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 Tolerance, 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 pruned 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


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 shui ping), National religious associations should take the lead in the study and implementation of the new “Regulations”. National religious associations should take the lead in the study and implementation of the new “Regulations”, People’s Daily, 12 September 2017: 17.

3. Wang Zuo’an, “全国性宗教团体要学习贯彻新修订‘条例’” (Quanqiu xing zongjiao tuan yi quanxue guanche xin xiuding ‘tiaoli’), National religious associations should take the lead in the study and implementation of the new “Regulations”. National religious associations should take the lead in the study and implementation of the new “Regulations”, People’s Daily, 12 September 2017: 17.


5. Guangzhou zongjiao tsuanti yao xuesi guanche xin xiuding “tiaoli”, National religious associations should take the lead in the study and implementation of the new “Regulations”. National religious associations should take the lead in the study and implementation of the new “Regulations”, People’s Daily, 12 September 2017: 17.
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. [4] 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 selectivity of religious tolerance in China.

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. [6] This is because the party-state has come to accept the positive ability of religion to provide the masses with psychological and social support (Gooasart 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 [7] 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.” [8] The political use of religion in the form of a united front with “the broad masses of the patriotic religious personages” community.

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 research 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).

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. [9]

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


7. 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.

8. For an overview of China’s religious freedom policy until the early 2000s, see Leung (2003).

9. Document 19 of 1982 marked the restoration of the policy of religious tolerance which 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 “关于我国新时期宗教问题的基本观点和基本政策” (Guanyu woguo shiqi jiao xue wenti de jiben gujiantan) (accessed on 4 December 2017).

10. 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 dangguo 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/ 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), (accessed 7 April 2018).

order for four types of religious activities to proceed. These practices were: county-level government assent for the erection of any new religious venue; 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 Guerguiev 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 nation’s five-thousand-year history. Confidence in this national culture, he proclaimed, would bring about the prosperity and eventual rejuvenation 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 nation’s five-thousand-year history. Confidence in this national culture, he proclaimed, would bring about the prosperity and eventual rejuvenation 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 nation’s five-thousand-year history. Confidence in this national culture, he proclaimed, would bring about the prosperity and eventual rejuvenation 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 nation’s five-thousand-year history. Confidence in this national culture, he proclaimed, would bring about the prosperity and eventual rejuvenation of the nation’s five-thousand-year history.

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 indigenousised 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 of separation between state and religion. Thus, Document 6 became the legal framework for the religious field; provincial agreement for any foreign visitation; and State Council approval for the acceptance of large foreign donations.

**Religious ecology** (16) and *sinicisation* as a policy prescription under Xi

12. 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.


17. 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,” ChineFile, 8 November 2013, http://www.chinefile.com/document-9-chinefile-translation#start (accessed on 23 November 2017).


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 Dream.

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As Chinese Buddhism was being applauded as a model of sinicisation, a campaign to demolish churches and crosses under a new zoning regulation (21) 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. (22)

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 undercuts the authoritarian regime’s imperative for social control and stability.

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, 24)

20. For example, benevolence (ren 仁), righteousness (yi 义), propriety (li 礼), wisdom (zhong 智), filiality (xin 孝), loyalty (zhi 忠), filial piety (xiao 孝), honesty (lian 信), and integrity (chi 信).


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)
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. (29) 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, political cooperation enshrined in the ideology and practice of the united front:

Doing a good job with folk religions has great significance for unifying 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 候).” [We must] “guide” with proper methods, “guide” with vigorousness, 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. (34)

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

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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.
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.
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” (luanjuan 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]

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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 nationwide 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 ‘Zhongduo 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’). 42. Interview with religious leader, Beijing, July 2014.
36. The 2018 Regulations raised the bei’an authorities of a living Buddha from the prefecture level to provincial level.
38. The authority to approve a new place of worship is placed with the prefecture-level government.
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 Yuee, 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. According 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风险 (Guanyu zongjiao shui niu ten niu ni niu, Xu Yucheng: The religious circle must look forward to the rule of law concerning religion), op. cit.
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 disadvantaged institutional position. Because they could not bear civil liabilities, they have had to rely on patriarchal ownership (shehui gongyou). Temples’ social ownership (shehui gongyou) has enabled them to obtain loans, and appear in court. Such heavy reliance on the state even intends to restrict individual citizens’ behaviour abroad. 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).

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, 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-

### 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 embodied in the decision, perfidiously in the execution, a lack of comprehensive planning, and little coordination among the party-state, religious community, and academia. 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.

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. Moreover, as Catholicism and Protestantism have been restructured, i.e., “sinicised,” via the “self-election and self-ordination” (zixuan zisheng), 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).

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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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