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Christianity in China

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Introduction

China has witnessed a religious revival over the past four decades, in particular with the significant increase in Christian believers, accounting for 5 percent of the population, according to Pew Research Center data. The number of Chinese Protestants has grown by an average of 10 percent annually since 1979. By [some estimates](#), China is on track to have the world's largest population of Christians by 2030. Though the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is officially atheist, the rise of Christianity presents Beijing with challenges as well as new options for contributing to services, such as health care and education, to an increasingly demanding public. The government recently launched a series of initiatives to further regulate, and at times restrict, Christian adherents.

What is the history of Christianity in China?

Early waves of Christianity began with the arrival of Italian Jesuit missionary [Matteo Ricci](#) in China in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. China's first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison, traveled to China in 1807 on behalf of the London Missionary Society and [translated \(PDF\)](#) the Bible into Mandarin. In the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity became a mobilizing political force: Hong Xiuquan [developed](#) a Christian-influenced ideology to mount the [Taiping Rebellion](#) (1850–1864) against the Qing Dynasty, attracting missionaries and revolutionaries alike. The rebels amassed control over more than one-third of Chinese territory and established a rival political order, known as the “heavenly kingdom.” The ensuing civil war killed an estimated twenty million people.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 resulted in widescale religious repression in mainland China. In keeping with its Marxist roots, the [Chinese Communist Party](#) declared itself atheist. “Maoist Thought,” a sinification of Marxism-Leninism that placed the future of the Chinese revolution in the hands of the rural peasants, was the dominant ideology. This was especially true at the height of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when places of worship were closed and religious practices were banned.

Mao Zedong's death and his successor Deng Xiaoping's subsequent reforms reopened China to the outside world, in turn granting greater freedoms to Chinese citizens. A surge in Christian adherents can be traced from the period beginning in the early 1980s. Today, China's Christian population [encompasses \(PDF\)](#) a range of citizens, from all ages, from the countryside and urban centers, including students and professionals. China is also the world's largest producer of Bibles: By the

end of 2014, the [Amity Printing Company](#), a joint venture between the Amity Foundation, a Chinese NGO, and the United Bible Societies, printed more than 140 million bibles in many languages for both domestic and international markets. However, while the government exercises a certain tolerance of religious practices, religious freedom is still constrained and regulated.

What is China's policy on religious practice?

The PRC officially recognizes five religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism. The activities of state-sanctioned religious organizations are regulated by the [State Administration for Religious Affairs](#) (SARA), which manages all aspects of religious life including religious leadership appointments, selection of clergy, and interpretation of doctrine. Christianity in China is overseen by three major entities: the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the China Christian Council, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. To register as a state-sanctioned Christian organization, religious leaders must [receive training](#) in order to “adapt” doctrine to Chinese thinking and culture. China does not differentiate among Christian denominations beyond Catholicism and Protestantism.

“No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the education system of the state.” – China’s constitution

Spirituality and religious practice have long been embedded in traditional Chinese culture, says Freedom House’s senior research analyst for East Asia, Sarah Cook. Article thirty-six of the Chinese [constitution](#) protects freedom of religion, however that protection is limited to so-called “normal religious activities,” explicitly stating that “no one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the education system of the state.” These provisions provide authorities with flexibility when determining which religious practices are consistent with party policy and which fall outside the state’s guidelines. The constitutional provision goes on to specify that religious bodies cannot be subject to foreign control. The Holy See and Beijing do not have formal diplomatic ties, but Pope Francis [signaled](#) in August 2014 that he hoped to thaw China-Vatican relations.

Underground house churches exist parallel to state-sanctioned Christian churches. These organizations operate outside of the guidelines of the government, and their regulation by party authorities is largely determined by local leaders. Much like official Christian organizations, their membership is also growing across regions and demographics, according to surveys by independent polling groups. A 2010 Pew Research Center report charted that [thirty-five million \(PDF\)](#) of China’s fifty-eight million Protestants belonged to independent house churches. Other Christian organizations estimate a much higher number.

Why has the number of Christians surged?

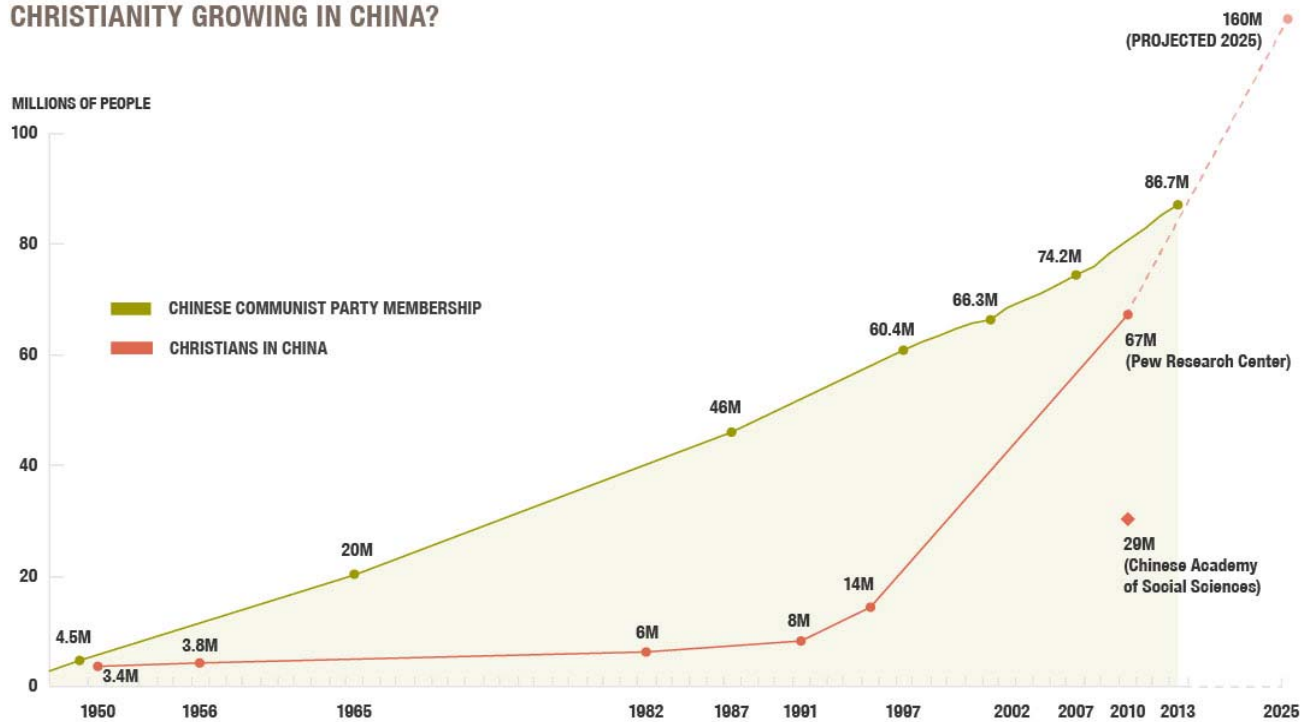
Social scientists have observed the rise of a [spiritual vacuum](#), following decades of unprecedented economic growth. Modern China has emerged as a wealthier and more educated society with renewed interest in religion. Consequently, experts say that as the CCP’s ideology loses public traction, Christian churches, official and unofficial, appear to be filling some of this void. Believers are not only searching for meaning in their own lives but also for the future of their country as China adapts to a rapidly changing economy and society. Protestantism “appeals to Chinese [traditions of ritual and community](#),” according to French Jesuit and China scholar

Benoit Vermander. Moreover, experts say Chinese Christians are also attracted to the faith's sense of fellowship, comprehensive moral system, organized structure, and solidarity as part of an international movement.

Christians in China are predominantly Protestant, drawn to the religion's emphasis on egalitarianism and spiritual community within the church, says Fenggang Yang of Purdue University's Center on Religion and Chinese Society. The sense of fellowship among Chinese Christians is attractive compared to the hierarchal structures of other religious and social organizations, Yang adds. It is also possible that more Chinese may choose Christianity over other faiths, such as Tibetan Buddhism, Islam, or Falun Gong, because Christianity is more tolerated and is potentially a safer option in China, says Freedom House's Cook.

Christian religious practice resurfaced after the end of the Cultural Revolution and has been gaining ground in Chinese society ever since. The number of Christians in the early 1980s was estimated at about six million. Today, estimates vary widely: The government tallied twenty-nine million Christian adherents, while outside organizations have placed their estimates substantially higher. In 2010 the Pew Research Center calculated a total of [sixty-seven million \(PDF\)](#) Christians in China, approximately 5 percent of the country's population. Other independent estimates suggest somewhere between 100 and 130 million. Purdue's Yang [projects](#) that if "modest" growth rates are sustained, China could have as many as 160 million Christians by 2025 and 247 million by 2032. Much of the discrepancy between official government numbers in China and expert estimates can be attributed to Beijing's nonrecognition of Christians engaged in religious activity outside of state-sanctioned religious organizations. A number of social scientists agree that surveys of China's general population [underestimate \(PDF\)](#) the size of the Christian population because some respondents are not willing to admit Christian identity. But the Pew Research Center cautions this makes it [extremely difficult](#) to measure accurate change over time and to identify patterns and make projections about switching into and out of Christian identity.

CHRISTIANITY GROWING IN CHINA?



Source: *Religion in China*, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Pew Research Center, Fenggang Yang, *People's Daily*, Chinatoday.com, Xinhua News Agency, Bloomberg, Charles Neuhauser, *China: A Country Study* (1987)

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Experts reference two historical events as drivers of China's religious awakening. Deng Xiaoping's opening and reform policy changes triggered a religious revival in the 1980s, with Christianity first spreading in house churches formed in rural areas. The second major event was the crackdown on democracy activists in Tiananmen Square in 1989. This marked a major turning point for urban communities; intellectuals who had hoped to promote democratic ideals as an alternative to Maoist thought pivoted to religious practice—to Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, and eventually Christianity.

On the economic front, Beijing shed traditional Maoist policies and has pursued a [market economy](#). As a result, social structures in rural and urban areas were dissolved. Religion entered the fold as a new form of social organization, mostly through conversion. As China works to strike a balance between what are anticipated to be difficult economic structural reforms and adapting to the changing needs of Chinese citizens, experts say that the Christian revival is likely to continue.

How has the government reacted to the surge in Christians?

Christians have faced growing repression in recent years. China ranked twenty-ninth on the [2015 World Watch List](#) compiled by Open Doors, a U.S.-based Christian non-profit, that tracks the persecution of Christians worldwide, up from [thirty-seventh](#) the previous year. Repression campaigns have not been consistent, but they have recently [targeted](#) both house and state-sanctioned churches—be it through the harassment and detention of Christian oberverants, blocking entry to sites of worship, interrupting gatherings, dismantling crosses, or demolishing churches. In 2014, party officials in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang's city of Wenzhou, known for its large Christian population, [ordered](#) the removal of hundreds of crosses and demolition of dozens of churches that allegedly violated construction regulations. In February 2015, Zhejiang party officials announced that the party would [enforce a ban](#) on religious belief among party members to prevent the "[penetration of Western hostile forces](#)." These

campaigns raised fears of possible widespread action against Christianity, but they seem to have been isolated cases.

The CCP identifies religious groups as potential threats to national security, social harmony, and core interests. Ye Xiaowen, former director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, [argued](#) in 1996 that “religion became a weapon in the hands of dissidents for inciting the masses and creating political disturbances.” Though the state’s regulation of religious practice tends to be cyclical—revival, repression, and back again—religion in China remains inherently political. Purdue University’s Yang wrote “faith-based organizations are perceived as one of the most serious threats to the Communist party,” in his 2012 book *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. According to Terence Halliday, co-director of the Center for Law and Globalization at the American Bar Foundation, “Christianity now makes up the [largest single civil society grouping](#) in China. The party sees that.”

A number of party members are concerned that Christianity could be used as a [tool to influence](#) China. Today, an increasing number of human rights advocates and lawyers are Christian adherents, stoking party suspicions that Christianity could be a unifying force to challenge its authority. While religious leaders and practitioners may have no intention of undermining the party, the very perception of a threat by party leaders sets the stage for possible confrontation between churches and the state.

Implementation of religious policy is largely left to local party officials. Though some have [repressed](#) religious groups (two high-profile cases included crackdowns on Beijing’s [Shouwang church](#) and Wenzhou’s [Sanjiang church](#)), elsewhere, leaders have turned a blind eye or been more tolerant, choosing not to interfere in Christian religious activities. A leading priority for local officials is ensuring good [party performance](#), which prizes social stability.

At the top level, Beijing has signaled attempts to inject party influence into Christian ideology. In August 2014, Beijing announced its bid to nationalize Christianity at a conference entitled the “Sinicization of Christianity.” According to state media, SARA director Wang Zuoan said that Christian faith should first and foremost be compatible with the country’s path of socialism and that “the construction of [Chinese Christian theology](#) should adapt to China’s national condition and integrate with Chinese culture.” To complement this initiative, Beijing [enhanced](#) efforts to bring unregistered churches and their members under the larger umbrella of the state-sanctioned authorities. If successful, the SARA would have greater oversight over the Chinese Christian leaders, activities, and beliefs of adherents. More traditional Chinese beliefs, such as [Chinese Buddhism](#) and [Confucianism](#), have also been championed by Beijing to promote a harmonious society. Some experts suggest that this push indicates a move by authorities to [buffer \(PDF\)](#) against the spread of Christianity.

Freedom House’s Cook says that with Xi Jinping’s concentration of power there may now be a window of opportunity: If the central party leadership decides that Christianity is good for China, there could be broader leniency as officials look to gain favor within the party. But Cook also emphasizes that the persecution of Christians appears to have increased under Xi.

Additional Resources

Experts discuss how Christianity has transformed Chinese society in this 2014 Brookings Institution event, [“Christianity in China: a Force for Change?”](#)

The U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor investigates religious freedom in China in this [2013 report](#).

This China Aid [2014 annual report](#) tracks the persecution of Christians and churches in mainland China.

Fenggang Yang’s 2012 book [Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule](#) explores the Chinese government’s treatment of religious practice under the leadership of the CCP.

This January 2015 Freedom House special report, the [Politburo’s Predicament](#), discusses limitations of the Chinese Communist Party’s repression of civil liberties.

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