

World
Watch
Research

China: Full Country Dossier

December 2023



OpenDoors

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

Open Doors International / World Watch Research

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Introduction

World Watch List 2024

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
1	North Korea	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	12.8	96	98	96	94	94
2	Somalia	16.5	16.7	16.6	16.6	16.6	10.6	93	92	91	92	92
3	Libya	15.9	16.0	15.9	16.1	16.4	10.2	91	88	91	92	90
4	Eritrea	14.6	14.9	15.5	15.9	15.7	12.8	89	89	88	88	87
5	Yemen	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	16.7	5.9	89	89	88	87	85
6	Nigeria	13.5	13.9	14.5	14.9	14.4	16.7	88	88	87	85	80
7	Pakistan	13.2	13.9	15.0	15.1	13.1	16.7	87	86	87	88	88
8	Sudan	14.1	14.2	14.9	14.9	15.5	13.3	87	83	79	79	85
9	Iran	15.0	14.6	13.5	15.8	16.5	10.9	86	86	85	86	85
10	Afghanistan	15.7	15.9	15.2	16.3	16.6	4.6	84	84	98	94	93
11	India	12.2	12.6	13.3	14.8	13.2	16.5	83	82	82	83	83
12	Syria	13.4	14.3	13.9	14.3	14.2	11.1	81	80	78	81	82
13	Saudi Arabia	15.2	15.3	14.8	15.7	16.6	3.3	81	80	81	78	79
14	Mali	11.1	10.1	14.7	12.8	15.1	15.6	79	76	70	67	66
15	Algeria	14.4	14.1	11.5	14.0	15.6	9.8	79	73	71	70	73
16	Iraq	14.2	14.4	14.0	14.8	13.9	7.8	79	76	78	82	76
17	Myanmar	12.2	10.6	13.4	13.7	13.0	16.1	79	80	79	74	73
18	Maldives	15.6	15.5	13.6	16.0	16.4	0.9	78	77	77	77	78
19	China	13.0	10.0	12.8	14.6	16.0	11.1	78	77	76	74	70
20	Burkina Faso	11.7	9.7	13.2	11.5	13.8	15.6	75	71	68	67	66
21	Laos	11.6	10.6	13.2	14.3	14.0	11.3	75	68	69	71	72
22	Cuba	13.2	8.7	13.8	13.3	15.1	8.7	73	70	66	62	52
23	Mauritania	14.6	14.2	13.8	14.2	14.2	1.3	72	72	70	71	68
24	Morocco	13.2	13.8	11.7	12.8	14.4	5.4	71	69	69	67	66
25	Uzbekistan	14.6	12.7	13.9	12.6	15.5	1.7	71	71	71	71	73
26	Bangladesh	12.4	10.6	12.5	10.8	10.4	14.1	71	69	68	67	63
27	Niger	9.4	9.6	14.5	7.7	13.1	15.9	70	70	68	62	60
28	CAR	10.3	8.6	13.9	9.6	12.2	15.6	70	70	68	66	68
29	Turkmenistan	14.2	12.3	13.6	13.9	15.5	0.6	70	70	69	70	70
30	Nicaragua	12.1	7.6	13.2	13.2	14.1	9.6	70	65	56	51	41
31	Oman	14.3	14.0	10.6	13.3	14.0	3.1	69	65	66	63	62
32	Ethiopia	9.9	9.7	12.6	10.4	12.1	14.4	69	66	66	65	63
33	Tunisia	12.3	13.2	10.2	12.4	13.8	6.9	69	67	66	67	64
34	Colombia	11.1	8.6	12.9	11.3	10.4	14.1	68	71	68	67	62
35	Vietnam	11.3	9.4	12.4	13.8	14.2	7.2	68	70	71	72	72
36	Bhutan	13.1	12.1	12.4	14.1	14.3	2.2	68	66	67	64	61
37	Mexico	11.5	8.5	12.5	11.1	10.6	14.1	68	67	65	64	60
38	Egypt	12.5	13.7	11.4	11.9	10.9	7.8	68	68	71	75	76
39	Mozambique	9.3	8.5	13.9	8.4	12.5	15.0	68	68	65	63	43
40	Qatar	14.2	14.2	10.5	13.2	14.4	0.6	67	68	74	67	66
41	DRC	8.0	7.9	12.6	9.7	13.0	15.9	67	67	66	64	56
42	Indonesia	10.9	12.3	11.5	10.2	9.7	11.5	66	68	68	63	60
43	Cameroon	8.8	7.6	12.6	8.0	13.1	15.9	66	65	65	64	60
44	Brunei	15.0	14.7	10.0	10.8	14.1	1.3	66	65	64	64	63
45	Comoros	12.7	14.0	11.2	12.4	14.2	1.1	66	66	63	62	57
46	Tajikistan	13.8	12.6	12.3	12.9	13.4	0.6	66	66	65	66	65
47	Kazakhstan	13.3	11.8	12.1	12.8	14.3	1.1	65	65	64	64	64
48	Jordan	12.9	14.2	10.5	12.4	12.8	2.2	65	65	66	64	64
49	Malaysia	13.0	14.1	11.5	12.2	11.1	2.4	64	66	63	63	62
50	Turkey	13.0	11.5	11.6	13.2	11.4	3.1	64	66	65	69	63

Rank	Country	Private life	Family life	Community life	National life	Church life	Violence	Total Score WWL 2024	Total Score WWL 2023	Total Score WWL 2022	Total Score WWL 2021	Total Score WWL 2020
51	Kenya	10.3	9.2	11.4	8.0	11.5	12.4	63	64	63	62	61
52	Tanzania	9.3	10.8	10.3	8.6	8.7	14.4	62	63	61	58	55
53	Nepal	12.1	10.4	9.5	13.2	12.3	4.4	62	61	64	66	64
54	Kuwait	13.1	13.6	9.4	12.0	12.2	0.9	61	64	64	63	62
55	Djibouti	12.3	12.6	12.7	10.1	12.3	1.1	61	60	59	56	56
56	Chad	11.6	8.2	10.2	10.2	10.3	10.6	61	58	55	53	56
57	UAE	13.3	13.4	9.5	11.3	12.8	0.7	61	62	62	62	60
58	Sri Lanka	12.9	9.2	10.8	11.5	9.7	5.9	60	57	63	62	65
59	Azerbaijan	13.2	9.9	9.6	11.9	13.6	1.7	60	59	60	56	57
60	Palestinian Territories	13.1	13.3	9.7	10.7	12.1	0.9	60	60	59	58	60
61	Kyrgyzstan	13.2	10.3	11.3	10.5	12.2	1.3	59	59	58	58	57
62	Russian Federation	12.7	7.7	10.6	12.8	12.9	1.7	58	57	56	57	60
63	Rwanda	9.4	7.7	9.0	10.4	11.7	9.4	58	57	50	42	42
64	Burundi	7.6	7.8	9.4	9.8	9.7	12.8	57	55	52	48	48
65	Bahrain	12.0	13.2	8.6	11.3	8.5	1.1	55	55	57	56	55
66	Honduras	7.9	4.7	12.2	7.3	9.9	12.6	55	53	48	46	39
67	Venezuela	6.0	4.4	11.1	10.0	10.8	10.7	53	56	51	39	42
68	Togo	9.2	6.7	9.3	7.1	11.0	8.9	52	49	44	43	41
69	Guinea	10.3	7.5	8.3	8.3	10.5	7.2	52	48	43	47	45
70	Uganda	8.1	5.0	7.4	6.7	8.8	15.9	52	51	48	47	48
71	Angola	6.8	6.7	8.1	11.5	11.4	7.2	52	52	51	46	43
72	Lebanon	11.0	10.2	7.0	6.1	6.6	7.2	48	40	11	-	35
73	Gambia	8.3	8.2	8.9	8.8	8.9	3.7	47	44	44	43	43
74	South Sudan	5.7	4.4	7.0	6.3	7.6	15.6	46	46	43	43	44
75	Belarus	9.6	3.8	5.8	9.7	13.3	3.3	46	43	33	30	28
76	Ivory Coast	12.0	6.5	8.7	5.9	8.0	3.3	44	44	42	42	42
77	Ukraine	5.5	4.8	8.0	11.6	11.6	2.8	44	37	37	34	33
78	Israel	9.8	8.6	5.8	6.3	6.9	6.7	44	38	41	40	38

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Sources and definitions

- This country report is a collation of data and analysis based around Open Doors World Watch List (WWL) and includes statistical information on world religions, Christian denominations and people groups prepared by the World Christian Database (WCD).
- Highlighted links in the text can be found written out in full at the conclusion of each main section under the heading “External links”. In order to reduce the length of these reference sections, a table containing links to regularly used sources can be found at the beginning of the “Keys to Understanding” chapter under the heading “Links for general background information”. Where one of these sources has been quoted in the dossier text, a quote reference is supplied as indicated in the second column of the table.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: “Any hostility experienced as a result of one’s identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians”. This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- The latest update of WWL Methodology can be found on the research pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/wwl-documentation/> and on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>.

WWL 2024 Situation in brief / China

Brief country details

In the table below, the number of Christians shown is an Open Doors (OD) estimate.

China: Population (UN estimate for 2023)	Christians	Chr%
1,452,128,000	96,700,000	OD estimate

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023) (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

Map of country



China: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	78	19
WWL 2023	77	16
WWL 2022	76	17

WWL 2021	74	17
WWL 2020	70	23

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

Dominant persecution engines and drivers

China: Main Persecution engines	Main drivers
Communist and post-Communist oppression	Government officials, Political parties
Dictatorial paranoia	Government officials, Political parties

Engines and Drivers are listed in order of strength. Only Very strong / Strong / Medium are shown here.

Brief description of the persecution situation

The policy of "Sinicizing" the church has been implemented across the country as the Communist Party is relying strongly on Chinese cultural identity to stay in control, limiting whatever could threaten its hold on power. New restrictions on Internet, social media, NGOs, registration duties and the 2018 regulations on religion (with its extensions in the following years, most recently the [new regulations](#) for religious venues and the activities carried out in them - Radio Free Asia, 3 August 2023) are being increasingly strictly applied and all seriously limit freedom. Likewise, already existing laws are being implemented more strictly and local authorities barely have any leeway to allow for flexibility.

Many of the house church venues, which had been closed due to the pandemic have not been re-opened and many house churches have been forced to split into smaller groups as a result. The old truth that churches would only be perceived as being a threat if they became too large, too political or by inviting foreign guests, has become an unreliable guideline today. Many churches are being monitored and closed down, no matter whether they are independent or belong to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Pastors and church leaders are facing stronger pressure to join the state-approved churches; in recent years accusations of "fraud", "running an illegal business" or "organizing illegal meetings" joined and partly replaced the standard accusation of "picking quarrels and provoking fight".

If a convert from Islam or from Tibetan Buddhism is discovered by community and family, they are usually threatened and physically harmed – all in an effort to win them back to their original faith. Spouses may be pressed to divorce. Neighbors and the local community may report a convert's Christian activities to the authorities or the village head, who would then take action to stop him or her.

Summary of international obligations and rights violations

China has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR)*
2. [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (ICESCR)

3. [Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#) (CAT)
4. [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW)
5. [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC)

(*China has signed but not ratified the ICCPR.)

China is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are monitored by the state, their activities often hindered and disrupted (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Churches are hindered from obtaining legal status and those officially registered are subject to heavy state interference (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christian leaders are imprisoned on charges of national security (ICCPR Art. 9)
- Children of Christians have been harassed and discriminated against because of their parents' faith (CRC Art. 2)
- Christian children are hindered from attending religious services and receiving religious education (CRC Art. 14)

Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period

- **28 June 2023:** Mu En and Enoch Wang, leaders of a Christian young adults group in Hefei, Anhui province, were [sentenced](#) to three and a half and three years imprisonment, respectively, for "fraud" (China Aid, 6 July 2023).
- **6 June 2023:** Pastor Qin Sifeng and Su Minjun of Beijing Lampstand Church were [sentenced](#) to five and a half years, and three and half years respectively, for "illegal business operations". They stood court in Zibo city, Shandong province (UCA News, 9 June 2023).
- **24 May 2023:** Police [closed](#) the Shengjia Christian Education and Help Center in Shunde city, Guangdong province and arrested four co-workers and Pastor Deng (China Aid, 27 May 2023). They received a 30 days criminal detention for "illegal business operations".
- **21 May 2023:** Authorities [closed](#) Zhongxing Christian Church in Zhengzhou city, Henan province, after the church had already been raided in 2019 (China Aid, 31 May 2023).
- **May 2023:** Five ethnic Nu and Lisu Christians who had been [detained](#) in August 2022 for "organizing and funding illegal gatherings" were released on bail by a court in Nujiang, Yunnan province (China Aid, 16 May 2023).
- **12 May 2023:** Elder Zhisheng Pan and Hua Huang of Nanchang Christian Assembly, Jiangxi province, were charged with "organizing and utilizing a religious cult" and sentenced to more than [three years](#) each (China Aid, 8 June 2023).
- **7 May 2023:** Authorities [raided](#) five of the six venues of Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church in Guangdong province simultaneously and took the leaders away. The pastor was put under pressure to join the TSPM church (China Aid, 27 June 2023).
- **10 April 2023:** Catholic priest Xie Tianming of Baoding diocese, Hebei province, [went missing](#), but reappeared on 10 April 2023 and agreed to join the Catholic Patriotic Association. At the time of reporting, he was in the process of "political re-education" (UCA News, 21 April 2023).

- **19 March 2023:** Pastor Li Jintao and four other Christians have been [detained](#) for several hours after a raid at a church in Nanchang, Jiangxi province (China Aid, 21 March 2023).
- **22 February 2023:** Authorities [demolished](#) a house of Datong diocese, Shanxi province, serving as convent for priests and nuns. The house is already serving the Catholic church for hundred years and has all the legal permits (Asia News, 23 February 2023).
- **8 February 2023:** Police [raided](#) a worship service of Shouwang church, Beijing, taking place in a tented venue (Bitter Winter, 14 February 2023). Shouwang church had been closed down and declared illegal in 2019.
- **29 January 2023:** The Catholic bishop of Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, Peter Shao Zhumin, and his secretary, Paolo Jiang Sunian, [went missing](#) after a long term underground priest, Chen Nailiang, passed away (Asia News, 31 January 2023).
- **12 January 2023:** Teachers Wang Minghai and Wan Hongxia from Xuande School of Mount Carmel Church, Anhui province, have been charged with illegal business operation and been [put under](#) "residential surveillance at a designated location" (China Aid, 14 January 2023).
- **11 January 2023:** The building of Nangang church, Wenzhou city, Zhejiang province was [demolished](#) by authorities to be replaced by commercial buildings (China Aid, 13 January 2023).
- **9 January 2023:** Since August 2022, Pastors Lian Changnian, Lian Xuliang and Preacher Fu Juan of Xi'an Church of Abundance, Shaanxi province, have been [held under](#) "residential surveillance at a designated location" for fraud accusations (China Aid, 9 January 2023).
- **December 2022:** Pastor Hao Zhiwei's appeal against her sentence of [eight year imprisonment](#) for "fraud" was dismissed by a court in Ezhou city, Hubei province (Bitter Winter, 27 December 2022).
- **15 December 2022:** Pastor Zhao Weikai from Zion Reformed Church in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, faced trial for "illegally possessing terrorism and extremism items". His trial ended without a public verdict and he remains in [detention](#) (China Aid, 21 December 2022).
- **16 November 2022:** Authorities in Linfen city, Shanxi province raided and [closed](#) the Covenant home church and an affiliated school (Bitter Winter, 21 November 2022)
- **27 October 2022:** Pastor Yang Jianxin's [prison sentence](#) of five and a half years for illegal Bible printing has been upheld by a court in Sanmenxia city, Henan province (Bitter Winter, 27 October 2022)

Specific examples of positive developments

15 March 2023: After imprisonment for 15 years, Uighur Christian Alimujiang Yimiti was [released](#) from a prison in Urumqi (UCA News, 20 March 2023).

External Links - Situation in brief

- Brief description of the persecution situation: new regulations - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/religion-controls-08032023122520.html>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cat.aspx>

- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women - <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>
- Summary of international obligations and rights violations: Convention on the Rights of the Child - <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: sentenced - <https://chinaaid.org/uncensored-news/stories-by-issue/religious-freedom/leaders-of-chinese-young-adult-group-charged-with-fraud/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: sentenced - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/chinese-christians-jailed-for-printing-religious-materials/101607>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: closed - <https://chinaaid.org/pastor-and-employees-of-christian-education-center-detained/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: closed - <https://chinaaid.org/local-police-blatantly-smash-and-loot-zhongxing-christian-church/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: detained - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/5-chinese-christians-held-for-illegal-gatherings-get-bail/101324>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: three years - <https://chinaaid.org/uncensored-news/stories-by-issue/rule-of-law/two-house-church-leaders-charged-with-organizing-a-cult/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: raided - <https://chinaaid.org/uncensored-news/featured/breaking-news/officials-establish-task-force-for-guangzhou-bible-reformed-church/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: went missing - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/missing-chinese-catholic-priest-joins-state-run-church/101074>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: detained - <https://chinaaid.org/pastor-li-jintao-500-miles-from-home-arrested-during-a-church-raid/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: demolished - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Datong-diocese%3A-authorities-demolish-priests%27-and-nuns%27-house-with-pickaxe-57819.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: raided - <https://bitterwinter.org/beijing-shouwang-house-church-refuses-to-die/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: went missing - <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Communist-Party-removes-Bishop-Shao-Zhumin-%26hellip%3B-again-57644.html>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: put under - <https://chinaaid.org/court-sends-home-two-christian-teachers-for-chinese-new-year/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: demolished - <https://chinaaid.org/armed-police-demolish-nangang-church-overnight/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: held under - <https://chinaaid.org/xian-church-of-abundance-ministers-placed-in-residential-surveillance/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: eight year imprisonment - <https://bitterwinter.org/pastor-hao-zhiwei-8-year-prison-sentence-confirmed-on-appeal/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: detention - <https://chinaaid.org/trial-of-zhao-weikai-ends-without-public-verdict/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: closed - <https://bitterwinter.org/covenant-home-church-banned-in-shanxi/>
- Specific examples of violations of rights in the reporting period: prison sentence - <https://bitterwinter.org/henan-pastor-sentenced-to-5-and-a-half-years-for-printing-bibles/>
- Specific examples of positive developments: released - <https://www.ucanews.com/news/china-frees-uyghur-christian-pastor-after-15-years-in-jail/100718>

WWL 2024: Keys to understanding / China

Links for general background information

Name	Quote Reference	Link	Last accessed on
Amnesty International 2022/23 China report	AI China 2022	https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/east-asia/china/report-china/	28 June 2023
BBC News China profile - updated 6 January 2023	BBC China profile	https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13017877	28 June 2023
Bertelsmann Transformation Index 2022 – covering 137 countries	BTI China Report 2022	https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/CHN	28 June 2023
CIA World Factbook China - updated 15 June 2023	World Factbook China	https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/china/	28 June 2023
Crisis24 China report (Garda World)	Crisis24 China report	https://crisis24.garda.com/insights-intelligence/intelligence/country-reports/china	28 June 2023
Economist Intelligence Unit China profile 2023	EIU China profile 2023	https://country.eiu.com/china	28 June 2023
FFP's Fragile States Index 2023 – covering 179 countries	FSI 2023 China	https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/	28 June 2023
Freedom House's 2023 Democracy index – covering 29 countries, China not included	Democracy Index 2023	https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores	
Freedom House's 2023 Global Freedom index – covering 210 countries	Global Freedom Index 2023 China	https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2023	28 June 2023
Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report – covering 70 countries	Freedom on the Net 2023 China	https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-net/2023	18 December 2023
Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/2022 – covering 170 countries	GIWPS 2021 China profile	https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/china/	28 June 2023
Girls Not Brides China report	Girls Not Brides China	https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/china/	28 June 2023
Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 - China country chapter	HRW 2023 China country chapter	https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/china-and-tibet	28 June 2023
Internet World Stats available in 2023	IWS 2023 China	https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#cn	28 June 2023
OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019 – covering 180 countries	OECD 2019 China	https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/CN.pdf	28 June 2023
RSF's 2023 World Press Freedom Index – covering 180 countries	World Press Freedom 2023 China	https://rsf.org/en/china	28 June 2023
Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index – covering 180 countries	CPI 2022 China	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/chn	28 June 2023
UNDP: Human Development Report China	UNDP HDR China profile	https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data/#countries/CHN	28 June 2023
US State Department's 2022 International Religious Freedom Report China	IRFR 2022 China	https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china/	28 June 2023
USCIRF 2023 China report – covering 17 CPC / 11 SWL	USCIRF 2023 China CPC	https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/China.pdf	28 June 2023
World Bank China data 2021	World Bank China data	https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfileId=b450fd57tbar=ydd=yinf=nzm=ncountry=CHN	28 June 2023
World Bank China overview - updated 20 April 2023	World Bank China overview	https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview	28 June 2023
World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook China - April 2023	Macro Poverty Outlook 2023 China	https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/c6aceb75bed03729ef4ff9404dd7f125-0500012021/related/mpo-chn.pdf	28 June 2023

Recent history

Xi Jinping assumed office as President in March 2013, although arguably his most powerful position is that of Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a position he has held since November 2012. He extended his presidency to a third term at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, which was [confirmed](#) by the country's parliament on 10 March 2023 (BBC News, 10 March 2023). While his first term in office saw a strong reduction in freedom in all sectors of society, his power became most visible in the abolition of the term-limit for serving as president in March 2018 which gives him a position of authority observers call the strongest since Mao Zedong. The new Politburo Standing Committee consists of close followers of Xi Jinping. At the same time, he faces major challenges, which became more apparent during his second term in office. First and foremost, the main task domestically is to keep economic growth on track, albeit at a lower level than in previous years. The COVID-19 pandemic and China's domestic zero COVID policy has put the country to the test and even saw very rare public protests in Shanghai and elsewhere (Reuters, 7 December 2022). In December 2022, the strict COVID measures were lifted, but the fact that China [did not publish](#) its quarterly cremation numbers of the last quarter of 2022 (SCMP, 15 June 2023) shows how sensitive and challenging the topic is for the leadership. However, there are a number of other issues which are also requiring attention:

- **The US-Chinese "decoupling" process:** This has continued with the Biden-administration in Washington. The problems here seem to be largely bi-partisan. The fact that the European Union announced a policy of "[de-risking](#)" (as opposed to "decoupling") illustrates that the challenges go beyond the USA (Reuters, 30 June 2023).
- **The Belt and Road Initiative:** Some of the challenges are related to identifying good projects and [implementing](#) them by working together with the recipient countries (AidData, 14 October 2022). However, the more China steps in as an international [lender of last resort](#), the more it will need to engage in debt restructuring negotiations far beyond the Belt and Road (World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper, March 2023).
- **The Russian/Ukraine war:** China is walking a tightrope, trying to uphold the principle of non-interference and state sovereignty, while supporting Russia without being seen as an official ally. What [one commentator](#) said in 2022 is still true, China is not particularly worried about what happens to Ukraine: 'For China, if Russia wins, that's great because China gains a stronger ally. If Russia loses, that is also great because China gains a vassal state, which is the second-largest nuclear power in the world. So I think people in the West, in Washington especially, want to see how China is going to lose in this. But in the Chinese framing, it's about how China is winning in this' (Grid News, 15 September 2022). At the same time, the events in Russia and the Ukraine are watched closely, even more so after the now deceased Wagner group leader, Prigozhin, staged his (ultimately aborted) [march](#) to Moscow in June 2023 (Reuters, 24 June 2023).
- **Foreign policy:** For instance, issues concerning the South China Sea, Taiwan, India and North Korea.
- **Population statistics:** China is having to prepare for both a falling population level and an ageing population, as the official population number actually fell for the first time in 60 years (see below: *Political and legal landscape*).

The Church in China is increasingly being affected by the state's much more unified approach of actively interfering with and dominating church affairs (instead of simply acting as a background administrator, as previously). This is happening regardless of whether the churches involved are state-approved or non-registered. Restrictions still come in indirect ways, such as the demand to include Communist ideology and rhetoric in teaching and sermons, but the focus is now clearly on limiting the space in which churches can operate: They are under pressure to adapt their ministry, are more closely watched and some are being simply closed down. Online space has also been restricted by new regulations coming into force in March 2022. Christian ministers have to register at an online platform and in the province of Zhejiang, a pilot project started in which all religious venues are required to show the Communist hammer and sickle at their entrances (see below: *Religious landscape*). Since the Christian community is arguably one of the largest organized social forces not controlled by the Communist authorities, it is natural that Christians are generally regarded with suspicion by them, especially since religion in general is seen as something which should be overcome by Communism. The steady stream of ever more tightening regulations on religion which began on 1 February 2018 has extended into the WWL 2024 reporting period. These regulations provide the authorities with the legal provisions for strict guidance and intervention.

Cardinal Joseph Zen, who is still facing trial (see: [China - Full Country Dossier, December 2022](#), pp.10-11) was allowed to travel to the Vatican to participate in the funeral for late Pope emeritus Benedict XVI; he also [met Pope Francis](#) on 6 January 2023 (UCA News, 10 January 2023).

On 18 January 2023, Pastor Allan Keung Ka-Wai was among six people [arrested](#) for producing and selling a book with allegedly seditious content (UCA News, 20 January 2023).

In May 2023, China Christian Council, the TSPM and the Christian Council of Hong Kong jointly held a symposium on the [Sinicization](#) of Christianity (News and Views, HKCC, 2nd Quarter 2023).

Political and legal landscape

The Communist Party (CCP) has tightened its grip on society (including all religious activities) and increasingly uses Maoist rhetoric and ideology in order to keep citizens in line. One of the biggest challenges China faces is its need for structural reforms: Both the demographic path the country is on and the increasing inequality (despite claims of poverty eradication) demand new answers (see below: *Economic landscape* and *Social and cultural landscape*). The economy was already slowing down before the arrival of COVID-19, but the strict domestic zero COVID policy and the continued US-Chinese decoupling process have made things worse. The CCP has its hands full trying to fulfill the tacitly agreed social contract of trading a lack of freedom for growing prosperity. However, the main CCP goal is not to bring happiness to the Chinese people or bring them prosperity, but first and foremost to stay in power. For this goal, they are also willing to reverse seemingly unchallengeable policies like zero COVID almost over night, even at the risk of citizens learning that people's actions like the "[A4 protests](#)" in November 2022 manage to change political considerations (PRC Leadership Watch, 1 March 2023). Consequently, the Polit Bureau Standing Committee announced that its dynamic COVID-19 policy represents a "[miracle](#) in the history of human civilization" (Neican, 17 February 2023). This declaration illustrates once more that Communist Party propaganda continues to trump absolutely everything.

The policy of severe lockdown-measures, suspended overnight in December 2022, did not prevent a wave of infections among the population. It is unclear whether it is justified to speak of a '[catastrophe](#)' hitting China, as some observers have done (Foreign Affairs, 16 February 2023), since statistics coming from China are often either non-existent or seriously flawed, but all estimates agree that at least one to 1.5 million people died from COVID-related causes. In addition, the Foreign Affairs article reported that, according to data from the National Health Commission, deaths caused by cerebrovascular and cardiovascular diseases in urban areas suddenly increased in 2020–2021 by 700,000 in comparison to 2019 levels. Although the cause is uncertain, that is a soberingly large number, even taking into account the sheer size of China's population.

Even if numbers can always be debated and doubted, it seems safe to say that citizens of China did not feel that they were experiencing a miracle in the WWL 2024 reporting period. As stated above (in: *Recent history*), the cremation numbers for the fourth quarter of 2022 have not been published. However, in what looks like a slip which was quickly rectified, official [cremation numbers](#) for the 1st quarter of 2023 in the province of Zhejiang were online for a short period of time (Reuters, 18 July 2023). According to those numbers, cremations increased by 70%, compared to the 1st quarter of 2022. If extrapolated, experts say that the estimated 1.5 million

excess deaths due to COVID-19 and the sudden change in the Zero-COVID-policy are backed up by these numbers. It should also be kept in mind that Zhejiang is a wealthy province with a comparably well-developed health system.

1) The repeated emphasis on Communist ideology is deemed necessary for staying in control

The CCP's main method for reaching the overarching goal of staying in control is to repeatedly emphasize Communist ideology. There is rarely a public statement or meeting in which the importance of heeding Communist values is not mentioned. This has been an emphasis from the beginning of President Xi's rule in 2012, but really took off when his name and ideas were officially [incorporated](#) into the CCP's Constitution (under the title "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era") at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 (Washington Post, 24 October 2017). A change in the Constitution made him the first leader since Mao Zedong to be able to extend his state leadership beyond the two-term limit.

The newly released update of the 'Working Procedures for the State Council' shows where all Chinese Communist ideology is heading: With [references](#) to Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and the ideologies of former presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao deleted, 'Xi Jinping Thought' has become the single measuring rod for all government policies (Radio Free Asia, 29 March 2023). Although universities have dedicated whole academic centers for studying 'Xi Jinping Thought', and the first center abroad has been opened in [Moscow](#) (SCMP, 2 July 2023), the basics are not that complicated: Having predominantly Communist Party members and civil servants in mind, it boils down to the understanding that whoever does not toe the Party line closely, is in high danger of being replaced. And whichever groups do not embrace Communist ideology (e.g., most churches), they risk getting into serious trouble at various levels; at the very least they will be given a strict reminder of Communist principles. While President Xi has been described as the 'core' of the Party in countless articles, one challenge is to embed Xi Jinping's thinking into the hearts and minds of all citizens and this is where much effort is being made, for instance, through media and censorship (see below: *Technological landscape*). At least 37 universities have set up a [course](#) on "Introduction to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era" (China Scope, 6 October 2020). Academia is not just following President Xi but is also becoming increasingly [nationalistic](#) (China Digital Times, 15 December 2020) and the room for debate is [shrinking](#) (Merics, 2 July 2021). (Liberal) [dissenters](#) still exist, but they must be very careful how they express their opinions (CSIS, 10 February 2022).

At universities, guidelines and communiques issued by the Communist Party have constantly limited the space for independent research and academic discussion. According to a recently published study, [student informers](#) in the class rooms have an especially chilling effect on professors (China File, 13 March 2023). Other professors said that they do not mind that classes are recorded and have adapted their teaching accordingly. As one professor said: "I think Hu Shi [a diplomat and scholar of Republican-era China] once said, when a country talks about morality every day, this country is particularly immoral. I really feel the degeneration of this country now—this country is hopeless. As so many people have profited from such a degraded environment, they are very supportive of such a system. A bad environment is where good people cannot do good things, so that you can only fall."

In what observers have called the “[largest mass-education drive](#) since the Mao era” (Wall Street Journal, 15 June 2021), only the CCP's version of Chinese [history](#) is to be told and any dissenting voices are to be reported (Channel News Asia, 11 April 2021). The CCP guides teachers in what should be taught through the content of history textbooks, e.g., about the “century of humiliation” and the infallible role of the Party (MEMRI [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#), 7/8 June 2022). The “century of humiliation” is a time spanning from 1839 (marking China’s defeat in the first Opium War) up to the second Chinese-Japanese War ending in 1945. In this period, China was fragmented, lost almost all of its wars and was forced to accept concessions of territory and pay reparations. Students in today’s China are being taught that this time of bullying is finally over, and that China is taking back its rightful place in the world. All of this is, of course, only possible under the rule of the Communist Party which has saved China from this humiliation and is the sole guarantor that this will never happen again. Another example is a [new textbook](#) entitled ‘The Principles of Scientific Atheism’ which has been distributed in colleges and among Communist Party cadres (UCA News, 2 February 2022). In this book, the author claims to explain ‘What God is’ and prove that ‘God does not exist’. He goes on to discuss ‘The Gods and their Effects’ and finally sets out ‘The Communist Party’s Religious Theory and Religious Policy’. The author is Li Shen, one time Director of the Confucianism Research Office at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. This shows that Confucianism is seen as being more genuinely Chinese and more easily adaptable to Communism than other religions. Reportedly, Shen even saw Confucianism as a form of atheism.

The old term “[Socialist spiritual civilization](#)” has gained a new lease of life after being revived by Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping (Bitter Winter, 31 January 2023). He has introduced the “epic history of the CCP” as the source of spirituality needed by the Chinese people. The term ‘Socialist spiritual civilization’ re-appeared in a collection of recent speeches by Xi Jinping, published in January 2023. This book has been made mandatory reading at schools and for CCP members. The term itself was coined by Deng Xiaoping almost 30 years ago and was promoted by Jiang Zemin. It arose from the realization that gaining wealth alone is not sufficient for satisfying the population’s needs and for keeping CCP rule stable. Xi Jinping’s focus on the ‘epic history of the CCP’ as being the source of spirituality for modern China may fall flat, however. It is very likely that the average Chinese man and woman will not find this focus to be enough and will continue to look for spirituality elsewhere.

Party members are special targets: In order to help keep them in line with Communist doctrine and – more importantly – with Xi Jinping's thinking, the CCP [released a special app](#) (The Guardian, 15 February 2019). All Party members are required to complete lessons on the app and to stick to the [thoughts of Marx and Lenin](#) (Reuters, 27 February 2019). President Xi Jinping even claimed that ‘[Xi Jinping Thought](#) on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era’ is nothing less than 21st century Marxism (Trivium China, 28 February 2019). This is remarkable: No state leader has ever before dared to view his own political theory as an updated version of Karl Marx’s thought. Those apps are [monitoring and copying user data](#) as well (BBC News, 14 October 2019). With the fourth volume of Xi Jinping Thought (“The governance of China”) [published](#) in July 2022 (China Daily, 3 July 2022), more study sessions for cadres and aspiring party members have followed.

A [crucial channel](#) for implementing all these ideological terms and slogans are the so-called 'New Era Civilization Practice Centers' (China File, 31 January 2022). These have been developed since 2019 as neighborhood centers for encouraging citizens to "feel the warmth of the Party and the government", according to an explanation by The People's Daily. A 2019 Communist Party directive proposed that these centers should enlist 13% of permanent county residents to serve as volunteers. While the effectiveness of this policy is as unknown as the total number of volunteers, such a strategy may also serve the Party's goal of maintaining social stability and quenching the people's thirst for becoming active on social or political issues. According to the '2019 Implementation Plan' issued jointly by the Party's Central Propaganda Department and its Central Guidance Commission on Building Spiritual Civilization, the centers should model the kind of behavior the Party deems "civilized" and help "truly open up the last mile in terms of propagandizing to the masses, educating the masses, leading the masses, serving the masses". This aptly shows the main priorities: Propaganda and guidance come first; service last.

The Communist Party also keeps a close eye on what it calls 'telling the China story well'. The CCP recently expanded the section on Communist ideology in [state exams](#) for journalists (Radio Free Asia, 12 January 2023). Since accreditation has to be renewed every three years, this increased focus on ideology will soon be felt by all journalists, putting an even bigger question-mark on reporting coming out of China. However, with the new "[counter-espionage law](#)" introduced in 2023, the CCP calls upon all citizens to be vigilant and report suspicious behavior, not just special professional groups or party members (Reuters, 1 August 2023).

2) The president displays a great measure of self-confidence

The 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took place on 1 July 2021 and [Xi Jinping's speech](#) received well justified attention (BBC News, 1 July 2021). However, other speeches held by him around that time are just as revealing. Apart from the CCP's own brand of Chinese history, it was one particular phrase used by Xi Jinping in his anniversary speech which caught the attention of observers: "Anyone who tries to [bully, oppress, or enslave China] will find their head broken and blood flowing against a great wall of steel built with the flesh and blood of more than 1.4 billion Chinese people!" While it is true that the translation of idioms always has to be viewed with caution, the wording has been used before and it is clearly meant as a [warning](#) to both internal and external audiences (China Digital Times, 2 July 2021). Maybe less vivid than the 'wall of steel' picture, is another phrase Xi Jinping has frequently used in other speeches: "[Time and momentum are on our side](#)" (Merics, 9 July 2021). This slogan claims that the West is in irreversible decline, making way for China's equally unstoppable rise to glory.

The CCP and its leader have been sounding self-assured and assertive, along with a newly published Party History book, all serving to hype up the country's patriotic mood. The book follows how Chairman Mao made China 'rise up', the reformer Deng made the country 'rich' and now Xi Jinping is leading China to its historical destiny by making it 'strong', thus justifying his goal of absolute power. It cannot be expected that the country's strong economic development will automatically bring about more democratic freedom; this potential consequence (observed elsewhere) is more than outweighed by the country's [growing totalitarianism](#), as a country expert has shown (Minxin Pei, China: Totalitarianism's long shadow, Journal of Democracy, Volume 32 No.2, pp 5-21, 2 April 2021).

This increasing self-assurance received a blow when the Ukraine War began, which seems to have come as a surprise to the Communist leadership: It would most certainly have preferred not to have had to deal with an international conflict prior to a politically sensitive period with the upcoming 20th Party Congress and President Xi Jinping's unprecedented third term. Nevertheless, the CCP made the most of it in claiming its neutrality while benefiting on discounted oil and gas (notwithstanding other challenges mentioned below, see: *Economic landscape*). The government is watching the war closely, especially for lessons to be learned concerning the possible 're-unification' of Taiwan and on safeguarding against any dissent. Apart from that, as said before, the Communist Party stands to benefit from a weakened, however not defeated, Russia.

Another area where Xi Jinping displayed his self-confidence is in the new set up of Politburo and the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Once powerful [factions](#) like the Communist Youth League have been effectively sidelined and kept from positions of power (Reuters, 26 October 2022). While a generational change among CCP leaders is underway, the common denominators for almost all leaders promoted at national and provincial levels are either a [relationship](#) with Xi Jinping or a technocrat background, e.g. in China's aviation and space industry - or both (Asia Society, 26 May 2023).

The 25th anniversary of the handover of Hong Kong by the United Kingdom on 1 July 2022 was another significant event. Its importance was underlined by the fact that Chinese President Xi Jinping made his first trip 'abroad' since January 2020 to attend. He met with members of the policing services as a sign of "appreciation for restoring law and order after the turmoil of 2019" and claimed in his key speech that Hongkong had "[risen from the ashes](#)" (South China Morning Post, 30 June 2022). However, the outgoing unofficial Vatican envoy to Hong Kong, Monsignor Javier Herrera-Corona, had a different view. He told a gathering of 50 Catholic organizations in Hong Kong that the freedoms they had enjoyed for decades [were over](#) (Reuters 5 July 2022). He was quoted saying "Change is coming, and you'd better be prepared. Hong Kong is not the great Catholic beachhead it was." He warned that closer integration with China in coming years could lead to mainland-style restrictions on religious groups.

3) The CCP is making an assertive stand against (perceived) adversaries and neighboring countries

Coinciding with this newly found confidence is a much more assertive stance in the foreign policy realm. According to the classic Maoist view, there are friends of China who understand and accept what is being said by the CCP, and there are enemies who are hostile and insist on criticism, instead of learning about the inherent 'goodness' of the Communist Party's policies. It is worth reading the [translation](#) of a Politburo-speech (provided by Neican, 4 June 2021). An excerpt reads: "It is important to strengthen the propaganda and interpretation of the [CCP], and to help foreign peoples realize that the [CCP] is truly fighting for the happiness of the Chinese people and understand why the [CCP] is capable [of success], why Marxism works, and why socialism with Chinese characteristics is good."

Consequently, Communist Party foreign policy has continued to be something of a challenge to the country's competitors' and neighbors: Apart from the already mentioned tense relationship with the USA, the EU also sharpened its stance (see above: Recent history). After meeting for

consultations in mid-2022, the EU High Representative of Foreign Affairs was quoted as saying: “The dialogue was everything but a dialogue. In any case, it was a [dialogue of the deaf](#)” (CNN, 18 July 2022). NATO, too, declared China as a “[security challenge](#)” in its Strategic Concept, stating that Beijing's policies were challenging its “interests, security and values” (Al-Jazeera, 30 June 2022). This downward spiral in China's foreign policy has accelerated with the increasing bloc-building after the Ukraine war started.

The CCP has continued creating hard facts in a range of key areas of contention (see also below: *Security situation*):

- **South China Sea:** It was discovered that eight years ago China had already [trademarked](#) hundreds of South China Sea landmarks with Chinese names (Benar News, 13 April 2021). China has continued to show a strong physical presence in contested areas (for instance, in disputes with the Philippines, but also with Japan) and has introduced a new [Coastguard law](#) which would make it easier to use violence against foreign vessels intruding on its claimed national sovereignty (Benar News, 22 January 2021). While encounters between Chinese forces and foreign military ships and aircraft continued to be recorded in the WWL 2024 reporting period, the US government had already taken a significant step in publicly denouncing the [legality](#) of Chinese claims in the South China Sea (US State Department, 24 January 2022). With improving US-Philippines ties, China stepped up its efforts to test the latter's resolve by sending a flotilla of maritime military vessels to [contested islands](#) in the South China Sea (Jamestown Foundation, 19 May 2023). A report that China was continuing construction-work on the contested [Spratly Islands](#) has been challenged, but illustrates the highly tense situation (Benar News, 21 December 2022).
- **Tibet Autonomous Region:** Another tightening of the screw could be seen in the Tibet Autonomous Region, where a new “[Ethnic Unity Law](#)” has been implemented (RFA, 1 May 2020). Xi Jinping [visited](#) the province for the first time in his tenure in July 2021 to witness the progress these and other policies were making (AP News, 24 July 2021).
- **The Uighur minority in Xinjiang:** While the CCP continues to deny the scale of the crackdown against the Uighur minority in Xinjiang (despite all evidence to the contrary - see Jamestown's report on [coercive labor and forced displacement](#) published in March 2021, Human Rights Watch's article on [systematic suppression](#) published on 19 April 2021 and ASPI's report on how the repression is governed, published on 19 October 2021), in a rare report it was shown that even in Xinjiang [church buildings](#) have to be closed when they fail to follow the policy of Sinicization (China Aid, 23 February 2021). In the wake of the UNHCHR's visit to China and Xinjiang in May 2022 (see below: *Trends analysis*), another investigation called the “[Xinjiang Police Files](#)” was published, documenting the depth and breadth of the human rights violations against the Uighurs (Adrian Zenz, The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies Volume 3, 2022, pp 1-56). A possible signal for a coming re-orientation of policy could be seen in President Xi Jinping's visit to Xinjiang for the first time in eight years, when he emphasized the importance of [economic development](#). Just before that visit, in June 2022, Governor Chen Quanguo, who had been the architect and overseer of the crackdown against the Uighur minority, was replaced by a technocrat and economic specialist (Nikkei Asia, 16 July 2022). The policy of “[sinicizing mosques](#)” and other Islamic structures stretches beyond Xinjiang and extends to Hui Muslims living in Yunnan province and elsewhere (Deutsche Welle, 7 June 2023).

- **Border issues with India:** China and India made efforts to [disengage](#) and avoid further military conflicts along its highly disputed 3,500km border (in contrast to the year 2020 with the [stand-off](#) reported by The Diplomat on 15 May 2020). On 9 December 2022, another [clash](#) between Chinese and Indian forces along the Line of Actual Control took place, this time in the Tawang sector in the Indian State of Arunachal Pradesh (Jamestown, 19 January 2023).
- **Border issues with Bhutan:** China has claimed a large piece of [Bhutanese state territory](#) as its own, amounting to around 11% of the whole of Bhutan (The Diplomat, 6 July 2020). Apart from the delicate implications for tiny neighbor Bhutan, the true addressee of this claim seems to be India. Since the claimed territory would be an enclave with no direct connection to the rest of China, it would make the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh the next candidate to be disputed. In the meantime, China has been building complete village infrastructures on [Bhutanese territory](#), thus tacitly claiming ownership of land for the Tibet Autonomous Region (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021). China and Bhutan announced the [resumption](#) of border talks (The Diplomat, 18 November 2021), but so far, no new developments have been reported. China allegedly [accelerated](#) the construction process along its border with Bhutan (Jamestown Foundation, 11 February 2022). Both countries agreed to [continue](#) with negotiations trying to resolve their border dispute (India Times, 14 January 2023).
- **The Pacific Islands:** The Pacific Islands are going through a phase of [political disunity](#), potentially increasing the chances for China's influence to deepen (RSIS, 1 March 2021). Apart from the very relevant geostrategic implications, which cannot be dealt with here, these frictions also highlight how China is actively competing and winning more and more influence in this part of the world. China and the Solomon Islands concluded a number of diplomatic agreements, including an agreement on [police cooperation](#) (ABC News, 10 July 2023). China offered similar pacts to other countries in the region, too. The Solomon Islands said this should not be seen as a threat to the region. Highlighting the pressure under which especially leaders of small states can come, outgoing Micronesian President David Panuelo has [published a letter](#) written to the leaders of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) which gives a rare glimpse into China's "political warfare and grey zone activity", currently faced by small nations in particular (The Diplomat, 10 March 2023). While it may be somewhat exaggerated to call the letter a 'bombshell', it provides chilling details of how a Head of State has been openly followed, threatened and intimidated.

In one incident described in the letter, the Chinese embassy in Palikir simply ignored the FSM government's decision not to send a representative to a conference by making a private citizen of the country its fictitious representative. While [spying, offering bribes](#) and pressing the country into accepting support in the form of vaccines were the general tactics described (AP News, 13 March 2023), President Panuelo sums up what he calls a general theme as follows: 'The FSM says 'no', and our sovereignty is disrespected, with the PRC saying we have achieved a consensus when we have not.' This letter may be dismissed as an embittered farewell note from a disgruntled politician, voted out of office and now settling scores. Nevertheless, it gives a rare insight into the mindset with which the Chinese Communist Party views foreign countries, especially smaller ones. At an ASEAN meeting in

2010, then Foreign Minister Yang Yiechi famously [quipped](#): ‘China is a big country and you are small countries and that is a fact’ (Financial Times, 13 July 2016).

4) Social control tools reinforced during COVID 19 are here to stay

In a stark reminder that surveillance still depends on the human factor, a [report](#) entitled “Pandemic State-building: Chinese Administrative Expansion in the Xi Jinping Era” was published on 16 February 2023, in which law experts Yutian An and Taisu Zhang (from Princeton and Yale universities respectively) discuss how law enforcement and information collection were delegated by the government to local authorities to cope more effectively with the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that this shift of power down to a lower level is now permanent: “This transformation has centered on the two lowest levels of urban government—the “subdistrict” or “street” (“*jiedao*”), and below them, the “neighborhood community” (“*shequ*”) — both of which previously wielded very little coercive power, but are now perhaps the most salient and significant nodes of governmental power in Chinese social life. Through a massive campaign of legal and administrative empowerment, these two layers of government are now the first line of defense against any significant social problem. (Page 2)

Neighborhood-level organizations were originally created in China for delivering public services and for engaging in genuine consultation with residents. They retained a certain veneer of self-governance by having local officials elected by residents, although such elections could only take place under the strict supervision and control of higher levels of government (Page 27). Throughout the pre-COVID era, policies aimed at strengthening subdistrict governments or neighborhood-level organizations were consistently paired with the need to strengthen top-down oversight over them. As with any internal control mechanism inside the Chinese government, such supervision could work either through the ‘state’ or the ‘Communist Party’, and heavy use was made of both (Page 31).

The authors sum up the changes accelerated by COVID-19 by showing how neighborhood-level organizations were converted into “social control command centers” (Page 34) through an official document of empowerment: “In the very same document that emphasized public service provision, the State Council stated that neighborhood organizations should also beef up their policing capacity and enhance their ability to resolve basic disputes. In particular, they should make sure they had the capacity to deal with local incidents of domestic violence, drug use, cult activity, and any kind of “emergency situation”. (Page 46)

Although Christian churches are not generally categorized as ‘cult activity’, in a climate where pastors of unregistered churches are increasingly facing accusations of economic crimes, financial fraud or the catch-all crime of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ ([WWR, 13 March 2023](#)), it is easily imaginable how the subdistricts and neighborhood communities can feel empowered to deal with this problem as well, although the directive of collecting evidence for “fraud” and related crimes comes from the higher levels. However, with this empowerment come challenges as well. As of 2022, there were 8,980 subdistricts in China, with some ‘meta’-subdistricts overseeing a population of over 300,000 people. The authors take the well-known Haidian District in Beijing as an example: “To illustrate the sheer magnitude of the change, consider some numbers from Haidian District in Beijing: it contains some 3 million residents, spread across 29 subdistrict-level entities and nearly 700 neighborhoods. Each subdistrict had

perhaps 100-150 staff members, and most neighborhood organizations employed 10-20 staff, depending on size. All 29 subdistricts had to be trained in administrative law enforcement, and the nearly 700 neighborhoods all had to transition from largely benign but also largely powerless public service suppliers to real governance units overseeing the movement, health, and safety of a few thousand people". (Page 54)

In terms of neighborhood-level organizations, the numbers become even more impressive. There are a staggering 117,000 of them nationwide and the sheer cost of monitoring them, be it by state or Communist Party means, are exorbitant (Page 56). However, as security and the survival of the Communist Party is paramount, the latter is willing to bear these costs since they are seen as necessary.

Another indication of the sheer effort this undertaking demands can be seen in the [numbers for Yunnan province](#) provided by CSW on 10 May 2023. These impressive figures are based on a February 2023 report by the Yunnan provincial United Front Work Department (UFWD) and refer specifically to ethnic and religious management grids:

- A leadership team, headed by leaders of UFWD and an ethnic and religious affairs commission, consists of personnel from 29 departments/groups.
- All 16 prefecture-level administrative regions and 129 counties in Yunnan have ethnic and religious work departments as legal entities, and all 1,419 townships in the province have special ethnic and religious officers.

The province has been divided into 9,370 ethnic and religious management grids, with 1,227 coordinators in place, covering 86.4% of the province's 1,419 townships, and 12,473 grid officers (informants), covering 84.73% of the province's 14,721 villages/communities. All 'spots' that are considered to be risky, hidden, dangerous or weak with some ethnic and religious factors are comprehensively and regularly investigated. For the investigators, the effective transformation from "when something happens, go find the people responsible" to "people looking out for things that may go wrong" has been achieved.

Control is not working seamlessly and the human factor is not to be underestimated. However, social control will undoubtedly play an increasingly large role, for the sake of regime security. It is important to keep in mind that the UFWD also has many tasks in the domestic realm, not just abroad, and these are sometimes called the [lesser known activities](#) (ChinaFile, 28 September 2023). One observer quoted in the China File report explains: 'There's no clear distinction between domestic and overseas united front work. This is because the key distinction underlying the United Front is not between domestic and overseas groups, but between the CCP and everyone else'.

Gender perspective

In relation to gender, China's laws are - on paper - relatively balanced. [The Marriage Law](#) mandates that both parties must be consenting in entering a marriage (Article 4) and forced marriages are prohibited in [Article 44](#) of China's 1992 Revised Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women. Women have the same legal rights as men to be recognized as head of the household and both genders have equal rights in relation to divorce (Marriage Law, Article

31). China ratified the Convention on the Elimination of the Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1980 and in 2015 passed its first-ever national law to address domestic violence. Despite these positive legal provisions, gender inequalities persist, and the effective implementation of legal frameworks is lacking, partly inhibited by the longstanding influence of Confucian family principles. The government's hesitation in protecting women's rights, not found in its attitude towards critics, is believed to also play a significant role in the [trafficking of child brides](#) (Human Rights Watch, 7 June 2022). Furthermore, the domestic violence law does not cover all situations, such as divorced or separated couples, or instances of sexual or financial abuse ([Asia Foundation](#), April 2020). According to [media reports](#), cases of domestic violence surged amid the COVID-19 lockdowns – [tripling](#) in February 2020 alone – which critics say points to the ineffectiveness of the 2015 law (The Diplomat, 6 April 2020; Usta et al, August 2021).

Military service is [technically obligatory](#) for men, with a service obligation of two years (World Population Review, accessed 7 June 2023). Due to the size of the population, however, this is rarely enforced as there are usually enough volunteers. This is likely to remain the status quo, considering the current economic climate and the increasing number of jobseekers ([The New York Times](#), 19 May 2023).

Religious landscape

China: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	96,700,000	6.7
Muslim	25,965,620	1.8
Hindu	20,010	0.0
Buddhist	244,115,030	16.8
Ethno-religionist	59,711,932	4.1
Jewish	3,032	0.0
Bahai	7,377	0.0
Atheist	95,068,146	6.5
Agnostic	465,294,250	32.0
Other	465,242,174	32.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)
(Adapted according to OD-estimate)

As a Communist country, China is - at least in theory - against all religions, since Marxist teaching states that “religion is the opium of the people”. According to its Constitution, China is atheist. But, as in all Communist countries, the government finds that citizens often tend to be religious and so it tries to use traditional religions and ethics as a means of controlling and steering society. Therefore, traditional Chinese culture in general (and Confucianism in particular) are praised as being truly Chinese, the message being: “If one needs to have a faith, it should be Confucian”, a move which brings around 40% of the population on the side of the government. And since Confucianism is more a philosophy than a religion, it is quite flexible and can accept all kinds of rulers, including Communist. Confucianism can thus “serve as an ethical resource for the state constitution, as well as a resource for [social governance](#)” (Journal of Law and Religion 35, No 1, Abstract, see also pp. 138-148). As one country observer said: The goal of the CCP is to co-opt religion into Communist society.

At the same time, the Chinese government is conducting a pilot project in selected regions, mobilizing citizens into reporting crimes (including illegal Christian activities) by giving them rewards. The strong warnings against religious groups are bearing fruit: Citizens organized in neighborhood committees are beginning to regard religious groups as ‘troublemakers’ and do not want them in their neighborhood. As always in China, this sentiment is not felt in the whole country. Xu Xiaohong, head of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China, said in June 2021 at an exhibition in Shanghai entitled ‘One Heart, One Virtue, One Path: Chinese Christianity Loves the Party, the Country, and Socialism Theme Exhibition’: “History fully proves that without the CCP, there is no religious policy that is supported by both believers and non-believers, there is no social environment for the healthy development of religion in China, and there is no good situation where all religions in China can live in harmony.” (Bitter Winter, 29 June 2021).

It may be more accurate to use the term “[Chinification](#)” instead of “Sinification”, as the real goal is not to gain cultural uniformity but to ensure political conformity and obedience to China’s government (China Source, 3 February 2020). In possibly the strongest sign that Sinicization is not really about forcing Chinese culture into religion, but about harmonizing religious expression with Communist ideology, the beliefs one could describe as being the most original Chinese religion, Taoism, have not been spared from being ‘Sinicized’: The Taoist head office held its first [forum on Sinicization](#) in July 2023 (Bitter Winter, 8 August 2023). In a pilot scheme in Zhejiang province, religious venues have to bear the Communist signage (see above: *Recent history*).

Tibetan Buddhism and Islam (especially in the province of Xinjiang) face particularly harsh restrictions since their activities are widely seen as being political, since both regions have been the scene of (or are still seen as being at risk spawning) independence movements, some of them acting violently against the authorities. Many observers refer to Xinjiang as a police state: When the existence of re-education camps for hundreds of thousands of citizens could no longer be hidden, the authorities simply stated that these camps serve vocational and other training purposes and tried to win over international opinion by giving carefully guided tours. According to local sources, Christian converts have also been run through these programs. The small numbers of Christian converts within the minority religions struggle to survive as they are under pressure from both government and the surrounding culture, but even Han Chinese Christians

are hindered from practicing their faith and keep their Christian meetings out of sight in these regions. Consequently, Xinjiang has been called a "[testing ground](#)" for the Communist Party's religious policies (Made in China Journal, 2 July 2021). There are other ethnic minority religions in existence, but they are not the focus of government repression.

The "Sinicization" (or "Chinafication", as some call it) of churches continues. Since 1 February 2020, [new rules](#) govern the organization of religion, its rites, selection of leaders and hiring of staff (International-LaCroix, 7 February 2020). Due to the new regulations on religion and its intensified implementation (both in depth and in breadth), numerous reports are emerging of raids and closures on churches - experienced by both TSPM and house-churches all over the country. This iron grip involves the confiscation of property and Christian materials (including Bibles), raids, fines and the arrest of church leaders. The February 2020 rules have since been updated and extended by regulations pertaining to religious ministers, which came into force on 1 May 2021. USCIRF published a report saying that the seven state-controlled national religious organizations help the Communist Party in [limiting freedom of religion](#) and in implementing the policy of "Sinicization" (USCIRF, 29 December 2022). On the local level, "[Special Committees](#) to Advance the Sinicization of Christianity" are built (China Aid, 25 April 2023, with an example from Qingdao, Shandong province).

All aspects of church life are now under the guidance of the Religious Affairs Office and the Communist Party. In a speech, delivered by a high-ranking member of the Communist Party in November 2019, the Ethnic Groups and Religion Committee of the Chinese National People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) was asked to [reinterpret and translate](#) (the original language said "re-annotate") holy scriptures (such as the Bible) guided by Socialist core values (China Scope, 1 January 2020). The goal seems to be to cultivate researchers of the Bible, who will work on an exegesis/annotation of the Bible based on Socialist core values.

Another example of this 'guidance' being imposed can be seen in Shandong province (and increasingly elsewhere) where churches are being forced to display government-prepared posters with verses from the Bible illustrating the twelve core principles of Socialism, namely:

- Prosperity
- Democracy
- Civility
- Harmony
- Freedom
- Equality
- Justice
- Rule of law
- Patriotism
- Dedication
- Integrity
- Friendship.

These same principles are being incorporated into training courses for church leaders and preachers. Another example is an [ethics textbook](#) published for secondary vocational schools, which has changed the ending of the Biblical account of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (to be found in the New Testament, Gospel of John, Chapter 8) (UCA News, 22 September 2020). In the Communist version of the story, Jesus does not protect and forgive the adulteress, instead he waits for the Pharisees to leave and then stones her himself, saying: 'I too am a sinner. But if the law could only be executed by men without blemish, the law would be dead'. Since schoolbooks have to go through a highly scrutinized process before being published (and as the publisher is the government-run University of Electronic Science and Technology Press), the Chinese authorities must have seen and approved this version. While all these examples may be individual cases, they deserve to be closely watched.

All kinds of cults are active in China, some of which may have Christian roots, but which seriously deviate from core Christian teaching. One of the best known is "Eastern Lightning" or "Church of Almighty God" (CAG), which believes that Jesus Christ has been born again in the form of a Chinese woman. The strong missionary zeal of the CAG has caused the authorities to act firmly against such groups which are referred to as "[xie jiao](#)", literally translated: "heterodox cults", a term already used in ancient, feudal China (Bitter Winter, 9 August 2018). According to a country expert, the authorities today do not distinguish between *xie jiao* and house churches anymore, they simply enforce the regulations by identifying any such gatherings as "illegal religious groups".

Due to rapid urbanization, the Chinese church developed from being basically a rural-style to an urban-style church with large congregations and all the opportunities and problems that accompanied such a development. Apart from the long working hours required in modern industry (which challenges the traditional forms of meeting), rising prices also pose difficulties. As the cost of living has risen considerably in recent years, churches have discovered the need to [financially care for pastors](#) and their families (China Source, 21 March 2017). According to the China Religion Survey 2015, the monthly [average income](#) of a church leader has been the equivalent of 70 USD, with 41% lacking any pension system (Bitter Winter, 4 August 2020). Despite all challenges, there is a [growing movement](#) among China's churches focusing on overseas mission (The Diplomat, 4 July 2018). The circumstances may get more difficult, but Christians are determined to spread the Christian faith, even when they have to [split](#) into cell groups or find other ways of practicing worship and fellowship (China Source, 18 June 2021).

According to one expert's [observation](#) (Professor Timothy Cheek writing in CCP Watch on 17 June 2022), the Communist Party's need to dominate everything, does not come without challenges: "Probably the greatest ideological success of the CCP in the past 20 years has been to identify the nation with the Party and to get most people to believe that even with its faults, there's no alternative to the Party to take care of China's national interests." This singlemindedness (also called monism), whereby the CCP declares that it alone must be responsible for organizing every aspect of Chinese society, collides with the people's need for some kind of spiritual foundation: "On what basis do you not just cheat everyone and assume everyone's trying to cheat you? That's a pretty nasty, brutish, and short way to live, and China's intellectuals don't like it. That's why you see the revival of Confucianism, because combined with a sort of nationalism that responds in understandable ways to the underlying racism of Western

liberal theory, as they experience it and as the more radical colleagues in my university put it.”

When asked about other sources of ideology in China today and if the Party-state has succeeded in stamping out other potential sources, such as religion or foreign political ideology, the answer is not surprising for anyone who has been watching China or has read Ian Johnson’s seminal book “The souls of China”: “Clearly not. There are a number of competing belief systems in China today. One of the great failures of the Communist Party, including in their own eyes, is their inability to eradicate religion. One of the weaknesses of the Chinese Communist state, perhaps its Achilles heel, is its inability to handle religion. The horrors of what they’re doing in Xinjiang and their recurrent spats with Chinese Christians are so unnecessary from an agnostic political science point of view, but the Party feels challenged, because religion is another ideology.”

Professor Cheek considers that a potential solution would be to simply add religion as a “Fourth Represent” to the so-called “Three Represents” (in Chinese: *San ge daibiao*) which the Central Committee formulated as the foundation of the CCP’s social political theory in the 1990s. The Three Represents are:

1. The CCP represents the advanced forces of production;
2. The CCP represents the advanced forces of culture;
3. The CCP represents all the people of China.

However, to add “4. The CCP represents selected religions in China” would be impossible since the Communist goal is ultimately to eradicate religion and not co-opt it. Professor Cheek states: “Now, if they can do the Three Represents and say capitalists are fine in the Party, they could get a Fourth Represent. They could find a way to accommodate religion. I know a couple of Muslim Party cadres, and that’s what they want. They would be happy to be Maoists and Muslims. The Party won’t let them. It’s an Achilles heel.”

In a concluding remark, Professor Cheek shares a surprising observation, saying that the Chinese people expect the government to “talk like a church”: “Xi Jinping cannot tell people what to think and they will do it like a bunch of automatons. This is not the Borg. But people need to know why they’re doing things. There’s a broad expectation in China that the government ought to talk like a church. Chinese politics is about values and morality. Western politics at least used to be about interests. No wonder we misunderstand each other.”

Economic landscape

According to UNDP Human Development Report China:

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 16,057
- **Multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people in multidimensional poverty is 3.9%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 17.4% The rate of people living below the national poverty line is 1.7%
- **Remittances:** 0.13% of the national GDP

According to World Bank China data:

- China is classified as an upper middle income country
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 18,188
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 3% in 2022, but 8.4% in 2021. The country's [accumulated debt-to-GDP ratio is 263%](#) as of the 3rd quarter of 2021 and there are other internal and external risks as well (Jamestown, 18 November 2022)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 6% (2019)

The days of very strong economic growth in China would seem to be over. For many years, China had recorded a double-digit economic growth, but in 2019, the growth rate hit a [29 year-low](#) at 6.1% (Fortune, 17 January 2020). Because of the already slowing growth and the strongly felt impact of the COVID-19 crisis, in 2020 the Communist Party did [not set a GDP growth target](#) for the first time in 30 years (The Economist, 30 May 2020). Likewise, in the long-expected 14th Five Year Plan, the Communist Party did not set a concrete growth rate to be achieved, but instead repeated a slogan (which echoes far beyond the economic sphere) about "[getting China's house in order](#)". This should be achieved by "proactively building a more favorable external environment" (MacroPolo, 10 November 2020). It is, however, not just the COVID-19-fallout which is slowing the economy down; [other reasons](#) for this - and for not setting a numeral GDP target - are the US-China strategic rivalry, the Russian-Ukraine war and the demise of the country's real estate sector (PRC Leadership Watch, 6 December 2022).

The authorities targeted tech companies with restrictions and fines in 2020 and 2021 and although this policy seemed to have been eased, these actions may be signs of what "getting China's house in order" means. In a reminder that such policies tend to come in waves, in July 2022 ride-hailing app Didi Global was [fined a record](#) 1.2 billion USD for several law breaches, additionally, it had already been banned from the Chinese app market (CNN, 21 July 2022). Another reason to get the house in order is corruption, despite all efforts by Xi Jinping and his anti-corruption campaign, China is living through what one observer called the "[Gilded Age](#)" (Foreign Affairs, 24 June 2021). In what was seen as a policy for the limitless fining of tech companies, Tencent and Ant Group were [fined](#) more than 1 billion USD in July 2023 (Bloomberg, 7 July 2023).

While China's GDP, which is the second largest in the world, is set to overtake the USA's by around 2030, it should be noted that there are [two sorts of GDP statistics](#) (Project Syndicate, 30 April 2021) and it is most common for the total GDP to be discussed. But this is a poor indicator for the situation of ordinary Chinese people in everyday life. Most economists therefore care more about China's per capita GDP, or income per person, than the aggregate measure. China's per capita GDP in 2022 was \$12,720, placing the country between Costa Rica (\$13,199) and Palau (\$12,084). Its per capita GDP in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms – with income adjusted to take account of the cost of living – was \$18,188. This is still below the global average of \$18,381 (2019; more recent data was not available) and puts China 72nd in the world, between Belarus (\$19,132) and Thailand (\$17,507).

There are also [considerable economic variations](#) between the provinces (Asia News, 5 November 2019). Roughly speaking, the urban and coastal areas in the east are far better off than the rural west and hinterland. Guangdong province, bordering Hongkong, is by far the wealthiest region.

Seen as a total, China has what one observer called a [debt hang-over](#), which is mainly a local problem, meaning that local and provincial governments are far more in debt than the nation state as such (Macro Polo, 2 July 2021; this article provides data per province). The continuing property sector crisis and the uncertainty about the use of "LGFV" (Local government financial vehicles) have [made matters worse](#) and raised the stakes for an intervention from Beijing (MacroPolo, 22 February 2023). China's debt [increased](#) between 2012 and 2022 by 37 trillion USD and the most vulnerable borrowers are state-owned enterprises (SOE), real estate developers and LGFV (PRC Leadership Monitor, 1 March 2023).

[Food self-sufficiency](#) still remains an important issue (Jamestown, 7 June 2021) and the CCP called for efforts to [secure food supplies](#) and citizens were advised to stock up on food and other supplies as the winter months of 2022 approached (Bloomberg, 23 November 2021). Apart from ideological alignment, food security may be one additional reason why China is siding with Russia in the Ukraine war. According to one [source](#), China produces approximately 93 percent of its own wheat, but the remaining 7 percent is still critical to its food security. China consumes all it has, increasingly feels the challenges from the climate change discussion, and is banning the sale of wheat for animal feed (The Diplomat, 30 March 2022). In the Diplomat article, the author adds:

"China plans to increase its Russian imports, saying that the door is 'wide open' for Russian wheat. Therein lies China's dilemma. Were even 5 percent of the Chinese population to be deprived of food made from wheat [e.g. China's other staple food, noodles; ed.], due to China's recently reinstated imports from Russia improbably being shut off by the Chinese government in a nod to sanctions, that translates into over 72 million people in China missing out on a staple food. That in turn would not only be a humanitarian disaster but also a political one for the CCP. If oil imports are not sufficient to meet demand, people may get ornery, but they will not starve to death. If food imports dry up, and people begin to be hungry, that would incite social protest and worse. ... Almost 200 million people in China today are over 65. That means that the Great Famine [1959-1961] is held within the living memory of a significant portion of the Chinese population, approximately 13.5 percent, according to Chinese figures. Little haunts China more than the idea of impending hunger. As such, China will go to great lengths to protect the stability and security of its food supply. If that means flouting international sanctions against Russia, expect China to do so. No sanction on China could be worse from its perspective than a threat to its food supply and the consequences of not having enough."

Due to the ongoing Chinese-US decoupling process, the Communist Party announced a "dual circulation" economic policy, which mainly means that China is turning more inwards, relying more on its [own strength](#) and abilities and, in economic terms, local demand (PRC Leadership tracker, 1 December 2021). This also includes a general strengthening of state-owned enterprises and the active involvement of Party committees in [private companies'](#) policies (Macro Polo, 16 December 2020). One observer summed up the trend as follows: "China Inc." is becoming "[CCP Inc.](#)" (PRC Leadership tracker, 1 December 2020). At the same time, all these efforts come with an ideological component, as could be seen in the introduction of "[common prosperity](#)", which is explicitly meant to shape the spirit of the people, too (Neican, 18 October 2021). One observer said that this policy is missing the [redistributive elements](#) necessary for sincerely improving income gaps, imbalances and challenges coming from demography and a

high number of migrant workers (PRC Leadership Monitor, 1 March 2023). And within China, experts are saying that in order to boost domestic consumption and find a new economic balance, [families](#) need to be subsidized (Pekingology, 15 July 2023). Meanwhile, migrant workers seem to be needed less and less, especially as the construction boom is (slowly) waning, and migrant workers see [few options](#) and a dark future ahead of them (The New York Times, 1 November 2023).

Internationally, China has become the fourth-largest provider of Foreign Direct Investments in the world according to [UNCTAD](#) and invests in such diverse regions and countries as Central Asia, Pakistan, Africa and Latin America (UNCTAD World Investment Report 2020). In 2022, China provided [145 billion USD](#) in Outbound Direct Investment, a 5.2% increase compared to 2021 (State Council, 10 February 2023). In a both economic and geo-strategic move, China has built up what observers call its "string of pearls" or "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) - a network of ports and commercial facilities along the coast all the way from China to Kenya, Sudan and Europe, of which ports like the (yet to be completed) Pakistani port of Gwadar are a very important part.

Such investments come with a risk, as can be seen in the [attack](#) against a hotel in Kabul, popular with Chinese citizens (Reuters, 12 December 2022). This attack triggered a wave of [anti-Chinese jihadist propaganda](#) in January 2023 (Jamestown Foundation, 6 January 2023) and led the Chinese Foreign Ministry to recommend its citizens and organizations to [leave the country](#) (Reuters, 13 December 2022). A [white paper](#) on foreign aid, released in January 2021, tries to keep the balance between *yi* (public good) and *li* (self-interest) (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 18 January 2021). The speed of investment has slowed down and the Communist Party is also facing increasing levels of scrutiny when applying for projects abroad. There are voices calling for a better [restructuring](#) and reorganization of the different Chinese aid initiatives (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 20 October 2021).

Additional reasons for the Communist Party to further develop the Belt-Road-Initiative (BRI) are to connect China's landlocked provinces to the sea and to keep the economy and surplus production running. However, criticism from abroad is being levelled at China for setting high interest rates for loans and requiring large numbers of Chinese workers to work in project countries. Apart from Pakistan, the BRI runs through other contested and insecure areas like Shan and Rakhine states in Myanmar. While China still did not officially recognize the military regime, it is continuing to [develop](#) the China Myanmar Economic Corridor with the country's military rulers, as long as the local situation is sufficiently stable to do so (The Diplomat, 1 February 2023). Finally, in what can also be seen as an attempt at diversification, China joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership ([RCEP](#) - a free trade agreement between ASEAN states and six of its partners) which it would also like to use to boost BRI progress (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 30 November 2020). While in terms of volume, the foreign trade with [North Korea](#) is negligible, it should be noted that the borders slowly reopened and goods (as well as coal) have been crossing the border again in March 2022 (38North, 23 March 2022). China is also willing to take risks, as was shown in the opening of a new land route for cargo transports with [Afghanistan](#) (Memri, 14 July 2023).

One of China's latest projects is the setting up of an international development bank called the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which has gained support from around the world despite opposition from the USA and Japan. Although its lending is still limited compared to other international development banks, China is likely to gain more diplomatic leverage. In general, by using 'soft power', China is increasing its influence around the world and its self-confidence. On the positive side, China's expanding influence presents opportunities for Chinese churches to become more active in ministry and mission. However, where countries feel threatened by China's growing power, there could be reactions causing the overseas mission work carried out by Chinese churches to be hindered.

According to the World Bank China overview:

- **Economic growth:** “China’s high growth based on investment, low-cost manufacturing and exports has largely reached its limits and has led to economic, social, and environmental imbalances. Reducing these imbalances requires shifts in the structure of the economy from manufacturing to high value services, from investment to consumption, and from high to low carbon intensity. Over the past few years, growth has moderated in the face of structural constraints, including declining labor force growth, diminishing returns to investment, and slowing productivity growth. The challenge going forward is to find new drivers of growth while addressing the social and environmental legacies of China’s previous development path. China’s rapid economic growth exceeded the pace of institutional development, and there are important institutional and reform gaps that China needs to address to ensure a high-quality and sustainable growth path. The role of the state needs to evolve and focus on providing a clear, fair and stable business environment, strengthening the regulatory system and the rule of law to further support the market system, as well as ensuring equitable access to public services to all citizens.”
- **COVID-19 and GDP:** “Following China’s swift reopening after the COVID-19 outbreaks in late 2022, GDP growth is expected to rebound to 5.1 percent in 2023, from 3 percent in 2022. Growth will be led by a recovery in demand, particularly for services. Investment is expected to remain robust, supported by slower but sustained growth in infrastructure and manufacturing investment, as well as the gradual stabilization of property investment. Net exports are expected to weigh on growth, due to softer external demand coupled with a modest acceleration in import growth driven by the increase in domestic demand. To support the ongoing recovery fiscal policy is expected to remain expansionary, albeit less so than in 2022. Monetary policy is likely to be relatively accommodative, and policy easing in the property sector will be maintained in 2023. Over the medium term, China’s economy continues to confront a structural slowdown. Potential growth has been on a declining trend, reflecting adverse demographics, tepid productivity growth, and rising constraints to a debt-fueled, investment-driven growth model. Structural reforms are needed to reinvigorate the shift to more balanced high-quality growth.”

A banking [scandal](#) emerged in April 2022, involving four rural banks in Henan province; it points however to problems in the rural banking system at a deeper level (Reuters, 12 July 2022). It could have serious implications not just for provincial authorities, but also for the central authorities. Around 400,000 customers who had invested in banking products from the four banks (and another one in Anhui province) were blocked from accessing and withdrawing their

savings from April 2022 onwards. While the products had often been bought [online](#) and categorized as “savings”, they may have been better categorized as “wealth management” products (SupChina, 15 July 2022) which are not covered by a state-wide insurance fund. Angry customers took to the streets and demanded that their “China dream” should not be shattered. Although the protestors did not formulate their demands as criticism of the central authorities and even used official government catchwords like “[China dream](#)”, another protest in July 2022 was violently attacked by unidentified assailants dressed in white (BBC News, 12 July 2022). Finally, however, the authorities did announce that depositors would get back at least part of their savings.

Another reminder of the current economic difficulties and the need for the authorities to react effectively is the ongoing housing and mortgage crisis, which arguably has a far greater impact than the bank scandal mentioned above. Buyers of residential housing projects across China are beginning to [withhold mortgage payments](#) until the houses are finished: “By July 12 [2022], buyers of 35 residential projects across 22 cities in China said they had decided to stop mortgage repayments, according to a report by Citigroup Inc. on Wednesday, despite the fact that it could mar their personal credit rating” (RFA, 14 July 2022). Particularly interesting in this is the last remark, as a bad personal credit rating can have far-reaching implications for their ability to act in the economic sphere (e.g., for buying and selling) and even in the social sphere (where a bad credit rating may become public and lead to neighbors and friends distancing themselves). The mortgage boycotts have reportedly spread to include [hundreds of thousands of home-owners](#) across China (Foreign Affairs, 30 August 2022), and the Central government is struggling to curb the ripple effects.

Christians have also been participating in China's breath-taking economic development over the last decades. At the same time, it has been a challenge for churches to serve the millions of migrant workers (and assist them when facing social difficulties) and to adjust to the new environment in the cities, which is so different to life in impoverished rural areas. Another phenomenon has been that many well-educated middle-class intellectuals have been drawn to Christianity as well, among them many lawyers and university lecturers.

Gender perspective

Overall, women remain economically more vulnerable than men in China. The gender gap in education has significantly improved over recent decades, such that girls significantly outnumber boys in higher-education enrolment (World Bank, China data). Despite this progress in China's education system, women face disadvantages in the workplace. As of 2022, the [labor force participation](#) rate for men was 72.6%, compared to 61.1% for women (World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2023). Employers have [openly favored men](#) for promotion and high-responsibility jobs, in part eager to avoid the cost of paying for maternity leave, according to a report by the New York Times (NYT, 16 July 2019). Furthermore a Human Rights Watch report revealed that 11% of civil service job adverts specify ‘[men only](#)’ (HRW, 29 April 2020). These problems all play a role in a declining population level (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*).

Social and cultural landscape

According to UNDP HDR China and World Factbook China:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Han Chinese 91.1%, other ethnic minorities 8.9% (includes Zhang, Hui, Manchu, Uighur, Miao, Yi, Tujia, Tibetan, Mongol, Dong, Buyei, Yao, Bai, Korean, Hani, Li, Kazakh, Dai) 7.1% (2021 est.)
- **Main languages:** Standard Chinese or Mandarin (official; Putonghua, based on the Beijing dialect), Yue (Cantonese), Wu (Shanghainese), Minbei (Fuzhou), Minnan (Hokkien-Taiwanese), Xiang, Gan, Hakka dialects, minority languages
- **Urbanization rate:** 64.6%
- **Literacy rate:** 96.8% (2018; of adults of 15 years and older)
- **Mean years of schooling:** 8.1 years.
- **Health and education indicators:** Per 10,000 people, China has 22.3 physicians and 43 hospital beds, the pupil teacher ratio in elementary school is 16:1

According to the World Bank China overview:

- **Population/Age distribution:** The percentage of citizens under 14 years of age is 17%; the percentage above 65 years of age is 13.9%
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 98.3% (2009), the primary school enrollment rate is 104%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 4.9%, the rate of vulnerable employment is 41%, the unemployment rate of youth between 15 and 24 is 13.2% (modeled ILO estimate)
- **IDPs/Refugees:** The [IOM](#) (accessed 17 July 2023) estimates that in 2017, 10 million Chinese migrants were living and working overseas, while one million international migrants were registered in China. The country hosted approximately [295,6 million migrant workers](#) in 2022, 75% of which worked in their [home province](#); this number means that 20.9% of the whole population and more than 37% of the total workforce are migrant workers. (Reuters, 27 May 2022/Statista, June 2023).

According to UNDP HDR China:

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.761, China ranks 85th of 189 countries. Its growth in terms of HDI has been one of the strongest of all countries since 1990 and the strongest among the countries categorized as "highly developed"
- **Life expectancy:** 76.9 years
- **Median age:** 38.4
- **GINI coefficient:** 38.5
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.168, China ranks 39th among 162 countries in the Gender Inequality Index. Together with Azerbaijan, China has the most unequal sex ratio at birth with a score of 1.13 (male to female births). The World Factbook China puts it at 1.09.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 4.3%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 45.4%; the percentage of youth between 15 and 24 years of age not in employment/school is 17.9%.

The Communist Party is facing a multitude of challenges in the social sphere, but three problems in particular are a focus for attention: 1) The population decline, 2) The youth challenge and 3) The eradication of poverty.

1) The population decline

In respect of the population decline, the reporting period of WWL 2024 was a historic one. China's statistical office has reported the first actual [decline](#) in population since more than 60 years (Reuters, 17 January 2023), five years earlier than originally predicted. It is expected that this is only [the beginning of a decrease](#) that will see a massive decline in workforce numbers and a growing number of pensioners, among other consequences (Grid News, 17 January 2023). According to UN projections, India overtook China as the [most populous country](#) of the world in April 2023 (The Guardian, 24 April 2023). And while it is clear that the [pension system](#) is in need of reform, this is an uphill battle (The Wire China, 22 October 2023).

It is by now a frequently-heard quip that the Chinese population is “getting old before it gets rich” or maybe never get “[rich](#)” at all (Reuters, 18 July 2023). The now abandoned one-child-policy has had serious downsides: A growing number of middle-aged citizens are facing the challenge of balancing the needs of making a living, family life and of caring for ageing parents who now enjoy longer life-expectancy. According to Chinese government statistics, the number of people older than 60 will have doubled in 2030 and the number of those above 65 will soon overtake the number of those under 14.

According to a [study](#) published by the Ministry of Public Security, the number of births in 2020 dropped by more than one million (or 15%) (Jamestown, 11 February 2021). However, this number varies regionally, with a city like Taizhou in relatively wealthy Zhejiang Province reporting a drop of 33%. The [number](#) of births in 2022 dropped to 9.56 million, a decline of almost 10% from the 10.62 million in 2021. The official number of deaths in 2022 was 10,41 million (SMCP, 18 January 2023).

According to China's latest census in 2020, the country saw an increase in population, but it was the [slowest growth](#) ever recorded within a decade and there was a significant decline in the number of births (Reuters, 11 May 2021). Looking at the census results, there are three particularly interesting points to take note of: One is that second children make up 50% of all births, showing that the easing of the one-child-policy has been effective, although its effects will come too late according to experts from inside and outside China and despite [headlines](#) such as “China is not having enough babies” (Channel News Asia, 27 November 2021). A second interesting fact is that only [two provinces](#) have more women than men, namely Liaoning and Jilin, both in China's northwest (Radii China, 11 May 2021). A third point of interest is that migration towards urban areas has continued, despite previous indications suggesting the opposite. In the last decade, urbanization patterns changed as intra-urban migration grew stronger, but the [rural-urban migration](#) was still strong and the urban population increased by 14.21% in the last decade (Sixth Tone, 9 June 2021). The official 2022 figures quoted earlier indicate that the trend of moving to urban areas continued, with the number of permanent urban residents reaching 920,71 million - or 65,22% - while the number of permanent residents of rural areas stood at 491,04 million, a decline of 0.5%.

According to observers, government reactions so far have mostly [made things worse](#), as these have put strong pressure on women (Foreign Policy, 3 May 2022), emphasizing traditional Confucian thinking. The options for the leadership to react to these challenges are clearly limited, especially since encouraging people to have more children, faces several obstacles: First, there may be social challenges (for instance, for migrant workers or for the increasing number of families who have to take care of their ageing parents while working long hours often a great distance away); secondly, according to studies, raising a child is comparably [more expensive](#) in China than it is in the USA or Japan (Reuters, 23 February 2022). The CCP's immediate reaction was to ease the two-child policy, turning it now into a [three-child policy](#) (Reuters, 31 May 2021). This has led many to question why such a limitation is still seen to be necessary at all. The most likely answer is that the CCP would like only certain people to have more children. Ethnic minorities tend to have more children than the average Han family. As one observer said, this comes very close to making [eugenics](#) widely acceptable: "Beijing is trying to restrict fertility in some groups, it is also encouraging fertility in other groups, namely, among Han urban dwellers." (Neican, 15 March 2021).

Another alternative for ageing societies is to encourage migration from cities into the countryside, a path the CCP will most definitely not want to follow. A far more likely and far less popular measure will be to raise the retirement threshold, something which had been proposed in the last 5 year plan, but never made it into law, as it was [highly unpopular](#) and even bore the risk of social unrest (Quartz, 22 April 2022). The [retirement age](#) in China for men is 60, while for women, it is 55 for white-collar workers and 50 for blue-collar employees (Xinhua, 12 March 2021). The largest investment bank in China, CITIC, which is state-owned, cited a [government plan](#) according to which the retirement age would be gradually raised to 65 for women and men by 2055 (Sixth Tone, 3 February 2023). It remains to be seen if such a plan or similar ones make it to the implementation stage, as it is likely that it will come at considerable political and social costs.

According to a 2021 report, 149 cities across China have entered the state of '[deep ageing](#)', meaning that 14% of the population are over 65 (RFA, 9 September 2021). This poses challenges, but also unique opportunities for Christians, who are known around the world for running nursing homes for the elderly, in obedience to Christ's command to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Taking into account the ongoing trend of urbanization, it is difficult for many to visit their parents on a regular basis. Therefore, millions of old people are left on their own. These demographic challenges translate into political challenges. The three main factors are: 1) The birth rate is shrinking; 2) The workforce is shrinking; and 3) The proportion of elderly people is growing exponentially. The traditional values of caring for ageing parents will therefore become virtually impossible for families to fulfil in the near future. This could become a serious problem for the Communist Party since other countries facing similar challenges have always partnered with social charities and churches. Such a solution is obviously not an option in Communist China where all social activities run by churches have been closed down or made to vanish from public view.

2) The youth challenge

The economic slowdown has another consequence which the Communist Party is having a hard time to deal with. In 2022, a record number of [10.6 million college graduates](#) hoping to start a career were faced with an increasing lack of opportunities (Sup China, 4 May 2022). Reportedly, graduates have been applying in record numbers for state jobs, a career that had come to be seen as second-choice, since private employers (especially in the tech sector) were creating more lucrative jobs in high numbers. But now, in more challenging times, as tech companies are struggling with tighter regulations and record fines, young people seem to appreciate more what has sometimes been referred to as the “[iron rice bowl](#)” (Taketonews, 5 May 2022).

Young people aged between 16 and 24 have a tough start in their working lives. Even according to official statistics, the [youth unemployment rate](#) hit a record 21.3% in the first half of 2023 (Global Times, 17 July 2023). According to Zhang Dandan, professor at Peking University, this percentage could be as high as [46.5%](#), if youths not actively looking for employment are included (Channel News Asia, 20 July 2023). While many try to find security in state employment, others – in record breaking numbers – are deciding to continue their studies and apply for postgraduate courses. At the same time, college graduates are applying for jobs for which they are over-qualified. Experts do not see any quick solutions for this dilemma, especially in an adverse economic climate. While this does not necessarily translate into social unrest, it poses a challenge for the tacit social contract the Communist Party has placed on society (see above: Political and legal landscape).

There are further unwanted consequences which the authorities are facing but find hard to react to. One is an increasing response among the youth called “tang ping” (“[lie flat](#)”), meaning that the younger generation is turning its back on the fierce competition in society and is looking to live a more simple, low-key life. To what extent this is a conscious choice or a consequence of circumstances depends on the individual case, but this response has turned into a movement which the CCP has begun to take note of (Jamestown Foundation, 1 July 2022). A related reaction to this is “bai lan” (“let it rot”), meaning that modern youth are simply giving up. And while it is neither a widespread movement nor possible for many young adults, “[run xue](#)”, meaning the “art of running away” and leaving the country, is at least something the younger generation is toying with online (Neican, 5 July 2022). Another [trend](#) has begun among discontented youth namely the “Four Won’ts”: Won’t date; won’t marry; won’t buy a home; and won’t have kids (China Digital Times, 20 July 2023). While a survey carried out by the Guangzhou branch of the Communist Youth League found that only 8% would fully subscribe to these ‘Won’ts’, it is enough to keep the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) worried.

A more pronounced reaction among young people is for them to move back to their parent's house and become “[fulltime children](#)” again (The China Project, 2 May 2023). Being a middle class phenomenon, this shows how families can still afford to take their children back. At the same time, these are the very young adults China needs for its economy – and for being the next generation of parents. How the Communist Party approaches this conundrum beyond the reach of ideology will be interesting to see. While none of these responses pose an immediate danger to CCP dominance in society, it shows that more and more people, especially young adults, seem to be disillusioned with what has been called the ‘China Dream’.

3) The eradication of poverty

The CCP's success at [eradicating poverty](#) has been widely reported and would seem to be a commendable achievement (China Digital Times, 26 January 2021), but not everyone is convinced that the claim is true. These reports should be seen in perspective as the CCP's definition of poverty may need to be revisited given China's overall economic situation. If international standards are used, up to 75% of the Chinese population in urban and 90% in rural areas can still be considered to be living in a [state of poverty](#) (Brookings, 25 January 2021). Whichever standards one follows, there is clearly a huge imbalance in the distribution of wealth in China, which should be kept in mind, whenever the CCP celebrates the eradication of poverty. Meanwhile, [responsibility](#) for the issue of poverty has been moved to a new government department: In February 2021, the "State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development", a high-level agency in charge of poverty alleviation, was officially replaced by the new "National Rural Revitalization Bureau" (The China Story, 22 April 2021).

While the Gini coefficient measuring inequality is quite low, the top 20% across China earn 10.2 times as much as the poorest 20%. While the economic slowdown is posing a challenge, the real problem is the [growing inequality](#) within China, according to data from the World Inequality Lab, in terms of overall wealth, the richest 10% in China own 70% of the household wealth (Grid News, 26 July 2022). As was already reported in WWL 2021's Full Country Dossier, Prime Minister Li Keqiang told his colleagues at the end of the '2020 Two Sessions' meeting that up to 600 million people in China were earning less than 1000 yuan (around 145 USD a month) and were struggling to make ends meet.

According to a [survey](#) by the Income Distribution Research Institute of Beijing Normal University, 964 million Chinese people earn a monthly income below 2,000 yuan (US\$ 292.50); 364 million earn a monthly income between 2,000 (US\$ 292.50) and 5,000 yuan (US\$ 731.10) and only 72 million people, or 5.13% of the total population, have a monthly income of more than 5,000 yuan (US\$ 731.10) (Caixin, 6 June 2020). There is a state-welfare program in place, but according to research the Communist Party is making use of it [for surveillance purposes](#), especially for monitoring religious groups (Bitter Winter, 13 June 2020). The welfare program had been initiated more than a decade ago under Hu Jintao to eradicate poverty particularly in rural areas, however, it is now also used as one way of monitoring and controlling the people.

According to Professor Keyu Jin's [book](#) "The New China Playbook: Beyond Socialism and Capitalism", the numbers have not changed much: "But the truth is that there are still around 870 million people with a monthly income below RMB 2000 (about US\$300). They have yet to join the four hundred million in the middle-income group, which by Chinese standards have a qualifying monthly income of RMB 2000–5000— far below the advanced-economy average. Having an enlarged middle-income group, which has the highest marginal propensity to consume, is the only way to truly bolster China's consumption engine." (Pekingology, 17 July 2023). Meanwhile, research not fitting into the official picture risks being censored. An academic survey carried out at Anhui Normal University has been [removed from social media](#) platforms (The Diplomat, 17 July 2023). The survey showed that 60 percent of the provincial migrant workers surveyed – many of whom had been working in Chinese cities for over 30 years – had

no pension and were unable to retire, lest they be forced to live on just 100 to 200 yuan (\$14 to \$28) per month”.

One important change could be the easing of China's strict household registration system (commonly known as *hukou*), which determines who has access to social provisions like education, healthcare and employment. This has especially limited migrant workers, who normally hold a *hukou* from their home provinces, meaning that they and their families do not enjoy those provisions in the cities where they are working. The National Development and Reform Commission announced that the *hukou* system will be [lifted](#) for cities up to three million inhabitants and eased for cities between three to five million inhabitants (China Daily, 18 July 2023). The consequences of this decision will also depend on its implementation and remain to be seen.

Another challenge is the ripple effect that the COVID-19 crisis has had - and not just on the economy. Millions of migrant workers have lost their jobs, unofficial estimates claiming this could have affected as many as 70 million workers. The continuing US-Chinese decoupling process (also involving other states) has added to this.

Further issues

Political parties other than the Communist Party are allowed to exist, but - not surprisingly - these are carefully selected by the Communist Party. They are consulted on a regular basis, but are careful not to go against the grain. Some civil society organizations are also allowed, but not Christian organizations, unless they are run under the auspices of registered churches, which excludes the larger part of Chinese Christianity from getting involved in social action in an organized way. In the past there had always been a certain leeway for local authorities to decide for themselves whom to tolerate, but recent legislation has the goal, as one observer said, to “[cultivate aridity and deprive them of air](#)” (Made in China Journal, 29 April 2021). This does not mean that such organizations are banned completely, but they are [vetted much more carefully](#) than before (Made in China Journal, 15 July 2021).

In a move to potentially kill several birds with one stone, the Chinese authorities also announced new regulations in 2021 for the [private education sector](#), which is a 120 billion USD business in China (Al-Jazeera, 26 July 2021). The main reasons were probably a) to ease the monetary and psychological costs for parents in providing a good education for their children (and help them get good grades in the infamous university entrance exam “*gaokao*”), but also b) to limit any influence from foreign teachers and educational programs, also those in the Internet. It also jeopardized an estimated three million jobs within the industry, many of those open for fresh college graduates.

In rural Tibetan communities, Buddhist Lamas have a great influence on daily life (e.g. government subsidies), because many of them are also local government officials. These Buddhist leaders even allocate resources, including relief resources from government, to families in the communities. If someone is known to be a convert to Christianity, they are excluded.

Gender perspective

Despite Communist ideals of gender equality, discriminatory stereotypes in relation to the roles and responsibilities of men and women persist. Men are expected to assume the position of financial provider, whereas women are perceived to [belong in the home](#) (Qing, S, The Journal of Chinese Sociology, July 8, 2020). This increases dependency of women and girls on men, a dynamic that can be exploited for the purpose of religious persecution, although the official policy is one of gender equality and empowering women. The CCP recently started to emphasize traditional “Confucian values” as an alternative to religions and improve birth rates which reflect the classical household gender roles.

The 2022 [WEF Gender gap report](#) published on 13 July 2022 lists China at position 102 out of 146 countries, down from rank 69 in 2013, the first full year of Xi Jinping’s presidency. This imbalance is reflected in the political leadership as well, leading one observer to use one of Mao's well-known sayings: “[Women hold up half the sky, but men rule the Party](#)” (Merics, 3 June 2021). The story of a woman who was [found chained up](#) in the province of Jiangsu and who had apparently been trafficked several times, was not only widely shared on social media in China for several months, it also highlighted a deeply entrenched problem, especially in rural areas (RFA, 24 February 2022). Another incident highlighting the situation of women in China was the Tangshan incident in June 2022, in which a young woman was [attacked](#) after rejecting unwanted sexual advances (Neican, 5 August 2022). The public anger was amplified when state media presented the case in a way apparently siding with the attacker.

Technological landscape

According to Internet World Stats (IWS 2023 China):

- **Internet usage:** 69.8% penetration - survey date: July 2022 (over 989 million users)
- **Facebook usage:** 0.3% penetration – survey date: July 2022

According to World Bank China data:

- **Mobile phone subscriptions:** 122 per 100 people. Multiple studies report a small gender gap in relation to [mobile phone ownership](#) and [internet usage](#), with rural women being [least likely](#) to have a phone or access to the internet (GSMA, The Mobile Gender Gap Report, 2019; CNNIC, February 2022; GSMA, Bridging the gender gap, 2015). Statistics gathered in May of 2023 show a marginal [3%](#) gap between the number of male Facebook users compared to female users (Napoleon Cat, May 2023).

According to Freedom on the Net 2023 China:

- China is categorized as “Not free” and has been listed as “the world's worst abuser of Internet freedom” for the ninth consecutive year. The report gives China the lowest score and states: “Conditions for internet users in China remained profoundly oppressive and confirmed the country’s status as the world’s worst abuser of internet freedom for the ninth consecutive year. Unprecedented protests were mobilized against the government’s COVID-19 policy during the coverage period. Though authorities responded with swift

censorship, protesters successfully pressured the government into withdrawing its draconian zero-COVID policy. Ordinary users continued to face severe legal and extralegal repercussions for activities like sharing news stories, talking about their religious beliefs, or communicating with family members and others overseas. Separately, authorities wielded immense power over the technology industry through new legislation, regulatory investigations, and app-store removals. Authorities also imposed new restrictions on generative artificial-intelligence (AI) tools during the coverage period."

- "The government maintains control over China's gateways to the global internet, giving authorities the ability to restrict connectivity or access to content hosted on servers outside the country. This arrangement is the foundation for the "Great Firewall," the informal name for the government's comprehensive internet censorship system. All service providers must subscribe via the gateway operators, which are overseen by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT)."
- "China's authoritarian regime has become increasingly repressive in recent years. The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to tighten control over all aspects of life and governance, including the state bureaucracy, the media, online speech, religious practice, universities, businesses, and civil society associations. The CCP leader and state president, Xi Jinping, secured a third term as party leader in October 2022, further consolidating personal power to a degree not seen in China for decades. Following a multiyear crackdown on political dissent, independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and human rights defenders, China's civil society has been largely decimated."
- "A minority of Chinese internet users, though they number in the tens of millions, access blocked websites with circumvention tools like virtual private networks (VPNs). However, the government has intensified its restrictions on these tools since 2017, when the MIIT banned the use of unlicensed VPNs. Service providers are barred from setting up VPNs without government approval, and illegal VPN operations have been increasingly targeted for closure or blocking. Blocks on VPNs typically escalate ahead of high-profile events, such as annual plenary sessions of the Chinese legislature. VPN providers have noted that a growing technical sophistication of Chinese authorities has been reflected in VPN blocking incidents. In November 2021, the CAC released a draft regulation, titled Network Data Security Management Regulations, that would punish individuals and institutions for helping users circumvent internet censorship. Presumably targeting app stores and hosting sites, the regulations would provide for penalties of up to 500,000 yuan (\$70,300)."
- "Self-censorship among ordinary users and journalists is common and takes place amid an increasing risk of account closures, real-world reprisals, and legal penalties for online commentary. Self-censorship is exacerbated by nationalistic netizens' intimidation and online harassment of those who they perceive as harming the reputation of China. There is evidence that WeChat users are increasingly self-censoring to preempt the closure of their accounts or other penalties, since WeChat is relied on for a wide variety of services that include messaging, banking, ride-hailing, ordering food, and booking travel. The app's critical role in daily life, alongside platform moderators' growing propensity to close accounts rather than delete objectionable posts, has increased pressure on users to self-censor. Self-censorship is pervasive among members of persecuted groups, especially Uyghurs, whose WeChat activities are closely

monitored. Many block relatives living abroad to avoid being detained for having foreign contacts."

[Internet regulations](#), effective from 1 March 2020, restricted user freedom in the Internet more than previously and are aimed at curbing any opposition to the prevailing Communist worldview (International-LaCroix, 11 March 2020). Christian content is still available on some online platforms, but the risk of access is increasing and it is resembling a game of cat and mouse with increasingly limited space for the latter. One example of this is the Christian platform "[Jingjie](#)", founded in 2013 and active on WeChat. While it continues to be active under different "handles", it had been closed down by the authorities for a second time in summer 2021 without any reasons given (China Source, 15 September 2021). As of November 2021, it was still posting on WeChat. Amazon's audiobook service Audible for reading religious books as well as other Bible apps in the Apple store have been [banned](#), as have Koran apps (AP News, 15 October 2021). Numerous Christian Internet accounts have been [closed](#) in China, among them the much used "Jonah's Home", which had been operating for over 20 years (Christianity Today, 13 May 2022). In March 2023, Christian worship music site "Zanmeishige.com" [closed](#) for good, citing "force majeure" (China Christian Daily, 27 March 2023). This is a result of the full implementation of recent regulations, some dating back to 2018, but with others only in force since March 2022. These policies are not limited to Christian sites; in all, reportedly more than [4000 websites](#) and 55 Apps have been closed down or removed (SCMP, 2 May 2023).

New rules for bloggers, fitting into the ever more restrictive Chinese Internet environment, require [real name registration](#) before anyone is allowed to start posting (AP News, 18 February 2021). In what has apparently been a tit-for-tat decision, Chinese regulators have also decided to [ban](#) the broadcasting of the BBC World Service in mainland China (BBC News, 12 February 2021). Although this ban is mainly symbolic since it was mostly only available in a few high-end hotels in cities anyway, it fits into the broader picture of the government making moves to control opinion.

New rules on the use of the [Internet for religious groups and organizations](#) came into force on 1 March 2022. Accordingly, organizations need to obtain a license for using the Internet for religious purposes (China Source, 8 February 2022). The implementation of the 'Administrative Measures for Internet Religious Information Services' reportedly led pastors to only share short voice mails on social media and decided to be even more cautious on WeChat, for example, to avoid having to submit sermon details to the authorities and the latter is complying strictly with the state monitoring of online contents. This shows that in-person meetings remain irreplaceable, wherever possible. The first (TSPM) churches in Jiangsu province were issued the [license](#) for "Internet Religious Information Services" in March 2022 (CCD, 11 March 2022).

The swift implementation of the Internet regulations does not come as a surprise since the Communist Party sees the online world as a place where speech needs to be restricted and controlled and dissent needs to be nipped in the bud. As one observer [commented](#): "Xi Jinping's government wants more than one billion Chinese people to use only one head; his government wants the Chinese people's mouths to have only one function: eat, not speak" (China Aid, 18 May 2022). Consequently, Christians are having to find creative ways to circumvent censorship.

In a vivid reminder that censorship and related operations can reach beyond China, on the anniversary of the 1989 events at Tiananmen Square, Bing and YouTube produced [error messages](#) when searches were made for photos or videos of the iconic “tank man” (the nameless man who faced a row of tanks with just a shopping bag in his hand) (Quartz, 7 June 2021). Although Bing and their parent company Microsoft apologized and spoke of a “human error”, this has not been the first such incident.

An eye-opening interview with a former Weibo censor revealed - at least in part - how [censorship](#) in China works in practice (The Protocol, 4 June 2021): One of the largest Internet and social media companies in China, ByteDance, employs 10,000 content moderators in Tianjin alone, which shows the immense challenge of attempting to censor the whole Internet (or of making it into a de facto intranet). Although some of the operations are automatized and artificial intelligence tools are applied, censorship is still strongly dominated by the human factor. The CAC (Cyberspace Administration of China) only provides guidance (and punishment after failures), but companies have to come up with their own censorship lists, which are consequently seen as valuable assets. The reason behind this policy is simple. In the words of the former censor: “The censors' strategy is to make you feel that the red line no longer exists, scaring you into complete self-censorship. It's always a cat-and-mouse game. Once censors realize users have tested a red line, they move it. The red line has become a moving target.” It is interesting to note that China's powerful [Cyberspace Administration](#) is a hybrid entity with ‘two nameplates displayed’ at the entrance to its headquarters: The government's and the CCP's (Stanford's DigiChina, 8 August 2022). Its demands seem to increase: According to another report, the Instagram-like platform Xiaohongshu identified 564 nicknames (or misspellings) of President Xi as well as sensitive terms within a two-month period in 2020 and [actively monitored](#) the news for potentially sensitive content shared on their site (Vice News, 19 July 2022).

The authorities stepped up their efforts to control [social media](#) (PRC Leadership Watch, 1 June 2022) and especially the comments functions which have been used as platforms for veiled and sometimes more direct criticism. There are plans to hold the tech companies responsible for all [comments](#) and to ensure that it is done under real-name conditions (MIT Technology Review, 18 June 2022). At the same time, censorship will not be able to completely rule out criticism, as efforts to censor the hardships brought by the lockdown in Shanghai showed (Sup China, 22 April 2022). A further step would be to ban all [“negative comments”](#), leaving it up to the CCP and censors to decide what should be classed as “negative” (Bitter Winter, 7 July 2022).

The above explains why the 989 million Internet users in China represent an impressive number, but their access to the Internet is limited. The rural-urban gap is still felt (particularly in the Western part of the country) not just in online accessibility, but also in Internet speed. However, the gap is closing. Internet cafés are becoming less important as access points since mobile phone coverage is improving. China is one of the world's largest technology developers and providers with an emphasis on electric mobility. Another well-known specialization is in providing electronics for mobile phone infrastructure. Indeed, Huawei, the largest and one of the few providers of the 5G mobile standard, is one of the focal points of the trade war with the USA; security aspects and the company's links with the People's Liberation Army and the Communist Party are not clear.

Pilot projects for the much-publicized "[Social Credit System](#)" have been carried out in some areas but two years ago there was evidently still a long way to go until the system could be introduced nationwide (Trivium China, 27 August 2019). As one country observer indicated in 2019: The "messy truth" about the [Social Credit System](#) (SCS) is that there is currently no centralized database and efforts at scoring are patchy and localized at best (China File, 22 April 2019). The [Social Credit Score](#) system can easily be adapted and used to monitor the political trustworthiness of all Chinese citizens (China Leadership Monitor, 1 March 2020). Research showed that the social effects of the Social Credit System are [present, but limited](#), as citizens know to distinguish and read a bad score (Alexander Trauth-Goik/Chuncheng Liu (2022): "Black or Fifty Shades of Grey? The Power and Limits of the Social Credit Blacklist System in China", Journal of Contemporary China, 30 September 2022). This kind of monitoring is becoming a top priority in today's China and it seems that the timing of the COVID-19 outbreak has been very convenient for the state authorities to [extend control](#) both by technical and more personal means (The Guardian, 9 March 2020).

The implementation of [Artificial Intelligence](#) into the systems may provide a boost for all surveillance and social monitoring, by bringing files from different authorities across the government together in one location (Reuters, 8 April 2022). At the same time, the Communist Party is well aware of the risks that AI is posing, so it tries to square the circle [with its rules](#) by reaping the technology's benefits without jeopardizing its own political security (The East is Read, 13 July 2023).

Physical surveillance has become so [synonymous](#) with Communist Party policy that some observers think the Party has switched its promise of economic improvement for citizens to simply providing security and well-being in a more general way (China Digital Times, 23 September 2022). It is not just the physical surveillance, which is increasing and causing worry, but also the growing levels of control in the virtual sphere. The CCP is becoming increasingly successful at indoctrinating a [young generation](#) of Internet and social media users by simply shutting out unfiltered news and feeding in ideological content, often with a strong nationalistic tone (Politico, 1 September 2020). As one observer writes, China's youth is increasingly [turning its back](#) on the West (Chatham House, 1 August 2021). This comes at a certain risk, as nationalism is easily fanned, but hard to contain. The challenge is, above all, to influence a generation who up until now was exposed to a very different narrative for the whole of their lives.

And from the media side of things, journalists who wish to obtain a [press card](#) have to pass a test which includes their knowledge about Xi Jinping thought, showing that it is not just a question of access restrictions, but also of shaping reports (RFA, 11 November 2020). The CCP likewise expanded the section on Communist ideology in [state exams](#) for journalists. Since accreditation has to be renewed every three years, this increased focus on ideology will soon be felt by all journalists, putting an even bigger question-mark on reporting coming out of China (RFA, 12 January 2023). In another effort at instilling the 'correct mindset', the All-China Journalists Association has brought out a [training app](#), which offers more than 220 courses on topics such as the Marxist view on journalism, CCP leadership and control of the media and – of course – 'Xi Jinping thought' (China Media Project, 4 July 2023). As an added bonus, the app is also able to track their progress and certify their training results, thus assisting with annual re-

views and renewals of journalists' press cards. Independent reporting from China has been made ever harder, since non-state media outlets have been put on a [market access blacklist](#) (The Diplomat, 13 October 2021). This means that even sources from within China would be banned from private investment if they allowed even modestly critical reports to be published, e.g. by revealing corruption cases. This is something which privately owned Caixin Media had done. As a result, Caixin was removed from the October 2021 [list of sources](#) approved for syndicated news content (RFA, 21 October 2021).

The system of control already in place is far-reaching and is well on the road to becoming Orwellian, once the technical capabilities are all in place; the political will for this seems to be a given. Christians are able to access the Internet, but always need to be careful about what they are doing and whom they are meeting. For Christians, the Internet space has become arguably tighter than for the average citizen, as they are perceived as being allied with Western influences. Even for Christians not living in China, control is a topic needing their attention. As WeChat warned its users abroad, their [interactions](#) on social media (histories, comments, likes etc.) are being sent to data centers in China (RFA, 8 September 2022).

A recently published article has used patent-filings for obtaining a glimpse into trending topics for [security-related issues](#) (Wright J & Weber V & Walton G F: "Identifying potential emerging human rights implications in Chinese smart cities via machine-learning aided patent analysis", in: Internet Policy Review 12/3, 28 July 2023). While the article focuses on "smart cities" and what is called the "city brain", one finding in particular stands out: Many of the patent-filings deal with identifying deviant or abnormal behavior. This can easily be adapted to or targeted at religious minorities, potentially including Christians.

Another illustration of the increasingly tighter ideological control is the news that 'there were [25,000 fewer book titles released](#) in China in 2022 than in 2021' (China Media Project, 25 April 2023). One fifth of the drop was due to a decreased number of new original Chinese titles being published, while there was a 20,000 reduction in the number of foreign titles published in translation. In the China Media Project article, one publisher complained: 'You cannot say China is bad, and you cannot say that foreign countries are good.' An informal ban on topics considered sensitive has seemingly had a chilling effect and resulted in the cancelation of many publishing projects. The felt arbitrariness of the censoring system also contributed to the decline.

Security situation

Global security

On the international stage, China presented a new policy in April 2022 called the "[Global Security Initiative](#)" - GSI (Jamestown, 13 May 2022). While its principle of "indivisible security" was first set out in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, it has become a common point of reference in many national strategic documents. While it is not impossible that the initiative will be backed by other countries (Russia already did so), it is clear that it comes with "Chinese characteristics" and is meant as a counterweight to what is seen as Western and especially American dominance. So far, the GSI is still [lacking detail](#), but it may become a focal point in an increasingly divided world (The Diplomat, 8 June 2022). Another initiative, likewise targeted at an international audience, is the "[Global Development Initiative](#)" - GDI (WEF, 17 January 2022). It was proposed at the UN

General Assembly in 2021 and ties to the Sustainable Development Goals the UN proposed and many states agreed to reach by 2030.

Minorities in Xinjiang, Tibet, Nei Mongol and elsewhere

While all the policies and actions referred to in previous Full Country Dossiers (dating back to the WWL 2021 reporting period) are still in place, it is important not to lose the broader view of what is going on. The ultimate goal of the Communist Party is to [assimilate](#) and ‘Sinicize’ ethnic minorities (Neican, 11 October 2020). This drive to assimilation is most widely seen in the CCP’s efforts at mainstreaming the Xinjiang, Tibet and Nei Mongol regions, but it extends to dozens of recognized and hundreds of unrecognized minorities. As China Neican noted in its October 2020 article referred to above: “A national consciousness fashioned by the CCP is seen as critical to maintaining the Party’s rule. This idea influences Beijing’s policies with respect to ethnic minorities, religion, education, media and internal security across the length and breadth of China.” The pressure to conform to this ‘national consciousness’ is thus beginning to be felt strongly by Christians and other religious minorities.

The question whether what is happening with China’s [Uighur minority](#) should be called genocide or not, while important, should not be seen as the main question (The Diplomat, 1 May 2021). Beyond the defining aspects of international law, the situation in Xinjiang has to be seen in a broader context, as the policy towards all ethnic minorities has changed. The goal, as The Diplomat explains, is now “to actively alter the thoughts and behaviors of what Chinese authorities perceive to be a ‘backward’, ‘deviant’ and innately ‘dangerous’ sub-section of its population by raising their ‘bio-quality’ (suzhi, 素质) and overseeing their rebirth as loyal, patriotic, and civilized Chinese citizens”. This is to be achieved by “planting the seed of patriotism” through the education system. It has to be kept in mind that China is home to 55 so-called “Minzu” or ethnic minorities. As of 2005, more than 71% of China’s minority population lived within one of the over 1,300 autonomous districts. These cover 64% of Chinese territory but are home to less than 10% of the total population. The long-term policy of granting autonomy has increasingly been replaced by the desire for a process of ‘transformation’ (or rather, assimilation): This entails a more interventionist role for the CCP and involves actively remolding a minority’s ideological, cultural and spiritual fabric into what President Xi calls the ‘collective consciousness of the Chinese (Zhonghua 中华) nation’. As a result, these shifts in policy go well beyond Xinjiang and are part of a fundamental rethinking of how the CCP is seeking to manage ethnocultural diversity. As far as Xinjiang is concerned, the emphasis seems to be on regional economic development, without neglecting strict control (see: Political and legal landscape). This may be seen as being a reaction to the high levels of international attention being given to the situation in this province.

Taiwan

The policy towards Taiwan is unchanged and China continues to send its navy and airforce across the Taiwan Strait and in the reporting period of WWL 2024, China made it very clear how important the Taiwan question is for the country. In turn, the Taiwan Strait continued to be crossed by naval vessels belonging to various nations which China sees as a provocation. China and Taiwan are both watching closely for lessons they can learn from the Ukraine war.

The increase of alliances in Asia, an increase in weapon supply and more visits by high-ranking Western politicians are likewise seen as provocations by China. Many long-term observers think that if China were to be involved in a serious conflict, Taiwan would be the most likely trigger for it. Some also see it as the ultimate prize the Chinese president is eyeing, and it featured prominently in the report for the 20th Party Congress in October 2022.

South China Sea

China's increasingly pronounced claims on the South China Sea, most recently with a map showing a "[Ten-dash-line](#)" (AP News, 31 August 2023), are causing backlashes as extra-regional forces are getting involved and claimant states see themselves forced to take a stand. The five-year anniversary of a ruling by a Court of Arbitration deciding in favor of the Philippines and rejecting almost all of China's claims highlights the prolonged stalled situation. A legal statement published by the US government in January 2022 did not help in easing the tensions (see above: Political and legal landscape). With navy vessels from various countries exercising freedom of navigation in this region, a greater level of international attention is being brought to the dispute. The South China Sea and Southeast Asia are seen as the People's Liberation Army's "[primary laboratory](#)" for developing both joint forces and doctrine. The aim is "to awe regional states into acquiescing to Chinese interests", resulting in what one observer called "learned helplessness" (NBR, 25 August 2022). As a reaction to this (and as what the Communist Party perceives as containment), the USA secured [access](#) to four additional military bases in the Philippines (BBC News, 2 March 2023). In several incidents beginning in August 2023, Chinese Coast Guard vessels and members of the Maritime Militia were engaged in [close encounters](#) with re-supply ships from the Philippines (ABC News, 10 November 2023).

North Korea

China has made it repeatedly clear to the world - especially to the USA and South Korea - that no solution for the Korean Peninsula will work without China being directly involved. China is not very happy about North Korea having nuclear weapons, but it sees the country as a [risk](#) it can control and contain to a certain extent (The China Project, 7 March 2023). Chinese officials have been [searching the homes](#) of female North Koreans, looking for signs of possible contact with South or North Korea (Daily NK, 3 November 2021). If the security officials find evidence of such contacts (either by inspecting their cell phones or by investigating any visits made to the Chinese provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin), they threaten to send the women back to North Korea.

Recent history shows that this is not an empty threat. Reports about North Korean women and girls as young as 12 [trafficked and abused](#) in the North Korean-Chinese border region ("Red Zone") emerged, pointing to a certain extent of lawlessness (Global Rights Compliance, 26 March 2023). [Facial recognition technology](#) in Chinese transportation has complicated the situation of North Korean escapees (RFA, 22 June 2023). Overall relations have [warmed again](#), not least illustrated by the fact that the two countries pledged to extend the 1961 mutual friendship treaty by a further twenty years (Jamestown Foundation, 17 August 2021). The border trade with China [slowly re-opened](#) early in 2022 (38North, 23 March 2022) and it should be kept in mind just how dependent North Korea is on China as an export destination. According to one report, China imported coal from North Korea at 1/4 of the world market price, capitalizing on

its [de facto monopoly](#) (NK Econwatch, 25 April 2022).

India/Bhutan

The military standoff with its neighbor India in May and June 2020, continues to simmer. China has been building village infrastructure on [Bhutanese territory](#), thus tacitly claiming ownership of land for the Tibet Autonomous Region (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021). Whereas neither the claim to ownership nor the factual occupation by building infrastructure are new tactics, the building of a whole village complex (named *Gyalaphug* in Tibetan or *Jieluobu* in Chinese) is a significant new step. Reports in 2022 showed that the villages had been expanded and [fully inhabited](#) (The Diplomat, 30 July 2022). Located in mountainous terrain, the area is still internationally understood to belong to part of Lhuntse district in northern Bhutan. The Bhutanese government does not have the means to monitor this territory and even less to do anything about such Chinese construction-work. As Foreign Policy reports, the territory is of great religious importance to Bhutan and the real goal of the Communist rulers might be to pressurize Bhutan into ceding disputed terrain in a region referred to as the ‘Chicken neck’. This lies much closer to India and is a strategically important area on the Doklam Plateau where China and India had a standoff in 2017. As mentioned above (in: Political and legal landscape), both sides agreed to continue negotiations. Since China does not have an embassy in Bhutan, these talks may take place in the Bhutanese embassy in India - a delicate situation for China, given the tensions with India, which turned violent again in the WWL 2024 reporting period.

Myanmar

In an unexpected development, China has been [building a wall](#) (or fortified fence) along its border with Myanmar (Asia Times, 19 December 2020). As this border stretches more than 2000 kilometers, this is no small undertaking and speculation has been rife about the possible motive behind it. Suggestions for the construction range from protecting against the spread of COVID-19 (or future pandemics) to hindering drug smugglers - or perhaps even to preventing dissidents from fleeing the country. But long-term Myanmar watcher Bertil Lintner has another interesting hypothesis; although [the whole article](#) is highly recommended reading, a small extract illustrates his thoughts on this matter (Asia-Pacific Research, 19 December 2020):

- “On November 27, the popular, privately-run but still strongly nationalistic Chinese website Toutiao published a long, unsigned [article](#) headlined ‘Speaking English and believing in Christ, is Kachin State in northern Myanmar pro-American?’ The article, which has all the hallmarks of state-approved propaganda, points out that the Kachins, called Jingpo in China, are the same people and, erroneously, that the Kachin Hills were once Chinese but ‘before 1941’, included in the then British colony Burma.”

This is not to say that the CCP’s reason behind building the wall is mainly to keep Christians/missionaries out, but it is at least noteworthy that the Party allows propaganda to be published which stirs up nationalist feelings mixed with ethno-religious undertones. At the same time, it shows that the relationship with Myanmar is more complicated than the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) rhetoric would like people to believe. The military regime in Myanmar aims to roll out a [surveillance system](#) with facial recognition features across all 14 regions and states of the country and Chinese companies are winning the contracts (The Diplomat, 12 July 2022). Within

the framework of the "[Digital Silkroad](#)", technical equipment is exported to other countries, too (Rogier Creemers, ed., "The Digital Silkroad - Perspectives from affected countries", Leiden Asia Centre, July 2021). The emergence of lawless zones in the border regions between Myanmar and Thailand, run by Chinese mafia and protected by Border Guard Forces (see: [Myanmar - Full Country Dossier](#), December 2022) poses a [challenge for the wider Southeast Asian region](#) as thousands of citizens get lured and then trapped in this area, where they are forced to participate in online scams and other illegal businesses. However, they also pose an increasing challenge for China itself, which is pushing the military regime in Myanmar to deal with these lawless regions, whose ventures are targeting Chinese citizens as well (USIP, 11 July 2023). The most [recent successes](#) in October/November 2023 by the opposition forces - namely the capture of territory along the Chinese border in Shan State (Reuters, 10 November 2023) - has led to a more pronounced distancing of China from Myanmar's military regime.

Afghanistan/Pakistan

While the Communist Party has studied the historical development of Afghanistan carefully and is not interested in becoming yet another nation to join "the graveyard of empires", it cannot avoid being drawn into the current situation. For one thing, it is a major player and superpower in the region; secondly, it shares a common border with Afghanistan (although only 76km long); and thirdly, Afghanistan could become an important part of the BRI and help in keeping rivals like India in check. After a Taliban representative called China 'a friend', Foreign Minister Wang Yi hosted a [delegation of the Taliban](#) (Washington Post, 28 July 2021), even before the Taliban officially took power. Thus, although China is cautious and wary of being dragged into a conflict, it seems to have little choice.

China's investment in [Afghanistan's economy](#), especially in the commodities and resources sectors, has so far been much more cautious and modest than the Taliban rulers were hoping for and has done little to bring any economic relief for the Afghan population (AAN, 16 September 2023), however, important infrastructure connections and [extraction contracts](#) are being negotiated (BBC News, 7 January 2023). China has also become the first country to [appoint a new ambassador](#) to take up residence in Kabul since the take-over by the Taliban regime in August 2021 (Reuters, 13 September 2023). After the killing of nine of its citizens in an attack in Pakistan in July 2021 and the attack against teachers of the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi in April 2022 (see above: *Economic landscape*), China has pushed for increasing the coordination of [counter-terrorism measures](#) with both Pakistan and the new Taliban leadership of Afghanistan (Jamestown Foundation, 7 September 2021). It reportedly also pushed for the possibility to deploy [own security providers](#), but this was politely declined by the Pakistani government (Jamestown, 14 July 2023).

Other countries

China agreed with Cambodia to [upgrade and expand](#) a naval base in Ream at the Gulf of Thailand and may have received stationing rights there, expanding the reach of the Chinese People's Liberation Army south- and westwards (Washington Post, 6 June 2022). According to a security analyst, China [hacked](#) into ASEAN servers in 2022, ahead of a US-ASEAN summit to be held the same year (Benar News, 2 March 2023).

In all the above areas of conflict and dispute, the Communist Party stirs up nationalist sentiment and receives support from most of the Chinese citizenship. In doing so, however, the CCP [leaves out](#) a significant segment of China's population who are not Han Chinese, thus fueling further unrest (The Diplomat, 18 August 2020). Christians are sometimes caught up in the middle of such conflicts. In Xinjiang and Tibet, even Han Chinese Christians suffer from all the restrictions and surveillance, although the small groups of converts (from Islam and Buddhism to Christianity) are more greatly affected.

Gender perspective

In countries neighboring China, Christian women and girls are exploited in extensive human trafficking networks ([Brookings, March 2022](#)). China's earlier one-child policy - which fueled 'son preference' and gender-biased sex selection - resulted in a shortage of women and a [corresponding rise in bride-trafficking](#) (Human Rights Watch, 3 November 2019). According to the US State Department's 2022 [Trafficking in Persons Report \(p. 433\)](#), traffickers have increasingly targeted impoverished Christian communities. For instance, [629 Pakistani girls](#), many of whom were Christian, were reportedly trafficked to China between 2018 and 2019 (AP News, 7 December 2019). In Myanmar, women from the Christian-majority Kachin state have been reportedly trafficked, married and [raped until they become pregnant](#) (The Guardian, 21 March 2019; [HRW, 21 March 2019](#)).

According to an investigation by Global Rights Compliance, an estimated [80%](#) of female North Korean refugees living in the north-eastern provinces of China (also known as the 'red zone'), are at high risk of sexual abuse and exploitation (Daily Mail, 29 March 2023). Reports suggest that whilst pandemic-related lockdowns and strict border closures may have significantly disrupted trans-border trafficking, confined victims faced increased risks of physical and sexual exploitation and abandonment by their traffickers due to reduced demand, while survivors faced reduced access to essential health and psychosocial services ([UNODC, 2021](#)).

Trends analysis

1) The fight against internal threats

The fight against perceived and real internal threats for the Communist Party has several dimensions:

a) Ideology

Reports show that the CCP is increasing its [funding of academic research](#) in social science topics which support Marxist theory, along with a range of other projects (Macro Polo, 30 November 2020). The number of research grants increased by more than 44% from 2015 to 2019, the number of projects sky-rocketed ten-fold and the areas which saw the greatest increase were "Marxism and Scientific Socialism", "Ethnic Studies" and "Party History and Party Building". Many of these projects are directly linked to President Xi and his "Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a new Era". Plans that one lecturer on Marxism should be employed for every 350 university students (together with a general increase in ideological education in schools, government departments and companies) have led to a surge in the demand for [graduates of studies in Marxism](#) (Financial Times, 7 July 2022). This confirms the overall impres-

sion that while everything else is changing – economy, society, technology – [politics is not](#) (The New Yorker, 16 May 2022).

And it possibly cannot, as the Communist Party always has to be right. This is very visible in the effort being made to keep the zero-COVID policy. For it is not a question about health, economy or the well-being of the people, but about [ideology](#) (Neican, 26 April 2022). End of November 2022, [protests](#) started across the country and some were not only demonstrating against the zero-COVID policy, but against CCP rule itself (Reuters, 28 November 2022). While the immediate answer has been to quash the protests, on 7 December 2022, the CCP announced major changes in the policy in what was called "[dynamic optimization](#)" (Reuters, 8 December 2022). This change may have been inevitable, but it comes at the cost of two risks: 1) Citizens may be encouraged by seeing that their protests change the course of CCP policy and potentially ideology and 2) even a gradual opening could see a surge in COVID infections with the risk of many deaths, especially among the older population. Both consequences do not sit well with a party which can do no wrong. The [true number](#) of COVID deaths in China may never be revealed, but according to calculations and extrapolations by experts it may be between one and one-and-a-half million people (New York Times, 15 February 2023).

In a reminder that the authorities do not really need the COVID Health App for tracking people down, some protest leaders heading the November 2022 demonstrations were reportedly found and [taken away](#) even after the App had been switched off (RFA, 18 December 2022). And as the Party Congress in October 2022 made clear, at a time when criticizing or speaking out against political decisions becomes tantamount to criticism of Xi Jinping (China File, 31 January 2023), no change to putting Communist ideology front and center can be expected. Consequently, out of the 20 highest-selling books in May and June 2023, [seven](#) were writings and speeches by Xi Jinping (RFA, 28 June 2023).

b) History - and the art of re-writing it

According to the CCP's "paradigm of continuity", the 5000-year history of China is presented as one seamless development culminating in the emergence of the CCP. This view of history thus instills the Chinese with national pride and confidence in the Party. The reason for President Xi to call archeologists to a politburo study session in the WWL 2022 reporting period may indicate that he perceives dangers ahead and wants to make sure there is an undeniable "historical truth", also called "[party historiography](#)" (Neican, 5 October 2020). It fits this narrative, when the CCP authorities in Shanxi destroyed [historical evidence](#) of Swedish missionary work in the province (Bitter Winter, 16 October 2020). Terms like "socialist spiritual civilization" and the "epic history of the CCP" as the source of spirituality needed by the Chinese people (as explained above in: Political and legal landscape) serve as the link between ideology and a history, where only victories are included.

Perhaps as a testimony of modern Chinese society's hollowness, this interest in spirituality can be seen in how much room social media gives to online horoscopes, fortune tellers and astrology. The followers of such 'services' have reached their millions and the numbers further increased in the crisis year 2020. Many young people are looking for security and are suffering from anxiety and depression. As such, they are unlikely to be convinced by the CCP's efforts at instrumentalizing history (as it did in the run-up to its 100th anniversary). In Marxism, history

serves a political purpose and the CCP is trying to create a sense of [historical destiny](#) (Neican, 20 April 2021). Even President Xi Jinping has been using [religious terms](#) like “miracle”, “belief”, “faith” and “soul”, when urging the nation to study Party history (Bitter Winter, 7 April 2021). It would seem that the soil is fertile for the Christian message as a liberating answer to society’s growing needs.

c) The Social credit system

China’s much-discussed Social Credit System (SoCS) is still more fragmented and patchy than a consistent tool for social monitoring. This has been [confirmed](#) by a 24 page report by Merics, published on 3 March 2021. The sheer number of institutions involved in the report (47) and the number of documents relating to SoCS in the Merics database (1456) is impressive. Despite the difficulties, a draft Social Credit Law was prepared for internal review in China in December 2020 and it remains to be seen whether a final law will be implemented. It is particularly important to keep in mind what the authors of the Merics report write on page 18 under the heading “The Party State’s growing surveillance eco-system”: “The Social Credit System is often incorrectly conflated with China’s surveillance state. In practice, it is a public, relatively transparent system and increasingly curtailed in its reach. But the Chinese party state has other, much more invasive projects at its command. These projects often operate more covertly and act beyond the confines of laws and regulations, in a relatively clear division of labor. These include Golden Shield, Skynet, Safe Cities and Police Clouds, Project Sharp Eyes, and the Integrated Joint-Operations Platform (IJOP) in Xinjiang.”

A [first evaluation](#) of (corporate) Social Credit data from Zhejiang province shows the potential of using the system to further align businesses with the priorities of the CCP: One indicator, called “Social Responsibility” consists of the sub-categories of donations, volunteer work and obtaining awards from the government. Investing into improving this indicator promises the largest payoff in terms of Social Credit Score. Thus, the authors conclude: “Perhaps not coincidentally, these are precisely the areas of emphasis in President Xi Jinping’s current campaign to reduce income inequality, promote pro-social contributions by wealthy individuals and private corporations and increase loyalty to the Party.” (Lin LY-H, Milhaupt CJ (2023). China’s Corporate Social Credit System: The Dawn of Surveillance State Capitalism? The China Quarterly 1–19).

Should the system ever be used beyond the business world, similar incentives and indicators for “well-behaving” can be easily imagined. At the time of writing, the social credit law, which aims at credibility and reliability in the business world, is [still under discussion](#) (MIT Technology Review, 22 November 2022). The authorities are well aware of the system’s limitations. Local governments are benefiting from rapid advances in artificial intelligence. In what is frequently referred to as ‘[one person, one file](#)’, systems are being developed and implemented which can sort through a variety of data and databases and provide the authorities with a single comprehensive file on every resident (Reuters, 8 April 2022). Although initial teething problems are to be expected, once overcome, this is a trend to watch.

At the most recent Two Sessions meetings in March 2023, the creation of a ‘[National Bureau for Data](#)’ (NBD) was announced by the leadership (The Messenger, 13 March 2023). While this new department may sound harmless enough, it will serve to oversee all data the government and

private companies are collecting from citizens. While details still need to emerge, this new bureau has the potential to centralize all data for further analysis, something that has been feared for a long time. In this respect, it should be noted that even China's infamous health app did not run on a centralized system, but was only a form of data-collection at local government level with no interaction between the various data-gathering centers. With the emergence of the NBD, data-collection and analysis is likely to lead to an easier and more seamless way of monitoring and controlling citizens, including Christians. This does not mean that the NBD will definitely be used in this way, but for a ruling party putting ever more emphasis on Communist ideology, security and regime safety, it is likely to prove too tempting to leave such a treasure-trove of data untapped.

d) Surveillance

In a wide-ranging investigation, the New York Times analyzed more than 100,000 Chinese government tenders and found that tools developed and used for [surveillance](#) are increasing at an unprecedented rate (New York Times - NYT, 21 June 2022). Right at the beginning, the authors of the NYT article are clear about the Chinese government's goals as stated in the documents: Systems are to be designed which "maximize what the state can find out about a person's identity, activities and social connections, which could ultimately help the government maintain its authoritarian rule."

One of the features high in demand were CCTV cameras with facial recognition features, which store gathered data on police servers for feeding into extensive analytical software. The intention, as exemplarily stated by Fujian province police, is clear - "controlling and managing people". For the same reason, phone-trackers have become ubiquitous, all of China's 31 provinces and regions are using them, collecting data on the whereabouts (and more) of individuals. Voice prints, iris scans and DNA samples are other items the government authorities are increasingly collecting. However, the authorities are aware of their limitations as well. One of the biggest problems identified is that the data has not been centralized. Consequently, one emphasis has been the consolidation of data scattered across different databases so that a single personal dossier can be created which is available for all agencies across the government. This is where the "one person, one file" system has to be watched. As Maya Wong, researcher at Human Rights Watch, is quoted by NYT (see link above, 21 June 2022): "This is an invisible cage of technology imposed on society, the disproportionate brunt of it being felt by groups of people that are already severely discriminated against in Chinese society." These tools can easily be used against the Christian minority as well, especially those who refuse to align with the Communist Party.

Another instrument in the surveillance toolbox is China's "[Grid Management](#)" (GM), although the capabilities of the current system should not be overstated (China Leadership Monitor, 1 March 2021). This GM system, implemented some years ago, basically divides the whole country into parcels of 10,000 people or clusters of a thousand residents to oversee security and improve the delivery of services. In reality, the implementation has been patchy and one major impediment has been the lack of funds at the provincial and local level. However, the recent changes to the system due to COVID-19 - the changes now being made permanent, according

to reports - , will undoubtedly increase the possibilities of such surveillance (see above: *Political and legal landscape*).

e) The demographic threat

Closely linked with the challenge to keep the economic growth on track is the double threat of a demographic decline and a rapidly ageing country. However, it is important to note that demography is [not destiny](#), as one observer wrote (Bert Hofman Blog, 19 January 2023). The CCP can counter these trends, e.g. by raising the pension age, by supporting families and especially mothers more, by permitting more social work by religious entities and by increasing and facilitating migration. It will be interesting to see if the CCP is willing to adapt accordingly. It may well find that social engineering is easier when it comes to imposing punishments (e.g. for having too many children) than when incentives need to be offered for changing behavior. In that respect, it is interesting to note that the very association which was responsible for a policy of forced sterilizations and abortions, the “Family Planning Association”, is now responsible for propping up the birthrate.

2) The fight against external threats

a) Competing with liberal democracies

China's relationship with the USA is highly contentious and even deteriorated in the WWL 2024 reporting period. The Ukraine war deepened this rivalry and although China does not want to be seen as invariably tied to Russia, it did little more than watch the war develop and support Russia in words, if not deeds.

At a time when it is said that the CCP simply [does not “get” democracy](#) (The Diplomat, 25 March 2021), misunderstandings can easily lead to wider consequences. It is however very likely that the CCP understands democracy well enough to realize its danger to its Communist rule. The Party is now looking to [law and order](#) as a promising possibility to legitimize its hold of power (Foreign Affairs, 27 February 2023). Security and rule by law (but not rule of law as in liberal countries) is regarded as a promising avenue for a new source of legitimacy and has the advantage of also keeping the large number of government cadres and party members under control, especially at the local level. Consequently, the CCP Central Committee issued a statement to [law schools](#) on 26 February 2023 (Bitter Winter, 2 March 2023), saying that erroneous concepts like the independence of the judiciary and Western constitutionalism (including the separation of powers with its checks and balances) should not be taught anymore.

China is gaining more and more influence around the world and, although it will not happen in the short term, it is worth thinking about what happens when China leads the world. In a cue from China's foregone dynasties and history, an analysis entitled “[China leads the world](#)” made the following points (The Atlantic, 5 October 2020): China will not be a pacifist power; China will insist on its own world order; China will export its values; China only tolerates relationships it can dominate. The conclusion, however, is worth quoting in full: “What becomes clear from an examination of China's history is that the Chinese don't just want to be a great power—they believe they deserve to be. In centuries past, the Chinese thought their sovereign had a right to rule ‘everything under heaven’. Due to the realities of technology and distance, China's reach

usually remained regional. But now, in the age of globalization, Beijing's influence may achieve that lofty goal."

One field in which China is investing to gain more influence is in exporting its technology and know-how about ways it can be used. The country has been increasing its activity in organizations which are [setting the global technological standards](#) according to which an increasingly digital world is running (National Bureau of Asia Research, "China's Digital Ambition: A global strategy to supplant the liberal order", 1 March 2022).

b) Influencing the United Nations

Another field where China is trying to gain more influence is international diplomacy, with a particular focus on the United Nations. This does not just mean taking up a position fitting to the growing economic and political power of the country, but it also means efforts in [re-defining](#) the United Nations' tasks and influencing important questions such as who is allowed to participate in debates and how human rights should be shaped in the future (The Diplomat, 1 October 2021). In one of the strongest signs of how far China has come, the May 2022 visit of UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, to Xinjiang surprised observers in its timing and content. However, her visit was characterized "by photo opportunities with senior officials and manipulation of her statements by Chinese state media, leaving an impression that she walked straight into a highly predictable [propaganda exercise](#) for the Chinese government" (Amnesty International, 28 May 2022).

Shortly after returning to Geneva, Ms. Bachelet announced that she would [not be seeking](#) a second term as High Commissioner, stating however that her decision was not connected to the much-criticized meetings in China (Reuters, 13 June 2022). The fact that the UNHCHR accepted the Communist Party's condition that it had to be a '[friendly visit](#)' (WWR, 30 March 2022) came under serious criticism from Human Rights observers. As could be expected, the Chinese authorities controlled Ms. Bachelet's movements and there were no confidential meetings with civil society actors or members of ethnic or religious minorities. Amnesty International did highlight the fact that the UN and China agreed to set up working groups to hold follow-up discussions on various issues, including the rights of minorities, counterterrorism, legal protection and human rights. However, the plans lacked clear goals and timelines.

During the UNHCHR visit, President Xi was quoted as saying that human rights are developing along the lines of Chinese history and culture. According to Xinhua, Ms. Bachelet expressed her [admiration](#) for China's efforts and achievements in eliminating poverty, protecting human rights and realizing economic and social development (Xinhua, 26 May 2022). It should be noted that the state media and authorities were merely [doing their job](#) by presenting the CCP as infallible, as one observer noted (Bitter Winter, 1 June 2022). This 'merely doing one's job' is also true in the way the authorities handle other targeted groups, including religious minorities such as Christians. According to official sources, the Communist Party can do no wrong.

China had been putting [pressure](#) on the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and on Michelle Bachelet personally not to publish the official report on violations in Xinjiang which had been finalized for publication back in 2021, arguing that it would "intensify

politicization and bloc confrontation in the area of human rights, undermine the credibility of the OHCHR and harm the cooperation between OHCHR and member states” (Reuters, 20 July 2022). However, on 31 August 2022, the long-awaited 46-page report on the [Human Rights situation in Xinjiang](#) was published. A summary of the main points was made available in a press release ([OHCHR Press release, 31 August 2022](#)). China responded with a 131 page ‘[note verbale](#)’, of which a link was made available at the end of the UN report. Throughout the report, the official Chinese position is referenced in the footnotes. The report found indications that authorities committed crimes against humanity. The exact wording in the UN report is: "The extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim groups, pursuant to law and policy, in context of restrictions and deprivation more generally of fundamental rights enjoyed individually and collectively, may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity” (paragraph 148).

In a reminder that it is hard even for China to keep all criticism under wraps, the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Tomoya Obokata, found ‘[reasonable](#)’ evidence for slavery taking place in Xinjiang (Bloomberg, 17 August 2022). These findings are particularly embarrassing as China recently signed ILO convention No. 105, which prohibits state-sponsored forced labor for political aims and economic development. And the new Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN, Volker Türk, published a statement saying that his office has documented cases of [arbitrary detentions](#) of Uighurs, Tibetans and other minorities as well as the separation of children from their families (RFA, 8 March 2023), illustrating that shaping the UN system is an uphill battle.

c) Serious risk of miscommunication

China's growing influence in the United Nations and on many countries worldwide does not mean, however, that it is opening up. On the contrary, [contacts with foreigners](#) are becoming increasingly restricted and rare (China File, 3 February 2022). Deng Xiaoping famously quipped: ‘If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.’ The author of the article in China File shows that "at least since the time of Marco Polo, China has managed cultural diversity by ring fencing". Thus, contacts with foreigners were already perceived as being ‘us against them’ centuries before the Communist Party came into power. According to the author, a recent position paper by the EU Chamber of Commerce in China reported that there were currently more foreigners living in Luxemburg than in China and concluded: "The number is diminishing. COVID-19 in some ways has come as a boon to Chinese leaders who tend towards xenophobia: It provides an excuse to keep foreigners out and, to a large extent, to keep Chinese in. And so, China has come full circle, from the bewildered sleeper that emerged from the Cultural Revolution rubbing its collective eyes to the isolated Middle Kingdom it has historically preferred to be, from the open door to the nearly closed."

Likewise, Global Times editor and Renmin University Dean Wang Wen spoke at an official seminar on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy on 9 May 2023, calling for a “[comprehensive opening-up](#) to the outside world” (Pekingology, 11 June 2023). According to Wang, the proportion of foreign residents in China is stated as being approximately 0.05% (a mere 700,000). This is very low for the world's second-largest economy and many of that number come from the developing world or from countries one might call the ‘China orbit’. Such a low

proportion can only increase misunderstandings about China and multiply the challenges involved in international cooperation.

At the same time, reporting from and about China became steadily more difficult in 2022. This has been made abundantly clear in the chilling [annual report](#) published by the Foreign Correspondents Club in China (FCCC, 1 March 2023). To an increasing extent, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is making it clear how it wants reporting about China to be done and the number of resident foreign correspondents is shrinking, especially from countries with a history of independent and critical press. This does not bode well for the future. Another interesting aspect in the FCCC report is the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on journalism. As of March 2022, [148 countries](#) from all continents had an official 'Memorandum of Understanding' with China (Green FDC, accessed 18 July 2023) and China has been keen to invite and train up journalists from African and Latin American countries, who then report on Chinese affairs in apparent independence.

While it would be wrong to claim that no information coming from China and its statistical offices can be trusted, outright distortions of numbers still happen (as with statistics concerning the COVID-19 outbreak). However, according to Professor Jeremy Wallace from Cornell University, it is more frequently the case that a [gentle](#) massaging of numbers takes place in order to make things look better, especially in the economic sphere (The Messenger, 7 March 2023). In any case, this "[walling off](#)" of China, as one long-term observer named it, is a worrying trend and may only increase, if the economic slowdown is prolonged or even accelerating (Foreign Affairs, 22 August 2023).

However, it should be kept in mind that news reports can be censored even when they use official statistics, as long as the news coverage is seen as touching upon sensitive topics. In the reporting period, this did not just apply to political questions, but [examples](#) also covered reporting about economic and social challenges like - among others - income inequality, youth unemployment and poverty among the elderly (The Diplomat, 17 July 2023).

3) Observations from the 20th Party Congress in October 2022

Decision-making within the CCP remains an opaque process judging by the chosen line-up of the Standing Committee: Macro Polo thinktank invited 1,000 China experts to predict the outcome and not a single one guessed correctly. It will of course take time until policies unfold, but it is already clear that [old influential factions](#) such as the Chinese Youth League have lost out, not even making it to the 24-member strong Politburo anymore (Reuters, 26 October 2022). All seven members of the Standing Committee appear to have been chosen in such a way that neither their accomplishments nor their advanced age make it likely that they would be able - let alone willing - to challenge Secretary-General Xi Jinping's rule or even voice meaningful alternative views. At the same time, this brings a certain risk. No commentator forgets to mention the long list of challenges the country's leadership is currently having to tackle. With the Secretary-General being surrounded by a group of 'Yes-men', it will be harder for him to [deflect the blame](#) for any problems or policy blunders on anyone else (NBR, 25 October 2022).

One catchphrase in Xi Jinping's report to the 20th Party Congress was '[national security](#)', which he mentioned 89 times, up from 55 times in 2017 (Grid News, 24 October 2022). It remains to be seen if blaming 'the West' will be enough in the long term. But the problem with 'Yes-men' goes deeper: There is evidence to show that even [internal documents are being heavily censored](#) causing China's powerful leaders to 'live in a cocoon' (AP News, 31 October 2022). If no one dares or is able to tell the truth without massaging numbers etc., China is in trouble - and so is the world. Given how much Chinese politics are centered around the person of President Xi, aged 70 at the time of writing (December 2023), it will become increasingly important to think about [succession scenarios](#) with each passing year; similarly, as time progresses, a certain jockeying for the best positions is likely to become increasingly visible (CSIS, After Xi, 21 April 2021). This will add to Xi Jinping's and the CCP's paranoia.

A good overview of how the recent changes can be interpreted and how difficult forecasts are was recently provided in a [Blog](#) (Andrew Batson, 8 February 2023). He identified four different modes of interpretation:

- "Don't get fooled again" – there are no real changes and the Communist Party is following its priorities as it always has;
- "A more benevolent dictator" – Ideology is not trumping everything and the Party is able to react flexibly and prioritize the economy;
- "The new technocrats" – As rank and file are following Secretary General Xi Jinping now, he trusts them to implement all necessary policies, even if this means some embarrassing changes;
- "A quiet revolt" – There is genuine opposition to Xi Jinping's leadership and his position is not as strong as it looks.

Only time will tell which interpretation (or combination) comes closest to the truth."

4) What the current situation in China means for Christians

The October 2022 Party Congress could be summed up by the [equation](#): 'High Ambition + Deep Insecurity = Tighter Controls' (USIP, 26 October 2022). The last paragraph of this USIP commentary is worth being quoted in full, as it also illustrates the situation for Christians: "The citizens of China can expect a continuation of current hardline policies and greater centralization of power; other countries should anticipate an assertive and combative PRC led by an activist dictator and an energetic party-military-state obsessed with seeking to control all aspects of human activity and to dominate all arenas both inside and outside its borders."

Thus, the push for control looks set to increase and, judging from experience, Christians are more likely to be seen as a threat to security than an asset.

The new laws and regulations for foreigners and their involvement in religious activities in China as well as the draft paper entitled "Administrative measures for religious clergy", the rolling-out of tests like the "Smart Religion App" and the policy on showing Communist signage on religious buildings, show that the situation for Freedom of Religion and Belief in general (and for Christians in particular) is getting worse. Christians are and will continue to be most affected by the Persecution engine *Communist and post-Communist oppression*; the Communist Party be-

hind the Beijing government has continued to create a negative climate for all forms of religion and put pressure on them.

Christians are trying to adapt to the changing circumstances. In an attempt at '[reading the tea leaves](#)', one author tried to make sense of what President Xi Jinping said at the National Religion Work Conference in 2021 (China Source, 4 February 2022), where he spoke of strengthening the "self-education, self-management and self-discipline" of religious leaders, defining the autonomy of religion as being limited by the rules and needs of the Communist Party. It is therefore clear that Christians in China will have to adapt to a new and much narrower environment, especially the Christian groups who are not affiliated to state-approved churches.

According to a survey of a wide spectrum of pastors asking i) how they were coping with the [situation](#) in early 2022 and ii) what trends there were in Chinese church life since the 2020 pandemic, the current trends can be summed up with the keywords 'group-based', 'family-based' and 'digitalization', and are not limited to house churches (China Christian Daily, 6 June 2022): "Group-based" refers to small group gatherings. "Family-based" means that meetings and worship services take place in a believer's home. "Digitalization" refers to worship, meetings, and training programs held online. Actually, the three changes began years ago, but the 2020 pandemic has speeded them up.

With the implementation of the Social Credit System (referred to above), even though it may be delayed, the authorities will very likely find ways and soon have the technical means to follow their plans up. In any case, for the foreseeable future, Christians and churches in China will see tough times ahead.

Parallel to the [training sessions](#) for personnel issuing the licenses for the use of the Internet for religious purposes (see above: *Technological landscape*), pressure from the United Front Work Department has been increasing on state-registered churches to study the directives on Sinification and so gain a deeper understanding of the Marxist, scientific approach to religion (China Christian Daily, 11 March 2022). It is thus very clear that it is up to the churches in China to prove that they are not – in the words of an article from the Communist Study Times of 21 March 2022 – "irreformable". Whether or not they succeed is solely for the Communist Party to decide.

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WWL 2024: Church information / China

Christian origins

The first record of Christians in China is written on an 8th century stone stele stating that (Nestorian) Christians reached the city of Xian in 635 AD. In what is called a [second \(or third\) wave](#), in the 13th century, Catholicism spread among the Mongols and Franciscan and Dominican missionaries worked in China ("A brief history of Christianity in China", 26 July 2017). Later on, Christianity was banned in the Ming dynasty, but Roman Catholics made new inroads to the country in the 16th century. Protestants arrived in Macau with the missionary Robert Morrison in 1807.

When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, the Communist Party took over and all religion was viciously fought against, especially religions seen as foreign (like Christianity). Foreign Christian missionaries had to leave the country and for decades, very little was known about how Christians were surviving. When the so-called Cultural Revolution took place (1966 – 1976) the whole of society was turned upside down. As a surprise to many, the Christian faith not only survived all efforts to eradicate it but had instead become deeply rooted in Chinese society. Despite all efforts at government control, Christians and churches are still thriving and, even though pressure seems to be increasing again, it is currently not as intense and as violent as in the times of the Cultural Revolution; however, many observers argue that it is the strongest wave of repression since that time.

Church spectrum today

China: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox		0.0
Catholic		9.6
Protestant		32.8
Independent		57.6
Unaffiliated		0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians		0.0
Total		100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement		32.1
Renewalist movement		35.0

Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox.
Roman Catholics: All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Renewalist movement:** Church members involved in Pentecostal/Charismatic renewal.

As can be seen from the percentages listed above, there are more Protestant churches in China than Catholic ones. The Three-Self-Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which is overseen by the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party (UFDW), was founded in 1954 and derives its name from following three principles: Self-governance, self-support and self-propagation. It has branches all across China and runs its own theological seminaries. House churches, on the other hand, are more numerous than TSPM churches and are also spread across the whole of China, but they are less connected and organized. They are independent, are not associated with the TSPM or the China Christian Council and often follow a variant of evangelical theology; there are also Baptist, Pentecostal and other groups among them. It is said that the majority of house churches are [Pentecostal](#) in character (China Source, 13 June 2023). They flourished in the 1980s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, but predate this time. In the 1990s, they experienced a strong trend to urbanization, following the general worker migration in society.

Catholics make up only a small part of the Christian presence in China, but have similar structures to the Protestants. In 1957, the Catholic-Patriotic Association (CPA) was formed, which also comes under the CCP's UFDW jurisdiction. Catholic churches are most numerous in the province of Hebei and in the northern and central parts of China. Apart from the CPA, there are independent Catholic churches and networks, which adhere to the primacy of the Roman Catholic pontiff in Rome. The Vatican [extended its agreement](#) with the Chinese government con-

cerning the appointment of bishops for another two years (AP News, 22 October 2022). Despite all criticism and clearly aware of the agreement's limitations, the Vatican has apparently decided that the benefits outweigh the risks. As the content of the agreement continues to be barred from publication, further details are not available. However, evidence is emerging that the Vatican is not happy with the agreement. In an interview in March 2023, Monsignor Paul Gallagher, Vatican Secretary for the relation with states said it was "[not the best deal possible](#), because of the other party" (UCA News, 15 March 2023). Shortly after this statement was made, Bishop Joseph Shen Bin was transferred to become the bishop of Shanghai in a unilateral move. The Holy See only learned of it from the media, which led Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, remark that "Chinese Catholics, even those defined as 'clandestine,' deserve trust," and should be "[respected in their conscience](#) and their faith.", indirectly acknowledging that there still is an underground Catholic church which should be respected in their decisions (Bitter Winter, 17 July 2023).

Areas where Christians face most difficulties

Converts from a Muslim or Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups arguably face the most severe violations of religious freedom in China as it is driven by their families and communities as well. Consequently, hotspots are Xinjiang, Tibet and Western China with the provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan, but also Qinghai and Ningxia (where Muslim minorities can be mostly found). Many Tibetans are living in the west of Sichuan, and Guizhou and Yunnan are home to many ethnic minorities as well. Yunnan, for instance, is also home to the minority of Hui Muslims.

As Protestant Christians are more concentrated in the provinces of Henan, Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi, and the numbers of Catholic Christians in Hebei are high, those provinces might be additionally considered to be hotspots. However, Christians and Christian churches face increasing restrictions and monitoring countrywide and reports are coming from almost all provinces, as can be seen from the selection of reports listed above in "Specific examples of violations".

Christian communities and how they are affected

Communities of expatriate Christians

Compared to the other categories of Christian communities below, expatriate Christian communities experience more freedom, but they face monitoring and limitations in their contact with local Chinese churches. However, Chinese authorities throughout the country are cracking down on [foreign Christian](#) missionaries, especially South Koreans (SCMP, 10 June 2018), but also Americans and Taiwanese. In 2020, the Chinese authorities published a draft of [new rules](#) for foreigners and their involvement in religious activities in China (CNN, 25 November 2020). These rules are part of a series of tightening laws on religion. Given that the Communist Party (CCP) has always been wary of 'foreign connections' or even 'interference' in religious affairs, it is not surprising that the new rules limit the extent of citizens' contact with foreign worshippers in the country. The number of foreigners in China seems to have plateaued at a comparably low level; however, the lifting of COVID restrictions may see the number picking up again. This has naturally meant that the number of foreign Christians dropped as well. It should

be noted, however, that this category is not restricted to expatriate Christians from Western countries.

Historical Christian communities and government-controlled churches

This category highlights a unique factor in Chinese Christianity: There are registered and government-recognized churches – the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) – and non-registered, independent churches. On the Roman Catholic side, these independent congregations are the followers loyal to the Vatican. TSPM and CPA-related churches are government-controlled and even if there is no direct censorship, their leaders will carefully weigh their words. Election of leadership is state influenced. [TSPM](#) and [CPA](#) have each published five-year-plans on how their churches will 'Sinicize' (UCA News, 17 August 2020 and 2 August 2018). The US State Department stated (IRFR 2022 China): TSPM Secretary General Xu "said that because these aims were not yet totally clear to all TSPM pastors, the TSPM would launch a new five-year Sinicization plan in 2023, which would include more standardized sermons to be preached in all churches. Xu said he hoped the plan would lead Chinese Protestant Christianity to "unite more closely around the Central Committee of the Party with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core." (pp.27-28) Churches have published leadership-level white papers on this topic, e.g., on [Sinicization](#) in a Catholic context (UCA News, 23 July 2018). As one country expert said: "Under the Sinification campaign they are pressured to conform their Christian doctrine and expressions of faith to the Party's requirement that these be in accord with Party ideology and free from foreign influence. "

Converts to Christianity

Converts are either from a Muslim background or from a Buddhist (Tibetan) background. Living in ethnic minority regions where some elements strive for independence and which are becoming ever more volatile, converts are facing pressure from two sides - from the government and family and community. While the government restricts any meeting or action it deems political or dangerous (for more on this, see above: Trends Analysis #2), family, friends and community put converts under pressure to return to the "true faith", because it is an important uniting factor for the ethnic groups, especially in times when the Communist authorities are pushing for homogeneity and imposing an "Ethnic Unity Law".

Non-traditional Christian communities

This category is made up of a multitude of Evangelical, Baptist and Pentecostal congregations under a whole variety of names, frequently not affiliated with denominations. On the Protestant side, these (often unregistered) non-traditional churches are also called house churches or underground churches, sometimes also family churches. Unlike several years ago, when congregations consisted of hundreds or thousands of members and in some provinces met openly in commercial buildings, most house churches have now returned to home gatherings. This category is seriously affected by the intensification of control and 'Sinification'.

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WWL 2024: Persecution Dynamics / China

Reporting period

01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023

Position on the World Watch List

China: World Watch List	Points	WWL Rank
WWL 2024	78	19
WWL 2023	77	16
WWL 2022	76	17
WWL 2021	74	17
WWL 2020	70	23

Ranks are shown above whenever the country scored 41 points or more in the WWL 2019-2023 reporting periods

The increase of 0.7 points in WWL 2024 (after increases of 1.1 points in WWL 2023, of 1.7 points in WWL 2022, more than four points in WWL 2021, five points in WWL 2020 and seven points in WWL 2019), shows a continually deteriorating situation and reflects that the strong pressure on churches, no matter whether they are government-affiliated or not, is felt nationwide. It is getting more and more difficult to avoid having to fall in line with official Communist ideology, especially with the continued flurry of published guidelines and policies affecting churches. The violence score remained at the same level as in WWL 2023. Many churches were forced to continue gathering in smaller groups or even move completely online. The scores for pressure in the 5 Spheres of life slightly increased across all spheres, whereas the motive behind all restrictions is the implementation of Communist ideology, the concrete reason for the small

increase across all sphere scores can be found in the new restrictions on groups using virtual platforms for religious purposes and other increased limitations. All regulations on religion are now being implemented in a strict and uniform manner, whether introduced in 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022 or 2023.

Persecution engines

China: Persecution engines	Abbreviation	Level of influence
Islamic oppression	IO	Very weak
Religious nationalism	RN	Very weak
Ethno-religious hostility	ERH	Not at all
Clan oppression	CO	Very weak
Christian denominational protectionism	CDP	Weak
Communist and post-Communist oppression	CPCO	Very strong
Secular intolerance	SI	Not at all
Dictatorial paranoia	DPA	Strong
Organized corruption and crime	OCC	Weak

The scale for the level of influence of Persecution engines in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. For more information see WWL Methodology.

Communist and post-Communist oppression (Very strong):

The over-arching goal of the Communist Party of China (CCP) is to maintain its power through national unity and by limiting outside influences. The rulers will do everything they deem necessary to reach these goals. Recent years have shown a growing orthodoxy in ideology and in emphasizing Communist values: One country expert explained this phenomenon as follows: "In the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, this varied depending upon the attitudes of provincial authorities, so that some provinces were known to be more severe and hardline, while others were more relaxed. However, under Xi Jinping's leadership policy on religion has been increasingly centralized and determined at the top, in Beijing, and so the picture is more consistent throughout the country."

Secretary General Xi Jinping is arguably the strongest Communist leader since Mao Zedong and the "core of the party". At the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, Xi Jinping achieved a third term of rule and after time limitations had already been abolished in 2018, it is very possible and indeed likely that he will be in charge for much longer than the official term which extends to 2027. (For a preliminary assessment of the outcomes of the Party Congress, see above: *Trends Analysis #3*).

The leadership's goal of maintaining power and social harmony includes the control of all religions (as these are a strong force in society) and hence the control of the growing Christian minority as well. This is even truer for the volatile regions of Buddhist Tibet and Muslim Xinjiang.

In these regions, the government has further tightened its grip, and this is not only felt by ethnic groups striving for independence, but also by the respective groups of converts to the Christian faith and even strongly by Han Chinese Christians. Inner Mongolia has become another ethnic minority region under increasing pressure to Sinicize. In many regions of China, Christian activities have increasingly been hindered (especially concerning activities for children and youth camps) and although house-churches were still targeted the most, government-controlled churches have faced restrictive control as well. A similar pattern can be seen for the Catholic church. The pandemic measures made it possible to "drown out" churches, with the authorities simply not allowing them to re-open.

One country expert shared: "There is evidence that suggests, that China and the CCP are pivoting away from traditional Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong thought in favour of an approach which emphasises a single totalitarian ruler who can set aside rule by law in times of crisis and reinstate the rule by law when the crises abates. Chinese constitutional scholars who defend the rule of Xi Jinping turn to the work of the German Jurist Carl Schmitt as an alternative to Western Liberal Democracies in favour of a totalitarian framework quite different from those that were established by Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. This places the Church in an ambiguous situation in that if they are identified as 'enemies' to the nation, they risk elimination, but if they offer loyalty and accept the sovereignty of the Sovereign and the CCP they will be allowed to exist."

Dictatorial paranoia (Strong):

President Xi Jinping has consolidated his power in a manner not seen since Mao Zedong, and under Xi the Communist Party has become almost militant in its efforts to attack any perceived threat to its authority. The main objective of the CCP is to maintain power, increasingly this seems to mean keeping President Xi in power. Given the overarching goal of ensuring "national security" and the broad definition of that term (see below: *Future outlook*), it is not surprising that Christians have come under additional scrutiny as well. In some ways, ideology is a tool which serves this purpose rather than being an end in itself. For example, Christianity is seen as a potential threat because it involves people organizing and rallying around something outside Party control, rather than specifically because of its theology.

Islamic oppression and Religious nationalism - Buddhist (Very weak):

Disclaimer: *The fact that the strength of the engines Islamic oppression and Religious nationalism is described here as 'very weak' (instead of 'Weak' as in previous reporting periods) does not mean there have been changes for the better on the ground. The new categorization is purely because WWL analysis aims to evaluate countries as a whole and an adjustment was seen as necessary since Xinjiang and Tibet are so sparsely populated (together making up less than 2% of China's total population). In fact, the situation deteriorated for all citizens in these regions, including Christians, as the authorities intensified their suppression.*

The north-western state of Xinjiang, where the Muslim Uighur minority lives, has come under even heavier control than before, making observers speak of a [police state](#), especially after re-education camps were set up (BBC News, 1 February 2018 - more recent examples and reports can be found above (in: *Security situation and Trends Analysis #2*) and below (in: *Persecution of other religious minorities*). Life for the small number of Christian converts from a Muslim back-

ground – most likely a few thousand – is extremely complicated. They suffer from the increased general pressure from the government as described above, but additionally face problems from their own family, friends and neighbors. Any deviation from the Muslim creed and traditions are seen as a disgrace and even as betrayal, since every Uighur is expected to be a Muslim. Although reports on the situation of the converts is difficult to obtain, all information received points to a very harsh situation, sometimes even involving violent incidents such as physical abuse by families. On the other hand, the difficulty of getting reports is also connected to the strong pressure the authorities are exercising on the Islamic community, so that families and communities are often torn apart and cannot target converts.

What has been said about *Islamic oppression* above also applies to the even smaller group of Christians from a Buddhist background in the Chinese region of Tibet (in far western China). Pressure and violence are increasing and the Chinese authorities do everything in their power to curb the Tibetan struggle for independence. On 1 May 2020 a so-called "[Ethnic Unity Law](#)" came into force, undermining Tibetan identity even further (RFA, 1 May 2020). Tibetan Christians face strong opposition from family, friends, neighbors and communities. To have a "deviant faith" in this region has a high price as conversion to Christianity basically shuts one out of the community.

Drivers of persecution

China: Drivers of Persecution	IO	RN	ERH	CO	CDP	CPCO	SI	DPA	OCC
	VERY WEAK	VERY WEAK				VERY STRONG		STRONG	
Government officials	Very weak	Very weak				Very strong		Very strong	
Ethnic group leaders	Weak	Weak				Very weak			
Non-Christian religious leaders						Weak			
Religious leaders of other churches						Weak			
Ideological pressure groups						Weak		Weak	
Citizens (people from the broader society), including mobs	Weak	Weak				Weak			
One's own (extended) family	Weak	Weak				Weak			
Political parties						Very strong		Very strong	

The scale for the level of influence of Drivers of persecution in society is: Not at all / Very weak / Weak / Medium / Strong / Very strong. Please note that "-" denotes "not at all". For more information see WWL Methodology.

Drivers of Communist and post-Communist oppression

- **Political parties (Very strong):** In their efforts to control and guide religious bodies, the Communist Party and government authorities, which are increasingly hard to distinguish, are the main drivers of persecution, discrimination and intolerance against Christians. The Communist Party increasingly boxes Christians in by controlling and acting against them. This is especially because Christians are the largest social body in China not under complete state-control, even though they are not united. It should be kept in mind that there are [281 million members](#) of the CCP and its affiliated youth organizations (Pew Research Centre, 23 October 2023), who are officially banned from engaging in a broad range of spiritual activities' (not to forget family members). In strongly Communist families, the family can become another driver since no-one who wants to become a member of the Party or make a career in public service is allowed to be religious. Muslim and Tibetan leaders can be co-opted by the Communist Party to toe the official party line. If they act as Party officials, they can be additional drivers of persecution.
- **Government officials (Very strong):** Whoever wants to become a government official at a higher level has to be member of the Communist Party who follows its ideology and directives. Without this, no career is possible. Whether officials at all levels are totally convinced of Communism's superiority is another question, but in order to prove being ideologically trustworthy, the policy against religions needs to be implemented, even more so as it is now the CCP closely watching over it. The degree of implementation of policies used to vary per region, city and even village, but such variations or gray zones are becoming smaller and smaller. The recent pattern of promotions and demotions as observed at the 20th Party Congress shows that toeing the ideological line is rewarded and this even more so in times where the external environment gets more challenging. As one country expert explained: "The top Communist Party leadership harbors strong anti-religious and anti-foreign sentiment, which translates into policies enacted throughout the entire political system. Legislators in the National People's Congress enact laws that discriminate against Christians. Ministries under the State Council are responsible for policies affecting all areas of life, including media, education, and social organizations, that are also discriminatory. The Party routinely uses these various arms of government to prevent the spread of religion and to keep believers under control. Security organs at the national and local levels conduct surveillance and take action against unauthorized religious activities, often in collaboration with officials from the Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD) and State Administration for Religious Affairs, which is under the UFWD. Under the guidance of the Party, the judicial branch ensures that those apprehended for such activities are punished. The Party itself is officially atheist, as is the military; religious believers are technically not permitted membership in these organizations."

Drivers of Dictatorial paranoia

- **Political parties (Very strong):** In their effort to stay in power, the Communist Party and the government authorities have carefully studied what led to the downfall of Communism elsewhere. One factor is the control of social groups such as Christians, who are still seen as alien and connected with foreign (mainly Western) powers and their potential to orga-

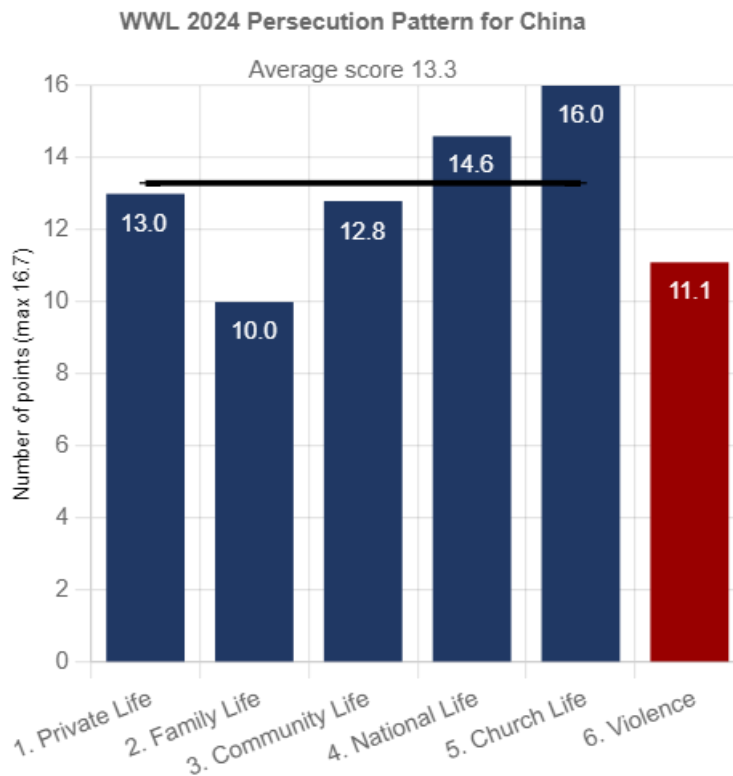
nize a significant percentage of the population independently from the Communist Party. The role of the Communist Party has grown stronger over the years, culminating in the old slogan "east, west, north, south, center - the party rules over all!".

- **Government officials (Very strong):** An official's own position depends on the Communist Party continuing to hold onto power and on how satisfied superiors are with their work. Therefore, most government officials will do everything possible to secure their position or make career, no matter whether they are personally convinced by Communist ideology or not. A standardized implementation of national policies throughout the vast country is a challenge, but the CCP puts a lot of pressure on officials to get policies implemented and also provides incentives, especially since dealing with religious groups is one of the Party's top priorities.

Drivers of Islamic oppression and Religious nationalism - Buddhist

- **Non-Christian religious and ethnic leaders (Very weak):** The small convert community from a Muslim and Buddhist background is facing a lot of problems from Muslim and Buddhist religious leaders. These are still influential in Xinjiang and Tibet, as in many cases they also serve official functions in administration and the Communist Party. Although the CCP is taking back the control from religious leaders, some of them remain influential as they perform the rituals for local people like weddings or funerals. Converts will face difficulties in all of these cases, if their conversion is known. Often such leaders are wearing several hats, as they double as Party members, village and sometimes even religious leaders. Whereas nationwide, their influence on pressure on Christians is very weak, locally and regionally, their influence is strong.
- **Extended family and Normal citizens (Weak):** Converts also face a lot of pressure to return to their old faith from the community they live in and their own parents and family. Conversion is seen as more than just changing religion; it is regarded as betrayal of the family and local community. Whereas nationwide, their influence on pressure on Christians is very weak, in certain locations and regions their influence can be strong.

The Persecution pattern



The WWL 2024 Persecution pattern for China shows:

- The average score for pressure on Christians in China rose from 13.1 in WWL 2023 to 13.3 points in WWL 2024. The score for pressure increased in almost all spheres of life, showing that the increasing restrictions over the years are having broad consequences. Pressure for implementing the new regulations on religion from 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 came directly from the national state level and the implementation has been rolled out over all provinces and implemented according to the will of the Communist Party, directly implemented by the UFWD, not the government. The legal and administrative environment became even more difficult, not just for the so-called house churches, but also for churches belonging to the Three Self Patriotic movement as well. The pressure to fall in line with and repeat the prevailing ideology of praising the achievements of the Communist Party in sermons and other areas of teaching has become much stronger and poses arguably one of the greatest risks for Christians in the long term.
- Pressure is strongest in the Church and National spheres of life (with extreme scores of 16 and 14.6 respectively). While pressure in these spheres is typical for countries where Communist and post-Communist oppression is active, the pressure in the Private sphere (13) points to the problems Christian converts with a Muslim or Buddhist background are facing, but is increasingly mixed with pressure on individual believers - not just churches - to adhere to Communist beliefs and on limitations concerning the revealing of one's Christian faith. This is also true for the Family sphere, which still has the lowest score of all spheres with 10 points. Pressure from Islamic oppression and Religious nationalism is present not just in the Private sphere, but also in the Family and Community spheres. But increased pressure resulting from Communist and post-Communist oppression is felt more

strongly in these spheres as well, for example in questions dealing with education or with employment, e.g. where Christians are teachers or medical staff and/or members of the Communist Party.

- The score for violence against Christians remained at 11.1 points. Reporting from China decreased over the WWL 2024 reporting period in general, but the sudden end of the strict zero-COVID policy showed that especially house churches had to split up and were not able to meet in the ways they used to prior to the COVID crisis. It seems that the pandemic offered the Communist authorities a unique opportunity in that respect. China has again crossed the threshold for scoring maximum points for churches being closed (which has been the case for many years already). There were no killings reported, but an increasing number of Christians continue to be imprisoned or detained, often under accusation of "illegal business operations", fraud or of acting against state security. The authorities - and the CCP in particular - do not seem to care much about negative international headlines in this respect or, in fact, in any human rights related issue.

Pressure in the 5 spheres of life

In each of the five spheres of life discussed below, four questions have been selected from the WWL 2024 questionnaire for brief commentary and explanation. The selection usually (but not always) reflects the highest scoring elements. In some cases, an additional paragraph per sphere is included to give further information deemed important. (To see how individual questions are scored on a scale of 0-4 points, please see the "WWL Scoring example" in the WWL Methodology, available at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/>, password: freedom).

Pressure in Block 1 / Private sphere

Block 1.8: It has been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others). (3.75 points)

For converts with a Muslim or Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups, it is virtually impossible to talk with others about their faith. If a convert dares to do so and is reported, he or she would be warned by local authorities and – depending on the case – could even be detained for a few days. Christians among Communist Party members, military staff, government officials or educators practice self-censorship, since being seen as religious carries a risk. The increasing overall pressure on churches and Christians discourages them from speaking about their faith and leads to more self-censorship in general, too.

Block 1.1: Conversion has been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another. (3.50 points)

This is especially true for three groups of Christians, which will face different levels of opposition.

1) Members of ethnic minorities, especially Muslims and Tibetans, will face the strongest pressure against conversion, up to being physically harmed in some cases. 2) Party and military members and applicants for these positions (more than 281 million people, plus, to a lesser extent, family members) as well as civil servants will also face pressure to keep their conversion a secret. However, depending on their family, they may at least be able to be open about it at home. 3) Finally, young Christians (under 18 years of age) will face opposition. This is a group of about 20% of the population (and partly overlapping with the number mentioned above, al-

though numbers are disputed) and they are legally not permitted to attend any religious meetings. This law aims at hindering young people from converting to any faith, including Christianity. As one country expert shared: "Increased atheistic education in schools is aimed at discouraging young people from believing in religion."

Block 1.4: It has been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.). (3.50 points)

Although the implementation of the new online rules was only starting to be rolled out in the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), at least 15 different social media channels run by Christians on WeChat have already been shut down. The times where one account would be able to reappear under a different name, after it had been closed down, seem to be over. This is not to say that sharing one's faith via such media is impossible, but it has become riskier and more difficult and the authorities have grown more sophisticated at - what one correspondent involved in this work called - playing a "game of cat and mouse". This leads to added caution and more self-censorship on the part of Christians.

Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.50 points)

While access to Christian content on the Internet is possible in general and communication on social media can also take place, (leading some observers to speak of a "vibrant online Christian community"), all this is strictly monitored by the government. TSPM churches are allowed to have websites, once they register, and many have good evangelical content of these websites. Christians are already preparing for more restrictions and a good deal of self-censorship is practiced. The government increasingly blocks website content and limits the space of available content, e.g. by blocking Bible apps. While it is still common for Chinese Christians to use VPN to obtain resources on the Internet, the risk for doing this is increasing and frequent users of VPN would catch the attention of the authorities.

'Audible' and Bible apps in the Apple store have been [banned](#) as have Koran apps (AP News, 15 October 2021). Jonah Home, a well-known Christian website for sharing resources, has [shut down](#) after 21 years of service (Christianity Daily, 2 May 2022). The authorities are also quick to act against what they see as "illegal activities" in the Internet, including religious activities (UCA News, 3 August 2020); several of those in contact with Christian websites have been visited and interrogated. Overall, especially with the new rules, Christians have become much [more cautious](#) in accessing and sharing Christian material on the Internet, although it is still done (Christianity Today, 3 March 2022). One country expert summed up the situation: "There is a decided push to eliminate the use of the internet to download any Christian materials over the internet." For converts to Christianity in Xinjiang and Tibet it has been especially risky to access Christian content, but they only number a few thousand.

Block 1: Additional information

For converts with a Muslim or Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups, it is far too dangerous to wear Christian symbols such as a cross or indicate Christian faith by displaying Bible verses at home. Young people under the age of 18 are legally prohibited from attending religious

meetings and are also not supposed to display any Christian symbols. But also for other Christians, there have been some reports from areas such as Beijing, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shaanxi, Shanxi and Sichuan, where the authorities have threatened Christians. For Christians who are Communist Party members or who serve in the armed forces, as well as for teachers and students, this can be risky, as they are not supposed to belong to any religion, let alone show it.

Muslim Uighur and Tibetan Buddhist converts have to be very careful in the way they worship, especially if they are the only Christians in their family. Bibles and other Christian materials have to be hidden carefully and can only be read with much caution since devout Muslim or Tibetan-Buddhist families will not accept this. Meeting with other Christians is a special challenge in these circumstances as on the one hand it is dangerous for the converts themselves, and on the other hand it may endanger other Christians at the meeting. Meeting with high-profile church leaders, especially those known for having connections abroad, is very risky as well. Known converts are closely monitored and will face threats and in some cases even physical or mental abuse.

Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere

Block 2.8: Christian children have been pressured into attending anti-Christian or majority religion teaching at any level of education. (4.00 points)

Children of all categories of Christian throughout the country are forced to study anti-biblical and anti-religious teachings as the atheist education system discourages religious belief (this is a campaign which was re-started in 2018). Children of Christians have been put under pressure to reveal their parents' religion, which indicates the levels of pressure teachers' superiors and the CCP are exercising, but not necessarily about the teachers' own attitudes. In a telling example reported in UCA News, 22 September 2020, a Chinese ethics textbook deliberately changed the ending of the Biblical account of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery (see details above in: *Religious landscape*). Although this one example should not be over-interpreted, it serves as an illustration of the sort of Communist goals the education system is working towards. The introduction of the "Children speak in unison" plan led one observer to state that the educational reforms contained in that plan "aim to mold model citizens from pre-school" (Jamestown, 10 September 2021). The Young Pioneers and Young Communist League actively recruit in schools, putting strong pressure on Christian students to declare loyalty to the Party.

Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.75 points)

As indicated above, in some parts of China, children have been set under pressure to tell teachers (who in turn have been pressured by their superiors, see Block 2.8 above) and the local authorities if their parents are active adherents of a specific religion. The CCP goes to great lengths to encourage an anti-religious mindset in children and warns that religious activities are to be regarded as illegal behavior. Strong atheistic education and promotional opportunities based on a young person's loyalty to the CCP, as well as restrictions on minors attending church, make it difficult for Christian parents to raise their children according to their Christian beliefs.

Another area where the CCP places a lot of emphasis is on influencing the younger generation to fully take on board Communist culture. It is therefore of no surprise that [home-schooling](#) is totally illegal, as is religious instruction for minors under the age of 18 (Christianity Today, 7 April 2022). Christian parents looking for ways for their children to avoid imbibing CCP ideology in the state education system have no real options. For converts from Muslim or Buddhist background, members of their wider family will try to influence the education of their children. One country expert summed up: "Atheistic education in schools discourages children from believing, particularly for students who want to advance socially and academically by joining the Party-run Young Pioneers or Young Communist League. Most Christian-run private schools have been closed down due to the state's crackdowns on private education and on religious activity for children."

Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.75 points)

If children remain strong in their Christian faith, despite being constantly taught otherwise, teachers (and peers) often discourage them from attending Christian activities in order to avoid pressure from superiors. Religious books are seen as "reactionary readings" and students are strongly discouraged from reading them. By law, all children are required to attend state school education according to the 9-year free education scheme. This policy has been very strictly implemented by the authorities. Reportedly, a [survey form](#) investigates the religious affiliation of college students and graduates in China and prohibits them from expressing any religious convictions at all (China Aid, 27 May 2022). Young people in some areas have been threatened with not being allowed to graduate or not being accepted for further studies. This pressure is even stronger on children of known converts.

Block 2.4: Christian baptisms have been hindered. (3.50 points)

For converts, baptisms cannot be held in public, and even baptizing them "low profile" to avoid being exposed carries a risk. While the authorities would detain a pastor who baptizes converts of Muslim and Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups, in most cases they would be released after a few days with a stern warning. Likewise, it is not permitted to baptize Christians under the age of 18, a limitation which is felt more strongly by the TSPM churches as they are more visible and much better known to the authorities. Technically, TSPM and Catholic Patriotic Movement churches are the only ones which are allowed to conduct baptisms, and the number of baptisms should not be noticeably high. As a country researcher for China said, house churches are no longer able to baptize publicly and especially not in the open.

Block 2: Additional information

In Tibet and Xinjiang, the situation is volatile and the more pressure the government places on society in these provinces, the more a conversion is seen as being a disgrace to the family and as a betrayal of the close-knit community life. Therefore, converts are very cautious and tend to hide their new-won faith. Once converts are discovered, they face the threat of divorce (if married) and may lose their inheritance rights. It is difficult for them to organize Christian weddings or funerals. Converts are expected to hold a traditional wedding ceremony and can therefore celebrate a Christian wedding only in hiding, if at all. But even house church Christians

can face problems in that respect, as the [ongoing challenges](#) of the Early Rain Community Church in Chengdu, Sichuan, shows (China Aid, 27 May 2022). One reason that the score in the Family sphere is lower than that for the other spheres is that the registration of births etc. is not a problem (see above: Questions 2.1 and 2.2).

Pressure in Block 3 / Community sphere

Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points)

Converts, mainly of Muslim and Buddhist background from minority ethnic groups, are put under pressure by family, friends and neighbors to renounce their Christian faith, and their children face discrimination and bias from Muslim or Buddhist teachers and pupils at school. Monitoring (e.g., by school authorities and neighborhood committees) is ubiquitous in the whole country and affects Christians as well as other citizens. Targets for monitoring are places where people meet, but also "high-profile" Christians who come under special scrutiny as they are either outspokenly critical of the administration or are seen as being connected to foreign groups. However, the criteria are not always so clear-cut.

The Communist Party operates a system of rewards to encourage security guards in the community to report any irregularities; this [grid management system](#) is tight and used for several purposes, including monitoring neighborhoods (PRC Leader, 1 March 2021). One source within the country said: "I know of a church leader, [whose phone was being] tapped for an unknown reason. Despite frequently changing and using many different communication methods, the surveillance continued. Now, he is considered an active Christian by the authorities and is therefore being [closely] monitored, so he has to be careful in serving."

Block 3.5: Christians have been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events. (3.75 points)

Meetings organized by Communist Party groups on a frequent basis (most commonly at the workplace), can be regarded as being quasi-religious. They invoke the Communist spirit and serve to align every part of society with Communist ideology. Civil servants, and staff in other public institutions and most workplaces, are required to attend and participate in community events organized by the local Communist authorities. In many cases, these events include singing Communist hymns and chanting slogans. The Young Pioneers and Young Communist League in schools are further examples; but also TSPM churches are required to celebrate Communist Party anniversaries. Communist ideology is ever present, be it in the media or in hoardings dotting the landscape and cities.

Block 3.10: Christians have been discriminated against in public or private employment for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

In public employment, discrimination against Christians is more common than in private employment. It has to be kept in mind here, that the state-owned enterprise sector is much larger than in most other countries, so public and quasi-public employment is more the norm

than in other countries. However, there are cases where the government has interfered in employment matters and pressed private employers to terminate contracts with religious believers. Private employers are required to have an active Party Cell and all religious believers are excluded from government positions which require Party membership.

Block 3.13: Christians have been interrogated or compelled to report to the local vigilante/police for faith-related reasons. (3.50 points)

In Xinjiang and Tibet, interrogation by the police is highly common, but Christians are a particular target since they are regarded as being potential "troublemakers". This is also true for Han Chinese church leaders in these regions. But even throughout China, church leaders and ordinary (often: key) church members are increasingly being called in for interrogation at police stations and offices of the Religious Administration. The former, well-known invitation to church leaders "to meet for a cup of tea" with the authorities has now been widely replaced with open monitoring and direct interrogation. One country expert stated: "Police keep tabs on all known religious leaders (registered or unregistered)." There have been numerous reports of cases concerning high-profile and less well-known churches (e.g., from the provinces of Beijing, Fujian, Gansu, Heilongjiang, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shanxi and Sichuan), and it is more than likely that most cases go unreported.

Block 3: Additional information

In an effort to fulfil the new Party regulations dealing with religions, local authorities do not shy away from switching their mode of operation from monitoring to intimidation and swift implementation. This may be a reflection of the fact that it is the Communist Party which has taken control of all religious affairs via the already mentioned UFWD in concert with local government agencies. There are hardly any gray areas left for local authorities in dealing with religious communities and especially house churches. One Christian shared: "For Han Christians, you may not be successful in doing business with government entities, because the government generally avoids getting involved with people of faith (if they know they are Christians)."

Pressure in Block 4 / National sphere

Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points)

While China does recognize freedom of religion in its Constitution, the implementation of this freedom is a far cry from having any real meaning. The Constitution makes this freedom contingent upon the priorities of the State, which has the power to define what constitutes "normal" religious activity. As the article "Freedom in handcuffs: Religious Freedom in the Constitution of China" explains, this right is limited by five restrictions described in Article 36 of the Constitution: i) Atheism is the official ideology of the state; ii) freedom of religion is just a legal not a fundamental right; iii) the Constitution enumerates citizen's obligations limiting the right; iv) Article 36 protects the inner freedom to have a particular religion, but not the freedom to outwardly live according to its rules of faith; and v) Article 36 speaks of "normal" religious activity (Professor Songfeng Li in: [Journal of Law and Religion](#) 35, No. 1/2020, pp. 113–137). One

country expert put it more simply: The Constitution is interpreted in such a way as to generally exclude religious practice and self-administration.

Block 4.9: Christian civil society organizations or political parties have been hindered in their functioning or forbidden because of their Christian convictions. (4.00 points)

The laws for both Chinese and overseas NGOs forbid organizations from engaging in religious activities. The space for Christian NGOs is therefore shrinking. Nevertheless, some Chinese NGOs still try to find some remaining space to operate in but have to do this under CCP supervision. China does not allow any political parties independent of the Communist Party and any political activity outside the CCP is forbidden; thus, any Christians attempting to set up an organization for political purposes will be dealt with swiftly by the authorities.

Block 4.15: Christians accused in court have been deprived of equal treatment. (4.00 points)

Courts in China serve the purposes of the Communist Party. They are not impartial, do not follow the rule of law principle and do not have juries. As a result, in cases in which the defendant is a Christian and the prosecutor is the state, once cases get to court, the verdict has already been decided by the Party and the prosecutors and the courts will decide accordingly. In the WWL 2024 reporting period, there have again been several cases of Christians being sentenced, sometimes to long prison sentences (see above: *Specific examples of violations*). It is notable that Christians are increasingly being sentenced on charges seemingly unrelated to matters of religion, such as taking part in illegal business operations, fraud or offences against national security.

Block 4.6: Christians have been barred from public office, or has promotion been hindered for faith-related reasons. (3.75 points)

All Communist Party members are by definition expected to be atheists. So it is clear that Party members, army staff and civil servants are not allowed to have any religious belief and even their family members are not supposed to be religious in any way. If their Christian faith becomes known, they will immediately face pressure to give it up. If they refuse, they may be demoted or lose their job. Equally likely is that they cave in to the pressure and leave their public occupation. The ban on holding religious beliefs in public employment has been extended to schoolteachers and medical staff.

Block 4: Additional information

Publicly displaying religious symbols is risky for all Christians in the Xinjiang and Tibet autonomous regions. As one country expert said: "Officials routinely discriminate against Christians." In the media, Christianity is depicted as being a tool of Western aggression and is consequently warned against.

The March 2018 White Paper made it clear that "actively guiding religions in adapting to socialist society" not only means "guiding religious believers to love their country and compatriots, safeguard national unity [and] ethnic solidarity", but also expects all religious bodies to "be subordinate to and serve the overall interests of the nation and the Chinese people. It also means guiding religious groups to support the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system;

uphold and follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics; develop religions in the Chinese context; embrace core socialist values; carry forward China's fine traditions; integrate religious teachings and rules with Chinese culture; abide by state laws and regulations, and accept state administration in accordance with the law."

One goal of this White Paper is to uncover any foreign contacts sponsoring church activities; its aim is therefore to promote the 'Chinafication' of churches. This goal has been spelled out in detail in regulations for Christian clergy and religious institutions and, most recently in the WWL 2024 reporting period, in the regulations for religious venues and the activities carried out in them, further explained below (see: Block 5 - Church sphere).

Pressure in Block 5 / Church sphere

Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points)

As mentioned above, the government's interest is in maintaining a "harmonious society" and in only protecting "normal religious activity". In terms of religion this means not just "managing" registered and non-registered churches but actively steering them. All communities of Christians are being monitored. In general, many church activities are not just monitored by the presence of agents, but also by CCTV cameras watching the pulpit, congregation and surrounding church compound. A country expert explained: "The preaching in Sunday services needs to be approved for TSPM churches, but situations still vary." More and more house churches experience harassment and obstruction once their activities have been discovered. Most have been forced to split up into small groups and gather in different and frequently changing locations, keeping a low-profile so as not to be detected by the sub-district officer or neighborhood committee.

The [full text](#) of the regulations for religious venues and the activities carried out in them has been translated and published (Bitter Winter, 7 August 2023). Certain articles stand out as being particularly significant:

- **Article 27:** *Members of the management organization of places of religious activity shall have the following basic conditions: (i) Love the motherland and support the leadership of the CCP and the socialist system; (ii)...*
- **Article 30:** *The management organization of a place of religious activity shall perform the following duties: (i) To unite and educate religious citizens to love the motherland, support the leadership of the CCP, practice socialist core values, adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of China's religions, and abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules and regulations and the relevant provisions of the management of religious affairs; (ii)...*
- **Article 36:** *Places of religious activity shall establish a study system, and regularly organize the personnel of the place to study the guidelines and policies of the CCP, national laws and regulations, Chinese excellent traditional culture, religious knowledge, and so on.*
- **Article 39:** *Religious activities shall be conducted in places of religious activity in compliance with national laws, rules and regulations, and the content of sermons and teachings shall be suitable for the characteristics of China's national conditions and the characteristics of the times, and shall be integrated with the excellent traditional Chinese culture and reflect the core socialist values.*

- **Article 40:** *Places of religious activity shall, in the course of religious activities, strengthen the publicity and education of the sense of community of the Chinese nation, strengthen the use of the commonly used languages and scripts of the state, promote national unity and progress, guide religious citizens to enhance national consciousness, civic awareness, awareness of the rule of law, correctly distinguish between national customs and religious beliefs, and shall not use religion to interfere in the administration, judiciary, education and social life.*

Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points)

The regulations on religion (February 2018 and February 2020) continued to be implemented in a very strict way which has led to churches being under tighter control and monitoring. At the same time, [new regulations](#) for religious institutions were made public in May 2021 (China Aid, 19 May 2021) and started being implemented from 1 September 2021 onwards. Beginning in the previous reporting period (WWL 2023), pressure increased on TSPM churches in rural areas to merge. One observer stated for his region in the WWL 2024 reporting period: "In the past, there were more than 30 church venues, but later many were cracked down. Now less than one third remain. Those closed down all qualified as official locations, having all the necessary permits." In some areas, house churches have not simply been closed down but have been placed under pressure instead to join TSPM churches.

Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points)

Everything is monitored. As part of the Sinicization campaign, pastors in registered churches are increasingly under pressure to promote CCP teaching in the churches. Training courses for preaching the Sinicization of religion have been rolled out in the three provinces of Guangdong, Liaoning and Shanxi (CCD, 15 August 2022). While such courses are still the exception and not the rule, they invite and lead to an increasing mindset of self-censorship. At the same time, the Communist Party has introduced new "[Administrative measures](#) for religious staff" for creating a national database of recognized and authorized church leaders, as well as of other religious leaders (Bitter Winter, 11 February 2021). The new rules for religious venues and the activities carried out in them have consequences for Christian teaching, preaching and published materials as well, especially with the articles quoted under 5.1 above.

Block 5.20: It has been risky for churches or Christian organizations to speak out against instigators of persecution. (4.00 points)

In the highly controlled political environment that China has become under the Communist Party, foreign organizations or individuals that criticize government policies are likely to be censored and/or expelled. Christian citizens who speak out against government measures are likely to be arrested and charged with disrupting social order, spreading rumors, or endangering national security, as has happened before. The Communist Party reacts harshly against anyone who provides foreign news sources with information about persecution, which together with a drop in the number of foreign journalists has resulted in a significant drop in reports. Since the sentencing of Pastor Wang Yi from the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, Sichuan, in De-

September 2019, many pastors have decided to avoid speaking out against the authorities, saying that it is not worth the risk. One country expert even extended the scope of this observation: “Whereas in the past there were some channels for voicing dissatisfaction with religious policies, today no dissenting voices are allowed. Christians who attempt to speak out publicly or who participate in efforts to raise awareness of the plight of persecuted believers are subject to prosecution. The risk exists not only for those residing in China, but also elsewhere. China now has the capacity to silence critics worldwide.”

Block 5: Additional information

While Christian material is still available online, the scope is decreasing and accessing it is becoming increasingly difficult. Messages posted by high profile Christians on public message boards for the People's Congress have been [deleted](#) (China Aid, 23 February 2022), as has the [social media account](#) of the Presbyterian Church of Shanghai (China Aid, 13 May 2022).

TSPM churches are applying for the new religious online licenses and reportedly the first (TSPM) churches in Jiangsu province were issued the [license](#) for “Internet Religious Information Services” in March 2022 (CCD, 11 March 2022). It should be noted that there seems to be no national regulation containing any provision about minors and their “exposure” to religion. However, there is an increasing number of [provincial regulations](#), such as in Guizhou, Hubei, Shanxi, Qinghai, Xinjiang and Yunnan (China Zentrum, 24 November 2021). The local authorities are mainly responsible for implementing the new regulations and now that the Communist Party is in control of religious matters, a more unified and strict approach is being taken. Christians in China still experience differing levels of freedom today, but most observers agree that freedom is shrinking fast.

The COVID-19 crisis was used as a pretext for delaying (often indefinitely) the re-opening of church buildings, providing the perfect way for not having to officially raid a church building (with its risk of photo and video footage of the police in action being leaked to a wider public). It seems that the aim is now to ‘suffocate’ unregistered churches out of existence, while co-opting and strictly monitoring the TSPM churches.

Violence

Violence is defined in WWL Methodology as the deprivation of physical freedom or as bodily harm to Christians or damage to their property. It includes severe threats (mental abuse). The table is based on reported cases as much as possible, but since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as being minimum figures. The following 5 points should be considered when using the data provided in the Block 6 table:

1. Some incidents go unreported because the Christians involved choose not to speak about the hostility being faced. Possible reasons for this may be:

- *Doing so would expose them to more attacks. For example, if a family member is killed because of his/her faith, the survivors might decide to keep silent about the circumstances of the killing to avoid provoking any further attacks.*
- *In some circumstances, the reticence to pass on information may be due to the danger of exposure caused by converts returning to their previous faith.*
- *If persecution is related to sexual violence - due to stigma, survivors often do not tell even their closest relatives.*

- *In some cultural settings, if your loved one is killed, you might be under the obligation to take revenge. Christians not wishing to do that, may decide to keep quiet about it.*

2. Other incidents go unreported for the following possible reasons:

- *Some incidents never reach the public consciousness, because no one really knows about it; or the incident is simply not considered worth reporting; or media coverage is deliberately blocked or distorted; or media coverage is not deliberately blocked, but the information somehow gets lost; or the incidents are deliberately not reported widely for security reasons (e.g. for the protection of local church leaders).*
- *In situations where Christians have been discriminated against for many years, armed conflict can make them additionally vulnerable. Christians killed in areas where fighting regularly takes place are unlikely to be reported separately. Examples in recent years have been Sudan, Syria and Myanmar.*
- *Christians who die through the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care (due to long-term discrimination) are unlikely to be reported separately. Christians are not always killed directly; they can be so squeezed by regulations and other oppressive factors that they die – not at once, but in the course of years. This often includes the deprivation of basic necessities such as clean water and medical care, or exclusion from government assisted socio-economic development projects. These numbers could be immense.*

3. The use of symbolic numbers:

- *In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100* etc.) is given and indicated with an asterisk. A symbolic number of 10* could in reality even be 100 or more but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 100* could go well over 1000 but the real number is uncertain. A symbolic number of 1,000* could go well over 10,000 but, again, the real number is uncertain. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000*, 100,000* and 1,000,000*: Each could indicate much higher numbers, but WWL chooses to be cautious because the real number is uncertain.*

China: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.1 How many Christians have been killed for faith-related reasons (including state sanctioned executions)?	0	0
6.2 How many churches or public Christian properties (schools, hospitals, cemeteries, etc.) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10000 *	1000 *
6.3 How many Christians have been detained for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.4 How many Christians have been sentenced to jail, labor camp, sent to psychiatric hospital as punishment, or similar things for faith-related reasons?	100 *	100 *
6.5 How many Christians have been abducted for faith-related reasons (including Christians missing in a persecution context)?	10 *	11
6.6 How many Christians have been raped or otherwise sexually harassed for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.7 How many cases have there been of forced marriages of Christians to non-Christians?	10 *	10 *

China: Violence scores per Block 6 question in questionnaire	WWL 2024	WWL 2023
6.8 How many Christians have been otherwise physically or mentally abused for faith-related reasons (including beatings and death threats)?	100 *	100
6.9 How many houses of Christians or other property (excluding shops) have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.10 How many shops or businesses of Christians have been attacked, damaged, bombed, looted, destroyed, burned down, closed or confiscated for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.11 How many Christians have been forced to leave their homes or go into hiding in-country for faith-related reasons?	10 *	10 *
6.12 How many Christians have been forced to leave the country for faith-related reasons?	100 *	10 *

For the WWL 2024 reporting period (see also the cases mentioned above in: *Specific examples of violations*):

- **Christians attacked:** Often the arrest of Christian leaders and beatings went hand in hand with attacks on churches. Reports have been considerably fewer than in earlier reporting periods, so the estimated number given here may be a serious understatement. Incidents can be found in the attacks in the Guangdong and Henan provinces referred to above (in: "Specific examples of violations")
- **Christians arrested or detained:** Church leaders were often detained as part of actions targeting churches. These incidents could span any length from a few hours to years. In cases of 'administrative detention', this was usually not longer than 15 days. A report entitled '[Home as prison](#)', published by NGO Safeguard Defenders on 6 September 2022, shows how much the number of house arrests in China has increased. This 'Residential Surveillance' (RS), as it is also termed, does not necessarily take place in one's own home; the location can also be a rented room in a hotel or on government premises, for example. However, the most appealing feature for security forces and prosecutors is that this tool is not under judicial review. From 2019 to 2020, the most recent years for which full data was available, the number of RS cases increased by 13%. Compared with 2013, the first full year after Xi Jinping became Secretary-General, the number has increased by more than 700%. Those are only the cases which have been officially recorded. RS is a tool which has also been frequently used against Christians, especially prominent Christian leaders.
- **Churches attacked:** It is impossible to give a concrete number of incidents where churches have been attacked. One reason for this is that authorities go to great lengths to prevent reports being made. As explained throughout this dossier, in most cases, the government did not need to execute a discernable action. Many churches and meeting places have simply vanished and TSPM churches were often forced to merge and build larger units. (However, when house church gatherings have vanished, it often means that the Christians have decided to simply split up and now meet in smaller groups at other and often changing locations.) One country expert estimated that in the reporting period of WWL 2022, up to

15,000 house churches and 5,000 TSPM churches and meeting points were closed. While the estimated minimum number for WWL 2023 was set at 1,000, for WWL 2024, the estimation was put at 10,000, as the times are over when house churches could gather publicly in venues like hotels, shopping lots and office buildings and numbered in the hundreds or even thousands at a single meeting. Additionally, connecting with the church in China from abroad became much more difficult, so concrete numbers are hard to come by.

- **Christian homes/shops attacked:** Homes of Christians have been raided in which electricity has been cut off and furniture damaged. Several Christians have been evicted and removed by force from their homes. Two typical reports by China Aid: [28 September 2023](#) and [8 June 2023](#).

5 Year trends

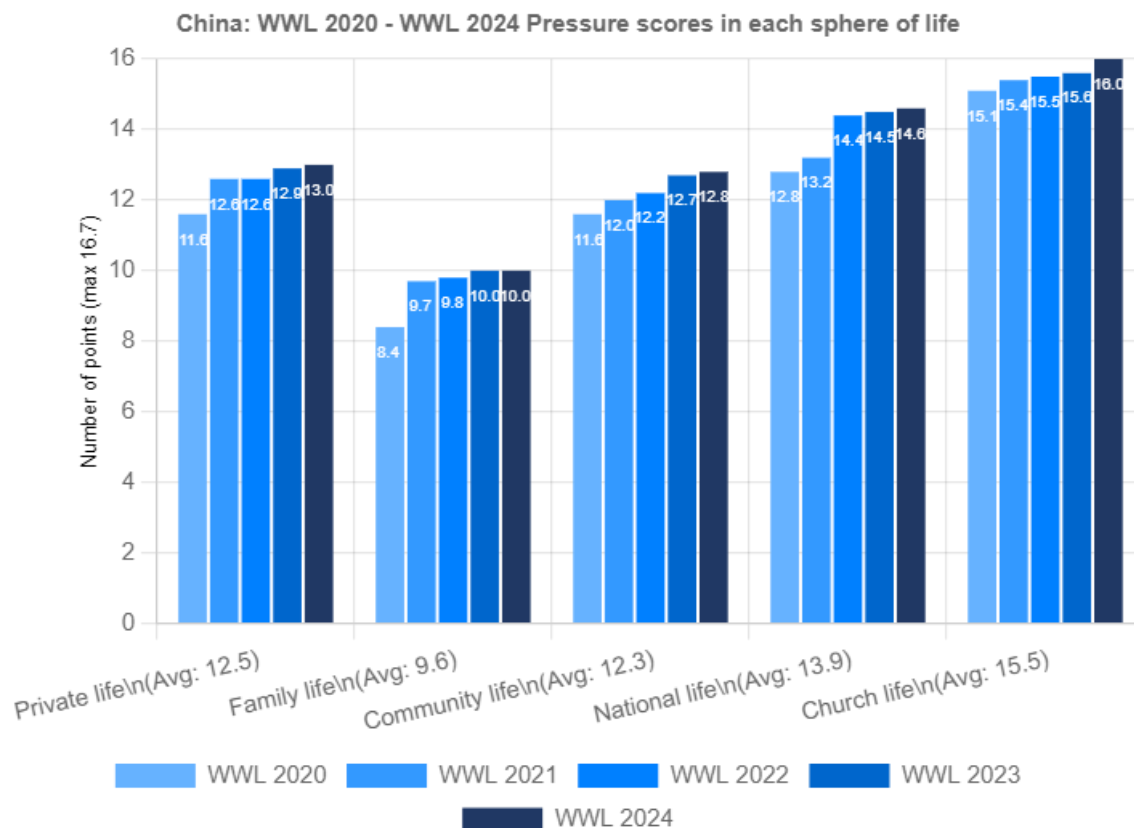
The following three charts show the levels of pressure and violence faced by Christians in the country over the last five WWL reporting periods.

5 Year trends: Average pressure

China: WWL 2020 - WWL 2024	Average pressure over 5 Spheres of life
2024	13.3
2023	13.1
2022	12.9
2021	12.6
2020	11.9

The score for average pressure further increased to the very high level of 13.3 points in WWL 2024, showing a period of pronounced increase after starting the five year period at 11.9 points in WWL 2020. This reflects how strict the implementation of the law on religion and related laws has been, and also includes the introduction of new laws and restrictions. It also indicates a consistently deteriorating situation for Christians in more and more regions of China, in both house churches and TSPM churches.

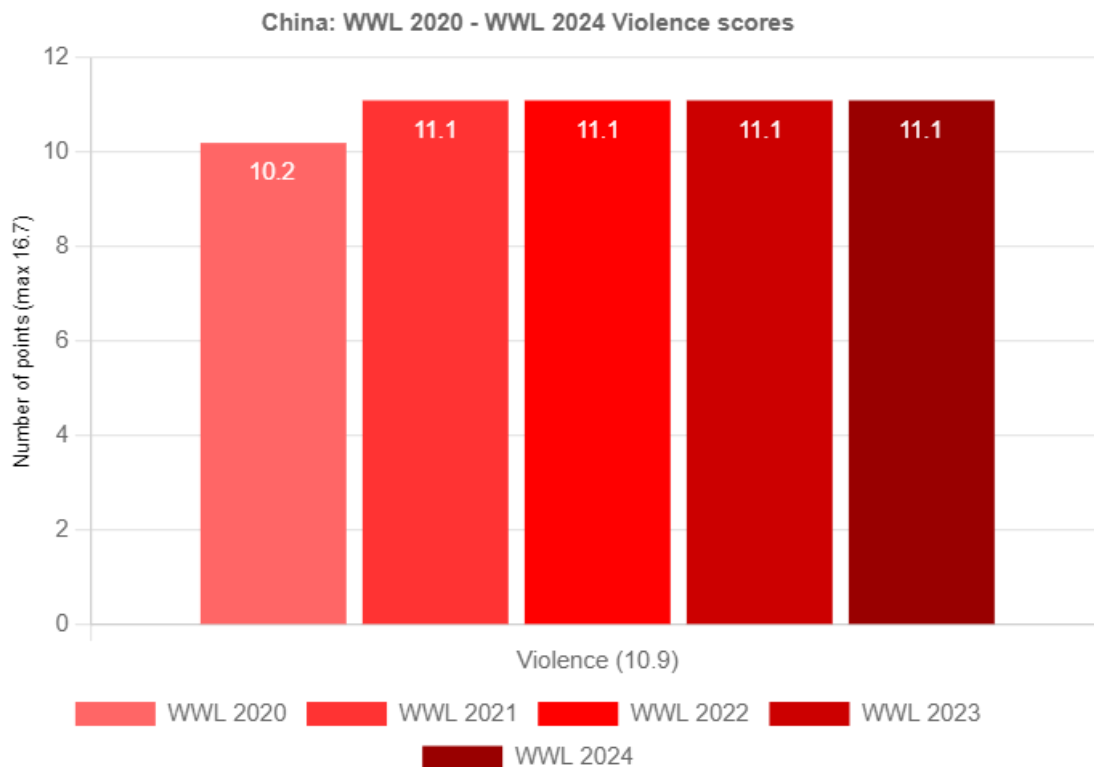
5 Year trends: Pressure in each sphere of life



It can be seen in the chart above that all five *spheres of life* show marked increases in score in the last five reporting periods and now - in WWL 2024 - have never been at a higher level in the past five years. The fact that the level of pressure in the *Family sphere* is not higher may be surprising at first sight. It should be kept in mind, however, that the situation of converts in Xinjiang and Tibet in particular has become increasingly difficult to monitor as reporting from these provinces is heavily restricted. Not surprisingly, the scores for *National life* have increased particularly significantly over the last reporting periods, reflecting the ever stronger pressure caused by the authorities bringing everything and everybody into the framework of Communist ideology. The high scores for *Church life* have been in the category 'extreme' all through the five reporting periods, reflecting how life for all churches has become much more difficult, no matter how big or small they are or whether they are TSPM or (unregistered) house churches. That is not to say that all churches have already been targeted, but that all churches need to be cautious and have come under increasing pressure, especially when dealing with the authorities.

5 Year trends: Violence against Christians

As can be seen in the chart below, the scores for violence against Christians - consistently in the category "very high" - have steadily increased and have now levelled off at 11.1 points (which is borderline to the category "extremely high"). However, there have not been any reports of Christians being killed for their faith.



Gender-specific religious persecution / Female

Group	Female Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Forced divorce; Forced marriage
Security	Trafficking; Violence – sexual
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

As marriage and birth rates fall in China, women are seeing an erosion of equal opportunities and are now encouraged toward “family virtues,” with pressure to focus on child-rearing and caregiving roles ([Wall Street Journal](#), 9 November 2022). It is too soon to tell if and how this will impact persecution, but it represents the possibility of increasing vulnerability for Christian women.

China’s (now abandoned) one-child policy is notorious for having created a gender imbalance. The consequences of this policy are interacting with the vulnerability of Christian communities in neighboring countries, as well as creating additional pressure on Chinese women. Female Christians from neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Myanmar caught in China’s network of trafficking may be sold as brides in predominately rural areas, although Chinese repression of media and control of the internet makes it difficult to document cases ([HRW](#), 7 June 2022). In

addition, women who have defected from the North Korean regime are also vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. Many North Korean women and girls flee to the border regions of South China for safety, but are then subjected to continuous cycles of violence, rape and sexual slavery in China's "Red Zone" ([DW](#), 2023, "North Korean Girls exploited in China's Red Zone).

Christian leaders are a target in China. Since many churches, especially house churches, are led by women, women are similarly affected by persecution, discrimination and intolerance as men, and may be imprisoned if their religious activities are discovered. Generally speaking, converts from Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds face the greatest pressure if their faith is discovered; their husbands may be pressured into divorcing them because they are seen as traitors to their ethnic group.

Gender-specific religious persecution / Male

Group	Male Pressure Points
Economic	-
Political and Legal	Imprisonment by government
Security	Abduction
Social and Cultural	-
Technological	-

Although they face similar pressure to women, male Christian leaders are particularly targeted for government surveillance. Catholic priests and high-profile house church leaders have been abducted. While in detention, many men are traumatized. Women may also be arrested and sentenced for their faith, but reports indicate that Christian men experience this more frequently. Men under prolonged detention are unable to provide financially for their families, and a country expert has described how "families suffer when men are arrested, as financial support disappears...[and] children are affected by the loss of a father." Due to such pressure, some church leaders choose to emigrate.

Persecution of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department's IRFR 2022 China:

- "There were reports authorities continued to remove "Arabic" architectural features such as minarets from Hui mosques and other Muslim religious sites in Qinghai, Yunnan, Shanghai, and Beijing. NGOs reported that in June, riot police injured 20 Hui civilians protesting the demolition of the Baoshan Mosque in Zhaotong City, Yunnan Province." (Page 3)
- "The government continued to label several religious groups, including the CAG, Shouters, All-Sphere Church, Guanyin Method, and many others as cults or xie jiao organizations. According to Bitter Winter, in August, the government updated its official list, which included more than 20 groups, mainly Christian and Buddhist but also Falun Gong. The human rights publication stated the regime increasingly classified as xie jiao any group the

CCP perceived as hostile to the regime, and courts “increasingly interpret the category by including in it even groups that are not part of the official list of the xie jiao.” (Page 32)

Besides Christians, Muslims in Xinjiang and Tibetan Buddhists face strong pressure from the government, as does Falun Gong. Details can be found in the still valid Freedom House Special Report of February 2017: "[The Battle for China's Spirit](#)".

Meanwhile, several internal documents on the treatment of the Muslim minority of the Uighurs in Xinjiang have emerged, revealing not just the strict political and ideological drive of the CCP's policy, but also the industrial scale of detention and "re-education". Among those reports, the "[China Leaks](#)" published by an international consortium with the New York Times on 16 November 2019, were particularly revealing. Other [reports](#) by Adrian Zenz and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) have added to the knowledge of what is going on in Xinjiang (China Digital Times, 27 November 2019). Another series of reports from Buzzfeednews used satellite images to give an [overview](#) of the scale of detention (Buzzfeed-news, 27 August 2020).

The Chinese government is openly defending its policy of detaining up to one million Muslim Uighurs and ethnic Kazakhs in detention centers in Xinjiang, claiming the fight against radical Islam makes such measures necessary. Typically, the [United Nations](#) is the main forum for battles on this subject: In October 2020, a coalition of 39 member states demanded an international investigation; however, China managed to bring together a coalition of 45 countries, opposing such a move and praising China for its minority policy (Catholic News Agency, 7 October 2020). The control of the Uighur population remains very high, as was illustrated by a [phone search program](#) by which searches against a masterlist of 50,000 files deemed as violent and terrorist are performed and mobile phone owners are then punished when a file is found (Human Rights Watch, 4 May 2023).

The "[Ethnic Unity Law](#)" applying to Tibet shows that assimilation is a wider policy of the CCP now (RFA, 1 May 2020). The plight of other groups like the "[Church of the Almighty God](#)" (CAG) also belongs here (Bitter Winter, 20 August 2020), a more detailed explanation can be found above under *Religious landscape*. There have also been reports that members of religious minorities being detained in the labor camps (such as Uighurs and members of the CAG) have been killed.

In Guangxi province, authorities are relocating and repressing members of various folk religions, termed as *xie jiao* ([Guangxi: Religious Repression Increases Among Zhuang Minority, Bitter Winter](#), 25 May 2022). In particular, members of the Zhuang minority are targeted and the operation is aimed at an allegedly large infiltration of illegal religion from neighboring Vietnam, where their worship is tolerated.

Future outlook

The outlook for Christians as viewed through the lens of:

Communist oppression

The law on religion and its February 2020 supplement continue to being implemented by the Communist Party via its United Front Work Department and the related offices on religion. Its strict implementation is strongly felt by all religions, but Christians have been a particular target and even TSPM churches have come under scrutiny. The CCP is much more relentless in following its goals and preserving its national ideology and will do whatever it deems necessary, as has been shown during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis when many church buildings were simply kept closed, while most other meetings and venues could start up again (some church venues were allowed to re-open as well). The "Administrative measures for [religious staff](#)" entered into force on 1 May 2021 (gov.cn, 9 February 2021). The room for churches in particular continues to shrink considerably, no matter if state-registered or house churches.

A report entitled "'[Comprehensive National Security](#)' unleashed: How Xi's approach shapes China's policies at home and abroad" sums up one of the major future challenges (Merics, 15 September 2022). While countries around the world (even democracies) are re-defining and tightening national security, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has raised this whole concept to new heights with its "securitization of everything". The CCP's traditional concept of national security, as followed by Mao Zedong, consisted of just three elements – political, territorial and military security. In contrast, Secretary General Xi's comprehensive national security concept consists of not less than 16 different types of security. The frame of analysis is being increasingly narrowed down to perceived or real internal and external threats. However, if threats are detected everywhere, this leads to ever higher levels of paranoia. As the number of perceived threats has been multiplying, so has the reaction against and adaptation to them. Threat recognition and adaptation has become a style of governance for the whole CCP system from the center down to the grassroots – even if it is only done to impress superiors and score points for promotion.

One of the areas in society where this change of priorities is becoming increasingly evident is religion. As the report explains: "Beijing sees individual identification with the party and country as fundamental to long-term security. Recent campaigns have focused on promoting a unified national identity (国家认同) and 'correct' mainstream values. Xi has called for a comprehensive national security outlook in religious affairs to ensure that religious organs promote CCP core values and policies. Minority languages have been marginalized in public education and partly restricted from use online. All Chinese are meant to be "one heart and soul" under the banner of a Chinese nation (中华民族) and the leadership of the CCP. Those who resist may be subject to re-education ...".

There is evidence that many of the younger generation are beginning to doubt the social contract (of participating in the ever improving economic situation in exchange for agreeing with strict limitations on personal freedom) and look for alternative meaning to life (see above: *Trends analysis #1*); this can be seen as a rich mission-field for Christians, but may also feed into the CCP's paranoia and its need for tighter control.

Dictatorial paranoia

Dictatorial paranoia plays out in an emphasis on national ideology and indoctrination, but can find its culmination in efforts to control and supervise society. China is the country where online and mobile paying systems are by far the most advanced and used, especially in cities, and such systems can be used for monitoring, too, leading to questions about data protection within China itself. While the Social Credit System and GM are still being developed (see above: *Trends Analysis 1c*), citizen ratings will have very serious implications. Questions arise not just about fraud or buying a better rating: What happens if citizens show socially unwanted behavior, by being – for example – religious or Christian? What will be the consequence of that?

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that it is relatively easy to introduce strict surveillance and isolation measures for health-related reasons, although there were some fears related to data protection being raised by Chinese citizens, too. However, the stronger the personality cult around President Xi Jinping grows, the more weight this Persecution engine, *Dictatorial paranoia*, will carry. An outline of what to expect from Chinese politics in the [next five years](#) up to 2025 by observers of the CCP includes a stronger focus on internal politics. The key points mentioned are: 'Xi consolidates political power in 2022', 'Government will become a better means to Xi's ends' and 'Xi's Party-state will deliver more for most Chinese citizens' (MacroPolo, 26 October 2020). This holds for the WWL 2024 reporting period as well, with the addition of: 'Manage to go it alone and overcome effects from the decoupling trends', increasing the economic autonomy and independence of China. Given how much these trends are centered around the person of President Xi, aged 70 at the time of writing, it will become increasingly important to think about [succession scenarios](#) with each passing year (CSIS, After Xi, 21 April 2021). This will add to CCP paranoia. For Christians in China, this consolidation of political power may well translate into increasing pressure to conform and the decoupling may lead to stronger isolation from other churches worldwide.

Islamic oppression and Religious nationalism - Buddhist

These Persecution engines are mainly driven by family, society and religious leaders and aimed against the few thousand converts among the Muslim and Buddhist (Tibetan) people groups. Pressure on converts is likely to remain high and potentially even increase as the urgency for conformity among these minority communities grows due to the increasing pressure being placed on them by government policing measures.

External Links - Persecution Dynamics

- Persecution engines description: police state - <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-china-42911468/china-xinjiang-police-state-fear-and-resentment>
- Persecution engines description: Ethnic Unity Law - <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/law-05012020182336.html>

- Drivers of persecution description: 281 million members - <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/10/23/10-things-to-know-about-chinas-policies-on-religion/>
- Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.50 points): banned - <https://apnews.com/article/technology-business-religion-china-apple-inc-dafe0fad25bdac0313d458453e0dcf53>
- Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.50 points): shut down - <https://www.christianitydaily.com/news/china-shut-down-of-well-known-christian-website-jona-home.html>
- Block 1.6: It has been risky for Christians to access Christian radio or TV, or Christian material on the Internet. (3.50 points): more cautious - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march-web-only/internet-regulations-china-evangelism.html>
- Block 2.7: Parents have been hindered in raising their children according to their Christian beliefs. (3.75 points): home-schooling - <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/april/china-education-school-homeschooling-restrictions.html>
- Block 2.9: Children of Christians have been harassed or discriminated against because of their parents' faith. (3.75 points): survey form - <https://chinaaid.org/uncensored-news/stories-by-issue/religious-freedom/investigation-of-students-religious/>
- Pressure in Block 2 / Family sphere: ongoing challenges - <https://chinaaid.org/uncensored-news/stories-by-issue/rule-of-law/early-rain-couple-overcame-harassment/>
- Block 3.2: Christians have been monitored by their local communities or by private groups (this includes reporting to police, being shadowed, telephone lines listened to, emails read/censored, etc.). (4.00 points): grid management system - <https://www.prcleader.org/post/grid-management-china-s-latest-institutional-tool-of-social-control>
- Block 4.1: The Constitution (or comparable national or state law) limits freedom of religion as formulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (4.00 points): Journal of Law and Religion - <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-law-and-religion/article/abs/freedom-in-handcuffs-religious-freedom-in-the-constitution-of-china/55969679D7541B29CAA7477AE1503627>
- Block 5.1: Church activities have been monitored, hindered, disturbed, or obstructed. (4.00 points): full text - <https://bitterwinter.org/the-new-chinese-measures-for-religious-activity-venues-come-into-force-on-september-1-the-full-text/>
- Block 5.2: It has been difficult to get registration or legal status for churches at any level of government. (4.00 points): new regulations - <https://chinaaid.org/uncensored-news/stories-by-issue/rule-of-law/ccp-issues-administrative-measures-for/>
- Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points): rolled out - http://www.chinachristiandaily.com/news/category/2022-08-15/training--preaching-of-sinicization-of-christianity-rolled-out-in-three-provinces_11770
- Block 5.8: Christian preaching, teaching and/or published materials have been monitored. (4.00 points): Administrative measures - <https://bitterwinter.org/enter-the-administrative-measures-for-religious-clergy/>
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Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website: <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

As in earlier years, these are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom): <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=China> and <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.