



Home Office

# Country Policy and Information Note

## China: Christians

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# Executive summary

The Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religion for 'normal religious activities' but does not define what these include.

There are 5 officially recognised religions, including Catholicism and Protestantism. Since 2012, the government has introduced a program of sinicization of religion. This requires religions to adapt their practices and doctrines to conform to traditional Chinese culture and values. Religious groups need to register with the government's Patriotic Associations to operate and undertake religious activities.

Estimates of the number of Christians, both in registered and unregistered groups, varies between 44 million and 130 million.

Christians, whether they belong to a state-registered church or not, are in general unlikely to be at risk of persecution or serious harm on the basis of their faith alone.

In state-registered churches, dissident bishops or prominent Christians who challenge, or who are perceived to challenge, public order and the legal conditions under which churches and leaders may operate, may be at risk of persecution or serious harm. Each case must be considered on its facts.

Underground Protestant and Catholic house churches exist, although information on their numbers and size of congregations is limited. Members of such churches face harassment including pressure to join CCP (Chinese Communist Party)-approved churches, disruption to meetings including electricity cuts, evictions, closure and restriction on religious education and media.

Some religious groups are considered by the government to be cult organisations, or xie jiao. Membership of any group considered to be a cult is illegal, and individuals can face criminal charges and sentences of up to life in prison.

Christians who worship in unregistered churches or as part of an illegal cult and conduct themselves in such a way as to attract the local authorities' attention to them, or their political, social or cultural views may face a real risk of persecution or serious harm.

Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state they will not, in general, be able to obtain protection from the authorities.

Where the person's fear relates to local officials, the March 2014 country guidance case of [QH](#) applies. In that case, the Upper Tribunal held that unless a person is the subject of an arrest warrant, their name is on a black list, or they have a pending sentence, they will generally be able to internally relocate.

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.

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# Assessment

## About the assessment

This section considers the evidence relevant to this note – that is information in the [country information](#), refugee/human rights laws and policies, and applicable caselaw – and provides an assessment of whether, **in general**, a person:

- faces a reasonable likelihood/real risk of persecution/serious harm from the state because they are a Christian
- is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- can relocate within a country or territory to avoid persecution/serious harm
- merits a grant of asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- if a claim is refused, it is likely 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.

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## 1. Material facts, credibility and other checks/referrals

### 1.1 Credibility

- 1.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 1.1.2 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](#)).
- 1.1.3 In cases where there are doubts surrounding a person’s claimed place of origin, decision makers should also consider language analysis testing, where available (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

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- 1.1.4 The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.

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### 1.2 Exclusion

- 1.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.
- 1.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be

excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection (which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status).

- 1.2.3 For guidance on exclusion and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instruction on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention](#), [Humanitarian Protection](#) and the instruction on [Restricted Leave](#).

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## 2. Convention reason(s)

- 2.1.1 The person's actual or imputed religion.
- 2.1.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.
- 2.1.3 For further guidance on the 5 Refugee Convention grounds see the Asylum Instruction, [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 3. Risk

### 3.1 Registered groups

- 3.1.1 In general, a person belonging to a state registered Christian group is unlikely to face a real risk of persecution from the state for that reason alone.
- 3.1.2 Dissident bishops or prominent Christians who challenge, or who are perceived to challenge, public order and the legal conditions under which churches and leaders may operate, may be at risk of persecution or serious harm, but this is likely to be exceptional.
- 3.1.3 In the country guidance case of [QH \(Christians - risk\) China CG \[2014\] UKUT 86 \(IAC\)](#), heard 6 June 2013 and promulgated March 2014, the Upper Tribunal (UT) held 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.'  
(paragraph 137 (1 and 2))
- 3.1.4 On Christians practising in state-registered churches, the UT in [QH](#) held:  
  
'Worship in State-registered churches is supervised by the Chinese government's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) under the [Religious Affairs Regulations] RRA.'

‘The measures of control set out in the [Religious Affairs Regulations] RRA, and their implementation, whether by the Chinese state or by nonstate actors, are not, in general, sufficiently severe as to amount to persecution, serious harm, or ill-treatment engaging international protection.

‘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.’ (paragraph 137 (3i to iii))

- 3.1.5 Christians are estimated to number, by various sources, between 44 million and 130 million (between 3% and 9% of the population) (see [Demography](#)).
- 3.1.6 The 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 (see [Legal framework](#)).
- 3.1.7 Since 2012, the government has introduced a program of sinicization of religion. This requires religions to adapt their practices and doctrines to conform to traditional Chinese culture and values. As part of this, registered religious organisations must support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and implement the values of socialism (see [Legal framework](#) and [General state approach to Christianity](#)).
- 3.1.8 The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) represents the official Chinese Catholic Church. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) represents the official Protestant church (see Catholics- [Registered groups, clergy and places of worship](#) and Protestants- [Registered groups and places of worship](#)).
- 3.1.9 The appointment of Catholic leaders is controlled by the Catholic hierarchy, headquartered in the Vatican. However, the CCPA does not recognise the authority of the Vatican. In 2018 the Sino-Vatican agreement was signed to regularise the status of some of the Chinese appointed bishops. This also allowed for unregistered Catholic groups/bishops to join the CCPA. However, as of 2021, only 6 Bishops had been appointed (see [Registered groups, clergy and places of worship](#) and [The Sino-Vatican agreement](#)).
- 3.1.10 To register, groups must submit detailed information on their members and doctrines, be one of the 5 state sanctioned religious associations, ensure that they adhere to the religious regulations and publicly promote the CCP’s leadership. Sources report that at the time of writing at least 1 member of a registered group was detained, although their detention was related to their involvement with land disputes and therefore may be due to their perceived opposition to the state (see also country policy and information note on [China: Opposition to the state](#)). The vast majority of Christians associated with registered groups continue to be able to practice their faith unhindered by the state (see [Religious regulations](#), Catholics- [State treatment of registered groups](#) and Protestants- [State treatment of registered groups](#)).

- 3.1.11 Various religious regulations have come into effect in the last decade. In 2018 regulations were issued which stipulated how religious organisations could train and approve clergy, and banned under 18's from religious activity. Churches were also required to install surveillance cameras to monitor the content of services and the actions of the congregation. In 2020, the Administrative Measures for Religious Groups came into effect regulating the organisation and function of registered religious groups and direct the practice of sinicization. Other regulations issued between 2021 and 2023 control the management of religious clergy, requiring them to register in order to operate, ban religious content on the internet unless groups hold an Internet Religious Service License, and allow for controls on religious venues (see [Religious regulations](#)).
- 3.1.12 The government has continued to impose restrictions on Christians linked to registered groups, and these have intensified since [QH](#) was heard in 2013. However, the available country information does not indicate that there are very strong grounds supported by cogent evidence to depart from the UT's findings in [QH](#).

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## 3.2 Unregistered groups and illegal 'cults'

- 3.2.1 In general, a person belonging to an un-registered Christian group or illegal cult is unlikely to face a real risk of persecution from the state for that reason alone.
- 3.2.2 Christians who worship in unregistered churches or as part of an illegal cult and conduct themselves in such a way as to attract the local authorities' attention to them, or their political, social or cultural views, may face a real risk of persecution or serious harm. Each case must be considered on its facts.
- 3.2.3 With regard to unregistered or house churches, the UT in [QH](#) held:
- '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.
  - '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.
  - '... 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.
  - '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 (paragraph 137 (4i to iv)).
- 3.2.4 In line with religious regulations, unregistered religious groups are not allowed to operate. However, there are national laws which provide

discretion to local governments to allow followers of unregistered religions to practise their faith. It is unclear from sources if and how discretion is applied, but is likely to depend on the motivations of the local authorities at the time and may vary by area (see [Religious regulations](#) and [State treatment - general treatment](#)).

- 3.2.5 Some Catholics remain loyal to the Vatican and therefore only practise their faith discreetly in underground churches. The authorities closely monitor the activities of these underground Catholic groups and pressure priests and bishops to join the state approved CCPA. Most Catholics will follow their local leadership regardless of whether they are state approved and as such leaders of these underground groups are more likely face adverse treatment, although this may depend on location and the particular community (see Catholics- [Treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
- 3.2.6 There is limited information on the number of un-registered bishops working. However, according to Pew Center research as of 2018, there were an estimated 30 to 40 underground bishops nationally. Comprehensive data on the number of Catholics detained is not available but information compiled by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom indicates that there were 2 bishops detained for not being recognised by the state as of February 2024 (see Catholics- [Treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
- 3.2.7 Most Protestants worship in unofficial house churches. The government continues to try and force those who belong to unregistered Protestant groups to join the state-approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). House churches not aligning with TSPM, particularly larger ones, can face harassment and disruption to meetings including electricity cuts, evictions, closure and restriction on religious education and media (see Protestants- [State treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
- 3.2.8 Larger unregistered Protestant groups and those perceived by the CCP as having more influence are more likely to attract adverse attention as they are more visible to the authorities. Sources note that authorities sometimes use charges of fraud and/or illegal business activity to prosecute members of unregistered groups. According to the USCIRF, at the time of writing, there were 15 Protestants from unregistered groups detained. Four were detained specifically for refusing to join the TSPM or refusing to register, 9 of the 15 were convicted on embezzlement and fraud charges and 2 were convicted for illegal business activity (see Protestants- [State treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
- 3.2.9 Some Christians groups are considered by the government as ‘cult’ organisations or xie jiao. Membership of any group considered to be a cult is illegal under Article 300 of the criminal law which prohibits individuals from organising cult organisations to “undermine the implementation of the nation’s laws” and allows for sentences up to life in prison (see [Criminal code](#) and [Cults](#)).
- 3.2.10 Christian groups considered to be cults include Church of Almighty God (also known as COAG or CAG) and The Local Church (Shouters). There is no data on the number of people who belong to groups considered to be cults. Although the law provides a list of those groups considered as xie jiao,

it also allows for the law to be applied to any religious movement, including smaller groups operating at a local level. Other groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, who are not included on the list, have had members charged under Article 300 of the criminal law (see [Cults](#) and [Jehovah's Witnesses](#)).

- 3.2.11 Members of the Church of Almighty God (CAG) have allegedly been involved in criminal activities. According to The Australian Government's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) there are credible reports of widespread arrests for this group. However, information is unclear whether police action against some of these members is related to their membership of the church or their alleged criminal activity (see [Church of Almighty God \(COAG/CAG\) or Eastern Lightning](#)).
- 3.2.12 Those identified as 'Shouters' come from a diverse range of Protestant groups. The term 'Shouters' applies to those identified by the authorities as members of this group even if they do not consider themselves to be 'Shouters' (see [The Local Church \(Shouters or The Assembly\)](#)).
- 3.2.13 Data on the number of those detained on charges relating to their membership of a cult vary. Statistics from the Church of Almighty God state that in 2020 1,098 members of the church were given prison sentences, although CPIT were unable to find any other source to corroborate those numbers. According to USCIRF data, at the time of writing in February 2024, there were 196 individuals detained on charges related to being a member of a cult. Of those 196, 148 belong to the Church of Almighty God (CAG). Dui Hua, a non-profit humanitarian organisation which focuses on criminal justice and treatment of detainees, noted that as of December 2023, 2,772 individuals were detained on cult charges (see [Cults](#) and [Church of Almighty God \(COAG\) \(CAG\) or Eastern Lightning](#)).
- 3.2.14 The government has continued to harass unregistered Christians, put pressure on them to join registered groups and disrupt services since [QH](#) was heard in 2013. However, the situation for most Christians has not changed significantly, and in general they remain unlikely to face treatment amounting to persecution for expressing and living their faith. Therefore there are not 'very strong grounds supported by cogent evidence' to justify a departure from [QH](#).
- 3.2.15 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## **4. Protection**

- 4.1.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state they will not, in general, be able to obtain protection from the authorities.
- 4.1.2 For further guidance on assessing state protection, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## **5. Internal relocation**

- 5.1.1 In general, there are parts of the country where a person would not have a well-founded fear of persecution and it will be reasonable for them to

relocate there.

- 5.1.2 While the onus is on the person to establish a well-founded fear of persecution or real risk of serious harm, decision makers must demonstrate that internal relocation is reasonable (or not unduly harsh) having regard to the individual circumstances of the person.
- 5.1.3 Where the person's fear relates to local officials, the UT in [QH](#) held:  
'... unless such individual is the subject of an arrest warrant, his name is on a black list, or he has a pending sentence, such risk will be limited to the local area in which the individual lives and has their *hukou*.  
'The *hukou* system of individual registration in rural and city areas, historically a rigid family-based structure from which derives entitlement to most social and other benefits, has been significantly relaxed and many Chinese internal migrants live and work in cities where they do not have an urban *hukou*, either without registration or on a temporary residence permit (see *AX (family planning scheme) China* CG [\[2012\] UKUT 97 \(IAC\)](#) and *HC & RC (Trafficked women) China* CG [\[2009\] UKAIT 00027](#)).  
'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. 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 (Paragraph 137(4) v, vi and vii)'
- 5.1.4 Since [QH](#) was heard in 2013 the situation for most Christians has not changed significantly. There continue to be Christian populations within China, particularly in the central and eastern areas and their treatment continues to be influenced by the motivations of local authorities. Therefore, there are not 'very strong grounds supported by cogent evidence' to justify a departure from [QH](#) (see [Treatment of all religious groups](#), Catholics- [Treatment of unregistered groups](#) and Protestants- [State treatment of unregistered groups](#)).
- 5.1.5 For further guidance on considering internal relocation and factors to be taken into account see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 6. Certification

- 6.1.1 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.
- 6.1.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

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# Country information

## About the country information

This contains publicly available or disclosable country of origin information (COI) which has been gathered, collated and analysed in line with the [research methodology](#). It provides the evidence base for the assessment.

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

This document is intended to be comprehensive but not exhaustive. If a particular event, person or organisation is not mentioned this does not mean that the event did or did not take place or that the person or organisation does or does not exist.

Decision makers must use relevant COI as the evidential basis for decisions.

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Section updated: 18 March 2024

## 7. Legal framework

### 7.1 Constitution

#### 7.1.1 Article 36 of the Constitution states that:

‘Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief.

‘No State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.

‘The State protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State.

‘Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.’<sup>1</sup>

#### 7.1.2 The US State Department, ‘2022 Report on International Religious Freedom’ (the 2022 USSD RIRF), noted that:

‘The constitution ... states citizens “enjoy freedom of religious belief,” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities,” without defining normal.

‘...The law does not allow individuals or groups to take legal action 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.

The government recognizes five official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Regulations require religious organizations to register with the government. Only religious groups belonging to one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations are permitted to register, and only these organizations may legally hold worship services. The five

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<sup>1</sup> The National Peoples Congress of the Peoples Republic of China ‘[Constitution](#)’, 14 March 2004

associations, which operate under the direction of the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFWD) are the Buddhist Association of China, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Islamic Association of China, the TSPM, and the CCPA. Other religious groups, such as Protestant groups unaffiliated with the official TSPM or Catholics professing loyalty to the Holy See but not affiliated with the CCPA, are not permitted to register as legal entities. The law does not provide a mechanism for religious groups independent of the five official patriotic religious associations to obtain legal status.<sup>2</sup>

7.1.3 See also [Religious regulations](#)

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## 7.2 Criminal code

7.2.1 Article 300 of the Criminal Law notes that:

'Organizing or exploiting mystic sects or cult organizations, or using superstition to undermine the implementation of the nation's laws and administrative provisions is sentenced to between three and seven years imprisonment and a concurrent fine; where circumstances are especially serious the sentence is seven or more years imprisonment and a concurrent fine; where circumstances are relatively minor, the sentence is up to three years imprisonment, short-term detention or controlled release and/or a fine.'<sup>3</sup>

7.2.2 The Australian Government's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) Country Information Report – People's Republic of China, dated 22 December 2021 (2021 DFAT report), based on public and non-publicly available sources including on-the-ground knowledge and discussions with a number of sources, noted 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.'<sup>4</sup>

7.2.3 Bitter Winter, an online magazine on religious liberty and human rights in China published by the Center for Studies on New Religions, headquartered in Italy, noted in an article from August 2022 that:

'It is important to note that Chinese courts of law apply Article 300 of the Criminal Code, which punishes with severe jail penalties those active in a [cult] xie jiao, both to groups included and not included in the list. The case law has clarified that Article 300 can be applied by analogy, for example to the Jehovah's Witnesses, which have never been included in any list of the xie jiao. It can also be applied to movements designated as xie jiao on a local scale, which are not regarded as of national or international relevance and will presumably never make it to the list.'<sup>5</sup>

7.2.4 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted:

'The law bans certain religious or spiritual groups. Criminal law defines banned groups as "cult [xie jiao] organizations" and provides for criminal

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<sup>2</sup> USSD, '[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)', 15 May 2023

<sup>3</sup> China Law Translate, '[Criminal Law \(2021 edition\)](#)'

<sup>4</sup> DFAT, '[Country Information Report - China](#)' (paragraph 3.53), 22 December 2021

<sup>5</sup> Bitter Winter, '[Xie Jiao: China Updates the List—With Some New Entries](#)', 30 August 2022

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. Criminal law prohibits “organizing and using a sect, cult, or superstition to undermine implementation of the law.” Violations carry a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.’<sup>6</sup>

7.2.5 See also [Other Christian groups including illegal groups \(or cults\)](#)

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### 7.3 Religious regulations

7.3.1 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 is available on the [China Law Translate website](#)<sup>7</sup>.

7.3.2 In addition to the Religious Affairs Regulations, on 1 February 2020 the ‘Administrative Measures for Religious Groups’ came into effect. According to a translation by Bitter Winter, Article 3 of the Administrative Measures states that:

‘A religious organization can be recognized as such only when it has been examined and approved by the religious affairs department of the people’s government, and register with the civil affairs department of the people’s government, in accordance with the national regulations on the administration of social organizations, and on religious affairs. Without the approval of the religious affairs department of the people’s government, or registration with the civil affairs department of the people’s government, no religious activities in the name of religious organizations are allowed.’<sup>8</sup>

7.3.3 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted that:

‘The 2020 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups regulate the organization, function, offices, supervision, projects, and economic administration of communities and groups at the national and local levels. The measures state that only registered groups may operate legally and stipulate that religious organizations must support the leadership of the CCP, adhere to the direction of Sinicization, and implement the values of socialism. The measures state that religious organizations shall “follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, abide by laws, regulations, rules, and policies, correctly handle the relationship between national law and canon, and enhance national awareness, awareness of the rule of law, and citizenship.”

‘... National laws allow each provincial administration to issue its own regulations concerning religious affairs, including penalties for violations. In addition to the five officially recognized religions, local governments may, at their discretion, permit followers of certain unregistered religions to carry out religious practices.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> USSD, ‘[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)’, 15 May 2023

<sup>7</sup> China Law Translate, ‘[Religious Affairs Regulations 2017](#)’, 7 September 2017

<sup>8</sup> Bitter Winter, ‘[2019 Administrative Measures for Religious Groups](#)’, 15 January 2020

<sup>9</sup> USSD, ‘[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)’, 15 May 2023

- 7.3.4 In 2021 the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) issued Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy. The measures include controls on clergy and require them to register in a national database, meaning that activity by those who are unregistered is banned<sup>10</sup>. A full translation of the measures is available on [Bitter Winter](#)<sup>11</sup>.
- 7.3.5 On 1 March 2022 the 'Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services' took effect. These measures ban religious content on the internet unless the group hold an Internet Religious Service License. These licences are only granted to the 5 government-controlled organisations, which are still subject to surveillance and limitations on what can be published online<sup>12 13</sup>, banning religious content on the internet and further constricting the narrow space for religious groups.<sup>14</sup>
- 7.3.6 On 1 September 2023 the 'Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues' came into effect. According to an article on VOA of 31 August 2023: 'The new rules prohibit organizations and individuals from using religious venues to endanger national security or to disrupt social order, public interests or citizens' legal rights, among other activities.'<sup>15</sup>
- 7.3.7 Bitter Winter wrote about the 'Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues' that: 'There are stricter provisions for including propaganda content in sermons, and establishing study groups of CCP documents in all places of worship. It is also specified that "It is prohibited to build large open-air religious statues outside of temples and churches," and the prohibition also applies to private citizens or donors.' A full translation of the measures is available on [Bitter Winter](#).<sup>16</sup>

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## 7.4 Registration process

### 7.4.1 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted that:

'According to regulations, in order to register, religious organizations must submit information on the organization's historical background, members, doctrines, key publications, minimum funding requirements, and government sponsor, which must be one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations. Registration information is required only once, but religious organizations must reregister if changes are made to the required documentation.

'The civil code permits a religious organization established according to law to apply for the status of a "legal person" (nonprofit entity). This status permits such organizations to own property, publish approved materials, train staff, and collect donations, thereby facilitating authorities' ability to track and regulate religious institutions.

'Religious and other regulations permit the five official patriotic religious

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<sup>10</sup> Bitter Winter, ['Enter the "Administrative Measures for Religious Clergy" ...'](#), 11 February 2021

<sup>11</sup> Bitter Winter, ['Enter the "Administrative Measures for Religious Clergy" ...'](#), 11 February 2021

<sup>12</sup> Bitter Winter, ['Crackdown on Religious Content on the Internet Coming...'](#), 28 December 2021

<sup>13</sup> USCIRF, ['2023 Annual Report- China'](#), 1 May 2023

<sup>14</sup> USCIRF, ['2023 Annual Report- China'](#), 1 May 2023

<sup>15</sup> VOA, ['China Issues New Requirements for Religious Groups'](#), 31 August 2023

<sup>16</sup> Bitter Winter, ['The New Chinese Measures for Religious Activity Venues...'](#), 07 August 2023

associations to engage in activities such as building places of worship, training religious leaders, publishing literature, and providing social services to local communities. The CCP's [United Front Work Department] UFWD, including the SARA, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs provide policy guidance and supervision on the implementation of these regulations.

'Regulations stipulate that individuals who participate in unsanctioned religious activities are subject to criminal and administrative penalties.'<sup>17</sup>

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## 7.5 Proselytising

7.5.1 The 2021 DFAT report stated that: 'Regulations prohibiting proselytising are generally enforced across China and religious education for those under 18 years is not permitted...'<sup>18</sup>

7.5.2 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted that: 'The law does not define what constitutes proselytizing. The constitution states that no state unit, social organization, or individual may force a citizen to believe or not believe in a religion. Offenders are subject to administrative and criminal penalties.'<sup>19</sup>

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Section updated: 18 March 2024

## 8. Demography

8.1.1 The US Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) World Factbook stated that China had an estimated population of over 1.4 billion<sup>20</sup>.

8.1.2 Dui Hua's, a non-profit humanitarian organization which focuses on criminal justice and treatment of detainees based in the US and Hong Kong<sup>21</sup>, report, The Persecution of Unorthodox Religious Groups in China, published in 2022, reported that:

'The Chinese government's tally of religious adherents, as of 2018, was around two hundred million, or approximately 14 percent of its population. This number only covers those who belong to the so-called "Five Great Religions"—Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism—of them, 44 million were Christians (6 million Catholics and 38 million Protestants). Observers generally believe that the official figures are a vast underestimate of the actual number of religious adherents. Independent estimates of the Christian population alone vary widely, but they all far outnumber the official tallies and could number as many as 80 million of those who worship in house churches and "underground" Catholic congregations alone.

'Much of the discrepancy between official numbers and expert estimates can be attributed to China's non-recognition of religious adherents outside of the five state-sanctioned patriotic associations. The official numbers would be much higher if, in addition to unregistered Christians, a rich array of

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<sup>17</sup> USSD, '[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)', 15 May 2023

<sup>18</sup> DFAT, '[Country Information Report - China](#)' (para 3.26), 22 December 2021

<sup>19</sup> USSD, '[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)', 15 May 2023

<sup>20</sup> CIA, '[World fact book, China- people and society](#)', last updated 24 October 2023

<sup>21</sup> Dui Hua Foundation '[Who We Are](#)', no date

communal practices that Chinese officials call “superstition,” were taken into account. Most, if not all, of these people are adherents of unorthodox religious groups, many of whose beliefs and practices are at odds with mainstream religious practices.’<sup>22</sup>

8.1.3 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted that:

‘Local and regional figures for the number of religious followers, including those belonging to the five officially recognized religions, are unclear. Local governments do not release these statistics, and even official religious organizations do not have accurate numbers. The Pew Research Center and other observers say the numbers of adherents of many religious groups often are underreported. In 2021, the U.S. government estimated Buddhists comprise 18.2 percent of the country’s total population, Christians 5.1 percent, Muslims 1.8 percent, followers of folk religions 21.9 percent, and atheists or unaffiliated persons 52.2 percent, with Hindus, Jews, and Taoists comprising less than 1 percent.’<sup>23</sup>

8.1.4 Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact tank that conducts ‘... public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research’<sup>24</sup>, noted in their report ‘Measuring Religion in China’ published in August 2023 that:

‘There is a range of estimates for the number of Christians in China, partly because different researchers use varying sources and methods, and partly because some analyses make adjustments to account for limitations in survey and government data.

‘One perspective is provided by responses to the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) question “What is your religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰)?” In 2018, the CGSS found that roughly 2% of Chinese adults, or about 20 million people, self-identify with Christianity in this way. According to this survey, Protestants account for roughly 90% of Chinese Christians, or about 18 million adults, while the remainder are mostly Catholics. Smaller groups, which include Orthodox Christians, are fewer than 1% of Christian adults in China.

‘... Some media reports and academic papers have suggested the Christian share may be larger, with estimates as high as 7% (100 million) or 9% (130 million) of the total population, including children. No national surveys that measure formal Christian affiliation – by asking people which religion (*zongjiao*) they identify with – come close to these figures.

‘However, survey questions that measure Christian beliefs and practices provide evidence that the number of people with some connection to Christian faith is greater than *zongjiao* measures reveal.

‘For example, the cumulative share of Chinese adults who say they “believe in” (*xiangxin*) Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu (天主, the word Chinese Catholics use for God) is 7%, or roughly 81 million adults, according to the 2018 CFPS

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<sup>22</sup> Dui Hua, ‘[The Persecution of Unorthodox Religious Groups in China: A Report](#)’, 2022

<sup>23</sup> USSD, ‘[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)’, 15 May 2023

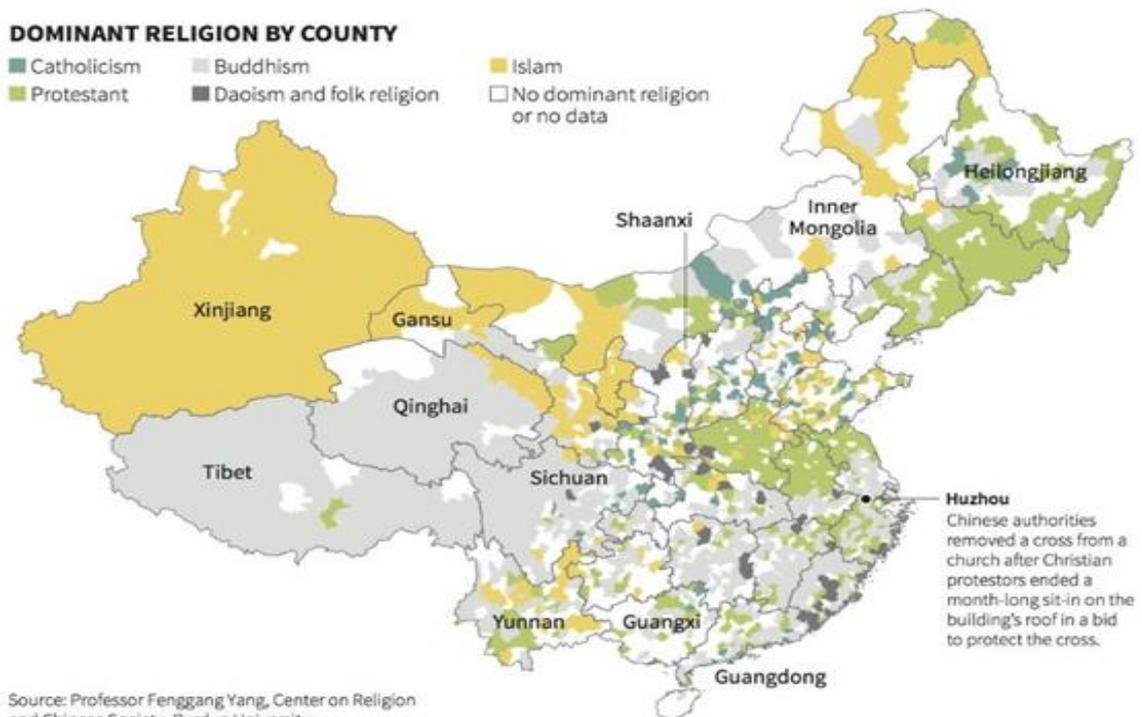
<sup>24</sup> Pew Research Center, ‘[About Pew Research Center](#)’, no date

survey.<sup>25</sup>

8.1.5 The diagram below produced by Purdue University in 2015 shows the dominant religions in China by province<sup>26</sup>.

## Major religions in China

### DOMINANT RELIGION BY COUNTY



Source: Professor Fenggang Yang, Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Purdue University.

W. Foo, 07/08/2015

(C) REUTERS

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Section updated: 27 February 2024

## 9. State treatment - general treatment

### 9.1 Treatment of all religious groups

#### 9.1.1 The 2021 DFAT report noted that:

'Under Xi Jinping, China has introduced a renewed campaign to "sinicise" religion. This work, undertaken through the Party's United Front Work Department and carried out through registered, state sanctioned religious organisations, aims to ensure that a "correct" version of religion is practised by adherents in China, with principles like patriotism, party leadership, and loyalty to the Party emphasised, and doctrine deemed inconsistent with Party supremacy de-emphasised or forbidden. This may involve changing elements of worship such as hymns, clerical attire or architecture to better align with Chinese cultural, aesthetic or political traditions. New religious regulations and implementation organisations aim to enhance government control over the appointment of religious leadership, increase transparency over sources of funding, limit religious practice to venues authorised by the government, reduce links with foreign religious organisations, and give the

<sup>25</sup> Pew Research Center, '[Measuring Religion in China](#)', 30 August 2023

<sup>26</sup> Purdue University's Centre on Religion and Chinese Society, '[Major religions in China](#)', 2015

Party greater say over religious doctrine taught in China. Religious groups that refuse to bring themselves under the authority of state-sanctioned religious organisations face being shut down. Some religious leaders have faced charges like subversion of state power. The 2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs contain broadly worded prohibitions against the use of religion to “split the country”, “undermine ethnic unity” or “engage in terrorist activities”. Although centrally organised, the situation for religions varies from place to place and is influenced by the actions and motivations of local authorities.

‘Professor Fenggang Yang of Purdue University describes religious groups as operating in a “red”, “grey” or “black” market. The red market groups are the officially sanctioned churches, such as the “patriotic associations”, the name used for officially sanctioned organisations that represent the five recognised religions. Grey markets include unofficial but tolerated (to a degree) religious gatherings. Black markets include underground movements and xie jiao. Some home congregations were originally in the black market but moved to the grey market with increased tolerance over decades. But the recent crackdown to “sinicise” religions is reversing this trend. Those groups that are allowed to exist are subject to close monitoring. CCTV cameras may be installed in religious buildings to monitor congregations and virtual platforms used by religious groups to meet may be monitored or censored.

‘... Overall, an individual’s ability to practise religion depends on whether the individual worships in registered or unregistered institutions, whether they practise openly or privately, and whether an individual’s religious expression or the religion itself is perceived by the CCP to be closely tied to other ethnic, political and security issues.’<sup>27</sup>

#### 9.1.2 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2023 Annual Report, covering events in 2022, noted:

‘The government continued to vigorously implement its “sinicization of religion” policy and demand that religious groups support the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) rule and ideology. The CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), and state-controlled religious organizations are integral in implementing this coercive policy.

‘The CCP has long repressed religious freedom and in recent years has become increasingly hostile toward religion, implementing campaigns to “sinicize” Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to remove alleged “foreign influences.” These policies require religious groups to support the CCP, including by altering their religious teachings to conform to CCP ideology and policy. Both registered and unregistered religious groups that run afoul of the CCP face harassment, detention, arrest, imprisonment, and other abuses.’<sup>28</sup>

#### 9.1.3 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted that:

‘Authorities continued to arrest and otherwise detain leaders and members

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<sup>27</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report - China](#)’ (para 3.24 -3.25 & 3.27), 22 December 2021

<sup>28</sup> USCIRF, ‘[2023 Annual Report- China](#)’, 1 May 2023

of religious groups, often those connected with groups not registered with the state-sanctioned religious associations. Authorities reportedly 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. Due to the lack of transparency regarding law enforcement's persecution of religious followers, estimates of those imprisoned during the year for their religious beliefs ranged from the low thousands to over 10,000.<sup>29</sup>

9.1.4 The Pew Research Center noted in their report 'Measuring Religion in China' published in August 2023 that:

'Although the government formally recognizes five religions – Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism – it closely monitors their houses of worship, clergy appointments and funding. Many activities that could help to maintain or expand these five zongjiao groups are banned, including proselytizing and organized religious education for children, such as Sunday schools or religious summer camps.

'Enforcement has varied over time and by province, but since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, local officials have been less likely to overlook such activities. Religions that are not officially recognized, including those practiced mainly by ethnic minorities or foreigners, also are subject to a host of controls.'<sup>30</sup>

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## 9.1 Surveillance

9.1.1 The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), reported in an article dated September 2020: 'Chinese public security officials monitor both registered and unregistered religious groups to prevent activities that "disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State," as stipulated by the Chinese constitution. In practice, however, monitoring and crackdowns often target peaceful activities that are protected under international law, say human rights watchdogs.'<sup>31</sup>

9.1.2 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted that:

'The government blocked religious websites and censored religious content from the popular messaging service WeChat. Authorities censored Mandarin- and Cantonese-language online posts referencing Jesus or the Bible, removed articles published by Christianity-related platforms, and removed the accounts or instructed internet service providers and individual users to remove accounts whose names contained the words "gospel" or "Christ." The government prohibited unauthorized online broadcasts of religious services. One NGO said the new rules concerning online religious content essentially treated Christian religious material on the internet "on a par with pornography, drug dealing, and inciting rebellion." Authorities continued to restrict the printing and distribution of the Bible, the Quran, and other religious literature and penalized businesses that copied and published

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<sup>29</sup> USSD, '[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)', 15 May 2023

<sup>30</sup> Pew Research Center, '[Measuring Religion in China](#)', 30 August 2023

<sup>31</sup> CFR '[Religion in China](#)', 25 September 2020

religious materials.’<sup>32</sup>

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## 9.2 Conditions of arrests, trials and detention

### 9.2.1 The 2022 USSD RIRF noted that:

‘Authorities continued to arrest and otherwise detain leaders and members of religious groups, often those connected with groups not registered with the state-sanctioned religious associations. Authorities reportedly 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. Due to the lack of transparency regarding law enforcement’s persecution of religious followers, estimates of those imprisoned during the year for their religious beliefs ranged from the low thousands to over 10,000.

‘NGOs, religious groups, and media sources continued to report deaths in custody, enforced disappearances (often through “residential surveillance at a designated location” – a form of black-site detention utilized by authorities against individuals accused of endangering state security), and organ harvesting in prison of individuals whom authorities targeted based on their religious beliefs or affiliation. NGOs and media reported authorities used violence during arrests and tortured detainees, including by forcing them to maintain stress positions, beating them, and depriving them of food, water, and sleep, and subjected them to forced indoctrination. NGOs reported that some previously detained individuals were denied freedom of movement even after their release.’<sup>33</sup>

### 9.2.2 Freedom House, in its February 2024 report, stated:

‘Violations of due process are widespread in practice. Trials of human rights activists, religious dissidents, and other human rights defenders are routinely held in secret, with even family members being denied information or entry. While adjudication of routine civil and administrative disputes is considered more fair, cases that touch on politically sensitive issues or the interests of powerful groups are subject to decisive “guidance” from party political-legal committees.

‘... Conditions in places of detention are harsh, with reports of inadequate food, regular beatings, and deprivation of medical care. In addition to their use to extract confessions, torture and other forms of coercion are widely employed in efforts to force political and religious dissidents to recant their beliefs. Impunity is the norm for police brutality and suspicious deaths in custody. Citizens and lawyers who seek redress for such abuse are often met with reprisals or imprisonment. Peaceful protesters are regularly beaten by police or hired aggressors.

‘Many political and religious dissidents have died in prison or shortly after release due to ill-treatment or denial of medical care.’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> USSD, ‘[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)’, 15 May 2023

<sup>33</sup> USSD, ‘[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom - China](#)’, 15 May 2023

<sup>34</sup> Freedom House, ‘[Freedom in the World 2024 – China](#)’ (Government practices), February 2024

### 9.3 General state approach to Christianity

9.3.1 Open Doors, a US based Christian group, produce a 'World Watch List' which is an annual ranking of 50 countries 'where Christians face the most severe persecution',<sup>35</sup> with 1 being the most extreme. Open Doors define persecution as 'any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ'. According to Open doors they gather evidence research using a 100 question survey which is answered by Open Doors partners in each country. Research is conducted in 150 countries, but the world watch list only ranks 50 countries each year<sup>36</sup>. In 2024 Open Doors, considering the situation in 2023, ranked China 19<sup>th</sup> in their list<sup>37</sup>.

9.3.2 The same source further noted about China that:

'Tightening restrictions and increasing surveillance are putting Christians in China under intensifying pressure, as the Communist Party seeks to limits all threats to its power.

'New restrictions on internet and social media – together with the 2018 regulations on religion, which includes a ban on under 18s attending church – are severely limiting Christian freedom.

'Under the draconian measures introduced in March 2022, churches that want to share sermons or Bibles studies online require a permit – but this is only available to the five state-approved religious institutions, such as the Three Self Patriotic Movement. The restrictions extend to social media, meaning that mentioning anything connected with Christianity could get people into considerable trouble.

'Given the surveillance used by the authorities – which is among the most oppressive and sophisticated in the world – Christians have little room for manoeuvre, both online and offline.'<sup>38</sup>

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### 9.4 Christian practices

9.4.1 Freedom House's Special report on the Battle for China's Spirit (The Freedom House Special Report) published in February 2017 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).'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Open Doors, '[World Watch List Methodology](#)', undated

<sup>36</sup> Open Doors, '[World Watch List Methodology](#)', undated

<sup>37</sup> Open Doors, '[World Watch List 2024](#)', 17 January 2024

<sup>38</sup> Open Doors, '[World Watch List 2023- China](#)', 18 January 2023

<sup>39</sup> Freedom House, '[Special report- The Battle for China's Spirit](#)', February 2017

## 10. Catholics

### 10.1 Registered groups, clergy and places of worship

10.1.1 The 2021 DFAT report noted that: ‘The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) represents the official Chinese Catholic Church. Globally, matters of Catholic doctrine, ecclesiastical law and the appointment of leaders (bishops) are usually controlled by the Catholic hierarchy, headquartered in the Vatican. The CCPA does not recognise the authority of the Vatican.’<sup>40</sup>

10.1.2 The Pew Research Center’s report ‘Measuring Religion in China’ noted that:

‘Government statistics on the numbers of officially registered Catholic venues and personnel – which include only those affiliated with the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) – point in slightly different directions.

‘On the one hand, the number of official Catholic personnel (bishops, priests and nuns) declined from 8,800 in 2009 to 8,000 in 2018. On the other hand, according to official statistics, the number of Catholic venues has grown slightly. In 2022, there were 6,440 officially registered venues (including 4,202 churches and 2,238 sites of worship), up from 6,000 in 2009. (Estimates of churches and worship sites for other years are unavailable.)

‘... Underground churches are made up of clergy and laity who reject China’s authority to select bishops and insist on loyalty to the Vatican, while CPA churches pledge loyalty to the Chinese government and espouse the principle of zixuanzisheng. As of 2018, there were seven CPA bishops whom the Vatican had not approved, and an estimated 30 to 40 underground bishops whom the Chinese government did not recognize.

‘In 2018, China’s relationship with the Vatican was recalibrated when the Vatican signed an agreement allowing the Chinese government to appoint bishops while giving the pope veto power. Since then, Pope Francis has recognized seven previously excommunicated “self-elected and self-ordained” Chinese bishops, while China has appointed eight underground bishops as CPA clergy, bringing the total number of bishops to 66 as of 2022.

‘Since signing the deal with the Vatican, the government has stepped up efforts to bring Catholic churches into the CPA and intensified its pressure on those that refuse to join.’<sup>41</sup>

10.1.3 The map below was taken from the Pew Research Center’s report ‘Measuring Religion in China’ and shows the distribution of registered Catholic churches. The Pew Research Center used data from the 2004 National Economic Census but observed that whilst the number of Catholic churches has quadrupled since 2004 the data still gives a good snapshot of geographical patterns<sup>42</sup>.

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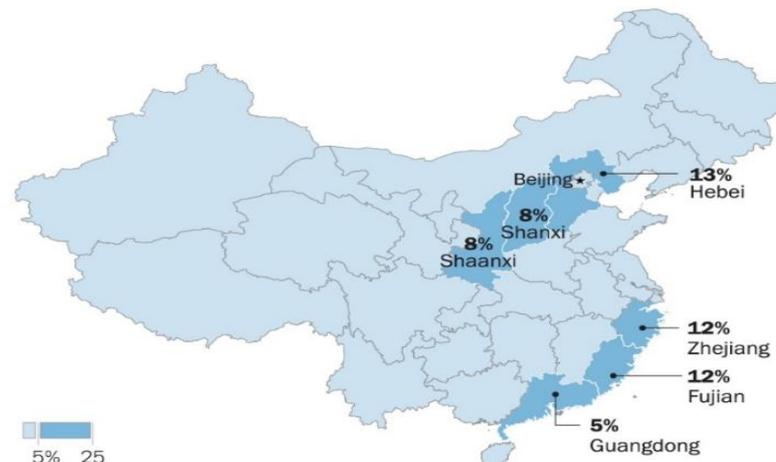
<sup>40</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report - China](#)’ (paragraph 3.36), 22 December 2021

<sup>41</sup> Pew Research Center, ‘[Measuring Religion in China](#)’ (section 4- Christianity), 30 August 2023

<sup>42</sup> Pew Research Center, ‘[Measuring Religion in China](#)’ (section 4- Christianity), 30 August 2023

**In 2004, China's Catholic churches were most numerous in Hebei, where many Catholics live**

*% of Catholic religious sites in each province, among all such sites in China*



Note: Only provinces with 5% or more of China's Catholic churches are labeled. Data is only available for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the 2004 China Economic Census, accessed through the Center on Religion and the Global East at Purdue University. "Measuring Religion in China"

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## 10.2 The Sino-Vatican agreement

- 10.2.1 The 2021 DFAT report noted: 'In 2018, the Vatican and Beijing signed an agreement that would regularise the status of some Chinese-appointed bishops so they would be viewed as valid by the Vatican. In return, those "underground" Catholic churches would join the CCPA. Most of the details of the deal are not known. The deal was extended in October 2020 for a further two years, allowing for more bishops to be recognised.'<sup>43</sup>
- 10.2.2 The Congressional Executive Commission On China (CECC), chaired by US politicians and established by US Congress in 2000 to monitor China's compliance with international human rights standards<sup>44</sup>, annual report 2022 noted that: 'Official efforts to assert control over Chinese Catholic leadership and religious practice have continued. The Sino-Vatican Agreement of 2018 established a mechanism for appointing bishops "in full communion" with the pope and "recognized by authorities of the People's Republic of China." Renewed in 2020, the Agreement led to the appointment and ordination of six bishops "within the [Agreement's] framework" as of 2021, according to the Vatican.'<sup>45</sup>
- 10.2.3 The Pew Research Center's report 'Measuring Religion in China' noted that: 'Underground churches are made up of clergy and laity who reject China's authority to select bishops and insist on loyalty to the Vatican, while CPA churches pledge loyalty to the Chinese government and espouse the principle of zixuanzisheng. As of 2018, there were seven CPA bishops whom the Vatican had not approved, and an estimated 30 to 40 underground

<sup>43</sup> DFAT, '[Country Information Report - China](#)' (paragraph 3.37), 22 December 2021

<sup>44</sup> CECC, '[Frequently Asked Questions](#)', no date

<sup>45</sup> CECC, '[China- Annual Report 2022](#)' (page 102), November 2022

bishops whom the Chinese government did not recognize.

‘... In 2018, China’s relationship with the Vatican was recalibrated when the Vatican signed an agreement allowing the Chinese government to appoint bishops while giving the pope veto power. Since then, Pope Francis has recognized seven previously excommunicated “self-elected and self-ordained” Chinese bishops, while China has appointed eight underground bishops as CPA clergy, bringing the total number of bishops to 66 as of 2022.’<sup>46</sup>

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### 10.3 State treatment of registered groups

- 10.3.1 An article in the Catholic Herald, a Catholic publication based in the UK, noted that: ‘Perhaps surprisingly, CPA bishops and their priests are not necessarily shielded from persecution—the seizure of church buildings, for example, or arbitrary arrest—and large numbers of dioceses are deliberately left without bishops. No official Bishops’ Conference recognisable by the Vatican was possible, since by definition a Bishops’ Conference must have as its members all and only the legitimate bishops of a nation.’<sup>47</sup>
- 10.3.2 ChinaAid, an international non-profit Christian human rights organisation<sup>48</sup>, noted in an article from November 2023 that: ‘The Chinese government has cautiously recognized certain high-ranking Catholic clergy to ensure that the leadership of the Catholic Church remains firmly in the hands of individuals who “love the country and the Church.” This tactic has effectively instrumentalized Church bodies for political stability.’<sup>49</sup>
- 10.3.3 CPIT could find no other information regarding the targeting of members of registered Catholic groups (see [Bibliography](#)).

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### 10.4 Treatment of unregistered groups

- 10.4.1 The 2021 DFAT report stated that:

‘... In the past, the Vatican has had some input into the selection of bishops but a number of Vatican-approved bishops also operate “underground”, separate from the CCPA. For some Chinese Catholics, allegiance to the Vatican Catholic Church hierarchy is an important part of faith because of their belief in a succession of authority that can be traced back to St Peter, a contemporary of Jesus. For those Catholics, Party-appointed priests and bishops are unable to validly confer sacraments that are central to their beliefs. On this basis they refuse to participate in religious activities associated with the CCPA.

‘... In spite of the deal [Sino-Vatican agreement], reports of a crackdown on Catholics as part of a wider campaign to sinicise religion continue. Underground priests who were demoted from the position of bishop as part of the deal are pressured to join the CCPA, according to various media

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<sup>46</sup> Pew Research Center, [‘Measuring Religion in China’](#) (section 4- Christianity), 30 August 2023

<sup>47</sup> The Catholic Herald, [‘The Sino-Vatican Pact fails again: an appeal from the...’](#), 20 May 2023

<sup>48</sup> ChinaAid, [‘About ChinaAid’](#), no date

<sup>49</sup> ChinaAid, [‘Catholic Bishop embraces sinicization policy’](#), 8 November 2023

reports. Some media reports say that underground priests had experienced torture and disappearance if they resisted. Fujian, a traditional stronghold for Catholicism and underground Catholicism in particular, has seen particular efforts to convert underground bishops.

‘The numbers of CCPA versus underground Catholics are not clear. Cardinal Zen, formerly Archbishop of Hong Kong and a vocal critic of the Chinese Government, has claimed in media reports the “underground community” has “practically disappeared” because of pressure on underground bishops. DFAT is unable to verify this claim.

‘DFAT assesses that some underground Catholics loyal to the Vatican are only able to practise their religion discreetly and some may face severe restrictions. Most Catholics will follow their local leadership, whether it is Party or Vatican controlled, and so leaders are more likely than congregants to face government attention, but the situation differs from place to place and community to community and many Catholics live in rural areas where local conditions may prevail.’<sup>50</sup>

#### 10.4.2 Bitter Winter noted in an article from July 2022 that:

‘Some Chinese Catholics who had been part of the underground did join the Patriotic Church, and some didn’t. Those who didn’t included bishops, in addition to priests and laypersons, and a new category was created, the “conscientious objectors.” These are the Chinese Catholics who recognize the authority of the Pope and the Vatican, yet do not accept Rome’s suggestion to join the Patriotic Association, claiming that their conscience cannot accept the participation in an organization controlled by an atheistic Communist Party.

‘The Vatican is not happy about the existence of the conscientious objectors and do not encourage their position in any way. Yet, it maintains that they are Catholics in good standing, and in the Vatican Guidelines of 2019—that some in the Vatican now regard as unwise and damaging the relations with the CCP—it asked the Chinese government to treat them with “respect.”’<sup>51</sup>

#### 10.4.3 The CECC Annual Report 2022 noted that:

‘In spite of the apparent thaw in Sino-Vatican relations signaled by the Agreement [between the Vatican and the CCP], the PRC exerted ongoing pressure on unregistered Catholic communities in 2021 and 2022, detaining seminarians, clergy, and at least two unregistered Vatican-appointed bishops. In May 2021, authorities detained Zhang Weizhu, bishop of Xinxiang Apostolic Prefecture in Henan, reportedly subjecting him to political indoctrination and holding him at an unknown location for over nine months without charge. On October 25, 2021, authorities in Wenzhou municipality, Zhejiang province, detained Bishop coadjutor of Wenzhou Shao Zhumin; they released him the following month, then detained him again on April 9, 2022. One observer said that Shao’s repeated detentions before major Chinese Catholic holidays are “almost scientific” in their regularity, noting his

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<sup>50</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report - China](#)’ (para 3.36, 3.38 – 3.40), 22 December 2021

<sup>51</sup> Bitter Winter, ‘[The Vatican-China Agreement and Pope Francis: To Renew or Not...](#)’, 25 July 2022

disappearance before Easter.<sup>52</sup>

- 10.4.4 The USCIRF 2023 Annual Report stated that: ‘Despite renewal in October [2022] of the Vatican-China agreement on bishop appointments, in December [2022] the Vatican protested the government’s installation of a bishop without its approval. Across China, authorities detained or otherwise forcibly disappeared Catholic priests and bishops—including Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu and Bishop Augustine Cui Tai—who refused to join the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.’<sup>53</sup>
- 10.4.5 In June 2023, the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCA news), an ‘independent Catholic media service from Asia’<sup>54</sup>, reported that 2 members of an independent house church were sentenced to 5.5 years and 3.5 years for alleged ‘illegal business operations’. They were arrested after the church printed religious materials<sup>55</sup>.
- 10.4.6 The Pew Research Center’s report ‘Measuring Religion in China’ noted that: ‘The Chinese government has always been wary of underground Catholic churches. Local authorities usually closely monitor covert Catholic activities and pressure priests and bishops to join the CPA as part of an ongoing program to “educate and convert underground Catholic forces.”’<sup>56</sup>
- 10.4.7 USCIRF produce the ‘Frank R Wolf Freedom of Religion or belief Victims List’, which records victims targeted due to their religion or belief and includes those currently detained, those released, those who have died in custody and those whose whereabouts are unknown. According to their website the list is compiled using USCIRF ongoing monitoring, communication with those affected and organisations that focus on religious freedom. USCIRF go on to note however that: ‘... due to the policies of foreign governments and the lack of independent news and human rights organizations in the countries represented in this database, it is difficult to obtain, confirm, and verify comprehensive information about all victims.’<sup>57</sup>
- 10.4.8 At the time of writing, the list records the details of 5 Catholics. The whereabouts of 2 of the people on the list, a priest and a bishop from unregistered Catholic groups, are currently unknown. One of the other 3 who were recorded as detained at the time of writing, Jimmy Lai, who is a Catholic, was detained following the introduction of the National Security Law in Hong Kong<sup>58</sup> (see the [Country Policy and Information Note: Hong Kong national security law, China](#) for more information on his case). The table below was produced using information from the list and gives the details of the other 2 Catholics currently detained<sup>59</sup>.

Name	Detained	Details of charges
Joseph Zhang	21/05/2021	Believed that Zhang was arrested for

<sup>52</sup> CECC, ‘[China- Annual Report 2022](#)’ (page 102), November 2022

<sup>53</sup> USCIRF, ‘[2023 Annual Report](#)’, 1 May 2023

<sup>54</sup> UCA News, ‘[About Us](#)’, no date

<sup>55</sup> UCA News, ‘[Chinese Christians jailed for printing religious materials](#)’, 9 June 2023

<sup>56</sup> Pew Research Center, ‘[Measuring Religion in China](#)’ (section 4- Christianity), 30 August 2023

<sup>57</sup> USCIRF, ‘[About USCIRF’s Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)’, no date

<sup>58</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)’, no date

<sup>59</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)’, no date

Weizhu		violating the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs, which require state approval of clergy.
Cui Tai	19/06/2020	Reportedly detained in relation to his religious leadership activities as a bishop unrecognized by the government.

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Section updated: 15 January 2024

## 11. Protestants

### 11.1 Registered groups and places of worship

#### 11.1.1 The 2021 DFAT report stated that:

‘The Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), established in 1949, is the official governing body for Protestant churches in China. “Three-Self” is a Chinese abbreviation for the church’s three principles of self-administration, self-financing and self-evangelisation taken from 19th century missionary philosophies. It does not refer to the Trinity. The Three-Self Church comes under the authority of the CCP’s United Front Work Department and is the single state-sanctioned Protestant church in mainland China.’<sup>60</sup>

#### 11.1.2 The Pew Research Center’s report ‘Measuring Religion in China’ noted:

‘There are two types of officially sanctioned Protestant places of worship in China: churches (*jiaotang* 教堂) and meeting points (*juhuidian* 聚会点). A meeting point is not different from a church functionally, but it may not look like a church building; it can be an apartment or office space and usually holds fewer congregants.

‘... In 2009, Protestant venues totaled 55,000 (including roughly 24,000 registered churches and 31,000 meeting points), according to the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Since then, China’s Protestant supervisory agencies have not broken out churches and meeting points separately. According to China’s State Council Information Office, there were roughly 60,000 legal Protestant venues in 2018, largely unchanged from a total of 58,000 venues in 2009. These do not include Protestant house churches or unauthorized meeting points.

‘Not all registered meeting points are included in the official statistics of formally registered Protestant venues, a discrepancy that might be explained, at least in part, by the ambiguous meaning of the Chinese words for “register” (*dengji* 登记 or *zhuce* 注册). These words can mean either “granted formal registration” or “put on local government record.” The latter may not appear in official statistics.

‘... The number of registered Protestant venues, which increased substantially between 1997 and 2008, has roughly leveled off since then.’<sup>61</sup>

#### 11.1.3 The map below was taken from the Pew Research Center’s report

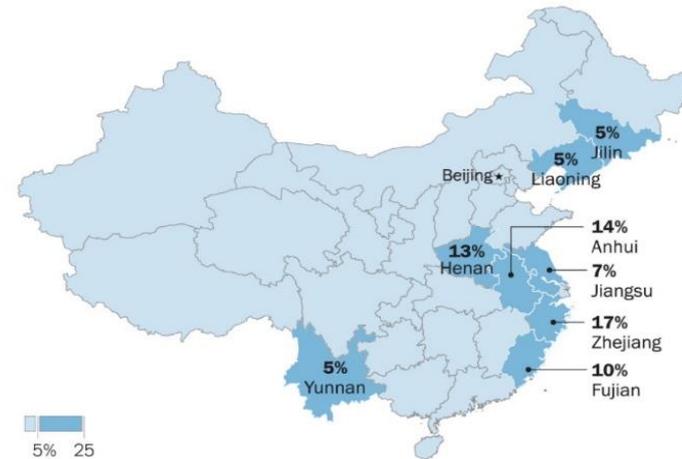
<sup>60</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report - China](#)’ (para 3.32), 22 December 2021

<sup>61</sup> Pew Research Center, ‘[Measuring Religion in China](#)’ (section 4- Christianity), 30 August 2023

'Measuring Religion in China' and shows the distribution of registered Protestant churches. The Pew Research Center used data from the 2004 National Economic Census but observed that whilst the number of Protestant Churches has quadrupled since 2004, the data still gives a good snapshot of geographical patterns<sup>62</sup>.

**Protestant churches in China were concentrated in coastal areas, as of 2004**

*% of Protestant worship sites in each province, among all such sites in China*



Note: Only provinces with 5% or more of China's Protestant churches are labeled. Data is only available for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the 2004 China Economic Census, accessed through the Center on Religion and the Global East at Purdue University. "Measuring Religion in China"

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## 11.2 State treatment of registered groups

### 11.2.1 USCIRF's report, 'China's 2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy', October 2021, stated:

'... authorities in Zhejiang province—a location with a large Christian population and previously known for its relative tolerance of Christianity—have intensified a crackdown on Christianity in recent years, including by persecuting state-sanctioned Christian leaders who opposed government policies. Notably in 2016 and 2017, Zhejiang authorities removed from office, and ultimately detained and arrested Protestant pastor Gu Yuese—a high-profile leader of the official Protestant group in Zhejiang—for his open opposition to the local authorities' forced cross removal and church demolition campaign.

'... According to reports, on May 2 [2021], a day after the new Measures became effective, a state sanctioned Protestant pastor in Wenzhou city, Zhejiang, was seen in a recorded video using the Bible to publicly promote the CCP's political propaganda and policies during a sermon. Clergy members who run afoul of government regulations and policies could now face severe penalties, especially for security-related charges such as "religious extremism," "separatism," and "terrorism" ... <sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Pew Research Center, '[Measuring Religion in China](#)' (section 4- Christianity), 30 August 2023

<sup>63</sup> USCIRF, '[China's 2021 Measures on the Management of Religious Clergy](#)', October 2021

- 11.2.2 The USCIRF documented the details of one Protestant, Zhang Shaojie, from the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, who was detained at the time of writing in February 2024. He was detained in November 2013 following a series of land disputes with local authorities. He was later charged with ‘obstruction of official business’ and ‘gathering a crowd to disrupt social order,’ a reference to his congregation. The former charge was later changed to ‘fraud’. In July 2014 he was sentenced to 12 years in prison<sup>64</sup>.
- 11.2.3 However, no other specific cases of targeting of members of registered Protestant churches are documented in the sources consulted (see [Bibliography](#)).

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### 11.3 State treatment of unregistered groups

#### 11.3.1 The 2021 DFAT report noted that:

‘Most Protestants worship in unofficial “house” churches. These “underground” churches may literally be in a house, or can be large gatherings in, for example, commercial office space. During COVID-19, some services moved online, which in some cases increased the size of congregations. In recent years the government has increased efforts to force them to submit to the authority of the [Three-Self Patriotic Movement] TSPM, teach Party-aligned doctrine, cut off association with foreign churches, and subject the appointment of leaders to rules set out by the TSPM. Churches refusing to align with the TSPM have been closed or threatened with closure. DFAT is aware of reports of authorities pressuring house churches by cutting off electricity, forcing landlords to evict members, or using procedural grounds to shut house churches. Larger churches are most likely to receive government attention; the larger the congregation, the greater the chance of such attention. This in practice means that small groups may be able to meet in private for unauthorised religious discussions.

‘The situation for Protestants differs from place to place and community to community. DFAT is aware of Protestant communities that have been largely unaffected by increased government oversight and where usual worship activities and practices have continued largely without any interference. The nature of Protestant Christianity is that smaller churches not linked to any central hierarchy or authority are harder to control by either the state or the religious authority but conversely are also less likely to be seen as a threat to the state and thus less likely to be targeted.’<sup>65</sup>

- 11.3.2 Dui Hua’s report ‘The Persecution of Unorthodox Religious groups in China’ published on 29 March 2022 noted: ‘Financial fraud is another crime often cited in cases involving unorthodox religion, when donations given to the leaders of the groups are considered by the public security bureau to be received in a fraudulent manner. This accusation is commonly used against unorthodox Christian groups that ask their adherents to contribute a portion of their income.’<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)’, no date

<sup>65</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report - China](#)’ (para 3.33 & 3.34), 22 December 2021

<sup>66</sup> Dui Hua, ‘[Persecution of Unorthodox Religious Groups in China](#)’ (page 44), 29 March 2022

### 11.3.3 The CECC Annual Report 2022 noted:

‘During this reporting year, PRC authorities continued to violate the religious freedom of Protestant Christians, engaging in pressure campaigns against unregistered churches by detaining church leaders and cracking down on religious education and media. The Commission has observed the Chinese government using charges such as “fraud” and “illegal business activity” to project a veneer of criminality onto activities that—according to international law—fall within the scope of normal religious practices. Local authorities also continued to target several influential unregistered or “house” churches.’<sup>67</sup>

### 11.3.4 In January 2023 Christian Solidarity Worldwide, which states that it works to defend, uphold and promote the right to freedom of religion or belief<sup>68</sup>, reported:

‘Fugong police in China’s Nujiang Lisu Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan province, took four Christians into custody on 12 January for participating in a Bible study in August 2022. Five Bible teachers who also attended the meeting have been detained since early August 2022. According to a source familiar with the situation, the teachers include three ethnic Nu men, Wang Shunping, Nu Sangdeng and San Luobo, and two women, Hua Xiuxia and Dong Mengru. All five have been formally charged with “organising and sponsoring an illegal gathering”, which in reality consisted of prayer and free Bible and music lessons for young people.’<sup>69</sup>

### 11.3.5 The USCIRF 2023 Annual Report noted:

‘Persecution of Protestant house church Christians also intensified in 2022. The government carried out a nationwide crackdown on house churches by harassing, detaining, physically abusing, and sentencing Protestants who refused to join the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Authorities targeted Reformed house church Christians, including Elder Zhang Chunlei of Ren’ai Reformed Church and Pastor An Yankui of Taiyuan Zion Reformed Church. Reports also emerged of harsh persecution of ethnic minority Protestants, such as Lisu and Nu Protestants in Yunan Province and Kyrgyz Protestants in Xinjiang reeducation camps.’<sup>70</sup>

### 11.3.6 In December 2023, CSW reported that: ‘Authorities in Chengdu in China’s Sichuan Province resorted to various illegal measures to prevent leaders and members of Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC) from taking part in an online prayer meeting on 9 December 2023.’<sup>71</sup>

### 11.3.7 At the time of writing in March 2024 the USCIRF recorded the details of 16 Protestants from unregistered Protestant groups who had been released from detention. This included 6 Protestants from the Early Rain Covenant Church who were detained together in 2018, with 1 released in 2022 after completion of their sentence and the rest reportedly released in 2019 or on an unspecified date. Five individuals were detained together in 2022 and reportedly released on bail in 2023. One individual was detained in 2008 and

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<sup>67</sup> CECC, ‘[China- Annual Report 2022](#)’ (page 103), November 2022

<sup>68</sup> CSW, ‘[Our work](#)’, no date

<sup>69</sup> CSW, ‘[Police detain more ethnic Christians in rural Yunnan](#)’, 19 January 2023

<sup>70</sup> USCIRF, ‘[2023 Annual Report](#)’, 1 May 2023

<sup>71</sup> CSW, ‘[Early Rain Church members harassed and leaders detained...](#)’, 11 December 2023

reportedly released in 2023, one individual was detained in 2015 and released after completion of their sentence in 2023 and one individual was detained in 2017 and released in March 2024 after completion of their sentence<sup>72</sup>. There are 16 Protestants from unregistered groups on the list who were detained at the time of writing, 2 of whom were charged with being members of a cult<sup>73</sup>.

11.3.8 CPIT has created the table below using the USCIRF data<sup>74</sup> as of March 2024, which gives details of those detained but excluding the 2 who were detained on cult charges.

Name	Date detained	Charge	Details of detention
Liu Yingxu	09/12/2018	unknown	One of 100 members of the unregistered house church Early Rain Covenant Church, who were detained by authorities.
Wang Yi	09/12/2018	Illegal Business Activity Subversion	Pastor of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu and a former human rights attorney, arrested alongside his congregation for failing to register their church with authorities and subject it to state regulation.
Li Juncai	20/02/2019	Embezzlement & Fraud	Pastor of a house church detained alongside three others reportedly for refusing to remove the church's cross and replace a religious sign in the church with a state-approved one.
Zhao Huaiguo	14/03/2020	Subversion	Zhao was reportedly targeted for posting commentary online about the coronavirus and politics and for repeatedly refusing to register his church with the officially sanctioned Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

<sup>72</sup> USCIRF, '[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)', no date

<sup>73</sup> USCIRF, '[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)', no date

<sup>74</sup> USCIRF, '[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)', no date

Name	Date detained	Charges	Details of detention
Yang Jianxin	2021	Illegal Business Activity	Pastor of a house church arrested for "conducting illegal business operations" and "printing and purchasing illegal publications" after he reached out to a local printer to print Bibles.
Zhang Chunlei	16/03/2021	Embezzlement & Fraud Subversion	Detained for "illegally operating as an association" after he visited a police station to learn about the status of several colleagues arrested while attending a religious retreat.
Yang Rongli	07/08/2021	Embezzlement & Fraud	Arrested after a government campaign targeting them and their church for refusing to join the TSPM.
Wang Xiaoguang	07/08/2021	Embezzlement & Fraud	As above
Zhou Jinxia	20/02/2022	Public Disorder	Detained as she preached in front of the CCP and government leadership compound at Zhongnanhai in Beijing municipality.
Chen Lijun	13/08/2022	Embezzlement & Fraud	Reportedly detained for purchasing religious books without government approval.
Lian Changnian	17/08/2022	Embezzlement & Fraud, Subversion	Member of the unregistered house church Church of Abundance. Arrested following a reported crackdown on the church's community. Authorities reportedly accused them of "endangering national security" and fraud.

Name	Date detained	Charges	Details of detention
Lian Xuliang	17/08/2022	Embezzlement & Fraud, Subversion	Member of the unregistered house church Church of Abundance. Arrested following a reported crackdown on the church's community. Authorities reportedly accused them of "endangering national security" and fraud.
Fu Juan	17/08/2022	Embezzlement & Fraud, Subversion	As above
Wan Changchun	11/04/2023	Embezzlement & Fraud	Arrested for alleged "illegal business activity" (Art. 225 CCL). Was one among hundreds of pastors who had signed onto a letter condemning state policy changes in 2017 that resulted in greater persecution of Christians.

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Section updated: 27 February 2024

## 12. Other unregistered Christian groups

### 12.1 Cults (xie jiao)

#### 12.1.1 The 2021 DFAT report stated that:

‘Some new religious movements, known as xie jiao, are illegal in China.

‘...There is a list of xie jiao but it can change quickly and is not available from official sources, making it difficult to determine at any time whether a particular religious movement is banned.

‘One Chinese county government website from Shaanxi states that xie jiao often “disguise themselves” or “pretend to be religions” (such as Christianity or Buddhism) or a manifestation of science or ancient practices. Another city government website from Shantou in Guangdong says that xie jiao spread false teachings and heresy. The national government’s “anti xie jiao” website has articles about various groups, a section to help people find missing relatives and a place to report xie jiao activity. Membership of such groups is illegal and the profile of a person who is a member is not relevant to the chances of arrest once detected; a low-profile worshipper in a xie jiao is still subject to arrest.’<sup>75</sup>

#### 12.1.2 The CECC annual report noted that: ‘Public security and judicial authorities

<sup>75</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report- China](#)’ (para 3.53, 3.55 & 3.56), 22 December 2021

continued to use Article 300 of the PRC Criminal Law, which forbids “organizing and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law,” to persecute members of spiritual groups deemed to be illegal or to be “cults” (xie jiao), including ... Church of the Almighty God, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others.’<sup>76</sup>

12.1.3 The USSD IRF 2022 noted the government defines a number of Christian groups as ‘cult organizations’ including the:

- Shouters
- CAG (also known as Eastern Lightning) [or COAG],
- 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
- Established King Church
- Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church)
- Family of Love
- South China Church<sup>77</sup>.

12.1.4 In August 2023 Bitter Winter reported that the authorities in Guangxi province had introduced a programme to indoctrinate primary and middle school children against xie jiao and illegal religion. Bitter Winter noted that:

‘What started by illustrating the harms of the “xie jiao” (movements banned for spreading “heterodox teachings,” sometimes less correctly translated as “cults”), quickly extended to denouncing “illegal religion” and criticizing religion in general as “anti-scientific.”

‘Children in some cases as young as six were led to repeat slogan hailing “science” and denouncing “feudal superstition.” Games, exercises, lectures, and even nursery rhymes were mobilized to impress the pupils.’<sup>78</sup>

12.1.5 Dui Hua collated information on political prisoners in China using mainly open-source reporting. The information they produce is not in a searchable database but they reported that as of 31 December 2023 there were 48,699 individuals in the political prisoner database with 7,371 currently in custody, this number includes religious practitioners<sup>79</sup>. They went on to note that the top crime for those detained was ‘Organising/using a cult to undermine implementation of the law’ for which they reported 2,772 people were detained. It is not clear from the source how many of these were linked to

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<sup>76</sup> CECC, ‘[China- Annual Report 2022](#)’ (page 96), November 2022

<sup>77</sup> USSD, ‘[2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: China](#)’, 15 May 2023

<sup>78</sup> Bitter Winter, ‘[Massive Campaign Against “Xie Jiao and Illegal Religion” Targets...](#)’, 18 August 2023

<sup>79</sup> Dui Hua Foundation, ‘[Political Prisoner Database](#)’, 30 June 2023

Christian groups or other religions<sup>80</sup>.

- 12.1.6 With regards to those who have been charged for being members of a cult the USCIRF recorded 196 individuals as detained at the time of writing in February 2024, with 5 individuals recorded having been detained and subsequently released and a further 115 individuals whose whereabouts were unknown<sup>81</sup>.

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## 12.2 Church of Almighty God (COAG/CAG) or Eastern Lightning

- 12.2.1 The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted in a Country of Origin (COI) information report of China, based on a range of public and confidential sources, published in May 2020 stated:

‘The CAG is a church that was established in 1989, with roots in Protestantism. ... In 1995 the Chinese authorities designated the CAG as a Xie Jiao ...

‘It is difficult if not impossible to ascertain exactly how many CAG members there are in China ... The Chinese authorities put the number of CAG members at four million, but most Western scholars believe this number is exaggerated. Due to the high degree of lack of freedom, CAG worshippers frequently change their address, making it difficult to pinpoint where in China most members of the church can be found. It is known, however, that the CAG originated from the central Chinese province of Henan and has spread to all parts of mainland China, including Xinjiang. The CAG’s mission is to bring all of humanity into contact with the “work of Almighty God”, and it therefore does not have an exclusively ethnic character ... The CAG has more female than male members.

‘ ... The Chinese government justifies its criminal prosecution of the CAG by referring to the church’s alleged criminal, violent and sectarian attributes ...’<sup>82</sup>

- 12.2.2 The 2021 DFAT report stated:

‘The Church of Almighty God (also known as Eastern Lightning) was banned as a xie jiao in November 1995. COAG operates in secret (both to avoid detection and as a general matter of practice) and so little is known about the Church.

‘ ... Little is known about the identity of the central female figure, which may be because of secrecy. Some non-COAG sources claim that she (as an historical figure) never existed at all and the Church denies claims that she is called “Yang” or “Deng” or that she comes from Henan, which is reported in some sources. DFAT understands from sources that different beliefs about her identity may exist amongst Church followers and DFAT is aware of some members who deny that any such figure exists at all. Others may pay little attention to the female Christ figure without denying her existence. Similarly, COAG texts might refer to “Almighty God” using male pronouns. Some

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<sup>80</sup> Dui Hua Foundation, ‘[Political Prisoner Database](#)’, 30 June 2023

<sup>81</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)’, no date

<sup>82</sup> Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘[Country of origin report China](#)’ (section 6.4), 1 July 2020

adherents believe that a woman came to earth as a new incarnation of Christ and the “ordinariness” of this woman may appeal to some rural female adherents.

‘There is no formal liturgy or sacraments in the COAG movement but weekly study meetings do occur. The leadership can change quickly. Members of the Church may deny, or not understand, the hierarchy and leadership of the Church, but DFAT understands that there is a hierarchy. Due to the secrecy that surrounds the Church, a common understanding may not be reached by members and questions about practice could genuinely be answered differently by different adherents. COAG members generally do read The Word Made Flesh, the central religious text of the group. DFAT is not aware of any central registry of members and understands that there are no authoritative estimates of the number of members.

‘COAG is controversial. Multiple claims of illegal activity such as homicides and kidnappings have been reported in the media. Members are reportedly forced to break away from families or sell their possessions to give the proceeds to the Church. These claims are disputed by COAG and some members. Other small groups, especially small Protestant groups, are strongly against COAG and many sources that describe the Church come from that origin. Those sources may not be reliable. DFAT understands that some Protestants cooperate with authorities to help them identify COAG activity and arrest members.

‘Separate police action against members may be related to membership of the organisation or alleged criminal activity connected to it.

‘ ... COAG is not well understood but it is clearly illegal in China, and reports of widespread arrests are credible. It is illegal for them to proselytise; those who attempt to proselytise, as well as leaders in the Church, are subject to greater scrutiny by authorities ... DFAT is unable to verify whether a former member or a person imprisoned for membership would be placed on an exit control list ...<sup>83</sup>

12.2.3 The Church of Almighty God’s 2020 Annual Report on the Chinese Communist Government’s Persecution of The Church of Almighty God published in February 2021, noted that:

‘According to incomplete statistics, just between 2011 and the end of 2020, more than 420,000 CAG Christians were arrested by the Chinese authorities, and the documented number of believers who have died as a result of persecution since the Church’s establishment has reached 192.

‘ ... In spite of the ravages of the epidemic [COVID-19], the CCP continued to carry out arrests, residential searches and confiscation of property, brutal torture, brainwashing and conversion, and long-term monitoring and harassment of CAG Christians on a massive scale. Incomplete statistics suggest that in 2020, there were at least 42,807 CAG Christians who were directly persecuted by authorities. [CPIT were unable to find information on how persecution is defined by CAG] Figures indicate that at a minimum, 7,055 suffered arrest, 5,587 were subjected to torture or brainwashing, and

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<sup>83</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report- China](#)’ (paragraph 3.57, 3.59- 3.63), 22 December 2021

1,098 were given prison sentences. Of these, 360 received sentences of three years or more, 57 received sentences of seven years or more, and three were given heavy sentences of 10 years or more.

'... Sentences given to CAG Christians by the CCP judiciary in 2020 became harsher on average, with the longest being 15 years. Internal CCP policies play a decisive role in the courts' sentences. Courts and procuratorates in many areas joined in the effort to suppress The Church of Almighty God in order to carry out the directives of the Central Committee's three-year "all-out war" outlined in its internal document. They required "strengthened leadership in handling of cases," "unified thinking on law enforcement," and "good education and management of the lawyers concerned." Many lawyers have stated that defending any case involving The Church of Almighty God is utterly useless.<sup>84</sup> CPIT could find no other sources that could corroborate the figures on persecution used by CAG. The CAG report also provided no further details regarding the number of lawyers spoken to or case examples.

12.2.4 Dui Hua's report 'The Persecution of Unorthodox Religious groups in China' published on 29 March 2022 noted that:

'Known also as the "Real God" church or "Eastern Lightning," Almighty God was founded by Zhao Weishan (赵维山) in Henan in 1989. The group believes that divine revelation has identified a "female Christ" who will reign over a new age in which humankind will be judged and only believers will survive. It also calls on members to slay the CCP which they call the "great red dragon." The group has an extensive organization both inside and outside China. Almighty God members have reportedly been involved in violent attacks on non-believers and other house church organizations, most notably the killing which took place at a McDonald's restaurant in Shandong in 2014.

'Despite being outlawed since 1995, Almighty God did not become a major target of religious suppression until late December 2012,

'Chinese government sources confirm Almighty God's widespread influence across mainland China. For instance, a 2019 indictment statement from Jiangsu revealed that there were 28,000 Almighty God members in Jiangsu's Xuzhou Prefecture alone as of the end of August 2018.

'... Almighty God prisoners made up 2,096 names of practitioners in the [Political Prisoner Database] PPDB [created in year 2000], about 8 percent of all unorthodox religious prisoners. Of them, 578 were held in prison or other carceral facilities at the time of writing.<sup>85</sup>

12.2.5 The USCIRF detailed of 236 members of the Church of Almighty God. The whereabouts of 88 members of the COAG were unknown at the time of writing in February 2024. The remaining 148 are recorded as detained. All 148 were charged with belonging to a cult with sentences ranging from 5-15 years<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> CAG, ['2020 Annual Report on the... Persecution of The Church of Almighty God'](#), 3 February 2021

<sup>85</sup> Dui Hua, ['Persecution of Unorthodox Religious Groups in China'](#) (pages 12-13), 29 March 2022

<sup>86</sup> USCIRF, ['Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List'](#), no date

12.2.6 CPIT has used the information from USCIRF to produce the table below which shows the years when members of the church were detained.<sup>87</sup>.

Year detained	Number of persons detained
2009	1
2013	2
2014	1
2015	1
2016	4
2017	54
2018	78
2019	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>

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### 12.3 The Local Church (Shouters or The Assembly)

12.3.1 In their undated Glossary section on the Shouters, Bitter Winter note that:

‘... the CCP and Chinese media called “Shouters” the members of the Local Church since the late 1970s, because of their practice to shout the name of the Lord Jesus Christ loudly. The Shouters were declared a *xie jiao* and banned in 1983, well before the first official list of the *xie jiao* was published in 1995. In China, “Shouters” and “Local Church” are often used as synonyms, although the leaders of Witness Lee’s branch of Local Church, whose headquarters are in Anaheim, California, insist that in China the Shouters are now a constellation of different groups, not all of them in contact with, or endorsed by, their organization in the U.S.’<sup>88</sup>

12.3.2 The 2021 DFAT report noted that:

‘The term “Local Church” refers to descendants of a Christian-based religious movement from the 1960s. They are often referred to as “Shouters”, which refers to the loud and energetic worship practices of the various groups. The group has experienced multiple splits and schisms and groups collectively designated as “Shouters” may be diverse and have little or nothing to do with each other. The term “Shouters” is sometimes used as a pejorative by critics or the government. Members of these groups may not call themselves “Shouters”, instead using “Local Church” or “the Assembly”.

‘DFAT understands that Shouters are not as actively pursued in China as they once were. They may not, in practice, be considered or treated as a *xie jiao*. DFAT understands from sources that they may have been delisted as a *xie jiao* but different sources offer conflicting information. In Chinese-language internet searches, DFAT found a 2020 reference in the Chinese press that quoted Xining (the capital of Qinghai in Western China) police as saying that the Shouters “pretend to be Christianity” (which is consistent with other anti-*xie jiao* messaging) and clearly states that Shouters are illegal.

‘... People identified as “Shouters” are a diverse range of groups of Protestant Christian origin that may be indistinguishable from other small

<sup>87</sup> USCIRF, [Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#), no date

<sup>88</sup> Bitter Winter, [‘Shouters’](#), no date

Protestant groups and may have no resemblance to other groups of the same origin ... Whether or not they see themselves as “Shouters” is not as relevant as whether they are perceived to be “Shouters” by authorities. The term is understood and applied regardless of self-identification of adherents. Therefore, a person who attempts to proselytise for a church or is seen as active within a church that is identified by authorities as a “Shouter” church faces a high risk of official discrimination. Local Church members do not attract the same amount of attention as Falun Gong or The Church of Almighty God, but DFAT notes inconsistent sources and information. DFAT assesses that identification as a “Shouter”, regardless of which church an adherent belongs to, may still lead to government attention, including imprisonment under the same provisions of law as other xie jiao.’<sup>89</sup>

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## 12.4 Jehovah’s Witnesses

12.4.1 For background information on Jehovah’s Witnesses see the [Jehovah’s Witnesses website](#) or the [BBC](#).

12.4.2 Bitter Winter reported in August 2020 that:

‘... Jehovah’s Witnesses don’t align with political ideologies or sing national anthems because of their faith. Nor do they join political organizations, like the Communist Party. Their children also refuse to join China’s League of Young Pioneers and wear its symbol—the red scarf.

‘These and other similar expressions of “political neutrality” by Jehovah’s Witnesses, including not voting in elections or serving in the army, have landed many believers in trouble with Chinese authorities. Unlike most democratic countries, China does not recognize such peculiarities as this group’s religious liberty and continuously persecutes its members, often regarded as a threat to its political stability.’<sup>90</sup>

12.4.3 Citing various sources, the Immigration Refugee Board of Canada (IRBC) noted on 18 October 2021 that ‘...the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] does not trust organizations the state does not control, including Christian branches or denominations such as ... Jehovah’s Witnesses ... and that “government sensitivity towards foreign influence” would impact these groups’ ability to practice their religion ... Chinese Jehovah’s Witnesses have reportedly faced “increased nationwide religious persecution since May 2018,” notably in Zhejiang, Guangzhou, Qingdao, Xinjiang, Nanjing, Tibet, Chongqing, Zhuhai, Shangxi, and Dali...’<sup>91</sup>

12.4.4 China Aid, an international non-profit Christian human rights organisation committed to promoting religious freedom and rule of law in China noted in an article dated 20 December 2021 that:

‘In 2019, the People’s Procuratorate of Korla City, Xinjiang charged 18 Jehovah’s Witnesses as a cult organization. The indictment letter stated that starting from 2009, the five generations of “elders” of the “Jehovah’s Witnesses” such as Liu Weiguo, Jiang Xijun, and Li Yifang violated the

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<sup>89</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report- China](#)’ (paragraph 3.71-3.72 & 3.74), 22 December 2021

<sup>90</sup> Bitter Winter, ‘[Jehovah’s Witnesses Persecuted for ‘Political Neutrality’](#)’, 31 August 2020

<sup>91</sup> IRBC, ‘[Responses to Information Requests](#)’, 18 October 2021

Administrative Measures for Religious Groups by establishing a congregation in Korla, by converting 63 people, and by misusing the name of Christianity. Their indictment also claimed that the apotheosis of “Jehovah” spread superstition and heresy, instigated believers not to join the CCP or the Chinese Communist Youth League, not to perform military service, not to raise the national flag, not to salute the national flag, not to sing the national anthem, not to participate in elections; they colluded with foreigners, used regular gatherings to control the thoughts of the believers, took the opportunity to collect money, affected the customary religious beliefs of the masses, seriously disrupted social order, and undermined the implementation of the law.

‘...the Jehovah’s Witnesses do not hold legal status in China. The “politically neutral” stand of this group’s believers, their refusal to sing the national anthem or join the CCP’s political organizations are all considered threats to the regime.’<sup>92</sup>

#### 12.4.5 The 2021 DFAT report noted that:

‘There is a small number of Jehovah’s Witnesses (JWs) in China. They are reportedly present across China but information about them is very limited. JWs claim their adherents throughout China have experienced home raids, physical abuse, separation from families (including visa cancellation and deportation of foreign spouses), interrogation, detention and placement in re-education centres.

‘ ... JWs are politically neutral and practise proselytization as a matter of faith. They are linked to a worldwide religion headquartered outside of China. These matters could influence their treatment but DFAT does not have enough information to make a firm assessment about ...official discrimination.’<sup>93</sup>

#### 12.4.6 The CECC Annual Report 2022 observed that:

‘Public security and judicial authorities continued to use Article 300 of the PRC Criminal Law, which forbids “organizing and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law,” to persecute members of spiritual groups deemed to be illegal or to be “cults” (xiejiao), including ...the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others ...Of the 2,506 records of prisoners known or believed to be detained, 1,542 contained information on the prisoner’s religious affiliation ... 18 were Jehovah’s Witnesses ...’<sup>94</sup>

#### 12.4.7 At the time of writing in, in February 2024, there no details of any Jehovah’s Witnesses on the USCIRF Frank R Wolf Freedom of Religion or belief Victims List, which records victims targeted due to their religion or belief and includes those detained, those released, those who have died in custody and those whose whereabouts are unknown <sup>95</sup>.

#### 12.4.8 See also [Proselytising](#)

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<sup>92</sup> China Aid, ‘[Follow-up Report: CCP Apprehend Members...](#)’, 20 December 2021

<sup>93</sup> DFAT, ‘[DFAT Country information Report - China](#)’ (paragraph 3.41- 3.42), 22 December 2021

<sup>94</sup> CECC, ‘[China- Annual Report 2022](#)’ (pages 11 and 44), November 2022

<sup>95</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)’, no date

## 12.5 Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

12.5.1 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints website has specific information regarding the religion in China. It also provides information to followers wishing to pursue the religion in China. Under their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) section they state that: 'The Church follows established official guidelines for the activities of its members in China. Within established guidelines, Church members are able to pursue personal individual belief and practice.'<sup>96</sup>

12.5.2 In answer to a question regarding activities that should be avoided in China the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints website FAQ's state:

'Please do not distribute any Church literature or other religious materials; please do not seek to attend Church meetings with foreign Church members, and please do not set up religious-based social media accounts, blogs, microblogs, WeChat public number, video site internet accounts, etc., that could be misunderstood as trying to promote the Church in China. Church members can take only one copy of each Church magazine or Church material for personal use in China. To avoid any misunderstanding, please do not send Church magazines or Church materials by mail or through the internet.'<sup>97</sup>

12.5.3 CNN, in an article from June 2020 noted that:

'Beginning in 1980, Church leadership began reaching out to the Chinese authorities to try to get permission to operate in the country, and in 1986, small church branches – meeting houses – were organized in Beijing and Xi'an, though only those holding foreign passports were permitted to attend. According to the Church, today there are around 10 meeting houses across mainland China...

'Despite this apparent lack of progress, Church leaders say they have built a strong relationship with the Chinese authorities, and in 2010 they announced moves to "regularize" their activities in the country.

' ... Currently, two types of Mormon worship are permitted in China: services for foreign nationals, and services for Chinese nationals who converted while overseas. The two are kept separate, and the Church is careful to avoid any sign of seeking to expand its Chinese membership within the country. Unlike with other countries in which it operates, however, the church does not provide membership figures for China ...

' ... As far as non-official faiths go, the Mormon Church is perhaps the gold standard for such a group in China. Current and former members, as well as outside observers, agreed that the Church is scrupulous about following Chinese law and avoiding anything that could be seen as proselytization.

' ... Unlike a regular church, Mormon temples are not open to non-members, and even those within the Church must be considered in good standing and receive a "recommend" from a Church official in order to enter.'<sup>98</sup>

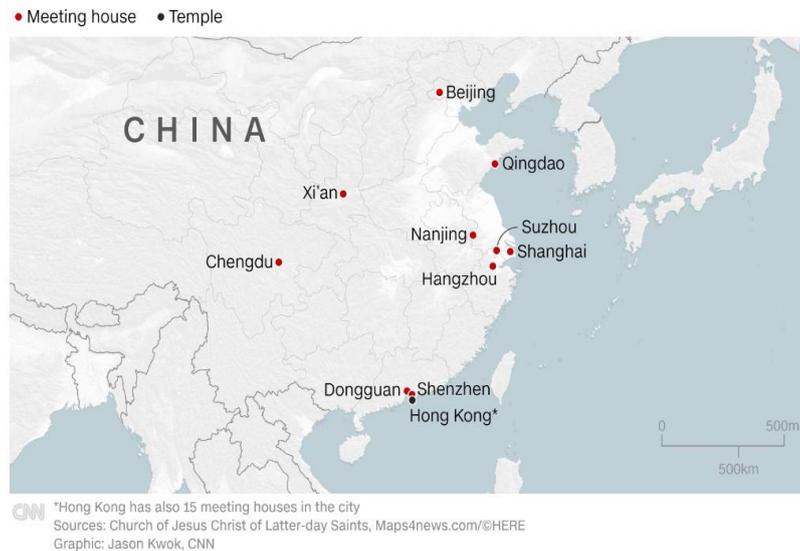
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<sup>96</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, '[The Church... in China](#)', no date

<sup>97</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, '[The Church... in China](#)', no date

<sup>98</sup> CNN, '[The Mormon church's century-long mission to crack China](#)', 11 June 2020

12.5.4 The map below, which shows the locations of meeting houses and temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was produced by CNN and was included in the article from 2020<sup>99</sup>.



12.5.5 The 2021 DFAT report noted that:

‘There are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) in China. The Church’s website notes the large worldwide Chinese diaspora has exposed many Chinese people to their faith. The website cautions members in China to be careful to comply with local laws and not distribute church literature or materials, or set up social media accounts to discuss their faith. It says there are local Sunday worship meetings in China. It also says that, because the Church follows government regulations, it has good standing and is respected.

‘ ... The construction of a Mormon Temple in Shanghai was announced in April 2020. At the time of writing, construction has not begun and it is not clear if it will proceed ...

‘Information about Mormons is limited.’<sup>100</sup>

12.5.6 At the time of writing, the USCIRF had no documented members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints who had been targeted due to their religion or belief and includes those detained, released, who have died in custody and whose whereabouts are unknown <sup>101</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup> CNN, ‘[The Mormon church’s century-long mission to crack China](#)’, 11 June 2020

<sup>100</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country information Report - China](#)’ (paragraph 3.43, 3.45- 3.46), 22 December 2021

<sup>101</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Frank R. Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List](#)’, no date

# Research methodology

The country of origin information (COI) 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 \(COI\)](#), 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.

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

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
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources

Wherever possible, multiple sourcing is used and the COI compared and contrasted to ensure that it is accurate and balanced, and provides a comprehensive and up-to-date picture of the issues relevant to this note at the time of publication.

The inclusion of a source is not, however, an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote.

Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

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# Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of the issues relevant to the scope of this note and forms the basis for the [country information](#).

The Home Office uses some standardised ToR, 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 other Christian groups
  - House churches
  - Cults

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# Version control and feedback

## Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **4.0**
- valid from **28 March 2024**

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### **Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – Start of section**

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.

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### **Official – sensitive: Not for disclosure – End of section**

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## Changes from last version of this note

Update to country information.

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## Feedback to the Home Office

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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](#).

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