The CCP ‘Saturates’ Religion with Socialist Values

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Executive Summary: The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is pushing to “saturate” (□□) religion with Chinese culture and socialist values. Party organs have used this tactic for more than a decade to wear down the organizational and spiritual independence of religious groups, and it is one of four mechanisms in a framework Party-state scholars use to describe the sinicization of religion.

- “Saturation” creates new Party-aligned norms that must be followed to avoid persecution. It demands surveillance, both through grassroots inspections and through technical means to ensure compliance.
- Local governments have run sinicization campaigns for years following Party guidance alone in the absence of a national statute on religion. However, the *Promotion of Ethnic Unity and Progress Law* contains some provisions relevant to religion and will lead to renewed efforts.

At the opening ceremony of the 2026 Shanghai Religious Community Chinese Culture Week, Shen Bin (□□), the bishop of the Catholic Church of Shanghai, introduced the “Initiative on Chinese Culture Saturating Religion” (The Paper, July 17). The term “saturate” (□□) refers to the integration of Chinese culture—and socialism with Chinese characteristics—into religion, acting as one mechanism for the sinicization of religion. In 2023, Zheng Xiaoyun (□□□), director of the department of world religion research at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, characterized the management of religion as consisting of “□” (guidance), “□” (harmonization), “□” (saturation), and “□” (transformation) (Zheng, 2023). **[1]**

Each tactic provides a framework for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to sinicize religion through its United Front Work Department (UFWD) and local ethnic and religious affairs (ERA) offices. In many Party-state directives and reports, multiple tactics are cited as the ends or means of the Party’s religious work, and Zheng’s heuristic is useful in showing that sinicization is multi-faceted. “Saturation” is particularly illustrative of the CCP’s mandatory integration between socialism and religion, such that the independence of religious groups is both organizationally and spiritually eroded.

The Party-state’s religious affairs work has explicitly followed the path of sinicization since the United Front Work Conference in 2015, when General Secretary Xi Jinping said that religion “must adhere” to this direction (□□□□□□□□□) (People’s Daily, May 21, 2025). The recently enacted *Promotion of Ethnic Unity and Progress Law* then standardized the sporadic approaches to sinicization across the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which will likely lead to renewed efforts (China Brief, March 27, April 2).

The ethnic unity law expands on existing procedure in ways that touch religion, especially regarding mandates on Party alignment in the home and in schools; but provincial, county, and municipal governments do not need a national law to target religion. Party guidance previously sufficed to

carry out sinicization efforts in the absence of a wide-ranging national statute, and Party organs have been promoting sinicization through "saturation" for over a decade, with local governments executing their guidance.

Local Documents Show 'Saturation' Efforts

"Saturation" is an attempt to reshape religion and integrate socialism with Chinese characteristics into personal identity. Book donations fill religious libraries with socialist and Party-aligned literature, such as *Xi Jinping's Talks on Governance and Regulations on Religious Affairs*. ERA committees also install flagpoles and put up propaganda posters. Shenyang City boasted donations of more than 2,000 books and more than 500 national flags in the years leading up to 2020 (Liaoning ERA Committee, December 18, 2020).

Party-guided education in history also plays a role in reshaping identity. In the northeast region, studying the Korean War is cited as helping to "cultivate the patriotism of the religious community, sharpen the ambition of strengthening the country, and practice service to the country" (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (Liaoning ERA Committee, December 18, 2020). In Hubei province, the ERA committee celebrated the "Hubei Religious Community 'Red Education' Base," a historical showcase that celebrates the CCP and its sinicization efforts (Hubei ERA Committee, April 24, 2022). The PRC's *Patriotic Education Law* calls for developing and visiting these sites (China Brief, December 15, 2023).

What the CCP calls "excellent traditional Chinese culture" (□□□□□□□□) provides yet another vector for influencing religious identity. In Hubei and elsewhere, religious sites will hold traditional festival celebrations and recitations of the Chinese classics (Hubei ERA Committee, April 24, 2022). Along with legal measures, using traditional culture for religious sinicization establishes that "the nation is greater than religion" (□□□□) (UFWD, May 19). Xu Xiaohong (□□□), chairman of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, a state-sanctioned body that oversees Protestant churches in the PRC, put this in a zero-sum context, saying that sinicization is a modern effort to prevent a reality where "one more Christian is one fewer Chinese" (□□□□□□□□□□□□) (Xinhua, March 11, 2019). This indicates that the fusion of religion and secular culture is an attempt to maintain a solely "Chinese" identity.

"Saturation" of religion also calls for the Party to influence theology itself. This can occur indirectly from book donations and ideological education, but is achieved more directly by encouraging religious leaders to align their messaging with the CCP. In Zhengzhou, the Protestant *liang hui* (□□) held a competition soliciting sinicized sermon manuscripts, and reportedly received 461 submissions (Zhengzhou ERA Bureau, July 9, 2024). **[2]** Sinicized sermons have covered themes such as "taking dedication to work as a sacrifice" (□□□□□) and "being a patriotic Muslim" (□□□□□□□□□□□□) (China Islamic Steering Committee, 2021; The Protestant Church in China, July 1). **[3]** For these religious leaders, contests provided an incentive for alignment, but they also serve the CCP's goal of bringing ideology into churches. The Party-state's tactics of identifying, cultivating, and co-opting willing religious leaders to advance its "saturation" of religion mirrors its work in overseas united front operations (China Brief, February 11).

'Saturation' Demands Grassroots and Technical Surveillance

Governing religion through "saturation" creates ideological norms that must then be upheld by religious followers. In Pengxi county, located in Sichuan province, cadre inspections include "heart-to-heart talks" (□□□□) and soliciting opinions before meetings. This is an attempt to increase "ideological contact" (□□□□), and forces Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists to embrace ideology or be marked as anti-CCP elements (Pengxi County UFWD, July 28, 2023). Sending cadres into

religious sites serves as a tool for monitoring religion and identifying the people, ideas, and value systems that threaten the Party’s interests. The experience of Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where indicators of religious extremism came to be defined so expansively as to include growing a beard or maintaining foreign contacts, shows how Party narratives shape what is tolerated and what is seen as religious fanaticism (United Nations, August 31, 2022).

The Party-state uses grassroots means to identify areas of interest and concentrate its monitoring efforts. In Jincheng, Shanxi province, the municipal united front work report discussed “targeted surveys and assessments covering villages with concentrated religious populations” and “foreign religious influences,” seeking to “fortify defenses against religious infiltration and expansion in key sectors and regarding specific religious groups” by “firmly grasping the city’s religious data” (□□) (Taixing Daily, February 28, 2022). In a sub-district of Wuxi City, “grid staff” (□□□) must conduct inspections of religious sites daily and maintain a registration ledger of religious leaders (Wuxi ERA Bureau, January 21). A local government in Anhui province also made reference to inspections by “grid staff” and “work ledgers,” where this refers to a report on investigative findings (Suncun Township Government, June 3, 2020).

The same inspection and monitoring tactics are used to identify “underground” religious sites. In advance of the 100th anniversary of the CCP’s founding in 2021, a local government in Huoqiu county, Anhui province, distributed an internal directive to villages and local bureaus. Party branches were ordered to inspect village units, shops, supermarkets, and hotels to identify unauthorized gathering points, including home-based gatherings (Wulong Town Party Committee and Government Office, 2021). The document names “core members” (□□□□) of “underground” churches that had previously been broken up, both as subjects for long-term monitoring and nodes within continuous investigations to ensure that their organizations do not return. At least during this “Large-Scale Inspection and Rectification Campaign” (□□□□□□□□), village Party officials were to “provide renewed education and guidance” (□□□□□□□□) for these “core members.”

Religion-specific indicators are used to determine threats, reinforcing the Party’s desire to “saturate” and co-opt religious groups. According to a work plan released by Shiti town, located in Dazhou, Sichuan province, the threats emerging from different religions vary, but all must be “checked and changed” (□□□□□) (Dazhou District People’s Government, September 22, 2018). Buddhists and Taoists are identified as constructing unauthorized temples and statues; the supposed threats in Christianity come from private gatherings, self-appointed preachers, and foreign influence; and for Islam, the Party is concerned by the appointment of imams from the northwest, foreign missions, and illegal classes (Dazhou District People’s Government, September 22, 2018). These issues are seen as threats because they reflect religion taking on a form that the Party feels is beyond its control. “Saturation” is a way to re-center ideology and Chinese identity.

The Party-state turns to technical surveillance to reinforce cadre inspections. In 2022, Zhejiang province’s “religious intelligent patrol” (□□□□) used real-time monitoring and early warning to identify three instances of illegal missionary activities, 11 illegal Buddhist events, three illegal renovations, and 49 cases of minors entering religious places (Daishan County Government Office, August 23, 2022). A document from Nantong, a city in Jiangsu province, shows that video surveillance is ubiquitous, with 534 surveillance cameras outfitted to the city’s 178 religious sites. All video is fed to the county’s “governance command center” (□□□□□□) that has supposedly “achieved full coverage of site monitoring and no blind spots” (□□□□□□□□□□□□) (ERA Commission of Jiangsu Province, April 25, 2025). Local Public Security Bureaus in Zhejiang also used the social media app Douyin to identify illegal Christian private gatherings (Daishan County Government Office, August 23, 2022).

Local governments rely on technical platforms built by the private sector. Baotou Pasis Network Technology (□□□□□□□□), for instance, offers a “smart religion management system” (□□□□□□□□) that integrates and analyzes data such as personnel, activities, and finances, in part with assistance from artificial intelligence (Pasis, accessed October 4). **[4]** There are also mobile applications intended to facilitate ERA work, as have emerged across departments in the PRC in recent years (China Brief, April 28). One, which is offered on Apple’s App Store, is meant to support inspections and assessments (Apple App Store, accessed October 4). Other companies offer similar products. In 2024, Jiangsu Cable Data Network (□□□□□□□□) won a bid to provide a digitalized platform for the Jiangsu government, writing in the press release that the project would “actively publicize relevant policies, regulations, and socialist core values through audio and video systems and terminals, and promote the implementation of religious sinicization” (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) (Jiangsu Cable Data Network, April 24, 2024).

Figure 1: AI-enabled video monitoring service advertised by Pasis

(Source: Pasis, accessed October 4)

Conclusion

The CCP describes the threat it faces from unmitigated religious practice, in part, as foreign “infiltration” (□□), with sinicization as the response. It is difficult to understand sending cadres into religious sites, shaping sermon rhetoric, cultivating ideology, and other aspects of religious “saturation” as anything other than the “infiltration” of religion by the Party itself. By acting against religious groups in much the same way that it describes the threat, the Party expresses its view that religion offers rival value systems and organizations that cannot remain independent. Zero-sum framing, such as Xu Xiaohong’s statement that without sinicization “one more Christian is one fewer Chinese,” only underscores this perspective.

Notes

[1] Zheng Xiaoyun [□□□], “‘Guide,’ ‘Harmonize,’ ‘Saturate,’ ‘Transform’: Several Theoretical Reflections on Deepening the Sinicization of Religion in China [‘□’ ‘□’ ‘□’ ‘□’——□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□],” *Studies in World Religions* [□□□□□□□], no. 7 (2023): 1–10.

[2] The term *liang hui* (□□) refers to the two organizations that manage Protestant churches in the PRC, the Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□) and the Chinese Christian Council (□□□□□□□).

[3] China Islamic Affairs Steering Committee [□□□□□□□□□□□□], ed., *New Collection of Wa’z Sermons, Vol. 7* [□□□□□□□□□□□□□] (Beijing: Commercial Press [□□□□□], 2021), https://archive.ph/DJnEL.

[4] The company also offers similar services for an “ideological management system” (Pasis, accessed October 4).

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