



Home Office

# Country Policy and Information Note

## China: Non-Christian religious groups

Version 2.0

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# Preface

## Purpose

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and analysis of COI for use by Home Office decision makers handling particular types of protection and human rights claims (as set out in the [Introduction](#) section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into 2 parts: (1) an assessment of COI and other evidence; and (2) COI. These are explained in more detail below.

## Assessment

This section analyses the evidence relevant to this note - that is information in the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw - by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment of, in general, whether one or more of the following applies:

- a person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- that the general humanitarian situation is so severe that there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of serious harm because conditions amount to inhuman or degrading treatment as within [paragraphs 339C and 339CA\(iii\) of the Immigration Rules](#) / Article 3 of the [European Convention on Human Rights \(ECHR\)](#)
- that the security situation is such that there are substantial grounds for believing there is a real risk of serious harm because there exists a serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in a situation of international or internal armed conflict as within [paragraphs 339C and 339CA\(iv\) of the Immigration Rules](#)
- a person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- a person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- a claim is likely to justify granting asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- if a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under [section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002](#).

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case's specific facts.

## Country of origin information

The country information in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual](#), 2013. Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

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

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

All information is publicly accessible or can be made publicly available. Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

Multiple sourcing is used to ensure that the information is accurate and balanced, which is compared and contrasted where appropriate so that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture is provided of the issues relevant to this note at the time of publication.

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

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote. Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the [bibliography](#).

### **Feedback**

Our goal is to provide accurate, reliable and up-to-date COI and clear guidance. We welcome feedback on how to improve our products. If you would like to comment on this note, please email the [Country Policy and Information Team](#).

### **Independent Advisory Group on Country Information**

The [Independent Advisory Group on Country Information](#) (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to support him in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

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# Assessment

Updated: 26 May 2021

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Basis of claim

1.1.1 Fear of persecution or serious harm by the state due to the person's involvement with a non-Christian religious group.

### 1.2 Points to note

1.2.1 For the purposes of this note, non-Christian religious groups include folk religions, Buddhism and Taoism (also spelt Daoism).

1.2.2 Country information and an analysis of the situation for Christians, practitioners' of Falun Gong, Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists is available in the CPINs on [China: Christians](#); [China: Falun Gong](#); [China: Muslims \(including Uighurs in Xinjiang\)](#) and [China: Opposition to the state](#).

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## 2. Consideration of issues

### 2.1 Credibility

2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).

2.1.3 Decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

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### Official – sensitive: End of section

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### 2.2 Exclusion

2.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.

2.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection.

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

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## 2.3 Convention reason(s)

### 2.3.1 Religion.

2.3.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.

2.3.3 For further guidance on Convention reasons see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.4 Risk

### a. State treatment of registered religious groups

2.4.1 The Chinese constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion and guarantees freedom of religion for ‘normal religious activities’ but does not define what these include (see [Constitution](#)).

2.4.2 The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is officially atheist and any of its 90 million members who are found to hold religious beliefs are usually expelled (see [Constitution](#)).

2.4.3 The government recognises 5 official religions - Buddhism, Taoism, Islam Protestantism, and Catholicism. Members of these 4 religions must register with the government’s Patriotic Associations, which seek to regulate and monitor the activities of registered religious groups. Only registered religious groups are legally allowed to hold worship services (see [Constitution](#)).

2.4.4 Although precise sizes of religious communities are unclear, according to government statistics from 2018 there are approximately 200 million registered religious adherents in China. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted that there are 380,000 registered clerical personnel, 5,500 religious organisations and more than 140,000 venues for religious activities registered according to law (see [Registered religious groups](#)).

2.4.5 The authorities exercise control over registered religious groups and restrict the activities and personal freedom of religious adherents when these are perceived to threaten state or CCP interests, particularly in relation to ethnic, political and security issues. The registered religions are required to adapt their practices and doctrines to conform to traditional Chinese culture and values, a process of ‘sinicization’ of religion. In February 2018, revised religious regulations came into effect which allowed state-registered religious organisations to possess property, publish state approved literature, train and approve clergy, and collect donations. The revised regulations also banned under 18s from religious activity; forced places of worship to install surveillance cameras; imposed restrictions of times and location of religious

celebration, restricted foreign donations or fundraising; restricted religious education in schools; and required some religious symbols to be removed (see [Regulation on Religious Affairs \(RRA\)](#) and [State attitude towards religion](#))

- 2.4.6 The CCP vets religious leaders for political reliability and can place limits on the number of religious leaders. In recent years, all religious groups, including state sanctioned ones, have faced increasing repression with closures of religious temples and places of worship and restrictions on traditional clothes and hairstyles (see [Registered religious groups](#) and [State treatment of specific religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.7 Registered religious groups are allowed to operate, albeit facing increasing restrictions. Restrictions may vary depending on the location. Affiliation with groups associated with Christianity or Islam is also more likely to lead to harsher restrictions. Those religious adherents who follow Buddhism, Taoism or folk religions are less likely to be subjected to such restrictions as these religions are viewed as part of traditional Chinese culture (see [Registered religious groups](#) and [State treatment of specific religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.8 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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#### b. State treatment of unregistered religious groups

- 2.4.9 Unregistered religious groups are illegal and risk having their activities restricted and their places of worship closed down. Legal provisions for religious leaders and believers who refuse to comply with restrictions allow for sentences of up to life imprisonment (see [Constitution, Unregistered religious groups](#) and [State treatment of religious groups in general](#)).
- 2.4.10 While there are no official statistics of the number of unregistered believers in China, official statistics note that there are 200 million registered religious adherents. According to a report by Freedom House there are more than 350 million religious believers in China; most of those who do not follow organised religion are followers of traditional folk religions and members of underground house churches or banned religious groups (see [Unregistered religious groups](#) and [Banned religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.11 Unregistered groups who refuse to align with official restrictions risk being disbanded. In some cases leaders/ members of these groups who refuse to comply with restrictions maybe arrested and detained although authorities allow some unregistered groups to continue to operate (see [Unregistered religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.12 Whilst membership of unregistered religious groups is illegal, where religious groups are not perceived to threaten the interests of the Chinese government religious practice may be possible. Membership of faiths which follow traditional Chinese beliefs, such as Buddhism, Taoism and Chinese folk religions are likely to be tolerated by the CCP as they are seen as part of traditional Chinese culture so long as they are not seen as being critical of the CCP or China in general (see [State attitude towards religion](#), [State](#)

[treatment of religious groups in general](#) and [State treatment of specific religious groups](#)).

- 2.4.13 It is unlikely that there is a generalised risk to those who are members of unregistered religious groups who are not perceived as threatening the interest of the Chinese government. Each case will need to be considered on its individual facts with the onus will be on the person to show that how they observe and express their faith will bring them to the adverse attention of the authorities and result in them facing treatment that amounts to persecution.
- 2.4.14 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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c. [Banned religious groups \(or “cults”\)](#)

- 2.4.15 On 3 June 2014, the government published a list of 20 banned religious groups, including several Buddhist groups, and began a crackdown against these organisations calling them “evil cults”. In September 2017, the China Anti-Cult website restated the list of banned groups and identified 11 of those as being “dangerous”. Involvement in a cult can attract a sentence of 3–7 years and life imprisonment for the most serious cases (see [Banned religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.16 Members of banned “cults” may be subject to police harassment, imprisonment, and torture, with leaders and some members being charged with organizing and using a cult to undermine implementation of the law. However, if members have been coerced into joining or repent and leave the cult (less serious cases) there is an option for punishment not to be imposed.
- 2.4.17 It is likely that leaders or organisers of these “cults” may face more severe penalties but there may be cases where members also face severe sentences as the law is not applied uniformly across China (see [Banned religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.18 Each case will need to be considered on its facts, with the onus on the person to demonstrate why they would be at risk of persecution.
- 2.4.19 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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d. [Buddhism, Taoism \(also spelt Daoism\) and folk religions](#)

- 2.4.20 There are approximately 185-250 million Chinese Buddhists and hundreds of millions of people who follow various folk traditions. There are no recent figures for the number of Taoist followers but a 2007 survey estimated that there were 12 million adults who identified with Taoism, with 173 million people reporting that they participated in Taoist practices although these can overlap with folk religions (see [Religion in China](#)).
- 2.4.21 Chinese Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions are considered more authentically Chinese than other religions and the CCP has shown more tolerance towards these than Islam and Tibetan Buddhism. President Xi has suggested that the traditional cultures of Confucianism, Buddhism and

Taoism could help the country's moral decline. There are reportedly hundreds, if not thousands, of folk religion temples which are unregistered with the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) but are tolerated by the government (see [State treatment of religious groups in general](#) and [State treatment of specific religious groups](#)).

- 2.4.22 Whilst the government's programme of sinicization has mainly affected Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, and Islam, in recent years Taoism, Buddhism and folk religions have faced some restrictions too. These have included the destruction, demolition covering up and repurposing of temples and statues, and restrictions on religious practices and traditions (see [State treatment of religious groups in general](#), [Folk religions](#), [Taoism \(also spelt Daoism\)](#) and [Buddhism](#)).
- 2.4.23 The number of adherents of folk religions, Buddhism and Taoism in the country compared against the relatively low number of reported incidents of restrictions to religious practice appears to show that followers of these religions are not generally subjected to treatment which would be sufficiently serious by nature and/or repetition as to amount to persecution or serious harm (see [State treatment of specific religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.24 Whilst membership of unregistered religious groups is illegal, where religious groups are not perceived to threaten the interests of the Chinese government religious practice may be possible. Unregistered religious groups belonging to Taoism, Buddhism or folk religions may be afforded more tolerance as they are seen as part of traditional Chinese culture and heritage, as long as they are not seen as being critical of the CCP or China in general (see [State treatment of religious groups in general](#), [Folk religions](#), [Taoism \(also spelt Daoism\)](#), [Buddhism](#) and [State treatment of unregistered religious groups](#)).
- 2.4.25 The onus will be on the person to show that how they observe and express their faith will bring them to the adverse attention of the authorities and result in them facing treatment that amounts to persecution
- 2.4.26 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.5 Protection

- 2.5.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state they will not, in general, be able to avail themselves of the protection of the authorities.
- 2.5.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.6 Internal relocation

- 2.6.1 In the country guidance case of [QH \(Christians - risk\) \(China\) CG \[2014\] UKUT 86 \(IAC\) \(heard 6 June 2013 and promulgated 14 March 2014\)](#), the Upper Tribunal held that in the light of the wide variation in local officials' response to unregistered churches, individual Christians at risk in their local

areas will normally be able to relocate safely elsewhere in China. The exception to this would be where the person is the subject of an arrest warrant, or their name is on a black list, or they have a pending sentence. Given the scale of internal migration, and the vast geographical and population size of China, the lack of an appropriate residence registration system (hukou) alone will not render internal relocation unreasonable or unduly harsh (paragraph 137 v and vii). Although this country guidance case was specific to Christians, the evidence suggests that the situation regarding internal relocation without an appropriate hukou is likely to be the same for members of other tolerated religious groups (see [Unregistered religious groups](#)).

- 2.6.2 Where the person's fear relates to restrictions imposed by local officials it may be possible to relocate to another area of China to escape the risk of local persecution. Decision makers must give careful consideration to the relevance and reasonableness of internal relocation on a case-by-case basis taking full account of the individual circumstances of the particular person.
- 2.6.3 For further information on the residence registration system (hukou) and internal relocation, see the country policy and information note on [China: Background including actors of protection and internal relocation](#).
- 2.6.4 For further guidance on internal relocation see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

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## 2.7 Certification

- 2.7.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.7.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

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# Country information

Section 3 updated: 19 May 2021

## 3. Religion in China

### 3.1 Religious demography

3.1.1 As of 2021 China's population stands at nearly 1.4 billion<sup>1</sup>. The government recognises 5 official religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism<sup>2</sup>.

3.1.2 Freedom House noted, in a special report, *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance under Xi Jinping*, published February 2017, that:

'China is home to over 350 million religious believers and hundreds of millions more who follow various folk traditions. Determining the precise size of religious communities in China is notoriously difficult, even for officially recognized groups. Government statistics exclude those who worship at unregistered temples or churches and believers under the age of 18, and many Chinese engage in a mixture of religious and folk practices. Official figures for Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists are based on ethnicity, embedding the assumption that all members of an ethnic group adhere to a particular religion.'<sup>3</sup>

3.1.3 The same report noted that as an estimate, there are 185-250 million Chinese Buddhists, 60-80 million Protestants, 21-23 million Muslims, 7-20 million Falun Gong practitioners, 12 million Catholics, 6-8 million Tibetan Buddhists, and hundreds of millions who follow various folk traditions, There were no figures for the estimated number of Taoists in China<sup>4</sup>.

3.1.4 The Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT), 'Country Information Report', People's Republic of China, 3 October 2019, stated:

'China is a religiously diverse country with a rich and complex society of faiths, belief systems and organised religious groups. Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism constitute the 'three teachings', a philosophical framework which historically has had a significant role in shaping Chinese culture, including traditional folk religions...

'It is difficult to provide exact figures on the number of religious believers in China. In 2018, the government released a white paper on China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief (CPPPFRB white paper). This states the major religions practiced in China are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, and religious believers total almost 200 million (including more than 380,000 clerical personnel). The white paper also notes the majority of 10 of China's ethnic minorities, totalling 20 million people, follow Islam (around 57,000 clerical personnel); 6

<sup>1</sup> CIA, '[World Factbook - China](#)' (People and Society), last updated 11 May 2021

<sup>2</sup> USSD, '[2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...](#)' (Section I.), 12 May 2021

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House, '[Special report- The Battle for China's Spirit](#)' (pg 9), February 2017

<sup>4</sup> Freedom House, '[Special report- The Battle for China's Spirit](#)' (pg 9), February 2017

million follow Catholicism (8,000 clerical personnel); and 38 million follow Protestantism (57,000 clerical personnel).

'The CPPPFRB white paper indicates there are also approximately 5,500 religious' groups in China, including seven national organisations: the Buddhist Association of China, Chinese Taoist Association, China Islamic Association, Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, Bishop's Conference of Catholic Church in China, National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China, and the Christian Council. There are also an estimated 144,000 places of worship in China: 28,000 Han Buddhist temples; 3,800 Tibetan Buddhist lamaseries; 1,700 Theravada Buddhist temples; 9,000 Taoist temples; 35,000 Islamic mosques... China also has 91 religious' schools, approved by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), where more than 10,000 students' study, including: 41 Buddhist, 10 Taoist, 10 Islamic... It has six national level religious colleges: the Buddhist Academy of China, High-Level Tibetan Buddhism College of China, Chinese Taoism College, China Islamic Institute, National Seminary of the Catholic Church in China, and Nanjing Union Theological Seminary.

'In practice, the number of religious believers, places of worship and religious organisations is likely to be much higher - particularly with respect to unregistered organisations (including house churches) which operate in parallel to state sanctioned Christian churches...'<sup>5</sup>

3.1.5 The US State Department, 2020 Report on International Religious Freedom Report (USSD IRF), stated:

'According to the State Council Information Office (SCIO) report Seeking Happiness for People: 70 Years of Progress on Human Rights in China, published in September 2019, there are more than 200 million religious' adherents in the country. An SCIO April 2018 white paper on religion in the country states there are approximately 5,500 religious groups.

'Local and regional figures for the number of religious followers, including those belonging to the five officially recognized religions, are unclear. Local governments do not release these statistics, and even official religious organizations do not have accurate numbers. The Pew Research Center and other observers say the numbers of adherents of many religious groups often are underreported.'<sup>6</sup>

3.1.6 The report further added:

'Some ethnic minorities follow traditional religions, such as Dongba among the Naxi people in Yunnan Province and Buluotuo among the Zhuang in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The central government classifies worship of Mazu, a folk deity with Taoist roots, as an expression of "cultural heritage" rather than religious practice.'<sup>7</sup>

3.1.7 The diagram below produced in 2015 by Purdue University Centre on Religion and Chinese Society shows the dominant religions by

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<sup>5</sup> DFAT, '[DFAT Country Information Report, People's Republic of ...](#)' (Para 3.28-31), 3 October 2019

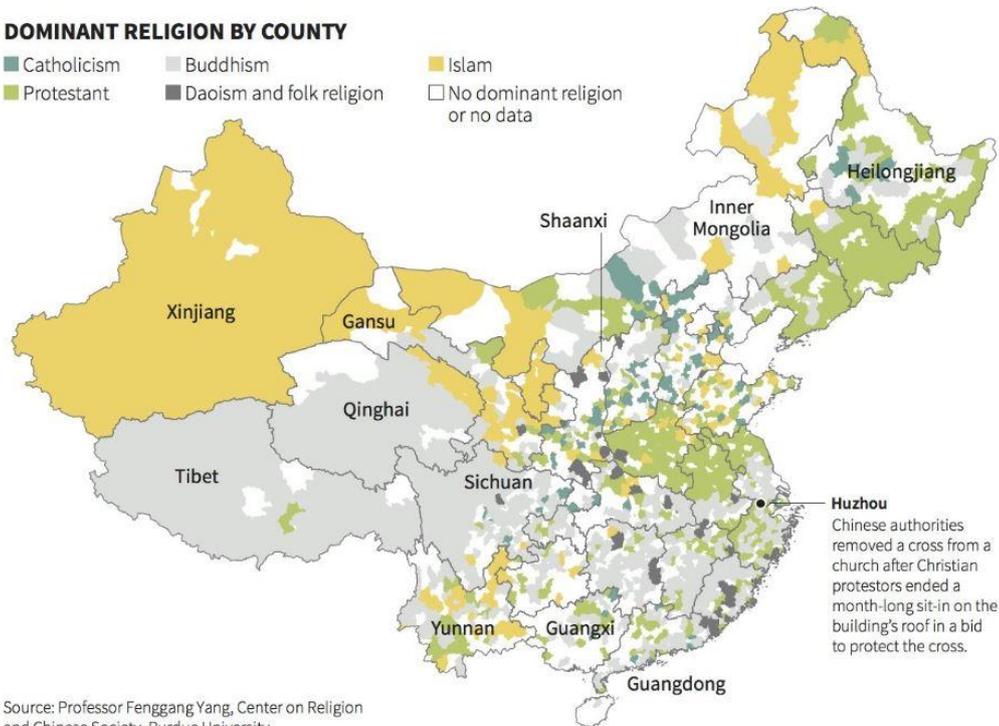
<sup>6</sup> USSD, '[2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...](#)' (Section I.), 12 May 2021

<sup>7</sup> USSD, '[2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...](#)' (Section I.), 12 May 2021

county/province<sup>8</sup>. This diagram may be subject to some small variations in religion distribution.

## Major religions in China

### DOMINANT RELIGION BY COUNTY



Source: Professor Fenggang Yang, Center on Religion and Chinese Society, Purdue University.  
W. Foo, 07/08/2015

REUTERS

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### 3.2 Folk religions

- 3.2.1 The CFR backgrounder on Religion in China, last updated on 25 September 2020, stated: 'Chinese folk religions have no rigid organizational structure, blend practices from Buddhism and Daoism, and are manifest in the worship of ancestors, spirits, or other local deities. Though the number of traditional Chinese religious adherents is difficult to measure accurately, the building of new temples and the restoration of old temples signals the growth of Buddhism and folk beliefs in China.'<sup>9</sup>

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### 3.3 Taoism (also spelt Daoism)

- 3.3.1 The Freedom House report of February 2017, stated: 'A 2007 Chinese Spiritual Life Survey estimated that there were ... 12 million adults who clearly identified with Taoism. Many more people (173 million) reported participating in some Taoist practices, although these may overlap with folk religions.'<sup>10</sup>

- 3.3.2 An article on the Learn Religions website, dated 15 July 2019, reported:

<sup>8</sup> Purdue University's Centre on Religion and Chinese Society, [Map](#), 7 August 2015

<sup>9</sup> CFR, '[Religion in China](#)', last updated 25 September 2020

<sup>10</sup> FH, '[The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and ...](#)', (p15), February 2017

‘Daoism or (dào jiào) is one of the major religions indigenous to China. The core of Daoism is in learning and practicing “The Way” (Dao) which is the ultimate truth to the universe. Also known as Taoism, Daoism traces its roots to the 6th century BCE Chinese philosopher Laozi, who wrote the iconic book Dao De Jing on the tenets of the Dao.

‘...Unlike Buddhists, Daoists do not believe that life is suffering. Daoists believe that life is generally a happy experience but that it should be lived with balance and virtue.

‘...During the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976, many Daoist temples were destroyed. Following economic reforms in the 1980's, many temples have been restored and the number of Daoists has grown. There are currently 25,000 Daoists priests and nuns in China and over 1,500 temples. Many ethnic minorities in China also practice Daoism.

‘...Daoism has influenced Chinese culture for over 2,000 years. Its practices have given birth to martial arts such as Tai Chi and Qigong. Healthy living such as practicing vegetarianism and exercise. And its texts have codified Chinese views on morality and behavior, regardless of religious affiliation.’<sup>11</sup>

- 3.3.3 The same article lists the Daoist ethnics minority groups of China to be Mulam (also practice Buddhism, located in Guangxi), Maonan (also practice Polytheism; located in Guangxi), Primi or Pumi (also practice Lamaism; located in Yunnan), and Jing or Gin (also practice Buddhism; located in Guangxi)<sup>12</sup>.

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## 3.4 Buddhism

- 3.4.1 The 2019 DFAT report stated: ‘Buddhism is acknowledged as a major religious faith in China. However, with the exception of Tibetan Buddhism, there is no clear distinction between Buddhism, so-called ‘folk religions’ and Daoism, all of which exert an influence in Chinese culture.’<sup>13</sup>

- 3.4.2 Asia Society noted in an undated article on Buddhism in China that:

‘Buddhism, a cultural system of beliefs and practices based on principles of compassion and non-attachment, originated in the sixth century BCE in what is today Nepal. It was brought to China by Buddhist monks from India during the latter part of the Han dynasty (ca. 150 CE) and took over a century to become assimilated into Chinese culture. One of the key forces of Buddhism’s success was Daoism. To help the Chinese comprehend Buddhist concepts, Buddhists borrowed ideas from Daoism via the Chinese language.

‘...Two schools that retain their influence today are Pure Land Buddhism and Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Even in mainland China, where religion is often suppressed by the government, there are practitioners of these two schools of Chinese Buddhism.’<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Learn Religions, [‘Daoism in China’](#), 15 July 2019

<sup>12</sup> Learn Religions, [‘Daoism in China’](#), 15 July 2019

<sup>13</sup> DFAT, [‘Country Information Report’](#) (Para 3.61-3.62), 3 October 2019

<sup>14</sup> Asia Society, [‘Buddhism in China’](#), undated

### 3.5 Tibetan Buddhism

- 3.5.1 The undated glossary section on the website of Bitter Winter, a magazine on religious liberty and human rights in China stated:

‘Buddhism is the religion of the overwhelming majority of Tibetans (78%). Tibet, an independent state based on the monastic structure of Buddhism, was occupied by Communist China in 1950 and gradually transformed into an “autonomous” region of China. The CCP then promoted massive immigration of Han Chinese into Tibet, where they now constitute a sizable percentage of the population (with statistics being politically manipulated and a matter of controversy), limited the practice of Buddhism and the use of Tibetan language, and tried to impose CCP-appointed Buddhist leaders. Some Tibetan organizations abroad denounce these practices as a forced sinicization of Tibet and even a form of “cultural genocide”.<sup>15</sup>

- 3.5.2 The 2019 DFAT report stated: ‘The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) is home to over six million ethnic Tibetans, nearly ninety per cent of the TAR population, the majority of whom practice Tibetan Buddhism. The Dalai Lama, condemned by the CCP as a criminal and exiled in India since 1959, is the spiritual leader of one of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism.’<sup>16</sup>

- 3.5.3 Free Tibet, a non-profit, non-governmental organisation advocating for the rights and freedom of Tibet and Tibetans, noted in an undated article on Tibet’s history and culture that:

‘Tibetan culture and identity is inseparably linked to Tibetan Buddhism.

‘Religious practice and Buddhist principles are a part of daily life for most Tibetans. Monks and nuns play a key role in their communities, providing guidance and education. They are often very active in protecting and promoting Tibet’s environment, language and culture.

‘Almost all Tibetans are deeply devoted to the Dalai Lama and his exile and treatment by the Chinese government are sources of grief and anger.

‘Tibetans’ allegiance to the Dalai Lama and to Tibetan Buddhism is seen as a danger to the occupying Chinese state and, as a result, all aspects of religious practice are closely monitored and controlled.

‘Simply possessing an image of the Dalai Lama can result in arrest and torture. Monks and nuns are frequently targeted by security restrictions and they make up a significant proportion of political prisoners in Tibet.’<sup>17</sup>

- 3.5.4 Please see the [country policy and information note on China: opposition to the state for consideration on the state](#) treatment of Tibetan Buddhists.

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<sup>15</sup> Bitter Winter, ‘[Glossary- Tibetan Buddhists](#)’, undated

<sup>16</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report](#)’ (Para 3.68), 3 October 2019

<sup>17</sup> Free Tibet, ‘[Tibet’s history and culture](#)’, undated

### 3.6 Islam

- 3.6.1 Please see the [country policy and information note on China: Muslims \(including Uighurs in Xinjiang\)](#) for information on Muslims.

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Section 4 updated: 19 May 2020

## 4. Legal Framework

### 4.1 International conventions

- 4.1.1 The government has signed, but not ratified, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>18</sup>, which provides all individuals the right to “adopt a religion or belief” of their choice<sup>19</sup>.

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### 4.2 Constitution

- 4.2.1 Article 36 of the Constitution of China, stated:

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

‘No state organ, social organization or individual shall coerce citizens to believe in or not to believe in any religion, nor shall they discriminate against citizens who believe in or do not believe in any religion.

‘The state shall protect normal religious activities. No one shall use religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the state’s education system.

‘Religious groups and religious affairs shall not be subject to control by foreign forces.’<sup>20</sup>

- 4.2.2 The 2019 DFAT report stated:

‘According to China’s 2018 CPPPFRB [China’s Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief] white paper, every citizen “enjoys the freedom to choose whether to believe in a religion; to believe in a certain religion or a denomination of the same religion; to change from a non-believer to a believer and vice versa. Believers and non-believers enjoy the same political, economic, social and cultural rights, and must not be treated differently because of a difference in belief.” However, Article 36 of the Constitution also states that no one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State. This is enforced by Chinese public security officials who monitor registered and unregistered religious groups.’<sup>21</sup>

- 4.2.3 The report also noted:

‘Historically, the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), and the Ministry of Civil Affairs provided policy guidance and supervision on the implementation of the

<sup>18</sup> OCHCR, ‘[Ratification Status for China](#)’ (5 October 1998)

<sup>19</sup> OCHCR, ‘[International standards on freedom of religion or belief](#)’, 2020

<sup>20</sup> The State Council, ‘[Constitution of the People’s Republic of China](#)’, 20 November 2019

<sup>21</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report](#)’ (Para 3.38), 3 October 2019

regulations. However, in 2018 the CCP moved religious affairs under the direct purview of the UFWD, and thus the CCP's Central Committee. To 'ensure centralised and unified leadership,' the UFWD absorbed SARA and has direct oversight of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office and has been elevated to a level of importance not seen since 1949.'<sup>22</sup>

4.2.4 The US Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Backgrounder on Religion in China, last updated on 25 September 2020, stated:

'The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is officially atheist. The party prohibits its nearly ninety million party members from holding religious beliefs, and it has demanded the expulsion of party members who belong to religious organizations. Officials have said that party membership and religious beliefs are incompatible, and they discourage families of CCP members from publicly participating in religious ceremonies. Although these regulations are not always strictly enforced, the party periodically takes steps to draw a clearer line on religion. In 2017, the party's official newspaper warned CCP members from putting faith in religion, calling it "spiritual anaesthesia."<sup>23</sup>

4.2.5 The 2020 USSD IRF report stated:

'The constitution, which cites the leadership of the CCP and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping Thought, states citizens "enjoy freedom of religious belief," but it limits protections for religious practice to "normal religious activities" without defining normal. It says religion may not be used to disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system. The constitution provides for the right to hold or not to hold a religious belief. It says state organs, public organizations, and individuals may not discriminate against citizens "who believe in or do not believe in any religion." The constitution states, "Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination."

'The law does not allow legal action to be taken against the government based on the religious freedom protections afforded by the constitution. Criminal law allows the state to sentence government officials to up to two years in prison if they violate a citizen's religious freedom.

'...The law bans certain religious or spiritual groups. Criminal law defines banned groups as "cult organizations" and provides for criminal prosecution of individuals belonging to such groups and punishment of up to life in prison. There are no published criteria for determining or procedures for challenging such a designation. A national security law also explicitly bans cult organizations. (see also [Banned religious groups \(or "cults"\)](#))

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

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<sup>22</sup> DFAT, '[Country Information Report...](#)' (Para 3.39), 3 October 2019

<sup>23</sup> CFR, '[Religion in China](#)', last updated 25 September 2020

CCP's UFWD, are the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), the Chinese Taoist Association, the Islamic Association of China (IAC), the Three Self Patriotic Movement Church (TSPM), and the CCPA. Other religious groups, such as Protestant groups unaffiliated with the official TSPM or Catholics professing loyalty to the Holy See, are not permitted to register as legal entities. The law does not provide a mechanism for religious groups independent of the five official patriotic religious associations to obtain legal status.

'According to regulations, religious organizations must submit information about the organization's historical background, members, doctrines, key publications, minimum funding requirements, and government sponsor, which must be one of the five state-sanctioned religious associations. Registration information is only required once, but religious organizations must reregister if changes are made to the required documentation.'<sup>24</sup>

- 4.2.6 The report also stated 'There continued to be no uniform procedures for registering religious adherents. The government continued to recognize as "lawful" only those religious activities it sanctioned and controlled through the state-sanctioned religious associations. Only government-accredited religious personnel could conduct such activities and only in government-approved places of religious activity.'<sup>25</sup>

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### 4.3 Regulation on Religious Affairs (RRA)

- 4.3.1 On 7 September 2017, China's State Council released a revised version of the Regulations for Religious Affairs ([Regulations](#)), which took effect on 1 February 2018. The Standing Committee of the State Council adopted the Regulations on 14 June 2017<sup>26</sup>.
- 4.3.2 The US Library of Congress stated: 'Compared to the last version of the Regulations, which were released in November 2004 and took effect in March 2005, the revised version has amended, added, and abridged several provisions on general principles, religious groups, religious schools, venues for religious activities, religious professionals, religious activities, religious assets, and legal responsibility...'<sup>27</sup>
- 4.3.3 An article by Forbes, the US global media company, in April 2019, stated: 'Another example of the recent deterioration is the requirement for religious groups to register with the relevant bodies. Similarly, building or using a place of worship must be registered as well. The process may take a very long time. Without such registration, any meeting of an already registered religious organization would be illegal and would trigger legal consequences, including a fine or even arrest. Furthermore, religious organizations cannot be run by foreigners. This prohibition also applies to foreign funding.'<sup>28</sup>
- 4.3.4 The 2019 DFAT report noted:

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<sup>24</sup> USSD, '[2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...](#)' (Section II), 12 May 2021

<sup>25</sup> USSD, '[2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...](#)' (Section II), 12 May 2021

<sup>26</sup> LoC, '[China: Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs](#)', 9 November 2017

<sup>27</sup> LoC, '[China: Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs](#)', 9 November 2017

<sup>28</sup> Forbes, '[Is China Conducting A Crackdown On Religion?](#)', 20 April 2019

'The conditions governing the establishment of religious bodies and religious sites, the publication of religious material, and the conduct of religious education and personnel are outlined in the Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA). In April 2017, President Xi called on CCP officials working in religious administration to reassert the Party's 'guiding' role in religious affairs. Xi's speech emphasised the need to 'sinicise' religion, to ensure religious rights did not impinge on CCP authority, and to enforce the prohibition on Party members from belonging to any religion. In September 2017, the State Council approved revisions to the 2005 RRA, which came into effect on 1 February 2018. The RRAs devolve substantial powers and responsibility to local authorities to prevent illegal religious behaviour, including undue influence from foreign organisations. Local authorities have significant discretion in interpreting and implementing the regulations at the provincial level.

'The 2018 RRAs "protect citizens' freedom of religious belief, maintain religious and social harmony and regulate the management of religious affairs," and give state-registered religious organisations rights to possess property, publish literature, train, and approve clergy, collect donations, and proselytise within (but not outside) registered places of worship and in private settings (but not in public). Government subsidies are also available for the construction of state-sanctioned places of worship and religious schools.'<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.3.5 The report further added:

'According to the State Council, the RRA also "curb and prevent illegal and extreme practices," and emphasise the need to prevent "extremism", indicating they may target Uighur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists. The RRAs: restrict religious education in schools; restrict the times and locations of religious celebrations; impose fines for organising illegal religious events or fundraising; detail procedures for approval and monitoring of religious training institutions and monitoring online religious activity; detail a requirement to report all donations over RMB 100,000 (approx. £11,000); 11000 prohibit registered religious organisations from distributing unapproved literature, associating with unregistered religious groups, and accepting foreign donations (previously permitted); and prohibit foreigners from proselytising. Parallel provisions in the Foreign NGO [Non-Government Organisations] Law also prohibit foreigners from donating funds to Chinese religious organisations, or raising funds on their behalf.'<sup>30</sup> (See [Proselytising and Banned religious groups \(or "cults"\)](#))

#### 4.3.6 Human Rights Watch's World Report 2021, covering the events of 2020, noted that:

'The Chinese government's efforts to "Sinicize" religion—which aim to ensure that the Chinese Communist Party is the arbiter of people's spiritual life— continued in 2020.'

'Existing Chinese law already requires that people can only practice five officially recognized religions in officially approved premises, and that the

<sup>29</sup> DFAT, '[Country Information Report](#)' (Para 3.40-1), 3 October 2019

<sup>30</sup> DFAT, '[Country Information Report](#)' (Para 3.42), 3 October 2019

authorities have control over their personnel appointments, publications, finances, and seminary applications. The Chinese government further tightened these restrictions on February 1, when it started to implement the new “Administrative Measures for Religious Groups.” The measures declare the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party in religious affairs, require religious organizations to publicize the Party’s policies, put in the hands of officials the power to decide even the most minute of religious decisions, and prohibit religious groups from operating without authorization.<sup>31</sup>

4.3.7 The US Congressional-Executive Commission on China’s (CECC) Annual Report, 2020, 14 January 2021, stated:

‘On February 1, 2020, the National Religious Affairs Administration implemented the new Measures on the Administration of Religious Groups, a set of 41 articles that emphasizes the role of the government and Party in controlling the government-affiliated religious associations that manage the five officially registered religions recognized by the government: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Catholic and Protestant Christianity. The newly released Measures supplement the already restrictive revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA), in force since 2018. The 2020 Measures contain articles that emphasize that the management of religious groups, including legal registration, leadership appointments, major events, and discipline under law, is subordinate to the government and Party. They also specify that religious organizations must follow the Party’s leadership and instruct leaders and lay believers to do so, accept the government’s oversight, and publicize Party directives and policies. Experts criticized the Measures as further violations of religious freedom, including the rights to freedom of worship and to choose one’s religious leaders without interference.

‘... The new Measures also require that religious groups “persist in the direction of sinicization (zhongguohua) of religion” under the Party’s leadership. The Party promotes the idea that “sinicization” means “integrating religious doctrines into Chinese culture,” and guiding religions to adapt to “Chinese Cultural Traditions,” as it says Buddhism has done in the past.

‘...Some observers have compared the Chinese government’s policies toward religion since the implementation of the RRA in 2018 to the era widely regarded as the most repressive toward religious believers in modern Chinese history, the Cultural Revolution (1966 to 1976).<sup>32</sup>

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Section 5 updated: 19 May 2021

## 5. State attitude towards religion in general

5.1.1 The 2017 Freedom House report stated: ‘Religion and spirituality have been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and identity for millennia. This fact posed a challenge for the avowedly atheist Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

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<sup>31</sup> HRW, ‘[World Report 2021](#)’, 13 January 2021

<sup>32</sup> CECC, ‘[Annual Report, 2020](#)’ (p111-112), 14 January 2021

when it came to power in 1949, and its strategies for dealing with religiosity in Chinese society have fluctuated in the decades since.’<sup>33</sup>

5.1.2 The 2019 DFAT report noted:

‘Broadly speaking, religious practice in China is possible within state-sanctioned boundaries, as long as such practices do not challenge the interests or authority of the Chinese government. While practice of non-recognised faiths or by unregistered organisations is illegal and vulnerable to punitive official action, it is, to some degree, tolerated, especially in relation to traditional Chinese beliefs. Nevertheless, restrictions on religious organisations vary widely according to local conditions, and can be inconsistent or lack transparency, making it difficult to form general conclusions.

‘... Religious practice that the government perceives as contravening broader ethnic, political or security policies ...is at high risk of adverse official attention. China has one of the largest populations of religious prisoners, estimated in the tens of thousands.

‘Members of religious groups claim government authorities continue to press to install CCTV at all religious sites, and failure to comply can lead to authorities cutting power and water or restricting rental space to pressure compliance.’<sup>34</sup>

5.1.3 The US Commission on International Religious Freedom’s (USCIRF), Annual Report on religious freedom, covering events in 2019, published in April 2020 noted:

‘Although the Communist Party has a long history of restricting religious freedom, in recent years it has become increasingly hostile toward religion and initiated campaigns to “sinicize” Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid them of what it deems “foreign” influences. The 2018 Revised Regulations on Religious Affairs effectively ban “unauthorized” religious teaching and expand the role of local authorities in controlling religious activities. Under article 300 of the Chinese Criminal Code, belonging to certain religious movements, such as the Falun Gong, is punishable with three to seven years’ imprisonment.’<sup>35</sup>

5.1.4 The CFR report updated in September 2020, stated: ‘Chinese public security officials monitor both registered and unregistered religious groups to prevent activities that “disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State,” as stipulated by the Chinese constitution. In practice, however, monitoring and crackdowns often target peaceful activities that are protected under international law, say human rights watchdogs.’<sup>36</sup>

5.1.5 The Freedom House report, ‘Freedom in the World 2021 – China’, covering events in 2020, published on 3 March 2021, stated:

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<sup>33</sup> FH, ‘[The Battle for China’s Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and ...](#)’ (p3), February 2017

<sup>34</sup> DFAT, ‘[Country Information Report](#)’ (Para 3.47), 3 October 2019

<sup>35</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Annual report on religious freedom \(covering 2019\)](#)’ (p15), April 2020

<sup>36</sup> CFR, ‘[Religion in China](#)’, last updated 25 September 2020

‘Societal groups such as women, ethnic and religious minorities, and LGBT+ people have no opportunity to gain meaningful political representation and—as with the rest of the population—are barred from advancing their interests outside the formal structures controlled by the CCP.

‘... Other official policies effectively deprive ethnic minority communities of their right to access, enjoy, and pass down their distinct cultures, religions, and identities.’<sup>37</sup>

- 5.1.6 Amnesty International reported in its annual report on the human rights situation in China covering 2020 that:

‘Regulations, effective as of 1 February, stipulated that religious groups must “follow the leadership of the Communist Party of China... persist in the direction of sinicization of religion, and practise core socialist values”. The government sought to bring religious teachings and practices in line with state ideology and to comprehensively strengthen control over both state-approved and unregistered religious groups. Reports documented the destruction of thousands of cultural and religious sites, particularly in the north-west of China. The state’s repression of religion in Xinjiang and Tibet remained severe. People were arbitrarily detained for ordinary religious practices that authorities deemed “signs of extremism” under the “De-extremification Regulations”.’<sup>38</sup>

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## 5.2 Proselytising

- 5.2.1 In January 2017, Reuters reported that: ‘China will crack down further on what it calls “cults” with a new judicial interpretation released on Wednesday [25 January 2017] mandating harsh punishments for groups proselytising to government officials or children or linking up with foreign groups.’<sup>39</sup> (see also [Banned religious groups \(or “cults”\)](#))

- 5.2.2 The DFAT 2019 report stated:

‘Regulations prohibiting proselytising are generally enforced across Chinese cities. Public expressions of faith are more vulnerable to adverse treatment than private worship (including in small groups). In Rongcheng, Shandong, an Social Credit System (SCS) pilot area, residents of First Morning Light, a neighbourhood of 5,100 families, have taken the official Rongcheng SCS pilot a few steps further and introduced their own SCS penalties for “illegally spreading religion.” DFAT is aware of reports of foreigners, including religious missions, being refused entry at churches due to pressure from local authorities.’<sup>40</sup>

- 5.2.3 The USSD IRF 2020 report stated:

‘Government policy allows religious groups to engage in charitable work, but regulations specifically prohibit faith-based organizations from proselytizing while conducting charitable activities.

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<sup>37</sup> Freedom House, [‘Freedom in the World 2021’](#), 3 March 2021

<sup>38</sup> Amnesty International, [‘Report 2020/2021: The State of the World’s...’](#), 7 April 2021

<sup>39</sup> Reuters, [‘China to crack down further on ‘cult’ activities’](#), 25 January 2017

<sup>40</sup> DFAT, [‘Country Information Report’](#) (Para 3.44), 3 October 2019

‘...The law does not define what constitutes proselytizing. The constitution states that no state unit, social organization, or individual may force a citizen to believe or not believe in a religion. Offenders are subject to administrative and criminal penalties.’<sup>41</sup>

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Section 6 updated: 19 May 2021

## 6. State treatment of religious groups in general

### 6.1 Registered religious groups

#### 6.1.1 The DFAT 2019 report stated:

‘In 2018, the Government attempted to regulate religious groups to prevent challenges to CCP and Government control. As religious observance has grown, the CCP has increased oversight and worked to tighten control over state-sanctioned religious organisations. Nevertheless, despite the atheist nature of the ruling CCP, as many as 25 per cent of Party officials in some localities are estimated to engage in some type of religious activity (mostly associated with Buddhism or folk religion).’

‘...DFAT assesses an individual’s ability to practise religion can be influenced by whether the individual exercises faith in registered or unregistered institutions, whether they practice openly or privately, and whether or not an individual’s religious expression is perceived by the CCP to be closely tied to other ethnic, political and security issues.

‘While the Constitution and 2018 RRA allow for sanctioned religious belief, DFAT assesses adherents across all religious organisations – from state-sanctioned to underground and/or banned groups - faced intensifying official persecution and repression in 2018, which continues in 2019. However, DFAT assesses that as Buddhism (as compared to Tibetan Buddhism) and Daoism are part of China’s cultural heritage and are not associated with foreign influence, believers are unlikely to experience significant restrictions.’<sup>42</sup>

#### 6.1.2 At a press conference in April 2020 Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying stated that there were more than 380,000 clerical personnel, 5,500 religious organizations and more than 140,000 venues for religious activities registered according to law<sup>43</sup>.

#### 6.1.3 The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs ‘Country of origin information report China’ published in July 2020, covering the period of March 2018 through June 2020, noted that:

‘The China’s religious landscape is categorised into three markets, namely a “red”, a “black” and a “grey” market. The “red” market refers to religious communities recognised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and under party control. In this context, the colour “red” refers to the colour of the CCP’s communist ideology.

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<sup>41</sup> USSD, [‘2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...’](#) (Section II), 12 May 2021

<sup>42</sup> DFAT, [‘Country Information Report’](#) (Para 3.29, 3.48-49), 3 October 2019

<sup>43</sup> MFA, [‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying’s Regular Press Conference ...’](#) 3 April 2020

‘...The Chinese authorities recognise five religions in total: Buddhism, Catholicism, Taoism, Islam, and Protestantism. Each of these religions has its own Patriotic Religious Association (PRA). A PRA is a state-led coordinating entity responsible for monitoring the selection, education, further training and actions of members of the clergy of the religion concerned. Buddhists come under the Buddhist Association of China (BAC), Catholics under the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), Taoists under the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA) and Muslims under the Islamic Association of China (IAC). There are two PRAs for Protestants, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC). The religious communities represented by a PRA belong to the “red” market of China’s religious landscape.’<sup>44</sup>

6.1.4 The USCIRF report covering 2019, stated: ‘In 2019, religious freedom conditions in China continued to deteriorate. The Chinese government has created a high-tech surveillance state, utilizing facial recognition and artificial intelligence to monitor religious minorities. On April 1, a new regulation requiring religious venues to have legal representatives and professional accountants went into effect. Some smaller religious venues, especially in rural areas, found these requirements impossible to fulfil.’<sup>45</sup>

6.1.5 The CFR report updated in September 2020, stated:

‘The government’s tally of registered religious believers is around two hundred million, or less than 10 percent of the population, according to several sources, including the UN Human Rights Council’s 2018 Universal Periodic Review.

‘...Chinese public security officials monitor both registered and unregistered religious groups to prevent activities that “disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the State,” as stipulated by the Chinese constitution. In practice, however, monitoring and crackdowns often target peaceful activities that are protected under international law, say human rights watchdogs.

‘...“Buddhism, Daoism, and other folk religions are seen as the most authentically Chinese religions and there is much more tolerance of these traditional religions than of Islam or Christianity,” says journalist Barbara Demick, former Beijing bureau chief for the Los Angeles Times.’<sup>46</sup>

6.1.6 The Freedom House report, ‘Freedom in the World 2021 – China’, covering events in 2020, published on 3 March 2021, stated:

‘...The CCP regime has established a multifaceted apparatus to control all aspects of religious activity, including by vetting religious leaders for political reliability, placing limits on the number of new monastics or priests, and manipulating religious doctrine according to party priorities. The ability of believers to practice their faith varies dramatically based on religious

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<sup>44</sup> Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘[Country of origin information report China](#)’, 1 July 2020

<sup>45</sup> USCIRF, ‘[Annual report on religious freedom \(covering 2019\)](#)’, (p15), April 2020

<sup>46</sup> CFR, ‘[Religion in China](#)’, last updated 25 September 2020

affiliation, location, and registration status. Many do not necessarily feel constrained, particularly if they are Chinese Buddhists or Taoists.<sup>47</sup>

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## 6.2 Unregistered religious groups

6.2.1 The Freedom House report of February 2017 stated: ‘The punishments meted out to religious leaders and believers who evade or refuse to comply with official restrictions are among the harshest for any form of dissent in China. Legal provisions allow for sentences of up to life imprisonment, and judges regularly hand down terms of more than five years for clearly nonviolent acts, including in circumstances that would not have triggered such harsh repression several years ago.’<sup>48</sup>

6.2.2 The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs ‘Country of origin information report China’ published in July 2020 noted that:

‘The China’s religious landscape is categorised into three markets, namely a “red”, a “black” and a “grey” market. ...Most faith communities in China belong to the “grey” market. These communities are not under the supervision of state religious bodies, as in the case of “red” religious communities, and according to the letter of the law, they are illegal. However, they are not viewed as Xie Jiao, and as such, they are not persecuted like the movements in the “black” market.

‘... The previous country of origin information report on China observed that freedom of religion and belief was coming under increasing pressure. This trend has continued unabated during the reporting period of this country of origin information report. A new regulation on religious affairs in China came into effect on 1 February 2018. The purpose of the new regulation was to place further restrictions on the scope of religious activities, particularly those associated with the ‘grey’ market. ‘Grey’ religious communities were forced to choose between aligning with a PRA or being disbanded or prosecuted by the Chinese authorities. A significant change in governance was implemented in March 2018. Previously, the PRAs were accountable to the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA). After the change, the United Front Work Department (UFWD) exercised this control. The UFWD is a CCP body and as such, the supervision of religious affairs came directly under President Xi Jinping and his governing party. The impact of this change is that it has blurred the distinction between state and party structures.

‘The February 2018 religious affairs regulations and the subsequent replacement of the SARA by the UFWD are part of a religion policy known as ‘Sinicisation’. This term does not refer to a process in which believers in China adapt their religion to local customs and cultural conditions, but to the CCP’s efforts to co-opt the state-recognised religions into the CCP’s interpretation of communism.

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<sup>47</sup> Freedom House, ‘[Freedom in the World 2021](#)’, 3 March 2021

<sup>48</sup> FH, ‘[The Battle for China’s Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and ...](#)’, (p14), February 2017

‘... the “grey” market of China’s religious landscape faced increasing repression during the reporting period of this report [March 2018 through June 2020].’<sup>49</sup>

6.2.3 The CFR report updated on 25 September 2020 noted that: ‘Many believers do not follow organized religion and are said to practice traditional folk religion. These practitioners, along with members of underground house churches and banned religious groups, account for many of the country’s unregistered believers.’<sup>50</sup>

6.2.4 The 2020 USSD IRF report, stated:

The government continued to close down or hinder the activities of religious groups not affiliated with the state-sanctioned religious associations, including unregistered Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, and other groups. At times, authorities said the closures were because the group or its activities were unregistered or, at other times, because the place of worship lacked necessary permits. ...Authorities allowed some unregistered groups to operate but did not recognize them legally. In some cases, authorities required unregistered religious groups to disband, leaving congregants from these groups with the sole option of attending services under a state-sanctioned religious leader.’<sup>51</sup>

6.2.5 The report also stated that:

‘Police continued to arrest and otherwise detain leaders and members of religious groups, often those connected with groups not registered with the state-sanctioned religious associations. There were reports police used violence and beatings during arrest and detention. Reportedly, authorities used vague or insubstantial charges, sometimes in connection with religious activity, to convict and sentence leaders and members of religious groups to years in prison.’<sup>52</sup>

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### 6.3 Banned religious groups (or “cults”)

6.3.1 Bitter Winter listed an article [‘The List of the Xie Jiao, a Main Tool of Religious Persecution’](#) which referred to the 20 groups on the Xie Jiao’s list of “evil cults” and had been listed publicly since 4 June 2014. Of the 20 groups 11 were listed as dangerous, this includes 2 Buddhist groups- Guanyin Method and True Buddha School. The Buddhist group the Yuandun Dharma Gate was listed as a group the public needed to be on guard against<sup>53</sup>.

6.3.2 In January 2017, Reuters reported that:

‘Authorities have gone after what they view as cults, which have multiplied in recent years, and demonstrations have been put down with force and some sect leaders executed.

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<sup>49</sup> Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [‘Country of origin information report China’](#), 1 July 2020

<sup>50</sup> CFR, [‘Religion in China’](#), last updated 25 September 2020

<sup>51</sup> USSD, [‘2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...’](#) (Section I), 12 May 2021

<sup>52</sup> USSD, [‘2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China ...’](#) (Section II), 12 May 2021

<sup>53</sup> Bitter Winter, [‘The List of the Xie Jiao, a Main Tool of Religious...’](#), 11 November 2018

'The judicial interpretation, release by the Supreme People's Court and state prosecutor, list seven areas for which offenders will face tough penalties, including carrying out cult activities in public or trying to recruit children or state bureaucrats.

'In cases considered less serious, where adherents repent and leave the cult, or where they have been coerced into joining a cult, there is an option for punishment not to be imposed, the interpretation states.'<sup>54</sup>

6.3.3 The Law Library of Congress report, 'China: Religion and Chinese Law', June 2018 stated: 'Over a dozen religious or spiritual groups are banned in China as "evil cults." Falun Gong, a spiritual movement that blends aspects of Buddhism, Daoism, and traditional qigong exercise, is one of them.'<sup>55</sup>

6.3.4 The 2019 DFAT report noted that:

'The Criminal Law provides for prison sentences of up to seven years for individuals who use 'superstitious sects, secret societies or evil religious organisations' to undermine the state's laws or administrative regulations. A 1999 judicial explanation refers to: "those illegal groups that have been found using religions, qigong [a traditional Chinese exercise discipline], or other things as a camouflage, deifying their leading members, recruiting and controlling their members, and deceiving people by moulding and spreading superstitious ideas, and endangering society." While the criminal provisions principally target Falun Gong, others who engage in practices deemed superstitious or cult-like can face harassment, detention and imprisonment.

'In September 2017, the government published a list of 20 banned groups on its official Anti-Cult website 'xie jiao'(cult) and launched an anti-cult platform on social media called 'Say No to Cult,' which includes a function for reporting suspicious activity. ... Local authorities interpret 'cult' in different ways. Chinese government sensitivities towards religious cults have historical roots: religious cults led significant rebellions during the 19th century...'<sup>56</sup>

6.3.5 The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 'Country of origin information report China' published in July 2020 noted that:

'The China's religious landscape is categorised into three markets, namely a "red", a "black" and a "grey" market. ...The "black" market refers to religious and spiritual movements that have been regarded as a Xie Jiao by the Chinese authorities. This term is commonly translated as "evil cult", but "heterodox teachings" is a more appropriate translation. Well-known examples of movements that have been banned as Xie Jiao are Falun Gong (FG) and the Church of Almighty God (CAG). From the Chinese government's point of view, followers of a Xie Jiao are not followers of a religion and are "subversive". Pursuant to Article 300 of the Chinese criminal statutes, individuals who are followers of a Xie Jiao can be sentenced to prison for a term of three to seven years or longer, and life imprisonment in the most serious cases...

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<sup>54</sup> Reuters, '[China to crack down further on 'cult' activities](#)', 25 January 2017

<sup>55</sup> The Law Library of Congress, '[China: Religion and Chinese Law](#)' (p3), June 2018

<sup>56</sup> DFAT, '[Country Information Report](#)' (Para 3.94- 3.95), 3 October 2019

‘...If a member of a group that has been designated as Xie Jiao moves to another province and does not publicly disseminate his or her faith there, a confidential source reports that this person may be able to avoid criminal prosecution. However, the same source adds the following: after moving to a new province, if this individual again engages in activities for the Xie Jiao-designated group, for example by attending religious gatherings or engaging in proselytising activities, this individual again runs the risk of criminal prosecution. Another source asserts that a member of a group can sometimes escape prosecution by moving away, but this tactic does not always prove effective. The source goes on to say it depends on the distance from the original province of residence and whether the person is considered by the authorities to be a high-profile figure. The same source adds that it is difficult to go unnoticed due to the omnipresent surveillance equipment, even though China is a vast country.

‘There is no clear answer to the question of whether the Chinese authorities make a distinction between members and leaders of a Xie Jiao. In theory, leaders receive more severe penalties than members. However, Article 300 of the Chinese criminal statutes cited above, which offers a legal framework for prosecuting Xie Jiao designated groups, is not administered uniformly throughout China. This may result in some cases where a member receives a more severe sentence than a leader.’<sup>57</sup>

6.3.6 The CFR report updated in September 2020, stated:

‘Several religious and spiritual groups, dubbed “heterodox cults” by Beijing, are subject to regular government crackdowns. The party-state has banned more than a dozen such faiths on the grounds that adherents use religion “as a camouflage, deifying their leading members, recruiting and controlling their members, and deceiving people by molding and spreading superstitious ideas, and endangering society.” ...International human rights groups, scholars of religion, and Chinese human rights lawyers have questioned such designations, criticizing the Chinese government for harsh repression against believers.’<sup>58</sup>

6.3.7 The 2020 USSD IRF Report noted that: ‘The law bans certain religious or spiritual groups. Criminal law defines banned groups as “cult organizations” and provides for criminal prosecution of individuals belonging to such groups and punishment of up to life in prison. There are no published criteria for determining or procedures for challenging such a designation. A national security law also explicitly bans cult organizations.’<sup>59</sup>

6.3.8 For further information on banned religious groups see the Country Policy and Information Note on [China: Christians](#) and [China: Falun Gong](#)

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Section 7 updated: 19 May 2021

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<sup>57</sup> Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [‘Country of origin information report China’](#), 1 July 2020

<sup>58</sup> CFR, [‘Religion in China’](#), last updated 25 September 2020

<sup>59</sup> USSD, [‘2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China’](#) (Section II), 12 May 2021

## 7. State treatment of specific religious groups

### 7.1 Folk religions

#### 7.1.1 The CFR report updated in September 2020, stated:

‘Many believers do not follow organized religion and are said to practice traditional folk religion. These practitioners, along with members of underground house churches and banned religious groups, account for many of the country’s unregistered believers.

‘... a 2012 Pew Research Center report found that more than 294 million people, or 21 percent of China’s population, practice folk religions. Chinese folk religions have no rigid organizational structure, blend practices from Buddhism and Daoism, and are manifest in the worship of ancestors, spirits, or other local deities. Though the number of traditional Chinese religious adherents is difficult to measure accurately, the building of new temples and the restoration of old temples signals the growth of Buddhism and folk beliefs in China.

‘...According to Ian Johnson, author of *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*, “hundreds, if not thousands, of folk religious temples are unregistered with the SARA but are tolerated.”<sup>60</sup>

#### 7.1.2 In October 2020 Bitter Winter, detailed multiple folk religion temples that were, shut down, demolished or repurposed following the lifting of coronavirus restrictions across Hebei, Henan, Zhejiang and Fujian provinces. The authorities gave differing reasons for the shutting down/demolishing of temples with some local authorities stating that there were too many temples, the temples were unlicensed, the temples were too close to expressways or they wanted to improve the aesthetic look of the environment<sup>61</sup>.

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### 7.2 Taoism (also spelt Daoism)

#### 7.2.1 The Freedom House report of February 2017, stated:

‘CCP leaders continue to view Taoism, an indigenous Chinese religion, as an attractive tool for building regime legitimacy on the basis of traditional Chinese culture and for improving relations with Taoist believers in Taiwan.

‘...Xi himself and the party’s propaganda apparatus in general have increasingly employed references to traditional Chinese culture—of which the Buddhist and Taoist religions are a key component—as the basis for upholding CCP values and political leadership.’<sup>62</sup> According to the 2017 Freedom House report, the degree of persecution experienced by Taoists is very low<sup>63</sup>.

#### 7.2.2 Bitter Winter reported in several articles that Taoism had been subjected in 2019 and 2020 to some government crackdowns with the demolition, closure and conversions of Taoist temples, statues and symbols, refusals or delays

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<sup>60</sup> CFR, ‘[Religion in China](#)’, last updated 25 September 2020

<sup>61</sup> Bitter Winter, ‘[Folk Religion Temples Wiped Out Across China](#)’, 27 October 2020

<sup>62</sup> FH, ‘[The Battle for China’s Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and ...](#)’, (p15), February 2017

<sup>63</sup> FH, ‘[The Battle for China’s Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and ...](#)’, (p15), February

in granting requests for the construction of Taoist venues, and restrictions on traditional clothes and hairstyles<sup>64 65 66</sup>.

#### 7.2.3 The 2020 USSD IRF report stated that:

‘China News Service reported that on November 28, the 10th National Congress of the Chinese Taoist Association was held in Jurong, Jiangsu Province. In addition to passing a code of conduct for Taoist teachers, the congress elected Li Guangfu as the new Taoist Association chairman. Li stated that Taoism should “adhere to the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era” and “adhere to the Sinicization of Taoism.”’<sup>67</sup>

#### 7.2.4 See also the section on [Buddhism](#)

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### 7.3 Buddhism

#### 7.3.1 The Freedom House report of February 2017, stated:

‘Chinese Buddhism and Taoism have revived significantly over the past 30 years from near extinction, but their scale and influence pale in comparison to the pre-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) era. With an estimated 185 to 250 million believers, Chinese Buddhism is the largest institutionalized religion in China.

‘...A large body of regulations and bureaucratic controls ensure political compliance, but unfairly restrict religious practices that are routine in other countries. Unrealistic temple registration requirements, infrequent ordination approvals, and official intervention in temple administration are among the controls that most seriously obstruct grassroots monastics and lay believers.

‘President Xi has continued Hu-era policies, creating an environment of relatively low persecution for Chinese Buddhist practice. His actions and rhetoric portray Chinese Buddhism as an increasingly important channel for realizing the party’s political and economic goals at home and abroad. In a rare occurrence, a Chinese Buddhist monk was sentenced to prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges.’<sup>68</sup> According to the Freedom House report the degree of persecution experienced by Chinese Buddhists is low<sup>69</sup>.

#### 7.3.2 The 2019 DFAT report stated: ‘As an East Asian religion, Buddhism has not been targeted for “sinicisation” in the same way as Christianity or Islam, although DFAT is aware of instances where local officials have targeted Buddhist monks and nuns for performing rites regarded as superstitious’<sup>70</sup>

#### 7.3.3 In 2019 Bitter Winter reported that books and DVDs by or relating to Venerable Master Chin Kung, a prominent Buddhist monk, had been deemed illegal by the Chinese authorities and had been banned and

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<sup>64</sup> Bitter Winter, [‘Lao-Tzu Sculpture Concealed for “Violating Religious Policy”](#)’, 19 September 2019

<sup>65</sup> Bitter Winter, [‘Taoists Deprived of Temples, Customs, and Traditions’](#), 16 November 2020

<sup>66</sup> Bitter Winter, [‘Taoist Temples Demolished or Repurposed Across China’](#), 9 November 2020

<sup>67</sup> USSD, [‘2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China’](#) (Section II), 12 May 2021

<sup>68</sup> FH, [‘The Battle for China’s Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and ...’](#), (p15), February 2017

<sup>69</sup> FH, [‘The Battle for China’s Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and ...’](#), (p15), February 2017

<sup>70</sup> DFAT, [‘Country Information Report’](#) (Para 3.61-3.62), 3 October 2019

destroyed throughout China<sup>71</sup>. Reports of the confiscation and destruction of Master Chin Kung's teachings and other Buddhist books deemed as unapproved by the Chinese authorities continued in 2020<sup>72 73</sup>.

7.3.4 The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 'Country of origin information report China' published in July 2020 noted that:

'The degree of lack of freedom varies according to the religious community and the 'colour' of the market ("red", "black", or "grey"). Generally speaking, the Chinese authorities adopt a fairly tolerant attitude towards Taoists and Chinese Buddhists. From the CCP's perspective, Taoism and the Chinese variants of Buddhism are part of China's cultural past and historical legacy, and these religions are useful when it comes to stirring up a sense of Chinese nationhood.'<sup>74</sup>

7.3.5 The CFR report noted:

'...Though Buddhism originated in India, it has a long history and tradition in China and today is the country's largest institutionalized religion.

'...The growth of Buddhism led to heightened visibility of its institutions, particularly Buddhist philanthropic organizations that deliver social services to the poor amid soaring inequality in China. Since Xi has come to power, experts have noted an apparent easing of tough rhetoric against, and even a promotion of, traditional beliefs in China. Xi has expressed hope that China's "traditional cultures" of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism could help curb the country's "moral decline."<sup>75</sup>

7.3.6 Bitter Winter reported throughout 2020 on the demolition of temples, violence against believers and the destruction, modification or covering up of Buddhist statues across China<sup>76 77 78 79</sup>. One temple master, interviewed for a November 2020 Bitter Winter article, observed that:

"Since the new Regulations on Religious Affairs came into force in 2018, the government started implementing even more draconian control of religions," the master added. "Officials repeatedly summoned the temple's masters to study religious policies and came to the temple to talk to us. Masters had no time to meditate and chant scriptures because of these frequent meetings. This was against our Buddhist practices. All the masters left to be spared these secular interferences."<sup>80</sup>

7.3.7 The US CECC Annual Report for 2020 stated:

'This past year, the government's relationship with Chinese Buddhists (not including Tibetan Buddhists) and Taoists continued to reflect a tension between promotion of these traditions, based on perceived benefits to Party

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<sup>71</sup> Bitter Winter, '[Fearing the Spread of Buddhism, CCP Bans Popular Master's...](#)', 16 July 2019

<sup>72</sup> Bitter Winter, '[Buddhist Books Further Purged from Temples and Libraries](#)', 19 July 2020

<sup>73</sup> Bitter Winter, '[Unapproved Buddhist Books Confiscated and Burned](#)', 27 October 2020

<sup>74</sup> Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, '[Country of origin information report China](#)', 1 July 2020

<sup>75</sup> CFR, '[Religion in China](#)', last updated 25 September 2020

<sup>76</sup> Bitter Winter, '[Buddhist Statues Purged Across Sichuan Province](#)', 11 April 2020

<sup>77</sup> Bitter Winter, '[Elderly Man Dies Protesting Temple Demolition in Anhui...](#)', 12 November 2020

<sup>78</sup> Bitter Winter, '[They Demolished a Temple and Put up a Parking Lot](#)', 15 November 2020

<sup>79</sup> Bitter Winter, '[Outdoor Buddhist Statues Destroyed in Temples and Scenic...](#)', 17 November 2020

<sup>80</sup> Bitter Winter, '[They Demolished a Temple and Put up a Parking Lot](#)', 15 November 2020

goals, and coercive control. Authorities promote Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese folk religion as elements of “fine traditional Chinese culture” that counter the perceived detrimental influences of foreign religions, especially Christianity and Islam. In a 2014 speech, President Xi Jinping pointed to Buddhism (which came to China from India) as a model of “sinicization,” an example of a religion successfully integrating into Chinese culture. Despite these outward statements of support for Buddhism and Taoism and the acknowledgment that they are either indigenized (Buddhism) or indigenous to China (Taoism), however, authorities nevertheless require them to undergo “sinicization” and support the leadership of the Party.’<sup>81</sup>

#### 7.3.8 The 2020 USSD IRF Report stated:

‘On May 29 [2020], the Hainan Buddhist Association held a training session for Buddhist professionals and monks across the province. The training included advising monks on how to implement religious Sinicization, Xi Jinping’s remarks at the National Religious Work Conference, and the religious affairs regulations.

‘... The state-owned China News Service reported that on December 1, SARA director general Wang delivered remarks at the 10th National Congress of the BAC. Wang called on the BAC [ Buddhist Association of China] to “pursue political progress toward the adherence of Sinicization of Buddhism” to ensure Buddhist content was suitable for “contemporary social development.”’<sup>82</sup>

#### 7.3.9 See also the section on [Taoism \(also spelt Daoism\)](#)

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### 7.4 Tibetan Buddhism

#### 7.4.1 For information on state treatment of Tibetan Buddhists see the [country policy and information note on China- Opposition to the state.](#)

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### 7.5 Islam

#### 7.5.1 For information on state treatment of Muslims see the [country policy and information note on China- Muslims \(including Uighurs in Xinjiang\)](#)

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<sup>81</sup> CECC, [‘Annual Report, 2020’](#), (p112-113), 14 January 2021

<sup>82</sup> USSD, [‘2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: China’](#) (Section II), 12 May 2021

# Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of what the CPIN seeks to cover. They form the basis for the [country information section](#). The Home Office's Country Policy and Information Team uses some standardised ToRs, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Religion in China
  - Religious demography
- Legal Framework
  - International Conventions
  - Constitution
  - Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA)
- State attitude towards religious groups
- State treatment of religious groups
  - Folk religions
  - Buddhism
  - Tibetan Buddhism
  - Taoism (also spelt Daoism)
  - Islam and Uighurs in Xinjiang
- Banned religious groups

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# Version control

## Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **2.0**
- valid from **27 July 2021**

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### **Official – sensitive: Start of section**

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

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### **Official – sensitive: End of section**

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## Changes from last version of this note

Updated country information and change to religions covered as Islam will now be covered in a separate CPIN and Tibetan Buddhism is in the CPIN on opposition to the state.

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