

## THE SINICIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

GERGELY SALÁT<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This study examines the Sinicization (zhongguohua) policy of Xi Jinping’s government and its impact on Christianity in China. It distinguishes between organic, bottom-up cultural adaptation and the top-down, politically driven Sinicization enforced since 2015, which demands that religious communities pledge loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party, adopt socialist core values, and sever foreign ties. The paper traces the development of this policy through Xi’s key speeches, major regulatory documents (2018–2025), and the five-year plans of official Protestant and Catholic organizations. It concludes that the policy represents state-imposed political domestication rather than genuine inculturation, steadily narrowing the space for authentic Christian practice in China.

**Keywords:** Sinicization (zhongguohua); Christianity in China; Chinese Communist Party (CCP); religious policy; Xi Jinping; religious freedom; state-church relations; political domestication

In May 2015, at the Central United Front Work Conference of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), General Secretary Xi Jinping announced a new direction for religious management in China, stating that “in actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society, we must adhere to the direction of Sinicization [...]”.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Gergely Salát is Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Chinese Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, and Senior Researcher at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, Budapest. Email: salat.gergely@btk.ppke.hu. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8430-5466>
- 2 “Xi Jinping zai Zhongyang tongzhan gongzuo huiyi shang qianguangdiao: gonggu fazhan zui guangfan de aiguo tongyi zhanxian, wei shixian Zhongguo meng tigong guangfan liliang zhichi 习近平在中央统战工作会议上强调：巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线，为实现中国梦提供广泛力量支持” [Xi Jinping Emphasizes at the Central United Front Work Conference: Consolidate and Develop the Broadest Patriotic United Front to Provide Broad Support for Realizing the Chinese Dream], *Gongchandangyuan Wang* 共产党员网,

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With this statement, a new era began not only in Chinese religious policy but also in the history of Christianity in China – an era characterized by the concept of Sinicization. Xi later elaborated on the details of the Sinicization program for religion in several speeches. At the same time, the government issued new administrative regulations on religion that explicitly mandated Sinicization as a fundamental requirement.

This study examines what Xi Jinping’s Sinicization policy means for China’s religious communities, primarily Protestants and Catholics, from legal, administrative, and political perspectives. Before turning to contemporary developments, however, it first examines the concept of Sinicization in some detail, including its bottom-up and top-down variants, and then briefly reviews the development of religious policy in the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to the beginning of the Xi era. Without this context, recent developments are difficult to interpret.

### **Zhongguohua: Defining the Concept**

The term rendered in English as “Sinicization” is *zhongguohua* (中国化) in the Chinese original, literally meaning “making Chinese” or “becoming Chinese.” It is important to note that this does not mean becoming Han Chinese (*hanhua* 汉化). In Chinese political discourse, a distinction is made between Han Chinese identity and the broader *Zhonghua* (中华) identity, which transcends individual ethnic groups and of which the Han Chinese are an integral part, alongside China’s recognized ethnic minorities. The state of this *Zhonghua* nation is *Zhongguo* – that is, China. In this sense, the Sinicization of religion does not mean Hanification, but rather alignment with this broader pan-Chinese identity.

In the modern era, the concept of *zhongguohua* first appeared in connection with Marxism-Leninism. The Chinese Communist Party, founded in 1921, soon confronted the problem that the basic tenets of Marxism and Leninism did not readily correspond to Chinese conditions: China in the 1920s represented a very different social and economic environment from that of nineteenth-century England or early twentieth-century Russia. The CCP suffered numerous failures in its early years partly because it paid insufficient attention to this problem. It was ultimately Mao Zedong who argued that Marxism-Leninism had to be adapted to

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20 May 2015, <https://news.12371.cn/2015/05/20/ARTI1432111597695781.shtml>[accessed: 25 May 2026].

Chinese reality: while its basic tenets were to be upheld, concrete policies had to be adjusted to the social, economic, and political conditions of contemporary China. Mao first used the term *zhongguohua* at a party conference in 1938, although in practice he had been following this political line even earlier.<sup>3</sup>

Since then, the Sinicization of Marxism – that is, adapting Marxism to ever-changing Chinese circumstances and thereby developing it further – has been expected of each successive paramount leader of the Party. Each leader has been required to develop his own theoretical contribution, thereby becoming the latest link in the ongoing Sinicization of Marxism. The most recent example is Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想), which is not an independent ideology but the latest stage in the development and Sinicization of Marxism.

With respect to religion, the concept of *zhongguohua* was first applied to Buddhism by religious scholars in the 1980s. They observed that this religion of Indian origin had undergone extensive Sinicization during the first millennium CE, and that this transformation had been a fundamental precondition for Buddhism's widespread adoption in China. The study of this process became an important strand of Chinese Buddhist studies. From this period onward, it also became common for Buddhist scholars and practitioners to present this pattern as an example for Chinese Christians to follow, emphasizing that the spread and lasting rootedness of any religion in China require its *zhongguohua* – its Sinicization. Beyond Buddhism, the concept of Sinicization became increasingly common in academic discourse on Chinese religions from the 2000s onward, and it presumably entered political usage from there.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to note that *zhongguohua* encompasses two distinct but related processes.<sup>5</sup> Sinicization can arise from below: in this sense, it refers to the more

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3 Joyce C.H. LIU, “Paradoxical Routes of the Sinification of Marxism: Materialist Dialectic and Immanent Critique”, in Joyce C.H. LIU, Viren MURTHY (eds.), *East Asian Marxisms and Their Trajectories*, New York: Routledge, 2017, 157–175.

4 Fenggang YANG, “Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond”, in Richard MADSEN (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Religion in Chinese Societies, vol. 18.), Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2021, 18–33.

5 Richard MADSEN, “Introduction”, in Richard MADSEN (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Religion in Chinese Societies, vol. 18.), Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2021, 1–15.

or less spontaneous adaptation of religions to Chinese circumstances. In the case of any religion that is not bound to a single nation but seeks to cross national and cultural boundaries, a recurring problem arises: the religion has a core that is, in principle, unchangeable, but also numerous external features associated with a particular culture. When such a religion moves from one cultural setting to another, its core teachings tend to remain intact, while its external cultural features adapt to the new environment.

In contrast to this bottom-up *zhongguohua*, there is also a form of top-down Sinicization that is far more political in character. It is directed simultaneously at the institutional structures of religions, the intensification of state control, intervention in personnel decisions, and even the modification of religious teachings. The Sinicization proclaimed by Xi Jinping clearly falls into this latter category. Here, we are not dealing with localization, acculturation, or accommodation, but with the adaptation of religion in China to the Chinese political system, and with the more emphatic enforcement of the state's traditional supremacy over religious life. This, too, is not without historical precedent: in the imperial period, rulers likewise claimed the authority to supervise religious institutions, define orthodoxy, suppress heterodoxy, and determine which teachings could legitimately serve the political order.<sup>6</sup>

This political dimension is also indicated by the fact that the slogan of *zhongguohua* is emphasized even in connection with indigenous Chinese religions such as Taoism. In these cases, cultural adaptation is obviously not the issue; what is meant is political alignment. This expectation gives the concept of Sinicization a distinctly political content: religious communities are required not merely to adopt Chinese cultural forms, but also to identify with the CCP's ideology, socialist core values, and the "Chinese dream." The goal is not simply for a given religion to become Chinese, but for it to become loyal – to the party and the state. In this sense, *zhongguohua* is not primarily a cultural project but a political one: the incorporation of religious communities into the party-led united front system, the institutionalization of their loyalty, and the supervision of their ideological content.

Chinese authorities deliberately blur the boundary between the two kinds of Sinicization. In official rhetoric, *zhongguohua* is presented as the natural and

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6 C. K. YANG, *Religion in Chinese Society. A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*, Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961, 180–217.

necessary adaptation of religions to Chinese society, supported by millennia-old precedents: the development of Buddhism in China, the integration of Islam, and even the legacy of Matteo Ricci are all invoked in this context. In reality, however, the policy now promoted under this label is a top-down, administratively enforced process whose outcome is not necessarily an authentically Chinese religion, but rather a state-controlled and politically obedient religious organization.

To distinguish between the two forms of Sinicization, some scholars use two separate terms: “Sinicization” for the bottom-up process and “Chinafication” for the top-down, state-directed one.<sup>7</sup> This distinction is fundamentally justified. The present study, however, follows the usage found in most of the scholarly literature and employs the term Sinicization in both senses.

Sinicization also has theological dimensions and affects community life, rituals, and other religious practices. The present article, however, focuses on top-down *zhongguohua* and examines its political and administrative dimensions. In what follows, Sinicization is therefore used not primarily as a cultural, historical, or theological concept, but as a political one. Its other dimensions would require separate treatment.

It is important to note that the Sinicization of religion is not an independent process, but fits organically into the broader changes that have taken place in China since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012. Among the most important of these are the restoration of party control over society and the economy, and the strengthening of the power of the party center – in other words, recentralization. Whereas from the 1980s onward the party had partially withdrawn from many areas of social life, under Xi Jinping this process was reversed, and the demand re-emerged for the party to control all areas of society as closely as possible. This has been accompanied by the more forceful propagation of Marxism and its contemporary variant, Xi Jinping Thought, and by their reintegration into education and propaganda. China today is far more ideologically saturated than it was in the decades before Xi Jinping.<sup>8</sup>

All of this has been accompanied by intensifying nationalism. This is not a contradiction, since in China Marxism has always been far more of a nationalist

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7 YANG, “Sinicization”, 16–17.

8 Gergely SALÁT, “The Power Politics of Xi Jinping – The First Ten Years of Xi Jinping, Part 2”, *KKI Policy Brief* KE-2023/15, Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2023, [https://hiia.hu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/KKIElemzesek.KE-2023.15\\_EN.pdf](https://hiia.hu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/KKIElemzesek.KE-2023.15_EN.pdf) [accessed: 25 May 2026].

than an internationalist phenomenon. The program of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” entails both the revival of carefully selected elements of Chinese culture and the demand to minimize foreign influence. The party leadership has made clear that foreign influences deemed harmful are to be removed from ideology, culture, and thought. This is therefore not merely a project of national revival, but also an effort to reduce what the party regards as the danger posed to China by foreign ideas.

All of this directly affects religion, and Christianity above all, which the Chinese state views with inherent suspicion: not only because of its foreign origin, but also because, in Chinese historical memory, it is closely associated with the imperialist powers.

### Religious Policy in the People’s Republic of China

Several factors shaped the attitude of the communist government that came to power in 1949 toward religion. One was the long-standing Chinese imperial tradition of subordinating religion to the state, inherited from a much older conception of political authority. Furthermore, the CCP sought to impose Marxist ideology on the whole country, regarding religious organizations as problematic both because they obstructed ideological hegemony and threatened the party’s monopoly of power over society. Christianity’s foreign origin made it particularly suspect: since Catholicism and Protestantism had spread alongside violent Western penetration, the real goal in practice was to suppress Christianity, or at least bring it under control.<sup>9</sup>

The new government recognized only five religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism – incorporating their “progressive” forces into the CCP-led united front through national “patriotic” organizations established in the 1950s. At the same time, the state engineered the impossibility of religious life: monasteries were stripped of their land, foreign missionaries expelled, and political campaigns made regular worship impossible. During the Cultural Revolution (1966), all religious activity was prohibited, temples closed, and clergy persecuted. After Mao’s death in 1976, the Deng Xiaoping leadership

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9 Gergely SALÁT, *Kína és a kereszténység*, Budapest: Szent István Intézet, 2023, <https://szentistvanintezet.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/kinai-keresztenyseg-tanulmany.pdf> [accessed: 25 May 2026], 9–11.

concluded that repression had proved ineffective and opted instead to guarantee a degree of religious freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Under these freer conditions – and contrary to the leadership’s expectations – religion began to grow rapidly.<sup>11</sup> Protestantism, in particular, experienced spectacular growth. The number of Protestant believers stood at approximately 700,000 in 1949 and probably grew little during the Mao era and into the late 1970s. By contrast, the government’s 1997 White Paper cited 10 million Protestants, the 2018 White Paper cited 38 million, and some unofficial – probably exaggerated – Western estimates have put the number of Chinese Protestants at around 100 million. Among Catholics, growth was less spectacular. According to one survey, there were 3,270,000 Catholics in China in 1946, shortly before the communist takeover; the 1997 White Paper put their number at 4 million, and the 2018 document at 6 million.<sup>12</sup> The Pew Research Center’s 2023 report puts the number of people who say they believe in Jesus or God at 81 million, though the number of actual denominational members is far lower according to the same report: 18 million Protestants and 2 million Catholics.<sup>13</sup>

Freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by the current 1982 Constitution, and numerous other laws also contain provisions to this effect. This, of course, does not amount to religious freedom in the Western sense. First, legal protection extends only to the five officially recognized religions, meaning that unregistered

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10 Raymond PONG – Carlo CALDAROLA, “China: Religion in a Revolutionary Society”, in Carlo CALDAROLA (ed.), *Religions and Societies: Asia and the Middle East*, Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982, 551–578.

11 Fenggang YANG, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

12 CHINA HANDBOOK EDITORIAL COMMITTEE (ed.), *Life and Lifestyles* (China Handbook Series), Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985, 208, 214; INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, China.org.cn, October 1997, <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/Freedom/index.htm> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; STATE COUNCIL INFORMATION OFFICE OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, *China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief*, Beijing: Guowuyuan Xinwen Banshigongshi, April 2018, [http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/2018n/202207/t20220704\\_130575.html](http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/2018n/202207/t20220704_130575.html) [accessed: 25 May 2026].

13 PEW RESEARCH CENTER, *Measuring Religion in China*, Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 30 August 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/measuring-religion-in-china/> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

Christian communities and groups classified as cults continue to face persecution. Second, anti-religious excesses by local cadres continue to occur and have in fact multiplied in recent years. Third, as we shall see, “freedom” itself means something quite different in the Chinese context.

In 1996, the drafting of a comprehensive law on religious affairs was announced, but such a law has still not been completed. Instead, only a State Council regulation was issued in 2005 under the title *Regulations on Religious Affairs*.<sup>14</sup> This regulation, too, guaranteed “freedom of religious belief,” though it said nothing about communal religious practice. Its most important rule was that every religious organization, venue, and religious professional had to be registered in advance with the local authorities; failure to do so rendered religious practice illegal. The text was a classic catch-all regulation: while it guaranteed “normal” religious practice, without defining the term, it classified religious activity as illegal if it was under foreign control, fell into the category of religious extremism, or was capable of disturbing public order or endangering social stability – although none of these concepts was clearly defined either. This regulation was later superseded by the 2018 *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, discussed below.

### The Ideological Framework of the Xi Jinping Turn

In the 1990s and 2000s, despite strict regulation, religious communities enjoyed a degree of relative freedom in practice – by Chinese standards – and this contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity discussed above. This relative liberalism was gradually replaced by a tightening that began after Xi Jinping’s rise to power in 2012. Party-state control increased across all areas of life, and religion was affected as well, with the major measures framed around the concept of *zhongguohua*.

The slogan of the Sinicization of religion first appeared in a speech by Xi Jinping in 2015, and the General Secretary subsequently elaborated on its meaning in further speeches. In the Chinese system – especially under Xi Jinping – guidance from the paramount leader is extremely important. The party press and internal publications publish such speeches, or summaries of them, and local party and

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14 GUOWUYUAN 国务院, *Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例 [Regulations on Religious Affairs], 30 November 2004 (effective 1 March 2005), <https://xzfg.moj.gov.cn/front/law/detail?LawID=1025> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

state leaders conduct relevant affairs within their areas of competence on this basis, knowing that their performance will be evaluated accordingly. For this reason, Xi's speeches are often more important than legislation, with the latter mainly providing the formal framework. What follows is an overview of how the program for the Sinicization of religion developed in the decade after 2015.

Xi Jinping first mentioned the need to sinicize religion at the Central United Front Work Conference, held on May 18–20, 2015. Religion was not the main topic of the conference, but was discussed alongside other social organizations and forces. Xi's speech included the following passage:<sup>15</sup>

In actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society, we must adhere to the direction of Sinicization, raise the level of law-based governance in religious work, view the social role of religion dialectically, attach importance to bringing into play the role of religious circles, and guide religion to contribute to economic development, social harmony, cultural prosperity, ethnic unity, and national reunification.

At the time of the speech, this was not yet clear, but subsequent official retrospectives have identified the event as the starting point of the new religious policy.<sup>16</sup> Alongside Sinicization, the passage already contains the demand for the active guidance of religion and a utilitarian approach whereby religion is to be used to promote broader political goals, such as economic development, ethnic unity – that is, the suppression of separatism – and national reunification, meaning above all reunification with Taiwan.

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15 “Xi Jinping zai Zhongyang.” The full texts of the Xi Jinping speeches cited here were generally not made public. However, Xinhua News Agency and the Party press reported on them in detail, quoting entire passages. The cadres responsible for implementing these directives work on the basis of such summaries, which in certain respects gives them greater practical importance than the original speeches themselves. In what follows, we quote from these summaries. In the analysis, we rely on the original Chinese texts of the speeches and the relevant legal provisions; where English translations are available, we provide references to them alongside the original Chinese sources.

16 Xunmou ZHANG 张训谋, “Ruhe renshi he xitong tuijin woguo zongjiao Zhongguohua” 如何认识和系统推进我国宗教中国化 [How to Understand and Systematically Advance the Sinicization of Religion in China], *Hongqi Wengao* 红旗文稿 24 (2025), <https://www.qstheory.cn/20251230/8fb9de71b57c491eb77535efb02e61c0/c.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

Sinicization played a more central role in Xi Jinping’s next relevant speech, delivered at the National Religious Work Conference in April 2016. Here, the entire speech was devoted to religious policy, and Xi elaborated in far greater detail on the role he envisioned for religion and for religious policy – or, in his terminology, the policy of freedom of religious belief.<sup>17</sup>

The starting point and ultimate goal of implementing the policy of freedom of religious belief is to unite the believing and non-believing masses to the greatest extent possible. Actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society means guiding the believing masses to love the motherland and the people; to safeguard national unity and the great unity of the Chinese nation; to subordinate themselves to the supreme interests of the state and the overall interests of the Chinese nation; to support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system; to persist in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; to actively practice the socialist core values, carry forward Chinese culture, and strive to integrate religious doctrines with Chinese culture; to comply with state laws and regulations and consciously accept state management in accordance with the law; to participate in reform and opening up and in socialist modernization, and to contribute to the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation – the Chinese dream.

This passage illustrates particularly clearly how different the Chinese understanding of “freedom of religious belief” is from the liberal Western concept of religious freedom. Xi defines the implementation of religious freedom through a series of requirements that, from a Western perspective, directly contradict the very meaning of religious freedom: believers are to subordinate themselves to the supreme interests of the state, support the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system, practice the socialist core values, accept state management, and contribute to the political project of national rejuvenation. Religious freedom thus appears not as protection from state interference, but as a framework within which religion is permitted only insofar as it serves the political, ideological, and national goals of the party-state.

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17 XINHUA SHE 新华社, “Xi Jinping chuxi quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua” 习近平出席全国宗教工作会议并发表重要讲话 [Xi Jinping Attends the National Religious Work Conference and Delivers an Important Speech], *Renmin Wang* 人民网, 23 April 2016, <https://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0423/c1001-28299513.html> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

The speech also discusses Sinicization in detail:

One important task in actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society is to support our country's religions in adhering to the direction of Sinicization. We must use the socialist core values to guide and educate religious figures and the believing masses, carry forward the fine traditions of the Chinese nation, guide the broad masses of believers with ideas of unity, progress, peace, and tolerance, and support each religion, while maintaining its fundamental beliefs, core doctrines, and ritual systems, in deeply excavating from its doctrines and religious canons content conducive to social harmony, the progress of the times, and sound civilization, and in interpreting its religious canons and doctrines in a manner that accords with the requirements of contemporary China's development and progress and with fine traditional Chinese culture.

The message is unambiguous: in these passages, Xi does not simply expect religious people to be "good citizens." The requirement goes further: he expects their religious identity to be subordinated to the party-state political order, to national unity, to socialist ideology, and to the requirements of Sinicization. In other words, the fundamental expectation is that religion should not separate believers from the party-state and the nation. They are expected to support CCP rule; to harmonize religious teachings with socialist core values; to "sinicize" religion and reinterpret its teachings where necessary; and to contribute to national goals, modernization, and the realization of the "Chinese dream."

In this context, Sinicization means, on the one hand, cultural adaptation: religious teachings must be connected with Chinese culture, with "fine traditional Chinese culture," and with Chinese national traditions. Religion must take on Chinese forms, Chinese language, and Chinese cultural framing. On the other hand, it also means political adaptation: "Sinicization" is not merely cultural localization, but the integration of religion into the national-political order defined by the CCP. Religion is "Chinese" when it does not represent foreign influence, universal religious authority, or transnational loyalty, but instead serves the goals of the Chinese party-state. The speech employs a rhetorical strategy that conflates the two forms of Sinicization, presenting them as an organic whole, although in reality they should be analytically distinguished.

The Sinicization requirement entered the highest-level party document in 2017, when Xi Jinping stated in his report to the 19th CCP Congress, in the section

on united front work: “We must fully implement the Party’s basic guidelines for religious work, adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of religion in China, and actively guide religion to adapt to socialist society.”<sup>18</sup> With this, Sinicization became part of the Party’s ideological canon.

Five years after the 2016 conference, another National Religious Work Conference was held in 2021, at which Xi Jinping delivered a further speech on religious policy. The requirement to sinicize religion again appeared prominently, and Xi expanded the expectations with new elements:<sup>19</sup>

We must further promote the Sinicization of religion in China; guide and support China’s religions in taking the socialist core values as their guiding principle; and strengthen the identification of religious figures and the believing masses with the great motherland, the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Chinese Communist Party, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. In religious circles, patriotic, collectivist, and socialist education must be conducted; education in Party history, the history of New China, the history of reform and opening up, and the history of socialist development must be strengthened in a targeted manner; and religious figures and the believing masses must be guided to cultivate and practice the socialist core values and to carry forward Chinese culture. We must adhere to the overall national security concept, uphold the principle of independence, autonomy, and self-management, and coordinate related

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- 18 Jinping XI 习近平, “Juesheng quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui, duoqu xin shidai Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi weida shengli: zai Zhongguo Gongchandang di shijiu ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao” 决胜全面建成小康社会, 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利: 在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告 [Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era: Report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China], *Xinhua Wang* 新华网, 18 October 2017, <https://news.sina.cn/2017-10-18/detail-ifymyxw3516456.d.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].
- 19 XINHUA SHE 新华社, “Xi Jinping zai quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao: jianchi woguo zongjiao Zhongguohua fangxiang, jiji yindao zongjiao yu shehui zhuyi shehui xiang shiyong” 习近平在全国宗教工作会议上强调: 坚持我国宗教中国化方向, 积极引导宗教与社会主义社会相适应 [Xi Jinping Emphasizes at the National Religious Work Conference: Uphold the Direction of Sinicization of Religion in China and Actively Guide Religion to Adapt to Socialist Society], *Guojia Zongjiao Shiwu Ju* 国家宗教事务局, 4 December 2021, <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/xxgcqgzjzghyjs/zyjs/2022-09-03/1306305927527268352.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

work. We must strengthen the management of internet religious affairs. We must effectively resolve outstanding problems affecting the healthy transmission of religion in China.

Here Xi formulates the Sinicization of religion not merely as a general principle, but as a concrete political-ideological program. He reiterates that religion cannot function as an independent social or moral authority, but must be embedded in the national, cultural, ideological, and security framework defined by the party-state. Religious communities and believers are to be guided by the socialist core values – meaning that a state-designated value system is placed above religious teachings, with which religious practices must also be aligned. Xi attaches particular importance to strengthening the identification of religious figures and the believing masses with the five fundamental political-cultural reference points: the “great motherland,” the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Chinese Communist Party, and socialism with Chinese characteristics. This makes clear that religious identity is acceptable only when it does not take precedence over, or weaken, these loyalties. In practice, religious communities must function as venues for political education.

The reference to the “overall national security concept” shows that, in Xi’s view, religion is not merely a social or cultural question, but also a potential security issue. The emphasis on the principle of independence, autonomy, and self-management primarily entails distancing religious communities from foreign religious centers, organizations, and influences.

In September 2025, the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee held a collective study session devoted to the Sinicization of religion, at which Xi Jinping also delivered a speech, essentially carrying forward what had already been formulated in earlier statements.<sup>20</sup>

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20 XINHUA SHE 新华社, “Xi Jinping zai Zhonggong Zhongyang Zhengzhiju di ershier ci jiti xuexi shi qiandiao: xitong tuijin woguo zongjiao Zhongguohua, jiji yindao zongjiao yu shehui zhuyi shehui xiang shiyong” 习近平在中共中央政治局第二十二次集体学习时强调: 系统推进我国宗教中国化, 积极引导宗教与社会主义社会相适应 [Xi Jinping Emphasizes at the 22nd Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee: Systematically Advance the Sinicization of Religion in China and Actively Guide Religion to Adapt to Socialist Society], *Zhongguo Zhengfu Wang* 中国政府网, 29 September 2025, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202509/content\\_7042829.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202509/content_7042829.htm) [accessed: 25 May 2026].

History and practice prove that only by continuously promoting the Sinicization of religion in China can we promote religious harmony, ethnic solidarity, social harmony, and the country's long-term stability.

Our country is a socialist country led by the Chinese Communist Party, and therefore actively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society is an inevitable requirement. We must adhere to the socialist core values as the guiding thread; guide religious figures and the believing masses to firmly establish correct views of the state, history, nation, culture, and religion; continuously deepen the “five identifications”; and consciously participate in the building of Chinese-style modernization.

Our country's religions can be transmitted in a healthy manner only if they always take root in Chinese soil and are permeated with Chinese culture. We must draw on the five thousand years of Chinese civilization, promote the integration of religion in China with fine traditional Chinese culture, and guide religious figures and the believing masses to strengthen their identification with Chinese culture.

Inspiring the initiative and self-transformation of religious circles is crucial to promoting the Sinicization of religion in China. We must support and guide religious circles in reflecting Chinese characteristics and adapting to the requirements of the times in their doctrines and religious rules, management systems, ritual customs, and codes of conduct, and in raising their level of self-education, self-management, and self-restraint.

Compared with his earlier speeches, this text represents a further step: Xi no longer merely states that religion must “adapt” to socialist society, but also makes clear that this adaptation must take the form of a systematic, institutionalized, and substantive transformation. Here, Sinicization is already a program for transforming religious teachings, institutions, rites, codes of conduct, and self-understanding.

An important element is that Xi directly connects the Sinicization of religion with political stability. The sentence states that only through the continuous Sinicization of religion can the long-term stability of the state be achieved, meaning that *zhongguohua* is presented as a precondition for stability. Religion is therefore treated as a potential source of instability, which can be transformed into a positive social force only if it fits within the framework defined by the CCP.

Xi clearly explains why he considers this adaptation inevitable: China is “a socialist country led by the Chinese Communist Party,” and the basis of religious

policy is therefore not religious freedom as such, but the political nature of the state. Since the country is socialist and under Party leadership, religion must also align with this political order. The requirement to establish “correct views of the state, history, nation, culture, and religion” signals that not only religious practice but also the thinking of believers is to be reshaped. Religious people are expected to think about the state, history, the nation, culture, and religion itself in the manner the Party considers correct. The “five identifications” already mentioned show the hierarchy into which religious identity is placed: faith may remain, but above it stand national, cultural, and party-political identifications.

A novel element is Xi’s insistence that religious communities must carry out this self-transformation themselves. This means that Sinicization must become internalized: religious organizations, leaders, and communities are expected to rework their own teachings, rules, management systems, rites, and codes of conduct. The state thus seeks not only to regulate religion, but also to have religious institutions transform themselves in accordance with party-state expectations and internalize those expectations. The requirement that the internal structures of religions should also reflect “Chinese characteristics” represents a far deeper interventionist ambition than before: the state does not merely regulate the external behaviour of religious communities, but also demands the transformation of religion’s content, self-understanding, and mode of operation. An interesting contradiction emerges here: top-down Sinicization seeks to generate a process that is expected to present itself as bottom-up, internally driven Sinicization.

The idea of sinicizing religion thus first appeared at the highest level in 2015, and, as we have seen, the concept has since continuously expanded and developed. This ongoing process clearly demonstrates that Sinicization is not a temporary policy, but a fundamental strategy. The policy rests on three mutually reinforcing logics: securing the political loyalty of religious communities, filtering out foreign influence, and supervising the ideological content of religion. These three objectives shape the concrete legal and administrative measures discussed in the following subsections.

### **Institutions and Regulations**

From the 1950s onward, the State Religious Affairs Bureau played a key role in implementing the PRC’s religious policy; in 1998, it was renamed the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). It supervised the activities of

religious organizations, appointments, and the registration and administration of religious institutions. However, the political direction of matters relating to religion had, from the beginning, been handled by the Party's United Front Work Department, since – as noted above – no sharp distinction was made between religious communities and other social organizations. Those considered useful were incorporated into the party-led united front.

As a sign of the renewal of religious policy, in 2018, as part of Xi Jinping's comprehensive reform of state and Party institutions, the State Administration for Religious Affairs was merged into the Party's United Front Work Department. The formerly governmental body thus officially became a Party organ, with the CCP bringing religion directly under its supervision. This made clear that religious policy is fundamentally a Party matter: religion is not merely a social phenomenon to be administered, but a component of the Party's political direction and mobilization strategy. At the same time, for external purposes the body retained its original name, so one may still encounter the name "State Administration for Religious Affairs," although it should be understood that it now functions as a Party organ.<sup>21</sup>

In 2018, new *Regulations on Religious Affairs* came into force, replacing those that had taken effect in 2005.<sup>22</sup> This document does not deal primarily with substantive doctrinal matters, but regulates the administration of religious activity in considerably greater detail than before. The word *Sinicization* does not appear in it; nonetheless, the document places greater emphasis on the need to suppress extremism and cults posing threats to national security, prohibits religious activity in schools, reinforces the registration requirement, and imposes stricter controls on foreign donations, travel, and connections.

The regulation's main goal is to ensure that religious activity can take place only within the framework of the official organizations of officially recognized religions and at state-registered and supervised venues. Communities outside the officially recognized framework are not dealt with by the regulation, except

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21 Martin LAVIČKA – Julie Yu-Wen CHEN, "New Measures for Governing Religions in Xi's China", *China Report* 59.3 (2023) 264–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00094455231187046>.

22 GUOWUYUAN 国务院, *Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例 [Regulations on Religious Affairs], 26 August 2017 (effective 1 February 2018), [https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content\\_5223282.htm](https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm) [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/religious-affairs-regulations-2017/>.

through a general prohibition, since they fall not under religious policy but under the jurisdiction of public security. Overall, the new regulation reflects the general tightening of the past decade, which has also extended to religious policy.

In 2020, another regulation was issued, the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups*, which already addressed substantive questions.<sup>23</sup> Article 5 of the regulation states:

Religious groups must follow the leadership of the Communist Party of China; abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules, and policies; adhere to the principles of independence, autonomy, and self-governance; persist in the direction of the Sinicization of religion; practice the socialist core values; and maintain national integrity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and social stability.

Article 17 provides as follows:

Religious groups shall publicize the directives and policies of the Communist Party of China, as well as the state's laws, regulations, and rules, among religious professionals and religious citizens; educate and guide religious professionals and religious citizens to support the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the socialist system; persist in following the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; obey laws, regulations, rules, and policies; correctly handle the relationship between national laws and religious rules; and raise awareness of the state, the law, and citizenship.

Article 32 states:

Religious groups shall establish study systems and organize their staff to study the major decisions and arrangements of the Communist Party of China, state policies and regulations, fine traditional Chinese culture, religious knowledge, and so forth.

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23 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Zongjiao tuanti guanli banfa* 宗教团体管理办法 [Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups], 20 November 2019 (effective 1 February 2020), <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/xxgk/2019-12-30/1306305919071551488.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/measures-for-the-administration-of-religious-groups/>; see also LAVIČKA – CHEN, “New Measures”, 265–266.

The document regulates in detail the operation, structure, leadership, administration, leadership responsibilities, and supervision of religious organizations. What is apparent, however, is that the 2020 regulation already goes beyond mere administrative regulation and addresses substantive issues: it prescribes that religious organizations must follow the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support the socialist system, adhere to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics, persist in the direction of the Sinicization of religion, and practice the socialist core values.

The regulation essentially transforms religious organizations into institutions of political education and mediation. Their task becomes to disseminate the Party's guidelines, state laws, and policies among religious personnel and believers, and to strengthen their consciousness of the state, the law, and citizenship. Religious prescriptions are explicitly subordinated to state law. The regulation also institutionalizes political study: religious organizations must establish a "study system" in which their staff study the Party's major decisions, state policies, "fine traditional Chinese culture," and religious knowledge alike. This clearly demonstrates that Sinicization here no longer means cultural adaptation, but political-ideological re-education and organizational discipline. The key innovation is thus that the substantive expectations articulated by Xi Jinping in the speeches cited above have now been given regulatory form.

In 2021, the State Administration for Religious Affairs issued a regulation titled *Measures for the Administration of Religious Professionals*. After religious organizations, the affairs of "religious personnel" – priests, pastors, monks, imams, and others – were thus also brought under detailed regulation.<sup>24</sup> In addition to administrative rules concerning training, qualifications, supervision, and related matters, this document also contains substantive prescriptions. Article 3 states:

Religious personnel must love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system, comply with the Constitution, laws, regulations, and rules, practice the socialist core values, adhere to the principle of the independent and autonomous operation of religion in China, follow the direction of the Sinicization of religion, and safeguard national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and social stability.

24 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Zongjiao jiaozhi renyuan guanli banfa* 宗教教职人员管理办法 [Measures for the Administration of Religious Professionals], 18 January 2021 (effective 1 May 2021), [https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content\\_5600086.htm](https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5600086.htm) [accessed: 25 May 2026]; see also LAVIČKA – CHEN, "New Measures", 267–268.

In essence, the obligations formulated by the 2020 regulation with regard to religious organizations are here extended to “religious personnel.”

In 2022, yet another area was brought under regulation: internet-based religious activity, which is particularly widespread in China. The *Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services*, issued jointly by the State Administration for Religious Affairs and several other government bodies, prescribe that online religious content – including live broadcasts, social media posts, and recordings of sermons – may be disseminated only by registered organizations, on their own platforms, and on the basis of prior official approval.<sup>25</sup> Foreign organizations and individuals may not provide online religious content in China. During the Covid pandemic, online worship services and sermons proliferated rapidly; this regulation was, in part, a state response to that phenomenon, seeking to bring the space of digital religious practice under a form of control similar to that exercised over physical religious practice. Article 3 states the same basic principles already seen in relation to offline religious activity:

Internet religious information services must comply with the Constitution, laws, regulations, and rules; practice the socialist core values; adhere to the principle of the independent and autonomous operation of religion in China; follow the direction of the Sinicization of religion; actively promote the adaptation of religion to socialist society; and maintain religious harmony, social harmony, and ethnic solidarity.

In 2025, the State Administration for Religious Affairs issued the *Detailed Rules for the Implementation of the Regulations on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners within the Territory of the People’s Republic of China*, regulating the religious life of foreigners residing in China.<sup>26</sup> The main rule is that,

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25 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Hulianwang zongjiao xinxi fuwu guanli banfa* 互联网宗教信息服务管理办法 [Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services], (effective 1 March 2022), [https://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/flfggz/flfggzbmgz/202305/t20230509\\_478398.html](https://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/flfggz/flfggzbmgz/202305/t20230509_478398.html) [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/internet-religious-information/>; see also LAVIČKA – CHEN, “New Measures”, 269–270.

26 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局, *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo jingnei waiguoren zongjiao huodong guanli guiding shishi xize* 中华人民共和国境内外国人宗教活动管理规定实施细则 [Detailed Rules for Implementation of the Regulations on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners within the Territory of the People’s

if foreigners wish to practice their religion collectively in China, they may do so only at officially registered religious venues, on the basis of prior official permission, under the leadership of Chinese religious personnel, and without the presence of Chinese citizens. Foreigners may establish religious, cultural, or friendly relations with Chinese religious actors only through official religious organizations. Foreign individuals may preach at Chinese religious ceremonies only if they have been officially invited by official religious organizations for this specific purpose, or if they have received explicit official permission to do so. Religious books, audio materials, and similar items may be brought into the country beyond quantities for personal use only under strict conditions.

The rule is clearly a response to the fact that China – especially for Protestants – has become an important missionary destination, with numerous foreign missionaries, primarily Korean and Taiwanese, arriving in the country and operating outside fully controlled conditions, for example in house churches. The authorities’ goal is to restrict this activity and channel it toward official – and therefore controlled – religious organizations.

Also in 2025, the State Administration for Religious Affairs issued the *Norms for the Online Conduct of Religious Personnel*, which gave concrete form to the 2022 internet regulation and again formulated substantive prescriptions.<sup>27</sup> Article 2 provides:

In their online activities, religious personnel are obligated to love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system, comply with state laws and regulations on the administration of religious affairs, observe social morality, public order, and good customs, model compliance with the “Self-Discipline Pact for Civilized Internet Use,”

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Republic of China], April 2025 (effective 1 May 2025), <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/ywdt/qtyw/2025-04-01/1356550603266883584.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/implementation-foreigners-in-china-religion/>.

27 GUOJIA ZONGJIAO SHIWU JU 国家宗教事务局 [State Administration for Religious Affairs], “Guojia Zongjiao Shiwu Ju guanyu yinfa ‘Zongjiao jiaozhi ren yuan wangluo xingwei guifan’ de Tongzhi” 国家宗教事务局关于印发《宗教教职人员网络行为规范》的通知 [Notice of the State Administration for Religious Affairs on Issuing the Code of Conduct for Online Behavior of Religious Professionals], 7 September 2025, <https://www.sara.gov.cn/static/content/xxgk/gfxwj/2025-09-16/1417173278783471616.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

conform to religious codes and commandments, and accept government supervision and social oversight.

Article 3 provides:

In their use of the internet, religious personnel are obligated to practice the socialist core values, adhere to the principle of the independent and autonomous operation of religion in China, follow the direction of the Sinicization of religion, actively promote the adaptation of religion to socialist society, and maintain religious harmony, social harmony, and ethnic solidarity.

Article 8 provides:

Religious personnel may not collaborate with foreign forces through the internet, nor may they support or participate in activities of foreign religious infiltration.

The document again prescribes that internet-based religious activity may take place only on the controlled platforms of official religious organizations. This means, for example, that the use of social media for proselytization is prohibited.

The framework for the Sinicization policy articulated in Xi Jinping's speeches was, from 2018 onward, given concrete content through an increasingly dense web of regulations. This regulatory ensemble is not accidental: it constitutes a coherent, mutually reinforcing system whose common goal is to bring religious communities under state control at every level – institutional, personal, and digital alike.

### **The Five-Year Plans for the Sinicization of Christianity**

The program for sinicizing religion in China applies to the recognized religions. The qualification “recognized” is important: communities outside the five officially recognized religions do not fall within the scope of the Sinicization policy. The government does not seek to sinicize these communities, but rather to force them into controlled religious organizations – this applies primarily to unregistered Christian communities – or else to eliminate them. More generally, what is called religious policy in China applies not to religion in general, but exclusively to the five recognized religions.

The five recognized religions thus constitute the target of Sinicization, but Christianity deserves special attention among them. Along with Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism are the religious traditions most relevant from the perspective of the Sinicization program because of their foreign origins. Buddhism has been present in China for nearly two millennia and is considered a “Chinese” religion in many respects, while Taoism originated in China.

The official Protestant and Catholic organizations responded quickly to the announcement of the program. On the Protestant side, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the China Christian Council issued the *Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinicization of Christianity (2018–2022)* at the end of 2017.<sup>28</sup> Even in its format, the document conformed to the political planning logic of communist-led systems. Catholics produced a similar document: the *Five-Year Work Plan for Advancing Adherence to the Direction of Sinification of Catholicism in our Nation (2018–2022)*.<sup>29</sup>

The two five-year plans fully conform to the expectations articulated in the Xi Jinping speeches and regulations discussed above, repeatedly referencing the socialist core values and emphasizing the leading role of the Chinese Communist Party.

The overall tone of the Protestant plan is well captured by the following passage:

The Chinese Church and Chinese Christians are the principal agents in advancing the Sinicization of Christianity. In promoting the Sinicization

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- 28 *Tuijin woguo Jidujiao jianchi Zhongguohua fangxiang wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao (2018–2022 nian)* 推进我国基督教坚持中国化方向五年工作规划纲要(2018–2022年) [Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinification of Christianity (2018–2022)], <https://www.hubeichurch.com/news/23.html> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; China Law Translate, [https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/outline-of-the-five-year-plan-for-promoting-the-sinification-of-christianity\(2018-2022\)/](https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/outline-of-the-five-year-plan-for-promoting-the-sinification-of-christianity(2018-2022)/).
- 29 ZHONGGUO TIANZHUJIAO AIGUO HUI 中国天主教爱国会 – ZHONGGUO TIANZHUJIAO ZHUJIAOTUAN 中国天主教主教团, *Tuijin woguo tianzhujiao jianchi Zhongguohua fangxiang wunian gongzuo guihua (2018–2022)* 推进我国天主教坚持中国化方向五年工作规划(2018–2022) [Five-Year Work Plan for Advancing Adherence to the Direction of Sinification of Catholicism in our Nation (2018–2022)], <http://www.jstzj.com.cn/huibian/mshow.asp?id=1097> [accessed: 27 May 2026]; China Law Translate, <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/five-year-work-plan-for-advancing-adherence-of-catholicism-in-our-nation-to-the-direction-of-sinification-%EF%BC%882018-2022%EF%BC%89/>.

of Christianity, the following principles must be observed: uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China, follow the guidance of the socialist core values, and identify with our nation's system, path, theory, and culture of development; be grounded in the teachings of the Bible and preserve fundamental beliefs and core doctrines; persist in independence and autonomy while maintaining unity of direction; take into account both the universality and the locality of the Church; draw insights from the practice of faith, spiritual experience, and theological heritage of the global Church; integrate with fine Chinese traditions and advanced socialist culture; and boldly assume social responsibility and integrate with Chinese society.

The spirit of the Catholic plan – in which the name of Xi Jinping appears five times, that of Jesus only once – is no different:

Adherence to the direction of the Sinicization of Catholicism in China requires conscious political identification. Love of the motherland and obedience to the state are the responsibility and obligation of every Christian. The core of political identification is acceptance of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support for the socialist system, and preservation of the authority of the Constitution and laws, the unity of the people, and the integrity of the motherland.

Catholics should practice the socialist core values and absorb the nourishment of fine traditional Chinese culture; advocate Chinese styles and integrate with Chinese culture in theological reflection, expressions of ritual and social practice, church construction, painting, music, and art.

It is apparent that, in the name of Sinicization, the official organs of the two Christian denominations seek to create a kind of hybrid system of thought in which original teachings, traditional Chinese culture, and contemporary political expectations all appear simultaneously. The documents also seek to portray Sinicization as the church's own internal development rather than as state compulsion: the Protestant plan embeds it in the legacy of the Three-Self movement, and the Catholic plan in the principle of inculturation associated with the Second Vatican Council. In substance, however, both clearly pursue state political goals.

After the first set of plans, both Protestant and Catholic organizations developed and published new five-year plans for the 2023–2027 period, in a similar spirit.<sup>30</sup> One innovation in the Catholic plan is that it expressly states the principle that “national law takes precedence over religious rules,” although this already follows unambiguously from the preceding policy framework.

### Chinese Christianity in Practice

The real question is how all this manifests itself in the daily lives of Chinese Christians – yet here the researcher faces a fundamental problem. Christians are scattered across a vast country and have not been the subject of any comprehensive, scientifically rigorous national survey; the questions are politically sensitive, and candor of interlocutors remains uncertain. Information available in the West comes primarily from human rights organizations with potential biases, or from sensationalist press coverage. Our knowledge thus consists more of scattered and anecdotal evidence than of systematic analysis. On this basis, the situation appears extremely contradictory.

On the one hand, churches and houses of prayer operate throughout the country; according to official data alone, tens of millions of Christians live in China; Chinese religious diplomacy is active; members of various Christian communities maintain lively international connections; and Beijing has even made important gestures toward the Vatican, most notably by concluding a 2018 agreement with the Holy See on the appointment of bishops, which has since been renewed several times and represents an important step forward.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, reports continue

30 JIDUJIAO QUANGUO LIANGHUI 基督教全国两会, *Shenru tuijin woguo Jidujiao Zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao (2023–2027 nian)* 深入推进我国基督教中国化五年工作规划纲要(2023–2027年) [Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Christianity in China (2023–2027)], <https://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/17230> [accessed: 25 May 2026]; ZHONGGUO TIANZHUIJIAO 中国天主教, *Shenru tuijin woguo tianzhujiao Zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao (2023–2027 nian)* 深入推进我国天主教中国化五年工作规划纲要(2023–2027年) [Outline of the Five-Year Work Plan for Deepening the Sinicization of Catholicism in China (2023–2027)], <https://www.chinacatholic.cn/ccic/report/2404/0481-1.htm> [accessed: 25 May 2026].

31 Mauricio PERCARA, “Crossroads of Faith and Politics: Understanding Vatican-China Relations in the 21st Century”, *Cognizance Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 3.12 (2023) 191–198, <https://doi.org/10.47760/cognizance.2023.v03i12.016> [accessed: 28 May 2026].

to emerge of crosses being demolished, churches being closed, Christians being persecuted, and religious practice being restricted.<sup>32</sup>

The various accounts suggest that, in practice, the freedom of religious life – particularly the operation of Christian communities – varies from place to place and from time to time. The broadly interpretable regulations allow local officials to handle religious affairs according to their own preferences and the circumstances of the moment. Thus, in certain areas, not only underground Catholics or unregistered Protestant communities are persecuted – with clergy taken into custody and congregations forcibly dissolved – but the activities of official churches are also strictly restricted. Elsewhere, local officials maintain good relations with religious communities, and in some places even unofficial Catholic or Protestant congregations operate openly without sanction.<sup>33</sup>

What is certain is that the trend over the past decade has been fundamentally negative. The most important development is that the registration requirement is being enforced increasingly seriously. The principle itself is not new, but after the 2018 tightening, enforcement of the registration requirement intensified, and the conditions also changed.

Because of the registration system, Christians can be divided into two groups. The first consists of registered Protestant and Catholic communities belonging to patriotic organizations, which operate legally, although they must fulfil the requirements of Sinicization. The second consists of communities that, for various reasons, have not registered. Over the latter constantly hangs the sword of Damocles: their places of worship may be closed at any time, their clergy taken into custody, and their congregations forcibly dissolved.

Control over religious personnel has also intensified, and political education has become a mandatory component in the training of priests and pastors. Seminaries and theological colleges have been required to introduce courses on patriotic education, Chinese history, and the socialist core values. In addition, religious personnel have been required to study the current Party line and official ideological

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32 Fuk-tsang YING, “The Politics of Cross Demolition: A Religio-Political Analysis of the ‘Three Rectifications and One Demolition’ Campaign in Zhejiang Province”, *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 5.1 (2018) 43–75, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22143955-00501004> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

33 Marie-Eve RENY, *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

documents. Sermons must be harmonized with the current political line of the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>34</sup>

Religious life is also affected by the extensive infrastructure of citizen surveillance that has been built in China. This is characteristic of virtually all areas of life, but in some provinces facial-recognition cameras have been installed in churches and houses of prayer, and QR-code entry systems are used to identify visitors. This enables the authorities to track who visits a given community and when.<sup>35</sup>

These processes do not unfold in a nationally uniform manner; concrete implementation depends greatly on the attitude of local authorities, the priorities of provincial and local Party leadership, and the size and visibility of the community in question. The overall trend is nonetheless clear: political and administrative control over religious life is intensifying, and the space available to Christianity is gradually narrowing in the Xi Jinping era.<sup>36</sup>

The reactions of communities vary; individual communities respond to the Sinicization policy with different strategies.<sup>37</sup> As we have seen, official religious organizations publicly identify fully with the policy's expectations. As far as can be determined from outside, however, serious internal debates take place within some registered churches about how far it is possible to comply with state expectations without surrendering the essential elements of the faith.

Some communities choose fragmentation: instead of maintaining larger, highly visible congregations, they divide into smaller, less conspicuous groups, hold their gatherings at unregistered venues, and minimize their digital presence. The authorities are primarily interested in larger, more organized communities, since Chinese historical experience suggests that such groups can pose a real political

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34 Peitong JING – Karrie J. KOESEL, “Church and State in Contemporary China: Securing Christianity”, *Politics and Religion* 17.1 (2024) 107–137, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048323000329> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

35 Chris MESEROLE, “Technological Surveillance of Religion in China”, *Brookings Institution*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/technological-surveillance-of-religion-in-china/> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

36 Sarah COOK, *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*, Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2017/battle-chinas-spirit> [accessed: 27 May 2026].

37 Carsten T. VALA, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?*, London: Routledge, 2018.

risk. Below a certain size, some congregations are therefore still able to remain under the radar.

Open political resistance is not typical. It is important to recognize that, since religion already occupies a marginal position in this enormously populous country, Christianity – unlike in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe – has never become a broad social basis for resistance. Moreover, in China, a strongly nationalized form of communism serves as the ruling ideology: support for the Party and patriotism are closely intertwined. Opposition to the system can therefore also invite accusations of being unpatriotic, particularly in the case of Christians, who are already regarded as followers of a religion of foreign origin.

For this reason, identification with the leadership's goals is more characteristic at the official level, while quiet adaptation is the norm at lower levels. Most communities do not seek open confrontation, but rather try to preserve the greatest possible room for manoeuvre within constantly narrowing political and administrative frameworks.

## Conclusion

Overall, the Chinese government's Sinicization program is a clearly top-down *zhongguohua* initiative, despite official rhetoric that deliberately blurs this approach with more organic processes. The program does not aim at genuine religious inculturation; rather, it enforces a political domestication of the Christian faith under Party control. Historically, state–church relations have posed complex dilemmas across eras, including under twentieth-century communist regimes. In contemporary China, similar challenges arise within the specific political and social conditions of the 21st century. While some goals of the official Sinicization effort may superficially coincide with the natural indigenization of Christianity, significant tensions remain. For example, subordinating core religious principles to Party–state policies can conflict with fundamental Christian teachings (such as those concerning family and social ethics). This raises a critical question: can Chinese Christianity adapt under these conditions without breaking from its core convictions, and is an authentic Chinese Christianity even possible if it is imposed through top-down administrative means?

The trend of the past decade has been an unmistakable narrowing of space for Christianity and an intensification of state control. At the same time, policy implementation is uneven across regions, reflecting the Chinese system's local

autonomy: enforcement of directives can vary widely by locality. It is unclear how long the current Sinicization push will last. Historically, China's system has alternated between periods of strict centralization and phases of relative decentralization ("tightening and loosening"). We appear to be in one of the more restrictive phases now, though this too may not last indefinitely.

Studying Chinese Christianity therefore demands exceptional sensitivity from outside observers. Reliable information is limited, and the stakes are high: the physical safety and basic freedoms of Chinese believers may be at risk. Observers should refrain from hasty or politically driven judgments and should follow developments with maximum caution and understanding. Over-politicizing these issues can cause real harm. Ultimately, the Sinicization campaign embodies a fundamental paradox: authorities are attempting to force by top-down administrative means an organic, internally driven transformation of faith that, by its nature, should occur spontaneously. Whether this tension – between the centuries-old processes of organic localization of Christianity and the current state-imposed domestication – can be resolved (and if so, how) remains uncertain. In the end, the future of Christianity in China will depend largely on how central policy evolves and on how Christian communities respond and adapt to these changing circumstances.

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