

About China Voices

Welcome to China Voices, a CSW quarterly update on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in China. All cases cited have been reported either publicly, including from various websites in China (* indicates Chinese language links), or privately through CSW sources. For feedback or further information, please email contact@thechinacorner.org.

Introduction

From July to September 2023, CSW recorded 83 incidents of violations affecting religious or belief groups throughout China.

The authorities tightened security for the World University Games (28 July - 8 August 2023). From drones, radios, and Tesla cars to 'special groups' such as religious groups, Chengdu police made sure all types of 'unstable factors' were covered by the Skynet surveillance programme.



A policeman and a drone. Source: sohu.com

Some house church leaders were reportedly under house arrest or forced to move house, including in some instances in connection to the Games; members were prohibited from gathering. In August 2023, two house churches were banned by the authorities in Guangzhou city.

The Chinese government's repression of Falun Gong has entered the 25th year. The total number of Falun Gong believers documented to have died due

to persecution has surpassed 5,000 while the actual total number of deaths from abuse is believed to be much higher, according to [Falun Dafa Information Centre](#). Read CSW's blog post about the story of [Falun Gong activist Fang Bin](#).

China's Sinicization plan demolishing domes and minarets of mosques has reached its last, most ambitious targets (read more in Part 1).

In September 2023, news emerged that a prominent Uyghur academic, Rahile Dawut, has been [jailed for life](#). She is the second influential Uyghur scholar known to have been permanently silenced by the Chinese authorities; economics professor Ilham Tohti was given a life sentence in 2014.

Despite international criticism, Xi Jinping's repressive policies in Xinjiang are set to continue. In a speech during his visit to Urumqi in August 2023, Xi hailed the 'hard-won social stability' in the autonomous region and urged the 'deepening' of Sinicization of Islam. In addition, more regulations to restrict religious activities are being introduced (read more in Part 2).

This quarter saw China's two brazen acts of transnational repression. Firstly, the Hong Kong authorities issued [arrest warrants and bounties](#) for eight overseas-based Hong Kong pro-democracy activists. All these activists are accused of violating the National Security Law while in exile. Secondly, human rights lawyer [Lu Siwei](#) was repatriated to China, two months after being detained by Lao police while trying to travel to the US to reunite with his family.

Dome demolition, closures of house churches, re-education camps for religious groups banned as 'xie jiao', 'deradicalization' of Uyghurs, [jailing](#) of Tibetans over images of the Dalai Lama and hunts for human rights defenders who have fled the country. What do these share in common? The answer is - in the words of a Chinese human rights lawyer - they are all 'products of Xi's obsessive "Zero

Clearance” mindset’, which was laid bare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part 1 – Sinicization of religion



A Party emblem has been added to the sign of Shizhan Church, Taizhou, Zhejiang province. Photo: China Aid

‘The crackdown on Christianity in Taizhou has been unusually severe in recent years. Several house churches have been targeted for elimination.’

- A pastor, July 2023

■ Religious understanding to align with the party

On 3 July 2023, at the 22nd meeting of the Joint Conference of National Religious Groups, participants [studied](#)* how to implement General Secretary Xi Jinping’s thoughts on religious work and to ‘effectively align the understandings of religious people with the spirit of the Central Committee of the Party’.

■ World-famous mosques ‘Sinicized’

The Grand Mosques of [Shadian](#) in Yunnan province and [Xiguan](#) in Gansu province are going through ‘rectification’ to remove foreign religious influences

on their architecture style, while Doudian Mosque in Beijing has [completed its transformation](#).

These three are the largest landmark Hui mosques in southwest, northwest and north China respectively; Shadian Mosque is known as the ‘little Mecca of the East’.

During an eight-month renovation project, the authorities in Beijing replaced the original Arabic-style dome of Doudian Mosque with five Chinese-style white round spires, removed the two tall minarets and added political slogans (e.g., ‘socialist core values’) throughout the mosque.

‘The principles of FoRB and cultural pluralism are essential to the existence of modern States, especially the stability of a large country with dozens of ethnic groups and multiple religions. The state should respect the religious and cultural rights and interests of Hui people, rather than forcing changes to conform to a particular ideology.’

- A Hui Muslim Scholar, May 2023

■ New textbook for seminaries with Sinicization as ‘main thread’

The state-sanctioned Christian bodies have been organising seminars on theological education, training Bible teachers, and preparing theological textbooks, one of which has already been published.

From August 8 to 10, 2023, CCC&TSPM held a [training conference](#)* for seminary teachers across the country, which aimed to help them ‘firmly establish the correct political direction’. Attendees were presented with ‘An Introduction to the New Testament’, a new textbook that will be the first to

be used in seminaries nationwide; other new theological textbooks will follow.

Part 2 – Policy Watch

■ Hardline policies to continue in Xinjiang

On 26 August 2023, Xi once again emphasised in a [speech](#)* in Urumqi that his top priority is to maintain stability in the XUAR. The government’s anti-terrorism anti-separatism campaign will continue, for which he urged ‘making good use of the law as a weapon’. Stability maintenance measures will be in place long term, including crackdown on ‘illegal religious activities’.

■ New regulations for religious venues contain stricter provisions for including propaganda in sermons

The National Administration of Religious Affairs (NARA)’s latest [administrative measures](#)* came into effect on 1 September 2023. The measures specifically mention Socialism six times, including that sermons should ‘reflect Socialist core values’ (Article 39). ‘Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’ is mentioned three times, including that study groups of CCP documents should be established in all places of worship (Article 36).

■ Trial credit scheme for religious personnel

A [trial system](#) to evaluate religious leaders has been pioneered by the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee of Shandong province, in a new way to impose ‘strict governance of religion’. In August 2023, the Committee held an event to promote the scheme among all religious groups in the province.

Although it is not clear what constitutes ‘poor behaviour’ which leads to a credit score of ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’, the scheme will give the authorities power to further restrict the way registered religious leaders manifest their religions in teaching and practice.



Three Self Protestant Movement (TSPM) training and patriotic education for preachers, Dezhou, Shandong, May 2023.

Source: Weibo

■ Draft of revised law on administrative punishment widely criticised

In September 2023, China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) published a draft of revised law on administrative punishment for low-level crimes, inviting public consultation. Many provisions were unanimously rejected by netizens and legal scholars.

Article 30(3) targets ‘anyone who produces, disseminates, or possesses for the purpose of dissemination articles, information, or materials that advocate cults and secretive societies’. Beijing-based dissident Zha Jianguo [questioned](#)* how police could decide which religion or belief is a ‘cult’. He recommended deletion of this clause as it would be a typical ‘pocket offence’, violating FoRB.

Part 3 – Coordinated arrest operations against banned religious groups

■ Church of Almighty God (CAG)

According to Bitter Winter, in 2023, the Chinese government launched a nationwide purge against the Church of Almighty God (CAG). From January to July 2023, at least 2,100 CAG members were arrested in [Jiangsu and Anhui](#) provinces alone. Over 1000 members were arrested in [Zhejiang Province](#) in one day; among them, 408 remain detained. Detained devotees have been subjected to torture.

■ Falun Gong

According to [Minghui*](#), seven Falun Gong practitioners in Longkou, Shandong province have been detained since May 2023, when the authorities deployed more than 100 plain-clothes to arrest 23 practitioners. They are facing trial under Article 300 of the Criminal Law.

■ All Range Church (ARC)

In July 2023, the authorities in China's central Hubei province detained 16 people who are deemed as key members of ARC, a Christian group banned since 1988. Distinctives of the group include members weeping during meetings.

Part 4 – Key Tibetan Buddhist events: cancellations, restrictions, and detentions

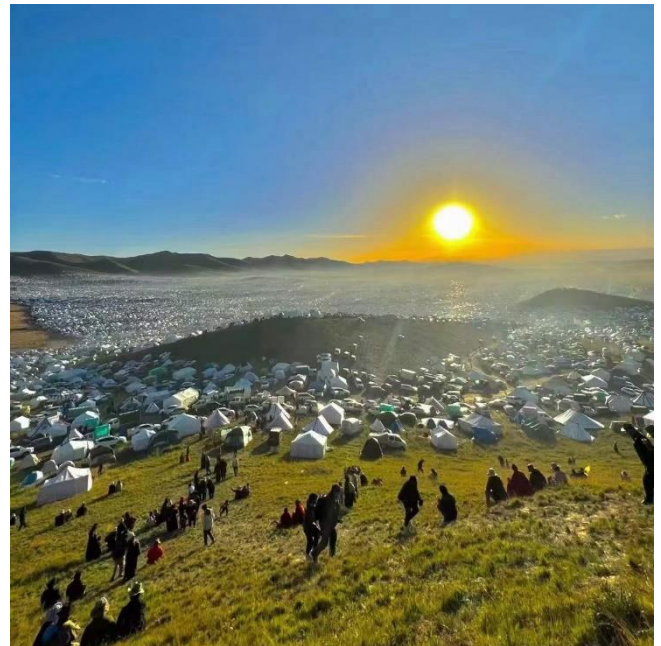
Kalachakra teachings are important Buddhist ceremonies for Tibetans. Only a very few qualified Tibetan Buddhist masters, including the Dalai Lama, can impart such teachings. In July 2023, two scheduled Kalachakra ceremonies were cancelled.

The seventh Gungthang Rinpoche was to give a Kalachakra teaching in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of southern Gansu Province. It was [cancelled](#) at the last minute.

A few days later, [police interrupted](#) another Kalachakra gathering in Guinan County, Hainan Tibet Autonomous Prefecture of northeastern Qinghai province. They detained ceremony organisers, dispersed tens of thousands of worshippers who had gathered there, and prematurely destroyed a sand mandala. The Seventh Athi Kalsang Tashi Gyatso, who was to give teachings, was forced to leave.

Tibetans' disappointment and anger must have felt by the authorities. The seventh Gungthang Rinpoche was permitted to confer Kalachakra on 15-17 September. However, authorities issued a directive saying the event was only arranged for residents of

Hezuo city, out of fear that a huge gathering could pose a threat to the government. More than 100,000 Tibetan devotees gathered for the teaching but, besides residents, Tibetans coming from Qinghai, Sichuan and other parts of the region were not allowed to attend, according to a [report](#) by RFA. At least one Tibetan was reportedly [arrested](#) on his way to the ceremony.



Tibetans gather for Kalachakra teaching by Gungthang Rinpoche in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.
Source: Twitter @SakarTashi

Notable reports

- [Measuring Religion in China](#) - Pew Research Centre
- [How the PRC seeks to reshape the global information environment](#) - US Dept of State
- [A night-time lighting analysis of Tibet's prisons and detention centres](#) - RAND Europe
- [Targeted in Türkiye: China's Transnational Repression Against Uyghurs](#) - Safeguard Defenders
- [Foreign prisoners in China: Abuse, forced labour and a denial of human rights](#) - UK Conservative Party Human Rights Commission

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