

New Wine in Old Bottles

Sinicisation and State Regulation of Religion in China

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses Xi Jinping's policy of religious sinicisation (*zhongguohua* 中国化) and the subsequent revision of the Regulations on Religious Affairs. I argue that Xi's fear of foreign influence has driven the direction of recent changes in religious policy in favour of indigenous or indigenised religions. I show that the effort to sinicise religions and the consequent strengthening of the existing regulatory framework risks exacerbating the challenges that the Xi regime seeks to confront in the first place.

KEYWORDS: Sinicisation, *zhongguohua*, Regulations on Religious Affairs, State-religion Relations, Selective Religious Toleration, United Front, China, Xi Jinping

Introduction

A series of events in Xi Jinping's first term signal an intensification of the government's policy toward religion. The first of these has been a renewed emphasis on united front work, of which religion is an integral part. In May 2015, Xi Jinping held what may have been the most significant united front work conference in three decades. Prior to the conference, for the first time since 1982, two sub-national leaders (*fuguoji* 副国级)—Sun Chunlan (a Politburo member) and Wang Zhengwei (a vice-chairman of the National People's Political Consultative Conference)—assumed the positions of department head and a deputy position, respectively, after the former head of the United Front Work Department was purged during Xi's anti-corruption campaign. A second, simultaneous sign was that the name of the conference was changed from the National United Front Work Conference to the Central United Front Work Conference. Both these moves indicated that Xi was placing a new emphasis on united front work, which Mao had praised as one of the three principal magic weapons, along with armed struggle and party building, in the Communist Party's revolutionary victory.

The importance of united front work had for a great part of the PRC's history been reduced due to its focus on coalition-building, which no longer fits the political framework, given the political dominance of the Communist Party. The renewed emphasis and expansion demonstrates Xi's recognition of an increasingly complicated and diverse society (Groot 2016) and of the challenges this pluralism poses to his reign in "a new era" in which China is "closer, more confident, and more capable than ever before of making the goal of national rejuvenation a reality."⁽¹⁾

In April 2016, Xi Jinping became the first Party Secretary since 2001 to attend the annual National Religious Work Conference. At that meeting Xi called for the Party to consolidate its united front with religious communities and to unite and organise religious believers to strive for his Chinese Dream. Speaking to an audience of religious work officials, he pronounced the grand strategy of religious sinicisation laid out in the Central United Front Work Conference and asked the attendees to confront the issues of foreign infiltration and religious extremism as well as to meet the challenges that had arisen from the Internet.⁽²⁾

Officials preparing a revision of the "Regulations on Religious Affairs (2005)" that had begun in 2014 quickly responded to Xi's instruction. Their draft was made public in September 2016, and nine months later, in 2017, the State Council passed the new Regulations, scheduled to take effect in February 2018. Wang Zuo'an, Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), emphasised that the revision was under the direct supervision of the Centre and that it aimed to "put in practice the spirit of the National Religious Work Conference."⁽³⁾

When he took office, Xi Jinping inherited a variety of challenges in the religious sphere that he perceived to be detrimental to his ruling objectives. These issues included widespread commercialisation of Buddhism and Taoism; extremism and anti-Chinese (*ni zhongguohua* 逆中国化) sentiment among the Muslim minorities and Tibetans; a persisting belief in the Holy Order among Chinese Catholics; and the proliferation of house churches among Protestants. The root cause of all these problems, Xi believed, was what he considered the failure of the religions to accept and become integrated into "fine traditional Chinese culture" (*Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua* 中华优秀传统文化). Especially troublesome, in Xi's view, were Christianity and Islam, whose followers' lack of confidence in Chinese culture has apparently primed them to absorb Western values and extremism.⁽⁴⁾

The term sinicisation (*zhongguohua* 中国化), officially introduced at the Central United Front Work Conference in 2015, connotes a state initiative

1. Xi Jinping, "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," *Xinhuanet.com*, 13 November 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf (accessed on 22 November 2017).
2. "习近平：全面提高新形势下宗教工作水平" (*Xi Jinping: quanmian tigao xinxingshi xia zongjiao gongzuo shuiping*, Xi Jinping: all-around improvement of the standard of religious work under new circumstances), *Xinhuanet.com*, 23 April 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm (accessed on 28 November 2017).
3. Wang Zuoan, "全国性宗教团体要学习贯彻新修订'条例'" (*Quanguoxing zongjiao tuanti yao xuexi guanche xin xiuding 'tiaoli'*), National religious associations should take the lead in the study and implementation of the new "Regulations", *中国宗教 (Zhongguo zongjiao, China Religion)* 2017(9): 24–26. Wang Zuoan, "学习贯彻新修订的宗教事务条例" (*Xuexi guanche xin xiuding de zongjiao shiwu tiaoli*, Study and implement the new revised Regulations on Religious Affairs), *People's Daily*, 12 September 2017: 17.
4. Chen Zongrong, "着眼长远做在当下：不断推动我国宗教中国化进程" (*Zhuoyan changyuan zuozai dangxia: buduan tuidong woguo zongjiao zhongguohua jincheng*, Eyes on the future, actions at the moment: continue to promote the progress of religious sinicisation in our country), *中国宗教 (Zhongguo zongjiao, China Religion)* 2016/12: 14–15.

to press religions in China to incorporate Chinese characteristics into their beliefs and practices. Coining this term was a strategic move aimed at solving the problems noted above. Yet what sinicisation entails is not immediately clear, although it targets foreign religious influence among Christians and extremism in Islam and Tibetan Buddhism.⁽⁵⁾ As a political task, it has met with confusion, anxiety, hostility, and indifference across religious communities. For example, one top leader's call for Taoism to "persist in and deepen the process of sinicisation" raised eyebrows among Taoists, who regarded the instruction as redundant for an indigenous religion.⁽⁶⁾ Further, the drive caused concern about the loss of cultural identity among minorities. Christians feared that the new policy would further reduce their already shrinking religious space.

This paper will address the pitfalls associated with the recent attempt of the Xi regime to alter the various religious practices and beliefs in China. I draw my evidence from qualitative and observational data, including interviews, official documents, government publications as well as those of the religious associations, newspaper archives, and online texts from internet forums. I will show that sinicisation as a policy prescription has failed to go beyond the existing regulatory framework that caused many of the religious challenges in the first place. Instead, this effort has managed to only increase the rigidity of the regulatory framework as it extends the scope of bureaucratic discretion in dealing with the various sects by publishing these new "Regulations."

I argue that the plan to tamper with religion for political purposes achieves only selective implementation at best. What has been an increasingly interventionist approach under Xi risks exacerbating bureaucratic clumsiness in handling religious matters, which in the past served only to escalate conflicts between the state and components of the religious community.

The political use of religion and the selectivity of religious tolerance in China

Over the course of four decades, official discourse directed toward religion changed from labelling it anachronistic to terming it cultural.⁽⁷⁾ This is because the party-state has come to accept the positive ability of religion to provide the masses with psychological and social support (Goosaert and Palmer 2011). Other than its psychological and social aspects, religion has also served strategic functions for the regime, as best demonstrated by the Party's employing the united front as a strategy, an ideology, and an institution of which religion is an indispensable part (Van Slyke 1967).

Accordingly, the PRC has since its establishment adopted—at least rhetorically—a policy of freedom of religious belief⁽⁸⁾ whose purpose has been to "unite the mass of believers and nonbelievers and enable them to centre all their will and strength on the common goal of building a modernised, powerful socialist state."⁽⁹⁾ The political use of religion in the form of a united front with "the broad masses of the patriotic religious personages" has also been the organising principle of the party-state's religious governance.

The CCP manages religions via three functionally different institutional establishments, each deployed at every administrative level of the party-state: at the centre, these are the United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), and the patriotic associations of the five state-sanctioned religions. The United Front Work Department is in charge of carrying out re-

search on the religious question, assisting the party committee with religious policy making, communicating with religious leaders, and coordinating between state organs and the patriotic religious associations. SARA implements religious policies and administers day-to-day religious affairs. In the party-state dual hierarchy, the head of the Bureau of Religious Affairs (BRA) at each level of the government is appointed from among the members of the local United Front Work Department. The personnel overlap is to ensure party control over religious policy implementation. Government-approved religious leaders at the various lower levels receive political appointments as members of the local people's congresses and local branches of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Patriotic religious associations, as the bridge between the state and the separate religious communities they represent, help mobilise their communities to support official policies. Any major change in policy or its implementation must go through this institutional triangle of the United Front Work Development, the BRA, and patriotic religious associations (Palmer 2009).⁽¹⁰⁾

The CCP's utilitarian approach to its management of religion, and its heavy reliance on administrative control, have rendered religious tolerance vulnerable to leadership change. This has been especially so since the 1989 Tiananmen violence and the subsequent fall of the Communist Bloc, both of which led the Party to fear religious subversion. This heightened suspicion of religion prompted a tightening of religious policy in Document 6, issued in early 1991 under then-Party chief Jiang Zemin with the goal of stabilising the regime in the immediate aftermath of the 1989 crisis.⁽¹¹⁾

Document 6 set back the more permissive approach to religion that had been established by Document 19 of 1982. That ruling had generally characterised the official treatment in the 1980s. By contrast, Document 6 formally added a requirement that prior government approval be granted in

- Wang Zuoran, "行稳致远·久久为功：坚持我国宗教中国化方向" (*Xingwen zhiyuan, jiujiu weigong: jianchi woguo zongjiao zhongguohua fangxiang*, Travel steadily to reach far-distant lands, persevere for success: insisting on the direction of sinicisation of our country), *中国宗教 (Zhongguo zongjiao, China Religion)* 2016/10: 13-15.
- "俞正声会见中国道教协会成立60周年纪念会代表" (*Yu Zhengsheng huijian Zhongguo daojiao xiehui chengli 60 zhounian jinianhui daibiao*, Yu Zhengsheng met with representatives at the commemoration for the 60th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Taoist Association), *The United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee Website*, 18 July 2017, <http://www.zyztz.gov.cn/tzb2010/ttfl/201707/87e80908ab7b4790821b635c50320b1b.shtml> (accessed on 28 November 2017).
- Prominent religious figures, notably Zhao Puchu (Chair of the Buddhist Association of China from 1980 until his death in 2000), began to advocate that religion is culture in order to counter the view of religion as anachronistic, still influential at that time and represented by the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in the early 1980s.
- For an overview of China's religious freedom policy until the early 2000s, see Leung (2005).
- Document 19 of 1982 marked the restoration of the policy of religious tolerance that was abandoned since the mid-1950s. It reversed the Party's nearly three decades of anti-religious policy and allowed religion to grow under government supervision. As a result of the policy liberalisation, the 1980s saw a strong rebound of religious activities. See "关于我国社会时期宗教问题的基本观点和基本政策" (*Guanyu woguo shehui shiqi zongjiao wenti de jiben guandian he jiben zhengce*, The basic viewpoint and policy on the religious question during our country's socialist period), issued by the CPC Central Committee on 31 March 1982, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/zcfg/zc/497.htm> (accessed on 4 December 2017). For English translation, see MacInnis (1989), 8-26.
- As part of the regime's new plan to restructure the party-state, SARA is to be merged into the United Front Work Department. This will further secure the Party's control over religious affairs. See "中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》" (*Zhonggong zhongyang yinfa 'shenhua dang he guojia jigou gaige fang'an'*, The CCP Central Committee issuing the "Program to Deepen the Institutional Reform of the Party and the State), *Xinhuanet.com*, 21 March 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm (accessed 7 April 2018).
- State Council and the CPC Central Committee, "关于进一步做好宗教工作若干问题的通知" (*Guanyu jinyibu zuohao zongjiao gongzuo ruogan wenti de tongzhi*, Notification regarding some questions of further implementing religious work), 5 February 1991, <http://pkulaw.cn/CLI.2.65793> (accessed on 3 December 2017).

order for four types of religious activities to proceed. These practices were: county-level government assent for the erection of any new religious venue;⁽¹²⁾ provincial permission for the acceptance of large foreign donations; provincial agreement for any foreign visitation; and State Council authorisation for any major religious activities concerning foreign affairs.

The CCP had previously avoided making any similar pronouncement because doing so would have violated its constitutionally-grounded principle of separation between state and religion. Thus, Document 6 became the first central-level regulation to explicitly declare the government's power to administer religious affairs (*guanli zongjiao shiwu* 管理宗教事务). Most importantly, the decree extended state oversight over religion by assigning the task of drawing up religious legislation to the State Council's Bureau of Religious Affairs instead of having the National People's Congress perform this role. This decision marked a turn to regulation in the Party's religious governance from a stance entailing more self-restraint that had been employed since the 1980s.

True, the period from the 1990s onwards did see increasing bureaucratic control via the drafting and implementation of two major administrative decrees—the "Regulations on the Administration of Religious Venues" in 1994 under Jiang Zemin and the "Regulations on Religious Affairs" in 2005 under Hu Jintao. As will be shown in the remaining paragraphs, Xi Jinping's action served to further this trend with his government's revision of the 2005 Regulations.

Xi came to power greeted by optimism from domestic reformists and China watchers that he would enforce a reform agenda leading to political change. Yet his first term saw tightening ideological control and intensified crackdowns on civil society, completely different from what was expected and hoped for.⁽¹³⁾

Xi has defied the norm of collective leadership established by the previous two generations of party leadership and has concentrated power in his own hands (see Gueorguiev article in this issue). At the 19th National Party Congress he placed mostly allies while failing to promote a successor in the Politburo Standing Committee. The Congress unanimously passed the amendment to the Party's Constitution to enshrine "Xi Jinping Thought"—a terminology previously reserved only for Mao—as a guide for the Party and the Chinese people to "strive for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."⁽¹⁴⁾

This same amendment elevated the "culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics" to a strategic position. Xi declared that China's socialist culture is rooted in the "fine traditional Chinese culture" developed over the course of the nation's five-thousand-year history. Confidence in this national culture, he proclaimed, would bring about the prosperity and eventual rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁽¹⁵⁾ Accordingly, Xi implied that a vigorously Chinese national culture is indispensable to China's continuous rise to great power status. He also has made explicit his ambition for China to provide an alternative model to the Western one—"the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics (...) a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence."⁽¹⁶⁾

The elevation of traditional Chinese culture is to a great extent a response to the challenges of Western ideas on the cultural front.⁽¹⁷⁾ The notion of religious sinicisation stems from this strategic thinking; the concept appeared in Xi's speech at the 19th National Party Congress in the sections on "consolidating and developing the patriotic united front" and "effectively safeguarding national security," as he elaborates below:

We will fully implement the Party's basic policy on religious affairs, uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society (...).

We must rigorously protect against and take resolute measures to combat all acts of infiltration, subversion, and sabotage, as well as violent and terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities, and religious extremist activities.⁽¹⁸⁾

This passage summarises the drive behind Xi's program of sinicising religion—a concern for regime stability and a fear of religious subversion. The policy is selective as it by nature favours indigenous or indigenised religions such as Chinese Buddhism, Taoism, and to a lesser degree, Islam.⁽¹⁹⁾ The presence in China of Christianity, with its historical connections with the West, is the reason for the initial adoption and formulation of religious sinicisation.

"Religious ecology" and sinicisation as a policy prescription under Xi

Thus, the issue of sinicisation was initially an academic response to a Christian problem. The school of thought that formulated this notion is known as the "religious ecology school," which holds that the workings of the religious landscape in a society are similar to those of an ecological system. A normal state is an equilibrium wherein all religions act as checks on each other by meeting the distinct demands coming from various groups. Consequently, the dramatic growth of Christianity in China is viewed as a pathology of an unbalanced religious ecology resulting from the destruction

- The rapid growth of temples driven by local economic initiatives led the central leadership to stipulate provincial permission for any erection of new temples in 1996. Provincial assent has since applied to all religious sites.
- "In Xi Jinping's Crackdown on Civil Society, Even Women's Rights Activists Aren't Spared," *South China Morning Post*, 16 March 2016, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1739150/xi-jinpings-crackdown-civil-society-even-womens-rights> (accessed on 20 November 2017); "They Target My Human Rights Work as a Crime: Annual Report on the Human Rights Situation in China (2016)," *Chinese Human Rights Defenders*, February 2017, <https://www.nchrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/annual-report.pdf> (accessed on 20 November 2017); "Cyber Space, Religion, Lawyers, Dissidents: China's Shrinking Civil Society under Xi Jinping's Crackdown," *Hong Kong Free Press*, 18 October 2017, <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/10/18/cyberspace-religion-lawyers-dissidents-chinas-shrinking-civil-society-xi-jinpings-crackdown/> (accessed on 20 November 2017).
- "Resolution on the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on the Revised Constitution of the Communist Party of China," *Xinhuanet.com*, 24 October 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702726.htm (accessed on 20 November 2017).
- "习近平提出，坚定文化自信，推动社会主义文化繁荣兴盛" (*Xi Jinping tichu, jiangding wenhua zixin, tuidong shehui zhuyi wenhua fanrong xingsheng*). Xi Jinping propose to build strong cultural confidence, help socialist culture to flourish), *Xinhuanet.com*, 18 October 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/19cpcnc/2017-10/18/c_1121820800.htm (accessed on 22 November 2017).
- Xi Jinping, "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," *op. cit.*
- Xi's fear of "foreign infiltration" is best illustrated by Document 9 in 2013, which listed the perils of Western ideas such as constitutional democracy, universal values, civil society, neoliberalism, and media independence, in undermining China's political system. See "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere," *ChinaFile*, 8 November 2013, <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation#start> (accessed on 23 November 2017).
- Xi Jinping, "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," *op. cit.*
- The Chinese-speaking, deeply sinicised strand of Islam is a lesser concern to the regime. The challenges of anti-Chinese trends and extremism are presented as a regional problem, mainly in Xinjiang. See Wang Zuonan, "坚持问题导向，明确目标任务，引领中国伊斯兰教健康发展" (*Jianchi wenti daoxiang, mingque mubiao renwu, yinling Zhongguo Yislanjiao jiankang fazhan*). Insisting on problem-oriented approach, having clear aims, guiding the healthy development of Chinese Islam), *中国宗教* (*Zhongguo zongjiao*, China Religion) 2016/12: 11-13.

of indigenous religious traditions, including Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religions that occurred in the first few decades of Communist rule (Wang and Gao 2012).

Underlying this school of thought is the idea that the Christian faith is harmful to Chinese cultural traditions. If the trend is allowed to continue, this school maintains, the eventual dominance of Christianity would not only pose a national security threat to the country via its foreign nature but would in addition bring about a further decline of Chinese civilisation. The policy prescription to what adherents of this school perceive to be a Christian problem is to revive fine Chinese cultural traditions, including religious cultures, while pushing for the sinicisation of Christianity (Mou 2009).

Specifically, the state should incorporate fine Chinese culture into socialism with Chinese characteristics; advocate Confucianist ethics;⁽²⁰⁾ and promote Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, including solving their commercialisation problem so that these faiths can utilise their traditional cultural advantage to help construct a healthy religious ecology. One more facet is that the state should provide legal space for an autonomous revival of folk religions. To combat the West's effort to Christianise China, Christianity in China should be sinicised by reforming its beliefs and practices, especially by eliminating its proselytism and discarding its teaching that salvation is possible through Christ alone, a belief viewed as incompatible with pluralistic and harmonious (*duoyuan tonghe* 多元通和) Chinese religious traditions. Above all, Chinese Christians must fulfil their national consciousness as well as their duty as citizens and as members of a community of shared destiny by rejecting all Western ideas and influences (Zhang 2011; Mou 2012; Zuo 2017).

The first conference of this group of thinkers was convened in March 2012 by the Centre for Religious Culture at Peking University and the Centre for Christian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. That initiative drew attention from members of the leadership in 2013 in accordance with Xi Jinping's dissemination of the grand narrative of his reign, the Chinese Dream.⁽²¹⁾ They became SARA's newly established "specially appointed experts" in 2014.⁽²²⁾ In the following years, under official guidance, national conferences on the sinicisation of Christianity were held, first in concurrence with the 60th anniversary of the founding of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China in August 2014, and then at the commemoration of the 100th birthday of K. H. Ting, one of the movement's founders, in September 2015.

The religious ecology school's view of an unruly Christian phenomenon fostered by hostile foreign forces taking advantage of weakening indigenous institutions reflects an anxiety over the loss of ideological and hence social control on the part of the ruling elite (Li 2010). It is not surprising that one of Xi's ideological hallmarks since he assumed power has been his emphasis on traditional Chinese culture, and his comment on Chinese Buddhism in his speech at the UNESCO Headquarters in March 2014 was widely seen as indicating his support for indigenous or indigenised religions:

Buddhism originated in ancient India. After it was introduced into China, the religion went through an extended period of integrated development with indigenous Confucianism and Taoism and finally became Buddhism with Chinese characteristics.⁽²³⁾

This stance energised Chinese Buddhist and Taoist communities, which have since been pushed by the authorities to actively promote China's soft power by hosting and participating in international religious exchanges and organisations.⁽²⁴⁾

As Chinese Buddhism was being applauded as a model of sinicisation, a campaign to demolish churches and crosses under a new zoning regulation⁽²⁵⁾ took place in Zhejiang Province, where China's largest Christian population resides. The local leader, Xia Baolong, is a Xi Jinping loyalist and had served as his deputy during Xi's tenure as Zhejiang's party secretary. Between 2014 and 2015, an estimated 12,000 to 17,000 crosses were forcefully removed from local churches, many of which were government-sanctioned churches whose expansion had been tacitly tolerated by the local state from the 1980s up until this point.

This destruction process led to a series of violent clashes between the local state and parishioners. As bearing an official status no longer guaranteed tolerance, and as the patriotic religious associations' repeatedly pleas through official channels proved futile to stop the violence, the government-fostered provincial patriotic Christian associations (the Zhejiang Protestant Christian Council, the Zhejiang Patriotic Catholic Association, and the Administrative Commission of the Catholic Church) unprecedentedly issued open letters condemning the action and demanding that local authorities stop the demolition.⁽²⁶⁾

Although the violent part of the campaign eventually died down, it was followed by dozens of arrests and the removal of church leaders, sending shock waves through both the authorities and the church, neither of which had expected such a level of confrontation. The events undermined the Communist Party's system of religious governance wherein the patriotic religious associations were said to serve as a bridge between the state and the religious community. Most importantly, this event undercut the authoritarian regime's imperative for social control and stability.

20. For example, benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 义), propriety (*li* 礼), wisdom (*zhi* 智), fidelity (*xin* 信), loyalty (*zhong* 忠), filial piety (*xiao* 孝), honesty (*lian* 廉), and integrity (*chi* 耻).
21. Zhongxin, "2013 国内宗教形势观察" (2013 *guonei zongjiao xingshi guancha*, Observations of the domestic religious development in 2013), *中国宗教* (*Zhongguo zongjiao*, China Religion) 2014/3: 14-16.
22. "国家宗教事务局成立宗教工作专家库" (*Guojia zongjiao shiwu ju chengli zongjiao gongzuo zhuanjia ku*, SARA established an expert group on religious work), *People.cn*, 26 January 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0126/c1001-24235908.html> (accessed on 1 April 2018). For a complete list of 33 "specially appointed experts," see SARA website, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/xxgk/zjgtpzjkjs20170904204343165711/index.htm> (accessed on 1 April 2018).
23. "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at UNESCO Headquarters," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China Website*, 28 March 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjyh_665391/t1142560.shtml (accessed on 15 November 2017).
24. Jiang Jianyong, "大力弘扬中华优秀传统文化，发挥道教积极作用" (*Dali hongyang zhonghua chuantong wenhua, fahui Daojiao jiji zuoyong*, Promoting Chinese traditional culture with vigor, bringing the positive effect of Taoism into full play), *中国宗教* (*Zhongguo zongjiao*, China Religion) 2014/9: 22-23; "推动中国宗教走出去，发挥宗教独特优势" (*Tuidong Zhongguo zongjiao zouchuqu, fahui zongjiao dute youshi*, Promoting for Chinese religions to go out, bringing religion's unique advantage into full play), *中国宗教* (*Zhongguo zongjiao*, China Religion) 2014/10: 28-30.
25. The People's Government of Zhejiang Province, "浙江省人民政府关于在全省开展'三改一拆'三年行动的通知" (*Zhejiangsheng renmin zhengfu guanyu zai quansheng kaizhan 'sangai yichai' sannian xingdong de tongzhi*, The People's Government of Zhejiang Province notification regarding launching three years of province-wide "three reconstructions, one demolition" campaign), 21 February 2013, http://zhejiang.gov.cn/art/2015/12/30/art_32431_261813.html (accessed on 3 December 2017).
26. Ian Johnson, "Decapitated Churches in China's Christian Heartland," *The New York Times*, 21 May 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/asia/china-christians-zhejiang.html>; "基督教团体就拆十字架发表公开信后，被收走公章" (*Jidujiao tuanti jiu chai shizijia fabiao gongkaxin hou, bei shouzou gongzhang*, Christian groups' official seals sieged after publishing Open Letters), *UCAN China*, 16 July 2015, <http://china.ucanews.com/2015/07/16/基督教團體就拆十字架發表公開信後，被收走公章/> (accessed on 15 November 2017); "中国基督徒抗议政府强拆十字架" (*Zhongguo jidutu kangyi zhengfu qiangchai shizijia*, Chinese Christians protest the government's forceful removal of church crosses), *The New York Times*, 11 August 2015, <http://m.cn.nytimes.com/china/20150811/c11china/zh-hant/> (accessed on 15 November 2017); "Second interview with the Wenzhou Pastor: After the Demolition Comes the 'Transformation'," *China Change*, 15 December 2015, <https://chinachange.org/2015/12/15/second-interview-with-the-wenzhou-pastor-after-the-demolition-comes-the-transformations/> (accessed on 15 November 2017).

In May 2015, sinicisation entered the official discourse when Xi declared these words at the Central United Front Work Conference regarding his religious policy:

To provide active guidance to religions [so they could] adapt to socialist society, [we] must insist on the direction of sinicisation, must increase the level of rule of law in religious work, must dialectically consider the social function of religion, and must attach importance to and develop the impact of religious personages. [We shall] guide religion to strive for the promotion of economic development, societal harmony, cultural prosperity, ethnic unity, and unification of the fatherland. ⁽²⁷⁾

Xi further elaborated on this policy at the National Religious Work Conference held in April 2016:

Providing active guidance to religions [so they could] adapt to socialist society is to guide the mass believers to love the fatherland, love the people, safeguard the unity of the fatherland, safeguard the great unity of the Chinese nation, observe and serve the best interests of the country and the interests of the Chinese nation as a whole; to uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, to support socialist institutions, to insist on the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; to actively practice socialist core values, promote Chinese culture, make great efforts to integrate religious doctrines with Chinese culture; to obey state laws and regulations, to conscientiously accept state management by law; to engage in reform and opening and the construction of socialist modernisation and contribute to the Chinese Dream to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

[it is to] support each religion, while maintaining its fundamental beliefs, core doctrines, rituals and rites, in thoroughly uncovering their content in the teachings and canons that are beneficial to societal harmony, progress, and healthy civilisation; [support them] to interpret the teachings and canons in line with the developmental requirements of contemporary China as well as fine traditional Chinese culture. ⁽²⁸⁾

The logic of the religious ecology school was explicit in the policy pronouncement, with its emphasis on traditional Chinese culture. Even folk religions are now guaranteed a rightful place in the socialist body polity, despite having been mostly regarded as superstitions in the past. Xi now saw the value of folk religions in his quest to uphold Communist rule, as his speech went on to reveal:

Doing a good job with folk religions has great significance for uniting the masses and advancing social harmony and stability; for safeguarding both national and public interests and for resisting foreign infiltration; for promoting China's fine traditional culture and cultivating good social norms; for maintaining close contact with overseas Chinese and promoting the unification of the fatherland. ⁽²⁹⁾

At the same conference, Xi asked his audience to follow the principle of political cooperation enshrined in the ideology and practice of the united front:

To do a good job with and insist on the basic principles of the Party's religious work, the key is to think deeply about, understand thoroughly, and carry out with precision [the concept of] "guidance (*dao* 导)." [We must] "guide" with proper methods, "guide" with vigoriveness, and "guide" with effectiveness, and hence firmly seize the initiative of religious work.

(...) Politically, [we] must insist on unity and cooperation; ideologically, [we] must respect each other. Engage more, have more heart-to-heart talks, provide more assistance. Convince [people] via reasoning; move [them] with emotion; attract and unite [them] via solving [their] practical difficulties. ⁽³⁰⁾

This development is remarkable in comparison with the National Religious Work Conference that Jiang Zemin assembled in December 2001. Against the backdrop of the anti-Falun Gong campaign that began in 1999, incorporating folk religions into the national agenda of religious work and hence providing them with legitimacy would have been unthinkable a decade and a half before Xi's time.

Despite Xi Jinping's emphasis on guidance, unity, and mutual respect, however, the revision of the "Regulations on Religious Affairs" that followed his speech seems to have failed to adjust the regulatory framework. Most of the rules that had been criticised by the religious community for bureaucratic overreach in the 2005 Regulations were left intact. Rather, this reworking simply expanded the scope and intensity of administrative control.

Regulations on Religious Affairs: Increasing religious control

The "Regulations on Religious Affairs" was the highest-level government regulation on the management of religion in China since 2005. It replaced the 1994 "Regulations on the Administration of Religious Venues," which was the first such bureaucratic decree to impose government oversight following the 1991 issuance of Document 6.

Interestingly, although the leadership had all the more reason to fear for regime survival given the social and political context in the early 1990s, the content of the 1994 Regulations appeared lax and curt (consisting of just 20 articles) when compared to the succeeding decrees. That earlier set of rules targeted only religious venues and prescribed mostly general principles. ⁽³¹⁾ The 2005 Regulations (with its 48 articles), however, covered the administration of religious organisations, academies, personnel, leadership, publication, and property. It greatly extended bureaucratic discretion over religious affairs, making religious organisations *de facto* subsidiaries of the state, and was at that time

27. "习近平：巩固发展最广泛的爱国统一战线" (*Xi Jinping: Gonggu fazhan zui guangfan de aiguo tongyi zhanxian*, Xi Jinping: Consolidate and develop the widest patriotic united front), *Xinhuanet.com*, 20 May 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-05/20_c_1115351358.htm (accessed on 16 May 2017).

28. "习近平：全面提高新形势下宗教工作水平" (*Xi Jinping: quanmian tigao xinxingshi xia zongjiao gongzuo shuiping*), *op. cit.*

29. "积极探索稳步推进：切实提高民间信仰工作能力和水平" (*Jiji tansuo wenbu tuijin: qieshi tigao minjian xinyang gongzuo nengli he shuiping*, Exploring actively and advancing steadily: conscientiously improving capabilities and standards of the work on folk beliefs), *中国宗教 (Zhongguo zongjiao, China Religion)* 2016/12: 16-17.

30. "习近平：全面提高新形势下宗教工作水平" (*Xi Jinping: quanmian tigao xinxingshi xia zongjiao gongzuo shuiping*), *op. cit.*

31. The State Council, "宗教活动场所管理条例" (*Zongjiao huodong changsuo guanli tiaoli*, Regulation on the Administration of Religious Venues), 31 January 1994, <http://pkulaw.cn/CLI.2.8908> (accessed on 4 December 2017).

regarded as a huge setback to the relaxation of religious control that had obtained in the 1980s. ⁽³²⁾

After the 1980s, the religious community made great efforts to push for a specialised law on religion. ⁽³³⁾ Advocates believed that although religious freedom had been enshrined in the 1982 PRC Constitution, China had yet to develop the kind of democratic institutions for the Constitution to serve as a protective device. A law on religion would therefore protect rather than restrict religion, they imagined, by regulating and restraining the agents of the state. ⁽³⁴⁾ Hopeful observers had thought that Xi's reign presented a golden chance for writing a law on religion after the Party's 18th National Congress pronounced what appeared at the time to be the regime's commitment to the rule of law. ⁽³⁵⁾

But the 77-article 2017 revision fell short of what the religious community had hoped for, that is, a law on religion. Moreover, the new Regulations, taking effect in February 2018, have not only largely preserved but also intensified the extant bureaucratic oversight. The cost of obtaining legality remains high. The authority to approve the erection of a new religious site is placed at the provincial level. ⁽³⁶⁾ The Regulations hold that a religious organisation must earn a stable income and be led by government-sanctioned clerics. It must first obtain the approval of the local BRA before submitting its registration request to the Bureau of Civil Affairs, which can reject the application if there already exists a similar organisation in the same area or if the organisation is deemed to pose a threat to national security or unity.

Small congregations simply do not have the resources to go through these layers of administrative procedures. Many lack professional clerics, not to mention clerics certified by patriotic religious associations. Getting certified in some cases is incompatible with the religious group's fundamental beliefs, such as in the case of the "underground" Catholic Church ⁽³⁷⁾ and the evangelical house churches, which have refused to affiliate with the state-sponsored patriotic churches. Besides, forbidding multiple similar organisations to be established in one area grants patriotic religious groups a monopoly to operate legally. These restrictions have driven a large portion of religious observances outside of government supervision, and the revised Regulations have failed to alter this dynamic.

Another example of the revision's failure to reform the existing regulatory framework is in the documentation of the clergy. The state has stipulated that the certification and appointment of all religious personnel must "report for the record" (*bei'an* 备案) to the county-level Bureau of Religious Affairs, which can accept or revoke the status of a clergyperson. But the *bei'an* authorities of politically sensitive Catholic bishops and living buddhas (*huofo* 活佛) in Tibetan Buddhism are SARA and the BRAs at the provincial level or above, respectively. ⁽³⁸⁾ Thus, the *bei'an* system has granted the government control over one of the key dimensions of religious affairs and has been used to remove those who have failed to comply. ⁽³⁹⁾ As patriotic religious leaders have increasingly become representatives of government interests, they have lost the authority once commanded by their predecessors. ⁽⁴⁰⁾ This has crippled one pillar of the party-state's institutional triangle of religious governance.

Furthermore, the revision added new provisions that would shrink religious space. The regime's wariness of religious subversion is explicit in the newly added Article 3, which states that the management of religious affairs shall "uphold the principles of protecting what is legal, prohibiting what is illegal, suppressing extremism, resisting infiltration, and combating crime." ⁽⁴¹⁾ Similarly, Article 4 added a clause stipulating that individuals and organisations are prohibited from creating conflicts within one religion or between religious believers and non-believers; from advocating, supporting, or funding

religious extremism; and from using religions to undermine ethnic unity, divide the nation, and engage in terrorist activities.

Some of the trends that the Regulations are trying to oppose under the category of "illegal activities" are the commercialisation of Buddhism and Taoism, such as "reckless construction" (*luanjian* 乱建) of temples and outdoor Buddha statues, temple leasing, publicly traded temple properties, and impersonating monks to rake in money, as well as expanding unauthorised religious activities such as participation in non-government organised hajj, setting up house churches, and proselytising online. "Extremism" and "crime" in the mind of those who drafted the Regulations are violence that portend Xinjiang and Tibetan independence or autonomy. "Infiltration" refers to foreign missionary work, the alleged purpose of which is to "Westernise" and "divide" China under the guise of business investment, building hospitals, setting up charities, tourism, cultural exchange, and study. The term applies also to the proliferation of underground churches aided by what the regime sees as a deliberate effort to oppress and divide patriotic religious associations. ⁽⁴²⁾

32. "徐玉成：宗教界十分期盼宗教法制化" (*Xu Yucheng: zongjiaojie shifen qipan zongjiao fazhihua*, Xu Yucheng: The religious circle much looks forward to the rule of law concerning religion), *Phoenix New Media Limited*, 12 December 2015, http://fo.ifeng.com/a/20151212/41522189_0.shtml (accessed on 30 January 2018).
33. The first attempt to push forward a law on religion was in 1989, when Zhao Puchu (Chairperson of the Buddhist Association of China) and K. H. Ting (Chairperson of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement) submitted a draft law to the National People's Congress. This legislative attempt failed due to a series of domestic and international events, including nation-wide Muslim protests against the book *Sexual Custom*, which was believed to have defamed Islam; the Tiananmen violence and the resulted removal of moderates from the leadership; and the fall of Communist rule in Poland and Romania, in which religion is believed to have played a critical role.
34. Interview with religious leader, Beijing, July 2014.
35. Xi Jinping, "关于'中共中央关于全面依法治国若干重大问题的决定'的说明" (*Guanyu 'Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu quanmian yifazhiguo ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding' de shuoming*, Explanation concerning the decision of the CPC Central Committee on major issues pertaining to comprehensively promoting the rule of law), *Xinhuanet.com*, 28 October 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-10/28/c_1113015372.htm (accessed on 7 December 2017).
36. The authority to approve a new place of worship is placed with the prefecture-level government.
37. As part of the effort to merge the government-sanctioned Church and the Vatican-appointed "underground" Church, the Vatican is reported to have asked underground bishops to resign in support of government-appointed bishops in December 2017, despite protests from the underground clergy. The potential backlash from Chinese Catholics is yet to be known. See Ian Johnson, "Vatican, Eager for China Ties, Ask 'Underground' Bishops to Step Aside," *The New York Times*, 29 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/29/world/asia/china-catholics-vatican.html> (accessed on 30 January 2018); John Baptist Lin, "The Vatican Asks Legitimate Bishops to Step Aside in Favor of Illegitimate Ones," *AsiaNews.it*, 22 January 2018, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/The-Vatican-asks-legitimate-bishops-to-step-aside-in-favour-of-illegitimate-ones-42896.html> (accessed on 30 January 2018).
38. The 2018 Regulations raised the *bei'an* authorities of a living Buddha from the prefecture level to provincial level.
39. Recent cases that have drawn national and international attention include Ma Daqin, who announced his resignation from all posts in the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association at his bishop ordination ceremony in 2012, and Gu Yue, who as President of the Zhejiang Protestant Christian Council published an open letter condemning the local authorities for church and cross demolitions in 2016.
40. Xu Yucheng, a former researcher at the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), lamented that the *bei'an* system introduced by the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs has allowed government authorities to legally install compliant religious leadership and expel disobedient ones. Accordingly in 2010, SARA directed the leadership change in the BAC and selected monks with dubious reputations to lead the association, which greatly tarnished the authority of SARA and BAC in the Buddhist community. See Xu Yucheng, "关于'宗教事务条例'发布十周年随想" (*Guanyu 'zongjiao shiwu tiaoli' fabu shi zhounian suixiang*, Random thoughts on the tenth anniversary of the publication of "Regulations on Religious Affairs"), *Pu Shi Institute for Social Science*, 6 November 2014, <http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=5313> (accessed on 5 April 2018); also "徐玉成：宗教界十分期盼宗教法制化" (*Xu Yucheng: zongjiaojie shifen qipan zongjiao fazhihua*, Xu Yucheng: The religious circle much looks forward to the rule of law concerning religion), *op. cit.*
41. State Council, "宗教事务条例" (*Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli*, Regulations on Religious Affairs), 7 September 2017, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm (accessed on 10 December 2017).
42. "新修订'宗教事务条例'释义(1)" (*Xinxuding 'zongjiao shiwu tiaoli' shiyi (1)*), Legal interpretations of the newly revised "Regulations on Religious Affairs", *中国宗教 (Zhongguo zongjiao, China Religion)* 2017/11: 63-69.

The revision also extends censorship to online religious content, and prohibits non-religious organisations, schools, and venues from providing religious education and from organising citizens to attend overseas religious activities (Article 41). This prohibition targets religious groups that operate outside government purview. What is unprecedented about this article is that the state even intends to restrict individual citizens' behaviour abroad. Finally, these rules grant the authorities the power to punish even when no crimes are committed (Article 68).

Nonetheless, the revision addresses two pressing issues facing the religious community, particularly Buddhism and Taoism: unclear property ownership and the consequent lack of legal personhood of religious venues. These problems have placed these groups in a disadvantageous institutional position. Because they could not bear civil liabilities, they have had to rely on patriotic religious associations or the BRAs to act on their behalf to enter contracts, obtain loans, and appear in court. Such heavy reliance on the authorities has rendered religious venues, especially temples, vulnerable to local state abuse. Temples' social ownership (*shehui gongyou* 社会公有) and potential for religious tourism have driven widespread local state-led temple commodification.⁽⁴³⁾ The new Regulations are expected to combat this trend by specifying the religious community's rights to state- and collective-owned sites and allowing religious venues to acquire legal personhood—but only if they first obtain the permission of the local patriotic religious association.

New wine in old bottles

To what extent the new Regulations will be implemented has yet to be seen. But as of late 2017, its guiding principal of sinicisation has already encountered bureaucratic inertia. A deputy head of SARA wrote a special editorial criticising the attitudes expressed in the ruling and the methods it mandates as well as misperceptions embedded in the decision, perfunctoriness in the execution, a lack of comprehensive planning, and little coordination among the party-state, religious community, and academia.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Accordingly, the policy has yet to make it onto the work agendas of most localities; in some areas, it has been disseminated simply as a slogan, and in others the great fanfare surrounding its announcement from the top has failed utterly to inspire the grassroots. One of the most peculiar applications was the promotion of traditional tea culture by provincial Christian Councils and the Committees of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches in Shandong and Yunnan.⁽⁴⁵⁾

In general, all groupings at the grassroots level, Taoist, Chinese Buddhist, and Muslim communities, do not view sinicisation as their issue—Taoism is indigenous; Buddhism, as a model of religious sinicisation, is indigenised; and Islam has achieved sinicisation since the Ming dynasty through its incorporation of Confucianism.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Moreover, as Catholicism and Protestantism have been restructured, i.e., "sinicised," via the "self-election and self-ordination" (*zixuan zisheng* 自选自圣) of bishops and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement since the 1950s, the program of sinicisation is viewed by many as nothing more than a political campaign whose main purpose is to strengthen religious control. Despite their enthusiasm for cooperation, the patriotic religious leaders at the national level are baffled and simply do not know where to begin, due to the lack of human resources available for sinicisation.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Above all, sinicisation as a policy lacks clarity; even Xi's introduction of it amounted to little more than a collection of slogans. The leadership of the

party-state's religious work understands it as a complicated, arduous systematic exercise that will involve the transformation of the religious field, including its thoughts, practices, infrastructures, and cultures. Thus far, the program is still in the stage of concept clarification.

Hence, the Central Institute of Socialism—equivalent to the Central Party School for non-party members—began training leaders of patriotic religious associations and religious academies in spring 2017.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Each seminar uses a combination of two or three course modules that cover general topics, including "Chinese Culture and the Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation" and "Religious Policy and Regulations," as well as specific themes, such as "Christianity and Cultural Exchange between China and the West," "Chinese Culture and Sinicisation of Christianity," and "A Pluralistic and Unifying Chinese Nation." The courses for the Xinjiang group are designed to inspire nationalistic sentiment and even include Mandarin lessons and field trips to national historical and war memorial museums and science and technology parks.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The main goal of these generally one-to-two-week seminars is to establish political and cultural consensus among religious leaders regarding the program of sinicisation,⁽⁵⁰⁾ even though the courses are target specific and cater to what the regime perceives as the challenges of each religion—commercialisation and weak discipline in Buddhism and Taoism; extremism and anti-

43. Temples and monasteries are designated by the state as belonging to society, unlike churches, which belong to the Christian organizations, and mosques, which belong to local Islamic communities. For a detailed discussion of the various types of religious property ownership and how they have affected local state-religion relationships, see Chang (2016).
44. Chen Zongrong, "关于我国宗教中国化方向的几点思考" (*Guanyu woguo zongjiao zhongguohua fangxiang de jidian sikao*, A few thoughts on the direction of sinicisation in our country), *中国宗教* (*Zhongguo zongjiao*, China Religion) 2017/1: 23-25.
45. Gao Ming, "弘扬传统文化：基督教信仰表达中国化的新尝试" (*Hongyang chuantong cha wenhua: Jidujiao xinyang biaoda zhongguohua de xin changshi*, Promote and develop traditional tea culture: Christian faith's one new attempt for sinicisation), *中国宗教* (*Zhongguo zongjiao*, China Religion) 2016/9: 34-35. "云南基督教两会举办'茶席边的圣经'项目成果分享会·探索基督教中国化" (*Yunnan Jidujiao lianghui juban 'chaxibian de shengjing' xiangmu chengguo fenxianghui, tansuo Jidujiao zhongguohua*, Yunnan Protestant Lianghui presents the results of its "the Bible alongside the tea" program, exploring the sinicisation of Christianity), *Fuyinshibao.cn*, 8 July 2016, <http://www.gospeltimes.cn/index.php/portal/article/index/id/34601> (accessed on 1 February 2018).
46. This claim represents the stance of the sinicised strand of Islam that has dominated the patriotic Islamic associations.
47. Chen Zongrong, "坚持我国宗教中国化方向要做好六个方面的工作" (*Jianchi woguo zongjiao zhongguohua fangxiang yao zuohao liuge fangmian de gongzuo*, Insisting on the direction of religious sinicisation in our country, [we] must do a good job in six aspects), *中国宗教* (*Zhongguo zongjiao*, China Religion) 2017/12: 10-13.
48. "中央社院举办全国基督教、天主教院校负责人基督教中国化研修" (*Zhongyangsheyuan juban quanguo Jidujiao, Tianzhujiao yuanxiao fuzeren jidu zongjiao zhongguohua yanxiuban*, The Central Institute of Socialism held seminars on the sinicisation of Christianity for the leaderships of the country's Protestant and Catholic schools), *zysy.org.cn*, 6 April 2017, <http://www.zysy.org.cn/a1/a-XCW6KP51630B1E799CC849> (accessed on 3 February 2018).
49. "中央社院第一期新疆中青年爱国人士培训班赴江苏、上海、泉州三地教学实践" (*Zhongyangsheyuan diyiqi Xinjiang zhongqingnian zongjiao aiguo renshi peixunban fu Jiangsu, Shanghai, Quanzhou sandi jiaoxue shijian*, The first training course for Xinjiang middle-aged patriotic religious personages at the Central Institute of Socialism visited three localities, Jiangsu, Shanghai, and Quanzhou, for field study), *izysy.org.cn*, 8 December 2017, <http://www.zysy.org.cn/a1/a-XCXWDT96AF67B00F6505CB> (accessed on 4 February 2018); "伊斯兰教与佛教相遇，会是怎样的一幅画面" (*Yisilanjiao yu Fojiao xiangyu, huishi zenyang de yifu huamian*, What would the image be like when Islam encounters Buddhism?), *zysy.org.cn*, 7 December 2017, <http://www.zysy.org.cn/a1/a-XCXWBOF033A16DBB71371D> (accessed on 4 February 2018).
50. "中央社院为中国天主教神职人员举办研修班" (*Zhongyangsheyuan wei Zhongguo Tianzhujiao shenzhi renxian yanxiuban*, The Central Institute of Socialism held seminars for Chinese Catholic clerics), *Xinhuanet.com*, 3 March 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/2017-03/03/c_1120566364.htm (accessed on 3 February 2018); "中央社会主义学院首次为道教人士举办研修班" (*Zhongyangshehuizhuyixueyuan shouci wei Daojiao renshi juban yanxiuban*, The Central Institute of Socialism held seminars for Taoist personages for the first time), *Xinhuanet.com* 11 April 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-04/11/c_1120788829.htm (accessed on 3 February 2018); "中央社院举办首个新疆伊斯兰教经学院研修班" (*Zhongyangsheyuan juban shouge Xinjiang Yisilanjiao jingxueyuan jiaoshi yanxiuban*, The Central Institute of Socialism held the first seminars for the Islamic academies in Xinjiang), *zysy.org.cn*, 11 July 2017,

Chinese sentiment in Islam; and de-sinicisation and politicisation in Catholicism and Protestantism.

In sum, sinicisation is a top-down socio-political engineering project with the ambition of accounting for local and religious variations. But few understand what sinicisation really entails—what it means to incorporate fine Chinese culture, a concept no less confusing, into theologies. Even fewer have the ability to promote it to the masses of religious followers. Carrying out the project with the existing regulatory infrastructure would be like demanding political gymnastics from a rigid bureaucratic body.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to place Xi Jinping's policy of religious sinicisation in the larger political context and regulatory framework. The Chinese leader is aware of the historical juncture at which China currently finds itself, and is pursuing a soft power strategy as manifested in the grand discourse of the Chinese Dream and the emphasis on Chinese culture. Yet Xi has also shown a deep anxiety over foreign infiltration, such that his formulation of religious policy has been driven by concerns for regime survival.

The problem is that in having to rely on a clumsy and self-serving bureaucracy to resuscitate traditional Chinese culture, religious sinicisation, like its ideological cousin, the Chinese Dream, is anything but inspiring. As a policy prescription, the resulting Regulations on Religious Affairs (2018) above all seek to intensify and expand bureaucratic oversight over the religious

sphere. Despite Xi's propagation of the principle of "guidance" and the rule of law, the current regime's religious governance still follows the logic of control and exclusion. It imposes comprehensive government supervision over religious observances that the regime deems normal and beneficial, but in the process sends underground those it sees as undesirable and non-conforming. Rather than loosening state regulation and allowing for a greater degree of religious tolerance, or making more religious observances legible and thus governable, the new Regulations, by expanding the scope and intensity of bureaucratic oversight, is reinforcing what is already a dysfunctional state regulation of religion.

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