banning under-18s from religious activities, and forcing churches to install cameras and sing pro-Communist songs.’²¹

5.1.3 The 2019 annual report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom covering events in 2018 (the 2019 USCIRF report) stated that:

‘According to religious freedom advocates, more than 5,000 Christians and 1,000 church leaders were arrested in 2018 because of their faith or religious practices (most of these arrests were short-term detentions that did not lead to criminal charges).

‘Authorities closed down or demolished thousands of churches or religious sites, including Zion Church in Beijing; the Golden Lampstand Church in Shanxi Province; and the Bible Reformed Church, House of David Church, and Rongguili Lane Church in Guangdong Province.

‘There were numerous reports throughout 2018 of authorities attempting to replace crosses, pictures of Jesus, and other symbols of the Christian faith with images of Xi Jinping. In Henan Province, local authorities required churches to remove the first commandment from lists of the Ten Commandments on the grounds that it placed loyalty to God above loyalty to the CCP. Even house churches that were not shut down faced increased restrictions on their ability to conduct religious activity, and in April, the government banned online sales of the Bible’²²

²⁰ Freedom House, ‘Special report- The Battle for China’s Spirit’, February 2017, [url](#).

²¹ CSW, “Faithful disobedience’ in the face of a relentless crackdown ...’ 1 February 2019, [url](#).

²² USCIRF, ‘2019 Annual Report’, April 2019, [url](#).

5.2 Treatment of Catholics

5.2.1 The Freedom House Special Report noted that ‘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.’²³

5.2.2 The 2018 CECC annual report noted that:

‘Chinese officials impede the freedom under international standards for Chinese Catholic congregations to be led by clergy who are selected and who conduct their ministry as called for by Catholic religious beliefs. Officials continued to insist that bishops be “self-selected and self-ordained”—that is, selected through patriotic religious organizations in consultation with government and Party officials, and then ordained by Chinese bishops. Many Chinese Catholics, sometimes known as “underground Catholics,” avoid the ministry of such bishops because they believe legitimate ecclesiastical authority can be conferred only by the Pope’s mandate, and they also object to affiliation with the patriotic religious association for Chinese Catholics, the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA).

‘The Holy See has declared the CPA “incompatible with Catholic doctrine” because it claims authority over Chinese bishops and their church communities while being backed by the Chinese government and maintaining independence from the Holy See. Foreign media reported that local officials pressured underground Catholic leaders to join the CPA in Fujian, Gansu, Hebei, and Zhejiang provinces, in some cases by holding bishops in official custody for periods ranging from one to seven months.

‘The Chinese government and the Holy See continued negotiations regarding control over the system of bishop appointments. In September 2018, the Wall Street Journal reported that an agreement was imminent. Under the deal, Chinese authorities would nominate future Chinese bishops that the Holy See would be able to veto. The Holy See would also recognize seven “illegitimate bishops” approved by the state; the Holy See had directed two underground bishops to step down to make way for two of these state-backed bishops in December 2017. Both sides reportedly agreed not to publish the agreement after its signing.

‘[...] At the national level, the two state-sanctioned national religious organizations for Catholics issued instructions to all local dioceses under their purview to report on local plans for implementation of the five-year plan passed in May 2018 to “sinicize” Catholicism in China. The “sinicization” of Catholicism has been described by one top government official as adapting interpretations of Catholic doctrine to what is required by Chinese development and traditional culture.’²⁴

5.2.3 The 2019 USCIRF report noted that:

²³ Freedom House, ‘Special report- The Battle for China’s Spirit’, February 2017, [url](#).

²⁴ CECC, ‘2018 Annual Report’, 10 October 2018, [url](#).

'On September 22, 2018, the Vatican and China reached a provisional agreement under which the pope would rehabilitate seven bishops from the state-run Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) who had been excommunicated, in return for a veto over any future appointments by the Chinese government. The deal was controversial among Chinese Catholics, particularly because the Chinese government cited it as justification for pressuring clergy and members of the underground church to join the CCPA (an estimated half of China's Catholics worship in underground churches).'²⁵

5.2.4 On 28 June 2019, Reuters reported that:

'The Vatican asked China's communist government [...] to stop intimidating Catholic clergy who want to remain unequivocally loyal to the pope and refuse to sign ambiguous official registration forms. [...] Under Chinese law, priests and bishops must register with the state. They also must sign a form accepting the principle of independence, autonomy and self-administration of the Church in China. Some have refused, fearing that it could jeopardize their fidelity to the pope as their religious leader and the independence of the local Church on doctrinal matters.'²⁶

5.2.5 The 2019 DFAT Report noted that

'The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) has managed Catholic affairs in China, including the appointment of bishops, since 1957. The CCPA does not recognise the authority of the Holy See to appoint bishops. Relations between the Vatican (which recognises Taiwan) and the PRC have varied over time. [...] In the past, local authorities required priests to submit sermons and prayers in advance for approval and to regularly provide names and addresses of congregation members. Sources report this is no longer required in areas where the Catholic Church has built trust with local officials over time.'²⁷

[Back to Contents](#)

5.3 Treatment of Protestants

5.3.1 The 2019 DFAT Report noted that:

'The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), established in 1949, oversees China's "post denominational" (i.e. non-denominational) Protestant church and its estimated 23 to 30 million members (official statistics). The "Three-Self" is a Chinese abbreviation for the church's three principles of self-administration, self-financing and self-evangelisation. The Chinese Christian Council (CCC) and the TSPM supervise approximately 60,000 registered Protestant churches and several hundred thousand affiliated meeting points.'²⁸

5.3.2 The 2018 CECC annual report noted that:

'Party and government officials maintained restrictions on the religious activities of Chinese Protestants, estimated to number around 60 to 80

²⁵ USCIRF, '2019 Annual Report', April 2019, [url](#).

²⁶ Reuters, 'Vatican says China intimidating Catholics loyal to pope', 28 June 2019, [url](#)

²⁷ DFAT, 'Country Report', 3 October 2019, [url](#).

²⁸ DFAT, 'Country Report', 21 December 2017, [url](#).

million, with some believers facing harassment, surveillance, detention, imprisonment, and other abuse because of their religious activities.

‘Under the “sinicization” campaign promoted by Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping, officials have sought to bring Protestant communities into alignment with Party interests and ideology by tightening control over registered, state-sanctioned Protestant groups and using harsh measures to pressure unregistered groups into submitting to government scrutiny and regulation. Measures implemented that have increased official control over officially sanctioned Protestant churches in some local areas included the installation of surveillance cameras, ordering cross removals from church buildings, and the establishment of official village-level groups to monitor religious activities. Under Xi’s leadership, officials planned to extend further influence over religious affairs and activities of registered Protestant communities.’²⁹

- 5.3.3 In March 2019 the Barnabus Fund reported that Christian protests were ignored as the authorities removed a cross from a Church. The report went on to note that:

‘Authorities forcibly removed the cross from the top of a registered church in Jiangsu province, China, on 10 February [2019], despite the protests of Christians. Builders arrived with a crane at Chengdong Christian Church and hoisted the large cross from the four-storey building. The national flag was flying next to it. More than 20 of the church’s 3,000-strong congregation were present. Many objected to the removal and others called for more prayer. Chengdong Christian Church is a government approved “three-self” church that was officially registered in 2007.

‘The past year has seen an intensification of government action against the official “three-self” churches, and unofficial congregations, known as “house churches” in China, a country where there are thought to be at least 150 million Christians, possibly even 200 million.

‘In November 2018, a “three-self” church in Henan province was ordered to erase the First Commandment from display by government officials. Also in Henan in 2018, crosses were torn down at churches in Jiaozuo, Shangqiu and Anyang and, in mid-April, a church at Gongyi was forcibly demolished.’³⁰

- 5.3.4 International Christian Concern noted that ‘The Chinese government has increasingly included the state-backed Three Self Patriotic churches in its crackdown on Christianity.’³¹

- 5.3.5 In their June 2019 article ‘Surveillance Cameras Besiege Three-Self Churches’, Bitter Winter noted that:

‘In February [2019], the chairman of the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Huaiyin district of Huai’an city in the eastern province of Jiangsu mentioned in a report that in 2018, 155 of the 170 government-approved Protestant churches in the district had surveillance cameras installed; 120 of them are connected to the regular government video

²⁹ CECC, ‘2018 Annual Report’, 10 October 2018, [url](#).

³⁰ Barnabus Fund, ‘Christian protests ignored as cross is torn down...’, 5 March 2019, [url](#).

³¹ International Christian Concern, ‘China Revokes Preaching Permit of...’, 26 March 2019, [url](#).

surveillance network, while the rest – to that of public security institutions. [...] Dozens of surveillance cameras with video- and audio-recording functions have also been installed in Dingji Town Three-Self Church, located in the same district. Surveillance cameras can be seen in front of and behind the courtyard, the prayer room, and the lobby.’³²

[Back to Contents](#)

Section 6 updated: 31 July 2019

6. State treatment of unregistered Christian groups

6.1.1 The Freedom House Special Report stated that:

‘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.

‘A renewed crackdown on quasi-Christian groups designated as “heterodox religions” has resulted in the imprisonment of over 400 religious leaders and lay believers.’³³

6.1.2 The 2018 CECC annual report stated that:

‘Unregistered church communities (commonly referred to as “house churches”) faced additional persecution as officials sought to pressure them into registering under the auspices of a patriotic religious association. As in previous years, Protestant house churches continued to face raids during church gatherings and eviction from meeting spaces.

‘In several instances, authorities in Yunnan province continued to detain and prosecute house church members on charges of “organizing and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law,” under Article 300 of the PRC Criminal Law. Since October 2016, around 200 people reportedly have been detained, six of whom were sentenced in December 2017. In a report directed at the Yunnan province-level group responsible for Party discipline inspection, one county-level Party committee described cult prevention activities as one of several measures aimed at “rectifying the inadequate implementation of the ideological work responsibility system.” Other measures in the same category included a “clean-up campaign aimed at foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and foundations.” In May 2018, the provincial state-sanctioned religious organizations for Protestants in Zhejiang province issued a statement banning one house church for promoting an “illegal” religion.’³⁴

6.1.3 The Council on Foreign Relations noted in their October 2018 backgrounder ‘Christianity in China’ that:

‘Underground house churches exist parallel to state-sanctioned Christian churches. These congregations operate outside the guidelines of the government, and their regulation by party authorities is largely determined by local leaders. Much like official Christian organizations, their membership is also growing across regions and demographics, according to surveys by

³² Bitter Winter, ‘Surveillance Cameras Besiege Three-Self Churches’, 9 June 2019, [url](#).

³³ Freedom House, ‘Special report- The Battle for China’s Spirit’, February 2017, [url](#).

³⁴ CECC, ‘2018 Annual Report’, 10 October 2018, [url](#)

independent polling groups. Fenggang Yang, of Purdue University's Center on Religion and Chinese Society, estimates that there are between 93 million and 115 million Protestants in China, with fewer than 30 million attending officially registered churches. Other Christian organizations estimate a higher number still.³⁵

6.1.4 CSW noted in February 2019 that 'Christians in Henan have also reported that unregistered churches across the province have been forcibly shuttered by authorities.'³⁶

6.1.5 China Aid's (an American based Christian NGO focused on raising awareness of 'human rights' abuses' and 'religious freedom in China') 2018 Annual Report noted that:

'Attempts were made to eliminate all house churches, including outlawing influential mega house churches across the nation, removing their presence on the internet, and forbidding evangelistic organizations from proclaiming the Gospel online; having pilot house churches either join the Three-Self Church or disband; disqualifying house church clergy for evangelism; and misusing fines and other administrative penalties on house churches in the name of "illegal religious activities" to exhaust churches financially.

'Since Feb. 1 [2018], the government of Tanghe County asked all house churches to register with the Three-Self Churches, or they will be dissolved. The local religious affairs departments and public security departments joined hands to take aggressive actions against house churches, causing many house churches to disband and church members to register with the local Three-Self Church. Believers caught worshiping collectively at someone's home were given a fine of 30,000 yuan (\$4,464.45 USD).'³⁷

6.1.6 The USCIRF 2019 report noted that:

'In 2018, at least two underground bishops were replaced by government-approved bishops. In October and November [2018], four priests from an underground church in Hebei were taken into police custody and forced to meet with CCPA bishops, who attempted to persuade them to join the state-run church. On November 9, local authorities in Zhejiang Province detained Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin without charge; he was released 14 days later, along with Father Lu Danhua of Lishui, who was arrested in December 2017. In addition, there were widespread reports of Chinese authorities closing underground Catholic churches, destroying crosses, confiscating Bibles and other religious materials, and otherwise restricting or interfering in religious activities. The crackdown has been especially severe in Henan Province, where churches received notices stating that children under 18 were forbidden from attending services such as Sunday school.

'The Chinese government also 'intensified its crackdown on Protestant groups that refused to join the state-run Three-Self Patriotic Movement (an estimated half to two-thirds of Protestants worship in unregistered house churches).

³⁵ CfR, 'Christianity in China', 11 October 2018, [url](#).

³⁶ CSW, 'Faithful disobedience' in the face of a relentless crackdown ...' 1 February 2019, [url](#).

³⁷ China Aid, '2018 Annual Report', 28 February 2019, [url](#).

'Even house churches that were not shut down faced increased restrictions on their ability to conduct religious activity, and in April [2018], the government banned online sales of the Bible.

'On December 9, police officers raided the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, and arrested Pastor Wang Yi and more than 100 congregants. Some of the congregants who were later released claimed that police had beaten them and forced them to sign a pledge renouncing the church. In December 2018, Pastor Wang and his wife were charged with inciting "subversion of state power"; at the end of the reporting period [2018], they remained in secret detention while awaiting trial.'³⁸

6.1.7 Bitter Winters May 2019 article 'House Churches Shut down for Disobeying the Party' reported that:

'Since the new Regulations on Religious Affairs came into effect in February 2018, the Chinese authorities have been attempting to curb the growth of Christianity by ordering Protestant house churches to join the official Three-Self Church; those who don't comply are shut down. This February [2019], local authorities raided a house church in Yuncheng city, in north China's Shanxi Province after its leaders refused to join the Three-Self Church. Members of the congregation told Bitter Winter that since last year, government personnel have regularly visited the church to harass them into "becoming official." As a means of pressure, the authorities have installed surveillance cameras at the entrance to the church to monitor their gatherings.'³⁹

6.1.8 The 2018 USSD IRF report noted that:

'The State Council's revisions to the Regulations on Religious Affairs strengthen already existing requirements for unregistered religious groups and require unregistered groups be affiliated with one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations to legally conduct religious activities. Individuals who participate in unsanctioned religious activities are subject to criminal and administrative penalties.

'Police arrested and otherwise detained leaders and members of religious groups, often those connected with groups not registered, as part of the state-sanctioned "patriotic religious associations." There were reports police used violence and beatings during arrest and detention. Reportedly, authorities used vague or insubstantial charges, sometimes in connection with religious activity, to convict and sentence leaders and members of religious groups to years in prison. Some previously detained persons were released.'⁴⁰

6.1.9 Bitter Winters article 'Over 100 House Church Believers in Shanxi Threatened with Arrest to Renounce Their Faith' reported that 'In recent months, numerous house churches have been shut down, and Christians arrested across the country. In Taizhou city of eastern China's Zhejiang

³⁸ USCIRF, '2019 Annual Report', April 2019, [url](#).

³⁹ Bitter Winter, 'House Churches Shut down for Disobeying the Party', 1 May 2019, [url](#).

⁴⁰ USSD, '2018 Report on International Religious Freedom', 21 June 2019, [url](#).

Province, at least ten house churches were shut down from March to April [2019] alone.⁴¹

6.1.10 International Christian Concern reported in May 2019 that:

‘On April 23 [2019], Zaidao Church in Beijing from the China Gospel Fellowship (CGF), a large house church network, was visited by officials from the Haidian District Ethnic and Religious Bureau, State Security, and Xueyuan Road Sub-district office. They demanded that the church join the local Three-Self church. If the church refuses, they were directed to contact Three-Self church Haidian Church and participate in a security training and stop using the name Zaidao Church by renaming themselves “Beijing Rongyu Building Gathering Place.” They were also asked to reduce the scale of their church.

‘If the church fails to fulfill these requests, they will face the same fate as two other prominent Beijing house churches – Shouwang Church and Zion Church – where thousands of their members have been banned from gathering and subject to harassment and surveillance from local authorities.

‘A Christian scholar based in Beijing told ICC, “So far, there have been churches across the country that were oppressed with different tactics by local government, with the aim to force them to join Three-Self, or cease their activities. Those who refuse will be banned, or have to shut down their churches.”⁴²

6.1.11 The 2019 DFAT Report stated that:

‘Estimates of numbers of unregistered Protestants in China vary from around 30 million to over 60 million. Unregistered Protestant churches risk adverse treatment by authorities due to their illegal status. Adverse treatment can include raids and destruction of church property, pressure to join or report to government-sanctioned religious organisations and, on occasion, violence and criminal sanction, particularly in response to land disputes with local authorities. DFAT is aware of, but cannot verify, reports of authorities pressuring house churches by cutting off electricity or forcing landlords to evict members. Some members of house churches claim to have been able to use registered church facilities for weddings, or to purchase bibles. Others have reported difficulties in hiring even commercial facilities such as hotels or restaurants, because of their association with illegal churches. Christian organisations report house church members were arrested in 2017 for refusing to register with the TSPM, and Christian schools were closed for ‘brainwashing’ children.

‘The Zhejiang provincial government’s 2013 urban renewal campaign led to the demolition of several hundred unregistered churches. In 2017, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom reported over 1,500 church demolitions or removals of crosses since 2014. The government has punished church leaders who oppose the campaign with heavy prison sentences (up to 14 years) on public disorder charges, as well as apparently unrelated charges such as embezzlement. In May 2019, media and Christian advocacy groups reported the government launched a new campaign called

⁴¹ Bitter Winter, ‘Over 100 House Church Believers in Shanxi...’, 7 July 2019, [url](#).

⁴² International Christian Concern, ‘China Wants the House Church to Vanish’, 15 May 2019, [url](#).

‘Return to Zero’ in April 2019, aimed at eradicating underground house churches and ensuring only state sanctioned and heavily restricted TPSM churches remained functional. Authorities have also targeted lawyers defending the church leaders’

[...] Heightened government sensitivity over foreign influence creates difficulties for prominent members of unregistered churches seeking to travel abroad, particularly for religious events, and for foreign church organisations to work, or liaise with registered churches, in China. NGOs report increasing difficulties for mainland Christians seeking to travel to Hong Kong or Macau for religious activities, and for Christian NGOs or activists from Hong Kong and Macau to travel to the mainland. DFAT assesses members of unregistered churches who participate in human rights activism are at high risk of official discrimination and violence, as are their families.¹⁴³

[Back to Contents](#)

6.2 Cults

6.2.1 In January 2017 Reuters reported that:

‘China will crack down further on what it calls “cults” with a new judicial interpretation released on Wednesday [25 January 2017] mandating harsh punishments for groups proselytising to government officials or children or linking up with foreign groups. [...] Authorities have gone after what they view as cults, which have multiplied in recent years, and demonstrations have been put down with force and some sect leaders executed.

‘The judicial interpretation, release by the Supreme People’s Court and state prosecutor, list seven areas for which offenders will face tough penalties, including carrying out cult activities in public or trying to recruit children or state bureaucrats.

‘In cases considered less serious, where adherents repent and leave the cult, or where they have been coerced into joining a cult, there is an option for punishment not to be imposed, the interpretation states.’¹⁴⁴

6.2.2 Bitter Winter noted in their article ‘The List of the Xie Jiao, a Main Tool of Religious Persecution’ that:

‘On September 18 2017, the revamped China Anti-Cult (xie jiao) website reiterated the list of banned groups which had been listed publicly in 2014. Of the total 20 groups, eleven were listed as being “dangerous:” 1.Falun Gong, 2.The Church of Almighty God, 3.The Shouters, 4.The Disciples Society, 5.Unification Church, 6.Guanyin Method, 7.Bloody Holy Spirit, 8. Full Scope Church, 9.Three Grades of Servants, 10.True Buddha School, 11.Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station. In addition, the website warned the public to “be on guard against” an additional nine groups: the Lingling Church, the Anointed King, the Children of God, Dami Mission, the New Testament Church, the World Elijah Gospel Mission Society, the Lord God Sect, the Yuandun Dharma Gate, and the South China Church. From

⁴³ DFAT, ‘Country Report’, 2019, 3 October 2019, [url](#)

⁴⁴ Reuters, ‘China to crack down further on ‘cult’ activities’, 25 January 2017, [url](#).

this list it appears there are two categories of groups, eleven major (“dangerous”) groups, and nine others, for a total of 20.⁴⁵

6.2.3 Human Rights Watch noted in their world report covering events in 2018 that ‘The government classifies many religious groups outside its control as “evil cults,” and subjects members to police harassment, torture, arbitrary detention, and imprisonment.’⁴⁶

6.2.4 The 2017 USSD IRF report noted that:

‘The law bans certain religious or spiritual groups. The criminal law defines banned groups as “cult organizations” and provides for criminal prosecution of individuals belonging to such groups and punishment of up to life in prison. There are no published criteria for determining, or procedures for challenging, such a designation. A national security law explicitly bans “cult organizations.” The CCP maintains an extralegal, party-run security apparatus to eliminate the Falun Gong movement and other such organizations. [...] The government also considers several Christian groups to be “evil cults,” including the Shouters, The Church of Almighty God (also known as Eastern Lightning), Society of Disciples (Mentu Hui), Full Scope Church (Quan Fanwei Jiaohui), Spirit Sect, New Testament Church, Three Grades of Servants (San Ban Puren), Association of Disciples, Lord God religious group, Established King Church, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Family of Love, and South China Church.’⁴⁷

6.2.5 The 2018 USSD report noted that ‘The Church of Almighty God reported authorities subjected 525 of its members to “torture or forced indoctrination” during the year [2018]. The Church also reported members suffered miscarriages after police subjected them to “torture and abuse” in detention facilities.[...] The Church of Almighty God reported authorities arrested 11,111 of its members during the year, of which 2,392 remained in custody.’⁴⁸

6.2.6 The 2017 CECC annual report stated that: ‘In January 2017, the authorities issued a joint interpretation of Article 300 that set out new sentencing guidelines and expressly criminalized certain forms of Internet usage to disseminate information about a “cult”, among other revisions.’⁴⁹

6.2.7 The 2019 DFAT Report stated that:

‘The Criminal Law provides for prison sentences of up to seven years for individuals who use ‘superstitious sects, secret societies or evil religious organisations’ to undermine the state’s laws or administrative regulations. A 1999 judicial explanation refers to: ‘those illegal groups that have been found using religions, qigong [a traditional Chinese exercise discipline], or other things as a camouflage, deifying their leading members, recruiting and controlling their members, and deceiving people by moulding and spreading superstitious ideas, and endangering society.’ While the criminal provisions

⁴⁵ Bitter Winter, ‘The List of the Xie Jiao, a Main Tool of Religious...’, 11 November 2018, [url](#).

⁴⁶ HRW, ‘World Report 2019’, 17 January 2019, [url](#).

⁴⁷ USSD, ‘2018 Report on International Religious Freedom’, 21 June 2019, [url](#).

⁴⁸ USSD, ‘2018 Report on International Religious Freedom’, 21 June 2019, [url](#).

⁴⁹ CECC, ‘2017 Annual Report’, 5 October 2017, [url](#).

principally target Falun Gong, others who engage in practices deemed superstitious or cult-like can face harassment, detention and imprisonment.

'In September 2017, the government published a list of 20 banned groups on its official Anti-Cult website 'xie jiao'(cult) and launched an anti-cult platform on social media called 'Say No to Cult,' which includes a function for reporting suspicious activity. Eleven banned groups were listed as 'dangerous' on the xie jiao website: Falun Gong, Eastern Lightning (also known as The Church of Almighty God), The Shouters, The Disciples Society (or Mentu Hui), Unification Church, Guanyin Method Sect (Guanyin Famen or the Way of the Goddess of Mercy), Bloody Holy Spirit, Full Scope Church, Three Grades of Servants (or San Ban Pu Ren), True Buddha School and Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station. The xie jiao website also warned the public to 'be on guard against' an additional nine groups: the Lingling Church, the Anointed King, the Children of God, Dami Mission, the New Testament Church, the World Elijah Gospel Mission Society, the Lord God Sect, the Yuandun Dharma Gate, and the South China Church. Local authorities interpret 'cult' in different ways. [...] Mainstream Christians tend to deride cults as heretics, but government crackdowns on 'cults' can affect unregistered mainstream Christian churches, as local officials may have difficulty distinguishing unregistered mainstream churches from cults.

'The Chinese government listed Eastern Lightning, an offshoot of the Shouters, also known as 'The Church of the Almighty God (COAG)', 'The Congregation', 'Oriental Lightning', 'Seven Spirit Sect', 'Second Saviour Sect', 'True Light Sect', 'True Way Sect', and 'New Power Lord's Church' as a banned xie jiao (cult) in November 1995. According to Chinese government statistics, COAG had four million members in 2014. However, COAG claims more than a million followers in a seven-level hierarchy.

'Academics claim the movement has been severely persecuted in China, and many COAG members, including national leader Ma Suoping (1969-2009), have been arrested or killed. According to statistics claimed by the movement, more than 400,000 members have been arrested in China to date. Security agencies have arrested large groups of sect members in Qinghai, Guizhou, Ningxia, Henan, Hubei, Xinjiang, Anhui and Liaoning provinces in recent years. DFAT is unable to verify these claims; however, academics cite semi-weekly references in Chinese State media reports regarding anti-COAG campaigns and arrests. State media reports detail abductions; extortion; beatings; murder; seduction; and aggressive proselytising as part of the group's practice of recruiting new members and punishing non-believers, including those seeking to leave the group.

'Sources report the government's efforts to crackdown on Christian 'cult' organisations aim to identify and punish the leaders, with disciples viewed as victims. COAG in Australia (which denies connection to the McDonald's attack) claims Chinese security agencies have monitored, intimidated, detained and mistreated its members in China since 2011, and its Annual Reports detail several such instances. Such treatment would be consistent with government treatment of members of other banned organisations. Stigma associated with cults may make it difficult for members to find

defence lawyers, and lawyers taking on their cases are often themselves targets of adverse attention by authorities.⁵⁰

- 6.2.8 For background on some of the banned groups see the glossary on the [Bitter Winter website](#)⁵¹ and the [China source article on Chinese Cults, Sects, and Heresies](#)⁵².

[Back to Contents](#)

6.3 Proselytising

- 6.3.1 The 2018 USSD IRF report noted that ‘According to the new regulations implemented February 1 [2018], proselytizing in public or holding religious activities in unregistered places of worship is not permitted. In practice, offenders are subject to administrative and criminal penalties. [...] Regulations specifically prohibited faith-based organizations from proselytizing while conducting charitable activities.’⁵³
- 6.3.2 The 2019 DFAT Report noted that ‘The 2018 RRAs ‘protect citizens’ freedom of religious belief, maintain religious and social harmony and regulate the management of religious affairs,’ and give state-registered religious organisations rights to possess property, publish literature, train, and approve clergy, collect donations, and proselytise within (but not outside) registered places of worship and in private settings (but not in public).’⁵⁴

[Back to Contents](#)

⁵⁰ DFAT, ‘Country Report’, 3 October 2019, [url](#).

⁵¹ Bitter Winter, ‘Glossary’, undated, [url](#).

⁵² China Source, ‘Chinese Cults, Sects, and Heresies’, 13 May 2015, [url](#).

⁵³ USSD, ‘2018 Report on International Religious Freedom’, 21 June 2019, [url](#).

⁵⁴ DFAT, ‘Country Report’, 21 October 2019, [url](#).

Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of what the CPIN seeks to cover. They form the basis for the [country information section](#). The Home Office's Country Policy and Information Team uses some standardised ToRs, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Religion in China
 - Religious demography
 - Legal framework
- State treatment of registered Christian groups
 - Catholics
 - Protestants
- State treatment of unregistered Christian groups
 - House churches
 - Cults

[Back to Contents](#)

Bibliography

Sources cited

Australian Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) 'Country information report People's Republic Of China, 3 October 2019, <https://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/country-information-report-china.pdf>. Last accessed 9 October 2019

Barnabus Fund, 'Christian protests ignored as cross is torn down from church in China', 5 March 2019, <https://barnabasfund.org/en/news/christian-protests-ignored-as-cross-is-torn-down-from-church-in-china>. Last accessed: 17 July 2019

Bitter Winter,

'The List of the Xie Jiao, a Main Tool of Religious Persecution', 6 November 2018, <https://bitterwinter.org/the-list-of-the-xie-jiao-a-main-tool-of-religious-persecution/>. Last accessed: 16 July 2019

'Surveillance Cameras Besiege Three-Self Churches', 9 June 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/surveillance-cameras-besiege-three-self-churches/>. Last accessed: 11 June 2019

'House Churches Shut down for Disobeying the Party', 1 May 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/house-churches-shut-down-for-disobeying-the-party/>. Last accessed: 11 June 2019

'Glossary', undated, <https://bitterwinter.org/glossary/>. Last accessed: 12 June 2019

'Over 100 House Church Believers in Shanxi Threatened with Arrest to Renounce Their Faith', 7 July 2019, <https://bitterwinter.org/house-church-believers-in-shanxi-threatened/>. Last accessed: 15 July 2019

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 'World fact book, China- people and society', updated 14 May 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html>. Last accessed: 20 May 2019

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), Freedom of Religion or Belief in full – A blog by CSW- 'Faithful disobedience' in the face of a relentless crackdown: one year since China's Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs.', 1 February 2019 <https://forbinfull.org/2019/02/01/faithful-disobedience-in-the-face-of-a-relentless-crackdown-one-year-since-chinas-revised-regulations-on-religious-affairs/>. Last accessed 17 July 2019

ChinaAid Association, '2018 Annual Report- Chinese Government Persecution of Churches and Christians in Mainland China January-December 2018, 28 February 2019, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1deR6dkQpidTsJ0RheaZ2Y8Q-C4XVvEWZ/view>. Last accessed: 16 July 2019

China Law Translate, Religious Affairs Regulations 2017, 7 September 2017, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/宗教事务条例-2017/?lang=en>. Last accessed: 10 June 2019

China Source, 'Chinese Cults, Sects, and Heresies', 13 March 2015, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinese-cults-sects-and->

[heresies](#). Last accessed: 12 June 2019

Council for Foreign Relations (CFR), 'Christianity in China', 11 October 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/christianity-china>. Last accessed: 31 July 2019

Freedom House,

'Special Report- The Battle for China's Spirit Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping', February 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_ChinasSprit2016_FULL_FINAL_140pages_compressed.pdf. Last accessed: 21 January 2019

'Freedom in the World', 4 February 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/china>. Last accessed: 2 September 2019

Human Rights Watch (HRW), World Report 2019, China, January 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/china-and-tibet>. Last accessed: 9 October 2019

International Christian Concern,

'China Revokes Preaching Permit of 57 Three-Self Church Pastors', 26 March 2019, <https://www.persecution.org/2019/03/26/china-revokes-preaching-permit-57-three-self-church-pastors/>. Last accessed 31 July 2019

'China Wants the House Church to Vanish', 15 May 2019, <https://www.persecution.org/2019/05/15/china-wants-house-church-vanish/>. Last accessed: 4 September 2019

Reuters,

'China to crack down further on 'cult' activities', 25 January 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-china-religion-crime/china-to-crack-down-further-on-cult-activities-idUSKBN15917O?utm_source=HRIC+Updates&utm_campaign=c0f8b0c9b7-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_01_26&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b537d30fde-c0f8b0c9b7-251625161. Last accessed: 4 September 2019

'Vatican says China intimidating Catholics loyal to pope', 28 June 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-china/vatican-says-china-intimidating-catholics-loyal-to-pope-idUSKCN1TT1MY>. Last accessed: 9 October 2019

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2019 Annual Report, April 2019, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>. Last accessed: 10 June 2019

United States Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC),

'2017 Annual Report' 5 October 2017, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2017-annual-report>. Last accessed; 17 September 2019

'2018 Annual Report', 10 October 2018, <https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2018-annual-report>. Last accessed: 11 June 2019

United States Department of State (USSD), 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2018', 21 June 2019, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china-includes-tibet-xinjiang-hong-kong-and-macau/>. Last accessed: 15 July 2019

[Back to Contents](#)

Sources consulted but not cited

Asia Times, 'Chinese Christians live in fear, fleeing abroad', 21 March 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/03/article/chinese-christians-live-in-fear-fleeing-abroad/>. Last accessed: 12 June 2019

The Church of Almighty God, website, undated <https://www.holyspiritspeaks.org/>. Last accessed: 4 September 2019

UCA News, 'Chinese authorities target temporary churches', 7 June 2018 <https://www.ucanews.com/news/chinese-authorities-target-temporary-churches/82503>. Last accessed: 4 September 2019

Xinhua, Judicial rule stipulates punishments for cult-related crime, 25 January 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com//english/2017-01/25/c_136012665.htm. Last accessed: 4 September 2019

World Watch Monitor, 'China: Christian students under pressure to give up their faith', 27 November 2018, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/china-christian-students-under-pressure-to-give-up-their-faith/>. Last accessed: 4 September 2019

[Back to Contents](#)

Version control

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- Version **3.0**
- valid from **25 November 2019**

Changes from last version of this note

updated country information

[Back to Contents](#)