

I: Chinese Buddhism and Taoism

Degree of persecution:

Chinese Buddhism

LOW

Taoism

VERY LOW

Trajectory of persecution:

Chinese Buddhism



Consistent

Taoism



Consistent

Key findings

- 1 **Revival:** Chinese Buddhism and Taoism have revived significantly over the past 30 years from near extinction, but their scale and influence pale in comparison to the pre-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) era. With an estimated 185 to 250 million believers, Chinese Buddhism is the largest institutionalized religion in China.
- 2 **Intrusive controls:** A large body of regulations and bureaucratic controls ensure political compliance, but unfairly restrict religious practices that are routine in other countries. Unrealistic temple registration requirements, infrequent ordination approvals, and official intervention in temple administration are among the controls that most seriously obstruct grassroots monastics and lay believers.
- 3 **Under Xi Jinping:** President Xi Jinping has essentially continued the policies of his predecessor, Hu Jintao, with some rhetorical adjustments. For CCP leaders, Chinese Buddhism and Taoism are seen as increasingly important channels for realizing the party's political and economic goals at home and abroad. In a rare occurrence, a Chinese Buddhist monk was sentenced to prison in 2016 on politically motivated charges.
- 4 **Commodification:** Economic exploitation of temples for tourism purposes—a multibillion-dollar industry—has emerged as a key point of contention among the state, clergy, and lay believers.
- 5 **Community response:** Religious leaders and monks are becoming increasingly assertive in trying to negotiate free or relatively inexpensive access to temples, and are pushing back against commercial encroachment, often with success.



Visitors walk past the statue of a bodhisattva in a scenic park in Zhejiang Province. Such parks, which encircle temples and charge entrance fees, are a growing source of tension between local Buddhist religious leaders and government authorities.

Credit: Kuei-min Chang

“The values of Buddhist ideals and the China Dream agree and understand [each other].... Together they achieve the ideological foundation of the struggle and the dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”

—Fang Litian, professor of Buddhist philosophy, Renmin University, 2013¹

“Many local governments look at temples as a source of revenue. The prefectural government developed the surrounding areas as an attempt to encircle the temple so they could collect an admission fee. But the Master will never agree. He says that the moment we have to collect an entrance fee to survive is the moment we close the temple.”

—Monk at a temple in Jiangsu Province²

Revival and expansion since the Cultural Revolution

Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, along with various folk religions, have been an integral part of Chinese culture and society for thousands of years.³ Although the CCP perceived them as relics of feudalism, it allowed some degree of state-sanctioned religious practice during the first 17 years of its rule, establishing corporatist associations to govern these and other faiths. Still, government agencies took over the management of temples, Buddhist and Taoist monastic clergy were forced to participate in manual labor, and performing religious rites became increasingly dangerous.

This limited degree of tolerance disappeared during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Aggressive eradication efforts became the norm. Temples were destroyed. Spiritual texts were burned. Monks and nuns were disrobed, imprisoned, and beaten. And the vast majority of lay believers ceased public and even private displays of faith in an atmosphere of harsh repression and political turmoil.

After Mao Zedong's death and Deng Xiaoping's ascension as paramount leader in 1978, the CCP largely returned to its pre-Cultural Revolution stance on religion, beginning a period of greater tolerance for Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, and even state support for temple reconstruction. As surviving religious leaders resumed their activities, it soon became evident that the party's efforts to eradicate these faiths—and Chinese religiosity generally—had failed.

A strict regulatory framework, extensive political controls, and economic exploitation continue to limit unchecked growth. Nevertheless, Chinese Buddhism has emerged as the country's largest institutionalized religion, while Taoism has experienced its own gradual revival on a smaller scale.

Today, more than 38,000 registered Chinese Buddhist and Taoist temples of varying sizes are in operation,⁴ and there are at least 120,000 Chinese Buddhist monks, nuns, and Taoist priests.⁵ For various reasons, including the fact that many Chinese practice a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion and do not affiliate with any formal religious organization, precise tallies of lay believers are nearly impossible to determine. Nevertheless, hundreds of millions of Chinese are believed to self-identify as Buddhists and Taoists. A 2007 Chinese Spiritual Life Survey estimated that there were 185 million Buddhists in China and 12 million adults who clearly identified with Taoism. Many more people (173 million) reported participating in some Taoist practices, although these may overlap with folk religions.⁶ More recently, the Pew Research Center estimated that as of 2010 there were 244.11 million Buddhists in China, representing 18.2 percent of the population.⁷

Day-to-day practice is diverse and influenced by spiritual lineage, geographic location, and other factors. But a significant proportion of Chinese Buddhist and Taoist religious rituals revolve around the temple, where Buddhist monks and Taoist priests perform services for devotees or offer spiritual guidance. Although large temples are those best known to both Chinese and foreigners, much more common across China are small venues that typically house one to five monks or nuns. These monastics focus their days on private practice and meditation, temple upkeep, and provision of spiritual services to lay believers in the surrounding community, and they face limited interference from local authorities.⁸ Much lay practice in both Buddhism and Taoism centers on the idea of merit, which one can

amass by performing good deeds and following the Tao, in addition to making offerings at temples. A person's stock of merit is believed to bring benefits in this life, the afterlife, and future rebirths. Anthropological studies indicate that such teachings play an increasingly important role in the lives of many urban Chinese, who may take guidance from concepts of merit or karma in their daily life even if they do not regularly participate in temple services or rituals.⁹

There are strong indications that this revival and expansion of Buddhism and Taoism will continue, if permitted. First, the current size of the monastic community and the population of lay believers pales in comparison to the pre-Cultural Revolution era, suggesting that the two faiths have further potential for growth.¹⁰ Second, temples are increasing their outreach by holding ritual assemblies, running religious knowledge workshops, celebrating holidays, and engaging in charitable work, often with the active assistance of lay believers. Third, demand for religious services and guidance is outstripping supply, particularly in terms of registered temples. If the estimates cited above are accurate, there is one sanctioned temple for every 6,400 believers, representing an extraordinary shortage.¹¹ As a result, even among the two religions that have the most cooperative relationship with the party-state, there is a large degree of extralegal religious practice taking place. For example, in 2014, Fujian Province reportedly had over 20,000 unregistered Taoist sites—more than 15 times as many as its 1,263 registered sites.¹²

Promoting Chinese Buddhism and Taoism to serve party goals

The CCP's religious policy has evolved since the end of the Cultural Revolution from a focus on accelerating the disappearance of religion toward identifying ways in which certain religious communities and leaders can help advance a range of CCP political and economic goals. While this attitude applies to all officially recognized religions, it has been especially evident with regard to Chinese Buddhism, and to a lesser extent, Taoism.

The CCP has tried to tap into the influence of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism to build its "soft power."

There are various ways in which these religions can serve to advance CCP policy goals at home and abroad. Domestically, CCP leaders have adopted them as a means of shoring up party legitimacy and Chinese nationalism in an era when Marxist ideology has lost its popular cachet. Faith-based Buddhist charity organizations or temples themselves are increasingly involved—often with official encouragement—in providing social services to vulnerable populations like orphans, the elderly, or victims of natural disasters. Party leaders reportedly perceive them as less politically threatening than, and even a possible replacement for, secular nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or Christian charities that play a similar role.¹³ And growing interest among foreign and domestic tourists in visiting religious sites with historical, artistic, or spiritual significance has fueled a multibillion-dollar industry, contributing to economic growth.

Externally, the CCP has tried to tap into the influence of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism to build its "soft power" and improve relations with Taiwanese society. The party's attempts to project soft power abroad gained prominence during the Hu administration as China emerged as the world's second-largest economy. A central dimension of the campaign has been to present the Chinese government as a standard-bearer and benefactor of traditional Chinese culture, a term almost synonymous with the legacies and influences of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In the realm of religious policy, this has manifested as support for international conferences.

For example, between 2006 and 2015, China organized and hosted four World Buddhist Forums, a previously nonexistent conference of 1,000 religious leaders, monks, nuns, and lay believers from over 30 countries.¹⁴ Besides the content of the conferences themselves, the robed monks gathered under Chinese auspices provided compelling images for state media to share globally, displaying the government's ostensible religious tolerance.¹⁵ In 2011, the CCP provided support for a major international Taoist conference.¹⁶

By contrast, in a sign that the CCP sees Chinese Buddhism as more useful and less politically threatening than other faiths,¹⁷ it has hosted no similar international conferences for Christianity or Islam, and officially disfavored Tibetan Buddhist figures like the Dalai Lama are excluded. The first overseas NGO allowed to establish nationwide branches in China was a Taiwanese Buddhist charity, which received approval in 2010, again underscoring the greater trust that the CCP places in Buddhist groups relative to both secular activists and other religious charities.¹⁸

Perhaps the most noticeable example of the party's use of Buddhism and Taoism to serve its political goals was the Hu-era association between the CCP campaign to promote a "harmonious society" and Buddhist or Taoist religious teachings. An April 2006 article by the official Xinhua news agency, posted on the CCP's own website, spelled this out explicitly. It stated that the first World Buddhist Forum sent the "message that the doctrines of Buddhism are officially recognized by the atheist government as a conducive vehicle to help with the creation of a harmonious society."¹⁹ In 2010, then Politburo Standing Committee member Jia Qinglin made a similar appeal at a meeting with leaders of the Chinese Taoist Association. According to Xinhua, Jia urged "the association to promote and adapt the ideals of harmony embodied in classic Taoist works to socialist society."²⁰

Scholars cite several factors that make Chinese Buddhism an especially appealing governing instrument for the CCP as it seeks to guide Chinese religiosity in directions it perceives as politically safe:

- There is a history of regime support and political complicity among Chinese Buddhist religious leaders and monastics. Chinese Buddhism features fewer theological barriers to professing loyalty to the emperor or ruling party compared with some other religions, and the temples that are so central to Buddhist practice are inherently immovable and irreplaceable, meaning religious leaders would risk incurring grave damage to their faith if they engaged in overt political resistance.²¹
- Chinese leaders believe that the spread of Buddhism helps promote civility, encourages the development of a more compassionate citizenry, and provides a safety valve for social tensions, but without provoking demands for political reform.²²
- Buddhist leaders are receptive to cooperation with the party-state. They respond to government demands related to charity work,²³ employ official rhetoric to urge Buddhism-friendly policies,²⁴ and proactively prove their political loyalty, for instance by aiding crackdowns on other spiritual communities.²⁵
- The extensive presence of Buddhism in neighboring countries represents a source of common cultural heritage and a unifying factor with Taiwanese society.²⁶

- Chinese leaders are wary of Christianity and Islam due to their association with foreign cultures, holy sites, and authorities, as well as their long histories of resistance to political repression. By contrast, although Buddhism originated in India, it gradually Sinicized over the course of centuries.

Several of these factors apply to Taoism as well (its indigenous character, close association with Chinese culture, and popularity in Taiwan, for example), rendering it another attractive partner for the CCP.

Chinese Buddhism and Taoism under Xi Jinping

Since assuming the helm of the CCP in November 2012, Xi Jinping has primarily continued Hu-era policies on Buddhism and Taoism. He met with the head of a Taiwanese Buddhist organization in 2013,²⁷ and in October 2015 a fourth World Buddhist Forum was hosted in Jiangsu Province.²⁸ In an important victory for such soft-power initiatives, in 2014 China for the first time hosted the general conference of a long-standing international Buddhist organization, the World Fellowship of Buddhists, founded in Sri Lanka in 1950.²⁹

“On the basis of traditional Chinese culture, nurture, and promote core socialist values.”

– Signs throughout Beijing, 2014

Nevertheless, there have been a number of minor changes since the Hu era, particularly with regard to the rhetoric on these religions and ways in which certain aspects of the party’s approach have become more explicit and strident:

- 1. Rhetorical shift from ‘harmonious society’ to ‘China Dream’:** As noted above, it was common in the last decade to see official statements on how Buddhism could serve the cause of achieving a “harmonious society,” a term that emerged as a propaganda centerpiece under Hu’s leadership. Since Xi coined the phrase “China Dream” to capture the party’s goal of realizing the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” Buddhism and Taoism have been held up as resources that can be deployed toward this end. The quote at the opening of this chapter, taken from a 2013 article titled “Buddhism and the China Dream,” is one example of such rhetoric.
- 2. Greater emphasis on using Chinese religion to shore up CCP legitimacy:** Xi himself and the party’s propaganda apparatus in general have increasingly employed references to traditional Chinese culture—of which the Buddhist and Taoist religions are a key component—as the basis for upholding CCP values and political leadership. Signs displayed throughout Beijing in the summer of 2014 reportedly promoted exhortations like “On the basis of traditional Chinese culture, nurture and promote core socialist values.” In a March 2015 speech to the UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Xi devoted a paragraph to acknowledging Buddhism’s positive contributions to Chinese culture and China’s own influence on Buddhism. Writers in various Buddhist publications interpreted the speech as confirmation that Buddhism would not be left out of the “China Dream” and optimistically heralded a new era for Buddhism in China.³⁰
- 3. More explicit concern over ‘foreign’ religious influences:** The CCP has long sought to separate religious believers inside China from spiritual authorities based outside the country, citing the principle of independence from foreign influence and self-governance as a core dimension of its religious policy. Nevertheless, in an important speech on

religious affairs that Xi delivered to top party cadres in April 2016, he emphasized that “we must resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means and prevent ideological infringement by extremists,”³¹ a likely reference to the growth of Christianity, Tibetans’ continued reverence of the exiled Dalai Lama, and fears of extremist violence among Uighur Muslims. The statement also matches party leaders’ broader hostility toward “Western” values under Xi. And it implies a more favorable view toward the “indigenous” religions of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism.

Despite these rhetorical shifts, there is little evidence of concrete changes in policy or implementation. Chinese Buddhism and Taoism appeared to benefit from this discourse mainly by omission: They were not subjected to the noticeably harsher treatment experienced by some other religious groups and secular activists under Xi.

Key methods of political control

Although Chinese Buddhism and Taoism have a relatively cooperative rapport with the party-state, there is an important coercive dimension to the relationship. The regime proactively seeks to exercise control over the leadership and development of these religions in an effort to ensure political loyalty and protect the benefits they offer to party goals. In the process, the authorities constrain Chinese citizens’ ability to practice their faiths as they see fit, violating their right to religious freedom.

While many of these restrictive measures predate Xi’s rise to power, they have played out in four key ways over the past four years:

- 1. Bureaucratic and interventionist state oversight:** Buddhist and Taoist leaders and believers are subject to three layers of oversight: the Buddhist Association of China (BAC) and the Chinese Taoist Association (CTA), ostensibly nongovernmental entities that work very closely with state agencies to guide the development of the religions and mobilize the religious community to support official policies; the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA); and the CCP’s United Front Work Department, responsible for managing relations with nonparty entities such as religious groups. Branches and representatives of all three bodies have networks that reach down to the village, district, and temple level.

For example, many temples are run jointly by monastics and a temple administration committee connected to the local Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB).³² More commercialized temples may also be administered by other state agencies involved in preserving and promoting cultural or historical heritage. Since 2010, the influence of state representatives at the upper echelons of the BAC appears to have increased, a contrast to previous periods when religious believers or leaders held more senior positions. A 2015 leadership rotation reinforced this trend, as the secretary general of the BAC and the director of SARA’s first division—Liu Wei and Wang Jian—essentially swapped places. Similar transitions have occurred in recent years among leaders of the Chinese Taoist Association.³³

- 2. Unrealistic registration requirements:** Under the 2004 Regulations on Religious Affairs, a religious site seeking official registration must demonstrate a stable lawful income, it must be a regular place of worship for a congregation led by qualified clerics, and the

application must be filed by one of the patriotic religious associations. Unfortunately, many small temples cannot meet these criteria, due to a lack of official property records or the absence of clerics certified by the relevant patriotic religious association, for instance. This has contributed to the large number of unregistered sites of worship.

Given the challenges of registering all such sites, in recent years the authorities have taken measures to guide visitors away from unregistered monasteries and temples to registered alternatives. In October 2012, SARA and nine other government agencies issued a directive prohibiting unregistered religious sites from conducting religious activities and collecting donations.³⁴ Meanwhile, SARA has been taking steps to distinguish registered and unregistered sites via placard campaigns in various regions,³⁵ and it has created a website listing sanctioned venues.³⁶

3. Restrictive clergy certification: The BAC has centralized the issuance of ordination certificates since 1994. It has also limited ordinations to at most 10 ceremonies per year and no more than 350 novices per ceremony, thereby creating a maximum annual quota of 3,500 ordinations, although in many years the actual total has been smaller.³⁷ Novices who seek ordination require approval from their monastery as well as the local branches of the BAC and the state RAB, embedding a test of political reliability into the process. Since 2000, admissions of new disciples have been limited to officially registered monasteries with at least five monks or nuns who are ordained and listed in a BAC registry.

Only three ordinations for the Taoist Zhengyi school have been performed since 1949, with the most recent one occurring in 2011.

For Taoism, the CTA also maintains a monopoly on the printing and issuing of all Taoist certificates, but it has held far fewer ordinations. For example, only three ordinations for the Zhengyi school have been performed since 1949, with the most recent one occurring in 2011. By contrast, the ordination of overseas Zhengyi Taoists (particularly from Taiwan) has been permitted annually since 1991 at Mount Longhu, to help advance “the unification of the fatherland.”³⁸ The Chinese disciples are at a disadvantage because, in Taoist belief systems, an individual may become a monk or nun, but without ordination he or she is not included in the master’s lineage or privy to the full benefits of the discipline’s spiritual power.

4. Isolated instances of violent repression: In recent years, there have been periodic reports of either partial or full destruction of temple properties by Chinese authorities, either due to lack of registration or to serve broader economic development goals. In a particularly violent episode in February 2014, more than 100 urban management officers (chengguan) were reportedly deployed in Xiamen, Fujian Province, to demolish an allegedly “illegally constructed” Buddhist temple, resulting in violent clashes with local residents.³⁹

On a more individual level, monastics who express criticism of the political system or solidarity with human rights causes have faced surveillance, travel restrictions, and even imprisonment. In April 2016, a court in Wuhan sentenced Buddhist monk Shengguan (also known as Xu Zhiqiang) to four years in prison for “inciting subversion of state power,”⁴⁰ a charge often used to imprison political dissidents.⁴¹ He had been detained in May 2015 while giving a Dharma lecture amid a broader clampdown on Chinese citizens suspected of commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Although imprisonment of a Chinese Buddhist monk is extremely rare, Shengguan's punishment was viewed among human rights lawyers and his disciples as a serious violation of religious freedom. It also sends a clear signal to other Buddhist monastics on the potential consequences of allowing social consciousness and personal interpretations of religious principles to override political loyalty to the CCP.

Economic exploitation of temple property

Almost as soon as temples began to be reopened after the end of the Cultural Revolution, local officials started to prey on them as a source of economic development. Over time, commodification of temple property has intensified as the economy has grown and the number of Chinese and foreign tourists has increased.

Commodification can take several forms. In some instances, temples have been converted wholly into tourist destinations and do not house religious clergy, a process one scholar termed the "museumification" of temples.⁴² This is the case at sites such as Beijing's White Pagoda Temple or Yangzhou's Tianning Temple, which are run by various government departments focused on tourism and preserving cultural heritage.⁴³ In many other settings, however, local officials and developers have sought to enclose a temple that is home to monastics inside a scenic park, charge high entrance fees, and compel the clergy to collect and share the revenue received. The temple leadership itself has little control over the admission fee.⁴⁴

The clergy at some temples have voluntarily imposed visitor fees, a relic of the period immediately following the Cultural Revolution when the community of lay believers and religious donations that could support the temple had not yet been reestablished. Such temple fees are typically quite low, however.

By contrast, once a temple is enclosed in a scenic park, the cost for visitors increases significantly. For example, at 162 temples of "national importance" that were open to the public in 2013, the average admission fee to the temple alone was 6 yuan (\$0.90). But for the 61 temples that were located inside a scenic park with an additional admission fee, the average total entrance cost rose nearly tenfold to 59 yuan (\$8.80). At popular sites, such fees can quickly add up to significant revenue. For example, the sacred Buddhist site Mount Putuo received 6.64 million visitors in 2015. With an admission fee of 160 yuan (\$23) per adult, the total income from admissions reached just over 1 billion yuan (nearly \$150 million) that year.⁴⁵ Tourists also contribute to the local economy through transportation services, lodging, restaurants, and souvenir shops.

As with other exploitative development practices in China, such as illegal land confiscation or forced demolition, the commodification of temples is driven in large part by the incorporation of economic growth figures into the formal performance evaluations of local officials, which determine their promotion potential.⁴⁶ In addition, because local party cadres are frequently reassigned to different geographic locations, many seek short-term ways to increase government revenue and development statistics with little regard for the long-term effects on the local population.

Enclosing a temple and charging admission is an attractive method, particularly because it does not entail the kind of environmental damage other initiatives might. As a result, according to

Kuei-Min Chang, who conducted fieldwork on the topic in recent years, “the pressure to put a price on temple access and religious services is constant.”⁴⁷ Interestingly, central authorities have—on paper, at least—attempted to discourage such practices. But with little action taken to alter the underlying incentives or penalize officials who pursue this strategy of career advancement, rhetorical condemnations have had a limited impact in curbing the phenomenon.

A study of 23 historic temples conducted between June 2012 and May 2015 found that given a choice, grassroots religious leaders would prefer free and open temple access for visitors.⁴⁸ From their perspective, charging a high—or any—admission fee is problematic for several reasons. First, it decreases the opportunity for low-income individuals to obtain religious services, including important rituals in both Buddhism and Taoism that are believed to confer great merit on devotees. Even for believers who can afford it, a high admission fee may reduce how frequently they visit the temple to pray, light incense, or seek spiritual guidance. Second, the fee represents a form of involuntary offering, violating the concept of free will that is essential to Buddhist enlightenment or the Taoist core principle of nonintervention. Third, high fees undermine the spiritual authority of the temple clergy that traditionally comes from the active consent of followers. Such authority is further harmed when local officials employ fake monks in the scenic park to provide unauthorized (but lucrative) religious services.

As a result of these dynamics, economic exploitation and the commodification efforts of local officials have become a key source of tension in the party-state’s relationship with Buddhist and Taoist clergy at the grassroots level.

Community response and resistance

As noted above, Buddhist leaders at the upper echelons of the bureaucracy demonstrate a high degree of political loyalty to the CCP and its governing agenda. Nevertheless, even for this relatively politically compliant faith community, relations with the party-state apparatus are not without tension, particularly at the grassroots level. For the most part, grassroots resistance to official controls among Chinese Buddhist and Taoist religious leaders has manifested in two key ways:

- 1. Exploiting gaps in enforcement to expand the space for religious practice:** This trend is exemplified by the wide range of activity at the country’s many unregistered temples, as well as in the area of religious charities. Scholar Susan McCarthy notes in her research on Buddhist charities that they effectively create a platform for lay believers to implement Buddhist teachings, experience spiritual awakening, and introduce concepts like compassion to the broader populace outside the confines of a formal site of worship, which Chinese regulations designate as the only location where practice and preaching are supposed to take place.⁴⁹
- 2. Pushing back against commodification efforts:** As part of the revival of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, the social influence and financial resources of monastics at temples has increased significantly since the early period after the Cultural Revolution. This change in power dynamics vis-à-vis local officials has apparently fueled greater

Economic exploitation has become a key source of tension in official relations with grassroots Buddhist and Taoist clergy.

assertiveness among monastics to protect temple assets from new economic encroachment or even reverse previously implemented commodification.⁵⁰

Chinese Buddhist and Taoist communities' pushback against commodification has taken several forms at both national and local levels of government, ranging from legal activism to mild acts of protest:

- 1. Advocating reforms to allow temples to acquire legal personhood:** Religious entities do not match any of the four types of legal person allowed under Chinese law: enterprise, official organ, institution, and social organization. Without legal personhood, they cannot sue or be sued and have to depend on the relevant religious association to represent them in court and negotiate on their behalf with government organs. This has contributed to the phenomenon of widespread commercial exploitation, prompting demands from temple leaders for the addition of a fifth category of "religious person."

Alongside individual abbots like Shi Yongxin of Shaolin Monastery, who raised the issue during the plenary sessions of the National People's Congress (NPC) in 2007 and 2015,⁵¹ official religious bodies and their representatives have also taken up the cause. Shi Chuanyin, president of the BAC, proposed to solve the problem of temples' lack of legal personhood during the 2013 and 2014 meetings of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).⁵² SARA's Research Center took up the issue in a thorough 2013 investigation published in its periodical, *China Religion*.⁵³ Such official support makes the campaign for the reform more likely to succeed.

- 2. Using the courts to protect religious trademarks:** In 2014, the CTA won a landmark case on behalf of the Shanghai City God Temple that led to the cancelation of the registered trademark "Chenghuang" (the name of the Taoist city god), which was being used by a jewelry company. The decision, which acknowledged that the name's use for commercial purposes would "hurt the religious sentiment of those who observe Taoism," was widely seen as a victory against the trend of commodification.⁵⁴ Encouraged by its success, the CTA, supported by SARA and Taoist delegates to the NPC and CPPCC, stated that they would continue to request the cancelation of other such trademarks.⁵⁵

- 3. Verbal negotiation, public pressure, and appeals to local officials:** Local temple leaders have successfully employed a variety of arguments, points of leverage, and public pressure in recent years to negotiate with local government actors for open temple access, lower admission fees, averted demolition, or greater priestly management of venues. These have included outlining the relative loss of income and increased public frustration that follow enclosure of a temple;⁵⁶ threats that visitors could shift to a competing temple should prices increase or remain static after the other temple lowered its fees;⁵⁷ and demonstrating that allowing religious leaders to manage a property as they see fit would help certification of the site as part of an important lineage, thereby promoting more tourism and economic development for the town.⁵⁸

In keeping with broader trends in civic activism in China, monks have also used social media to publicize threats to temple assets and put pressure on local officials to abandon certain plans. One such instance occurred in 2013, when local authorities

announced a plan to demolish monks' living quarters at Xingjiao Temple and establish a scenic park around it. The temple is famous for housing the remains of Xuanzang, the monk whose pilgrimage to India to seek Buddhist teachings inspired the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West*. When the plan was exposed on social media, it drew strong public opposition, as well as criticism from the BAC and SARA, due to the significance of Xuanzang to Chinese Buddhism. As a result, the local government canceled the demolition and abandoned the enclosure plans.⁵⁹

4. Non-cooperation protests: When negotiation efforts have failed, monks at several temples have resorted to more assertive tactics in recent years. One particularly common one has been the temporary closure of the monastery to visitors. On numerous occasions in provinces such as Hebei, Shaanxi, and most recently Yunnan, this has served as a kind of “trump card” for the monastics.⁶⁰ It signals to the local authorities that without the monks' consent to allow visitors to enter, the local government cannot make any money. The subtle act of protest also hurts the officials' reputation among local residents and the broader faith community when word of the incident is posted online.

Such actions have forced officials to recalculate the costs and benefits of enclosing a temple or charging higher fees. In the documented incidents Freedom House identified, the officials took a much more conciliatory stance within weeks, days, or even hours of the monks' closed-door protest. Another quiet form of protest used to remind officials of the importance of monastic cooperation has been nonparticipation of prominent religious leaders in official ceremonies.⁶¹

Future outlook

As the country's largest institutionalized religion, Chinese Buddhism plays a particularly important role in Chinese society, while Taoism is a truly indigenous Chinese faith. Both are seen as a potential governing partner for the CCP. Given Xi Jinping's rhetorical emphasis on traditional Chinese culture and instances of support for activities like international conferences and charitable work, Chinese leaders' preference for these religions over other faiths may be expressed in more concrete—and financial—ways in the coming years.

Despite such official preference, Chinese Buddhism and Taoism are subject to a variety of official controls and encroachments on autonomy that are viewed negatively by many grassroots religious leaders. This is particularly true in the realm of economic commodification. As China experiences a slowdown in economic growth, religious commodification may evolve in two possible directions. On the one hand, pressure to commodify temples may increase if local officials perceive it to be a fruitful source of consumer-driven income at a time when other revenue sources are dwindling. On the other hand, as the economic downturn affects middle-class Chinese, they may have fewer resources to tour religious sites, reducing the impetus for economic development of such venues.

Regardless of the precise trajectory that takes hold under the new economic conditions,

Monks have used social media to publicize threats to temple assets and put pressure on local officials to abandon certain plans.

it is clear that at least some commodification initiatives will continue. As temples' social capital in the community grows further with the ongoing revival of Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, and monastics take note of which tactics have achieved success at other sites, new examples of assertiveness in pushing back against local government commodification efforts are likely to emerge. Eventually, they may also attract a fiercer official response.

NOTES

1. Litian Fang, "Foijiao yu Zhongguo meng," [Buddhism and the China dream], *Zhongguo Zongjiao* 12 (2013), 28–31.
2. Kuei-min Chang, "Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China," *Columbia University Academic Commons*, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7916/D8SN097K>.
3. For the sake of clarity, this report refers to "Chinese Buddhism" to distinguish it from Tibetan Buddhism (whether practiced by Tibetans or Han). It consists mostly of Mahayana Buddhism, but also strands of Zen and Theravada.
4. These figures exclude Tibetan Buddhism. According to official figures, as of 2014, there were 27,700 Chinese Mahayana Buddhism places of worship, 1,700 for Theravada Buddhism, and 9,000 for Taoism. See State Administration for Religious Affairs of China, "Woguo Zongjiao De Jiben Qingkuang," [The Basic Information of Our Country's Religions], April 1, 2014, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/llyj/63734.htm>.
5. This figure is based on data from the State Administration for Religious Affairs, indicating that as of 2014, there were 72,000 registered Chinese Mahayana Buddhist monks and nuns, 2,000 monastics from Theravada Buddhism, and 48,000 Taoist priests. State Administration for Religious Affairs of China, "Woguo Zongjiao De Jiben Qingkuang," [The Basic Information of Our Country's Religions], April 1, 2014, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/llyj/63734.htm>.
6. Katharina Wenzel-Teuber, "2015 Statistical Update on Religions and Churches in the People's Republic of China," *Religions and Christianity in Today's China* 6, no. 2 (2016): 20–43.
7. The center does not disaggregate Taoism, but includes an estimate of 294.3 million people who practice folk religion (21.9 percent of the population). These may also overlap with the Buddhists given the mixture of traditions that many Chinese practice. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, "Global Religious Futures—China," (accessed June 10, 2016), http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/china#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010®ion_name=All%20Countries&restrictions_year=2013.
8. Interview with China scholar who wished to remain anonymous, June 2016.
9. Gareth Fisher, *From Comrades to Bodhisattvas: Moral Dimensions of Lay Buddhist Practice in Contemporary China* (University of Hawaii Press, 2014).
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11. E-mail communication with Kuei-Min Chang, doctoral candidate, Columbia University, June 2016.
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 36. See State Administration for Religious Affairs, "Zongjiao Changshuo Jiben Xinxi" [Basic Information of Religious Venues], accessed November 16, 2016, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/csjsx/>; Chongqing Municipal Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee, "Chongqing Shi Quanmian Qidong Fojiao Daojiao Huodong Changsuo Biaozhi Pai Guapai Gongzuo" [Chongqing Municipality Comprehensively Begins Buddhist and Taoist Religious Activity Site Placard Hanging Work].
 37. See State Administration for Religious Affairs of China, "Quanguo han chuan fojiao siyuan chuanshou san tan da jie guanli banfa" [National Measures for Administering the Initiation Regarding the Three Pure Precepts in Han Buddhism Temples], December 20, 2010, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfg/qgxzttxgigzd/6512.htm>.
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pressure and persecution since then, including forced dismissal as manager of a temple in Jiangxi Province in 2006, after he held a religious ritual for those killed in 1989 and sought to protect the temple's assets from appropriation by local officials. Human Rights in China, "Top Buddhist Officials Join in Persecution of Activist Monk," August 25, 2006, <http://www.phayul.com/news/tools/print.aspx?id=13662&t=1>.

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