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The State of Religion in China

Christian J. Parham

Pepperdine University, christian.parham@pepperdine.edu

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Introduction

“[Every day] you get up at 5am and have to make your bed, and it had to be perfect. Then there was a flag-raising ceremony and an ‘oath-taking’... There was not a minute left for yourself. You are exhausted.”¹ This quote describes the daily routine of an Uyghur Muslim detained by the Chinese government. China has recently been the headline of much international news due to its violent treatment of Uyghur Muslims and other religious minorities. While China denies involvement with many of the allegations, this treatment raises an important question: What is the state of religion within China, and how does the government receive religious minorities? Within my paper, I will examine some of China’s historical background that led to modern-day attitudes towards religion and what treatment looks like for religious groups accepted by the Chinese government versus those that are not.

Historical Background

Firstly, I will provide historical context about China and religion. From its very inception, China has always had forms of religion. Going back as far as the fifth millennium BC, historians found evidence of “segregation of the dead into what appear to be kinship groupings, graveside ritual offerings of liquids, pig skulls, and pig jaws, [and] collective secondary burial, in which the bones of up to 70 or 80 corpses were stripped of their flesh and reburied together.”² All of these traditions signify that there was likely a shared religion between the people of the time. In more modern history, until the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the religious practices of China “were based on the absolute religious authority of the emperor, who, theoretically at least, relied solely on his judgment to determine which religious practices and organizations to protect and which ones to ban.”³ Despite this, three major religions made up the fabric of China’s social and political structure, frequently referenced as the three pillars of Chinese society: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.⁴ During much of the Qing dynasty, Confucianism received acknowledgment for being the official state religion, and

¹ “China: Draconian Repression of Muslims in Xinjiang Amounts to Crimes against Humanity.” *Amnesty International*, 17 Aug. 2021, www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/06/china-draconian-repression-of-muslims-in-xinjiang-amounts-to-crimes-against-humanity/.

² “Chinese Religion.” *ReligionFacts*, 28 Jan. 2021, religionfacts.com/chinese-religion/history.

³ Goossaert, Vincent. “` State and Religion in Modern China: Religious Policy and Scholarly Paradigms .”” *HAL-SHS*, 13 October 2006, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00106187/document>. Accessed 11 December 2021.

⁴ National Geographic Society. “Chinese Religions and Philosophies.” *National Geographic Society*, 19 Aug. 2019, www.nationalgeographic.org/article/chinese-religions-and-philosophies/.

Taoism and Buddhism were labeled as orthodox—meaning they were acceptable within Chinese standards and adhered to the patriarchal society. Alongside these, other orthodox organizations included some cults and various religious groups.⁵ Forbidden, nonorthodox groups were “congregational groups, [that were] based on voluntary participation.”⁶

However, in 1901, this changed with reforms passed to adapt China to more Western ideals, based upon Japan’s influence. After this, the Constitution reformed to include “the separation of state from religion, defined as something independent from politics, and the recognition by the state of a legal status and some privileges to one or several churches organized with their own clergy, laity, places for worship, educational institutions, etc.”⁷ This same policy extended into the formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) after the Chinese Civil War in 1949. The PRC government created the Religious Affairs Bureau to oversee all religious activities and gave official government permission to five different religions—Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Daoism—while setting the state as the head of these churches.⁸ This permission did not give these religions the right to practice openly, and it utterly banned other religions outside of these approved five. However, from 1966 to 1977, religious freedom took a turn for the worst due to the Cultural Revolution. Led under Mao Zedong, the goal of the revolution was “to attack the Four Olds—old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits—in order to bring the areas of education, art and literature in line with Communist ideology.”⁹ Religion was not part of the Communist ideology, and because of this, people who practiced any religion “suffered a decade of attacks and persecution.”¹⁰ Religion became practiced in

⁵Goossaert, Vincent. “State and Religion in Modern China: Religious Policy and Scholarly Paradigms” *HAL-SHS*, 13 October 2006, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00106187/document>. Accessed 11 December 2021.

⁶Goossaert, Vincent. “State and Religion in Modern China: Religious Policy and Scholarly Paradigms.” *HAL-SHS*, 13 October 2006, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00106187/document>. Accessed 11 December 2021.

⁷ Goossaert, Vincent. “State and Religion in Modern China: Religious Policy and Scholarly Paradigms.” *HAL-SHS*, 13 October 2006, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00106187/document>. Accessed 11 December 2021.

⁸ Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. “Freedom of Religion in China: A Historical Perspective.” Berkley Center For Religion, Peace and World Affairs, berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/freedom-of-religion-in-china-a-historical-perspective.

⁹ *Cultural Revolution*, depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/graph/9wenge.htm.

¹⁰ Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. “Freedom of Religion in China: A Historical Perspective.” Berkley Center For Religion, Peace and World Affairs, berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/freedom-of-religion-in-china-a-historical-perspective.

secret until Zao's death in 1976, bringing the rise of a new leader, Deng Xiaoping, and the end of this state-sponsored attack on religion.

Modern Day Stance on Religion

Xiaoping implemented revisions to the Constitution in 1982, and one of these revisions included updates to China's stance on religion. Within the Constitution, it writes,

“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.”¹¹

The Constitution's stance on religion remains mostly the same since this update. In 2018, the State Council granted some additional freedoms by allowing state-approved religious groups to receive donations, own property, and write literature.¹² Unfortunately, these freedoms also came with additional restrictions, including a requirement that only national-level religious groups are allowed to create religious colleges, and limitations on the times and venues religious services can be held.¹³ By 2020, increased regulations required religious groups to accept and promote the values of the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁴ In spite of these restrictions, China still recognizes the same five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism, prohibiting the practice of other faiths.¹⁵

As mentioned earlier, in order to be able to hold services, religious organizations must go through an extensive process to become formally accepted

¹¹ *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html.

¹² *China Revises Regulation on Religious Affairs*, english.www.gov.cn/policies/latest_releases/2017/09/07/content_281475842719170.htm.

¹³ *China Revises Regulation on Religious Affairs*, english.www.gov.cn/policies/latest_releases/2017/09/07/content_281475842719170.htm.

¹⁴ China Law Translate. “宗教团体管理办法.” *China Law Translate*, China Law Translate, 17 Jan. 2020, www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/measures-for-the-administration-of-religious-groups/.

¹⁵ “The State of Religion in China.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/religion-china.

by the Chinese government. The process is only available for the aforementioned approved five religions. The first step is submitting a request with the Religious Affairs department, as they are “responsible for the set-up...and for review of operations prior to the approval for their charters.”¹⁶ Upon a review process that is privatized and highly secretive, accepted religious groups are then “[guided]...in establishing and completing systems of rules based on the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules, policies, and actual work requirements, and [strengthening] ideological establishment, organizational establishment, work-style establishment, and international establishment.”¹⁷ The religious groups are subject to consistent investigation and monitoring by the Religious Affairs Bureau and strict requirements to promptly submit any changes within leadership, finances, and research.¹⁸

All of these regulations display why China received a rating of “very high” on governmental restrictions of religion.¹⁹ Despite this, more Chinese people are becoming religious, “because of rapid economic development, urbanization and globalization.”²⁰ Based upon 2020 data from the Council on Foreign Relations, “31% of China is agnostic, 30% are Chinese folk-religionists, 16% are Buddhist, 7% are Christian, 6% are atheist, 4% are ethnic religionist, 1% are Muslim, and 0.4 are Daoist.”²¹ That brings the percentage of religious practitioners in China to a whopping 63%, which is surprising given the immense control from the government. Understanding these numbers, how does the government treat approved religious organizations—versus those who are not?

¹⁶ China Law Translate. “宗教团体管理办法.” *China Law Translate*, China Law Translate, 17 Jan. 2020, www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/measures-for-the-administration-of-religious-groups/.

¹⁷ China Law Translate. “宗教团体管理办法.” *China Law Translate*, China Law Translate, 17 Jan. 2020, www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/measures-for-the-administration-of-religious-groups/.

¹⁸ China Law Translate. “宗教团体管理办法.” *China Law Translate*, China Law Translate, 17 Jan. 2020, www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/measures-for-the-administration-of-religious-groups/.

¹⁹ September 30, 2021, and Samirah Majumdar Chris Baronavski. “Religious Restrictions around the World.” *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, 30 Sept. 2021, www.pewforum.org/essay/religious-restrictions-around-the-world/.

²⁰ Service, Purdue News. “Religion in China Is Highly Diverse by Region, Research Shows.” *Purdue University News*, www.purdue.edu/newsroom/releases/2018/Q4/religion-in-china-is-highly-diverse-by-region,-research-shows.html.

²¹ “The State of Religion in China.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/religion-china.

Approved Religious Groups—The Experience of Person X

To better grasp what life is like in China for those in an approved religious organization, we will look at Person X. They are a student from China who is now studying at Pepperdine, and a Protestant Christian.²² They attended high school in New York, ultimately becoming a Christian there. However, during breaks, they would return to China. They flew back to China during summer break of 2019, and upon returning decided they officially want to commit their life to God through baptism. They contacted their preacher, who was a close friend and spiritual mentor. They were scheduled to be baptized, along with 3 or 4 congregation members. It became a large gathering, with family and friends joining, but the preacher and person X ended up being pulled to the back of the auditorium before it began. Here, government officials greeted them and told them that it was okay for them to be having a baptismal ceremony, but as a Congregation, they were not allowed to evangelize on college campuses, hold gatherings that are not government approved, or give out faith-related posters. They got reminded of the detrimental consequences of holding a religious gathering, which included fines, or worse, jail time. Person X said that despite the serious nature of the conversation, the government officials were relatively friendly, yet accomplished their purpose: dissuading them from being vocal about their faith. Shortly after that encounter, their pastor baptized them before their family and friends. Person X recalls how their mom attended the ceremony, with her face hidden, because she works for the Communist Party and is not supposed to publicly associate with religion.

The next time Person X came back home was during COVID-19, after Pepperdine sent students home for online learning. When they returned, they found China had intensely heightened the restrictions on religion, using COVID-19 as an explanation. Even government-approved gatherings now would have a penalty, causing many churches to switch to online services. Unfortunately, at their church, and many others, these online sermons would regularly be deleted, nowhere to be found. It reached such an intense level that Person X felt it became persecution, something they never felt from the government before. They concluded their experience by saying that they feel that China does not want religion to be a part of society, but rather tolerates it because they recognize a large percentage of the population is religious.

²² X, Person. *Interview*. 8 12 2021.

Unapproved Religious Groups—Uyghur Muslims

The experience of those within approved religious groups is undoubtedly challenging, but ultimately nowhere near the level of persecution faced by the Uyghur Muslims. Beginning as early as 2014, the Chinese government began rounding up the Uyghurs, reaching a current total of anywhere from 800,000 to 2,000,000 of them placed into “re-education” camps.²³ Oftentimes, they did not get a valid reason for having to go to these camps—some excuses received included “traveling to or contacting people from any of the twenty-six countries China considers sensitive...attending services at mosques; having more than three children; and sending texts containing Quranic verses.”²⁴ At the camps, numerous atrocities occur, ranging from forced mass surveillance, detention, indoctrination, and even forced sterilization.²⁵ The workers at the camp force many of the Muslims to do laborious field work, “pledge loyalty to the CCP and renounce Islam...as well sing praises for communism and learn Mandarin.”²⁶ Some of the women were raped by these same workers, in the late hours of the night.²⁷ The Uyghurs left in China are fleeing in droves to Turkey, out of fear for themselves and their families.²⁸ In response to the camps, the United States, European Union, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada put sanctions against China’s top government officials and accused them of genocide.²⁹ China denies all of the allegations, claiming that the camps are simply tools to protect the state against terrorist activity. In retaliation, China then placed sanctions against these

²³ “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang.

²⁴ “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang.

²⁵ Matthew Hill, David Campanale and Joel Gunter. “‘Their Goal Is to Destroy Everyone’: Uighur Camp Detainees Allege Systematic Rape.” *BBC News*, BBC, 2 Feb. 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-55794071.

²⁶ “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang.

²⁷ “China’s Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-repression-uyghurs-xinjiang.

²⁸ Khan, Ahmer. “The Uighur and Syrian Refugees Making a Home Together in Turkey.” *Refugees* / *Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 4 Mar. 2021, www.aljazeera.com/features/2021/3/4/the-uighur-and-syrian-refugees-making-a-home-together-in-turkey.

²⁹ Muhammad, Jeannette. “U.S. Joins EU In Sanctions Against China Over Treatment Of Uyghur Muslims.” *NPR*, NPR, 22 Mar. 2021, www.npr.org/2021/03/22/980090541/u-s-joins-eu-in-sanctions-against-china-over-treatment-of-uyghur-muslims.

countries and their government officials.³⁰ Currently, international surveillance shows that the camps are expanding as China builds more.³¹

Unapproved Religious Groups—House Churches

Another unapproved religious group within China are the house churches. House churches refer to the Protestant and Catholic churches that operate outside the government. They began at the end of the Cultural Revolution, in secret due to the punishments for those who practiced religion. Since then, they grew in popularity, and dramatically increased in number from 2018 until now. This increase is due to a policy called “Sinicization,” a five-year plan released by the government in 2018 to “[revise] the Bible and [use] church sermons to enforce party leadership and reject foreign influences.”³² Many house churches cite this as the reason they ultimately chose to violate China’s policy of churches registering with the government, and instead chose to meet undercover. While these gatherings typically occur in people’s homes, some large house churches meet in office buildings and hotel conference rooms.³³ The government, particularly under Xi Jinping’s administration—who believes in strict militant atheism—is cracking down on these churches, one of them being the Early Rain Covenant Church in 2018. This was one of the largest house churches in China, and on May 12, 2018, the first signs of shut down began. They arrested over 200 people gathering and released them the next day. After that, they arrested all the elders, most of their families, and even a child attending the church’s unregistered preschool.³⁴ This crackdown was a clear sign—the Chinese government would not have any apparent dissent without consequence.

³⁰ Muhammad, Jeannette. “U.S. Joins EU In Sanctions Against China Over Treatment Of Uyghur Muslims.” *NPR*, NPR, 22 Mar. 2021, www.npr.org/2021/03/22/980090541/u-s-joins-eu-in-sanctions-against-china-over-treatment-of-uyghur-muslims.

³¹ Ramzy, Austin. “China Is Expanding Detention Sites in Muslim Region of Xinjiang.” *The New York Times*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/24/world/asia/china-muslims-xinjiang-detention.html>. Accessed 13 December 2021.

³² “For China's Underground Churches, This Was No Easy Christmas.” *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Dec. 2019, www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-12-25/china-church-sinicization.

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³⁴ JerryM. “Chinese Police Raid Prominent House Church.” *WORLD*, wng.org/articles/chinese-police-raid-prominent-house-church-1617299829.

Unregistered Religious Group: Falun Gong

The final unregistered religious group facing extreme government persecution is Falun Gong. This group, created in 1990 by Li Hongzhi, was initially sponsored by the government.³⁵ Ultimately, China banned the group in 1999, feeling threatened by its mass appeal and rise to prominence within Chinese society. Since then, many of its followers fled to Hong Kong, where the ban was never enforced. However, China recently enforced a new law in Hong Kong “broadly [defining] crimes of secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces punishable by up to life in prison.”³⁶ Many followers in Hong Kong fear for their safety and security, as China’s government looks to regain strict control over its territories.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, the government of China displayed stringent restrictions on religion. As Chinese society modernizes, the government’s control on religion will continue to face challenges. In future years, the government will likely become even stricter to accommodate for this, further emphasizing the clear distinction in treatment between approved religious groups and non-approved.

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³⁶ “Banned in China, Some Falun Gong Fear New Hong Kong National Security Law.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 27 July 2020, www.reuters.com/article/us-hongkong-security-falungong/banned-in-china-some-falun-gong-fear-new-hong-kong-national-security-law-idUSKCN24S02T.

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