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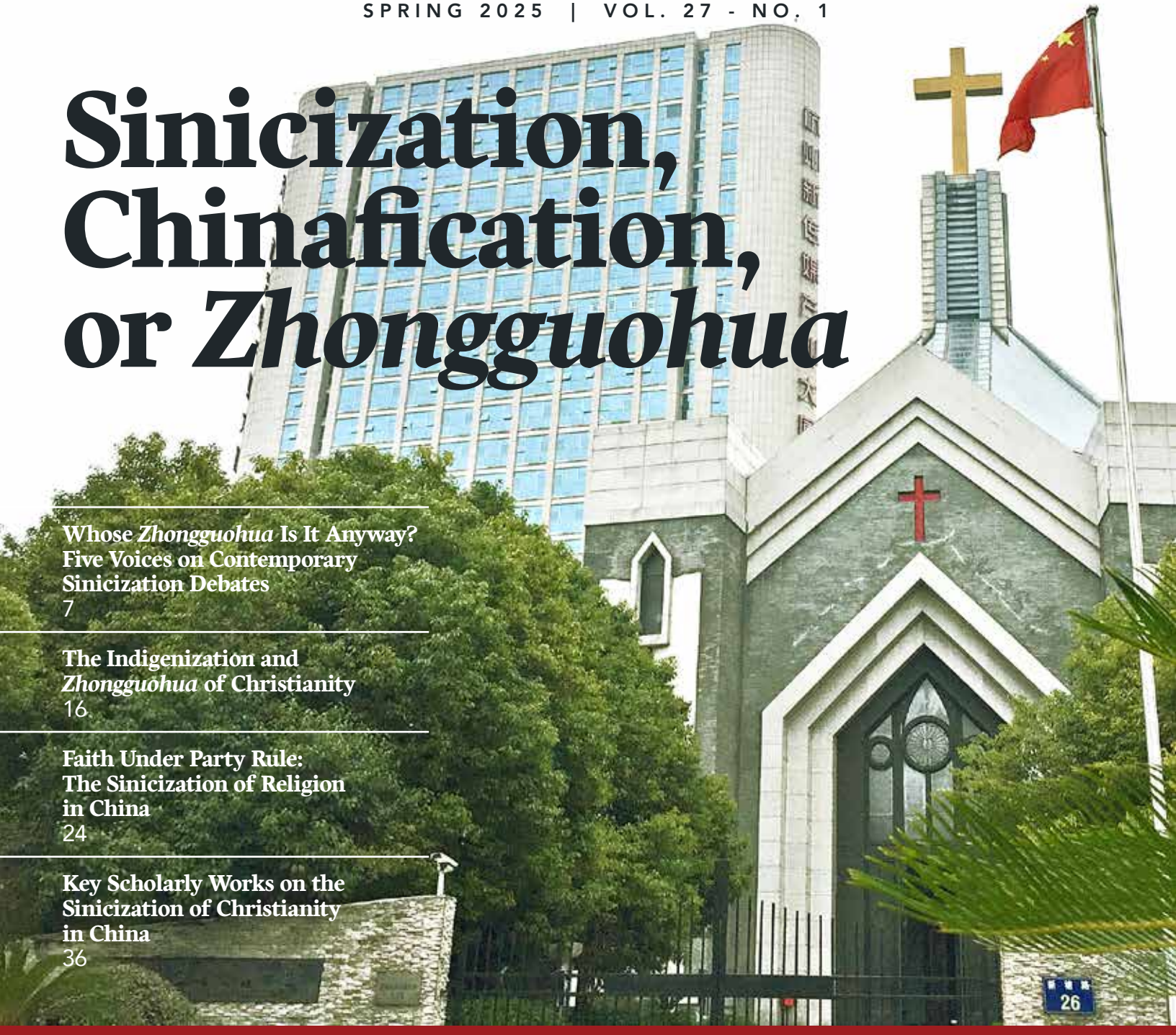
Sinicization, Chinafication, or *Zhongguohua*



A window into Christianity in China and the key issues that impact the church.

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About ***ChinaSource***

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The mission of ChinaSource is to be a trusted partner and platform for educating the global church on critical issues facing the church and ministries in China, and for connecting Christians inside and outside of China to advance God's kingdom globally.

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COVER PHOTO: Chongyi Church, Hangzhou, China | **PHOTO BY:** Naomi Thurston

Image: ChinaSource Team

Flipping the Page—Back to *ChinaSource Journal*

BY ANDREA LEE

Names carry meaning. They tell a story, convey a purpose, and sometimes, they remind us of where we've been and where we are going. That is why we've decided to turn back a page in our history and restore the name of our flagship publication from *ChinaSource Quarterly* to *ChinaSource Journal*. For those who have been with us for a long time, you may remember that this publication originally launched as *ChinaSource Journal* in 1999. The name reflected its depth and purpose—a serious, reflective, and insightful journal that examines Christianity in China and the key issues shaping the church. Over time, we rebranded it as *ChinaSource Quarterly* to emphasize the publication schedule. But as the years passed, we found ourselves returning to an important realization: this was never just about when we published—it was about what we published.

> **"... this was never just about when we published—it was about what we published."**

A CHRONICLE OF CHANGE

Looking through the decades of past issues (which you can browse here), one thing becomes clear: this publication has been a witness to the ever-changing landscape of Christianity in China. Early issues explored themes like China's rapid urbanization, the rise of house churches, and the role of foreign missions. Over time, the focus expanded to include diaspora engagement, digital ministry, and generational shifts within the Chinese church. Each issue is a window into a particular moment in history, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities that have shaped the church over the years.

A PLATFORM FOR DIVERSE VOICES

One of the strengths of this publication has been its ability to bring together a wide range of perspectives. Scholars, ministry practitioners, and Chinese Christian leaders have all contributed, offering insights into leadership development, religious policy, spiritual formation, and cross-cultural engagement. This diversity of voices has allowed us to go beyond surface-level analysis and engage with the complexity of Christianity in China from multiple angles.

A COMMITMENT TO THOUGHTFUL ENGAGEMENT

Unlike sensationalized narratives about Christianity in China, *ChinaSource Quarterly* has always sought to provide a balanced, thoughtful approach. It doesn't just report trends—it analyzes them. It invites readers to wrestle with difficult questions, such as the role of the church under tightening regulations, the impact of globalization, and the future of Chinese theological education. This intellectual and spiritual depth is what has given the publication lasting value.

WHY THE NAME CHANGE MATTERS

Looking at the history of this publication, it's clear that *journal* is the right name for it. This has never been just a quarterly update—it has always been a serious, reflective space for deep engagement with the church in China. Restoring the name *ChinaSource Journal* is not about nostalgia; it is about embracing the true nature of what this publication has been all along—a resource that informs, equips, and fosters meaningful conversation about Chinese Christianity and the global church. We are grateful for each of you who has been part of this journey with us.

> **"It is about embracing the true nature of what this publication has been all along—a resource that informs, equips, and fosters meaningful conversation about Chinese Christianity and the global church."**

Thank you for reading, reflecting, and walking with us as we seek to make sense of the ever-changing landscape of Christianity in China.

So, welcome to the next chapter of *ChinaSource Journal*. We're glad you're here.

Andrea Lee *李晏戎 serves as the Content Manager at ChinaSource.*

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BY NAOMI THURSTON AND JORDAN WANG

Whose *Zhongguohua* Is It Anyway?

Five Voices on Contemporary Sinicization Debates[1]

Image: Joann Pittman

As guest editors, we appreciate ChinaSource's commitment to inclusivity, balance, and flexibility, which allows us to honor our preference for using traditional Chinese characters throughout this issue for the sake of overall consistency. While our contributors may use different scripts in their original writing, presenting this issue in a unified format ensures coherence and readability while continuing to reflect the diversity of voices and perspectives shared in these pages.

The Sinicization (*Zhongguohua*, 中國化) of Christianity in China can historically be seen as both a political strategy and a religious negotiation. In 1993, Jiang Zemin mandated that religion adapt to socialism and ordered religious institutions to reform in harmony with socialist doctrines.[2] This United Front policy set the stage for a more assertive push toward ideological conformity, which would take full shape two decades later under Xi Jinping. In 2014, the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC) formally introduced Sinicization as a guiding

> **"The Sinicization (*Zhongguohua*, 中國化) of Christianity in China can historically be seen as both a political strategy and a religious negotiation."**

principle for Protestant Christianity. In 2015, at a national United Front Work Department (UFWD) conference, Xi Jinping declared Sinicization the official direction for all religions in China. In 2017, at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, he reaffirmed this policy as a key element of religious governance. The party-state defines religious expression in ideological terms and integrates it into its broader framework of national unity and security.

Contemporary debates on the Sinicization of Chinese religions have taken different strategic directions. The United States government calls it "China's coercive religious policy"[3]; some scholars follow the newer official translation of "developing religions in the Chinese context,"[4] while others associate the historical project of Sinicization predominantly with that of cross-cultural negotiation (particularly in the case of Protestantism and Catholicism).[5]

> **Contemporary debates on the Sinicization of Chinese religions have taken different strategic directions.**

Critics decry the "political domestication"[6] or, more pointedly, the Xi-ist regulation[7] of a nationalist policy. Translations of "基督教中國化" in particular—that is, the *Zhongguohua* of Protestantism—have in recent years swung back and forth between various neologisms, the less precise interpretation of "contextualization," and the more common rendering, "Sinicization."[8] The phrases explaining this notion also have their standard English translations. China's religions are to be developed in a Chinese

Image: Jaddy Liu | Unsplash

style (中國式), with Chinese characteristics (中國特色), and in line with Chinese socialism.

> **China's religions are to be developed in a Chinese style (中國式), with Chinese characteristics (中國特色), and in line with Chinese socialism.**

While these English translations are not decisive, they relate to China's global image-building, as discussed in Chin Ken Pa's article in this issue. From a policy viewpoint, developing Chinese religions is not a socio-cultural or religious concern but one of international relations and national security. In his preface to a recent book series entitled, "Studies on Religion and China's National Security and International Strategy,"[9] Xu Yihua stresses the need for a two-fold strategy that manages the security risks posed by the infiltration of foreign religions while "enhancing China's international image" through international religious diplomacy.[10]

> **From a policy viewpoint, developing Chinese religions is not a socio-cultural or religious concern but one of international relations and national security.**

The present issue of the *ChinaSource Journal* explores this and related backgrounds to notions of religious Sinicization not routinely explored in English-language sources. Contributions to this issue introduce lesser-known discussions in Chinese academia, bringing clarity and substance to some of the conceptual confusion over Sinicization, which remains a notion associated with diverse movements and agendas. This particular issue focuses on state-sanctioned institutions, but it does not address the impact of Sinicization on house churches, which remains an open question for further study.

In his lead article, He Guanghu reframes this debate from the perspective of religious studies; Ying Fuk-tsang reiterates that the cross-cultural encounter between China and a foreign religion, for religious proselytizers, means not only the Sinicization of Christianity but, first and foremost, the Christianization of China. Chin Ken Pa's analysis of the dual goals of official Sinicization/*Zhongguohua* also highlights the irreligious rationale of this policy, presented to religious communities

as patriotic faith and to the outside world as Chinese religion. Sociologist Richard Madsen, who has published extensively on the subject, contributes a short piece here on the United Front and *Zhongguohua*, defining the concept negatively and in contrast also to Catholic understandings of cultural accommodation. Finally, Eva-Maria Hanke-Estevez's overview sheds light on Xi's recent policy and its background. Taken together, these texts draw a clearer picture of how Chinese religious policy shapes the landscape of Chinese Christianity and religion in China more generally by charting a unified direction and constructing an identity *not*, however, claimed by *all* of China's faithful.

[1] Note: In this introduction and throughout the issue, the editors have opted to use Chinese traditional script where characters are inserted into the text for reference, *pinyin* transliterations—unless other renderings are more commonly found in print or used by an author, and to write out Chinese names in their conventional order.

[2] Ying Fuk-tsang 邢福增, "Mutual Adaptation to Socialism: TSPM and Church-State Relations," in *Concilium: International Review of Theology* 2008, no. 2 (June): 71-87; Ryan Dunch, "Christianity and 'Adaptation to Socialism'," in *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, ed. Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 155-178.

[3] Dylan Schexnaydre, "Sinicization of Religion: China's Coercive Religious Policy," United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, September 2024, accessed January 25, 2025, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/2024%20China%20Factsheet%20Sinicization.pdf.

[4] This focus echoes the official line of recent years. Cf. "Xi Stresses Developing Religions in Chinese Context," *China Daily*, December 4, 2021, accessed January 31, 2025, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202112/04/WS61ab4c56a310cdd39bc7961b.html, and other sources reporting on Xi's address to a national conference on religious affairs held December 3-4, 2021, in Beijing. The expression "堅持我國宗教中國化方向" [promote the direction of the Sinicization of Chinese religions] is often used in official rhetoric; "宗教中國化" [Sinicization of Chinese religions] is also embedded in the current five-year plan for the continued promotion of the Sinicization of Chinese religions: "深入推廣我國基督教中國化五年工作規劃綱要 (2023-2027年) [Five-Year Planning Outline for Advancing the Sinification of Christianity (2023-2027)."

[5] Cf. Tao Feiya 陶飛亞, and Philip L. Wickeri, eds., Preface,《中國基督宗教史 (635-1949*): 一種跨文化視野* 》[*History of Christianity in China (635-1949): An Inter-Cultural Perspective*] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2024).

[6] Yang Fenggang 楊鳳崗, "Xi Jinping Is Not Trying to Make Christianity More Chinese," *Christianity Today*, January 16, 2024, accessed 28 January 2025, https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/01/china-christianity-xi-religion-policy-sinicization/.

[7] See Ray Wang, "Sinicisation or 'Xinicisation' [sic.]: Regulating Religion and Religious Minorities under Xi Jinping," in *Political and Social Control in China: The Consolidation of Single-Party Rule*, edited by Ben Hillman and Kou Chien-Wen (Canberra: ANU Press, 2024), 247-280, http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.16487862.16.

[8] Confer recent issues of translated articles in the *Chinese Theological Review* (CTR), issues 26 (2014) to 31 (2022), for example, "Remarks on the Seminar on Chinization of Christianity in China" (CTR 26); "Build up the Chinese Protestant Church Through Sinicization" (CTR 28); "The Sinicization of Christianity: A Chinese Christian's Thoughts (CTR 27); "Build Up the Chinese Protestant Church Through Sinicization" (CTR 28); "Five-Year Outline Plan [sic.] to Promote the Contextualization of Protestant Christianity in China (2018-2022)" (CTR 29); "Continue the Further Contextualization of Christianity in China and Enhance the Church's Adaptation to Socialist Society" (CTR 31).
While printed English works such as President Xi's collected speeches published by the Foreign Language Press in English and Chinese consistently render 中國化 "Sinicization" in English, some online translations of government-issued texts also deviate from this. For example, Xu Xiaohong's 2019 speech on the topic, "堅持我國基督教中國化方向 積極與社會主義社會相適應" was rendered, "Adhering to the indigenization and contextualization of Christianity in China and making it suitable for a socialist society" by China Daily, the English-language CPC organ. Another point worth noting is that the English translation of Xi Jinping's Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China does not use the term Sinicization with reference to religion, but instead reiterates continued commitment to the "principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt to socialist society." "Sinicization," therefore, while appearing in print as the official English translation of 中國化 for many years, is now one of many renderings. For "Sinicization" as a standard translation,
see Xi Jinping 習近平,《習近平談治國理政》（第一卷-第四卷）[*The Governance of China*, I-IV] (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014-2022). These volumes are published by the Foreign Languages Press in Chinese and other languages.

[9] Xu Yihua 徐以驊, ed.,《宗教與中國國家安全與對外戰略論叢》[*Religion and China's National Security and Foreign Policy Series*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2015).

[10] Xu Yihua 徐以驊, "Series Preface," in Zhang Hua 張化,《社會中的宗教：觀察與研究》[*Religion in Society: Observation and Research*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2015), 1-3.

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Cover Story

Image: Mirko | Adobe Stock

What Is the Significance of the "Sinicization of Christianity"? —A Perspective from Religious Studies

BY HE GUANGHU

In recent years, the Sinicization of Christianity (as part of the "Sinicization of Religions"), as an important requirement from the Chinese leadership and an official directive from the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and its religious bureaus at all levels (formerly the "State Administration for Religious Affairs" and Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau in all provinces and cities), has become not only the focus of work for the Christian churches throughout China, but also a topic of discussion in Chinese religious studies.[1]

The authorities' demand was driven by the strategic concern over religious influence of "hostile forces from the West" and the political need for nationalist-statist ideology. The churches' response was driven by the social condition of "politics' domination over religion," which was rooted in the Chinese tradition and has been further reinforced since 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded.

What distinguishes the current situation is the unprecedented intensity of the authorities' demands and the corresponding efforts by the church. This time, the resources and energy invested by the churches, along with the visible—though often superficial—outcomes, have reached unparalleled levels. At the same time, the related academics' engagement with the topic in line with the above direction is more evident than ever, as they have found that it is relatively easy to get governmental funding for research on "Sinicization" in the direction and to publish related essays in academic journals.[2]

What, then, is, the significance of the proposition "Christianity should be Sinicized" (the meaning of "Sinicization of Christianity"), from the perspective of religious studies (including philosophy and history of religion)?

We can first examine it from the perspective of theory or concept.

The demand for the "nationalization" or "ethnicization" of religions should not entail transforming religions into something non-religious or requiring them to renounce the very essence that defines them. In other words, it is not a call for

"What distinguishes the current situation is the unprecedented intensity of the authorities' demands and the corresponding efforts by the church."

the "de-religionization" of religion. Just as every entity has its own essence (i.e., those fundamental qualities that, if lost, will strip it of its unique identity), so too does religion. To demand that a religion relinquish its essence is as absurd and impossible as asking a chicken to become a duck.

Similarly, the call for the "nationalization" or "ethnicization" of a specific religion should not demand that it transform into another religion or abandon its core teachings. Every religion possesses an intrinsic essence, expressed through its fundamental doctrines, that distinguishes it from other religions. These teachings cannot simply be renounced. For instance, the Sinicization of Buddhism does not imply that Buddhism should become Taoism. Likewise, the Sinicization of Islam and Christianity does not suggest that they should morph into Buddhism or Taoism.

So, what does it mean for a religion to be "nationalized" or "ethnicized" (and for any religion to be "Sinicized")? From the perspective of religious studies, all religions consist of intangible ideological concepts and emotional experiences rooted in a belief system. These intangible elements require tangible expressions, such as behavioral practices and organizational structures, with language serving as the backbone.[3] The intangible elements are intrinsic, inherent, and relatively stable, and do not change due to external forces. In contrast, the tangible elements—external, subordinate, and more variable—are shaped by external circumstances. The former embodies the inner essence of the religion, which, if transformed to a certain extent, would fundamentally change the religion itself. The latter, however, pertains to the external form of the religion. When adjusted and adapted to meet the needs of a specific social environment, these external elements can facilitate the smoother spread and development of the religion within that context.

Therefore, the "nationalization" or "ethnicization" of a religion does not mean transforming it into another religion or abandoning its spiritual faith and essential content. Instead, it just means taking on the related nation's (or ethnic group's) expressive forms, first language, then arts and various cultural forms, and behavioral practices and organizational structures pertaining to the local environment. However, it is vitally important to remember that form must serve content—forms such as language and the arts are merely means of religion, while spiritual faith alone is its ultimate purpose.

"The "Sinicization" movement, which embraces the Chinese language, arts (including painting, sculpture, architecture and music), and other cultural expressions—without necessarily rejecting foreign influences—should be understood as a means rather than an end."

In this way, the "Sinicization" movement, which embraces the Chinese language, arts (including painting, sculpture, architecture and music), and other cultural expressions—without necessarily rejecting foreign influences—should be understood as a means rather than an end. It does not serve as the ultimate end of a religion but enables it to thrive and develop more effectively. This is the broader significance of the "Sinicization" of any religion, including Christianity.

However, we can identify different answers to this question, from the perspective of history or facts.

Firstly, since the dawn of civilization, every religion has emerged in the cultural milieu of a certain ethnic group or nation. Most religions have naturally expressed themselves through the cultural forms of their place of origin. Their languages, arts and other expressions have often been characterized by the national features of their context. For the majority of these religions, which remain confined to their home countries, there is little need to advocate for "nationalization" or "ethnicization," as they have been inherently "nationalized" or "ethnicized". For example, it is meaningless to call for "Sinicization" of Taoism, for "Japanization" of Shintoism or for "Indianization" of Hinduism. Scholars of religion often categorize these religions as "national or ethnic religions" as opposed to "world religions".

"...it is meaningless to call for "Sinicization" of Taoism, for "Japanization" of Shintoism or for "Indianization" of Hinduism."

Of course, if some religions in this category begin to spread beyond their original borders, with some new ideas or circumstances due to the changes of history, they would require a degree of "domestication" or "transformation." However, this process is not a matter of "nationalization," but on the contrary, involves a form of "foreignization." Therefore, only by embracing the cultural forms of the target society or target nation can these religions successfully spread and establish themselves. For instance, Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism, when disseminated beyond their homelands, have had to incorporate aspects of foreign cultures, lifestyles and languages, such as English, to facilitate their spread.

"If some religions of this category begin to spread beyond their original borders, with some new ideas or circumstances due to the changes of history, they would require a degree of "domestication" or "transformation."

Image: Joann Pittman

Secondly, another category of religions in the history of civilization—the "world religions," as opposed to "national religions"—also emerged within the cultural context of specific nations. However, driven by their universal beliefs or concepts, these religions aspire to spread globally. The so-called "three great world religions"—Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam—are prime examples. With this purpose, from their inception, these religions have sought to transcend the cultural and geographical limitations of their origins, such as Judea, Kapilvastu and Arabia. They (to different extents) incorporated the cultural characteristics of their target nations, adapting their language, arts and even explanations of doctrines to the target populations. This adaptation has enabled them to achieve remarkable success in foreign contexts, not only spreading across the world but also

Image: Zhang Kaiyv | Unsplash

becoming integral to the cultures and national identities of the regions they reached. In essence, the process of "nationalization" in the countries to which they spread has been both a necessity and a natural outcome. Consequently, asking these religions to "nationalize" themselves is redundant, as they have consistently pursued, realized, and kept continuing to achieve such a goal, as part of their global expansion. For them, such a demand holds little practical significance.

This fact is particularly evident in the case of the "Sinicization of Christianity." From its first documented entry into China during the reign of Emperor Taizong in the Tang Dynasty (7th Century CE), Christianity demonstrated a remarkable degree of active and conscious adaption to Chinese culture. This is evident in various aspects, such as its Chinese name, "*Jingjiao* (meaning Bright Teaching)," the designation of its places of worship as "*si* (temples)," and the creation of artifacts like the *Jingjiao* Stele (also known as the *Nestorian Stele*), which recorded the spread of early Chinese Christianity from the *Da Qin* (or Roman Empire). The Stele's "Ode" and "Preface" reflected an emphasis on harmony between church and state. Additionally, many of the *Jingjiao* literature from that period employed Buddhist and Taoist terminology. All of these showcased the high level of Sinicization of Christianity at that time. Emperor Taizong announced this teaching (Christianity) as "benevolent and beneficial to people and suitable for the whole world," highlighting its level of acceptance within Chinese society. Scholars of religion have also noted that during Emperor Wuzong's anti-Buddhist campaign, Christianity was confused and grouped with Buddhism and suffered similar persecution—this is further evidence of its deep cultural integration with Chinese traditions.

"Emperor Taizong announced this teaching (Christianity) as "benevolent and beneficial to people and suitable for the whole world," highlighting its level of acceptance within Chinese society."

During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (17th century CE) when Christianity began to take root in Chinese society, Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits, who represented the highest achievement of missionaries at that time, followed a radical "Sinicization" policy—they not only

took on Confucian robes and spoke Chinese, but also learned Confucian and other Chinese classics and introduced them to the West; not only opposed the "anti-Sinicization" direction from the Pontiff, but also made all efforts to express Christian concepts in Chinese terms; even today's Chinese scholars imbued with traditional literature would highly admire the beautiful style of those missionaries' works in classical Chinese.

From the nineteenth century to the present, the "Sinicization" of Christianity in China has been much more evident in various ways. It is reflected in the collaborative efforts between foreign missionaries and Chinese locals to translate the Bible into Chinese and the countless Christian works written by native literati and scholars in Chinese language. It can also be seen in the involvement of missionaries in the Western Affairs Movement (*Yangwu Yundong* 洋務運動)[4] and the Hundred Day's Reform, as well as the significant contributions of Chinese Christian elites in politics, business and culture to various aspects of Chinese society—science and technology, education and scholarship, medicine and public health, journalism and publishing, philanthropy and social services, and so on. Moreover, the advocacy by both Chinese and foreign church leaders for a "self-reliant" Chinese church and the eventual establishment of the "three-self" principles (self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation) marks further milestones in this process. All these efforts and achievements have showcased that the "Sinicization" of Christianity in China has already been fully realized.

All in all, today's Chinese Christians are mostly ordinary Chinese people who have grown up in China and are immersed in Chinese culture. Most of them have very little knowledge of foreign languages and cultures. Their Christianity has endured over 1,300 years of history in China, weathering many challenges and undergoing a long course of "assimilation." For much of history, Christianity in China has been largely isolated from the outside world. All of this raises a question: Do Chinese Christians today need more "Sinicization," or would they benefit more from "going out and inviting in"—fostering broader and deeper exchanges with their brothers and sisters around the world?

Of course, the conclusions drawn here are from academic, religious, and historical perspectives. Perhaps from a political standpoint, the "Sinicization of Christianity" may carry its own significant and practical implications, but that lies beyond the scope of this essay.

"Do Chinese Christians today need more "Sinicization," or would they benefit more from "going out and inviting in"—fostering broader and deeper exchanges with their brothers and sisters around the world?"

1 During recent visits to churches in Guangzhou and in Wenzhou—including those directly and indirectly managed by the China Christian Council and the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (CCC&TSPM)—I observed forceful propaganda focusing on the "Sinicization of Christianity." This was apparent in various ways, such as large slogans displayed in church courtyards and content on bulletin boards. The most prominent spaces were dedicated to showcasing related speeches by Party leader Xi. In fact, online photos frequently depict religious groups holding meetings to study the leader's speeches and ceremonies of lifting national flag in temples of various religions, among which even Taoism, the native Chinese religion, is doing such "Sinicization of Religion."

2 In China, private funding for research in the humanities and social sciences is very rare and difficult to operate, and academic journals require official approval to publish. Among state-funded programs in these fields, topics related to religion are quite limited; essays related Christianity in the scarce religious journals face even stricter censorship.

3 Cf. He Guanghu 何光滬, "Religion," in *A Dictionary of Religions*, ed. Jiyu Ren (Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Press, 2009).

4 Editor's note: 洋務運動, often called "the Self-Strengthening Movement" (自強運動), also known as the Westernization or Western Affairs Movement (c. 1861–1895), was a period of radical institutional reforms initiated in China during the late Qing dynasty following the military disasters of the Opium Wars.

Editor's note: This article was originally written in Chinese and has been translated and edited by the ChinaSource team with the author's permission and approval.

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Image: Joann Pittman

The Indigenization and *Zhongguohua* of Christianity

BY YING FUK-TSANG

In recent years, discussions on the "*Zhongguohua* (Chinafication) of Christianity" have garnered widespread attention, sparking debates over whether "*Zhongguohua*" is synonymous with "indigenization." This article aims to delve into an exploration and comparative analysis of the official discourse concerning the *Zhongguohua* of religions and the historical backdrop of indigenization within the context of Chinese Christianity.

ZHONGGUOHUA AND INDIGENIZATION

While the conceptual framework of *Zhongguohua* has been introduced by numerous scholars (Zhuo Xinping, Zhang Zhigang) of mainland Chinese religious studies, its prominence is closely intertwined with the persona of Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Between 2015 and 2022, Xi referenced the notion of "*Zhongguohua*" in relation to religious matters on four separate occasions during speeches delivered at the Central United

Front Work and National Religious Work Conferences.[1] Serving as a distinctive hallmark of religious theory within the milieu of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era," a comprehensive grasp of its essence requires a revisiting of the context of official documentation.

Scholars who have delved into the historical trajectory of Chinese Christianity are well-acquainted with the principle of indigenization.[2] As far back as the nineteenth century, endeavors undertaken by Western missionaries in China bore the aspiration of "localizing the gospel within China."[3] In 1922, the term "Indigenous Church" made its debut within the "Message of the National Christian Conference."[4] Subsequently, scholarly discourses germinated encompassing themes such as indigenization, contextualization, and localization, concepts that continue to endure.[5]

Thus, the question arises: can *Zhongguohua* be equated with the notion of indigenization? An attempt to draw a comparison is pursued through the lens of three distinctive dimensions: objectives, content, and essence.

> **"Can *Zhongguohua* be equated with the notion of indigenization? An attempt to draw a comparison is pursued through the lens of three distinctive dimensions."**

ON OBJECTIVES: WHY?

The comprehension and resolution of religious concerns have consistently occupied central positions within the purview of the CPC's endeavors in the religious domain. In 1993, Jiang Zemin, then-General Secretary of the CPC, introduced the proposition of "actively work[ing] for the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism," thereby mandating that religious bodies undertake reforms that harmonize with socialist doctrines and institutions, while also advocating for constructive contributions to socialist undertakings.[6] This transformative stance marked a departure from the Party's earlier position that classified "religion as the opium of the people," towards an acknowledgment of the adaptive role that religion could play within socialist society.[7] In the twenty-first century, Xi Jinping underscored the imperative of "actively guiding religions to adapt to socialist society, while steadfastly upholding the path of *Zhongguohua* in religious matters."[8] Serving as a cardinal guiding tenet for the governance of religious affairs within the contemporary Chinese milieu, the concept of *Zhongguohua* represents an evolution of the adaptational paradigm, introducing innovative interpretations thereof.

In contrast, indigenization emerges as an internal dialogue within the realm of Chinese Christianity. Ng Lee Ming, a scholar in religious studies, points out that the underpinning purpose of indigenization is evangelistic in nature—"to foster the assimilation of Christianity within a non-Christian environment" and "to illuminate and elucidate the relevance of Christianity within an ever-shifting cultural context."[9]

Evidently, *Zhongguohua* and indigenization delineate divergent objectives. As articulated by Xi Jinping, the "positive role of religion does not reside in transforming religion into a universal remedy for societal challenges or artificially augmenting religious fervor." Instead, it entails "guiding religion to proactively contribute to the advancement of economic progress, cultural flourishing, national unity, and territorial integrity."[10] Consequently, the prime objective of *Zhongguohua* pertains to directing religious practice in alignment with national priorities, in contradistinction to the evangelistic emphasis intrinsic to indigenization.

> **"Consequently, the prime objective of *Zhongguohua* pertains to directing religious practice in alignment with national priorities, in contradistinction to the evangelistic emphasis intrinsic to indigenization."**

ON CONTENT: HOW?

The approach toward realizing the objectives of *Zhongguohua* warrants scrutiny. Xi Jinping outlines the necessity of "imbuing diverse religions with Chinese culture by drawing upon the core values of socialism." This entails facilitating religious communities in devising interpretations of religious doctrines and canons that coalesce with the exigencies of the times, while also safeguarding against the infiltration of Western ideologies and countering the sway of extremist dogmas.[11]

In the realm of indigenization, the endeavor encompasses several facets: (1) the establishment of self-governing and

self-supporting ecclesiastical structures; (2) a cultural exploration of the interplay between Christianity and traditional cultural elements; (3) an artistic enrichment of Christianity's integration with culture through innovations in domains such as music, literature, visual arts, rituals, and architecture; and (4) a social contemplation of the interrelationship between Christianity and societal contexts, particularly those pertaining to socio-cultural transformation.[12]

Evidently, the main drive of *Zhongguohua* centers around "guiding" religious teachings towards alignment with socialist foundational values, underscored by a heightened focus on reinforcing ideological "guardrails" and mechanisms for "resisting" external influences.

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In 2021, Xi further expanded upon these requisites, urging the religious community to strengthen its commitment to "patriotism, collectivism and socialism," while also advocating for an augmented learning about history of the CPC, the PRC, reform and opening up, and the development of socialism. This directive serves to intensify adherents' commitment to "our country, the Chinese nation, and the Chinese culture, and to support the CPC, and socialism with Chinese characteristics."[13]

Undoubtedly, the discourse on the *Zhongguohua* of religions also engages with "Chinese culture," wherein the notion of cultural "permeation" within religious paradigms is more closely aligned with the cultural, ritualistic, and artistic dimensions inherent in efforts of indigenization. However, upon comprehensive analysis of the broader scope of discourse surrounding *Zhongguohua*, it emerges that the propagation of traditional Chinese cultural elements should not be viewed in isolation from the recent official exhortations for the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (中華民族的復興)." The central thrust lies in the premise that the cultural facets of religion, within the *Zhongguohua* paradigm, should significantly contribute to the overarching rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Conversely, indigenization, in addition to fostering "seeking the common ground," accentuates the need to critically supplement the limitations inherent in traditional culture within the realm of this common ground. Instances from history, such as the "harmonization with Confucianism (*he ru*, 合儒)" and the "complementing Confucianism (*bu ru*, 补儒)" articulated by late Ming and late Qing missionaries, such as Matteo Ricci, James Legge and Young J. Allen, serve as poignant illustrations of this approach.[14]

ON ESSENCE: WHAT?

The divergences in purpose and content underscore their intrinsic disparities. In actuality, *Zhongguohua* transcends the ambit of merely fostering a culturally congruent manifestation that aligns with Chinese cultural norms or the "Sinicization" (which is sometimes translated to *hanhua* 漢化) of religious paradigms. As expounded by Xi, "both native religions and foreign religions must consistently adapt to the evolutionary trajectory and progress of our society, infusing the spirit of the times, thereby catalyzing religious harmony, social cohesion, and national unity."[15] At its core, the essence of *Zhongguohua* is germane not solely to foreign religions (such as Catholicism and Protestantism), but it extends to indigenous faiths (like Taoism and Sinicized Buddhism) and ethnic religious practices (such as Islam and Tibetan Buddhism). In the event that religions deeply entrenched within local cultures necessitate alignment with *Zhongguohua* principles, it follows that the political identification with the PRC emerges as the absolute value.[16] Functioning as a religious theory emblematic of the contemporary era, the *Zhongguohua* of religions signifies a "from above" enterprise that synergizes religious ideologies with the core values of socialism.[17]

In contrast, deliberations within the realm of Chinese Christianity concerning indigenization lack a centralized driving impetus, instead unveiling an array of disparate "from below" voices.[18] Some stakeholders underscore the importance of identifying commonalities between Christianity and traditional cultural elements, while others accentuate inherent contradictions between Christian doctrines and cultural paradigms, contending that the rejuvenation and salvation offered by Christianity are imperative for Chinese culture. Naturally, apprehensions arise that indigenization might inadvertently distort the fundamental essence of Christianity,

Image: Canva

leading to religious syncretism. A review of the history of modern Chinese Christianity reveals a tapestry of internal diversity and even antithetical perspectives on the question of indigenization. Ultimately, within the context of the interface between religion and culture, the delicate equilibrium between "relevance" and "uniqueness" engenders an enduring and constructive internal tension.

TASKS AND CHALLENGES

In summation, it is imperative to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the distinctions separating *Zhongguohua* and indigenization, refraining from conflating the two, even when they manifest certain semblances at specific levels.

After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese Church rose from the ashes and continued to grow despite various constraints. Today, although Christians still account for a relatively low proportion of the Chinese population, Christianity is no longer a "foreign religion" of the past, from the perspective of either Chinese Christian history or social reality, but instead, it has become a religion rooted in local society.[19]

Reflecting on the dissemination of Christianity within Chinese societies, the central aim of indigenization lies in the endeavor to "seek and elucidate the significance of Christianity for human beings living within an ever-changing cultural landscape."[20] How Christianity perceives its current circumstances, particularly in relation to its comprehension of the people embedded within this context, alongside the relevance of the principles of the Kingdom of God at this critical juncture, assumes paramount significance. These queries cast the spotlight on the enduring responsibilities that the Church is entrusted with, as it grapples with the vicissitudes of time.

* For the full Chinese version, please refer to *Newsletter of the Research Center for Chinese Christianity, Chung Yuan Christian University* 18 (September 2023): 1-4.

1 Editor's note: Xi Jinping referenced "*Zhongguohua*" in relation to religious matters on at least three occasions between 2015 and 2022: the Central United Front Work Conference (May 18–20, 2015), the National Religious Work Conference (April 23, 2016), and a Central United Front Work Conference (July 30, 2022).

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11 See notes 6 above.

12 See notes 7 above.

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17 Richard Madsen, "Introduction," in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, 1-4.

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20 See notes 6 above, 20.

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Countering Infiltration and Going Global:

The Dual Strategy of the Sinicization of Christianity

BY CHIN KEN PA

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)[1] operates as a party driven by ideological rule, where the formulation and implementation of policies are deeply tied to its underlying ideological framework. Any ideological disagreement with the CCP is often perceived as a threat, particularly when it involves organized groups, such as religious communities, whose beliefs inherently challenge the party's ideology. As a result, it is crucial to identify ideologies that may pose a threat to the security of Chinese socialism and address them with appropriate seriousness.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the CCP initiated a series of purges aimed at "imperialism," with both Catholicism and Protestant

Christianity targeted as perceived tools of imperialist invasion, a concept widely referred to as "cultural invasion." In recent years, the approach to religious affairs has shifted toward the "Sinicization of Christianity." This strategy is rooted in two key objectives: "countering infiltration" and "going global." The former aims to prevent Christianity from being used as a tool for foreign influence, as proposed by Duan Dezhi (段德智) of Wuhan University. The latter focuses on enabling Chinese Christianity to extend its influence globally, a vision advocated by Xu Yihua (徐以驊) of Fudan University.

Image: Joann Pittman

"In recent years, the approach to religious affairs has shifted toward the "Sinicization of Christianity." This strategy is rooted in two key objectives: "countering infiltration" and "going global."

While leading a major research project on philosophy and social sciences for the Ministry of Education of the PRC, titled "A Strategic Study on Religious Infiltration from Abroad and China's Ideological Security" (境外宗教滲透與我國意識形態安全戰略研究), Duan Dezhi outlined three key aspects of national strategic thinking: preventing and resisting foreign religious infiltration, safeguarding the ideological security of socialism, and opposing ethnic separatism. He regards this as a fundamental issue tied to the survival or demise of socialist ideology.

The roots of this issue can be traced back to the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, which prompted renewed reflection on the need to address the potential collusion between religion and foreign forces, and the threat this poses to the security of China's socialist ideological rule. As a result, stricter measures were deemed necessary to limit the connections between domestic religious groups and foreign influences.

Duan Dezhi emphasized that religion is a significant national security concern for three main reasons: (1) religions are inherently organized, (2) their ideologies often compete with state ideologies, and (3) they frequently maintain transnational connections. These factors have compelled the CCP to closely monitor the influence of foreign or transnational religions in China. On the international stage, transnational religions often leverage their global networks to influence domestic governance, sometimes leading to social conflicts or contradictions and, in more extreme cases, triggering so-called "color revolutions." As a result, it is imperative to guard against the impact of religion on national governance and ideology, with particular vigilance to avoid a recurrence, in China, of the "Eastern European tragedy" of the last century.

Duan Dezhi argued that foreign religious infiltration played a significant role in the collapse of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European parties. He argued that the Soviet Union's failure to adapt religion to socialist society was a fundamental error, stemming from both "left" and "right" missteps. Stalin's "ultra-left" approach of violently opposing religion produced counterproductive effects, while Gorbachev's "ultra-right" approach of promoting religious work led to alienation from the Party and socialism. Duan emphasized that both extremes were detrimental and that the crux of the issue lies in the proper implementation of religious policies. For this reason, he reiterated that this is a fundamental issue tied to the survival of socialist ideology.

In essence, given the current significant shifts in the international landscape, China's "religious work" must remain vigilant to the reality that religion is often perceived as a "foreign force." The issue of "infiltration" should be carefully considered in all aspects of this work, as religion is perceived as a force that threatens China's regime or national unity. Particular caution is advised when addressing Vatican Catholicism and US-based Christianity, which are regarded as having been "leveraging foreign forces for influence."

Xu Yihua, the director of the Center for the Studies on Religion and China's National Security at Fudan University, advocates for the "Religious Diplomacy Theory," which explains China's religious development and its national security concerns from a diplomatic perspective. He proposes the concept of "going global," which involves active diplomatic negotiation or counter-offensive strategies. Xu contends that transnational religions undermine patriotic sentiment by creating confusion over national identity and are often used as a legitimate basis for international criticism or intervention, such as in the case of human rights issues like freedom of religion. He views these issues as tools used by foreign powers to exert pressure on China.

As religion is closely linked to China's status as a global power, it is crucial to shape China's international image and solidify its diplomatic influence. The strategy of making Chinese religions "go global" is part of China's broader approach to diplomacy and international relations. This can be achieved by engaging with multinational religious groups and organizations through state channels (i.e., legal religions), rather than through civil society (i.e., illegal or underground religious groups). The "going global" of Chinese religions aims to promote them globally, serving two purposes: first, to demonstrate to the international community that religious freedom exists within the Chinese state, with religions under Chinese governance exhibiting unique characteristics; and second, to leverage these religions as a tool to project China's diplomatic power and enhance its soft power, encapsulated in the concept of "the Believing China (信仰中國)."[2]

Xu emphasized that China is now a "major country" with its own strategies and unique perspective, positioning itself as a "major country of faith." He highlighted the critical role of religion as a vehicle for China's public diplomacy, reflecting the government's central role in facilitating public diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges. According to China's national context, this approach integrates government and citizen participation in parallel, fostering multilevel interactions. It represents the flexible application of the Party's united front theory and mass line principles on an international scale.

As a country abundant in religious resources, China can leverage religion as a form of soft power in its diplomacy by promoting Chinese religions aligned with its policies and practices. The church, academia, and government can serve as the core pillars of religious public diplomacy, establishing a division of labor among the religious, academic, and political sectors. This collaboration aims to strengthen China's influence in global diplomacy, embodying the vision of "Chinese religion going global."

Xu believes that China's large population of religious believers serves as clear evidence of the country's steady religious development. Combined with China's significant international influence, this population provides an opportunity to export a uniquely Chinese form of religion to the world. By doing so, China can not only demonstrate the stability of its religious development but also introduce religions with Chinese characteristics, particularly Christianity adapted to Chinese characteristics. Xu argues that as the international community gains a better understanding of Christianity in China, criticism of the country's approach to managing religious development will diminish.

Building on Tu Weiming's (杜維明) concept of "Cultural China," Xu Yihua introduced the idea of "the Believing China" as part of China's international diplomatic strategy and cross-strait policy, presenting it as an "unspoken safeguard for national security." Xu argues that "the Believing China" is not merely a contemporary strategy but is deeply rooted in historical precedent. He notes that throughout China's history, periods of national strength and self-confidence have often coincided with significant religious exchanges between China and foreign countries. On one hand, this reflects China's active acceptance and tolerance of

"The strategy of making Chinese religions "go global" is part of China's broader approach to diplomacy and international relations. This can be achieved by engaging with multinational religious groups and organizations through state channels (i.e., legal religions), rather than through civil society (i.e., illegal or underground religious groups)."

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both local and foreign religious beliefs, fostering harmonious coexistence. On the other hand, it demonstrates China's sincere efforts to learn from and disseminate exemplary religious cultures from abroad. Through these frequent and constructive religious interactions, China not only shapes its own identity but also influences neighboring countries. This approach ensures that China's diplomacy is rooted in strong mutual relationships, including positive connections with the religious traditions of other nations.

In summary, the strategy of "Chinese religion going global" or exporting "the Believing China" represents an adjustment in China's approach to national security and religious issues following the end of the Cold War in 1989. This strategy aims to position religion as a tool for promoting national economic development, safeguarding national interests, advancing the values of a harmonious society, propagating socialist ethics, and strengthening national security. It also seeks to expand religion's role to encompass both social and diplomatic functions. In this sense, the "Sinicization of Christianity" becomes a critical component of China's foreign strategy. It is not only about adapting Christianity to align with Chinese characteristics domestically but also about developing a distinctly "Chinese Christianity" capable of "going global" and representing the nation on the global stage.

"The strategy of "Chinese religion going global" or exporting "the Believing China" represents an adjustment in China's approach to national security and religious issues following the end of the Cold War in 1989."

[1] Editor's note: Both CPC and CCP refer to the Communist Party of China. The term CPC is the officially recognized designation within China, while some foreign media continue to use CCP.

[2] Editor's note: About the definition of "the Believing China (信仰中國)", see Xu Yihua 徐以驊 and Liang Yancheng 梁燕城,〈中國全球戰略與精神文明〉[China's Global Strategy and Spiritual Civilization],《文化中國》*[Cultural China]*, no. 87 (2015): 4-14, accessed March 11, 2025, https://crrs.org/w/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/87-p04-XuLeung.pdf. While Xu and Leung originally coined the English term "the Believing China", "Religious China" may be more intuitive for English-speaking readers.

Editor's note: This article was originally written in Chinese and was translated and edited by the ChinaSource team with the author's permission and approval.

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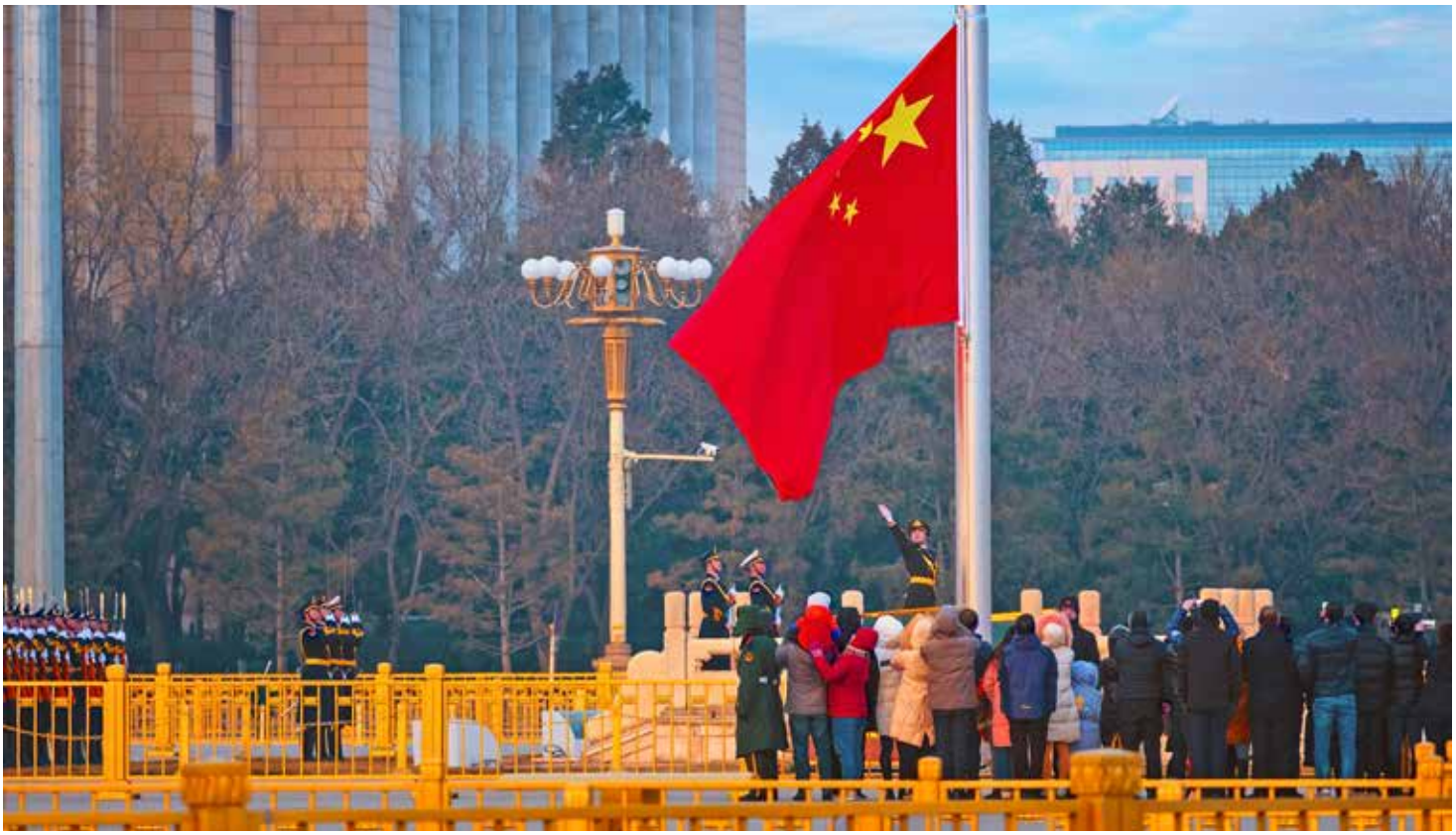

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Faith Under Party Rule:

The Sinicization of Religion in China

BY RICHARD MADSEN

In a "Christmas Greeting Letter to the Chinese Catholic and Christian Communities," the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA)[1] outlined the government's vision for religion in China throughout 2025.

"In the past year, the Catholic and Christian communities have fully implemented the [Communist] Party's theory of religious work in the new era, fully implemented the Party's basic policy on religious work, adhered to the direction of the Sinicization of religion in China, adhered to the principle of independence and autonomy, held high the banners of patriotism and socialism…"[2]

Central to this statement is the "direction of the Sinicization of religion in China." What is Sinicization (*zhongguohua*, 中國化)? Understanding it begins with defining what it is not. It is not the same as what anthropologists, historians, and theologians mean by "indigenization," "localization," or "enculturation." These generally refer to adaptations to local cultural traditions carried out by religious leaders and community members to make their practices more understandable and practicable. In China, it means conforming to the party-state's agenda. It utilizes the Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD, 中國共產黨中央委員會統一戰線工作部/統戰部) to "match the needs of China's development and the great traditional culture and proactively fit into the Chinese characteristics of a socialist society."[3]

It is part of a general project of the Xi Jinping regime to tighten Party control over Chinese society. Party membership

only encompasses about six percent of the population and the department of the Party that reaches out to non-Party members is the UFWD. It does so by identifying or inserting leaders who are sympathetic to the Party (and helping to get rid of those who are not) and using techniques of surveillance and control to ensure that these leaders make their followers conform to Party agendas. The UFWD has played more or less active roles in different periods of Chinese history. When taking power in 2013, Xi Jinping expanded the UFWD's resources and mandate to make it reach deeper into society and widen its influence among groups—especially overseas Chinese—outside of the PRC. The UFWD's mandate includes all manner of groups in civil society, such as academia and professional associations, community service associations, ethnic advocacy associations, and so forth. Sinicization is the UFWD's agenda for Chinese religious associations. All religions are to be Sinicized, even Taoism, which has been a deep part of Chinese culture for more than two millennia. But the challenge of bringing "foreign religions" like Christianity and Islam into the Party's agenda requires increased effort.

> **"Sinicization is the UFWD's agenda for Chinese religious associations. All religions are to be Sinicized, even Taoism, which has been a deep part of Chinese culture for more than two millennia."**

Xi Jinping first officially called for Sinicization at a UFWD meeting in 2015 and has reiterated it at major Party gatherings, including the National Party Congress in 2017. In his official formulation, the term means that all religions and indeed all parts of Chinese culture should "match the needs of China's development and the great traditional culture and pro-actively fit into the Chinese characteristics of a socialist society." According to Yang Fenggang, the somewhat contradictory formula is the outcome of tensions between different factions of Chinese leadership. A crucial issue for elite factions is what kind of Sina—or China—they want. Militant atheists want a modern China with no religion at all. Traditionalists want to retain in some form a pre-modern Han Chinese religious heritage. Nationalists want to purify China of Western influences—especially of Christianity.[4] To enforce Sinicization, the UFWD has absorbed SARA.

Compared with the religious policy laid out in 1982 in Document 19 from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the new policy is more proactive. The old policy recognized that religion would persist (although gradually fade away) and set restrictions to keep its influence from expanding. The Sinicization policy aims to transform religions, root and branch, so that they serve the Party-led society. This includes shaping the stories told by historians, philosophers, and theologians to say that China's religions have only developed effectively when they conform to proper state authority; to reform liturgical practices to fit the needs of economic and political development; to identify and educate leaders committed to this agenda and dispose of those who are not. These agendas are carried out through the "Patriotic Associations"

> **"A key requirement is that religions must be properly patriotic. Translations of basic religious texts, like the Bible, are to be revised "to bring them into line with the official Marxist ideology of the CPC and the 'new era.'"**

established for each religion.
A key requirement is that religions must be properly patriotic. Translations of basic religious texts, like the Bible, are to be revised "to bring them into line with the official Marxist ideology of the CPC and the 'new era.'"[5] Patriotic education programs are to be held with special emphasis on the study of Party history and the writings of Xi Jinping. Courses on these subjects are mandatory in institutes for training of religious professionals. Religious art and architecture must conform to Chinese traditional styles.[6] This is part of the rationale for the campaign to take down crosses on churches in certain places. However, "traditional culture" is narrowly defined. When the Jade Buddhist Temple in Shanghai tried to hire a Japanese architect to build a modern style lecture hall, perhaps to be attractive

> **An obstacle to implementing Sinicization is Chinese culture itself. Religious life for thousands of years has been communal, deeply embedded in networks of kin and friends, with a hearty resistance to formal organization.**

Image: Joann Pittman

Image: Joann Pittman

to modern urban practitioners, this was rejected for being insufficiently traditional. Religious leaders who resist these measures can be banned from practicing and sometimes imprisoned.[7]

An obstacle to implementing Sinicization is Chinese culture itself. Religious life for thousands of years has been communal, deeply embedded in networks of kin and friends, with a hearty resistance to formal organization. It has been heir to an extremely rich and diverse repertoire of symbols and stories and customs, all available to be creatively combined and elaborated by innovators arising from outside any official hierarchies. Throughout the twentieth century, this led to many religious movements—syncretistic redemptive societies," indigenous charismatic Christian churches, and new religious movements like Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God. These are the most truly indigenized forms of religion in China, although they of course are rejected by the State as the very opposite of Sinicization. Since the massive crackdown on Falun Gong and other "evil cults" (the official translation of *xiejiao* [邪教], the traditional term that has been used to denote heterodox sects) in 1999, in the early twenty-first century such groups have faded from public view, at least in the West, but we can assume that their "precursor components" are still available and still, outside of public view, are being assembled.

Partly in response to such movements, the state has been developing an unprecedently massive modern system of surveillance and control. But its effectiveness is constrained by an enormous traditional repertoire of resistance, passive, active, hidden, and partially open, all deployed at times with amazing creativity. These are carried out not only by heterodox sects but also by members of established churches. To cite a few things that I saw in my own fieldwork, Daoist and Buddhist temples get presented as museums. Spiritual practices are named "intangible cultural heritage," and churches get registered as "companies." Members of officially approved churches are creatively carrying out enculturation, while calling it Sinicization.

Faced by myriad forms of resistance, then,

> **Faced by myriad forms of resistance, then, the UFWD apparatus for Sinicization, impressive as it looks on paper, may be a paper tiger.**

the UFWD apparatus for Sinicization, impressive as it looks on paper, may be a paper tiger. The cadre charged with implementing Sinicization has among the lowest status in the system. It's commonly observed—and among the top leadership decried—that "formalism" is the modus operandi of much of the bureaucracy—go through the motions, fulfill official requirements, stay out of trouble, but don't put in any effort—especially creative effort—to solve real problems. People with real religious zeal have long known how to handle such bureaucratic behavior.

One area, though, where Sinicization is relatively effective is in participation of UFWD-directed religious leaders in international fora. Most religious representatives at international meetings can only do so if permitted by the UFWD. Any speeches they give are vetted and possibly even written by the UFWD, and any meetings they have are reported by cadres from the UFWD traveling with them. The version of their particular faiths that they give is thoroughly "Sinicized." Foreign observers of China, though, should prepare to be surprised when the creativity of authentic Chinese culture emerges in unexpected ways—for better or worse—from the grassroots of the society.

Image: Markus Winkler | Unsplash

"Foreign observers of China, though, should prepare to be surprised when the creativity of authentic Chinese culture emerges in unexpected ways—for better or worse—from the grassroots of the society."

1 Editor's note: The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) was merged into the United Front Work Department (UFWD) in 2018. The UFWD now uses the names of both SARA and the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA).

2 State Administration for Religious Affairs 國家宗教事務局,〈致天主教、基督教界的聖誕賀信〉[A Christmas Letter to the Catholic and Christian communities], *Catholic Church in China*, December 23, 2024, accessed Feburary 5, 2025, https://www.chinacatholic.cn/ccic/report/2412/0370-1.htm. The message is basically the same as in every greeting given during the recent past at Christmastime.

3 Xi Jinping Speech to United Front Work Conference on Religious Work, Xinhua News Agency, April 23-24, 2015.

4 Yang Fenggang 楊鳳崗, "Sinicization or Chinafication?" in Richard Madsen, ed. *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021), 16-43.

5 Sergio Ticozzi and Editorial Desk, "2019 Statistics and Major Events of the Catholic Church in China," *Tripod*, no. 196 (Spring 2020): 217, accessed March 11, 2025, https://hsstudyc.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/T196_11-major-events.pdf.

6 Editorial Committee, "The Catholic Church in China in 2021: An Analysis," *Tripod*, no. 200 (Spring 2022): 238, accessed March 11, 2025, https://hsstudyc.org.hk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/T200_12.pdf.

7 Huang Weishan 黃維珊, "The Sinicization of Buddhism and Its Competing Reinventions of Tradition," in Madsen, *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions*, 64-85.

Richard Madsen *趙文詞 is distinguished professor emeritus of sociology at the University of California, San Diego, and the director of the Fudan-UC Center on Contemporary China. He has written books on Catholicism in China and Buddhism in China, and many articles on religion in China.*

How *Zhongguohua* Was Adopted as a Path in China's Current Religious Policy

Image: Markus Winkler | Unplash

BY EVA-MARIA HANKE-ESTEVEZ

In 2015, General Secretary Xi Jinping (習近平) proclaimed "adherence to the direction of *Zhongguohua* (中國化, Sinicization) of religions"[1] in religious policy. Although the term *Zhongguohua* was new in his policy, its roots stretch back further, with various uses throughout Chinese history. For instance, the concept of *Zhongguohua* of Marxism can be traced to Mao Zedong (毛澤東).[2] This article explores the prehistory of *Zhongguohua* of Protestant Christianity as propagated by the Xi administration, which is outlined below. While in my wider research, I argue that *Zhongguohua* has a specific prehistory in every context within which Xi applies it, I also contend that, as a political slogan, its exact meaning remains ill-defined and has to be spelled out in relation to current and future religious debates.

Xi speaks of the *Zhongguohua* of all five recognized religions, with Protestant Christianity being one of them, alongside Catholicism, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam. Religious work, for Xi, is part of the Party's broader agenda. It takes place under the banner of socialist religions, under which each religion is confronted with the question of what adapting to China means for them. The *Zhongguohua* of Protestant Christianity is often discussed under the label of *Jidujiao Zhongguohua* (基督教中國化, Sinicization of Christianity) or *Jiduzongjiao Zhongguohua* (基督宗教中國化, Sinicization of Christian religion). Scholars such as Tang Xiaofeng (唐曉峰) use the latter term to encompass both Protestantism and Catholicism, despite the two being treated as distinct religions within Chinese discourse.[3]

The *Zhongguohua* of Christianity has roots

> **Xi speaks of the *Zhongguohua* of all five recognized religions, with Protestant Christianity being one of them, alongside Catholicism, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam.**

in academic discussions, which have gradually influenced Xi's religious policy. Understanding how academic debates have influenced policy requires recognizing the interplay between academia and politics in China's Marxist education system, where scholars frequently act as political advisors.[4]

With China's opening at the end of the 1970s, the religious landscape and its research flourished. An important organization in this development is the Institute of World Religions (IWR) (*Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan shijie zongjiao yanjiu suo*, 中國社會科學院世界宗教研究所), which was founded in its current form in 1981. It is part of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) (*Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan*, 中國社會科學院), and its predecessor was already established under Mao.[5] The aim in the 1960s was to understand religion as a fundamental aspect that influences the global population.[6] Today, the research of the IWR is focused on analyzing religions from a global perspective. CASS is one of the leading research institutions in China, specializing in the social sciences.[7] It was founded in 1977 and reports directly to the State Council of the People's Republic of China. Its main task is to conduct social science research, provide policy advice, and offer scientific expertise in various areas of the social sciences. The Academy plays a significant role in shaping China's social and economic policies by providing important scientific studies and recommendations to the government. CASS is also an important hub for the production of academic publications dealing with Chinese society, politics,

Image: Joann Pittman

and the economy. At the IWR, atheists and scholars of various religions conduct research side by side. Moderate atheists at the institute had believed that religion would naturally fade as China's economy prospered.[8] However, tensions arose between militant atheists and scholars of religious studies, especially after the change of power from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping. However, it was only after the change of power that both sides sensed an opportunity to gain more influence.[9] As early as 1998, Zhuo Xinping (卓新平) became the first scholar of Christian studies to serve as the director of the IWR, which gave Christian Studies a major boost in legitimacy with support from other pioneering scholars such as Liu Xiaofeng (劉小楓) and He Guanghu (何光滬).[10] However, Christian Studies came under increased pressure in the early 2010s from some atheists who accused the field of undermining Marxist ideology.[11]

In response to these pressures, Zhuo Xinping, together with Zhang Zhigang (張志剛), two scholars of religion, proposed framing the *Zhongguohua* of Christianity as a way to consolidate various discourses on how Christianity could adapt to China.[12] This refers to various aspects, including contemporary political dimensions, as well as the cultural and religious spheres. Discussions about adaptation had been present since the first missionaries entered China in the seventh century CE and could be described under the slogan *Zhongguohua*. Previously, related discussions had often taken place under terms such as indigenization (*bensehua*, 本色化), localization (*bentuhua*, 本土化), and contextualization (*chujinghua*, 處境化) and were primarily related to cultural and religious concerns. The discourse on the *Zhongguohua* of Marxism, which was viewed positively by Party theorists, may have served as a model here, as well as the *Zhongguohua* debate of Buddhism, which demonstrably led to an increase in publications and was of great interest to the Communist Party of China (CPC).[13] The debate was on how Buddhism, originally from India, transformed into an integral part of Chinese culture; in a broader sense, the central question is how religions can be integrated into the Chinese system with a Marxist view of religion.[14] In a similar vein, one can

interpret Zhang Zhigang and Zhuo Xinping's proposal of the *Zhongguohua* of Christianity as a way to defend Christian Studies against criticism from atheists. The discourse was well-received by both academics and officials from the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA).

Despite the claim that the *Zhongguohua* promoted by Xi originates in academia and has been integrated into religious policy, it would be inaccurate to suggest that this policy operates separately from religious groups and that the line of *Zhongguohua* is only imposed on them. Politics and religion in China are not only intertwined through academic structures. Discourses are also shaped by the religious organizations themselves. Regarding Protestant Christianity, a brief look at the past of the two umbrella organizations of the Protestant church in China, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) (*Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui*, 中國基督教三自愛國運動委員會) and the China Christian Council (CCC) (*Zhongguo jidujiao xiehui*, 中國基督教協會) is necessary. The two organizations were founded at different times but exist in parallel today and are referred to under the term *liang hui* (兩會, "the two organizations"). They have a joint headquarters in Shanghai, are often publicly perceived as a unit due to their joint appearance, and are referred to as the official Protestant Church. But they are separate in terms of their organizational structure, each with its own president and administrative regulation. Legally speaking, the Three-Self Movement is above the Christian Council. The movement emerged in the context of the political and ideological changes in China after the founding of the PRC. During this period, the government adopted a policy emphasizing adaptation to Chinese conditions and promoting an anti-imperialist approach, including in matters of religion. Similarly, some Christians took the Chinese revolution as an opportunity to rethink the church and come to terms with the CPC.[15] It was against this background that the TSPM was founded in 1954 under the leadership of Wu Yaozong (吳耀宗) and other leading Christian and political figures. From the very beginning, the TSPM had to cooperate with the CPC.[16] The name "Three-Self" refers to the three principles emphasized by the movement: self-governance, self-financing and self-propagation, which are still its guiding principles today.[17] The authors of the founding document, the Christian

"Politics and religion in China are not only intertwined through academic structures. Discourses are also shaped by the religious organizations themselves."

"From the very beginning, the TSPM had to cooperate with the CPC. The name "Three-Self" refers to the three principles emphasized by the movement: self-governance, self-financing and self-propagation, which are still its guiding principles today."

Image: Jonathan Densford | Adobe Stock

Manifesto (三自宣言 *san zi xuanyan*, full name: 中國基督教在新中國建設中努力的途徑, *Zhongguo jidujiao zai xin Zhongguo jianshe zhong nuli de tujing*), argue that Christianity must adapt to the new communist reality in China.[18] Their aim is to establish an indigenized Chinese church. The Three-Self ideas date back to the missionary strategists Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson.[19] In a way, the debate harks back to earlier discussions about the adaptation and independence of Christianity in China. The narrative has always been about adapting Christianity to the actual circumstances. This narrative is still used today. Proponents point to the early discussions of indigenization, contextualization and localization as precursors to today's discussion. For example, Zhang Zhigang argues that the previously mentioned terms were primarily used by scholars from the church side to discuss the adaptation of Christianity in relation to culture and social circumstances. In contrast, *Zhongguohua* is now widely used in academic discourse as a term that addresses that addresses the integration into "Chinese culture, the Chinese nation, and in particular, contemporary Chinese society."[20] The difference between then and now lies not in the question of adaptation but in the circumstances to which Christianity should adapt. Today, this is the ideology of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

In conclusion, Xi's directive to align all religions with *Zhongguohua* is not only rooted in academic and institutional history but is also deeply embedded in the traditions of the official Protestant Church. This history illustrates the complexity of defining what exactly *Zhongguohua* means. Xi's policy, while framed as a duty for religions to adapt to a socialist society, remains vague in terms of its concrete content and its broader implications for religious practice in China.

1 Xi Jinping 習近平,〈鞏固發展最廣泛的愛國統一戰線 爲實現中國夢提供廣泛力量支持〉[Consolidate and Develop the Broadest Patriotic United Front to Provide Broad Support for the Realization of the Chinese Dream], 中央政府門戶網站 *[Central Government Portal]*, May 20, 2015, accessed January 20, 2025, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-05/20/content_2865448.htm.

2 Mao Zedong 毛澤東,《第一編-關於世界觀和方法論》*[Part One - On Worldview and Methodology]*, accessed January 20, 2025, https://www.marxists.org/chinese/pdf/chinese_marxists/mao/01210805.pdf, 204.

3 See Tang Xiaofeng 唐曉峰,〈基督宗教研究的中國化發展及其宗教學定位〉[The Development of the Sinicization of the Study of Christian Religion and ist Religious Orientation],《中國宗教》*[China Religion]*, No. 8 (2018).

4 Zhuo Xinping 卓新平,〈士的擔當與宗教學的未來〉[The Responsibility of the "Scholar" and the Future of Religious Studies], 天主教在線 *[Catholic Online]*, April 9, 2018, accessed January 21, 2025, https://ccccn.org/other/2018-04-09/63022.html.

5 Wu Yungui, "The History of the Institute of World Religions Chinese Academy of Social Sciences", conference paper, in *The Historical Significance of the Lotus Sutra and its Role in the 21st Century*, ed. Soka University, Institute of Oriental Philosophy (Japan 2014), accessed January 21, 2025, https://www.totetu.org/assets/media/paper/j010_005.pdf, 6.

6 Wu, "The History of the Institute of World Religions Chinese Academy of Social Sciences", 6.

7 〈中國社會科學院概況〉[Overview of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences], 中國社會科學院 [Chinese Academy of Social Sciences], accessed January 22, 2025, http://www.cass.cn/gaikuang/.

8 Yang Fenggang 楊鳳崗, "Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond", in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, ed. Richard Madsen (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 24f.

9 Ibid., 29.

10 Ibid., 28.

11 Ibid., 29.

12 See Zhang Zhigang, "Three-fold Thinking on the Sinicization of Christianity", *Evangelische Theologie* 75, no. 5 (2015), 385f.

13 Yang, "Sinicization or Chinafication?", 29f.

14 Fang Litian 方立天,〈論中國化馬克思主義宗教觀〉[On the Religious View of Marxism with Chinese Characteristics], 愛思想 [*Aisixiang*], December 9, 2022, accessed January 22, 2025, https://www.aisixiang.com/data/138975.html.

15 Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground: Protestant Christianity, the Three-Self Movement, and China's United Front* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 42.

16 Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground, 42.*

17 Xu Xiaohong 徐曉鴻,〈發揮三自組織在新徵程中的引領作用 系統推進我國基督教中國化——慶祝中國基督教三自愛國運動委員會成立70週年講話〉[Play the Leading Role of the Three-Self Movement in the New Journey, and Systematically Promote the Sinicization of Christianity in China — Speech Celebrating the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the China Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee], 中國基督教三自愛國運動委員會 \ 中國基督教協會 [China Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee \ China Christian Council], October 24, 2024, accessed January 21, 2025, https://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/18358.

18 Ibid.

19 Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground*, 37.

20 Zhang, "Three-fold Thinking on the Sinicization of Christianity", 385f.

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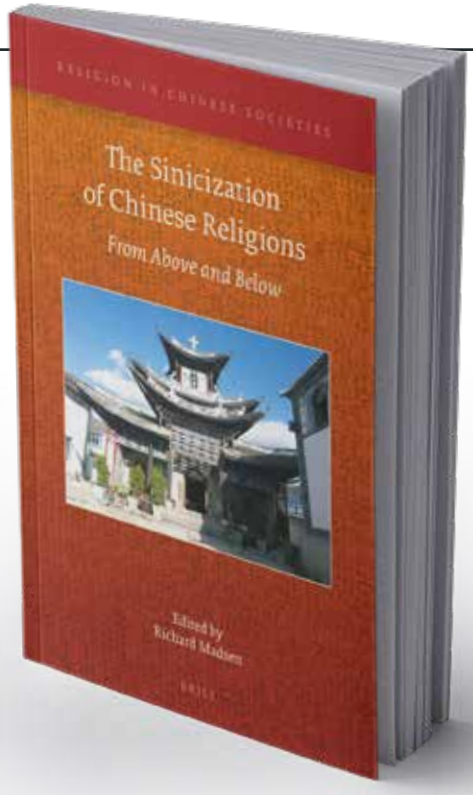
On Rhetorics and Lived Religion:

A Review of *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*



BY NAOMI THURSTON

> **"...Chinese cultures have proven to be enormously resilient in the face of social and political upheavals over the centuries and have shown great capacity for creative adaptation to changing circumstances. In the long run, perhaps, the Sinicization from below will be more consequential than the Sinicization from above.[1]"**

Richard Madsen's edited volume on the contemporary Sinicization of Chinese religions consists of six dense chapters (in addition to an introduction and a six-page index), which are based on the proceedings of an academic workshop held at the University of California, San Diego, in 2018. The contributions cover the following chapters relevant to the Sinicization of religions:

(1) "Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond" by Yang Fenggang;

(2) "'Official Confucianism' as Newly Sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party" by Chen Yong;

(3) "The Sinicization of Buddhism and Its Competing Reinventions of Tradition" by Huang Weishan;

(4) "Already Post-Modern. Buddhist Stone Images in Luoyang and the Question of Sinicization" by Wang Dong;

(5) "Faith in the Future/Practices of the Past. A Sinicized Islamic Revival among the Hui of Xining" by Alexander Stewart; and

(6) "Xiejiao, Cults, and New Religions. Making Sense of the New Un-Sinicized Religions on China's Fringe" by J. Gordon Melton.

Image: Joann Pittman

None of these chapters focuses exclusively on Protestant Christianity, although much of the opening chapter does, including a section on *Zhongguohua* (中國化) in Christian Studies, as does much of Chapter 6, which discusses the stigma and criminalization of some "unorthodox" Christian groups. Filling an important research gap in international scholarship, the volume highlights Sinicization discourses in other Chinese religions, including what Chen Yong calls "official Confucianism" as the Sinicized expression of China's own ancient tradition. This weighting is significant considering the prominence of the "Sinicization of Protestantism" as compared with the Sinicization of other Chinese faiths, especially in the past twelve years.[2]

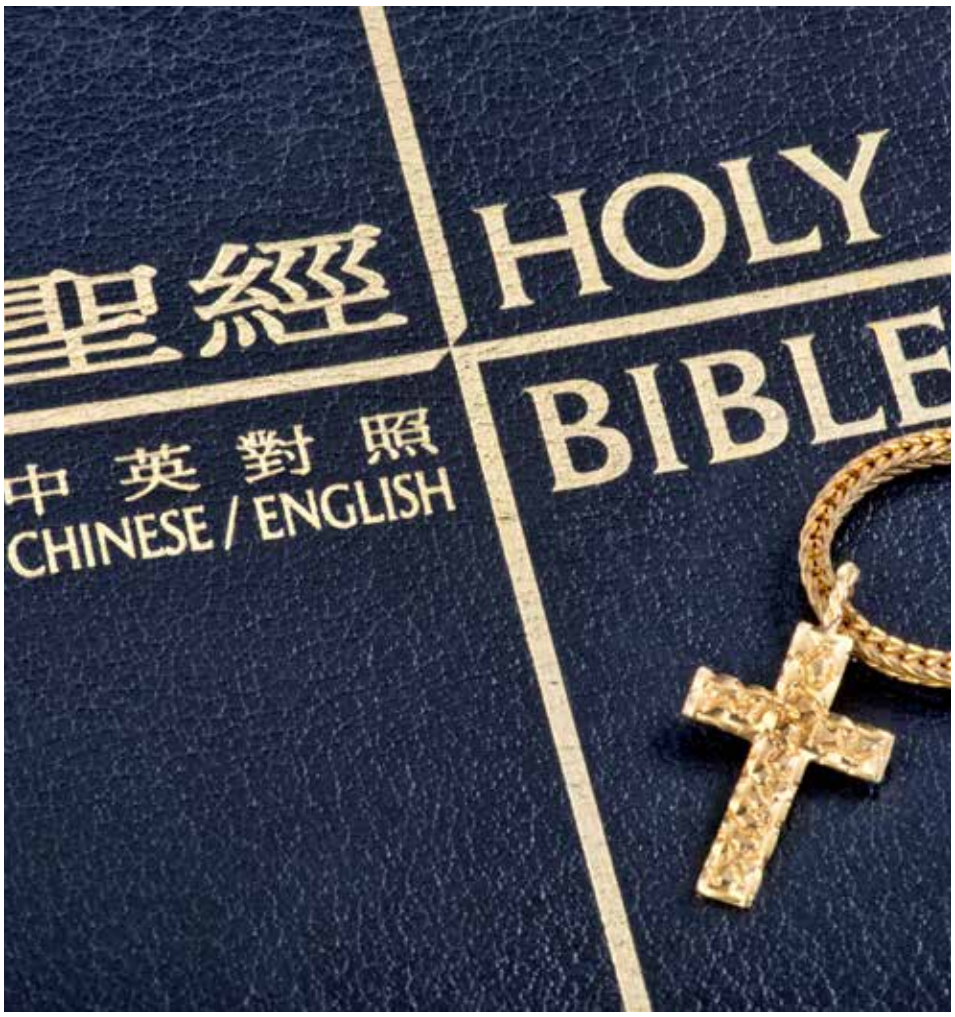
Following the opening chapter on recent policy history, the six chapters of the book are structured thematically from most to least *Zhongguohua*-ed, i.e., officially "Sinicized," Chinese religions, that is, from a state-initiated Confucianism—as Chen Yong calls it—to the proscribed "evil" cult. Taken together, the contributors present and problematize a complex interplay between religious groups accruing religious authority to themselves on one hand, and the state controlling religion in the interest of advocating its Sino-socialist narrative on the other. Some key insights can be gleaned here:

1. First, what Madsen refers to as "Sinicization from above," and what Yang calls "Chinafication" in this book have distinct historical trajectories for different ideologies and religions, from Maoist Sinicization to today's Sinicization-of-religion rhetoric, which varies across religions and locales. This is outlined explicitly in Yang's chapter.
2. Secondly, as the contributions to this issue demonstrate, *Zhongguohua* is a matter not only of organic adaptations to religious needs that change with the development of religious communities (Madsen's "Sinicization from below"), but of programmatic rhetorics. Huang Weishan's chapter on the different narratives by which Buddhism today reinvents and propagates itself in state, academic, and religious discourses, highlights this well in her explications of how China's Buddhist stories are told.[3]
3. Sinicization is not the only possible direction for a religion in China

"What Madsen refers to as "Sinicization from above," and what Yang calls "Chinafication" in this book have distinct historical trajectories for different ideologies and religions."

to develop: some religious communities choose to emphasize internationalization or intentionally maintain foreign ties or elements that are seen as contrasting with elements of Chinese traditional or contemporary identities. Wang Dong's fascinating chapter illustrates this point.[4]

4. Sinicization is often, though not exclusively, a male-dominated discourse. This is the case for Buddhist clergy reinventing "traditional principles" in the rhetoric of traditionalism.[5]



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"Sinicization is often, though not exclusively, a male-dominated discourse."

5. Finally, further studies, especially in terms of ethnographic fieldwork that covers more of today's Chinese religious traditions, are needed to extend the discussions begun in this volume. Alexander Stewart's and Huang Weishan's chapters provide strong examples of research on lived religion, covering some of the diversity of Hui cultural and religious identity expressions in Xining and the complex negotiation of narratives within and about contemporary Chinese Buddhist communities, respectively.

The volume may have benefited from the inclusion of a broader range of Chinese religions, including at least the two other official religions, Catholicism and Taoism, which are not represented. Of course, scholars need not necessarily follow the Chinese government's designation of official religions, and this compilation also represents its own narrative, pointing to a far more complex reality of religions in Chinese contexts, whose orientations are far from monolithic and led by interests that may clash with the agendas of the state, which has its own rhetoric on the desired direction for Chinese religions.

Madsen's dichotomy of Sinicization "from above and below" is helpful and restates a general distinction between two discourses. Historian Ying Fuk-tsang distinguishes between historical movements within Chinese Christianity, for example, and the contemporary rhetoric of *Zhongguohua*. The former designates missionary indigenization efforts, as well as the Republican-era indigenization movement (本色化運動) initiated by Chinese theologians and church leadership as distinct from and in protest against conservative missionary Christianity; the latter, for Ying, is the government-led policy of Sinicization (中國化). Even a century ago, missionaries had their own terminology to describe the process of the Chinese church becoming Chinese-led. These terms ranged from the "three-self principle" to "naturalization," the "Nevius Plan," etc., while the contemporary Sinicization discourse involves the terminology of Chinese style (中國式) and with Chinese characteristics (中國特色) and with reference to the orientation it seeks to promote in the development of Chinese religions: one that is commensurate with Chinese-style modernization and socialist values.[6] Zhao Zichen spoke of a "national church," although he understood this in universal terms: each national church had its own historical message to speak to a particular national situation[7]: this is the important difference between the Chinese Communist Party's nationalist rhetoric and the narratives of religious groups whose identity connects not only with

> **The work is a must-read for anyone concerned with the direction of Chinese religions and China's religious policy.**

Chinese culture, but with the international and cross-cultural elements of their faiths as well. This tension rings through the different case studies that make up this edited volume.

Some chapters in the book would have benefited from being updated for publication, especially Chapter 6 on new religious movements and portions of the book based on field research (which at the time would have been difficult to conduct). As the book was published in the midst of a global pandemic that brought new waves of restrictions to Chinese religious congregations across the country, it would be highly beneficial to have this book updated with additional information on the post-COVID state of Chinese religious life. There is depth and theoretical sophistication to the arguments that are presented in this volume, some of which, however, might have been more convincingly related to the contemporary Sinicization (*Zhongguohua*) of religions (Chapter 2 hardly mentions the term), since this is the terminological set-up a reader coming to the volume will expect. Despite these shortcomings, the work is a must-read for anyone concerned with the direction of Chinese religions and China's religious policy. It hones in on the difficulty of squaring official rhetoric with lived religious experience when narrating the story of contemporary religious life in China.

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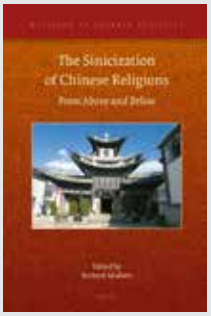

The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below

Edited by Richard Madsen

[Religion in Chinese Societies, Volume:18]. Leiden: Brill, 2021, 192 pages.
ISBN-10: 9004465170
ISBN-13: 978-9004465176

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[1] Richard Madsen, "Introduction," in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions From Above and Below* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–15, 14.
[2] Cf. Yang Fenggang 楊鳳崗, "Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond," in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, ed. Richard Madsen (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 32.
[3] Cf. Huang Weishan 黃維珊, "The Sinicization of Buddhism and Its Competing Reinventions of Tradition," in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions from Above and Below*, ed. Richard Madsen (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 64-85.
[4] Cf. Dong Wang, "Already Post-Modern Buddhist Stone Images in Luoyang and the Question of Sinicization," in *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions From Above and Below*, ed. Richard Madsen (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 86-129.
[5] Huang, "The Sinicization of Buddhism," 75.
[6] 〈中共中央關於進一步全面深化改革 推進中國式現代化的決定〉[Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Deepening Reform Comprehensively to Advance Chinese Modernization], 中華人民共和國中央人民政府 [the State Council of the People's Republic of China], July 21, 2024, accessed February 21, 2025, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202407/content_6963770.htm; "Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China," the State Council of the People's Republic of China, October 25, 2022, accessed February 21, 2025, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/topnews/202210/25/content_WS6357df20c6d0a757729e1bfc.html.
[7] Cf. Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao) 趙紫宸, "The Relation of the Chinese Church to the Church Universal," *Chinese Recorder*, vol. 54, June 1923, 350-353, reprinted in *The Collected English Writing of Tsu Chen Chao* (Works of T. C. Chao, Vol. 5), ed. Wang Xiaochao (Beijing: China Religious Culture Publisher, 2009), 121-124.

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Resource Corner

Key Scholarly Works on the Sinicization of Christianity in China

GUEST EDITORS AND OLIVIA LAW

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CHRISTIANITY AS A CHINESE RELIGION: A THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

Written by Alexander Chow

Ching Feng, n.s., 17, no. 1–2 (2018): 27–41.

This article examines the theological evolution of Chinese Christianity and highlights its alignment with a core principle of Chinese spirituality—the unity of Heaven and humanity. The author argues that Chinese Christianity should be recognized as an authentic expression of Chinese religious identity.

MAKING CHRISTIANITY CHINESE: SINICIZATION OUTSIDE STATE NARRATIVES

Written by Christine Lee and Jianbo Huang

China Perspectives (2023): 3–8. Accessed February 22, 2025.

This editorial discusses the complex ongoing process of "Sinicization" in contemporary China, arguing that Christianity has always been adapting to and mirroring Chinese culture; its growing popularity is due to the efforts of local Chinese rather than foreign associations, suggesting that Christianity has always been a Chinese religion.

↘ https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.15300

EPILOGUE. MULTIPLE SINICIZATIONS OF MULTIPLE CHRISTIANITIES

Written by Richard Madsen

In Sinicizing Christianity, edited by Zheng Yangwen, 319–326. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

Madsen's epilogue to this volume restates the importance of understanding Christianity's variability and adaptability rather than viewing it as static and monolithic.

INTRODUCTION. THE SINICIZATION OF CHINESE RELIGIONS: FROM ABOVE AND BELOW

Written by Richard Madsen

Edited by Richard Madsen, 1-15. Leiden: Brill, 2021.

By incorporating various scholars' studies on the major religions and their responses to Sinicization in China, Madsen in this introduction highlights the differences in the approaches to Sinicization from above and below and suggests that the impact of Sinicization from below may be more profound.

OFFICIAL PROTESTANT GROUPS PLAN NEXT FIVE YEARS OF SINICIZATION: WHAT DOES THE TSPM/CCC 5-YEAR PLAN TELL US ABOUT THE DIRECTION OF OFFICIAL PROTESTANTISM?

Written by Carsten Vala

ChinaSource *Blog, April 3, 2024. Accessed February 15, 2025.*

Vala compares the TSPM/CCC's new five-year plan with the previous plan, tracing a stronger emphasis on patriotism and politics on the part of the official Protestant Church.

↘ https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/official-protestant-groups-plan-next-five-years-of-sinicization/

SINICIZING RELIGIONS, SINICIZING RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Written by Benoît Vermander

Religions *10, no. 2 (2019): 137. Accessed March 12, 2025.*

Vermander analyzes the relationship between Sinicization and academic autonomy. He posits that scholars aim for a balance between these two aspects by shifting their research to the past. However, this shift might inadvertently diminish the "Chineseness" of the Sinicization of religion.

↘ https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020137

CHAPTER 1: SINICIZATION OR CHINAFICATION? CULTURAL ASSIMILATION VS. POLITICAL DOMESTICATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA AND BEYOND

Written by Fenggang Yang 楊鳳崗

In The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below, *edited by Richard Madsen, 16–43. Leiden: Brill, 2021.*

In this chapter, Yang Fenggang aims to clarify the origin of the word *Zhongguohua* and traces its political implications in recent Christian studies. For this reason, Yang advocates for the adoption of "Chinafication" over "Sinicization" to differentiate the political and cultural connotations of these two words.

XI JINPING IS NOT TRYING TO MAKE CHRISTIANITY MORE CHINESE

Written by Fenggang Yang 楊鳳崗

Christianity Today, *January 16, 2024. Accessed January 28, 2025.*

In this article, Yang Fenggang reiterates his proposal of differentiating Sinicization from Chinafication. The author concludes that despite the challenging circumstances, Christianity will continue to survive due to the perseverance of its believers and the extensive Sinicization it has already undergone.

↘ https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/01/china-christianity-xi-religion-policy-sinicization/

SINICIZING CHRISTIANITY: INTRODUCTION

Written by Yangwen Zheng

Edited by Zheng Yangwen, 1–30. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

Zheng Yangwen's introduction to the book suggests that the spread of Christianity and its Sinicization process were largely influenced by historical circumstances and the pragmatic use of Christianity, revealing the multifaceted nature of this religion's Sinicization.

Olivia Law *羅雋慧 is a graduate student and research assistant in the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. In addition to this work, Olivia Law is also working on a project related to female missionary activities of the Stewards in colonial Hong Kong.*

Image: Tom Ru | Unplash

What's in a Name?

BY BRENT FULTON

It is an honor to have Naomi Thurston and Jordan Wang as guest editors for this issue of *ChinaSource Journal*, along with contributions from He Guanghu, Chin Ken Pa, Ying Fuk-tsang, Richard Madsen, and Eva-Maria Hanke-Estevez. Together they offer a nuanced view of a concept that has received considerable coverage in recent years yet remains difficult to define.

As the theme of this issue suggests, and as our contributors explore from various perspectives, defining the term in question goes to the heart of understanding China's current policy and its effect upon religious believers.

Is it Sinicization, Chinafication, or *Zhongguohua*?

The question calls to mind the Confucian concept of Rectification of Names, with its reminder to use precise language in defining one's terms.

On its face, *Sinicization*, the common English translation of *Zhongguohua*, seems to emphasize the process by which a religion or school of thought from outside China not only becomes accepted within the culture, but also makes itself at home, contributing to and becoming part of the culture. Yet, as Ying Fuk-tsang points out, Sinicization is not synonymous with indigenization or localization. The former, as practiced in China today, is a top-down effort to remake religion; the latter two are organic, bottom-up expressions of religion within a host culture. He Guanghu makes

the point that "nationalization" or "ethnicization" of religion is a means, not an end, which enables a religion to thrive and develop more effectively. Providing examples from the seventh century, He shows that Sinicization of Christianity has in fact been occurring for as long as Christianity has been in China. In the current case, however, the end goal is not the flourishing of religion within the Chinese context or the ability for a religion to be propagated in culturally appropriate ways, but rather religion's identification with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its propagation of socialist values.

> **"Sinicization is not synonymous with indigenization or localization. The former, as practiced in China today, is a top-down effort to remake religion; the latter two are organic, bottom-up expressions of religion within a host culture."**

Chinafication puts the party-state front and center, thus providing a more accurate rendering of the concept as it is currently used in China. Having clawed back much of the authority ceded to Chinese state organs during the reform and opening-up period, President Xi has sought to erase any distinction between the state and its ruling party. To "Chinafy" religion is to bring it firmly under the control of the Communist Party of China (CPC) so it can serve the party's priorities of national unity and national security. Rooted in China's long history of state domination of religion, this approach speaks to the role of religion within China's political culture. One may argue that, for religion to be culturally Chinese, it must find its appropriate place within the state-society hierarchy.

Tracing the history of *Zhongguohua*, the original term in Chinese, Eva-Maria Hanke-Estevez notes the complicated relationship and ongoing dialogue between the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the CPC, as well as the role of scholars who have sought to use *Zhongguohua* as a way to make sense of Christianity's place in Chinese cultural discourse.

The term *Zhongguohua* also speaks to the geography of the Middle Kingdom in relation to the rest of the world. Chin Ken Pa notes the dual strategy of preventing infiltration and using religion for diplomatic purposes. Bringing religious doctrine into conformity with socialist ideology diminishes religion's ideological threat, while mobilizing believers to "go global" enhances China's image among religious communities overseas. Most of China's Christians would likely agree with He Guanghu's observation on the benefit of "going out and inviting in"—fostering broader and deeper exchanges with their brothers and sisters around the world. Yet, as Richard Madsen notes, the United Front structures put in place to manage such interactions limit the honest exchange of ideas and the formation of deep relationships.

> **"The term *Zhongguohua* also speaks to the geography of the Middle Kingdom in relation to the rest of the world."**

In their editorial, Naomi Thurston and Jordan Wang ask, "Whose *Zhongguohua* Is It Anyway?" The articles in this issue highlight the many and diverse voices in China that have tried to define the concept. At the end of the day, however, it is the CPC that drives the current Sinicization campaign. Leaders in China's official church circles are left to attend more study sessions on following the rules, endure awkward interactions with foreign contacts, and try to strike a balance between honoring the Party and serving the needs of the believers. Both inside and outside the official sphere, meanwhile, China's Christians pursue the real work of Sinicization in their own unique ways as the gospel continues to take root and flourish in today's China.

Here at ChinaSource we are undergoing our own rectification of names as we restore the original title of the *ChinaSource Journal*. In "Flipping the Pages," Content Manager Andrea Lee relates some of the backstory around this renaming (un-renaming?). We trust you will enjoy this issue, and we look forward to having you join the conversation.

Dr. Brent Fulton *傅邦寧 is the founder and catalyst of ChinaSource.*

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