

World Watch Research

China:

Background Information

September 2024



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



China: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
1,425,179,000	96,700,000	OD estimate

Recent history

Xi Jinping assumed office as President in March 2013, although arguably his most powerful position is that of Secretary-General of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a position he has held since November 2012. He extended his presidency to a third term at the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, which was [confirmed](#) by the country's parliament on 10 March 2023 (BBC News, 10 March 2023). While his first term in office saw a strong reduction in freedom in all sectors of society, his power became most visible in the abolition of the term-limit for serving as president in March 2018 which gives him a position of authority observers call the strongest since Mao Zedong. The new Politburo Standing Committee consists of close followers of Xi Jinping. At the same time, he faces major challenges, which became more apparent during his second term in office. First and foremost, the main task domestically is to keep economic growth on track, albeit at a lower level than in previous years. The COVID-19 pandemic and China's domestic zero COVID policy has put the country to the test

and even saw very rare public protests in Shanghai and elsewhere (Reuters, 7 December 2022). In December 2022, the strict COVID measures were lifted, but the fact that China did not publish its quarterly cremation numbers of the last quarter of 2022 (SCMP, 15 June 2023) shows how sensitive and challenging the topic is for the leadership. However, there are a number of other issues which are also requiring attention:

- **The US-Chinese "decoupling" process:** This has continued with the Biden-administration in Washington. The problems here seem to be largely bi-partisan. The fact that the European Union announced a policy of "de-risking" (as opposed to "decoupling") illustrates that the challenges go beyond the USA (Reuters, 30 June 2023). President Xi and President Biden had a much awaited meeting at the APEC summit in San Francisco in November 2023 (AP News, 16 November 2023) and President Xi made a trip to Europe in May 2024 (New York Times, 5 May 2024). These visits testify to the efforts China is making to improve relations, with economic concerns firmly at the center.
- **The Belt and Road Initiative:** Some of the challenges are related to identifying good projects and implementing them by working together with the recipient countries (AidData, 14 October 2022). However, the more China steps in as an international lender of last resort, the more it will need to engage in debt restructuring negotiations far beyond the Belt and Road (World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper, March 2023). Due to security challenges in countries like Pakistan and Myanmar, as well as the embarrassing public withdrawal of Italy from the BRI (having joined the initiative with much fanfare five years earlier - Financial Times, 5 December 2023), the BRI seems to have lost its strong appeal and seems to be shifting in priorities in Beijing as well.
- **The Russian/Ukraine war:** China is walking a tightrope, trying to uphold the principle of non-interference and state sovereignty, while supporting Russia without being seen as an official ally. What one commentator said in 2022 is still true, China is not particularly worried about what happens to Ukraine: 'For China, if Russia wins, that's great because China gains a stronger ally. If Russia loses, that is also great because China gains a vassal state, which is the second-largest nuclear power in the world. So I think people in the West, in Washington especially, want to see how China is going to lose in this. But in the Chinese framing, it's about how China is winning in this' (Grid News, 15 September 2022). At the same time, the events in Russia and the Ukraine are watched closely, even more so after the now deceased Wagner group leader, Prigozhin, staged his (ultimately aborted) march to Moscow in June 2023 (Reuters, 24 June 2023). It remains to be seen what the consequences may be of the growing number of reports about China undermining international embargoes to aid the Russian war effort.
- **Foreign policy:** For instance, issues concerning the South China Sea, Taiwan, the Middle East, India and North Korea.
- **Population statistics:** China has to prepare for both a falling population level and an ageing population, as the official population statistics continue to drop at a slowly accelerating pace (see below: *Political and legal landscape*).

The Church in China is increasingly being affected by the state's much more unified approach of actively interfering with and dominating church affairs (instead of simply acting as a background administrator, as previously). This is happening regardless of whether the churches involved are state-approved or non-registered. Restrictions still come in indirect ways, such as the demand to include Communist

ideology and rhetoric in teaching and sermons, but the focus is now clearly on limiting the space in which churches can operate: They are under pressure to adapt their ministry, are more closely watched and some are being simply closed down. Online space has also been restricted by new regulations coming into force in March 2022. Christian ministers have to register at an online platform and in the province of Zhejiang, a pilot project started in which all religious venues are required to show the Communist hammer and sickle at their entrances (on this and Sinicization developments see below: *Religious landscape*). Since the Christian community is arguably one of the largest organized social forces not controlled by the Communist authorities, it is natural that Christians are generally regarded with suspicion by them, especially since religion in general is seen as something which should be overcome by Communism. The steady stream of ever more tightening regulations on religion which began on 1 February 2018 seems to have somewhat consolidated in the WWL 2024 reporting period, but continues to have significant consequences. These regulations provide the authorities with the legal provisions for strict guidance and intervention.

Political and legal landscape

The Communist Party (CCP) has tightened its grip on society (including all religious activities) and increasingly uses Maoist rhetoric and ideology in order to keep citizens in line. One of the biggest challenges China faces is its need for structural reforms: Both the demographic path the country is on and the increasing inequality (despite claims of poverty eradication) demand new answers (see below: Economic landscape and Social and cultural landscape). The economy was already slowing down before the arrival of COVID-19, but the strict domestic zero COVID policy and the continued US-Chinese decoupling process have made things worse. The CCP has its hands full trying to fulfill the tacitly agreed social contract of trading a lack of freedom for growing prosperity and prefers to blame the USA or the broader "West" for economic difficulties and other problems, thus distracting from Party policies which are simply not delivering anymore.

It is important to keep in mind that the main CCP goal is not to bring happiness to the Chinese people or bring them prosperity, but first and foremost to stay in power. For this goal, Xi Jinping is willing to [axe](#) his Minister of Foreign Affairs as well as the Minister of Defense, even though both had been hand-picked by him only roughly a year ago (CNN, 24 October 2023) and both had less say in their respective areas than their CCP Central Committee counterparts.

For the goal of staying in power, the CCP is also willing to reverse seemingly unchallengeable policies like zero COVID almost overnight, even at the risk of citizens learning that people's actions like the "[A4 protests](#)" in November 2022 can succeed in changing political considerations (PRC Leadership Watch, 1 March 2023). Consequently, the Polit Bureau Standing Committee announced that its dynamic COVID-19 policy represents a "[miracle](#) in the history of human civilization" (Neican, 17 February 2023). This declaration illustrates once more that Communist Party propaganda continues to trump absolutely everything. The policy of severe lockdown-measures, suspended overnight in December 2022, did not prevent a wave of infections among the population. It is unclear whether it is justified to speak of a '[catastrophe](#)' hitting China, as some observers have done (Foreign Affairs, 16 February 2023), since statistics coming from China are often either non-existent or seriously flawed, but all estimates agree that at least one to 1.5 million people died from COVID-related causes. In addition, the Foreign Affairs article reported that, according to data from the National Health Commission, deaths caused by cerebrovascular and cardiovascular diseases in urban areas suddenly increased in

2020–2021 by 700,000 in comparison to 2019 levels. Although the cause is uncertain, that is a soberingly large number, even taking into account the sheer size of China’s population. Even if numbers can always be debated and doubted, it seems safe to say that citizens of China did not feel that they were experiencing a miracle in the WWL 2024 reporting period. As stated above (in: Recent history), the cremation numbers for the fourth quarter of 2022 have not been published. However, in what looks like a slip which was quickly rectified, official [cremation numbers](#) for the 1st quarter of 2023 in the province of Zhejiang were online for a short period of time (Reuters, 18 July 2023). According to those numbers, cremations increased by 70%, compared to the 1st quarter of 2022. If extrapolated, experts say that the estimated 1.5 million excess deaths due to COVID-19 and the sudden change in the Zero-COVID-policy are backed up by these numbers. It should also be kept in mind that Zhejiang is a wealthy province with a comparably well-developed health system.

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

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

The newly released update of the ‘Working Procedures for the State Council’ shows where all Chinese Communist ideology is heading: With [references](#) to Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and the ideologies of former presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao deleted, ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ has become the single measuring rod for all government policies (Radio Free Asia, 29 March 2023). Although universities have dedicated whole academic centers for studying ‘Xi Jinping Thought’, and the first center abroad has been opened in [Moscow](#) (SCMP, 2 July 2023), the basics are not that complicated: Having predominantly Communist Party members and civil servants in mind, it boils down to the understanding that whoever does not toe the Party line closely, is in high danger of being replaced. And whichever groups do not embrace Communist ideology (e.g., most churches), they risk getting into serious trouble at various levels; at the very least they will be given a strict reminder of Communist principles.

While President Xi has been described as the ‘core’ of the Party in countless articles, one challenge is to embed Xi Jinping’s thinking into the hearts and minds of all citizens and this is where much effort is being made, for instance, through media and censorship (see below: Technological landscape). At least 37 universities have set up a [course](#) on “Introduction to Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese characteristics for a New Era” (China Scope, 6 October 2020). Academia is not just following President Xi but is also becoming increasingly [nationalistic](#) (China Digital Times, 15 December 2020) and the room for debate is [shrinking](#) (Merics, 2 July 2021). (Liberal) [dissenters](#) still exist, but they must be very careful how they express their opinions (CSIS, 10 February 2022).

At universities, guidelines and communiqués issued by the Communist Party have constantly limited the space for independent research and academic discussion. According to a recently published study,

[student informers](#) in the class rooms have an especially chilling effect on professors (China File, 13 March 2023). Other professors said that they do not mind that classes are recorded and have adapted their teaching accordingly. As one professor said: “I think Hu Shi [a diplomat and scholar of Republican-era China] once said, when a country talks about morality every day, this country is particularly immoral. I really feel the degeneration of this country now—this country is hopeless. As so many people have profited from such a degraded environment, they are very supportive of such a system. A bad environment is where good people cannot do good things, so that you can only fall.”

The CCP has also come a step closer to taking direct [control of universities](#) (Radio Free Asia, 18 January 2024). The new regulations are forcing the merger of the university presidents’ offices with the Party Committee, thus creating a unified leadership. While the latter already had a say in the universities’ day to day management, and all universities are bound by the Communist Party’s laws and ideology anyway, this merger may turn out to be more than just symbolic: It could further curtail any freedoms universities have still been able to enjoy, including academic freedom.

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

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

average Chinese man and woman will not find this focus to be enough and will continue to look for spirituality elsewhere.

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

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

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

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

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

Digital Times, 2 July 2021). Maybe less vivid than the ‘wall of steel’ picture, is another phrase Xi Jinping has frequently used in other speeches: "[Time and momentum are on our side](#)" (Merics, 9 July 2021). This slogan claims that the West is in irreversible decline, making way for China’s equally unstoppable rise to glory.

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

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

Another area where Xi Jinping displayed his self-confidence is in the new set up of Politburo and the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Once powerful [factions](#) like the Communist Youth League have been effectively sidelined and kept from positions of power (Reuters, 26 October 2022). While a generational change among CCP leaders is underway, the common denominators for almost all leaders promoted at national and provincial levels are either a [relationship](#) with Xi Jinping or a technocrat background, e.g. in China’s aviation and space industry - or both (Asia Society, 26 May 2023). This self-confidence suffered a dent, when two ministers were made to disappear, although they had been picked by Xi Jinping himself. This shows the downside of having so much power: It is very hard to deflect problems on to someone else.

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

'[Top Talent Pass Scheme](#)' was designed to draw skilled workers from all over the world, but has in fact drawn 95% mainland Chinese citizens (to the tune of 55,000) (New York Times, 20 March 2024). Reasons mentioned were higher payment and relatively greater freedom.

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

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

Consequently, Communist Party foreign policy has continued to be something of a challenge to the country's competitors' and neighbors: Apart from the already mentioned tense relationship with the USA, the EU also sharpened its stance (see above: Recent history). After meeting for consultations in mid-2022, the EU High Representative of Foreign Affairs was quoted as saying: "The dialogue was everything but a dialogue. In any case, it was a [dialogue of the deaf](#)" (CNN, 18 July 2022). NATO, too, declared China as a "[security challenge](#)" in its Strategic Concept, stating that Beijing's policies were challenging its "interests, security and values" (Al-Jazeera, 30 June 2022). This downward spiral in China's foreign policy has accelerated with the increasing bloc-building after the Ukraine war started. In the mean time, all parties have continued with the talks and it is no longer perceived as a 'dialogue of the deaf', since both sides acknowledge the importance of such discussions. Nevertheless, positions are entrenched and it is hard to see any progress.

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

- South China Sea: It was discovered that eleven years ago China had already [trademarked](#) hundreds of South China Sea landmarks with Chinese names (Benar News, 13 April 2021). China has continued to show a strong physical presence in contested areas (for instance, in disputes with the Philippines, but also with Japan) and has introduced a new [Coastguard law](#) which would make it easier to use violence against foreign vessels intruding on its claimed national sovereignty (Benar News, 22 January 2021). Encounters between Chinese forces and Philippines military ships were more frequent and became more dangerous, and there is a risk that the conflict could spill out of control in 2024. Although the militaristic approach and growing claims in the South China Sea have [not won](#) China any friends in the region, the country seems to be confident that its importance and size suffices in coercing other states into agreement (East Asia Forum, 15 March 2024).
- Tibet Autonomous Region: Another tightening of the screw could be seen in the Tibet Autonomous Region, where an "[Ethnic Unity Law](#)" has been implemented (RFA, 1 May 2020). Xi Jinping [visited](#) the province for the first time in his tenure in July 2021 to witness the progress these and other policies were making (AP News, 24 July 2021).

- The Uighur minority in Xinjiang: While the CCP continues to deny the scale of the crackdown against the Uighur minority in Xinjiang (despite all evidence to the contrary - see Jamestown's report on [coercive labor and forced displacement](#) published in March 2021, Human Rights Watch's article on [systematic suppression](#) published on 19 April 2021 and ASPI's report on how the repression is governed, published on 19 October 2021), a rare report has shown that even in Xinjiang [church buildings](#) have to be closed when they fail to follow the policy of Sinicization (China Aid, 23 February 2021). In the wake of the UNHCHR's visit to China and Xinjiang in May 2022 (see below: Trends analysis), another investigation called the "[Xinjiang Police Files](#)" was published, documenting the depth and breadth of the human rights violations against the Uighurs (Adrian Zenz, The Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies Volume 3, 2022, pp 1-56). President Xi Jinping visited Xinjiang for the first time in nine years and emphasized the importance of [economic development](#). The regional authorities are following a different policy now: Although there are far less labor camps, there is now a policy of coercive labor transfers to other provinces (Jamestown Foundation, 14 February 2024). The policy of "[Sinicizing](#)" [mosques](#) and other Islamic structures stretches beyond Xinjiang and extends to Hui Muslims living in Yunnan province and elsewhere (Deutsche Welle, 7 June 2023).
- Border issues with India: China and India made efforts to [disengage](#) and avoid further military conflicts along its highly disputed 3,500km border (in contrast to the year 2020 with the [stand-off](#) reported by The Diplomat on 15 May 2020). On 9 December 2022, another [clash](#) between Chinese and Indian forces along the Line of Actual Control took place, this time in the Tawang sector in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh (Jamestown, 19 January 2023). China and India have since pledged to maintain "[peace and tranquility](#)" at the border (AP News, 16 August 2023).
- Border issues with Bhutan: China has claimed a large piece of [Bhutanese state territory](#) as its own, amounting to around 11% of the whole of Bhutan (The Diplomat, 6 July 2020). Apart from the delicate implications for tiny neighbor Bhutan, the true addressee of this claim seems to be India. Since the claimed territory would be an enclave with no direct connection to the rest of China, it would make the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh the next candidate to be disputed. In the meantime, China has been building complete village infrastructures on [Bhutanese territory](#), thus tacitly claiming ownership of land for the Tibet Autonomous Region (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021). China and Bhutan announced the [resumption](#) of border talks (The Diplomat, 18 November 2021), but so far, no new developments have been reported. China allegedly [accelerated](#) the construction process along its border with Bhutan (Jamestown Foundation, 11 February 2022). Both countries agreed to [continue](#) with negotiations trying to resolve their border dispute (India Times, 14 January 2023). Despite all the talks, China's claims on Bhutanese territory have increased over the years and it has altered the [status quo](#) in the border region (Jamestown Foundation, 2 February 2024).
- The Pacific Islands: Apart from the very relevant geostrategic implications, which cannot be dealt with here, frictions in the region highlight how China is actively competing and winning more and more influence in this part of the world. China and the Solomon Islands concluded a number of diplomatic agreements, including an agreement on [police cooperation](#) (ABC News, 10 July 2023). China offered similar pacts to other countries in the region, too. The Solomon Islands said this should not be seen as a threat to the region. Although the country's strongman was ousted in elections in 2024, the [new Prime Minister](#) and former Foreign Secretary is seen as being friendly to China as well (Spectator Australia, 7 May 2024). Highlighting the pressure under which

especially leaders of small states can come, outgoing Micronesian President David Panuelo has [published a letter](#) written to the leaders of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) which gives a rare glimpse into China’s “political warfare and grey zone activity”, currently faced by small nations in particular (The Diplomat, 10 March 2023). It provides chilling details of how a Head of State has been openly followed, threatened and intimidated. In one incident described in the letter, the Chinese embassy in Palikir simply ignored the FSM government’s decision not to send a representative to a conference by making a private citizen of the country its fictitious representative. While [spying, offering bribes](#) and pressing the country into accepting support in the form of vaccines were the general tactics described (AP News, 13 March 2023), President Panuelo sums up what he calls a general theme as follows: ‘The FSM says ‘no’, and our sovereignty is disrespected, with the PRC saying we have achieved a consensus when we have not.’ This letter may be dismissed as an embittered farewell note from a disgruntled politician, voted out of office and now settling scores. Nevertheless, it gives a rare insight into the mindset with which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views foreign countries, especially smaller ones. At an ASEAN meeting in 2010, then Foreign Minister Yang Yiechi famously [quipped](#): ‘China is a big country and you are small countries and that is a fact’ (Financial Times, 13 July 2016).

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

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

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

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

capacity to deal with local incidents of domestic violence, drug use, cult activity, and any kind of “emergency situation”. (Page 46)

Although Christian churches are not generally categorized as ‘cult activity’, in a climate where pastors of unregistered churches are increasingly facing accusations of economic crimes, financial fraud or the catch-all crime of ‘picking quarrels and provoking trouble’ ([WWR, 13 March 2023](#)), it is easily imaginable how the subdistricts and neighborhood communities can feel empowered to deal with this problem as well, although the directive of collecting evidence for “fraud” and related crimes comes from the higher levels. However, with this empowerment come challenges as well. As of 2022, there were 8,980 subdistricts in China, with some ‘meta’-subdistricts overseeing a population of over 300,000 people. The authors take the well-known Haidian District in Beijing as an example: “To illustrate the sheer magnitude of the change, consider some numbers from Haidian District in Beijing: it contains some 3 million residents, spread across 29 subdistrict-level entities and nearly 700 neighborhoods. Each subdistrict had perhaps 100-150 staff members, and most neighborhood organizations employed 10-20 staff, depending on size. All 29 subdistricts had to be trained in administrative law enforcement, and the nearly 700 neighborhoods all had to transition from largely benign but also largely powerless public service suppliers to real governance units overseeing the movement, health, and safety of a few thousand people”. (Page 54)

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

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

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

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

Control is not working seamlessly and the human factor is not to be underestimated. China’s much discussed model of surveillance [is also not so easy to export](#) (Foreign Affairs, 6 January 2024). While the technical equipment exists and is being exported in growing quantity and quality, successful surveillance still needs a strong investment in terms of human manpower. Not many of the target

countries seem to be able or willing to make this investment. Social control will undoubtedly play an increasingly large role, for the sake of regime security. It is important to keep in mind that the UFWD also has many tasks in the domestic realm, not just abroad, and these are sometimes called the [lesser known activities](#) (China File, 28 September 2023). One observer quoted in the China File report explains: ‘There’s no clear distinction between domestic and overseas united front work. This is because the key distinction underlying the United Front is not between domestic and overseas groups, but between the CCP and everyone else’.

Gender perspective

In relation to gender, China’s laws are - on paper - relatively balanced. [The Marriage Law](#) mandates that both parties must be consenting in entering a marriage (Article 4) and forced marriages are prohibited in [Article 44](#) of China’s 1992 Revised Law on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women. Women have the same legal rights as men to be recognized as head of the household and both genders have equal rights in relation to divorce (Marriage Law, Article 31). China ratified the Convention on the Elimination of the Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1980 and in 2015 passed its first-ever national law to address domestic violence. Despite these positive legal provisions, gender inequalities persist, and the effective implementation of legal frameworks is lacking, partly inhibited by the longstanding influence of Confucian family principles. The government’s hesitation in protecting women’s rights, not found in its attitude towards critics, is believed to also play a significant role in the [trafficking of child brides](#) (Human Rights Watch, 7 June 2022). Furthermore, the domestic violence law does not cover all situations, such as divorced or separated couples, or instances of sexual or financial abuse ([Asia Foundation](#), April 2020). According to [media reports](#), cases of domestic violence surged amid the COVID-19 lockdowns – [tripling](#) in February 2020 alone – which critics say points to the ineffectiveness of the 2015 law (The Diplomat, 6 April 2020; Usta et al, August 2021).

Military service is [technically obligatory](#) for men, with a service obligation of two years (World Population Review, accessed 5 August 2024). Due to the size of the population, however, this is rarely enforced as there are usually enough volunteers. This is likely to remain the status quo, considering the current economic climate and the increasing number of jobseekers ([The New York Times, 19 May 2023](#)).

Religious landscape

China: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	96,700,000	6.8
Muslim	28,961,519	2.0
Hindu	20,278	0.0
Buddhist	229,755,067	16.1
Ethnic religionist	73,955,708	5.2
Jewish	3,057	0.0
Bahai	6,827	0.0
Atheist	96,850,206	6.8
Agnostic	459,977,847	32.3
Other	438,948,262	30.8
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024 (Adapted according to OD-estimate)

While all religions are considered ‘opium for the people’ according to Marxist-Leninist doctrine, religions which are seen as being more indigenous, such as Buddhism and Taoism, enjoy a certain level of (increasing) [state support](#), as a recent analysis explained (Council on Foreign Relations, 14 May 2024). Other religions, such as Islam or Christianity, are perceived as being foreign and therefore undesirable. According to its Constitution, China is atheist. But, as in all Communist countries, the government finds that citizens often tend to be religious and so it tries to use traditional religions and ethics as a means of controlling and steering society. Therefore, traditional Chinese culture in general (and Confucianism in particular) are praised as being truly Chinese, the message being: “If one needs to have a faith, it should be Confucian”, a move which brings around 40% of the population on the side of the government. And since Confucianism is more a philosophy than a religion, it is quite flexible and can accept all kinds of rulers, including Communist. Confucianism can thus “serve as an ethical resource for the state constitution, as well as a resource for [social governance](#)” (Journal of Law and Religion 35, No 1, Abstract, see also pp. 138-148). As one country observer said: The goal of the CCP is to co-opt religion into Communist society.

At the same time, the Chinese government is conducting a pilot project in selected regions, mobilizing citizens into reporting crimes (including illegal Christian activities) by giving them rewards. The strong warnings against religious groups are bearing fruit: Citizens organized in neighborhood committees are beginning to regard religious groups as 'troublemakers' and do not want them in their neighborhood. As always in China, this sentiment is not felt in the whole country. It may be more accurate to use the

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

The National Joint Conference of Religious Groups have issued [guidelines](#) on how to implement the Patriotic Education law in their context (Bitter Winter, 12 January 2024). There are no surprises as the guidelines are all based on 'Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era' as well as [Xi Jinping's speech](#) on religion in 2016. (China Source, 27 April 2016). The fact that the term "patriotism" is used 14 times in the brief guidelines shows where the emphasis is being laid. And, of course, Sinicization is mentioned too. In that respect, it should be emphasized that the CCP is not aiming for cultural assimilation, which would be natural for a non-indigenous religion, but for [political domestication](#) and – ultimately – control (Christianity Today, 19 January 2024). In an excellent analysis, Professor Carsten T. Vala showed how the 2023 Regulations for [Religious Activity Site Registration](#) work and how practical the limits on Christians are (China Source, 8 February 2024). It should also be noted that the trend to indict and sentence Christians for alleged [fraud](#) (and not because of their religion) is getting stronger (China Aid, 26 January 2024).

In an [assessment](#) of the Sinicization policy entitled 'Adaptation of Religion – A Tool for Control, Fostering or Something Else?', Professor Fredrik Fällman from Gothenburg University in Sweden highlighted the following, among other things (Religions and Christianity in Today's China, 2024 No.1, 29 January 2024):

- The promotion of 'socialist core values' (shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhi guan 社会主义核心价值观) is also a part of this same nationalist tendency that goes through all of the above. From such texts one can see a clear differentiation between what is 'best' or 'good' (youliang 优良) and 'excellent' (youxiu 优秀), and e.g. religion and ethnic minorities are always at the most 'good' or 'best' (youliang) traditions while anything Zhonghua 中华 or of the CPC is 'excellent' (youxiu). The 'socialist core values' are in many cases drawn from religious tradition, but are now requested to be 'core' also for religions in China, in their current 'adapted' form.'
- Party representatives for their part have been talking about 'reducing the burden of religious activity on believers' (jianqing xinzhong zongjiao huodong fudan 减轻信众宗教活动负担) (Zhu Weiqun 2015), which is actually a core statement in the whole 'adaptation' process. The party seems to aim for less 'religious' religions with greater social and moral responsibility, being 'useful' for social harmony and for contributing to the nationalist project of 'excellent traditional Zhonghua culture.

Sinicization is not just about an ideological adaptation of religion, but about 'a less religious religion', which fits very well with the old Marxist adage that religion is opium for the people and should be finally overcome, if possible.

Tibetan Buddhism and Islam (especially in the province of Xinjiang) face particularly harsh restrictions since their activities are widely seen as being political, since both regions have been the scene of (or are still seen as being at risk spawning) independence movements, some of them acting violently against the authorities. Many observers refer to Xinjiang as a police state: When the existence of re-education camps for hundreds of thousands of citizens could no longer be hidden, the authorities simply stated that these camps serve vocational and other training purposes and tried to win over international opinion by giving carefully guided tours. According to local sources, Christian converts have also been run through these programs. The small numbers of Christian converts within the minority religions struggle to survive as they are under pressure from both government and the surrounding culture, but even Han Chinese Christians are hindered from practicing their faith and keep their Christian meetings out of sight in these regions. Consequently, Xinjiang has been called a "[testing ground](#)" for the Communist Party's religious policies (Made in China Journal, 2 July 2021). There are other ethnic minority religions in existence, but they are not the focus of government repression.

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

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

Professor Carsten Vala of Loyola University Maryland compared the previous [five-year plan](#) (2018-2022) of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC) with the most recent one (2023-2027). In conclusion he states (China Source, 3 April 2024): "The most important conclusion is that the TSPM/CCC now lays far greater emphasis on political loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party and comparatively weaker emphasis on traditional Christian ideas." He also states: "Much of the concern overseas has been that the official church is rewriting the Bible or changing traditional theological concepts. In fact, in more than 20 years of studying the church in China, this is the closest that I've seen such efforts actually taking place."

The 2023-2027 plan states that Protestants should 'abandon content that cannot keep pace with the times in interpretation of the Bible and doctrine' and 'reform old ideas that are out of date and

inconsistent with biblical principles’. However, this should be done via a theology with ‘Chinese characteristics’. This is a well-used phrase by Xi Jinping and can be seen as a gateway for introducing Communist political values into theology. As Vala points out:

Does this mean throwing overboard traditional and orthodox theological concepts? And integrating traditional culture into theology? Yes to both! For example, the outline calls for efforts to ‘construct a theory of man with Chinese church characteristics’ that draws on traditional culture and biblical teaching to ‘correct the negative and one-sided human theory that overemphasizes original sin and total depravity.’ In its place, the call is to ‘build a Christian theory of man that combines the tradition of the ecumenical church and the excellent Chinese cultural tradition ... in line with the middle way’.

If consistently implemented, this may have several implications, according to Vala:

First, divisions within the official churches will sharpen, as Protestants more swayed by political pressures will strengthen in comparison to those holding to more traditional and theologically orthodox beliefs. In particular, the cleavages between higher levels of bureaucratic leadership, particularly between the national or provincial leaders and individual church pastors, will become a chasm.

Second, the theological distance between orthodox unregistered ‘house’ church congregations and the official churches will widen considerably, as house churches will increasingly criticize official churches for ‘playing politics’.

And, most importantly:

Third, if Protestant churches more and more ‘toe the Party line’, their distinctiveness to members of society who are not affiliated with the churches will wane, weakening the attraction of the Christian faith. And, perhaps, this has been Xi Jinping’s vision for a Sinicized Christianity all along.”

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

A widespread yearning for meaning and ‘peace for one’s soul’ within Chinese society has resulted in a strongly [growing interest in religion](#), which includes traditional folk religions and all kinds of groups based on New Age philosophy and spiritual development (Asia Society, 5 June 2024). This has also led to cult-like situations in which followers have lost hundreds of millions of dollars. Some of the groups even run pyramid schemes, where followers seek to reach a higher rank in the organization by drawing in more followers and their donations. While the struggle against cults predates the era of Communist rule, it has to be kept in mind that Communist ideology by definition opposes religion and what it calls ‘superstition’. Consequently, the author writing for Asia Society draws the conclusion: "Unless Beijing begins to recognize the value of tolerance and religious pluralism — and has more faith in its own people — it will have to sustain its anti-cult propaganda indefinitely.”

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

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

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

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

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

However, to add "4. The CCP represents selected religions in China" would be impossible since the Communist goal is ultimately to eradicate religion and not co-opt it. Professor Cheek states: "Now, if

they can do the Three Represents and say capitalists are fine in the Party, they could get a Fourth Represent. They could find a way to accommodate religion. I know a couple of Muslim Party cadres, and that's what they want. They would be happy to be Maoists and Muslims. The Party won't let them. It's an Achilles heel."

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

Economic landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report China](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Gross National Income (2017 USD PPP):** 18,025
- **Multidimensional poverty:** The rate of people in multidimensional poverty is 4.2%, the rate of people vulnerable to it is 17.4% The rate of people living below the national poverty line is 1.7%
- **Remittances:** 0.14% of the national GDP

According to [World Bank China data](#) (accessed 5 August 2024):

- China is classified as an upper middle income country
- **GDP per capita (PPP constant 2017 international USD):** 18,188
- **GDP per capita growth rate:** 3% in 2022, but 8.4% in 2021. The country's [accumulated debt-to-GDP ratio is 263%](#) as of the 3rd quarter of 2021 and there are other internal and external risks as well (Jamestown, 18 November 2022)
- **Poverty gap at 6.85 USD a day (2017 PPP):** 6% (2020)

The days of very strong economic growth in China would seem to be over. For many years, China had recorded a double-digit economic growth, but in 2019, the growth rate hit a [29 year-low](#) at 6.1% (Fortune, 17 January 2020). Because of the already slowing growth and the strongly felt impact of the COVID-19 crisis, in 2020 the Communist Party did [not set a GDP growth target](#) for the first time in 30 years (The Economist, 30 May 2020). Likewise, in the long-expected 14th Five Year Plan, the Communist Party did not set a concrete growth rate to be achieved, but instead repeated a slogan (which echoes far beyond the economic sphere) about "[getting China's house in order](#)". This should be achieved by "proactively building a more favorable external environment" (MacroPolo, 10 November 2020). It is, however, not just the COVID-19-fallout which has slowed the economy down; [other reasons](#) for this - and for not setting a specific GDP target - are the US-China strategic rivalry, the Russian-Ukraine war and the demise of the country's real estate sector (PRC Leadership Watch, 6 December 2022). The insecurity about the economic development and measures to be taken was also apparent in the delay of the Third Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which only took place in July 2024 (while in the normal course of events, it would have taken place in fall 2023). Although [reforms](#) were already announced and promised in April 2024 (Reuters, 30 April 2024), in an environment where security trumps virtually everything the much needed reforms are difficult

to implement. It seems easier to announce support policies than to actually implement [structural reforms](#) (Pekingology, 21 March 2024).

The authorities targeted tech companies with restrictions and fines in 2020 and 2021 and although this policy seemed to have been eased, these actions showed the direction for “getting China's house in order”. In a reminder that such policies tend to come in waves, in July 2022 ride-hailing app Didi Global was [fined a record](#) 1.2 billion USD for several law breaches and had already been banned from the Chinese app market (CNN, 21 July 2022). Another reason to get the house in order is corruption, despite all efforts by Xi Jinping and his anti-corruption campaign, China is living through what one observer called the ["Gilded Age"](#) (Foreign Affairs, 24 June 2021). In what was seen as a policy for the limitless fining of tech companies, Tencent and Ant Group were [fined](#) more than 1 billion USD in July 2023 (Bloomberg, 7 July 2023). On the other hand, China is subsidizing tech firms, especially companies related to the development and production of semi-conductors, even more so after the USA and various US allies put [export restrictions](#) on the more advanced ones and on equipment (The Wire China, 17 March 2024).

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

There are also [considerable economic variations](#) between the provinces (Asia News, 5 November 2019). Roughly speaking, the urban and coastal areas in the east are far better off than the rural west and hinterland. Guangdong province, bordering Hongkong, is by far the wealthiest region. Seen as a total, China has what one observer called a [debt hang-over](#), which is mainly a local problem, meaning that local and provincial governments are far more in debt than the nation state as such (Macro Polo, 2 July 2021; this article provides data per province). The continuing property sector crisis and the uncertainty about the use of "LGFV" (Local government financial vehicles) have [made matters worse](#) and raised the stakes for an intervention from Beijing (MacroPolo, 22 February 2023). China's debt [increased](#) between 2012 and 2022 by 37 trillion USD and the most vulnerable borrowers are state-owned enterprises (SOE), real estate developers and LGFV (PRC Leadership Monitor, 1 March 2023). Further, reforming the system may be complicated by research findings from Tsinghua University which have revealed that the level of local government debt may be [five times higher](#) than officially admitted (East is Red, 22 December 2023).

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

challenges from the climate change discussion, and is banning the sale of wheat for animal feed (The Diplomat, 30 March 2022). In the Diplomat article, the author adds:

“China plans to increase its Russian imports, saying that the door is ‘wide open’ for Russian wheat. Therein lies China’s dilemma. Were even 5 percent of the Chinese population to be deprived of food made from wheat [e.g. China’s other staple food, noodles; ed.], due to China’s recently reinstated imports from Russia improbably being shut off by the Chinese government in a nod to sanctions, that translates into over 72 million people in China missing out on a staple food. That in turn would not only be a humanitarian disaster but also a political one for the CCP. If oil imports are not sufficient to meet demand, people may get ornery, but they will not starve to death. If food imports dry up, and people begin to be hungry, that would incite social protest and worse. ... Almost 200 million people in China today are over 65. That means that the Great Famine [1959-1961] is held within the living memory of a significant portion of the Chinese population, approximately 13.5 percent, according to Chinese figures. Little haunts China more than the idea of impending hunger. As such, China will go to great lengths to protect the stability and security of its food supply. If that means flouting international sanctions against Russia, expect China to do so. No sanction on China could be worse from its perspective than a threat to its food supply and the consequences of not having enough.” Consequently, China and Russia activated an old idea of establishing a "[New Land Grain Corridor](#)" in order to export grain and related goods to China (Asia Society, 8 May 2024). According to the report, China’s food self-sufficiency rate has decreased from 101.8% in 2000 to 76.8% in 2020. By 2035, this is expected to further decrease to 65%.

Due to the ongoing Chinese-US decoupling process, the Communist Party announced a “dual circulation” economic policy, which mainly means that China is turning more inwards, relying more on its [own strength](#) and abilities and, in economic terms, local demand (PRC Leadership tracker, 1 December 2021). This also includes a general strengthening of state-owned enterprises and the active involvement of Party committees in [private companies](#)’ policies (Macro Polo, 16 December 2020). One observer summed up the trend as follows: “China Inc.” is becoming "[CCP Inc.](#)” (PRC Leadership tracker, 1 December 2020). One observer said that this policy is missing the [redistributive elements](#) necessary for sincerely improving income gaps, imbalances and challenges coming from demography and a high number of migrant workers (PRC Leadership Monitor, 1 March 2023). And within China, experts are saying that in order to boost domestic consumption and find a new economic balance, [families](#) need to be subsidized (Pekingology, 15 July 2023). Meanwhile, migrant workers seem to be needed less and less, especially as the construction boom is (slowly) waning, and migrant workers see [few options](#) and a dark future ahead of them (The New York Times, 1 November 2023).

Internationally, China has become the third-largest provider of Foreign Direct Investments in the world behind the United States and Japan and slightly ahead of Germany according to [UNCTAD](#) and invests in such diverse regions and countries as Central Asia, Pakistan, Africa and Latin America (UNCTAD World Investment Report 2023). In 2023, China provided 146 billion USD in Outbound Direct Investment. In a both economic and geo-strategic move, China has built up what observers call its “string of pearls” or “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) - a network of ports and commercial facilities along the coast all the way from China to Kenya, Sudan and Europe, of which ports like the (yet to be completed) Pakistani port of Gwadar are a very important part. Such investments come with a risk, as can be seen in frequent attacks against Chinese nationals. This attack triggered a wave of [anti-Chinese](#)

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

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

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

According to the [World Bank China overview](#): (last updated April 2024):

- ***Economic growth:***

"China's strong growth has been based on investment and export-oriented manufacturing, an approach that has largely reached its limits, and has led to economic, social, and environmental imbalances. Reducing these imbalances will require a shift from manufacturing to high value services, from investment to consumption, and from high to low carbon intensity. In recent years, growth has moderated in the face of structural constraints, including declining labor force growth, diminishing returns to investment, and slowing productivity growth. The challenge going forward is to find new drivers of growth while addressing the social and environmental legacies of China's previous development path. The role of the state also needs to continue to evolve, focusing on providing a clear, fair, and stable business environment, strengthening the regulatory system and the rule of law to

further support the market system, as well as ensuring equitable access to public services to all citizens."

- ***Economic outlook:***

"Following moderate post-pandemic growth of 5.2 percent in 2023, growth is projected at 4.5 percent in 2024. Domestic demand in China has remained sluggish and contributed to low inflation, while the policy space for stimulus is constrained. Weak business confidence, in part driven by the property market downturn, continues to weigh on growth. Over the medium term, China's economy is expected to undergo a structural slowdown. Potential growth has been on a declining trend, reflecting adverse demographics, tepid productivity growth, and rising constraints to a debt-fueled, investment-driven growth model. Structural reforms are needed to reinvigorate the shift to more balanced high-quality growth."

A banking [scandal](#) emerged in April 2022, involving four rural banks in Henan province; it points however to problems in the rural banking system at a deeper level (Reuters, 12 July 2022). It could have serious implications not just for provincial authorities, but also for the central authorities. Around 400,000 customers who had invested in banking products from the four banks (and another one in Anhui province) were blocked from accessing and withdrawing their savings from April 2022 onwards. While the products had often been bought [online](#) and categorized as "savings", they may have been better categorized as "wealth management" products (SupChina, 15 July 2022) which are not covered by a state-wide insurance fund. Angry customers took to the streets and demanded that their "China dream" should not be shattered. Although the protestors did not formulate their demands as criticism of the central authorities and even used official government catchwords like "[China dream](#)", another protest in July 2022 was violently attacked by unidentified assailants dressed in white (BBC News, 12 July 2022). Finally, however, the authorities did announce that depositors would get back at least part of their savings.

Another reminder of the current economic difficulties and the need for the authorities to react effectively is the ongoing housing and mortgage crisis, which arguably has a far greater impact than the bank scandal mentioned above. Buyers of residential housing projects across China are beginning to [withhold mortgage payments](#) until the houses are finished: "By July 12 [2022], buyers of 35 residential projects across 22 cities in China said they had decided to stop mortgage repayments ... despite the fact that it could mar their personal credit rating" (RFA, 14 July 2022). Particularly interesting in this is the last remark, as a bad personal credit rating can have far-reaching implications for their ability to act in the economic sphere (e.g., for buying and selling) and even in the social sphere (where a bad credit rating may become public and lead to neighbors and friends distancing themselves). The mortgage boycotts have reportedly spread to include [hundreds of thousands of home-owners](#) across China (Foreign Affairs, 30 August 2022). In January 2024, one of the largest developers, Evergrande, filed for [bankruptcy](#) in a Hong Kong court, owing an overall sum of more than 300 billion USD (AP News, 29 January 2024). In how far the company will be liquidated and creditors get their money will be up to the authorities in Beijing to decide.

Christians have also been participating in China's breath-taking economic development over the last decades. At the same time, it has been a challenge for churches to serve the millions of migrant workers (and assist them when facing social difficulties) and to adjust to the new environment in the

cities, which is so different to life in impoverished rural areas. Another phenomenon has been that many well-educated middle-class intellectuals have been drawn to Christianity as well, among them many lawyers and university lecturers.

Gender perspective

Overall, women remain economically more vulnerable than men in China. The gender gap in education has significantly improved over recent decades, such that girls significantly outnumber boys in higher-education enrolment ([World Bank China data](#), accessed 5 August 2024). Despite this progress in China's education system, women face disadvantages in the workplace. As of 2022, the [labor force participation](#) rate for men was 72.6%, compared to 61.1% for women (World Bank, Gender Data Portal, 2023). Employers have [openly favored men](#) for promotion and high-responsibility jobs, in part eager to avoid the cost of paying for maternity leave, according to a report by the New York Times (NYT, 16 July 2019). Furthermore a Human Rights Watch report revealed that 11% of civil service job adverts specify '[men only](#)' (HRW, 29 April 2020). These problems all play a role in a declining population level (see below: Social and cultural landscape).

Social and cultural landscape

According to [UNDP Human Development Report China](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024) and [World Factbook China](#) (accessed 5 August 2024):

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

According to [World Bank China data](#) (accessed 5 August 2024):

- **Population/Age distribution:** The percentage of citizens under 14 years of age is 17%; the percentage above 65 years of age is 13.9%
- **Education:** The primary school completion rate is 105% (2010), the primary school enrollment rate is 100%
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 5%, the rate of vulnerable employment is 42%, the unemployment rate of youth between 15 and 24 is 15.9% (modeled ILO estimate)

According to [IOM](#) (accessed 7 May 2024) and [Statista](#) (published 31 May 2024):

- **IDPs/Refugees/Migrant workers:**
 - The IOM estimates that in 2017, 10 million Chinese migrants were living and working overseas, while one million international migrants were registered in China.

- Statista states: "In 2023 there were approximately 297.5 million migrant workers in China. Nearly 121 million of them were local migrant workers, working in the vicinity of their place of home, while 176.6 million worked at more distant places in their home province or in regions far away. The number of migrant workers increased slightly by around 1.9 million people in 2023."
- "The total number of migrant workers in China has increased steadily, except for 2020. In 2022, migrant workers in China accounted for more than 20 percent of the total population and roughly 38 percent of the Chinese labor force. It is worth noting that nearly half of migrant workers left their hometowns without their families. In terms of education, the majority of migrant workers in China are moderately educated, i.e. less than 15 percent of them did not get to finish middle school. Migrant workers contribute significantly to China's urbanization and modernization. Roughly 27 percent of them were employed in the manufacturing industry in 2022, and around 18 percent in the construction sector."

According to [UNDP Human Development Report China](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** With a score of 0.788, China ranks 75th of 193 countries. Its growth in terms of HDI has been one of the strongest of all countries since 1990 and the strongest among the countries categorized as "highly developed"
- **Life expectancy:** 78.7 years
- **Median age:** 40.2
- **GINI coefficient:** 38.5
- **Gender inequality:** With a score of 0.186, China ranks 47th among 166 countries in the Gender Inequality Index. Together with Azerbaijan, China has the most unequal sex ratio at birth with a score of 1.13 (male to female births). The World Factbook China puts it at 1.09.
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate is 4.3%; the rate of vulnerable employment is 45.4%; the percentage of youth between 15 and 24 years of age not in employment/school is 17.9%.

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

1) The population decline

In respect of the population decline, the reporting period of WWL 2024 was a historic one. China's statistical office has reported the first actual [decline](#) in population since more than 60 years (Reuters, 17 January 2023), five years earlier than originally predicted. According to UN projections, India overtook China as the [most populous country](#) of the world in April 2023 (The Guardian, 24 April 2023). And while it is clear that the [pension system](#) is in need of reform, this is an uphill battle (The Wire China, 22 October 2023). According to the 2023 statistics, China's total population has [dropped by two million](#), accelerating the trend observed before (Reuters, 17 January 2024).

It is by now a frequently-heard quip that the Chinese population is "getting old before it gets rich" or maybe never get "[rich](#)" at all (Reuters, 18 July 2023). The now abandoned one-child-policy has had serious downsides: A growing number of middle-aged citizens are facing the challenge of balancing the needs of making a living, family life and of caring for ageing parents who now enjoy longer life-

expectancy. According to Chinese government statistics, the number of people older than 60 will have doubled in 2030 and the number of those above 65 will soon overtake the number of those under 14. An increasing number of hospitals are closing their [obstetric](#) departments due to the drop in birth rates. Although the total numbers do not look too worrying yet, a local newspaper warned that an ‘obstetric winter’ is coming (Reuters, 19 March 2024).

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

While migration towards urban areas has continued, despite previous indications suggesting the opposite, the population decline has other consequences as well. In the last decade, urbanization patterns changed as intra-urban migration grew stronger, but the [rural-urban migration](#) was still strong and the urban population increased by 14.21% in the last decade (Sixth Tone, 9 June 2021). The official 2022 figures quoted earlier indicate that the trend of moving to urban areas continued, with the number of permanent urban residents reaching 920,71 million - or 65,22% - while the number of permanent residents of rural areas stood at 491,04 million, a decline of 0.5%. China’s pension system, which is in need of reform, struggles to keep in step with the pace of a rapidly aging society. From 2022 to 2023, the number of people [aged 60+](#) grew by almost 17 million to 297 million or 21.1% of the total population (Reuters, 18 January 2024). However, any change in the social security system has the potential of leading to frustration and protests, something the leadership is keen to avoid.

According to observers, government reactions so far have mostly [made things worse](#), as these have put strong pressure on women (Foreign Policy, 3 May 2022), emphasizing traditional Confucian thinking. The options for the leadership to react to these challenges are clearly limited, especially since encouraging people to have more children, faces several obstacles: First, there may be social challenges (for instance, for migrant workers or for the increasing number of families who have to take care of their ageing parents while working long hours often a great distance away); secondly, according to studies, raising a child is comparably [more expensive](#) in China than it is in the USA or Japan (Reuters, 23 February 2022). The CCP’s immediate reaction was to ease the two-child policy, turning it now into a [three-child policy](#) (Reuters, 31 May 2021). This has led many to question why such a limitation is still seen to be necessary at all. The most likely answer is that the CCP would like only certain people to have more children. Ethnic minorities tend to have more children than the average Han family. As one observer said, this comes very close to making [eugenics](#) widely acceptable: “Beijing is trying to restrict fertility in some groups, it is also encouraging fertility in other groups, namely, among Han urban dwellers.” (Neican, 15 March 2021). In a similar vein, the deputy director of the National Bureau of Statistics, Sheng Laiyun, was quoted as saying in October 2023: “Although population quantity has declined, [population quality](#) is improving more rapidly” (China Digital Times, 26 October 2023).

Another alternative for ageing societies is to encourage migration from cities into the countryside, a path the CCP will most definitely not want to follow. A far more likely and far less popular measure will be to raise the retirement threshold, something which had been proposed in the last 5 year plan, but never made it into law, as it was [highly unpopular](#) and even bore the risk of social unrest (Quartz, 22 April 2022). The [retirement age](#) in China for men is 60, while for women, it is 55 for white-collar workers

and 50 for blue-collar employees (Xinhua, 12 March 2021). The largest investment bank in China, CITIC, which is state-owned, cited a [government plan](#) according to which the retirement age would be gradually raised to 65 for women and men by 2055 (Sixth Tone, 3 February 2023). It remains to be seen if such a plan or similar ones make it to the implementation stage, as it is likely that it will come at considerable political and social costs.

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

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

2) The youth challenge

The economic slowdown has another consequence which the Communist Party is having a hard time to deal with. In 2022, a record number of [10.6 million college graduates](#) hoping to start a career were faced with an increasing lack of opportunities (Sup China, 4 May 2022). Reportedly, graduates have been applying in record numbers for state jobs, a career that had come to be seen as second-choice, since private employers (especially in the tech sector) were creating more lucrative jobs in high numbers. But now, in more challenging times, as tech companies are struggling with tighter regulations and record fines, young people seem to appreciate more what has sometimes been referred to as the “[iron rice bowl](#)” (Taketonews, 5 May 2022). According to one report, the [ratio](#) of applicants to jobs offered in public service in 2023 was 77:1 (East Asia Forum, 2 May 2024).

Young people aged between 16 and 24 have a tough start in their working lives. Even according to official statistics, the [youth unemployment rate](#) hit a record 21.3% in the first half of 2023 (Global Times, 17 July 2023). According to Zhang Dandan, professor at Peking University, this percentage could be as high as [46.5%](#), if youths not actively looking for employment are included (Channel News Asia, 20 July 2023). While many try to find security in state employment, others – in record breaking numbers – are deciding to continue their studies and apply for postgraduate courses. At the same time, college graduates are applying for jobs for which they are over-qualified. Experts do not see any quick solutions for this dilemma, especially in an adverse economic climate. While this does not necessarily translate into social unrest, it poses a challenge for the tacit social contract the Communist Party has placed on society (see above: Political and legal landscape). A possibly predictable consequence of these inconvenient numbers was the CCP’s decision to [discontinue](#) publishing the youth unemployment statistics altogether (Reuters, 15 August 2023). In January 2024, numbers were published again, using an ["optimized" method](#), and unsurprisingly the numbers were considerably

lower (New York Times, 17 January 2024). The World Bank/ILO figures provided above, however, show that the number of unemployed youths continues to grow.

There are further unwanted consequences which the authorities are facing but find hard to react to. One is an increasing response among the youth called “tang ping” (“[lie flat](#)”), meaning that the younger generation is turning its back on the fierce competition in society and is looking to live a more simple, low-key life. To what extent this is a conscious choice or a consequence of circumstances depends on the individual case, but this response has turned into a movement which the CCP has begun to take note of (Jamestown Foundation, 1 July 2022). A related reaction to this is “bai lan” (“let it rot”), meaning that modern youth are simply giving up. Another [trend](#) has begun among discontented youth namely the “Four Won’ts”: Won’t date; won’t marry; won’t buy a home; and won’t have kids (China Digital Times, 20 July 2023). While a survey carried out by the Guangzhou branch of the Communist Youth League found that only 8% would fully subscribe to these ‘Won’ts’, it is enough to keep the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) worried.

A more pronounced reaction among young people is for them to move back to their parent’s house and become “[fulltime children](#)” again (The China Project, 2 May 2023). Being a middle class phenomenon, this shows how families can still afford to take their children back. At the same time, these are the very young adults China needs for its economy – and for being the next generation of parents. And while it is neither a widespread movement nor possible for many young adults, “[run xue](#)”, meaning the “art of running away” and leaving the country, is at least something the younger generation is toying with online (Neican, 5 July 2022). Although the general trend of emigrating from China is not very pronounced, the number of Chinese citizens making it to US soil [increased 10-fold](#) in 2023, to a still modest 37,000 (Nikkei Asian Review, 13 February 2024). It is estimated that of those leaving China, 15-20% are Christians, a [higher percentage](#) than Christians have in the total population (China Source, 4 December 2023), which WWR estimates as being 6.7% (WWR, [China Full Country Dossier](#), December 2023, p.21). How the Communist Party approaches this conundrum beyond the reach of ideology will be interesting to see. While none of these responses pose an immediate danger to CCP dominance in society, it shows that more and more people, especially young adults, seem to be disillusioned with what has been called the ‘China Dream’.

3) The eradication of poverty

The CCP’s success at [eradicating poverty](#) has been widely reported and would seem to be a commendable achievement (China Digital Times, 26 January 2021), but not everyone is convinced that the claim is true. These reports should be seen in perspective as the CCP’s definition of poverty may need to be revisited given China’s overall economic situation. If international standards are used, up to 75% of the Chinese population in urban and 90% in rural areas can still be considered to be living in a [state of poverty](#) (Brookings, 25 January 2021). Whichever standards one follows, there is clearly a huge imbalance in the distribution of wealth in China, which should be kept in mind, whenever the CCP celebrates the eradication of poverty.

While the Gini coefficient measuring inequality is quite low, the top 20% across China earn 10.2 times as much as the poorest 20%. While the economic slowdown is posing a challenge, the real problem is the [growing inequality](#) within China, according to data from the World Inequality Lab, in terms of overall wealth, the richest 10% in China own 70% of the household wealth (Grid News, 26 July 2022).

As was already reported in WWL 2021's Full Country Dossier, Prime Minister Li Keqiang told his colleagues at the end of the '2020 Two Sessions' meeting that up to 600 million people in China were earning less than 1000 yuan (around 145 USD a month) and were struggling to make ends meet.

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

According to Professor Keyu Jin's [book](#) "The New China Playbook: Beyond Socialism and Capitalism", the numbers have not changed much: "But the truth is that there are still around 870 million people with a monthly income below RMB 2000 (about US\$300). They have yet to join the four hundred million in the middle-income group, which by Chinese standards have a qualifying monthly income of RMB 2000–5000— far below the advanced-economy average. Having an enlarged middle-income group, which has the highest marginal propensity to consume, is the only way to truly bolster China's consumption engine." (Pekingology, 17 July 2023). Meanwhile, research not fitting into the official picture risks being censored. An academic survey carried out at Anhui Normal University has been [removed from social media](#) platforms (The Diplomat, 17 July 2023). The survey showed that 60 percent of the provincial migrant workers surveyed – many of whom had been working in Chinese cities for over 30 years – had no pension and were unable to retire, lest they be forced to live on just 100 to 200 yuan (\$14 to \$28) per month".

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

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

Further issues

Political parties other than the Communist Party are allowed to exist, but - not surprisingly - these are carefully selected by the Communist Party. They are consulted on a regular basis, but are careful not to go against the grain. Some civil society organizations are also allowed, but not Christian organizations, unless they are run under the auspices of registered churches, which excludes the larger

part of Chinese Christianity from getting involved in social action in an organized way. In the past there had always been a certain leeway for local authorities to decide for themselves whom to tolerate, but recent legislation has the goal, as one observer said, to “[cultivate aridity and deprive them of air](#)” (Made in China Journal, 29 April 2021). This does not mean that such organizations are banned completely, but they are [vetted much more carefully](#) than before (Made in China Journal, 15 July 2021).

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

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

Gender perspective

Despite Communist ideals of gender equality, discriminatory stereotypes in relation to the roles and responsibilities of men and women persist. Men are expected to assume the position of financial provider, whereas women are perceived to [belong in the home](#) (Qing S: The Journal of Chinese Sociology, 8 July 2020). This increases dependency of women and girls on men, a dynamic that can be exploited for the purpose of religious persecution, although the official policy is one of gender equality and empowering women. The CCP recently started to emphasize traditional “Confucian values” as an alternative to religions and improve birth rates which reflect the classical household gender roles. The 2022 [WEF Gender gap report](#) published on 13 July 2022 lists China at position 102 out of 146 countries, down from rank 69 in 2013, the first full year of Xi Jinping’s presidency. This imbalance is reflected in the political leadership as well, leading one observer to use one of Mao's well-known sayings: “[Women hold up half the sky, but men rule the Party](#)” (Merics, 3 June 2021). The story of a woman who was [found chained up](#) in the province of Jiangsu and who had apparently been trafficked several times, was not only widely shared on social media in China for several months, it also highlighted a deeply entrenched problem, especially in rural areas (RFA, 24 February 2022). Another incident highlighting the situation of women in China was the Tangshan incident in June 2022, in which a young woman was [attacked](#) after rejecting unwanted sexual advances (Neican, 5 August 2022). The public anger was amplified when state media presented the case in a way apparently siding with the attacker.

Technological landscape

According to DataReportal [Digital 2024: China](#) (21 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 76.4% penetration (1.09 billion users)
- **Social media usage:** 74.2% of the total population (1.06 billion users)
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 123.6% of the total population (1.76 billion connections).

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

According to [Freedom on the Net 2023 China](#):

- China is categorized as "Not free" and has been listed as "the world's worst abuser of Internet freedom" for the ninth consecutive year. The report gives China the lowest score and states: "Conditions for internet users in China remained profoundly oppressive and confirmed the country's status as the world's worst abuser of internet freedom for the ninth consecutive year. Unprecedented protests were mobilized against the government's COVID-19 policy during the coverage period. Though authorities responded with swift censorship, protesters successfully pressured the government into withdrawing its draconian zero-COVID policy. Ordinary users continued to face severe legal and extralegal repercussions for activities like sharing news stories, talking about their religious beliefs, or communicating with family members and others overseas. Separately, authorities wielded immense power over the technology industry through new legislation, regulatory investigations, and app-store removals. Authorities also imposed new restrictions on generative artificial-intelligence (AI) tools during the coverage period."
- "The government maintains control over China's gateways to the global internet, giving authorities the ability to restrict connectivity or access to content hosted on servers outside the country. This arrangement is the foundation for the "Great Firewall," the informal name for the government's comprehensive internet censorship system. All service providers must subscribe via the gateway operators, which are overseen by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT)."
- "China's authoritarian regime has become increasingly repressive in recent years. The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continues to tighten control over all aspects of life and governance, including the state bureaucracy, the media, online speech, religious practice, universities, businesses, and civil society associations. The CCP leader and state president, Xi Jinping, secured a third term as party leader in October 2022, further consolidating personal power to a degree not seen in China for decades. Following a multiyear crackdown on political dissent, independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and human rights defenders, China's civil society has been largely decimated."
- "A minority of Chinese internet users, though they number in the tens of millions, access blocked websites with circumvention tools like virtual private networks (VPNs). However, the government has intensified its restrictions on these tools since 2017, when the MIIT banned the use of unlicensed VPNs. Service providers are barred from setting up VPNs without government approval, and illegal VPN operations have been increasingly targeted for closure or blocking. Blocks on VPNs typically escalate ahead of high-profile events, such as annual plenary sessions of the Chinese legislature. VPN providers have noted that a growing technical sophistication of Chinese authorities has been reflected in VPN blocking incidents. In November 2021, the CAC released a draft regulation, titled Network Data Security Management Regulations, that would punish individuals and institutions for helping users circumvent internet censorship. Presumably

targeting app stores and hosting sites, the regulations would provide for penalties of up to 500,000 yuan (\$70,300).”

"Self-censorship among ordinary users and journalists is common and takes place amid an increasing risk of account closures, real-world reprisals, and legal penalties for online commentary. Self-censorship is exacerbated by nationalistic netizens' intimidation and online harassment of those who they perceive as harming the reputation of China. There is evidence that WeChat users are increasingly self-censoring to preempt the closure of their accounts or other penalties, since WeChat is relied on for a wide variety of services that include messaging, banking, ride-hailing, ordering food, and booking travel. The app's critical role in daily life, alongside platform moderators' growing propensity to close accounts rather than delete objectionable posts, has increased pressure on users to self-censor. Self-censorship is pervasive among members of persecuted groups, especially Uyghurs, whose WeChat activities are closely monitored. Many block relatives living abroad to avoid being detained for having foreign contacts."

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

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

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

(TSPM) churches in Jiangsu province were issued the [license](#) for “Internet Religious Information Services” in March 2022 (CCD, 11 March 2022).

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

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

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

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

The above explains why the 1.09 billion Internet users in China represent an impressive number, but their access to the Internet is limited. The rural-urban gap is still felt (particularly in the Western part of the country) not just in online accessibility, but also in Internet speed. However, the gap is closing.

Internet cafés are becoming less important as access points since mobile phone coverage is improving. China is one of the world's largest technology developers and providers with an emphasis on electric mobility. Another well-known specialization is in providing electronics for mobile phone infrastructure. Indeed, Huawei, the largest and one of the few providers of the 5G mobile standard, is one of the focal points of the trade war with the USA; security aspects and the company's links with the People's Liberation Army and the Communist Party are not clear.

The CCP is following a policy of "[cyber sovereignty](#)" and lobbies for this concept internationally (USIP, 7 March 2024). This ties in well with the overarching goal of security (as explained above in: Political landscape) and would, if it succeeds, further divide and splinter the Internet. Despite all the limitations mentioned above (possibly even because of them) and despite all the risks, the number of [VPN downloads](#) doubled (VOA, 15 February 2024) and "tens of millions" of Chinese continue to use [WhatsApp](#) (BBC News, 1 May 2024).

In an effort to ensure 'national security', documents issued by the Ministry of State Security on 26 April 2024 give China's state security police sweeping powers to [gather electronic data](#) by checking all kinds of electronic devices, including smartphones and laptops.

Pilot projects for the much-publicized "[Social Credit System](#)" have been carried out in some areas but two years ago there was evidently still a long way to go until the system could be introduced nationwide (Trivium China, 27 August 2019). As one country observer indicated in 2019: The "messy truth" about the [Social Credit System](#) (SCS) is that there is currently no centralized database and efforts at scoring are patchy and localized at best (China File, 22 April 2019). The [Social Credit Score](#) system can easily be adapted and used to monitor the political trustworthiness of all Chinese citizens (China Leadership Monitor, 1 March 2020). Research showed that the social effects of the Social Credit System are [present, but limited](#), as citizens know to distinguish and read a bad score (Alexander Trauth-Goik/Chuncheng Liu (2022): "Black or Fifty Shades of Grey? The Power and Limits of the Social Credit Blacklist System in China", Journal of Contemporary China, 30 September 2022). This kind of monitoring is becoming a top priority in today's China and it seems that the timing of the COVID-19 outbreak has been very convenient for the state authorities to [extend control](#) both by technical and more personal means (The Guardian, 9 March 2020). It may, however, be too early to call for a "[post social credit era](#)", as some observers did (The Wire China, 17 December 2023).

The implementation of [Artificial Intelligence](#) into the systems may provide a boost for all surveillance and social monitoring, by bringing files from different authorities across the government together in one location (Reuters, 8 April 2022). At the same time, the Communist Party is well aware of the risks that AI is posing, so it tries to square the circle [with its rules](#) by reaping the technology's benefits without jeopardizing its own political security (The East is Read, 13 July 2023). This poses big [challenges](#), especially as large language models seem to be best when trained and drawing from a wide array of sources (The Wire China, 14 April 2024).

Physical surveillance has become so [synonymous](#) with Communist Party policy that some observers think the Party has switched its promise of economic improvement for citizens to simply providing security and well-being in a more general way (China Digital Times, 23 September 2022). It is not just the physical surveillance, which is increasing and causing worry, but also the growing levels of control in the virtual sphere. The CCP is becoming increasingly successful at indoctrinating a [young](#)

[generation](#) of Internet and social media users by simply shutting out unfiltered news and feeding in ideological content, often with a strong nationalistic tone (Politico, 1 September 2020). As one observer writes, China's youth is increasingly [turning its back](#) on the West (Chatham House, 1 August 2021). This comes at a certain risk, as nationalism is easily fanned, but hard to contain. The challenge is, above all, to influence a generation who up until now was exposed to a very different narrative for the whole of their lives.

And from the media side of things, journalists who wish to obtain a [press card](#) have to pass a test which includes their knowledge about Xi Jinping thought, showing that it is not just a question of access restrictions, but also of shaping reports (RFA, 11 November 2020). The CCP likewise expanded the section on Communist ideology in [state exams](#) for journalists. Since accreditation has to be renewed every three years, this increased focus on ideology will soon be felt by all journalists, putting an even bigger question-mark on reporting coming out of China (RFA, 12 January 2023). In another effort at instilling the 'correct mindset', the All-China Journalists Association has brought out a [training app](#), which offers more than 220 courses on topics such as the Marxist view on journalism, CCP leadership and control of the media and – of course – 'Xi Jinping thought' (China Media Project, 4 July 2023). As an added bonus, the app is also able to track their progress and certify their training results, thus assisting with annual reviews and renewals of journalists' press cards. Independent reporting from China has been made ever harder, since non-state media outlets have been put on a [market access blacklist](#) (The Diplomat, 13 October 2021). This means that even sources from within China would be banned from private investment if they allowed even modestly critical reports to be published, e.g. by revealing corruption cases. This is something which privately owned Caixin Media had done. As a result, Caixin was removed from the October 2021 [list of sources](#) approved for syndicated news content (RFA, 21 October 2021).

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

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

Another illustration of the increasingly tighter ideological control is the news that 'there were [25,000 fewer book titles released](#) in China in 2022 than in 2021' (China Media Project, 25 April 2023). One fifth of the drop was due to a decreased number of new original Chinese titles being published, while there was a 20,000 reduction in the number of foreign titles published in translation. In the China

Media Project article, one publisher complained: ‘You cannot say China is bad, and you cannot say that foreign countries are good.’ An informal ban on topics considered sensitive has seemingly had a chilling effect and resulted in the cancelation of many publishing projects. The felt arbitrariness of the censoring system also contributed to the decline.

Security situation

Global security

On the international stage, China presented a new policy in April 2022 called the “[Global Security Initiative](#)” - GSI (Jamestown, 13 May 2022). While its principle of “indivisible security” was first set out in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, it has become a common point of reference in many national strategic documents. While it is not impossible that the initiative will be backed by other countries (Russia already did so), it is clear that it comes with “Chinese characteristics” and is meant as a counterweight to what is seen as Western and especially American dominance. So far, the GSI is still [lacking detail](#), but it may become a focal point in an increasingly divided world (The Diplomat, 8 June 2022). Another initiative, likewise targeted at an international audience, is the “[Global Development Initiative](#)” - GDI (WEF, 17 January 2022). It was proposed at the UN General Assembly in 2021 and ties to the Sustainable Development Goals the UN proposed and many states agreed to reach by 2030.

Minorities in Xinjiang, Tibet, Nei Mongol and elsewhere

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

The question whether what is happening with China’s [Uighur minority](#) should be called genocide or not, while important, should not be seen as the main question (The Diplomat, 1 May 2021). Beyond the defining aspects of international law, the situation in Xinjiang has to be seen in a broader context, as the policy towards all ethnic minorities has changed. The goal, as The Diplomat explains, is now “to actively alter the thoughts and behaviors of what Chinese authorities perceive to be a ‘backward’, ‘deviant’ and innately ‘dangerous’ sub-section of its population by raising their ‘bio-quality’ (suzhi, 素质) and overseeing their rebirth as loyal, patriotic, and civilized Chinese citizens”. This is to be achieved by “planting the seed of patriotism” through the education system. It has to be kept in mind that China is home to 55 so-called “Minzu” or ethnic minorities. As of 2005, more than 71% of China’s minority population lived within one of the over 1,300 autonomous districts. These cover 64% of Chinese territory but are home to less than 10% of the total population. The long-term policy of granting autonomy has increasingly been replaced by the desire for a process of ‘transformation’ (or rather,

assimilation): This entails a more interventionist role for the CCP and involves actively remolding a minority's ideological, cultural and spiritual fabric into what President Xi calls the 'collective consciousness of the Chinese (Zhonghua 中华) nation'. As a result, these shifts in policy go well beyond Xinjiang and are part of a fundamental rethinking of how the CCP is seeking to manage ethnocultural diversity. As far as Xinjiang is concerned, the emphasis seems to be on regional economic development, without neglecting strict control, but shifting the policy to coercive labor transfers to other provinces (see above: Political and legal landscape). This may be seen as being a reaction to the high levels of international attention being given to the situation in this province.

Taiwan

The policy towards Taiwan is unchanged and China continues to send its navy and air-force across the Taiwan Strait and make it very clear how important the Taiwan question is for the country. In turn, the Taiwan Strait continues to be crossed by naval vessels belonging to various nations which China sees as a provocation. China and Taiwan are both watching closely for lessons they can learn from the Ukraine war. The increase of alliances in Asia, an increase in weapon supply and more visits by high-ranking Western politicians are likewise seen as provocations by China. Many long-term observers think that if China were to be involved in a serious conflict, Taiwan would be the most likely trigger for it. Some also see it as the ultimate prize the Chinese president is eyeing, and while the Taiwanese presidential elections in January 2024 saw some data interference from mainland China, the re-election of a candidate supporting the status quo (independence) and the third defeat in a row of the KMT candidate may have made Beijing finally realize that peaceful reunification is not an option and that coercion could be answered by fierce resistance. However, it also [showed](#) that voters are more interested in domestic politics than in any cross-straits future (PRC Leadership, 1 March 2024).

South China Sea

China's increasingly pronounced claims on the South China Sea, most recently with a map showing a "[Ten-dash-line](#)" (AP News, 31 August 2023), are causing backlashes as extra-regional forces are getting involved and claimant states see themselves forced to take a stand. The five-year anniversary of a ruling by a Court of Arbitration deciding in favor of the Philippines and rejecting almost all of China's claims highlights the prolonged stalled situation. With navy vessels from various countries exercising freedom of navigation in this region, a greater level of international attention is being brought to the dispute. The South China Sea and Southeast Asia are seen as the People's Liberation Army's "[primary laboratory](#)" for developing both joint forces and doctrine. The aim is "to awe regional states into acquiescing to Chinese interests", resulting in what one observer called "learned helplessness" (NBR, 25 August 2022). As a reaction to this (and as what the Communist Party perceives as containment), the USA secured [access](#) to four additional military bases in the Philippines (BBC News, 2 March 2023). In several incidents beginning in August 2023, Chinese Coast Guard vessels and members of the Maritime Militia were engaged in [close encounters](#) with re-supply ships from the Philippines (ABC News, 10 November 2023). These grey zone operations continued and [escalated](#) when several members of the Philippines marine were hurt (Lowy Institute, 21 March 2024). The confirmation that the USA will aid the Philippines if their "[vessels are attacked](#)" means that the simmering conflict has the potential to heat up fast (Benar News, 11 April 2024).

North Korea

China has made it repeatedly clear to the world - especially to the USA and South Korea - that no solution for the Korean Peninsula will work without China being directly involved. China is not very happy about North Korea having nuclear weapons, but it sees the country as a [risk](#) it can control and contain to a certain extent (The China Project, 7 March 2023). Chinese officials have been [searching the homes](#) of female North Koreans, looking for signs of possible contact with South or North Korea (Daily NK, 3 November 2021). If the security officials find evidence of such contacts (either by inspecting their cell phones or by investigating any visits made to the Chinese provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin), they threaten to send the women back to North Korea. Recent history shows that this is not an empty threat. Reports about North Korean women and girls as young as 12 [trafficked and abused](#) in the North Korean-Chinese border region ("Red Zone") emerged, pointing to a certain extent of lawlessness (Global Rights Compliance, 26 March 2023). [Facial recognition technology](#) in Chinese transportation has complicated the situation of North Korean escapees (RFA, 22 June 2023). Overall relations have [warmed again](#), not least illustrated by the fact that the two countries pledged to extend the 1961 mutual friendship treaty by a further twenty years (Jamestown Foundation, 17 August 2021). China has fiercely [defended](#) its repatriation policy of North Korean defectors, when it was called out for it by the UN Special Rapporteur, showing its willingness not only to defend itself, but also its ally (NK News, 19 March 2024).

India/Bhutan

The military standoff with its neighbor India in May and June 2020, continues to simmer. China has been building village infrastructure on [Bhutanese territory](#), thus tacitly claiming ownership of land for the Tibet Autonomous Region (Foreign Policy, 7 May 2021). Whereas neither the claim to ownership nor the factual occupation by building infrastructure are new tactics, the building of a whole village complex (named Gyalaphug in Tibetan or Jieliubu in Chinese) is a significant new step. Reports in 2022 showed that the villages had been expanded and [fully inhabited](#) (The Diplomat, 30 July 2022). Located in mountainous terrain, the area is still internationally understood to belong to part of Lhuntse district in northern Bhutan. The Bhutanese government does not have the means to monitor this territory and even less to do anything about such Chinese construction-work. As Foreign Policy reports, the territory is of great religious importance to Bhutan and the real goal of the Communist rulers might be to pressurize Bhutan into ceding disputed terrain in a region referred to as the 'Chicken neck'. This lies much closer to India and is a strategically important area on the Doklam Plateau where China and India had a standoff in 2017. As mentioned above (in: Political and legal landscape), both sides agreed to continue negotiations. Since China does not have an embassy in Bhutan, these talks may take place in the Bhutanese embassy in India - a delicate situation for China, given the tensions with India, which turned violent again in the WWL 2024 reporting period and has a [long history](#) of sometimes violent competition (USIP, 25 March 2024).

Myanmar

In an unexpected development, China has been [building a wall](#) (or fortified fence) along its border with Myanmar (Asia Times, 19 December 2020). As this border stretches more than 2000 kilometers, this is no small undertaking and speculation has been rife about the possible motive behind it. Suggestions for the construction range from protecting against the spread of COVID-19 (or future pandemics) to

hindering drug smugglers - or perhaps even to preventing dissidents from fleeing the country. But long-term Myanmar watcher Bertil Lintner has another interesting hypothesis; although [the whole article](#) is highly recommended reading, a small extract illustrates his thoughts on this matter (Asia-Pacific Research, 19 December 2020):

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

This is not to say that the CCP’s reason behind building the wall is mainly to keep Christians/missionaries out, but it is at least noteworthy that the Party allows propaganda to be published which stirs up nationalist feelings mixed with ethno-religious undertones. At the same time, it shows that the relationship with Myanmar is more complicated than the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) rhetoric would like people to believe. The military regime in Myanmar aims to roll out a [surveillance system](#) with facial recognition features across all 14 regions and states of the country and Chinese companies are winning the contracts (The Diplomat, 12 July 2022). The emergence of lawless zones in the border regions between Myanmar and Thailand, run by Chinese mafia and protected by Border Guard Forces (see: [Myanmar - Full Country Dossier](#), July 2024) poses a [challenge for the wider Southeast Asian region](#) as thousands of citizens get lured and then trapped in this area, where they are forced to participate in online scams and other illegal businesses. However, they also pose an increasing challenge for China itself, which is pushing the military regime in Myanmar to deal with these lawless regions, whose ventures are targeting Chinese citizens as well (USIP, 11 July 2023). The most [recent successes](#) in October/November 2023 by the opposition forces - namely the capture of territory along the Chinese border in Shan State, which the latter could not had achieved with at least tacit Chinese consent, (Reuters, 10 November 2023) - has led to a more pronounced distancing of China from Myanmar's military regime. This was apparently acknowledged by the military regime: according to a press release by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security from November 2023, Myanmar authorities [handed over](#) 31,000 telecom fraud suspects in an operation which had started in September 2023 (MPS, 21 November 2023). However, China’s role and influence may still be limited: a regime "[shrinking further](#) towards the center" (IISS, 31 March 2024) and thus, fighting for its survival or at the very least perceiving it has to, may not be willing to listen to Chinese attempts of influencing the situation.

Afghanistan/Pakistan

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

choice. China's investment in [Afghanistan's economy](#), especially in the commodities and resources sectors, has so far been much more cautious and modest than the Taliban rulers were hoping for and has done little to bring any economic relief for the Afghan population (AAN, 16 September 2023), however, important infrastructure connections and [extraction contracts](#) are being negotiated (BBC News, 7 January 2023). China has also become the first country to [appoint a new ambassador](#) to take up residence in Kabul since the take-over by the Taliban regime in August 2021 (Reuters, 13 September 2023). After the killing of nine of its citizens in an attack in Pakistan in July 2021 and the attack against teachers of the Confucius Institute at the University of Karachi in April 2022 (see above: Economic landscape), China has pushed for increasing the coordination of [counter-terrorism measures](#) with both Pakistan and the new Taliban leadership of Afghanistan (Jamestown Foundation, 7 September 2021). It reportedly also pushed for the possibility to deploy [own security providers](#), but this was politely declined by the Pakistani government (Jamestown, 14 July 2023). However, renewed attacks have led the new government of Pakistan to promise a "[foolproof](#)" security (Panda Paw Dragon Claw, 29 April 2024), and may lead to additional pressure on the host country.

Other countries

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

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

Gender perspective

In countries neighboring China, Christian women and girls are exploited in extensive human trafficking networks ([Brookings, March 2022](#)). China's earlier one-child policy - which fueled 'son preference' and gender-biased sex selection - resulted in a shortage of women and a [corresponding rise in bride-trafficking](#) (Human Rights Watch, 3 November 2019). According to the US State Department's 2022 [Trafficking in Persons Report \(p. 433\)](#), traffickers have increasingly targeted impoverished Christian communities. For instance, [629 Pakistani girls](#), many of whom were Christian, were reportedly trafficked to China between 2018 and 2019 (AP News, 7 December 2019). In Myanmar, women from the Christian-majority Kachin state have been reportedly trafficked, married and [raped until they become pregnant](#) (The Guardian, 21 March 2019; [HRW, 21 March 2019](#)). According to an investigation by Global Rights Compliance, an estimated [80%](#) of female North Korean refugees living in the north-eastern provinces of China (also known as the 'red zone'), are at high risk of sexual abuse and exploitation (Daily Mail, 29 March 2023). Reports suggest that whilst pandemic-related lockdowns and strict border closures may have significantly disrupted trans-border trafficking, confined victims

faced increased risks of physical and sexual exploitation and abandonment by their traffickers due to reduced demand, while survivors faced reduced access to essential health and psychosocial services (UNODC, 2021).

Christian origins

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

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

Church spectrum today

China: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox		0.0
Catholic		8.4
Protestant		32.8
Independent		58.7
Unaffiliated		0.0
Doubly-affiliated Christians		0.0
Total		100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement		33.0
Pentecostal-Charismatic		34.9

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not

*Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".*

As can be seen from the percentages listed above, there are more Protestant churches in China than Catholic ones. The Three-Self-Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which is overseen by the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party (UFWD), was founded in 1954 and derives its name from following three principles: Self-governance, self-support and self-propagation. It has branches all across China and runs its own theological seminaries. The TSPM is the subject of a [comprehensive study](#) published in 2021 (China Source, 22 May 2024) and covers the hotly debated topics of Sinicization and of who is ultimately in charge in TSPM churches. The author describes the relationship with the Communist authorities as a balance between domination and circumvention. How this balance plays out in the long term, remains to be seen.

House churches, on the other hand, are more numerous than TSPM churches and are also spread across the whole of China, but they are less connected and organized. They are independent, are not associated with the TSPM or the China Christian Council and often follow a variant of evangelical theology; there are also Baptist, Pentecostal and other groups among them. It is said that the majority of house churches are [Pentecostal](#) in character (China Source, 13 June 2023). They flourished in the 1980s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, but predate this time. In the 1990s, they experienced a strong trend to urbanization, following the general worker migration in society.

Catholics make up only a small part of the Christian presence in China, but have similar structures to the Protestants. In 1957, the Catholic-Patriotic Association (CPA) was formed, which also comes under the CCP's UFWD jurisdiction. Catholic churches are most numerous in the province of Hebei and in the northern and central parts of China. Apart from the CPA, there are independent Catholic churches and networks, which adhere to the primacy of the Roman Catholic pontiff in Rome. The Vatican [extended its agreement](#) with the Chinese government concerning the appointment of bishops for another two years (AP News, 22 October 2022). Despite all criticism and clearly aware of the agreement's limitations, the Vatican has apparently decided that the benefits outweigh the risks. As the content of the agreement continues to be barred from publication, further details are not available. However, evidence is emerging that the Vatican is not happy with the agreement. In an interview in March 2023, Monsignor Paul Gallagher, Vatican Secretary for the relation with states said it was "[not the best deal possible](#), because of the other party" (UCA News, 15 March 2023). Shortly after this statement was made, Bishop Joseph Shen Bin was transferred to become the bishop of Shanghai in a unilateral move. The Holy See only learned of it from the media, which led Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State, remark that "Chinese Catholics, even those defined as 'clandestine,' deserve trust," and should be "[respected in their conscience](#) and their faith.", indirectly acknowledging that there still is an underground Catholic church which should be respected in their decisions (Bitter Winter, 17 July 2023). Beijing's approach towards Catholicism can be described as 'controlling by diplomacy' and seems to be working reasonably well, as could be seen most recently at a conference in Rome on 21 May 2024 commemorating a landmark meeting in 1924, in which foreign missionaries in Shanghai affirmed the need for local church leadership. The commemoration took place in the Vatican and included a keynote address by the Catholic bishop of Shanghai, Joseph Shen Bin. This has been termed

'[the first time in memory](#)' that China's Communist authorities allowed a mainland bishop to participate and even speak at a conference in the Vatican (AP News, 21 May 2024).

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=China>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

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- Recent history: did not publish - <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3224233/china-drops-cremation-data-quarterly-report-raising-questions-about-key-covid-death-indicator>
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