

### 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](mailto:contact@thechinacorner.org).

### Introduction

From October to December 2023, CSW recorded 71 incidents of violations affecting religious or belief groups across China. Individuals have been deprived of their liberty for reasons such as:

- renting a hotel room for a religious meeting
- praying for the Dalai Lama
- helping Christians buy Bibles
- conducting a wedding according to Islamic customs
- sharing about one's religion or belief in a social media group

CSW's new [briefing](#) on China's 'Socialist rule of law' explains some factors that contribute to human rights violations in the country.

Apart from detention and imprisonment, acts of government reprisals against religious adherents include:

- Suspension of pension
- Denied business license
- Forced evictions
- Unfair dismissals
- Children expelled from school
- Exit bans

Promotion of patriotism has long been integrated into all aspects of life for every Chinese citizen: news, entertainment, kindergartens, schools, colleges, workplaces, community spaces, courts, prisons, military barracks. Yet the ruling Communist Party saw the necessity of having a law to codify nationalist education, aiming for everyone – from

children to professionals – to 'love the country, love the Party, and love Socialism' (see Part 1).

Unsurprisingly, ultra-nationalism is on the rise in China. Members of house churches have reported incidents where police call them 'traitors', a term associated with the Cultural Revolution era.

China has embarked on a propaganda campaign to hack the world's collective memory of the re-education camps in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Carefully orchestrated [foreign media tours](#) have been organised to show off Xinjiang rebranded as a tourism hotspot. The UN [said](#) violations against Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities may constitute crimes against humanity and that 'the conditions remain in place for serious violations to continue and recur'.

China is also attempting to [rebrand Tibet](#). In October 2023, the authorities started replacing 'Tibet' with 'Xizang' on official diplomatic documents.

According to Minghui.org, 1,188 Falun Gong practitioners are known to have been [sentenced](#)\* by Chinese authorities in 2023, with Shandong Province and the northeastern provinces having the highest numbers. A total of 209 people were reported to have [died](#)\* as a result of China's ongoing crackdown on Falun Gong in 2023.

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*"Citizens enjoy the freedom of religion or belief" in Article 36 of the Constitution has become an empty phrase.'*

- Chinese legal scholar, August 2023

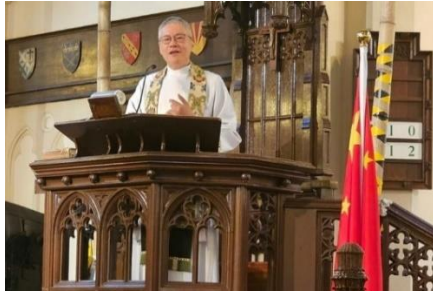
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### Part 1 – Policy watch

#### ■ Patriotic Education Law

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The [Patriotic Education Law](#)\* was passed on 24 October in China's rubber-stamp parliament, the National People's Congress. Article 22 stipulates that 'the State encourages and supports religious groups, religious colleges and places of religious activity to carry out education in patriotism' so that 'patriotic sentiments of religious clergy and believers' are enhanced and religions are guided 'to adapt to Socialist society'.



St. John's Cathedral in Hong Kong displayed China's national flag on 1 October 2023. Source: HK01

Tibetans have already been under increasing pressure to denounce the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Teachers and students from schools in Ali prefecture in western Tibet were urged to [pledge their loyalty](#)\* to the country and the ruling party and to criticise the Dalai Lama and 'separatism'. One of the person specifications for public sector jobs in Sigatse city in southern Tibet is [being 'trustworthy'](#) in following the Communist Party and denouncing the Dalai Lama.

### ■ Reporting of 'illegal religious activities' awarded

On 6 December 2023, the Guangzhou Municipal Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs in Guangdong Province [released a video](#)\*, which shows a young woman contacting the Bureau about her boyfriend's religious activity. Anyone who reports a religious activity held by unauthorised persons or in an unauthorised venue or religious training without approval may receive a cash prize up to 10,000 yuan (roughly £1100).

### ■ Christmas celebrations banned in some places, Christians harassed

Leaders of TSPM/CCC (state organs of the Protestant church) were given a [lecture](#)\* by top political adviser Wang Huning on Christmas Eve, urging 'comprehensive and strict' management of religious affairs and adherence to the Party's direction of Sinicization of Christianity.

According to CSW sources, some Christians reportedly suffered online harassment, with hostile comments including 'Christmas is a celebration of the invasion of China by the Eight-Power Allied Forces'; some universities used this as a reason to prohibit students from celebrating Christmas.

Churches in Hebei, Henan, Fujian, and Tianjin were surrounded by police officers in riot gear on Christmas Eve. Plainclothes officers even patrolled inside some churches, ensuring no minors were present.



Police officers outside a Catholic church in Baoding, Hebei province, on Christmas Eve 2023. Source: Asia News

### ■ Ramadan alerts

In November 2023, an [IPVM report](#) revealed that the Chinese surveillance firm Hikvision won a 'Smart Campus' project in China that 'automatically sends an alert' on ethnic minority students 'suspected of fasting during Ramadan' based on student dining records. Hikvision claimed that the alerts had never been developed. The company has been identified by the UK government as a security threat; the US has banned the imports and sales of its equipment since 2022.

## ■ Leaders reiterate the Party’s vision for ethnic and religious groups

Wang Huning made a [research trip](#)\* to Yunnan in December 2023. He repeated to officials what Chairman Xi [said](#) to the political bureau in October about forging a strong sense of community and building a shared spiritual home for the Chinese nation. He added that work was needed to make all ethnic groups identify more with the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, the Party and Socialism with Chinese characteristics, and that the Party’s Sinicization policy must be implemented.

## Part 2 – Sinicization of religion

### ■ ‘Mosque consolidation’

The Chinese government is significantly reducing the number of mosques in Ningxia and Gansu provinces by decommissioning, shutting down, demolishing and converting mosques for secular use, according to a [report](#) by Human Rights Watch. The ‘mosque consolidation’ policy is part of China’s efforts to Sinicize Islam. Other methods include removing Islamic architectural features such as domes and minarets and [appointing](#)\* politically trained imams to promote Sinicized Islam.

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*‘Three mosques were merged into one. Then they threatened and warned people against entering it. Eventually, the mosque had to shut down because no one used it.’*

- Hui Muslim (VOA, December 2023)

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### ■ Top Catholic bishop calls for ‘creative’ Biblical interpretation

Shen Bin, who was appointed Bishop of Shanghai without approval from the Vatican in April 2023,

leads the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops’ Conference of the Catholic Church in China. In an interview with state media in October 2023, Bishop Shen firmly [supported the Sinicization](#) policy, saying it was crucial for the survival and development of Catholic Church in China. He called for ‘a Catholic theological framework with Chinese characteristics’ and ‘creative interpretations of doctrines guided by core Socialist values’.

### ■ Worship turned into a show of ‘Sinicized’ Christianity



Performers dressed as the Red Army in a church in Shenyang, 19 November 2023. Source: Fuyin Shidai

TSPM/CCC hosted an event to promote ‘excellent traditional culture’ in a church in Liaozhong District, Shenyang, Liaoning province, in place of its Sunday service on 19 November 2023. Performances included songs to praise ‘the motherland’ and the Party, and the story of Long March was acted out.

## Part 3 – Restrictions on religious education

### ■ Christians

In recent years, a number of Christian schools and home education institutions have been targets of the government’s crackdown on religious education. Some Christian teachers and heads of institutions have been arrested; many church schools are subject to evictions and harassment. In October 2023, a woman teaching at an informal church school was [detained](#)\* for 10 days after her

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husband reported her to the police in Shanxi province. In another incident, the authorities in Haining city, Zhejiang province, [ordered](#)\* a Christian high school to shut down and issued a fine of 60,000 yuan (roughly £6620) to its director.

### ■ Tibetans

The authorities in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province have issued a directive, which [bans](#) Tibetan language classes from all schools in the prefecture from September 2023.

## Part 4 – Christian ‘fraud’ cases

This quarter saw another house church being shut down and its leaders detained for allegedly committing ‘fraud’. Pastor Zhou Songlin and four other leaders of Sweet Springs (‘Ganquan’) Church in Hefei, the capital city of Anhui province, were [detained](#)\* in November 2023. Three of them were released on bail after 28 days but Pastor Zhou and Elder Ding Zhongfu remain in detention. According to CSW sources, the church has been in operation for more than 20 years; it owns two properties which were jointly purchased by church members and are used purely for religious purposes.

Numbers of ‘fraud’ cases since 2019 (collected by CSW):

- 14 house churches involved in such cases
- 8 Christians have been jailed for between 3 years and 12 years
- 30 Christians are still being held in pre-trial custody

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*‘If the allegation against Sweet Springs Church is upheld, that means that every urban house church will face prosecution in the same way.’*

- House church member, December 2023

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## Notable reports

- [China’s ‘Socialist rule of law’](#) – CSW
- [Sell Out My Soul’: The Impending Threats to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Hong Kong](#) - Hong Kong Watch
- [China: Mosques Shuttered, Razed, Altered in Muslim Areas](#) – Human Rights Watch
- [2023 Persecutors of the Year](#) - International Christian Concern
- [Genocide Tours: International Travel Companies in East Turkistan](#) - Uyghur Human Rights Project
- U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission [2023 Annual Report to Congress](#)
- [Freedom on the Net 2023](#) – Freedom House
- [The Hong Kong 2019 Protest Movement: A Data Analysis of Arrests and Prosecutions](#) - Georgetown Law Center for Asian Law
- [A framework for understanding political violence and mental health amongst Chinese human rights lawyers](#) - The 29 Principles
- [Families in Fear: Collective Punishment in 21st Century China](#) - Safeguard Defenders

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