

Christianity in China since 2018: Grassroots Perspectives

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Introduction

Since the change in leadership of the Chinese state in 2012 and 2013, there has undoubtedly been a renewed emphasis on ideology by the Communist Party of China (CPC) with the aim of bolstering governance capabilities via enhancing the relationship between the senior leadership and members, strengthening the connection between society and the senior leadership and seeking to become the dominant voice among the many narratives within the CPC and in society more broadly (Mittelstaedt 2023). As a result, there have been some significant changes to religious policy and state “management” of Christian churches in the People’s Republic of China since 2018 at both the national and local levels.

Of course, the CPC’s approach to religion has always had an ideological underpinning, but as scholars have noted, this ideological basis to religious policy has been tempered with a pragmatic bent in its implementation (Cox 2007, p. 374; Hetmanczyk 2015, p. 168). Even before 1949, the CPC was prepared to be pragmatic in its united front work, engaging with religious groups to “win hearts and minds.” A key consideration in analysing the CPC’s treatment of religion is the sparring between ideology and pragmatism at the national and local levels. In fact, we can view the CPC’s policy on religion through this double lens of ideology and pragmatism, with one seeming to take precedence over the other at particular times since 1949. This is further impacted by the CPC’s pragmatic approach to law and its enforcement since law is “valued as a means to accomplish some one or other particular end not as a value in itself contributing to the social order” (Sheehy 2006, p. 243; see also Schak 2020, p. 213). We should therefore not rule out the role of pragmatism in the current ideologically-charged atmosphere.

Focusing primarily on Three-Self-affiliated congregations in a single city in China, in this paper I will argue that despite a tightening of policy and legal controls on Protestant churches in a heightened ideological milieu, there is still a degree of pragmatism in how policy and legal controls are implemented at the grassroots and thus church leaders and

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their congregations still have some space to define and carry out their own goals. To this end, I will first provide a brief overview of my research methods and my fieldsite, Huanghaicheng.¹ Next, I will provide an overview and analysis of some of the key changes to the state's approach to and management of religion in China, focussing specifically on the city's Three-Self-affiliated congregations and their responses to these changes. I will then conclude with some observations about the nature of church-state interactions in recent years.

Huanghaicheng

I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork² in Huanghaicheng's Three-Self-affiliated congregations (churches, meeting points and small-groups) for the past fifteen years. My latest research trips include two trips in 2019 (totalling ten weeks) and two trips in 2023 (totalling six weeks). My fieldwork has included extensive participant observation in multiple congregational activities – Sunday worship gatherings, early-morning prayer meetings, Bible studies, youth meetings, children's meetings, festival galas, funerals, weddings and baptisms. I have also interviewed and talked with church leaders, seminary students, lay church workers, believers and government officials in Huanghaicheng. Lastly, my research also includes analysis of national, provincial and local policy documents, legislation and other official publications.

Huanghaicheng is a level-two city on the coast of the Huadong region and the municipality is divided into four districts. The economy predominantly relies on manufacturing, tech, various marine industries and tourism. Protestant Christianity in Huanghaicheng dates back to the nineteenth century and there was a sizable Protestant population before 1949 which survived and thrived through the political turmoil of the Mao era and the significant socio-political changes which have taken place in the reform era. The Three-Self-affiliated congregations themselves vary in how they developed. Some are continuations of congregations from the pre-Communist era, others developed during the latter years of the Cultural Revolution, and the remaining ones were established in the 1980s or later. The churches, and some of the “meeting points” are registered with the state via the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, while the rest of the meetings points and the “small groups” are not formally registered with the state but have permission to meet because they have ties to a registered church. I therefore refer to all of these congregations as “Three-Self-affiliated.” In the next section, I provide an overview of the key changes impacting state management of religion since 2018 and how Huanghaicheng's Three-Self-affiliated congregations have responded to these changes.

1 Pseudonym.

2 I am extremely grateful to the following bodies for fieldtrip funding since 2009: Economic and Social Research Council; Universities' China Committee in London; University of Edinburgh, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures' Research Fund; The Carnegie Trust; Royal Society of Edinburgh. I would also like to thank Janet Black, Laura Tomlinson and Anja Pogačnik at the University of Edinburgh for first-class research administrative support!

Major Changes since 2018

There have been some significant legislative revisions relating to religion since the start of 2018. On February 1, 2018 the revised “Regulations on Religious Affairs” (RRA, *Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli* 宗教事务条例) came into effect. The 2018 RRA differs in some important ways from the earlier RRA but there were two notable changes. Firstly, unlike the earlier 2005 RRA, the revised version returned to the more ideological language of earlier policy documents with an emphasis on religious groups and religious adherents to “practice the core values of socialism” (*jianxing shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 践行社会主义核心价值观) (Article 4). And, secondly, the revised RRA expanded the responsibility of managing religious affairs to village (*cunmin weiyuanhui* 村民委员会) and residents committees (*jumin weiyuanhui* 居民委员会) (Article 6) thus further leading to the possibility of increased control of religious groups at the local level.³ Many provincial-level governments have since revised their own local versions of the RRA, in large part mirroring the central tenets of the national RRA. In addition to the revised RRA in 2018, the state has published a series of pieces of legislation (“measures,” *banfa* 办法) which expand on the RRA in more detail, further curbing the space for religious activities, and emphasising the leadership of the CPC (*Zhongguo gongchandang de lingdao* 中国共产党的领导) and the “Sinicisation” (*Zhongguohua* 中国化) of religion amongst other things.⁴ According to church leaders in Huanghaicheng, the purpose of the legislation is to better “standardise” (*guifan* 规范) religious activities in terms of what is permitted and what is proscribed across the country.

Churches have been required to promote the core values of socialism and the “Sinicisation” of Christianity. However, church leaders have tended to respond to this in a lacklustre manner, borrowing ideas from other churches via the Internet in a formulaic manner. The requirements laid down by the UFWD to demonstrate compliance with these state projects is also formalistic: church leaders send photographs of printed materials posted on the church noticeboard and church leaders “propagating” the core ideas to church members. Such scenarios are easily staged. The church leaders themselves are not expending too much of their time and energy in engaging with these activities. It would seem that evangelism is still at the core of what these Three-Self-affiliated churches are doing and there are still regular calls in sermons to church members to “spread the gospel to people around them” (*ba fuyin chuanjiang gei shenbian de ren* 把福音传讲给身边的人). Church members are still engaging in gospel leafleting on the streets of Huanghaicheng, for example, although not on the same scale as before (see McLeister 2021).

After a CPC review of religious affairs work, Xi instigated the institutional reform of the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA, formerly the State Administration

³ For a discussion of other key changes, see Masláková 2020.

⁴ These include “Measures on the Administration of Religious Organisations” (*Zongjiao tuanti guanli banfa* 宗教团体管理办法, 2020), “Measures on the Administration of Religious Clergy” (*Zongjiao jiaozhi ren yuan guanli banfa* 宗教教职人员管理办法, 2021), “Measures on the Administration of Religious Schools” (*Zongjiao yuanxiao guanli banfa* 宗教院校管理办法, 2021), “Measures on the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services” (*Hulianwang zongjiao xinxi fuwu guanli banfa* 互联网宗教信息服务管理办法, 2022), “Measures on the Administration of the Supervision of the Financial Affairs of Religious Activities Sites” (*Zongjiao huodong changsuo caiwu guanli banfa* 宗教活动场所财务管理办法, 2022), and “Measures on the Administration of Religious Activities Sites” (*Zongjiao huodong changsuo guanli banfa* 宗教活动场所管理办法, 2023).

of Religious Affairs [SARA]) whose personnel and primary functions were effectively absorbed by the United Front Work Department (UFWD) at the national level (see Wang 2019, p. 110). The reform of provincial- and local-level Religious Affairs Bureaus (RAB) is currently incomplete but at the local levels, the UFWD now has direct oversight of religious affairs work and in Huanghaicheng, some of the former RAB personnel now work directly for the UFWD. Since 2019, the subdistrict offices (*jiedao banshichu* 街道办事处) in Huanghaicheng have also had increasing responsibility for religious affairs oversight, so much so that in 2023, church leaders reported that the UFWD appeared to have taken a step back from the day-to-day administration of religious affairs and that this responsibility was being placed on the subdistrict offices. I am unclear as to how representative this is of the rest of the province or other regions of China.

This shift from subdistrict offices playing a role in monitoring religious activities to actively managing the activities of Three-Self-affiliated congregations has brought with it both challenges and opportunities. Church leaders in Huanghaicheng claimed that the subdistrict office cadres did not really understand very much about Christianity, and while this had the potential to lead to misunderstandings and unreasonable demands, these church leaders saw this as an opportunity to help shape the cadres' understanding of the church. As with the changes in legislation discussed above, some of the requests from the subdistrict offices and how they are handled also has a formalistic element; for example, one church leader was asked by the subdistrict office to provide the church's twelve-month sermon plan so that the office could send this to the municipal-level UFWD. The church leader explained that their church did not have such a plan, so the cadre in charge of this demand made up the plan herself and passed it on to the UFWD. This demonstrates that there is still an element of "box-ticking" in how religion is managed by the local state.

A number of state-led movements or campaigns aimed at religious adherents have also either been ramped up or initiated since 2018. The first campaign came from the CPC centre and was another attempt to discourage Party members practicing religion. This had its roots back in 2015 when the CPC's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection raised concerns about CPC members believing in religion (see Groot 2015, p. 173a). State-run media pushed the message about CPC members not believing in religion (for example, see Sang 2016). Similar concerns had been highlighted previously, such as in the mid-1990s and early 2000s (see Rule 1996, p. 4; Organization Department 2000, p. 46). However, unlike previous campaigns aimed at purging religious beliefs from the CPC, this one was arguably more determined and sustained. It began to have an impact on Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng in early 2019 when CPC members who attended these congregations stopped attending. The campaign then took a new turn when CPC members were asked to discourage family members from attending church. State cadres and soldiers were also prohibited from attending church. Some CPC members who had been baptized made requests for churches to delete their names from church records.

While this campaign has had some impact on church attendance numbers in Huanghaicheng's Three-Self-affiliated congregations, the campaign has not cut off CPC members, cadres and soldiers from the churches. Church leaders still play an important role in pastoring such people on a one-to-one basis and there are still opportunities for CPC

members and others to take part in some smaller-scale church activities such as Bible studies and prayer meetings. During the Covid-19 pandemic when churches were not permitted to worship in person, one church divided its members into small groups to provide opportunities for members to meet when restrictions allowed them to. Following on from the lessons learned through this process, the two pastors of the church set up a small group for CPC members and cadres which they themselves lead. The conversion to Christianity of one UFWD official in Huanghaicheng was widely – albeit quietly – celebrated.

As part of the state-led Sinicisation project, the UFWD, together with other state agencies launched the “Four Enters” (*si jin* 四进) in 2018. The motivation behind the Four Enters was to embed four ideological elements into religious organisations: the national flag, the Constitution and laws and regulations (*xianfa he falü fagui* 宪法和法律法规), core socialist values (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan* 社会主义核心价值观), and excellent traditional Chinese culture (*Zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua* 中华优秀传统文化). The Four Enters appears to have been rolled out in larger cities first; for example, in Tianjin there was much fanfare about flags in 2018 (Tianjin shi fojiao xiehui 天津市佛教协会 *et al.* 2018). The “patriotic” religious organisations were tasked with aiding its implementation and in Huanghaicheng, Three-Self-affiliated congregations were at first “encouraged” by the UFWD to engage with the Four Enters in Spring 2019, but were then forced to implement it after church leaders largely ignored the initial directives. The most obvious marker of whether or not churches were complying was the presence or lack of a national flag. To date, there has been no order to fly the flag inside churches.⁵

Once it became clear to church leaders that the directive to fly the national flag at religious activity venues was non-negotiable, they complied, albeit with some degree of foot-dragging. Church leaders themselves state that the flying of the national flag does not directly contradict the core doctrines of Christianity but they are not unaware of the political signals which the flying of the national flag sends, and they are more concerned with the affect it has had on church members. In one church, the requirement to fly the national flag was a contributing factor in one elder leaving the church and setting up a new (unregistered) congregation. The other elements of the campaigns are easier to skirt around, and as with the requirements for churches to promote core socialist values and Sinicisation, churches have tended to borrow the wording or text from other churches and send a photograph to the UFWD or subdistrict office to demonstrate their “engagement.”

In the summer of 2019, Three-Self-affiliated churches in Huanghaicheng were ordered by the UFWD to no longer permit minors (children under 18) to enter church sanctuaries or take part in religious activities, as had taken place in other parts of China.⁶ Although some scholars have stated that proselytising to minors is “illegal” in China (Wong 2001, p. 543; Weller 2012, p. 93) or that minors are “constitutionally prohibited from having any

5 The Four Enters was followed up in late 2023 with the Six Enters (*liu jin* 六进), with the national anthem being included together with the flag, the other three of the four enters remaining the same, and the addition of two additional elements: anti-evil cult propaganda (*fan xiejiao xuanchuan* 反邪教宣传) and livelihood services (*minsheng fuwu* 民生服务) but I have little knowledge of how this is being rolled out.

6 As far as I can ascertain, no announcement of this campaign has been published by the UFWD or other state organs in Huanghaicheng; however, some local governments have published notices to the same effect, for example, Kaijiang county in Sichuan (see Zhonggong Kaijiang 2021).

religious belief” (Pew Research Center 2023, p. 104), the picture has always been more complex than this and I think such statements are an inaccurate reflection of the legislation. There is no national-level legislation which explicitly prohibits minors from taking part in religious activities. However, the implementation of this directive is undoubtedly linked to CPC fears about the influence of Christianity on minors, the education system and society more broadly. The move to prohibit minors from attending churches was followed up with the proscription of university students, and primary, secondary and university teaching staff attending churches. There were also reports of university students in Huanghaicheng being asked to renounce their faith in order to gain permission to take the postgraduate study entrance examination, something which has been reported elsewhere (Pew Research Center 2023, p. 104).

This move by the state to prohibit minors from attending church gatherings is widely seen in the Three-Self-affiliated congregations as an attempt to “cut off the roots of faith” (*duan gen* 斷根) and this has elicited a number of responses. Firstly, churches are considering how they can better equip parents to pass on their faith to their children. Secondly, all the Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng provide opportunities for children to come together for Bible stories, prayer and other activities. Some of these are highly structured, some more ad hoc; for example, one church has continued to go through its yearly children’s work plan, despite the prohibition. On Sunday mornings, the children line up outside the church doors and once they have all arrived, they walk to a nearby apartment belonging to one of the church workers. Here, they study the Bible and pray together, led by one of the preachers. In other churches, children gather in the church office during the worship gathering and are looked after by one of the church workers, something UFWD officials are aware of. During Christmas of 2019, the UFWD permitted one church in Huanghaicheng to include children in the Christmas-day worship gathering.⁷ I observed children attending youth meetings in Huanghaicheng churches in 2023, suggesting that the policy is not always strictly implemented.

Following the demolition of church buildings and removal of crosses on churches in Zhejiang in the years 2013–2016 (McLeister 2018), the provincial authorities rolled out the installation of CCTV cameras in church buildings (Hai Yan 2017). Such measures were subsequently implemented in religious sites across China, with the purpose of monitoring religious activities. The installation of CCTV cameras includes the use of microphones for the recording of audio, thus enhancing the ability of the state to monitor religious sites. In Huanghaicheng, the installation of CCTV cameras in the Three-Self-affiliated religious activity sites took place in 2020 during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic as the city repeatedly went into and out of lockdown.

The presence of CCTV monitoring in churches has been another cause for concern for some lay members, but there is widespread ambivalence to their presence in churches and meeting points. Firstly, some church leaders claim that if state officials are listening in to their worship gatherings, then that is no bad thing. Obviously, church leaders need to ensure that they are seen to be complying with requests from the local state, but that does not currently appear to be very difficult to do. Secondly, the CCTV cameras are not installed

7 In another city in the province, the UFWD permitted children to attend church at Christmas in 2023.

in a very systematic or comprehensive manner, and therefore do not cover every corner of the church sanctuaries. They are not installed in church offices and other parts of the church, except for the entrances. Thirdly, church leaders claim that the state does not have sufficient personnel to monitor the every word and action of those attending church gatherings. This appears to relieve some of the pressure that church leaders may otherwise feel. Lastly, one church has been able to interfere with the CCTV system on several occasions when the topic of the sermon or the actions of the congregation strayed into areas deemed to be sensitive (such as speaking in tongues). So, there appears to be a general ambivalence to the presence of CCTV cameras, and sometimes even direct resistance to them.

Since 2019, there have also been a number of restrictions on the location and number of religious activities sites. This has affected churches in a number of ways. Firstly, starting in 2019, and in tandem with an attempt to reduce the impact of religion on the state education system, the authorities introduced zoning rules whereby religious activity venues can not be located within one hundred metres of a primary or secondary school, or a Higher Education Institute (HEI). This has resulted in meeting points and Christian student groups having to move to new locations. And, of particular interest, is the case of a “house church” which until the new zoning rules was renting a property near Huanghaicheng’s largest university. The church leaders were instructed to move outside of the zone, rather than being shut down. I visited this church in 2019 after its move. Secondly, since 2023, there has been a push to have one congregation in each sub-district or county town (*zhen* 镇). This had led to a reduction in the number of meeting points because the local government has forced several congregations to merge; for example, two or three are merged into one. This is in part connected to numbers of attendees: where numbers of attendees are down post-Covid 19, there is more pressure for congregations to merge.

Despite recent claims that “meeting sites in rural areas are entirely banned” (Vala 2024), this is not the case in Huanghaicheng. In fact, in one district of Huanghaicheng, a now retired pastor convinced the UFD to allow several rural meeting points to continue by arguing that the elderly members were too infirm to travel to other parts of the district to attend a church. And the merging of meeting points and/or churches does not stop groups of Christians continuing to meet together. Retired pastors and current church workers continue to help provide teaching and support to these groups. One pastor continues to utilise WeChat to teach and pray with various groups in his district, despite not having the now necessary public WeChat account to conduct religious activities and despite the restrictions set out in the “Measures on the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services” (*Hulianwang zongjiao xinxi fuwu guanli banfa* 互联网宗教信息服务管理办法, 2022). The leaders of all the Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng see it as their duty to help shield “house churches” and unregistered groups with the “protective umbrella” (*baohusan* 保护伞) provided by their “legal” (*hefa* 合法) status.

Concluding Thoughts

In this paper I have provided a brief overview and analysis of some of the key changes to religious policy in China which have been introduced since 2018. Overall, these changes

have led to a reduction in numbers attending Huanghaicheng's Three-Self-affiliated congregations. This is having an impact on the churches in a number of ways: reduced numbers of adherents means that churches are in an increasingly difficult financial situation. Of key importance is that there are now fewer minors and young people engaging with church communities in meaningful ways and this poses a number of challenges for church leaders: firstly, how will churches seek to engage meaningfully with young people? And, secondly, how will Three-Self-affiliated congregations raise up young Christians who will be future leaders of the church?

The significant takeaways from my more recent fieldwork in 2019 and 2023, is that although on paper and in practice there is increasing restrictions on the Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng and their activities, there is still space for them to manoeuvre and, as one pastor put it, “We are still working hard to provide space for the church” (*women nuli wei le gei jiaohui liu dian kongjian* 我们努力为了给教会留点空间). Personal relationships between church leaders and local state officials is still an important aspect of how new policies and legislation are implemented and there is still space for church leaders to negotiate with officials on some things. The degree of formalism or formality (*zouxingshi* 走形式) in the actions expected of churches, tells us that the policies and legislation are not being implemented fully and to the letter. For now, it seems that at least in some instances, church leaders can make a statement to the effect that they are on-board with state projects and this seems to suffice. What we do not know is how long this will last or if the central state will ramp up its attempts to ensure that the policy is fully implemented everywhere. Judging by the performance on other policies (family planning, for example), this may be an impossible task. In the meantime, we should not assume that the state's approach to Christianity is uniform across time and space, and we should continue to investigate how churches are responding to the changing socio-political milieu.

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