

# RESEARCH

## Revisionist Religion

### *Xi Jinping's Suppression of Christianity and Elevation of Traditional Culture as Part of a Revisionist Power Agenda*

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This paper explores recent developments in the regulation and repression of religion by the Chinese state under Xi Jinping. It argues that the “three rectifications and one demolition” campaign launched in Zhejiang province was not an isolated local effort, but rather is rooted in a particular ideological agenda being promoted by the Chinese Communist Party. Further, it asserts that this ideological agenda is foundational to the CCP’s drive to establish itself as a credible alternative to Western hegemonic power. This is demonstrated by a thorough examination of primary sources, including CCP media, speeches, and official documents, especially pertaining to the anti-Western ideology campaign, the demolition campaign in Zhejiang, and most significantly, Xi Jinping’s promotion of “Chinese traditional culture” in the domestic and international spheres. By illustrating a specific and coordinated program of suppressing foreign religion on the one hand, and promoting Chinese or “Sinicized” religion on the other, this paper places these efforts at the center of China’s revisionist power agenda.

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During a highly-publicized speech to a work conference on religion, Chinese President Xi Jinping reasserted the absolute control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over religion, warning especially against “overseas infiltration via religious

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means.”<sup>2</sup> This long-anticipated speech informed religious leaders and regulators that the role of religion was to serve the agenda of the state.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, it confirmed a hard turn toward increased state regulation and oversight of religion, consistent with the major crackdown on Christianity that has been underway for two years in China’s eastern Zhejiang province.<sup>4</sup> The content and tone of the speech came as no surprise to many observers of religion in China, who have watched events in Wenzhou and the tightening strictures on Christianity and compared them with the more tolerant—even friendly—posture the regime has taken in regard to Daoism, Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I assert that the crackdown on Christianity under Xi Jinping in Wenzhou—and in China more broadly—is part of a larger agenda. The CCP aims to blend a state-led market economy with an authoritarian government, in an alternate, distinctly Chinese political model. Where Western advocates of Christianity have long touted the Judeo-Christian roots of the liberal democratic idea, Xi Jinping has moved to quell these potential rival influences, and conversely to enhance the influence of Chinese philosophies and theologies. Unlike Confucianism, Daoism, or Chinese Buddhism, Christianity is understood as posing an ideological threat to Xi’s “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” agenda.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Xi Jinping sees the suppression of Christianity as a critical step in the promotion of his new ideological project.

## Background

In April of 2014, reports of churches being forcibly demolished began to emerge from the Wenzhou municipality of China’s Zhejiang province, meeting with widespread international condemnation.<sup>7</sup> To many outsiders, whose only frame of reference for these events was the official atheism of Marxist orthodoxy, a campaign of religious repression in an avowedly communist regime was objectionable, but not unexpected. However, for others, this was a surprising and seemingly anomalous development, out of step with

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<sup>2</sup> “China Focus: Xi calls for improved religious work,” *Xinhua*, April 23, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/23/c\\_135306131.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/23/c_135306131.htm).

<sup>3</sup> *Xinhua*, “China Focus: Xi calls for improved religious work.” He stated that religious believers should, “merge religious doctrines with Chinese culture, abide by Chinese laws and regulations, and devote themselves to China’s reform and opening up drive and socialist modernization in order to contribute to the realization of the ‘Chinese Dream’ of national rejuvenation.”

<sup>4</sup> Ian Johnson, “Decapitated Churches in China’s Christian Heartland,” *New York Times*, May 21, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/asia/china-christians-zhejiang.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Lawrence C. Reardon, “The Party Giveth and the Party Taketh Away: Chinese Enigmatic Attitudes Towards Religion,” in *Religious Transformation in Modern Asia: A Transnational Movement*, ed. David W. Kim (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 26-49.

<sup>6</sup> Carrie Gracie, “The Credo: Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation,” *BBC News*, November 7, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29788802>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Marquand, “In China, a Church-State Showdown of Biblical Proportions,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 11, 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2015/0111/In-China-a-church-state-showdown-of-biblical-proportions>. See also: Ian Johnson, “Church-State Clash in China Coalesces Around a Toppled Spire,” *New York Times*, May 20, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1nI5BY0>.

the then widely assumed trajectory of religion in China, and particularly out of step with the easy and even intimate relationship between Party, private sector, and Protestant Christianity in Wenzhou.

Although religion remained highly regulated in China in the period leading up to Xi Jinping's accession to power, religious and state actors had increasingly developed what Kellee Tsai terms "adaptive informal institutions," constituted by interactions in which space for religious observance was created.<sup>8</sup> These flourished to the degree that religious belief and practice were presented as contributing to the "harmonious society" project, in both its social and economic capacities—that is, to the degree that a religion was said to inculcate civic duty and spur economic growth. In fact, many foreign and domestic religious groups successfully cultivated and received state patronage for the establishment of certain explicitly faith-based educational or charitable endeavors.<sup>9</sup>

Wenzhou, known colloquially as "China's Jerusalem" for its large and visible Christian population, was the epitome of this confluence between religion and state goals. So-called "Boss Christians" wrote books and hosted seminars touting the link between Christian devotion and success in business.<sup>10</sup> In view of the tremendous growth of the Wenzhou manufacturing-based economy, it is not surprising to find that local and national officials were both intrigued with the potential utility of Protestant Christianity and also, then, willing to look the other way when unregistered churches hosted public religious events or registered churches built structures whose ostentatiousness exceeded building codes limiting height and use of religious symbols.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, on a national level, Hu Jintao's Harmonious Society (*hexie shehui*) and Scientific Development (*kexue fazhan guan*) programs elevated effectiveness and practicality over ideology. First mentioned in a speech in Jiangxi, and shortly thereafter in Hunan, President Hu characterized *kexue fazhan guan* as an effort to "actively explore ways of development that conform to reality." In other words, development that is "scientific" should not pursue GDP growth at the expense of all else, but should attend to community well-being and social stability.<sup>12</sup> Observers and religious actors alike accurately interpreted these emphases as signaling openness to religious participation in the Chinese public square on socially and economically utilitarian grounds.<sup>13</sup> Thus, beginning

<sup>8</sup> Kellee Tsai, *Capitalism Without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 38-39.

<sup>9</sup> This extended to exchange programs that sent Chinese graduate students to evangelical Protestant institutions, notably Regent College's Chinese Studies Program in Vancouver, Canada. In conversations with the author, many students in this program described their research projects as relating to the intersection of social stability, economic growth and Christian thought. See: <http://www.regent-college.edu/graduate-programs/chinese-studies>.

<sup>10</sup> Nanlai Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 30-34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-34.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Fewsmith, "Promoting the Scientific Development Concept," *China Leadership Monitor* 11 (July 2004): 2, [http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/clm11\\_jf.pdf](http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/clm11_jf.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem*, 27-29.

gradually in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping (as a part of his “reform and opening up” program) and increasingly under Hu Jintao’s tenure, religious studies programs, faith-based charities, civil society groups, and others flourished, as the CCP explored ways that religion could contribute to the continued development of the Chinese market economy without jettisoning moral and ethical constraints.<sup>14</sup>

If increasing dialogue and openness to the contributions of religion, and to Christianity in particular, was characteristic of CCP practice under Hu Jintao, Xi Jinping has made a clear break with his predecessors’ approach. Xi conceives of religion in a fundamentally different way than did Hu; rather than serving as a useful—if ideologically problematic—tool for spurring economic growth, he understands it to operate at a deeper level, with the potential to challenge or sustain CCP rule. Christian groups—notably the Roman Catholic Church—have played a galvanizing role in toppling authoritarian regimes, such as in the case of Poland’s Solidarity movement. Similarly in China, Christianity has been an inspiration to human rights defenders, many of whom are practicing rights lawyers. Xi’s wariness of the impact of religion has brought Christian beliefs and practices under much higher levels of official scrutiny.<sup>15</sup>

Mr. Xi’s wariness has translated to repression; in its 2015 annual report on religious freedom around the world, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) writes that, “some have characterized the new wave of persecution against Christians that swept through China in 2014 as the most egregious and persistent since the Cultural Revolution,” calling religious freedom violations “unprecedented.”<sup>16</sup> USCIRF’s 2016 report suggests that little has changed, and the detention of lawyers taking on religious cases has notably increased.<sup>17</sup>

Not only does this crackdown indicate a reversal, but its consequences have provoked a significant international backlash, including forceful statements by prominent U.S. lawmakers, many of whom play an important role in shaping the U.S.-China relationship. For example, as the demolition campaign continued through 2015, a bipartisan group of senators issued a statement urging President Obama to raise human rights

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<sup>14</sup> The period of greater openness to Christianity described in this paper, and against which Mr. Xi’s approach is contrasted, can be dated from the publication of Document 19, in 1982, until the eviction of Beijing’s Shouwang Church in 2011. Document 19 was the first attempt to grapple with the role of religion in the reform era, reinstating regulatory structures and acknowledging the persistence of religious belief. In 2011, the public battle over the eviction of the unregistered, evangelical Shouwang megachurch by its landlord, under government pressure, signaled the end of an era for utilitarian tolerance.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the Chinese *weiquan* “rights lawyers” and their motivations, including a discussion of their attraction to Christianity, see Fu Hualing and Richard Cullen, “Climbing the Weiquan Ladder: A Radicalizing Process for Rights Protection Lawyers,” *The China Quarterly* 205 (2011): 40-59.

<sup>16</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2015* (April 30, 2015): 33-35, <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%20Annual%20Report%202015%20%282%29.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report 2016*, (May 2, 2016): 32-37.

concerns during the upcoming bilateral summit, writing that, “under President Xi, there has been an extraordinary assault on rule of law and civil society in China.”<sup>18</sup> One of the signatories, former Republican presidential candidate and Senator Marco Rubio later reiterated: “On nearly every possible front, human rights are under assault in China, and religious freedom is no exception. Zhejiang province is ground zero for this crackdown...we continue to see crosses forcibly removed and churches demolished.”<sup>19</sup> Significantly, Senator Rubio went on to link these rights violations to the G20 Summit, which will be hosted in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, in September of 2016, insisting that the province adequately address its human rights deficit before the gathering.<sup>20</sup>

The CCP appears untroubled by this intensified scrutiny, despite it generating a renewed interest in Chinese human rights among U.S. lawmakers. Once a perennial thorn in Beijing’s side, U.S. denunciations of Chinese rights violations have been largely sidelined since China was granted Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) in 2001.<sup>21</sup> Before this seminal policy shift, normal trade relations with China required yearly renewal, a fact leveraged by some members of Congress in an effort to secure concessions from the PRC on human rights.<sup>22</sup> As China’s economic dominance has grown, Washington’s ability to apply pressure on Beijing has diminished, so issues of religious freedom, rule of law, civil and political rights have taken a backseat to the stability of global markets, which increasingly depend on China.

In light of the turbulent history surrounding bilateral trade relations and their link with human rights concerns, Beijing is unlikely to welcome a return to any regular or sustained political discussion of its rights record, especially a discussion that threatens to interfere with events like the G20 Summit, as Senator Rubio intimated. This suggests that a considered, intentional, and political choice was made to absorb the consequences of the crackdown, systematically marginalizing Christianity in order to establish a more explicitly Chinese moral and ethical foundation for governance, reform, and development. Religious repression, then, is central to the broader Xi agenda, rather than merely evidence of local variation or a series of anomalous and isolated incidents.

If this is so, the question arises: why and how does religious repression fit into the Xi

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<sup>18</sup> United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Senators Urge President Obama to Raise Human Rights Concerns during upcoming September Visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to the United States,” Newsroom, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 11 August 2015, [http://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/senators-urge-president-obama-to-raise-human-rights-concerns-during-upcoming-september-visit-by-chinese-president-xi\\_jinping-to-the-united-states](http://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/ranking/release/senators-urge-president-obama-to-raise-human-rights-concerns-during-upcoming-september-visit-by-chinese-president-xi_jinping-to-the-united-states).

<sup>19</sup> “Commission on China Chairs Smith, Rubio Welcome Developments in Case of Lawyer Zhang Kai, Urge President Xi to Ease Restrictions on Religious Groups,” Office of Representative Chris Smith, March 24, 2016, <http://chrissmith.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=398802>.

<sup>20</sup> “Commission on China Chairs Smith, Rubio Welcome Developments in Case of Lawyer Zhang Kai,” Office of Representative Chris Smith.

<sup>21</sup> Zhou Qi, “Conflicts over Human Rights between China and the U.S.,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (February, 2005): 105-124.

<sup>22</sup> Zhou, “Conflicts over Human Rights between China and the U.S.,” 107.

administration's domestic and international agenda? And, as a corollary, why is the crackdown perceived to be so essential as to trump the consequences associated with international disapproval, when China has arguably benefited from decreased tension around human rights violations in its relations with other great powers—especially with the United States?<sup>23</sup>

The USCIRF 2015 report asserts that, “unprecedented violations against Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Falun Gong practitioners” had taken place in that year.<sup>24</sup> Chinese Buddhists, Daoists, and practitioners of Confucian religious rites<sup>25</sup> are notably absent from this list, and have not been subject to the same level of persecution.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, not only have these groups experienced lower levels of repression, but they have also found themselves newly valued and promoted, under the rubric of “traditional culture.”<sup>27</sup> Liberally peppering speeches with Confucian aphorisms and affirming the contributions of Daoism and Buddhism to Chinese civilization, President Xi has proven that he is committed to filling China’s “spiritual vacuum” without allowing an opening through which Western ideologies might enter.<sup>28</sup>

Implicit within the official promotion of traditional, authoritarian expressions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism is a repudiation of the Western, liberal democratic

<sup>23</sup> Since the delinking of permanent normal trade relations with China (PNTR) from human rights, culminating in China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, China’s economy has reaped massive benefits. James Mann describes it thusly: “In 2000, the United States made [PNTR] privileges permanent and successfully led the way for China’s entry into the World Trade Organization. The United States runs a trade deficit with China that is now over \$ 200 billion a year. China’s ability to sell goods in the United States is one of the driving forces behind its rapid economic growth.” See James Mann, *The China Fantasy: Why Capitalism Will Not Bring Democracy to China* (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2007), 32, Kindle Edition.

<sup>24</sup> USCIRF, *Annual Report 2015*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> While Confucianism’s status as a religion is still widely debated, for our purposes it is enough to recognize that it is a traditional value system previously condemned by the CCP that continues to be expressed at the popular and elite level. Because Confucian teaching has long placed special emphasis on filial piety, a major component of Confucian practice involves the veneration of ancestors and other notables, including Confucius himself, practices which are referred to in this section as “religious rites.” At the same time, because the rites and practices associated with veneration are not understood as having supernatural significance, and are not prescribed or regulated by any kind of central religious authority, it is not necessarily accurate to characterize Confucianism as a religion. Confucius has also enjoyed a renaissance in Chinese elite and political circles, which focus predominately on his preferential option for social order. Finally, Confucius and Confucianism have been marketed internationally as emblematic of China’s rich and lengthy intellectual tradition.

<sup>26</sup> This is not to minimize incidents of religious repression or violations of religious freedom experienced by these groups, but merely to note that they have been considerably less.

<sup>27</sup> Xinhua News Agency, “*Xi Jinping lun zhongguo chuanguotong wenhua—shiba da yilai zhongguo lunshu*” [Xi Jinping’s speeches on traditional culture—important selections from 18 expositions], February 28, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-02/28/c\\_126206419.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-02/28/c_126206419.htm).

<sup>28</sup> For more on the “spiritual vacuum” contention and debate, see the study in Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 167-168.

ideal. In this view, Chinese traditional culture and thought have produced a Chinese state appropriate to the Chinese nation; Western religion, on the other hand, produced liberal democracy, which may be appropriate to Western nations, but is decidedly not Chinese. By linking the political ideas of state capitalism (the “Chinese” model) and liberal democracy (the “Western” model) with their alleged religious-philosophical foundations, and attaching special significance to the geographic center of each, the Party is suggesting that one package—Chinese religion and the Chinese party-state—is superior to the other. Authoritarianism undergirded by indigenous, traditional Chinese philosophy and religion is lauded precisely because it is uniquely and thoroughly Chinese, free of foreign influence, and the more appropriate option for a non-Western nation.

As a result, during the Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang administration, we have seen three major developments pointing to the suppression of Western-associated religions in order to establish an alternative that offers philosophical legitimacy to the Chinese authoritarian political model. First, non-Chinese religious ideas have been linked with Western ideology, and both have been dismissed as inimical to Chinese political orthodoxy. Second, there has been an increase in positive references to traditionally Chinese religious practices and belief systems, while associated institutions have been promoted. Finally, in terms of perceptible actions taken against religions believed to provide legitimacy to rival ideologies, there has been an unprecedented crackdown on Christianity, Tibetan Buddhism, and Islam.

The politically sensitive form of Islam, practiced by Uyghur Muslims, is concentrated in Xinjiang and closely linked with separatist movements.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Tibetan Buddhism is inextricably linked with calls for Tibetan sovereignty, as exhibited by the “splittist” Dalai Lama. These faiths, while potentially categorized as “indigenous” or “traditional” religions, are perceived as posing territorial threats to the regime.<sup>30</sup> Christianity, by contrast, does not pose a territorial threat; rather, it poses an ideological threat to the

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to note that Islam in China includes a diversity of ethnic groups, devotional styles and levels of discontent and assimilation with the Han Chinese majority and Chinese state. For example, China’s Hui Muslims have exhibited higher levels of satisfaction and integration than Uyghur Muslims. For more on Hui Muslims and national identity in China see Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People’s Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> USCIRF and Pew reporting both indicate that Falun Gong (FLG) has also been subject to dramatic increases in religious repression and persecution. This paper will not address the Falun Gong case, in that the reasons for its suppression are less ideological in nature, but rather are rooted in CCP fear of large gatherings and also in China’s history of heterodox new religious movements (NRMs). Thus, of the religions subject to crackdown under the Xi-Li regime, only the Falun Gong has been designated a so-called “evil cult” (*xiejiao*) by the Party. This suggests that, while religious freedom advocates are right to advocate on its behalf, it should not be understood to be a “religion” in the traditional sense, but instead a variety of *qigong* exercises, whose popularity and devotion the government has found to be problematic. The ham-fisted CCP response to FLG has exacerbated the problem, resulting in a spiral of FLG entrenchment and radicalization met with repression and persecution, in seeming perpetuity. For more on the *xiejiao* designation, see Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2014): 52-56.

cultural and political components of Xi's nationalist project. Thus, the change in state behavior towards Christian religious traditions is indicative of the threat Western ideology poses to regime survival.

### **“Universal values,” Western ideology, and Christianity**

In the immediate wake of the church demolition campaign in Wenzhou, renowned sociologist Peter Berger reflected on its meaning in the *American Interest*, hypothesizing that a stagnating economic growth rate was beginning to force the regime to look beyond poverty reduction and rapid growth for legitimacy. To this end, Berger writes that, “The emerging legitimation is nationalism. Ideologically, this entails suspicion of all ideas deemed to be un-Chinese, including the idea of universal human values, and of religions seen as insufficiently indigenized,” tying this suspicion to the demolitions.<sup>31</sup> In China, “universal values” refers to the notion that our common humanity implies moral and ethical principles that transcend nation, race, or ideology.<sup>32</sup> Over time, these principles came to be particularly associated (by Chinese advocates and detractors alike) with the ideals of “democracy, freedom, justice, human rights and philanthropy.”<sup>33</sup> While some in the CCP asserted the compatibility of the universal values concept with socialism, others countered that no political idea could be truly universal but rather is inherently local, historical, and particular. According to Maoist critics of universalism, this means that it is acceptable to draw from various non-Chinese models, but not to absolutize them.<sup>34</sup> Similar debates about the universality of any value system have taken place in the West, especially in the era of postmodernism and post-colonial critical theory.<sup>35</sup> As universal values have been called into question, they have also been vigorously defended, especially by scholars who adhere to Judeo-Christian religious traditions.<sup>36</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, like Berger, many of China's ruling elite associate universal values claims with non-Chinese religious ideas, a status placing both religion and political

<sup>31</sup> Peter Berger, “Is the Chinese Regime Changing its Policy Toward Christianity?” *American Interest*, June 11, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Qi Jianmin, “The Debate over ‘Universal Values’ in China,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 72 (2011): 882-890, 882-883.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 888.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 883.

<sup>35</sup> Critics of such value systems have pointed out the power dynamic inherent in claims of objectivity, universality, or absolutism. These power claims were often made by Western, colonial forces, who asserted that a prior grasp of Judeo-Christian ethical frameworks justified their paternalistic rule. Since the emergence of the postcolonial critical project in the academy, it has become commonplace to question claims of universal or objective values. In international relations, these ideas are most closely associated with Michel Foucault's conceptions of hegemonic power, see especially Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972) and, Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” *Truth/Power: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980). For its application to postcolonial theory, see especially Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1979).

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2011.

ideal alike in the category of objectionable foreign ideology. For example, in a training document issued by the Organization Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee the two are explicitly linked, with the document exhorting cadres to resist foreign ideological influences:

We must remain steadfast in our faith in Marxism, never lose our bearings when discussion becomes heated about Western constitutional democracy, ‘universal values,’ and ‘civil society,’ and avoid losing our sense of self under the influence of feudal superstitions and religion.<sup>37</sup>

In Ian Johnson’s investigative piece about the escalation of anti-Christian persecution in the summer of 2014, he likewise provides important context for international readers, pointing out that Christianity has long been associated with Western calls for “universal values,” to its political detriment.<sup>38</sup> Increasingly, suspicion of universal values has been codified in new regulations and campaigns, beginning with the highly secretive Document 9, an internal Party communiqué circulated in April of 2013. It was later leaked, printed abroad and subsequently translated by the Asia Society’s *ChinaFile* in November of the same year.<sup>39</sup> Document 9 issues sharp condemnations against a series of assertions, values and challenges to Chinese Communist Party rule, including broadsides against the promotion of universal values, civil society, constitutional democracy, neoliberalism and “the West’s idea of journalism.”<sup>40</sup> These condemnations are followed closely by instructions to, “[s]trengthen leadership in the ideological sphere,” and “guide our party members and leaders to distinguish between true and false theories.” Importantly, the details of the latter instruction are given as follows: “Forcefully resist influential and harmful false tides of thoughts, help people distinguish between truth and falsehood, and solidify their understanding.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Xinhua News Agency, “Zhonggong zhongyang bu yinfa guanyu zai ganbu jiaoyu peixun zhong jiqiang lianxiang xinnian he daode pinxing jiaoyu de tongzhi,” [Central Committee: Notice Regarding Strengthening Cadre Education and Training in Ideals, Beliefs and Ethical Conduct], July 20, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-07/20/c\\_1111699389.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-07/20/c_1111699389.htm) (translation available: <http://blog.feichangdao.com/2015/02/a-chronicle-of-chinas-campaign-to.html>).

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, “Church-State Clash in China Coalesces Around a Toppled Spire.” <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/asia/church-state-clash-in-china-coalesces-around-a-toppled-spire.html?hpw&rref=world>.

<sup>39</sup> ChinaFile editors, “Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation. How Much Is a Hardline Party Directive Shaping China’s Current Political Climate?” *ChinaFile*, November 8, 2013. <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation#start>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

The impetus for the hardline and deeply ideological stance expressed in the document was the debate that emerged around constitutionalism during the initial leadership transition.<sup>42</sup> In the period before the Xi agenda crystallized, many publicly articulated hopes that he would continue the CCP's apparent movement in the direction of liberalism and reform. These articulations coalesced around a speech given by the newly-minted President Xi, in which he seemed, implicitly, to lend his support to constitutional reform through strengthening its implementation and accountability mechanisms.<sup>43</sup> The locus of constitutionalists' and reformers' hopes was Xi's statement that, "the life of the constitution lies in its implementation."<sup>44</sup> China legal scholar Rogier Creemers concluded that, "[p]arty jargon notwithstanding, the language on implementing the constitution and protecting people's rights seems to have encouraged the pro-constitutionalist side to step up."<sup>45</sup>

As has repeatedly been the case in the history of CCP campaigns and statements, an overly generous and optimistic interpretation of the speech resulted in a misplaced confidence that calls for constitutional reform would not provoke government reprisals. The experience of Democracy Wall is instructive here: as Deng Xiaoping launched his return to power after Mao's death, he signaled to workers, students, and other actors that they should express their discontent and desire for democratic reform by posting "big character" posters in the center of Beijing.<sup>46</sup> Not long afterward, he concluded that the campaign was too politically costly and had gotten out of hand; a crackdown

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<sup>42</sup> The terms "constitution/alism," "democracy" and "constitutional democracy" are used here in the sense in which they are used in mainstream Chinese academic and political discourse. Though these terms are contested and retain some ambiguity in the PRC, they should nonetheless not be understood as interchangeable with Western liberal democracy, centered around a system of local and national direct, popular elections. Instead, they refer broadly to the democracy stipulated in the PRC Constitution, which allows for local elections to the National People's Congress (NPC), a body that serves primarily in a consultative rather than legislative role, and is tasked in part with interpreting China's constitution. When calls for "constitutionalism" or "constitutional democracy" are issued by Chinese academics or officials, they are most often calls for the NPC to be given greater latitude and authority, and for aspects of the constitution that receive less emphasis to be afforded greater recognition. Support for constitutional democracy should therefore not be construed as opposition to CCP rule or even as meaningful dissent. For a more extensive discussion of constitutionalism in the Chinese context, see Shi Hexing, "The People's Congress System and China's Constitutional Development," and the response by Jacques deLisle, both in *China's Political Development: Chinese and American Perspectives*, ed. Kenneth G. Lieberthal, Cheng Li, and Yu Keping (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014): 103-130.

<sup>43</sup> Rogier Creemers, "China's Constitutionalism Debate: Content, Context and Implications," *The China Journal*, no. 74 (July 2015): 91-109, 244.

<sup>44</sup> Xinhua News Agency, "Xi Jinping: Zai shoudu gejie jinian xianxing xianfa gongbu shixing 30 zhounian dahui shang de jianghua." ["Xi Jinping: Everyone in the Capital Commemorates the 30th Anniversary of the Constitution, a Speech to the Assembly"], April 12, 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-12/04/c\\_113907206.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-12/04/c_113907206.htm).

<sup>45</sup> Creemers, "China's Constitutionalism Debate," 7.

<sup>46</sup> Robert MacFarquhar, "The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism: 1969-1982," in *The Politics of China: Sixty Years of the People's Republic of China*, ed. Robert MacFarquhar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 320-322.

ensued, where the movement's leaders were arrested.<sup>47</sup> Just as the Democracy Wall movement was initially encouraged and then met with harsh suppression, the calls for more robust constitutional implementation and greater rights protections were met with the unequivocal and comprehensive statement of condemnation contained in Document 9.

### Constitutionalism and the Maoist Backlash

The backlash against constitutionalism—in particular the first two points contained in Document 9, opposing constitutional democracy and universal values—laid the groundwork for the subsequent anti-Western ideology campaign that is still ongoing today. The central focus of the anti-Western ideology campaign has been academia and the perceived foreign intrusions that might undermine the authority of the CCP regime. According to an aggregation of the campaign's relevant speeches and documents, presented in chronological order, the opening salvo of this ideological project was launched in June of 2014 by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Dean Wang Weiguang in the journal *Qiushi*, published by the Party's Central Committee. In it, Wang suggests that the values implicit and explicit in Western ideologies are intended as a kind of Trojan horse with the end goals of destabilization and regime change:

Certain countries in the West advertise their own values as “universal values,” and claim that their interpretations of freedom, democracy, and human rights are the standard by which all others must be measured... Their goal is to infiltrate, break down, and overthrow other regimes... They scheme to use Western value systems to change China, with the goal of letting Chinese people renounce the Chinese Communist Party's leadership and socialism with Chinese characteristics, and allow China to once again become a colony of some developed capitalist country.<sup>48</sup>

A series of conferences,<sup>49</sup> speeches,<sup>50</sup> editorials,<sup>51</sup> and documents<sup>52</sup> followed, each condemning the idea that academic freedom entailed teaching foreign value systems and ideologies or criticizing the Chinese Communist Party and its official doctrine.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Robert MacFarquhar, “The Succession to Mao and the End of Maoism: 1969-1982,” 321.

<sup>48</sup> Weiguang Wang, “Strive to Modernize the State's Governance Systems and Capabilities (*Nuli tuijin guojia zhili tixi he zhili nengli xiandaihua*),” *Qiushi*, June 16, 2014, [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2014-06/16/c\\_1111106051.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2014-06/16/c_1111106051.htm) (partial translation available: <http://blog.feichangdao.com/2015/02/a-chronicle-of-chinas-campaign-to.html>).

<sup>49</sup> The issue of Western values and their infiltration of Chinese higher education was discussed at the 23rd National Working Meeting on Party Building at Institutes of Higher Learning in Beijing: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-12/29/c\\_1113818177.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-12/29/c_1113818177.htm).

<sup>50</sup> See for example, Wang Weiguang, “Wang Weiguang's Speech at CASS's 2014 ‘Three Discipline Projects’ Working Meeting, [*Wang weiguang zai zhongguo shekeyuan 2014 nian san xiang jilu jianshe zhuanli gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua*],” Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, [http://cass.cssn.cn/zhuanti/sanxiangjilvjianshexuexijiaoyuहुodong/sanxiangjilvlilunjiedu/201408/t20140801\\_1275930.html](http://cass.cssn.cn/zhuanti/sanxiangjilvjianshexuexijiaoyuहुodong/sanxiangjilvlilunjiedu/201408/t20140801_1275930.html).

While this campaign is ongoing, two of its touchstones are an unreleased speech or series of speeches by Xi Jinping, likely given in early fall 2014 and known as Document 30,<sup>54</sup> and a set of directives issued by education minister Yuan Guiren. In January 2015, the *New York Times* reported on Document 30 in the context of China's Maoist resurgence,<sup>55</sup> depicting the top-secret internal document as a follow-up to the anti-constitutionalist Document 9.<sup>56</sup> According to the *Times* journalist Chris Buckley, it "demands cleansing Western-inspired liberal ideas from universities and other cultural institutions." Because Document 9 was leaked and shared prodigiously throughout Chinese and Western media, Document 30 was guarded closely, and at first shared only through several work conferences devoted to conveying instructions on its adoption and implementation.<sup>58</sup> Later, portions were excerpted and referenced in state media, and it is clear that its dictates and their reverberations have been felt throughout the Chinese academy.

Building upon Documents 9 and especially 30, Education Minister Yuan made concrete the campaign's call to purge the academy of pernicious Western ideology when he issued his so-called "Three Nevers" directive. According to *Xinhua* state media, Yuan instructed teachers, administrators and officials to "[s]trengthen controls over how Western-derived teaching materials are used, and under no circumstances allow into our classrooms any teaching materials that spread Western value systems."<sup>59</sup> To keep Western ideology out of the classroom, Yuan stated that universities must never

<sup>51</sup> Representative editorials include, People's Daily [*Renmin Ribao*], "A Call for Scholarly Work in Marxism in the Service of the People [*Gaoyang makesizhuyi wei renmin zuo xuewen*]," July 10, 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0710/c1001-25263107.html>.

<sup>52</sup> Documents include, e.g., General Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, "Opinion Regarding Further Strengthening and Improving Propaganda and Ideology Work in Higher Education Given the New Circumstances [*Guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gajin xin xingshi xia gaoxiao xuanchuan sixiang gongzuo de yijian*]" (unpublished), described in *Xinhua*, "January 9, 2015. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/19/c\\_1114051345.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/19/c_1114051345.htm).

<sup>53</sup> The representative examples listed above were taken from Farris, William, "A Chronicle of China's Campaign to Rectify Political Ideology at Universities: 2014 – 2015," *Fei Chang Dao*, February 15, 2015. <http://blog.feichangdao.com/2015/02/a-chronicle-of-chinas-campaign-to.html>.

<sup>54</sup> No complete, public version of the original is available in Chinese or English.

<sup>55</sup> In China, Maoists are categorized as "conservative," due to their resistance to reform and allegiance to Marxist orthodoxy, while "constitutionalists" fall into the reformist category, though this does not entail outright opposition to CCP rule. Xi Jinping has increasingly come to be seen as a conservative, and Document 30 likewise falls in this category. For an informative discussion of Neo-Maoism as conservative, see Willy Lam, "The Maoist Revival and the Conservative Turn in Chinese Politics," *China Perspectives* 2 (2012): 5-15, <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/5851>.

<sup>56</sup> Chris Buckley and Andrew Jacobs, "Maoists in China, Given New Life, Attack Dissent," *The New York Times* (January 4, 2015.).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Xinhua* News Agency, "Yuan Guiren: University Instructors Must Comply with the Bottom Lines of Politics, Law, and Ethics [*Yuan guiren: Gaoxiao jiaoshi bixu shou hao zhengzhi falu daode santiao dixian*]," January 29, 2015. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/29/c\\_1114183715.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-01/29/c_1114183715.htm) (partial translation available: <http://blog.feichangdao.com/2015/02/a-chronicle-of-chinas-campaign-to.html>).

allow socialist values or Party leadership to be attacked in the classroom; *never* allow the constitution to be violated, and *never* allow teachers to vent their grievances to students, imparting a negative attitude.

By following the development of the constitutionalism debate as it morphed into the anti-Western ideology campaign, it has become clear that Xi Jinping is targeting the idea of universal values that are rooted in Judeo-Christian religions. Xi and the resurgent Maoists believe that universal values penetrate Chinese elite thinking through dissemination in the universities, and so must be intercepted and countered in the academy, before they find expression in demands for constitutional democracy. Whereas supposedly Western values, transmitted through venerable works of theology and philosophy, were valued by Hu Jintao for their potential economic utility, they have are viewed as dangerous by Xi Jinping.

### **The Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and the Rehabilitation of “Traditional Culture”**

As the number of Christians in China continues to rise—a trend that so far appears to be unaffected by higher levels of regulation and repression—its association with Western values means that this growth poses a problem for the CCP.<sup>60</sup> In December 2014, scholar of Christianity in China, Richard Madsen stated:

There seems to be a new move to try and suppress Churches. It’s connected with the nationalism of China’s government, and concerns that this is a foreign religion with connections around the world... [China’s rulers] hope the revival of traditional religions like Daoism and Buddhism will help crowd-out Christianity.<sup>61</sup>

In other words, if Christianity is perceived by Xi as being uniquely insidious and foreign, the answer is to promote indigenous Chinese religion.

Elsewhere, Madsen argues cogently that the recent tendency for Chinese state leaders to emphasize Chinese traditional culture and “cultural heritage” is a matter of necessity: the post-Mao era is rife with internal contradiction and economic growth is beginning to slow. In this fragile context, the CCP has sought legitimacy in the philosophies its founding father devoted himself to purging.<sup>62</sup> However, to ascribe the resurgence

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<sup>60</sup> Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, “Religious Composition by Country, 2010-2050,” Pew Forum (April 2, 2015), <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projection-table/>. The most recent Pew religious projection data predicts that the growth of Christians will peak in 2030, and will then level off or decline.

<sup>61</sup> Tom Hancock, “No Season of Goodwill for China’s Underground Christians,” Daily Mail, December 29, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-2889679/No-season-goodwill-Chinas-underground-Christians.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Richard Madsen, “From Socialist Ideology to Cultural Heritage: The Changing Basis of Legitimacy in the People’s Republic of China,” *Anthropology and Medicine* 21 no. 1 (2014): 58-70.

of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist tradition predominately to fragility and desperation would misrepresent the nature of Xi's project. Madsen, thus, aptly writes that the CCP "increasingly presents itself as protector of China's 'non-material cultural heritage'—the rituals and myths and sought-after virtues that link everyday life to an imagined 5000 years of glorious Chinese tradition."<sup>63</sup> By promoting Chinese (i.e. non-Tibetan) Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, Xi attempts to—in Madsen's words—"crowd out" the growing body of Chinese Christians as well as the potentially subversive "universal values" ideology that he understands Christianity to be lending philosophical support to. Importantly, he is at the same time providing ideological legitimation for a sustainable Chinese authoritarianism.

As Perry Link comments, a Confucian authoritarianism that neglects personal ethics and morality will not adequately resonate with either Chinese tradition or contemporary demands.<sup>64</sup> Link writes:

No dream about what it means to be Chinese in the twenty-first century can feel right in Chinese culture if it omits all mention of moral behavior. Democracy advocates who speak of "rights" and "dignity" may be using foreign terms, but they are also answering a very traditional Chinese question about how people should relate to one another. China's rulers surely recognize the lacuna in their dream, but they fear the concept of citizenship because it gives the populace too much autonomy.<sup>65</sup>

The challenge, then, is to articulate a Chinese-ness rooted in traditional culture and bolstered by a metaphysic that stresses order alongside morality, without entailing democracy. Xi Jinping has done exactly that in his embrace of the indigenous religious-philosophical traditions of Daoism and Confucianism, and by fully nationalizing Buddhism, which has its origins in India, but has been thoroughly integrated into the Chinese religious pantheon.

Buddhism, precisely because it has been fully "Sinicized," has come in for special praise and held up as a model for Christianity by Chinese scholars of religion, who have played an important role in shaping China's religious regulatory structure and policy. Zhuo Xinping, director of the Institute of World Religions at CASS has published and spoken widely on this topic, exhorting Christians in China to embrace the government's "Sinicization" program (*Zhongguohua*), in order that Christianity might be made as Chinese as Chinese Buddhism, in terms of loyalty to the state and external appearance (in other words, "looking" Chinese in its rites, practices and devotions). In an essay he contributed to the Institute of World Religions' and CASS's discussion of

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<sup>63</sup> Madsen, "From Socialist Ideology to Cultural Heritage," 58-70.

<sup>64</sup> Perry Link, "What it Means to be Chinese: Nationalism and Identity in Xi's China," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 3 (May/June 2015).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

Christianity's need for "Sinicization," Zhuo paints a picture of Chinese Buddhism's foreign origins, which necessarily produced foreign loyalties.<sup>66</sup> However, he asserts that Buddhism crucially assimilated to Chinese culture, *in direct response to* the decline of India and rise of China, a process Zhuo characterizes as "seizing the opportunity to... become a truly Chinese religion."<sup>67</sup> According to Zhuo and his colleagues, then, the solution to the problem of Western religion in China is for its members to acknowledge China's superior political power and adapt accordingly.

This embrace of Buddhism and other religions, which would seem anathema to the Chinese Communist Party, has been accomplished through Xi's "traditional culture" campaign. In April of 2014, Xinhua released a collection of the president's comments on "traditional culture," urging Party members to study them carefully.<sup>68</sup> Referring to the "Chinese Dream" for which he is known, President Xi reveals that the content of the dream is the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*zhonghua renmin weida fuxi*) and that this will, in part, be brought about by a re-appreciation of traditional Chinese culture.

Because Buddhism does not immediately fit into the category of indigenous philosophical or theological tradition, Xi has been keen to baptize it with "Chinese characteristics," emphasizing the way in which it has become thoroughly integrated into Chinese traditional culture. While Director Zhuo and other Chinese religious officials and scholars have emphasized the unique, assimilative character of Chinese Buddhism in the domestic arena, as described above, Xi has also done so on the international stage. During his 2014 UNESCO speech in Paris, he recounted the history and contributions of Buddhism in China. Acknowledging its foreign origin, Xi then characterizes it as undergoing "integrated development with the indigenous Confucianism and Daoism and finally becom[ing] the Buddhism with Chinese characteristics, thus making a deep impact on the religious belief, philosophy, literature, art, etiquette and customs of the Chinese people."<sup>69</sup> Benjamin Kang Lim and Ben Blanchard assert that this rehabilitation of traditional faiths, including the indigenization of Buddhism, constitutes a concerted effort to provide an ideologically and spiritually unmoored nation with solid, Party-approved ground to stand on.<sup>70</sup> By touting this project in his appearances abroad, Xi is signaling that this is not merely an internal strategy, but is part of the "Chinese Dream" agenda in the national and international arenas.

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<sup>66</sup> Xiping Zhuo, "The Three Essential Factors for the Sinicization of Christianity: Endorsing the Chinese Political System, Adapting to Chinese Society, and Embodying Chinese Culture [*Jidujiao zhongguohua de san yaosu: dui zhongguo zhengzhi de rentong, dui zhongguo shehui de shiying, dui zhongguo wenhua de biada*]," China State Ethnic Affairs Commission Newspaper (*Zhongguo minzu bao*), March 17, 2015, <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/report/150333601-1.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Xinhua News Agency, *Xi Jinping lun zhongguo chuantong wenhua*.

<sup>69</sup> Xi Jinping, "Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China at UNESCO Headquarters, 3/28/2014" (Speech, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France, March 28, 2014).

<sup>70</sup> Benjamin Kang Lim and Ben Blanchard, "Xi Jinping Hopes Traditional Faiths Can Fill Moral Void in China: Sources," *Reuters*, September 29, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/29/us-china-politics-vacuum-idUSBRE98S0GS20130929>.

Confucianism has also undergone a revival under the last two PRC administrations, but with a decidedly warmer tone under Xi. Confucius' birthday in 2014 was widely celebrated with official CCP support, while the CCP utilized his name and image to support its premier expression of international soft power in the rapidly multiplying Confucius Institutes. However, in a further indication of the shift in tone, Xi himself has liberally referred to his own study of the Confucian classics.<sup>71</sup> Ian Johnson recounts Xi's visit to Confucius' hometown, in order to illustrate his amenability to the previously maligned philosopher and his teaching: "[Xi] picked up two volumes on Confucianism and, in a reversal of the party's longtime antagonism, issued a rare endorsement: 'I need to read these books very carefully.'" <sup>72</sup>

Once again, this has not been limited to the domestic sphere, but has been enshrined in China's soft power "charm offensive," through the establishment of "Confucius Institutes" worldwide. While these institutes are predominately used for the teaching of Mandarin Chinese, and touch very little on ethical, moral or philosophical aspects of Chinese traditional culture, it is still significant that they have been launched under the banner of Confucius and Confucianism, as China's face to the world, when not fifty years ago Confucian temples were being smashed on orders from Mao to destroy the "Four Olds," (referring to "old ideas, culture, customs and habits.")<sup>73</sup> The Confucius Institutes and the appropriation of Confucius began under Hu Jintao, but Xi has made allusions to Confucian texts more explicit and has referred to them more easily than did his predecessor.<sup>74</sup>

The promotion of Daoism has also experienced a surge of state support, despite being naturally less well organized than the Confucian or Buddhist societies, which have more centralized institutional structures.<sup>75</sup> A post on the China Central Television (CCTV) English website informs readers that, "China is on a fast track to modernization. At the same time, many are frustrated about a perceived decline in public morals, as well as an environmental degradation. Daoism, with its belief in harmony and austerity, can help tackle spiritual dilemmas that accompany an economic boom."<sup>76</sup> Mentioned in the UNESCO speech and elsewhere, Xi groups Daoism with Buddhism and Confucianism to form the basis of the "traditional culture" that is central to China's rejuvenation.

<sup>71</sup> Gracie, "The credo: Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

<sup>72</sup> Johnson, "Church-State Clash in China Coalesces Around Toppled Spire."

<sup>73</sup> Tong Zhang and Barry Schwartz, "Confucius and the Cultural Revolution: A Study in Collective Memory" *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 11 no. 2 (December 1997): 189-212.

<sup>74</sup> Josh Chin, "Literary Leaders: Why China's President is So Fond of Dropping Confucius," *Wall Street Journal*, May 9, 2014, <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/05/09/literary-leaders-why-chinas-president-is-so-fond-of-dropping-confucius>.

<sup>75</sup> Matthew Bell, "Daoism Gains a Foothold, Again, in China," *PRI's The World*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2015-01-30/daoism-gains-foothold-again-china>.

<sup>76</sup> Zhang Dan, ed. "Relevance of Taoism in Modern Times," *CCTV English*, November 21, 2011, <http://english.cntv.cn/program/china24/20111121/103746.shtml>.

## An Unprecedented Crackdown and the anti-Christmas Campaign

If Christianity in China is seen as a direct threat to “traditional culture” and also as a conduit of Western ideologies promoting “universal values” that might ultimately lead to democracy and regime change, we should not be surprised to see widespread measures taken to suppress its public expression. In the last two years, since the ideological rectification campaigns have ramped up, there have been three areas where the move to contain Christianity in China has been especially stark: first, the Wenzhou church demolitions; second, the increased arrest and harsh sentencing of religious leaders; and third, state media’s rhetorical amplification of anti-Christmas movements at universities. These higher levels of repression have been observed by many organizations that provide reporting on religious freedom and human rights in China, including USCIRF, Freedom House, Pew, and the Congressional Executive Commission on China.

In her recent work *Religion and Authoritarianism*, Karrie J. Koesel observes that:

When religious-state collaboration collapses, authoritarian officials may return to more coercive mechanisms of control, such as introducing new rules restricting religious freedoms, refusing the registration and accreditation of religious groups, and denouncing some faiths as threats to social stability. Control may also come in more informal and uncontestable forms, such as delaying building permits or propping up rival faiths, with the intention that the targeted community will slowly wither away.<sup>77</sup>

This is precisely what we witness in the Wenzhou church demolitions. These demolitions in Zhejiang province took place in a region characterized by high levels of church-state cooperation rather than antagonism. The coziness of the relationship between Christian actors and the local state in Wenzhou has been studied at length by scholars, including anthropologist Nanlai Cao, in *Constructing China’s Jerusalem*. In the chapter, “The Rise of ‘Boss Christians’ and Their Engagement with State Power,” he tells the stories of a number of wealthy Christian entrepreneurs and factory owners, who have used their influence to negotiate space for themselves and their churches that is neither technically legal nor prosecuted as illegal, though these churches and their activities exist in the open, and thereby, by law, should be registered.<sup>78</sup> That is, not only are the evangelistic activities, churches, conferences and organizations left alone, as many underground churches may be—partly because they stay hidden—but they exist aboveground, and refuse to conceal their intent. Increasingly, the government had acknowledged and accommodated Christianity in the region.

The dramatic shift in the relationship between Christianity and the Chinese state under Xi, then, is why the demolitions seemed so out of the ordinary in the municipality,

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<sup>77</sup> Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism*, 31.

<sup>78</sup> Cao, *Constructing China’s Jerusalem*, 24-41.

and elicited such widespread alarm and protest. The focal point for local Christians and government officials alike was the Sanjiang Church, notable because it was both a registered, government-affiliated church and also because it was targeted for its height and supposed ostentation, despite the fact that the project's grandiosity had been encouraged by government officials eager to promote development.<sup>79</sup> Provincial secretary Xia Baolong, reportedly a close ally of Xi Jinping, was visiting the area in November of 2013, and was troubled by the way that the church's imposing cross dominated the landscape.<sup>80</sup> The cross was ordered taken down, but a standoff ensued when the church refused, a saga that ultimately resulted in its total destruction.<sup>81</sup> Afterward, according to USCIRF, "at least 400 churches were torn down or had crosses forcibly removed and/or demolished...a notable increase over previous years."<sup>82</sup>

While an extensive back and forth took place in the international media as to whether the destruction that took place was aimed at Christians in particular or presaged a broader national crackdown,<sup>83</sup> in the two years since, the verdict seems to be that this was an especially intense iteration of what is actually a broader campaign.<sup>84</sup> Zhejiang officials alleged that action was only taken against buildings that had not received proper approval or had violated zoning restrictions or building codes, and that the "three rectifications and one demolition" campaign was equally applied to business, residences and houses of worship alike. Professor Fenggang Yang of Purdue University's Center on Religion and Chinese Society finds the building violation justification unconvincing and disingenuous, observing that it is well known that local governments have been instructed to deny most building or renovation permits for religious structures.<sup>85</sup> The ensuing shortage of worship sites ensures that religious actors will persist in their building projects, at which point the governing document on handling religious affairs, Document 19, discourages local officials from demolition or punitive action.<sup>86</sup>

This gray area means that the majority of religious-use buildings have not necessarily received the proper permitting, leaving them vulnerable to shifting political winds. In short, the rapid growth of Wenzhou Christianity and subsequent lack of churches forced many religious entrepreneurs to operate in a grey zone, when providing resources adequate to the demand side, a reality predicted by Yang's "red, black and gray

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<sup>79</sup> Johnson, "Church-State Clash."

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> USCIRF, *Annual Report*, 34-35.

<sup>83</sup> See for example Tom Phillips, "China denies declaring war on Christians after mega-church is razed," *The Telegraph*, April 29, 2014., <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10794749/China-denies-declaring-war-on-Christians-after-mega-church-is-razed.html>.

<sup>84</sup> USCIRF, *Annual Report*, 33-37.

<sup>85</sup> Yang Fenggang, "Zhongguo yingdui jidujiao de xin changshi de lao taolu," [China's approach to Christianity: the new model and the old road], *Financial Times Chinese*, December 29, 2014, <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001059884>.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

markets” model of religious supply and demand under authoritarian governance.<sup>87</sup> To claim, then, that building codes alone were involved is to obscure the complex interaction between the central and local governments, and between both levels and religious actors. Additionally, in an internal document issued before the demolition and later obtained by the *New York Times*, the local government made clear their “aims to regulate ‘excessive religious sites’ and ‘overly popular’ religious activities, but it specific[ed] only one religion, Christianity, and one symbol, crosses.”<sup>88</sup>

Due to the opacity of Chinese government processes, it cannot be said with certainty that the Wenzhou demolition campaign received central approval or support, or that it began as a directive from top leadership. That Party leaders did not explicitly disavow or move to suppress Xi’s actions, however, suggests that these measures were likely in line with central interests. As well, President Xi’s ties to Zhejiang and to Xia Baolong are extensive; Xi served as Party Secretary of the province from 2002 until 2007, and is believed to be cultivating a “Zhejiang clique,” a group of allies that includes Xia.<sup>89</sup> Actions taken in Zhejiang province, then, are not incidental to the Xi agenda, and are unlikely merely to have escaped his notice.

Zhejiang’s 2015 announcement that religious believers would be specifically excluded from Party membership is further evidence that the church demolitions in that province may be tied to anti-Western policy and rhetoric at the national level. Although the Party is officially atheist, and members are naturally expected to toe this line, this has not been strictly enforced.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Zhejiang’s highly publicized effort to more rigorously screen for religious belief highlights the shift in elite attitudes toward religion. Reporting on this development, the state-run *Global Times* cites a professor from the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, writing that, “[the professor, Li Yunlong] said that Zhejiang authorities stressed this basic requirement due to local situation, adding he hopes this will set an example to other provinces. ‘This could be a part of efforts against the penetration of Western hostile forces,’ said Li.”<sup>91</sup>

While persecution has not been as pronounced in other regions, churches throughout China have faced growing constraints and found their right to exist called into question, especially in areas where Christianity is seen as posing a particular challenge to

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<sup>87</sup> Yang describes the gray market as “consist[ing] of all religious and spiritual organizations, practitioners, and activities with ambiguous legal status,” and argues that it grows in response to tightening regulation, because of constricting supply. See Yang Fenggang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 87-92.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson, “Church-State Clash.”

<sup>89</sup> Willy Lam, “The Eclipse of the Communist Youth League and the Rise of the Zhejiang Clique,” *China Brief* 16, no. 8 (May 11, 2016), 3-6.

<sup>90</sup> Eleanor Albert, “Religion in China,” *CFR Backgrounders*, Council on Foreign Relations, June 10, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/china/religion-china/p16272>.

<sup>91</sup> Cao Siqi, “Zhejiang CPC bans religious beliefs among applicants,” *Global Times*, February 1, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/905305.shtml>.

Chinese traditional culture. A striking example of this tension may be found in Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, where efforts to prevent churches from being built or even expanded on this “sacred ground,” have received widespread attention and debate.<sup>92</sup> Because Qufu is seen as embodying the spirit of Chinese culture and tradition, Christian churches—the embodiment and foundation of foreign ideologies—are seen by many as especially inappropriate.<sup>93</sup> The campaign to prohibit Christian churches in the city has been spearheaded by Confucian scholar Zeng Zhenyu, who is also a high-ranking Communist Party official.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, the USCIRF report claims “leaders and members of both registered and unregistered churches have faced increased harassment and arbitrary arrests. Typically, leaders of house churches are more vulnerable to these types of charges, but in 2014 pastors of sanctioned churches also faced detention or arrest.”<sup>95</sup> This troubling pattern has continued into 2016. For example, Pastor Gu Yuese, considered by many to be one of China’s most well-respected, state-affiliated clergy, was detained on charges of embezzlement after protesting the removal of his church’s cross.<sup>96</sup> Pastor Bao Guahua, also pastor of a state church, was sentenced in February 2016 to 12 years in jail, also following resistance to the demolition campaign.<sup>97</sup>

The connection between ideological purging of Western values in academia and religious suppression is tellingly illustrated in the bizarre anti-Christmas movement that took place in December 2014, and was subsequently lauded by state media. Bloomberg’s Adam Minter describes one of these scenes, at Northwest University in Xi’an as follows: “somebody has strung a banner on campus that reads: ‘Be good sons and daughters of your country, stand against Western holidays.’ And on Christmas Eve the university required all students to watch ‘Confucius-themed’ documentaries,” with students physically barred from exiting.<sup>98</sup>

Minter’s account is taken from the *Beijing News*, and its repetition suggests that the stand against Western religious holidays is a story that the Xi administration wants told. The *New York Times* version of the event recounts a nearly identical instance in Wenzhou, in addition to the Northwest University episode, and ties these displays to

<sup>92</sup> Hannah Beech, “Expansion of Christian Church in the Birthplace of Confucius Creates Controversy in China,” *Time*, January 28, 2016, <http://time.com/4197803/christian-church-qufu-confucius/>. The initial controversy over the presence of churches in Qufu is described in Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 174-175. However, the issue has seen renewed tensions in 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion*, 174-175.

<sup>94</sup> Beech, “Expansion of Christian Church in the Birthplace of Confucius.”

<sup>95</sup> USCIRF, *Annual Report*, 33-37.

<sup>96</sup> Radio Free Asia, “China Detains Highest-Ranking Christian Pastor Since Cultural Revolution,” January 29, 2016, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/pastor-01292016113618.html>.

<sup>97</sup> Edward Wong, “Pastor in China Who Resisted Cross Removal Gets 14 Years in Prison,” *New York Times*, February 26, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/27/world/asia/china-zhejiang-christians-pastor-crosses.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Adam Minter, “Xi Jinping’s Dreaming of a Red Christmas,” *Bloomberg*, December 25, 2014, <http://www.bloombergvew.com/articles/2014-12-25/xi-jinpings-dreaming-of-a-red-christmas>.

the crackdown on churches.<sup>99</sup> Although most Chinese who celebrate Christmas are not doing so in a religious way, the mere association of Christianity and Western values seems to taint the holiday. Reporter Andrew Jacobs sees Leftist suspicion of Christmas celebrations as reflecting a sense that the holiday is a kind of “Trojan horse” for Western ideology.<sup>100</sup> A post by officials on the university’s Communist Youth League microblog seems to confirm this view, in which the appeal of Christmas is exactly the problem: “In recent years, more and more Chinese have started to attach importance to Western festivals...In their eyes, the West is more developed than China, and they think that their holidays are more elegant than ours.”<sup>101</sup>

### **The Chinese Dream: alternative, not integration**

Many will argue that the idea of Xi Jinping establishing an alternative ideology and squelching those systems of belief and values that he believes undergird democratic ideals is less likely than a preference for decentralized religion. In this view, Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism better lend themselves to state control because they lack an organizational model linking grassroots, local communities with a central religious authority. In contrast, many of Christianity’s best-known iterations are highly networked, such as the Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Presbyterian Churches; such organizational bases may be seen as fertile ground for organized political opposition movements. However, many of the churches that have seen their crosses destroyed or have come under additional pressure are part of the so-called “house church” movement, characterized in part by denominational non-affiliation, with no allegiance to an external organizational authority or formal association with similar churches. Additionally, the salient difference between “Chinese” and “Western” religion in Mr. Xi’s paradigm is not that one looks to a central authority and the other does not; it is the location of the authority. Even when house churches lack a formal governing structure beyond the local church, they are perceived (and perceive themselves) to possess transnational loyalties to religious communities throughout the world and to doctrines formulated outside the purview of the Chinese Communist Party.

Similarly, it might be argued Mr. Xi is a sincere admirer Confucius or Chinese Buddhism, so that any praise or promotion they receive is born of devotion rather than of a political agenda. However, this is unlikely, given that the CCP—under Xi and Li—has reiterated that Party membership is limited to professed atheists, a position we would expect to see softening rather than hardening if Xi were giving freer rein to his personal religious preferences. Admittedly, the assertions made by this paper must remain somewhat speculative, in that we ultimately are given very little insight into the thinking behind Xi Jinping’s actions. However, in realms where less ambiguous developments are unfolding, we witness Xi Jinping repudiating the integration and adaptation model

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<sup>99</sup> Minter, “Xi Jinping’s Dreaming of a Red Christmas.”

<sup>100</sup> Andrew Jacobs, “Chinese Hit Back Against a Foreign Intrusion: Christmas,” *New York Times*, December 29, 2014., <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/atheist-china-cracks-down-on-a-force-of-the-west-christmas>.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

and instead embracing a grandiose vision of China's renewed greatness, a greatness built on a strong and resilient authoritarianism.

From the sharp turn toward harsh regulation of "foreign" Christianity, juxtaposed with the newly enthusiastic and very public promotion of Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, we see that Xi Jinping and conservative elements in the Party not only understand Christianity to be a threat to the survival of the CCP regime, but also feel compelled to offer a legitimate indigenous alternative. As he continues to tout the "Chinese Dream" and Chinese "traditional culture," astute China watchers will pay close attention to the way that traditional religion is used to shore up the efforts at national rejuvenation. In the realm of religious ideology as in the area of international norms and institutions, Xi Jinping desires not to join, integrate, or even to subvert from within; rather, he desires to demonstrate a new way altogether.

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