

Control of Religious Freedom in Authoritarian States:  
Explaining China's Selective Treatment of Protestant Churches

by

Sarah Lee

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Committee in charge:

Professor Kevin O'Brien, Chair  
Professor Jason Wittenberg  
Professor Leonardo Arriola  
Professor Peter Lorentzen

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## Abstract

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Why do authoritarian states selectively control religious freedom? In China, what explains the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s tendency to repress some Protestant churches while allowing other Protestant churches to operate?

Upon the rapid growth of this Western religion, the atheist Communist Party has controlled and repressed Protestant churches and churchgoers. However, contrary to the expectation that persecution should simply target all unregistered churches, the government has varied in the tactics and amount in repressing both registered and unregistered churches. In addition, the revised *Regulations on Religious Affairs* passed under the Xi administration in 2018 has tightened the government's grip on religion. Here, two questions arise. First, why are not all registered churches safe from repression, and why are not all unregistered churches repressed? Second, how should we understand the government's selective repression of churches in light of the recent changes in religious policies?

Through a three-part theoretical framework, I argue that selective repression occurs when actors at different levels of society are mired in relationships that motivate and constrain their decisions toward repression. Specifically, the central government is lodged between domestic and international audience, juggling domestic control and international reputation which leads to selective prioritization of religious control; the local officials are caught between the central government above and the society below as they selectively implement repressive policies; and the religious communities are stuck between abiding by government rules and obeying God's commands, which explains variations in their religious behavior and experience of repression.

I test these theories using a mixed-methodology approach. Using machine learning techniques on an original dataset of official news articles from 2016 to 2021, I demonstrate that as both domestic and international pressures increased and changed in nature, the central government's prioritization of religious policies also increased, with directions shifting from selective repression in the early to mid 2010s to indiscriminate repression starting in the late 2010s. Additionally, I use process tracing and qualitative case studies to illustrate that when religious control is not communicated as a national priority by the central government, local

officials have more discretion over how and on whom to implement restrictive regulations, leading to selective implementation of repressive policies. Finally, based on insights from over 120 interviews I conducted with Chinese pastors from 2016 to 2019 and 30 supplementary interviews with missionaries and academics from China, South Korea, and the United States, I show that pastors choose a style of ministry that increases the risk of repression due to their beliefs about God and the government.

Explaining selective repression helps to understand not only the kinds of religious activities that are discouraged by the state, but also the specific characteristics of civil society and particular ideologies that the government is unwilling to tolerate. The ways in which different levels of an authoritarian government tackle the threat of religion also reveal the innerworkings of central-local relations as well as national and local policymaking and implementation. At the same time, observing Chinese pastors as they operate in a repressive environment provides insight into the various minds of the religious people. In this way, this research also contributes to the broader discussion of civil rights, repression, and state-society relations in the context of a strong authoritarian state.

To my parents,  
Hyung Won Lee and Miriam Chu

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CCC: China Christian Council

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

INGO: International Non-Governmental Organization

NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

PRC: People's Republic of China

PSB: Public Security Bureau

RAB: Religious Affairs Bureau

SARA: State Administration for Religious Affairs

TSPM: Three-Self Patriotic Movement

UFWD: United Front Work Department

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I once thought a Ph.D. dissertation was a rite of passage. Once I had written it, I would have magically transitioned from a struggling graduate student to an academic and a producer of knowledge. However, through this dissertation project, I became a student of the world once more, humbled by the huge lesson that my research would not have been possible without the help of mentors, friends, and family from all stages of my life and all parts of the world.

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# Chapter 1:

## Introduction

“We can’t be too loud.”

The female pastor warned as she waited for someone inside to unlock the apartment door. Inside the apartment, the plain white living room had been cleared for large gathering. Rows of colorful plastic chairs filled one half of the room while the other half was occupied by two young adults busily setting up the microphone, editing PowerPoint slides, and adjusting the projector screen. People began to trickle in, as curious to spot a newcomer as I was to see them. When the service began at 10 o’clock, people sang Chinese hymnals coarsely guided by a digital HymnMaster. Based on a verse from the New Testament, the pastor spoke about the grace of God. Following the sermon, members of the congregation shared stories of thanksgiving they experienced in the previous week. This was my first visit to a house church in China in July 2010.

Since then, I have visited many more churches in different parts of China. Some were even more hidden from the public eye, with meetings of ten to twelve people held quietly on a weekday to avoid suspicion. Others held Sunday services in the conference room of a contemporary office building. Yet others were housed in grandiose sanctuaries with the Chinese flag waving out in the front yard. The diversity of churches was especially fascinating to witness because it was different from the image of churches portrayed in international news outlets. Reports of countless cross demolitions and photos of congregations gathering outside in defiance against the government shutdown of their church were hard to place alongside these churches I saw firsthand surviving and thriving in various forms. And this kind of mismatch has not been limited to churches in China.

Religion grows in different shapes and sizes in authoritarian countries because it faces restrictions that make it difficult to operate freely and safely. In other words, flexibility and versatility are required for a religion to survive in a restrictive environment. Religion is not entirely welcomed in nondemocracies because it can adopt many identities—as a majority or a

minority group in the population ([Fox 2018](#); [Fox, Eisenstein, Breslawski 2022](#)), as a registered or an unregistered organization in society ([Flere 2010](#), [Finke, Mataic and Fox 2017](#)) and as a supporter or an opponent of the regime in power ([Johnston and Figa 1988](#); [Koesel 2014](#); [Belge and Karakoc 2015](#)). Regardless of which identity it holds, religion has the power to spread ideologies ([Kearney 1986](#); [Williams 1996](#); [Aminzade and Perry 2001](#)), organize lifestyles ([Wood 2002](#)), and unite and gather people for a cause ([Gill 2003](#)). Religion can be beneficial to the government by bringing harmony and stability to society ([Maton and Wells 1995](#); [Gopin 2002](#); [Smock 2006](#)), yet with the same power it can also incite people to revolt against the regime (Tocqueville 1835; [Mardin 1971](#); [Anderson 2004](#); [Herold 2015](#)). It is especially this latter potential that perpetuates the threat of religion in the perspective of authoritarian governments.

Historical precedents also confirm and strengthen authoritarian states' wariness toward religion. Religion has been associated with many violent conflicts around the globe ([Fox 2004](#); [Atran and Ginges 2012](#)), while some religions have even been at the root cause of the collapse of authoritarian regimes ([Philpott 2004](#)). Koesel ([2014](#)) finds that changes across Eastern Europe had "strong religious overtones that hardened overtime and fueled violent conflict."<sup>1</sup> Similar examples of religious struggle for political change can be seen in the Middle East, as with the 1979 Iranian Revolution ([Bill 1982](#)), as well as in Latin America ([Zebich-Knos 2002](#)), Africa ([Jacobs 2002](#)), and Asia ([Lambert 2001](#)).

For these reasons, different forms of authoritarian control over religion are found around the globe. Iran supports Shi'i Islam as its official state religion and represses non-Muslim minority religions as well as different sects of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Russia does not have a state religion but maintains a close and interdependent relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church, recognizes few as "traditional" religions, and uses laws on extremism and antiterrorism to repress religious minorities.<sup>3</sup> Singapore protects the freedom of religions that do not disrupt "public order, public health, and morality," and specifically represses Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church.<sup>4</sup> North Korea is less transparent about the makeup of religious groups in its society but is known to repress all religions, subjecting people caught engaging in religious activities to interrogations, torture, public trials, and labor camps.<sup>5</sup>

Restrictions on religion are also found in China despite its constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. Under the State Constitution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially recognizes and permits five religions, including Protestantism, contingent on registration with the government.<sup>6</sup> Article 36 articulates that the state "protects normal religious activities," but

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<sup>1</sup> Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Firuz Kazemzadeh, "The Baha'is in Iran: Twenty years of repression." *Social Research* (2000): 537-558; Scott Weiner, "Religious Freedom Conditions in Iran," *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*, August 2021, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2021-08/2021%20Iran%20Country%20Update.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, "2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Russia," *Office of International Religious Freedom*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/russia/>

<sup>4</sup> Singapore Statutes Online, *Constitution of the Republic of Singapore*, <https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/CONS1963?ProvIds=pr15-&ViewType=Advance&Phrase=public+order&WiAl=1>, Retrieved July 2, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, "2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)," *Office of International Religious Freedom*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/north-korea/>

<sup>6</sup> The five official religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

that “no one may...engage in activities that disrupt public order.”<sup>7</sup> The room for interpretation left in these phrases allows for variation in religious policies, not excluding repressive ones. Under this umbrella of limited freedom, the number of Chinese Protestant Christians has grown by 10 percent on average every year since 1979. Currently, approximately 5 percent of the Chinese population is Protestant, rivalling the number of registered CCP members.<sup>8</sup>

The Chinese government requires religious sites to register with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), a government-sanctioned patriotic religious association for Protestants, in order to operate legally.<sup>9</sup> Although registration seems to be the simple choice, in reality, churches face choices that come with tradeoffs. A church that registers gains the legal right to worship and hold services, but with less autonomy. In contrast, a church that does not register with the TSPM enjoys the autonomy of operating without direct government oversight in the choice of locations, pastors, or ideology, but faces risks of persecution in all these areas.

The latent threat perceived in churches and the dichotomy between registered and unregistered churches suggest that the Chinese government’s policies toward Christian churches should be simple: repress illegal, unregistered churches. Contrary to expectations, state repression has varied among (e.g., registration status, location,) and within (e.g., congregation size, building size) different types of churches without a clear pattern distinguishing the repressed from the not repressed. In addition, there have been variations in the *methods* of repression including arrests, detainment, physical violence, ideological training, reassignment of personnel, fines, service interruptions, church closings, flag and security camera installations, cross demolitions, among others. Given this complexity, how do we explain the Chinese government’s selective repression of Protestant churches?

## State of Selective Repression in China

Cambridge Dictionary defines *repression* as “the use of force or violence to control a group of people.”<sup>10</sup> Based on this definition, I further define *religious repression* as the government’s obstruction of worship by leaders and the congregation. *Selectivity* or *selectiveness* refers to “the act of intentionally choosing some people or things and not others.”<sup>11</sup> As this definition clearly states, the choice of calling repression “selective” carries the assumption that the state’s decision to repress some units and not others is one of intention. As will be evident in the following chapters, this assumption of intentionality undergirds the entirety of my argument and analyses. Put differently, if I were to take away intentionality from the state’s decision to repress targets, then this would make efforts to understand the minds of the authoritarian state irrelevant. Instead, the question I could ask with such arbitrariness would be what the state could achieve from randomly repressing a large population, and how much the state would be wasting through useless efforts to monitor and regulate the population if the end goal were random repression. Alternatively, adding intentionality to the state’s decision-making allows conjectures

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<sup>7</sup> *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, 14 March 2004, National People’s Congress Website, [http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/node\\_2825.htm](http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/node_2825.htm).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> State Administration for Religious Affairs, *Regulations on Religious Affairs* [宗教事务条例], 30 November 2004, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regulations-on-religious-affairs>.

<sup>10</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/repression>

<sup>11</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/selectivity>

to be made and implications to be drawn regarding the state's strategies and objectives from the state's acts of repression. Thus, the concept of selectivity produces more room for intention both on the part of the state (in its decision to repress) and on the part of the investigator (on an analytical level).

Assuming selectivity in its full meaning, the Chinese government's selective repression of Protestant churches is a puzzle worth exploring because no single factor or attribute—of either the state or the churches—distinguishes the churches that have experienced repression from ones that have not. While there is no official data detailing all incidents of repression in the country that is open to public, data collected by ChinaAid, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) devoted to promoting religious freedom in China, provides a brief snapshot of the state of religious repression in China. Using this data, I organize the variations in the government's repression of Protestant churches into three broad dimensions: targets of repression, timing of repression, and tactics of repression.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of *targets*, the Chinese government's treatment of Christian churches has varied among and within different types of churches. First, while repression has mainly targeted house churches, instances of repression against state-registered churches were also documented beginning in 2009.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that the way the Chinese government distinguishes between the types of churches has begun to blur. Second, variations in repression also appear within church types. Among house churches, some small-sized churches experience government interference while some do not. Due to their small size, some churches operate in secret, some churches operate with the implicit permission of local officials, and others face repression through arrests and evictions. Larger house churches also experience different kinds of treatment by the government. For example, the Shouwang Church was evicted from its place of worship in a rented office building in Beijing in 2009, and later transactions to legally purchase a building were blocked by the government.<sup>14</sup> In sharp contrast, the Zion (*Xi'an*) Church, also an unregistered church of comparable size in Beijing, held uninterrupted worship services in an office building, and its head pastor continued to make political statements openly denouncing the actions that the government took against the Shouwang church.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, state-registered churches also experience variations in treatment. In the cross-demolition campaign in Zhejiang, some state-registered churches were repressed, while others remained unscathed. In contrast to those in Zhejiang, state-approved churches in Beijing continue to pride themselves on their long

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<sup>12</sup> These dimensions may overlap. For example, arrests of religious leaders can be understood as an example of target as well as tactic of repression.

<sup>13</sup> ChinaAid, *2009 Annual Persecution Report*, China Aid Association, p. 12. Some examples from 2009 illustrate this trend: Zhengzhou City Religious Bureau raided the Zhutun TSPM Church and arrested and sentenced its leaders to labor camp; Jinan City government raided Changchunli TSPM Church, took over the building and expelled the church leadership; Rizhao City Religious Bureau and police raided a registered church training meeting and closed down the church; Wuhan City Religious Bureau broke the door of Enguang TSPM Church and forced the pastor to retire.

<sup>14</sup> The Shouwang Church, which began as an underground church with ten people, grew to a size of 1,000 people by 2006. When the church rented an office building in order to accommodate its enlarged membership, the church also began experiencing various forms of persecution. Church attendees received threats of dismissal from their employers and schools, and after the eviction from its place of worship, small groups of people gathered in parks to continue to worship, to which the government responded with arrests and detentions.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Pastor Jin Mingri. 2016. This church was subsequently shut down in late 2018.



history (e.g., Gangwashi Church) and some have even enjoyed publicized visits from former U.S. Presidents (e.g., Chongwenmen Church).<sup>16</sup>

Even within the dimension of targets, there are sub-level variations at the individual level: arrests, interrogation, and detainment of church attendees versus church leaders, rural churchgoers versus urban churchgoers, and average churchgoers versus Christian human rights lawyers. In addition, there is also variation in the geographical location of targets. In 2014, municipalities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing experienced the largest number of repression cases, while in 2015, provinces such as Zhejiang, Guangdong, and Guangxi were more frequently targeted for repression.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the dimension of *time*, there have been increases in the number of repressed people and churches since 2006, in the cases of repression against state-approved churches since 2009, and in the persecution of Christian human rights lawyers since 2010.<sup>18</sup> With increased involvement of human rights lawyers, the government has seen an increase in the number of lawsuits involving Chinese Christians. In order to circumvent legal proceedings, the government began to increasingly rely on torture and mafia tactics around the same period. Also, the sudden appearance and growth of urban, mega-sized house churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have also been followed with an increase in the number of repressed urban church leaders.

In addition to the dimensions of target and time, there are also variations in the *tactics* of repression used by the government. Repression tactics vary from personal repression – arrests, detainment, physical violence, and ideological retraining; operational repression – reassignment of personnel, fines, service interruptions and church closings; and structural repression – security camera and flag installations, cross demolitions, among others.

Although variations exist in multiple dimensions and levels, these are not drawn from systematic observations. Official documentation of repression does not exist, while unofficial reports published by non-governmental organizations, such as ChinaAid and OpenDoors, and online magazines, such as Bitter Winter, are based on a collection of testimonies and far from being comprehensive or unbiased. In the interview, Bob Fu, the President of ChinaAid, acknowledged the presence of bias in these reports, since contacting a U.S.-based organization is not something any churchgoer in China thinks, knows, or is able to do.<sup>19</sup> However, because I seek to explore selective repression within the local region—that is, why a local official represses some churches but not others in his area of jurisdiction—I can utilize existing local variations. In all cities either visited by me or covered by an organization’s informant, there were churches that were repressed and those that were not, all with varying characteristics.

## Existing Explanations

State repression of religion is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it one that is ideologically or geographically limited to Protestant churches in China. While the study of state repression has

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<sup>16</sup> Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the U.S.A. “President Clinton Attends Sunday Church Service in Beijing” (<http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zmgx/zysj/kldfh/t36226.htm>)

<sup>17</sup> ChinaAid, *2014 Annual Persecution Report*, China Aid Association; ChinaAid, *2015 Annual Persecution Report*, China Aid Association.

<sup>18</sup> ChinaAid, *2006 Annual Persecution Report*, China Aid Association.

<sup>19</sup> Also, the organization’s informants can collect information from their regions, but not all regions are covered by informants. Interview with Bob Fu, 2017.

attracted scholars over the years, a systematic study of *selective* religious repression is yet to be seen. Existing works on religious repression show that religious repression can be studied as one category under the broader topic of state repression as well as its own unique phenomenon distinct from general patterns of repression. This implies that understandings of religious repression in China can be bolstered by theories and examples from various regions and time periods as well as categories. In this section, I survey extant theories of state repression, religious repression, and selective repression, in order to build on existing knowledge and provide a rationale for developing my own theory of selective repression of religion.

### *State Repression*

Analyses of state repression include a number of different labels for repression, including “state violence,” “democide,” “state-sponsored murder,” “human rights violations,” “negative sanctions,” “political terror,” “government abuse of physical integrity rights,” among others. Using these different labels, existing studies of state repression have ranged from explaining why repression is chosen as a control tactic and characterizing the actors that use or incite repression, to identifying the structural conditions that facilitate states’ use of repression.

#### 1. Explaining Repression as a Tactic

One batch of studies explaining state repression focuses on why repression is used as a control tactic ([Rummel 1995](#); [Cingranelli and Richards 1999](#); [Moore 2000](#); [Davenport 2007](#); [Carey 2010](#); [Escribà-Folch 2013](#); [Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014](#); [O’Brien and Deng 2015](#); [Ritter and Conrad 2016](#)). This question itself can be further divided into several related but divergent approaches. For example, some argue that repression is chosen as a tactic because it is the most effective at addressing threat ([Escribà-Folch 2013](#)), the least costly ([Moore 2000](#)<sup>20</sup>), or the most familiar ([Davenport 2007](#), in the discussion of “coercive expertise”). These studies are in line with others that evaluate repressive tactics in comparison to non-repressive tactics ([Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014](#)). Others bring in a temporal element, assessing whether repressive tactics are more useful as a preventive measure or as a responsive measure ([Carey 2010](#); [Ritter and Conrad 2016](#)).

Another approach in demystifying state repression delves into repression’s potential to create backlash, side effects, and counterproductive results. O’Brien and Deng ([2015](#)) illustrate through the case of Zhejiang, China, that “ill-considered and poorly-timed police action” can escalate protests, create a ‘protest spectacle,’ and lead to concessions for the protestors that are counter to government interests. Hess and Martin ([2006](#)) explore the conditions under which repression becomes a crucial turning point (termed “transformative”) for social movements in India, East Timor, and the United States. Additional studies show mixed findings regarding the success with which state repression dampens protests ([Hibbs 1973](#); [Muller and Weede 1990](#); [Francisco 1995](#); [Rasler 1996](#); [Dickson 2007](#)). These studies raise the question of “why authorities continue to apply repressive action despite mixed effectiveness at behavioral control”

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<sup>20</sup> Moore develops a model with assumptions that the state chooses between accommodation and repression “in response to the costs (or lack of costs) imposed by the dissident’s most recent action.” W. H. Moore, “The Repression of Dissent: A Substitution Model of Government Coercion,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44(1), 2000, p. 112.

([Davenport 2007](#), p. 10). However, the question remains largely understudied in literature, perhaps underscoring the prevailing assumption that despite its questionable effectiveness, repression is still the preferred choice for states.<sup>21</sup>

The variety of approaches suggests that existing studies may be addressing different questions, each providing only a piece of the puzzle of why states use repression as a tactic. At the same time, understanding why states resort to repressive tactics does not answer the question of why states *selectively* repress entities, since repression is the common outcome across all of these existing studies.

## 2. Explaining Repression through Actors

Another group of studies assesses the characteristics of involved actors to determine why repression occurs. Some of these works have provided general insight into understanding repression at the level of the state by exploring characteristics of the state, such as regime type ([Henderson 1991](#); [Poe and Tate 1994](#); [Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005](#); [Davenport 2007](#); [Simmons 2009](#)), existence of democratic institutions ([Davenport 1996](#); [Keith, Tate and Poe 2009](#); [Mitchell, Ring, and Spellman 2013](#)), involvement in war ([Rummel 1995](#); [Hill Jr. & Jones 2014](#)), population size ([Poe and Tate 1994](#); [Nordàs and Davenport 2013](#)), and level of economic development ([Mitchell and McCormick 1988](#); [Henderson 1991](#)). For example, Bueno de Mesquita et al. (2005) argue that because autocracies rely on the support of the elites, they are more likely than democracies to use repression as a means to protect the political status quo. Using a similar logic, scholars refer to democratic institutions as a factor that reduces state use of repression ([Poe and Tate 1994](#), [Davenport 2007](#)). Conrad and DeMeritt (2012) observe the executive's level of dependence on citizens' financial and political support to explain its propensity to use domestic violence against citizens. An additional set of studies has disaggregated the concept of the "state" as the repressor by examining the outsourcing of state repression ([Deng and O'Brien 2013](#); [O'Brien and Deng 2015](#); [Scoggins 2018](#); [Ong 2018](#); [Cheng 2020](#); [Ong 2022](#)). In these ways, the literature has focused on "why some governments violate basic human rights more than others," paying significant attention to characteristics of the repressor to explain state repression.<sup>22</sup>

There are also studies that explain state repression by focusing on the repressed. Repressed entities, whether they are religious minority groups, political dissidents, labor unions or advocacy NGOs, are analyzed according to the threat they cause, more than the inherent characteristics of the members that make up the entities. This tendency is built on the assumption that repression is a response to threat and not carried out randomly or based on other non-threat-related attributes. For example, Chaudry (2022)'s analysis of all countries between 1990 and 2013 reveals that states repress NGOs differently depending on the kind of threat posed by each type of organizations. According to Chaudry, international NGOs (INGOs), more than domestic NGOs, target states, organizations, and transnational networks in ways that "impose costs on

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<sup>21</sup> Davenport (2007) also points out that the question has "never been examined in a rigorous manner." One explanation he offers in the case of counterinsurgent efforts in Iraq despite increase in insurgencies is that it is hard to suspend a policy once it takes on momentum. Christian Davenport, "State repression and political order," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 10 (2007), p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel W. Hill and Zachary M. Jones. "An Empirical Evaluation of Explanations for State Repression." *American Political Science Review* 108.03 (2014): 661.

states from above” and make states “feel more threatened by their activities.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Carey (2010) explores the probability of repression based on the type of domestic dissent, varying in levels of violence and organization.<sup>24</sup> These findings suggest that the state distinguishes among the characteristics of the targets of repression insofar as they pose a threat to the state. The logic is also fundamental to Davenport (2007)’s ‘Law of Coercive Responsiveness,’ which posits that “when challenges to the status quo take place, authorities generally employ some form of repressive action to counter or eliminate the behavioral threat.”<sup>25</sup>

In short, existing analyses more often emphasize the characteristics of the repressor (state) compared to those of the repressed to explain repression. Analyzing different state attributes is helpful in understanding when and why states repress, but not as useful when trying to fathom why a state would choose to repress some and not other units. Similar limitations are found in studies that focus on the repressed. While the logic of coercive responsiveness seems to be the most intuitive explanation for repression, it homogenizes the traits of the repressed under the broader category of threat. Various types of threat get jumbled together only to be treated in terms of their protest size and frequency, and much nuance is lost in the process. This becomes especially problematic in examining selective repression in China, when two seemingly similar churches are treated in drastically different manners and the existence (or lack thereof) of threat does not suffice to explain the discrepancy.

### 3. Explaining Repression through Structural factors

A third group looks to structural conditions to explain state repression (Henderson 1991; Henderson 1993; Poe and Tate 1994; Davenport 1995; Krain 1997; Poe, Tate, and Keith 1999; Conrad and Moore 2010; Makara 2016). Structural conditions can consist of internal, domestic conditions as well as external, international conditions. For example, Davenport (2007) finds that repression increases as a result of both civil and international conflict. Along a similar logic, Wright (2014) explains state repression by looking at state involvement in territorial revisionism and intrastate competition. He argues that “when states seek to revise territory through conflict, both democracies and autocracies have reason to increase repression.”<sup>26</sup> Pierskalla (2010) models the strategic interaction between repression and dissent to suggest that threats from within the ruling coalition (military or a hard-liner faction) may induce a government to engage in repression. Similarly, Hill Jr. and Jones (2014) also show through cross-validation that among many predictors, “civil conflict is the best predictor... of state repression.”<sup>27</sup> Aside from domestic conflict, domestic legal institutions—often in line with abovementioned studies connecting regime type and repression—such as constitutional arrangements (Cross 1999; Keith, Tate, and Poe 2009) and common law heritage (Mitchell, Ring, and Spellman 2013) serve to explain state repression.

At the same time, structural conditions outside of domestic affairs can also explain state repression. Wood (2008) points out the significance of external conditions such as international

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<sup>23</sup> Suparna Chaudhry, "The Assault on Civil Society: Explaining State Crackdown on NGOs." International Organization (2022): p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> The types of domestic dissent studied include demonstrations, strikes, riots, guerilla attacks and revolutions.

<sup>25</sup> Davenport 2007, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Wright argues that as conflict becomes deadliner, democracies are more inclined to increase depression to secure victory, while autocracies become less likely to increase repression due to limits in resources. Thorin M. Wright, "Territorial Revision and State Repression." *Journal of Peace Research*, 51, no. 3 (2014): pp. 378-380.

<sup>27</sup> Hill Jr. and Jones 2014, p. 662.

economic sanctions that limit the availability of goods for authoritarian governments to distribute to the elites, thereby leading to repression. Likewise, connections are drawn between World Bank structural adjustment agreements and states' respect for human rights ([Abouharb and Cingranelli 2006](#)). In a similar manner, DeMeritt ([2012](#)) looks at the influence of international organizations (IOs) to find that IOs, through the mechanism of naming and shaming, can both reduce the likelihood and severity of government killing. Other scholars have also examined the role of INGOs in state repression ([Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005](#); [Franklin 2008](#)). And combining both domestic and international factors, Makara ([2016](#)) examines both domestic (public opinion) and regional contexts (relations with the Arab world) to explain how the Jordanian monarchy decided between using repression and making concessions toward the Palestinian guerilla fighters.

In these ways, structural conditions, similar to explanations focused on repressive tactics or those built around the characteristics of actors, can advance the analysis as far as explaining when states are more likely to repress. All three approaches can shed light on when repression is a desirable tactic, what type of states are likely to use repression, and whom the state targets for repression. While these approaches can be the starting points for understanding the Chinese government's repression of Protestant churches, they leave open the issue of why the Chinese government chooses to repress some churches and not others.

#### 4. Explaining Selective Repression

Finally, extant studies on *selective* repression in China provide more insight into the abilities and calculations of the decisionmakers. They explain selective repression as a capacity problem due to limits in resources ([Wright and Zimmerman-Liu 2013](#); [Vala 2013](#)), as a result of concession costs ([Göbel 2021](#)), as a strategic deterrent to prevent future unrest ([Lorentzen 2017](#)), as a mixed signal to induce the society to pay close attention to the state's rules ([Stern and O'Brien 2012](#)), as a tool to gain information about discontent in society ([Lorentzen 2017](#)), and as a last resort among all measures ([Chen 2017](#); [Li 2018](#)).<sup>28</sup> Many of these studies focus on the repression of protests, which is relevant for analyzing the threat of collective action posed by churches. At the same time, existing theories of selective repression in China still leave untouched the elements of threat specific to religion and unanswered the question of how and why specific units are chosen as targets of repression, ultimately circling back to the original question.

#### *Religious Repression*

Although religious repression can be studied as one type of state repression, the particular nature of religion distinguishes it from other types of repression. Religious identities, unlike other identities, make claims that transcend national borders, encompass every aspect of their

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<sup>28</sup> Local governments often lack "adequate personnel, is poorly funded, and suffers low prestige," and their limited capacity is exacerbated by the fact that Protestantism is only one of five officially approved religions to manage, let alone unapproved religions and cults. Teresa Wright and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, "Engaging and Evading the Party-State: Unofficial Chinese Protestant Groups in China's Reform Era," *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 1:1, (2013), p. 11; Carsten Vala, "The State-Religion Relationship in Contemporary China: Corporatism with Hegemony," in Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath ed. *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaption, Survival and Resistance* (2013), p. 104.



members' lives, and withstand "secular challenges because of the supernatural claims they make and the stakes they pose for their adherents."<sup>29</sup> This means religious repression can occur for different reasons (e.g., the threat of religious ideologies) and draw different responses (e.g., religious justifications) relative to nonreligious repression.

Existing works devoted to explaining states' religious repression either follow similar trends in analyzing at the level of the state and above, or look deeper into domestic situations to find country-specific answers. In the former category, studies offer different intuitions for explaining religious repression, putting emphasis on factors such as the number of government regulations on religion, the level of political competition, and the level of religious division. For instance, Grim and Finke (2010) use the religious economies model (as an alternative to the clash-of-civilizations perspective) to argue that religious regulations disrupt the fair competition among religions within a society by restricting the supply of religion through increased entry and operating costs for some religions. They explain that fair competition among religions, through deregulation of religion, is what produces "rich pluralism" where no religion can monopolize power over others, and no religion suffers from the interference of the state.<sup>30</sup> While it is useful to think of a state's religious regulations as separate from religious repression, the case of China shows that the implementation of regulations themselves can be seen as a type of repression. Similarly, Sarkissian (2015) points this out: "The laws, regulations, and restrictions that have the effect of suppressing religion receive much less attention because they tend not to involve violence against individuals and groups."<sup>31</sup> In China, enforcing a law often comes hand in hand with violence.

In the latter category, existing studies of religious repression focus on idiosyncratic domestic situations specific to each country. Most studies in this category put emphasis on explaining the church or the society's response or resilience to state repression of religion (Gautier 1998; Froese 2004; Wittenberg 2006), rather than explaining the acts of repression themselves. For example, Gautier (1998) explains the roles church elites have played in restoring civil society in Eastern European Communist regimes leading up to their democratic transitions in the late 1980s.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Wittenberg (2006) investigates the political persistence of the Roman Catholic and Calvinist Churches under Communism.

While macro-level explanations of religious repression are useful to determine broader patterns across countries with similar religious structural conditions, they do not consider variation in individual strategies and behaviors of the repressors that can explain the selectivity of targets. Similarly, country-specific responses to repression are useful to understand the aftermaths of repression, but not as useful in explaining the acts of repression that led to the responses.

Studies that focus on religious repression specifically in China also display similar tendencies as the general literature on repression. They remain largely descriptive due to the

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<sup>29</sup> Ani Sarkissian, *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion*. (Oxford University Press: 2015), p. 5. Grzymala-Busse, Anna, "Why Comparative Politics Should Take Religion (More) Seriously," *Annual Review of Political Science*. Vol. 15, 2012, p. 424.

<sup>30</sup> Brian J. Grim, and Roger Finke. *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2010., p. 23. Also in Grim and Finke, "Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Religious Economies?" *American Sociological Review*. Vol. 72. 2007. P. 636.

<sup>31</sup> Sarkissian, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Gautier, Mary. "Church Elites and the Restoration of Civil Society in the Communist Societies of Central Europe," *Journal of Church and State*. Vol. 40, No. 2, Spr. 1998, p. 289-317.

topic's sensitivity making it difficult for scholars to collect and publish data. Examples of existing studies include tracing the subtle variations in religious policies ([Zhu 2010](#); [Leung 2005](#), [Potter 2003](#)), explaining the Christian growth phenomenon in China ([Yang 2005](#); [Dunch 2001](#)), and illustrating the consequences of religious restrictions on the Christian population ([Yang 2006](#)). Others have also focused on challenges to Protestant growth ([Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 2014](#)), the government's toleration of Protestant churches ([Reny 2018](#)), and adaptive responses to regime pressure ([Vala 2017](#); [Doshay 2021](#); [Lee and O'Brien 2021](#)). These works build the groundwork on understanding religious repression, yet do not offer a systematic analysis of repression, let alone *selective* repression.

In summary, existing studies on the topic of religious repression have remained descriptive, nonpolitical, or focused on the aftermaths of repression on the society due to the difficulty of gathering data. They, like broader literature on state repression, present analyses that highlight different aspects of repression, but fall short of solving the puzzle of selective repression of Protestant churches in China. To put it another way, the puzzle of selective repression can benefit from both considering multiple angles of state repression and narrowing in on the selectivity of repression. This is the basis upon which my theoretical argument is built.

## **Main Argument**

Selective repression is the result of a complex process composed of multiple actors and their relationships. Specifically, I argue that selective repression occurs when actors at different levels of society—the central government, local officials, and religious communities—are each embedded in conflicting relationships that motivate and constrain their decisions toward repression. The side of the relationship that is more salient to the actor at the time determines, respectively, how much the central government prioritizes the control of religion, how local officials evaluate the threat and utility of each church, and how each church chooses its level of compliance with the government. And the combination of these three parts explains why some churches are repressed, and others operate freely.

First, the central government is lodged between domestic and international pressures as it determines its approach to religious control. In more specific terms, the central government faces a dilemma because repression can help to maintain domestic control and regime stability, but it can also draw international scrutiny and hurt its national image. Conditional on the salience of these pressures, the central government decides how much to prioritize the control of religion nationwide and how to justify it to the international audience. This difference in the center's priorities explains selective repression of churches at the national level.

Second, the local officials are caught between the central government and the society as they selectively implement repressive policies. As local officials struggle between pleasing the central government and utilizing the churches to their benefit, their decision to implement repressive policies upon churches also varies. They take into consideration both their prospects for promotion as well as the threat and usefulness of churches in relational and material terms. This part focuses on why some churches are repressed from a local implementation perspective.

Third, the religious communities are stuck between abiding by government rules and obeying God's commands, which explains variations in their religious behavior and experience of repression. Depending on how their beliefs are positioned in relation to God and the government, pastors' behaviors range from working within the government system to actively

petitioning the government for religious freedom. Variations in pastors' behaviors explain why some churches are repressed and others are not, starting from a close observation of the repressed (or the not repressed) instead of the repressor.

The central government, local officials, and religious communities each explains a dimension of the puzzle of selective repression: *timing*, *tactic*, and *target*. The central government's struggle between its domestic and international agendas determines the weight given to religious control at the time, explaining the *timing* of repression. The local officials' dilemma between meeting the demands of the central government and the domestic population (religious communities) influences the repressive *tactics* implemented on the religious people. Finally, the pastors' balance between their beliefs toward God and the government shape their behavior, thereby affecting the state's selection of *targets*.

## Implications of the Argument

As foreshadowed in the discussion of existing studies, this dissertation builds upon the broader literature of state repression. However, instead of looking for general patterns of repression, this dissertation goes one step further by asking why one authoritarian state represses parts of a religion. Similarly, the dissertation does not focus on explaining why a particular religion is repressed more in comparison to other religions, but instead looks at the subunits—that is, individual Protestant churches—that experience differential treatment by the government. Therefore, the question is not, why Protestantism, but instead, why *this* Protestant church and not that church.

At the same time, understanding selective repression nevertheless speaks to these same questions in repression literature. Explaining why some churches are repressed over others helps to understand not only the kinds of religious activities that are discouraged by the state, but also the specific characteristics of civil society and particular ideologies that the government is unwilling to tolerate. This takes the discussion back to the level of the state, where lessons can be drawn about why a state represses a part of society. Similarly, examining the characteristics that differentiate repressed churches from non-repressed churches also directs the focus back to Protestantism; church traits associated with repression can be interpreted as elements of Protestantism that are threatening to an authoritarian state. In this way, a narrower analytical focus on selective religious repression produces insights on the greater topic of repression.

Several implications also follow this line of logic. On an analytical and methodological front, my research demonstrates that there are more ways to approach the topic of state repression than suggested by existing studies. The prevailing trend in most fields of social science research is to concentrate on one aspect of a phenomenon, to be able to produce and isolate the most precise findings. In the repression literature as well, scholars have focused on different facets of the phenomenon, ranging from the repressors to the repressed, from domestic to international, and from causes to consequences, to understand the broader pattern of repression. In contrast, this dissertation does the opposite. It adopts a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, by exploring the roles of the central government, local government officials, and Protestant pastors, to understand a narrower subtopic of repression—selective repression. Research on repression can benefit from research on selective repression and from considering multiple disaggregated aspects of repression together in one breath.



A similar conclusion can be drawn regarding studies on authoritarian regimes. The innerworkings of authoritarian regimes are often hidden under a veil with limited amount of data open to the public. Especially for research on repression in authoritarian regimes, systematic data collection is difficult and often dangerous. Stern and O'Brien (2012)'s "state reflected in society" approach gets around this problem by "conjur[ing] [the state's] reflected image through statements, policies, and crackdowns that offer attentive onlookers hints of where state preferences lie."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, this dissertation suggests that creativity and boldness, including exploring repression in a bottom-up fashion, also offer valuable insights into the calculations of the state.

There are also sets of implications more specific to the topic of repression in China. First, contrary to the conventional wisdom that the calculations of the Communist Party leadership are unitary and top-down, my research shows that state repression is the product of many actors' interrelated considerations. And these considerations neither arise from only within the government, nor are limited to those inside the country. Rather, the study distributes agency to different actors, including the targeted population and the international audience, and necessitates studies of repression beyond looking at characteristics of the repressor.

And what we know of the CCP can also be expanded upon through this dissertation. The research presents another aspect of the Party than its secretive and inscrutable nature. By discovering patterns in selective repression, the study demonstrates that some of the CCP's decisions, at least when it comes to selective repression, can be traced to rational calculations. For example, the central government's tightening of religious restrictions can be understood as a response to changing domestic and international pressures. Likewise, its increasing efforts to instill Party ideology among citizens can be seen as a way to tame citizens' behavior from the inside out.

Second, this dissertation adds agency and complexity to local officials and their roles in repression. Portrayals of Chinese local officials began from passive agents in a principal-agent relationship with the Center (Wedeman 2001; Tanner and Green 2007; Clarke 2010; Li 2010), to become more complex as loyal followers of the central government driven by promotion (Huang 1995; Edin 2003; Wang 2005), to independent governors detached from the central government's oversight and corrupted through personal connections (Gold 1985; Yang 1994; Yang 2002; Li 2011). This dissertation adds to the existing complexity of local officials by representing them as sophisticated actors pulled by multiple goals and rationales, including those specific to the religious realm.

Third, Protestant pastors are found to be a very diverse group: they cannot all be characterized as passive compliers to government regulations or active opponents of the government. My research shows that pastors vary in their beliefs and behavior despite adhering to the same Protestant principles. Pastors also choose behavior with full awareness of its repercussions. Some pastors deliberately choose to defy rules despite risks of repression, while other pastors willfully facilitate repression knowing its effects on religious freedom. These observations substantiate both the concepts of resilience and diversity of faiths when it comes to Protestant communities in China.

In short, I explore motivations and calculations undergirding the repressors and the repressed in authoritarian China, where religion is a matter of national security and a politically sensitive topic. By collecting data from an authoritarian state and capturing the period in which

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<sup>33</sup> Stern, Rachel E., and Kevin J. O'Brien. "Politics at the boundary: mixed signals and the Chinese state." *Modern China* 38, no. 2 (2012), p. 175.

the state is tightening its religious restrictions, the analysis provides insights into the Chinese leadership, as it builds its goals for China and its global position. At the same time, observing Chinese pastors as they prepare for, and react to, a repressive government gives a glimpse of their incongruous minds. Some are unfazed, others are angry or distraught, and yet others are accepting of the increasingly narrowing regulatory environment. In this way, this research also contributes to the broader discussion of civil rights, repression, and state-society relations in a strong authoritarian state.

## Methodology

Repression is a difficult topic to study. As Cingranelli and Richards (1999) point out, “information about government violations of human rights is the kind of information an accused government tries to hide.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, studying repression in China suffers from limited data availability and feasible methodology.<sup>35</sup> Due to the political sensitivity of repression, there is no open or known record of government repression of churches. Available datasets<sup>36</sup> are limited to government statistics and anecdotal reports, while in-depth surveys about the government or the Party remain general and unrelated to politics or repression.<sup>37</sup> Nongovernmental organizations, such as ChinaAid, collect data on repression based on reports from correspondents in multiple cities, yet they do not provide a systematic or comprehensive list of repressed churches in those areas.

The difficulty of research is compounded in the case of *religious* repression in China because religion itself has always been a sensitive topic. Cases of religious repression are rarely reported in China’s domestic media outlets unless they are accompanied by a rationale—for instance, that the church was heretical, spreading dangerous ideas, or engaging in illegal activities or financial corruption.

Additionally, understanding religious repression in China is difficult because there often is not a clear and visible cause of repression. An organized protest may provide a direct rationale for why an authoritarian government needs to repress it. For instance, it threatens the legitimacy of the regime and may grow into something bigger, like democratization. On a more prosaic level, protests may disrupt the everyday social order. However, most pastors and churchgoers in China are not engaged in outward and collective expressions of opposition against the Party, nor do they express the need or desire to do so. Without a clear provocation or an incident to which one can point as the reason for repression, it becomes challenging to explain the Chinese government’s repression of churches, let alone its selective repression *among* churches within the same religious tradition. This creates a need to tell the story of the seemingly peaceful but repressed Protestant churches as well.

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<sup>34</sup> David L. Cingranelli, and David L. Richards. "Respect for Human Rights After the End of the Cold War." *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (1999): p. 519.

<sup>35</sup> In addition, restrictions on freedom of speech and expression combined with heightened measures against foreign influence have created tremendous obstacles for Western journalists and academics. Tom Philips, “No Country for Academics: Chinese Crackdown Forces Intellectuals Abroad,” *The Guardian*. May 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/24/academics-china-crackdown-forces-intellecutuals-abroad>.

<sup>36</sup> Existing studies on religious repression use datasets such as Fox (2011)’s Religion and State Dataset, and Grim and Finke (2006)’s International Religious Freedom Dataset (Sarkissian 2015).

<sup>37</sup> The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) acknowledges the limited available information for China.

To overcome these difficulties, I adopted a multi-method approach to studying selective repression of Protestant churches. My curiosity in the topic of selective religious repression began in the early 2010s, where I witnessed firsthand the drastic differences among the openness of churches and their experiences with government repression. Building on this curiosity, my fieldwork from 2016 to 2019 laid the proper groundwork to develop theories and built the empirical backbone to evaluate my arguments. During this period, I visited 15 different cities in China, ranging from directly administered municipalities like Beijing and Shanghai to other cities spread across 7 different provinces in the northeastern, southeastern, and southwestern parts of China. In all, I conducted over 120 interviews with registered and unregistered pastors and participant observation with pastors and churchgoers.

My selection of locations maximized regional variations in the history and dominance of Protestant faith, distribution of types of churches, experiences of repression, and geography and economy. However, due to the difficulty of recruiting participants, I prioritized regions where I knew I had better access to participants. Although these locations were chosen based on both strategy and potential access to more participants, the regional spread and the variety in these locations' history and traits allowed me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of religious repression in China that was not bound to a specific province or city. Because I sought to explore selective repression occurring within a local region, the variety of locations helped to find commonalities in selective repression across different parts of China *despite* geographic, economic, and historical differences. Moreover, in any given district or county-level region, I was able to take advantage of the variations in the traits and experiences of churches. There were churches that had built close relationships with the government, and those that operated secretively. There were churches that experienced repression, and those that had not. These variations helped construct a dataset of churches for analysis of repression.

While I cannot reveal the list of all locations for reasons of topical sensitivity and participant safety, I can discuss the rationale behind choosing some of the bigger, more intuitive cities. Beijing and Shanghai are two of the four directly controlled municipalities in China. Directly controlled (or directly administered) municipalities are highest ranked, province-level cities that are directly under the administration of the central government. Both municipalities are located on the eastern coast of China and are also the top two cities with the highest GDP. Accordingly, both cities have extensive economic interaction with international actors, and have a well-established network of both registered and unregistered churches. However, these two cities vary in their local political system, history and level of interaction with foreign actors, and their distance from the center. These regional differences have allowed me to gauge what the political system, history and proximity to the central government may mean for operation by religious entities as well as repression motives and style by local governments.

I also traveled to provinces with a dominance of Protestantism in order to take advantage of the greatest number of Christian churches and cases of repression (or lack thereof). Shandong and Zhejiang are both coastal provinces considered to be hubs of Christianity since the establishment of the PRC. These provinces have both faced high levels of religious persecution, but in different styles—Zhejiang has experienced thousands of cross removals from both registered and unregistered churches, while Shandong has seen a growth in the number of arrests of house church attendees. The similarities as well as variations between these two provinces helped to reveal the differences in implementation of religious repression.

Given the sensitivity of the topic, one of the most difficult parts of research was finding people who were willing to be interviewed. To make matters worse, field research in general has

become more difficult under the Xi Jinping regime. Especially since 2018, the government has tightened its overall grip on civil liberties, which has had direct effects on foreign scholars as well. Especially owing to my focus on religious repression, any interaction I had with individuals was done in secret, and I had to continue to be mindful of the danger that I could cause to both myself and the subjects.

Since there was no known list of churches or people who had been repressed by the government, I used a snowball sampling with multiple sample seeds to start the snowballs. Additionally, I cold-approached churches that were locatable through the Baidu search engine and Baidu Maps in every city. Each interview lasted an average of 1.5 to 2 hours and was conducted in Mandarin Chinese, Korean, or English depending on the interviewee's preference.<sup>38</sup> Because I was interested in factors leading up to repression, rather than explaining the post-hoc effects of repression, I first inquired about their faith and their past ministry and then moved on to more sensitive issues regarding their relationship with the government and experiences with repression. Likewise, in analyzing the interview transcripts, I was careful in accounting for possible bias arising from any combination of the following: interviewer effect, a nonrepresentative sample, and self-censorship out of fear of repercussions from the government.

On this note, it is important to point out additional problems of learning about repression as told directly by the repressors and the repressed. With the frame pitting the repressors against the repressed and portraying their relationship as perpetrators versus victims, there is an implied moralistic element that can act as an obstacle to research. The former group can become hesitant to participate in research, automatically assuming that the researcher has critical views of the government and its management of religion. The opposite is also possible: those that have taken part in implementing repressive measures can try to provide a post-hoc justification in order to convince the researcher that these were valid actions well-grounded in need. In contrast, the repressed often carries the emotional and physical trauma from the experience of repression. This can lead to unintentional memory alteration or intentional exaggeration (for instance, to fault the government and emphasize their own suffering and bravery), or just plain refusal to share information with the researcher.

However, when conducted and analyzed with care, interviews can offer novel and valuable insights that cannot be found any other way. Combining other methodologies can also complement such insights. To corroborate the interviews from China, I conducted 30 supplementary interviews with missionaries and academics from South Korea and the United States. Missionaries and academics who have spent time in China (or studied China in depth) were able to provide up-close observations of the repressive situation in China both as an insider experiencing repression and as a foreign outsider who were one step removed from China's domestic situation. Additionally, I have applied machine learning techniques on an original dataset of official news articles in China from 2016 to 2021. I also use process tracing and qualitative case studies in analysis. In each chapter, I provide details on the research design particular to each level of analysis.

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<sup>38</sup> Several of the pastors I interviewed were ethnically Korean people mostly from northeastern regions of China. Because of South Korea's heavy influence on China missions, ethnically Korean people were also some of the most active participants in Chinese Protestantism.

## **Preview of Dissertation**

The following three empirical chapters (Chapters 2-4) explore selective repression at three levels. Chapter 2 of the dissertation looks at selective repression at the broadest level by examining the decision maker, or the central government. Using machine learning techniques on an original dataset of official news articles from 2016 to 2021, I demonstrate that state priorities toward religion change in degree and nature depending on the domestic and international pressures at the time.

Chapter 3 explains selective repression from the vantage point of implementors, or the local officials. I argue that local officials are caught between the central government above and the society (churches) below. I use process tracing and qualitative case studies to illustrate that local selective implementation of repressive policies varies with Party priorities and local relationships with churches.

Chapter 4 analyzes selective repression at the ground level by looking at pastors and their churches. Based on insights from over 120 interviews I conducted with Chinese pastors from 2016 to 2019 and 30 supplementary interviews with missionaries and academics from China, South Korea, and the United States, I show that some pastors choose a style of ministry that increases the risk of repression due to their beliefs about God and the government.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 5), I sum up the main arguments and the empirical findings in the dissertation. I consider the theoretical implications of my research on both existing studies of repression as well as Chinese politics. I also discuss various ways to expand upon and further explore the topic by drawing connections to different religions, civil society groups, and other authoritarian countries. I conclude by providing a preview of some of the aftermaths of religious repression on the central and local governments as well as the Protestant pastors. As an extension of preceding chapters, this concluding chapter considers the effects and consequences of repression especially as they relate to the core actors of Chinese society.

## Chapter 2:

# The Central Government's Dilemma: Dealing with Regime Stability and National Image

<sup>13</sup> Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, <sup>14</sup> or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

1 Peter 2:13-16

What explains the central government's role and its extent of power in the management of religion? How does the central government decide on the direction of religious policies? The role of the central government in the religious realm deserves a closer look because it creates contradictory expectations and puzzling outcomes. A strong and authoritative central government should be able to wipe out intolerable religions just as it would corrupt officials.<sup>39</sup> But a powerful central government may also, in theory, overlook ordinary churchgoers. Alternatively, a weak central government may not have the capacity to maintain control over religious entities in the country. But the recent increase in religious repression suggests resolve and strength on the part of the central government.<sup>40</sup> Combined together, these incongruities imply that the central government and its considerations in the decision-making process with regards to religious policymaking are complex and multifaceted.

Delving deeper into the complexities of Chinese leadership, this chapter looks at selective religious repression from a higher and broader level, by examining the role of the central government. More specifically, I explore the complex dilemma that the central government faces in the religious policy realm by considering the pressures posed by domestic and international

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<sup>39</sup> James Leung, "Xi's Corruption Crackdown." *Foreign Affairs*, 94 (2015): 32.

<sup>40</sup> Eleanor Albert and Lindsay Maizland, "Religion in China," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 25, 2020.

audiences. Using machine learning techniques on an original dataset of official news articles and insights from interviews, I demonstrate that the central government juggles between maintaining domestic control by strengthening regime stability and surviving international scrutiny by improving its global reputation. Conditional on the salience of each pressure at the time, the central government decides how much and in what way to prioritize the control of religion in its national policymaking. This difference in the center's priorities explains selective repression of churches at the national level and the *timing* of selective repression.

In this chapter, I introduce the theory behind the central government's prioritization of religious control as a response to continuous pressures posed by the domestic and international audiences. Then I explain the data and methodology employed to evaluate the theory. In the analysis section, I investigate how the pressures faced by the central government change between 2016 and 2021 and explore the subsequent changes in religious policymaking. Then I conclude the chapter by examining the implications of the findings on the discussion of selective repression in China.

## Theory of Religious Control

The freedom of religious belief and other fundamental guidelines have remained consistent throughout different versions of religious policy documents. However, the government's religious control, as manifested through levels of repression, has fluctuated over the years. A part of what explains varying levels of religious repression—and specifically, of selective repression—is the different ways in which the government has prioritized and implemented the guidelines in different time periods. More specifically, the central government chooses how much to prioritize the control of religion, while the local government officials (discussed in the following chapter) determine how religious policies get implemented on the ground.

The central government's prioritization of religious control at the time is influenced by *continuous pressures*. Changes in these pressures over time make the central government pay more or less attention to the control of religion in its overall policy direction. It is also important to point out that not all attempts to bring about government action results in pressure for the government. Rather, the attempts turn into pressure only when they trigger preexisting concerns on the part of the government.

Continuous pressures develop from the central government's existential struggles to maintain control over both its society and its international reputation while holding onto its strong authoritarian grip. Domestically, the government is continuously pressured by threats to regime stability. Yang (2017) argues that a key dimension of China's development experience is the "leadership's preoccupation with maintaining stability."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a CCP Central Community Circular in 1991 states the following:

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<sup>41</sup> Dali L. Yang, "China's Troubled Quest for Order: Leadership, Organization and the Contradictions of the Stability Maintenance Regime." *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26, no. 103 (2017). p. 36.

Maintaining stability is the overriding political task for the whole Party and the entire people. Strengthening political and legal work plays an important role in safeguarding social stability.<sup>42</sup>

In the religious realm, one type of threat to stability arises from the uncontrolled growth of the Protestant population ([Kao 2009](#); [Sun 2017](#)). Because Protestant Christianity is a foreign religion that serves as a direct reminder of 19<sup>th</sup> century foreign aggression ([Adeney 1985](#)), its population rivalling that of Party members and unprecedented rapid growth have been a constant concern for the Communist regime. Additionally, religious people's notable involvement in anti-government activism has aggravated the concern ([Lee 2007](#); [McCarthy 2013](#)). While many, if not most, Protestant pastors and believers profess their religion and faith to be separate from politics—a “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's” mindset—few and occasional acts by symbolic figures, such as Pastor Wang Yi, have induced greater pressure for the government.<sup>43</sup>

Another continuous pressure comes from religion's connections to extremism and separatism ([Pratt 2010](#); [Wibisono, Louis and Jetten 2019](#)). Located on the borders of China and home to ethnic minorities, Tibet Autonomous Region and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have both been targets of the government's repression to subdue separatist movements as well as efforts to quicken economic development ([Leibold 2020](#); [Zhang 2021](#)). The government's treatment of Tibetan Buddhists and Uyghur Muslims can be interpreted as religious control as much as management of ethnic minorities ([Davis 2008](#); [Acharya, Gunaratna and Pengxin 2010](#)). However, it is also undeniable that concerns of separatism and extremism feed back into the government's overall perception of threat in religion. Accordingly, the government has expended much of its resources to the “stability maintenance regime” (维稳体制, *weiwentizhi*) in order to “suppress undesirable elements in the social order” including religious elements.<sup>44</sup>

A similar logic explains the pressures faced by the central government to satisfy the international audience. Maintaining regime stability not only requires control over domestic society but also a degree of acceptance from the international community. Chang ([2020](#)) points out that China “would not be willing to endure the embarrassment if international society were to cast doubt on the functioning of the Communist Party.”<sup>45</sup> For this reason, China needs to avoid “any arguments or causes that challenge its one-party ruled Communist government.”<sup>46</sup> However, a well-functioning Communist government is not necessarily a benign one; successfully suppressing social unrest can also demonstrate regime strength to some spectators. In other words, these international pressures require the central government to find a good balance between showing off its regime strength and gaining the respect of other countries.

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<sup>42</sup> 中共中央关于维护社会稳定加强政法工作的通知 [‘CPC Central Committee Circular on maintaining social stability and strengthening the political and legal affairs work’], 十三大以来重要文献选编, II [Selected Important Documents since the Thirteenth National Party Congress] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1991), pp. 998–1006.

<sup>43</sup> Pastor Wang Yi is the head pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church and an outspoken critic of the government's repression of religious freedom. SCI China Correspondent, “439\* Chinese Christian Leaders—and Counting—Sign Joint Statement Affirming Religious Freedom,” *The St. Charles Institute*, 5 September 2018, <http://www.stcharlesinstitute.org/voices/2018/9/4/198-chinese-christian-leadersand-countingsign-public-joint-statement>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Yung-Yung Chang, “The Post-Pandemic World: Between Constitutionalized and Authoritarian Orders—China's Narrative-Power Play in the Pandemic Era.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 26, no. 1 (2021): p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



Achieving this balance is especially difficult in the religious realm because the government's treatment of religion is often at odds with its desired national image. When used well, religion can help to bolster China's image of being a cultural powerhouse and a country of diversity. But when certain elements of religion receive the spotlight, such as the rapid growth of a foreign religion or religious persecution, they often overpower international discussions about China and conflict with China's desired national image. Therefore, carefully crafting and projecting a desired national image is a continuous pressure for the central government.

As China began to quickly develop its economy and emerge as a great power nation, much of its earlier public diplomacy efforts had been focused on reassuring its neighbors and the world of its "peaceful rise." (Zheng 2005; Hartig 2016) A 2005 document by the PRC's State Council Information Office states that "peaceful development is the inevitable way for China's modernization" and a "serious choice and solemn promise made by the Chinese government and the Chinese people."<sup>47</sup> However, with tremendous economic growth and emerging talks of its potential to surpass great power status to become a super power, China seems to have become more assertive in its approach to building its international reputation. As the *New York Times*' notable China correspondents remarked in 2018, "China's leadership appears increasingly impervious to rebukes from abroad."<sup>48</sup> They argued that China, "emboldened by its economic clout," no longer barks nor restrains its behavior in response to international criticism as it had before its changed status.<sup>49</sup>

In fact, China led by the Xi administration has been projecting a more assertive and confident image abroad, while also demonstrating its transition from being a rule-taker to a rule-maker (Zeng, Xiao, and Breslin 2015; Graaf and Apeldoorn 2018). China's efforts to becoming a rule-maker has been discussed in different contexts ranging from humanitarian peacekeeping (Isnarti 2018) and cyberspace (Demchak 2019) to international financial standards (Wang 2018) and global governance (Peng 2018). Regardless of which policy realm, China has taken on a more proactive role in the global arena, evidenced through "a whole range of institutional and economic initiatives, as well as a more assertive military posture" in the territorial disputes.<sup>50</sup>

In line with these efforts, the Chinese leadership has also initiated domestic changes to show off the new image of China. Efforts to realize legal reforms, codify rules, and bolster existing regulations are several examples of these changes.<sup>51</sup> A notable initiative is the plan to adopt the rule of law in China, as demonstrated through the publication of the Plan on Building the Rule of Law in China (2020-2015). Western conceptions of the 'rule of law' refers to a "system in which law is able to impose meaningful restraints on the state and individual members of the ruling elite, as captured in the... notions of a government of laws, the supremacy

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<sup>47</sup> State Council Information Office, "China's Peaceful Development Road," *Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations Office at Geneva and Other International Organizations in Switzerland*, December 12, 2005, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cegv/eng/zywjyjh/t227733.htm>

<sup>48</sup> Steven Lee Myers and Chris Buckley, "An Emboldened China No Longer Cares What Its Critics Think," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/14/world/china-detentions-canadians-human-rights.html?searchResultPosition=204>

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn, "US-China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?" *International Affairs*, 2018, p. 118.

<sup>51</sup> State Council, "China Issues Plan on Building Rule of Law" [http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202101/10/content\\_WS5ffaf67ec6d0f72576943960.html#:~:text=The%20plan%20to%20build%20the,the%20Chinese%20people%2C%20it%20adds.](http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202101/10/content_WS5ffaf67ec6d0f72576943960.html#:~:text=The%20plan%20to%20build%20the,the%20Chinese%20people%2C%20it%20adds.)

of the law, and equality of all before the law.”<sup>52</sup> While China’s use of the term, translated as *fazhi* (法治) or *yifazhiguo* (依法治国), has sparked different interpretations, the government has nonetheless been actively advertising these domestic efforts abroad. This suggests that the national image that the government wants to project to the world may change over time and serve as a continuous pressure for the Chinese government.

Additionally, specific incidents or a series of events can motivate or exacerbate existing continuous pressures. These incidents are often in the form of demands for religious freedom by human rights activists, religious leaders, and domestic and international organizations. They create uncertainty for the government because they are often manifestations of domestic discontent and can be precursors to small- and large- scale protests. They also quickly rouse the attention of international media, governments, and organizations. In this way, these incidents demand immediate response from the central government.

A significant incident or a series of unsettling events outside of China, which on its own may not be deliberate or related, can also distress the central government. For example, activities of religious extremist groups in other countries can create concerns for the Chinese government toward its own domestic security. Likewise, religious organizations’ contributions to democratization movements abroad can exacerbate the Chinese government’s existing concerns about the threat of religion. Following a similar logic, reports of domestic unrest in different regions and unrelated areas can lead to international discussions about the fragility of the Chinese regime, thereby creating unintended pressure for the Chinese central government.<sup>53</sup> In these kinds of cases, the mere presence of groups within and outside the country who hold differing goals and beliefs can aggravate the Chinese government enough to change its policy stance.

### *Central Government’s Dilemma*

When continuous pressures build up due to existing concerns of regime stability and international reputation, the central government needs to respond to relieve the pressure.<sup>54</sup> Specific to the religious realm, how the government chooses to respond—through its management of religion—depends on the continuous pressures at hand, and manifests through specific incidents that arise. For specific, individual events, such as a small-sized protest or a petition, the government can respond by repressing or accommodating the citizens’ demands. However, domestic pressures are often met with repression, because the central government needs to both quell immediate threats to social stability and also set a stern image to prevent society from engaging in similar activities.

At the same time, international pressures push the central government in the opposite direction. Condemnations by state leaders, political and economic sanctions, and media criticism all discourage the Chinese government from freely resorting to repression. For example, in the

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<sup>52</sup> Peerenboom, Randall. *China’s Long March toward Rule of Law*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 2. However, China’s use of the term *fazhi* (法治) or *yifazhiguo* (依法治国) has sparked debates about whether China really means to say “rule by law” and the term is misleading on purpose. “‘Rule of Law’ or ‘Rule by Law’? In China, a Preposition Makes All the Difference,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 20, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-24523>

<sup>53</sup> For example, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 immediately put international spotlight on whether it is likely for China to invade Taiwan.

<sup>54</sup> When pressures do not escalate, the government can also choose to ignore them.

detainment case of Xu Zhangrun, Tsinghua University law professor who openly criticized the CCP after Xi's announcement to remove the two-term presidential limit, the government chose to release him after the U.S. expressed concerns.<sup>55</sup> Admittedly, international pressure does not always work in this manner. There are instances—such as in its repression of Uyghur Muslims or its hardline approach in the South China Sea—where China (and other authoritarian countries) chooses not to compromise. However, these decisions are also made with awareness of international demands and the consequences of not meeting them. China's aggression in the South China Sea disputes has been accompanied with outward projections of the self-image as the “defender of legitimate rights,” “innocent victim” and “peacemaker.”<sup>56</sup> These images were communicated using propaganda techniques specifically designed for the international audience. This shows that the close watch of global spectators can sway the Chinese government away from repression, and if not, then at least pressure the government enough to defend its actions.

A dilemma develops because the pressures of regime stability and international reputation pull the government in opposing directions. From the central government's perspective, maintaining regime stability requires a stern, and often repressive, response to society. In contrast, improving international reputation necessitates more lenience or at least a more circuitous and legalized approach to repression.

Bringing this dilemma into the context of religious repression, the central government has both the needs to repress religion and to appease the global audience who opposes repression. Building on this logic, I theorize the following:

1. *As the continuous pressures change, the central government also adjusts its approach to religious control.*

Because continuous pressures consist of two types—regime stability and international reputation—they can also change in two ways: change in the level of threat to regime stability and change in the national image projected to the international audience. Each of these pressures influences how the central government manages religion.

- 1a. *As perceived threats to regime stability increases, the central government increases its prioritization of religious management.*

Without significant threats to regime stability, the central government's control strategy toward religion is less prioritized, allowing for more selective repression. Upon receiving this guidance from the central government, local government officials can use their discretion to determine whether a church should be shut down or a person should be arrested. The central government can allow such decentralization of management and selectivity of repression because religion's threat to its regime is manageable, to the extent that only certain threatening elements need to be rooted out with targeted repression.

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<sup>55</sup> “China Releases Professor who Criticized President Xi, Friends Say,” *Reuters*, July 12, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific-voa-news-china-china-releases-professor-who-criticized-president-xi-friends-say/6192638.html>

<sup>56</sup> Zhu and Krever, “Newspapers as Tools to Promote National Agenda: How Chinese Communist Party Newspapers Frame Images of the South China Sea Disputes for National and International Audiences,” *Global Media and Communication*, 2022, p. 10.

However, as challenges to its regime stability intensifies, I expect the central government's prioritization of religious control to also increase, resulting in less selective and more indiscriminate repression nationwide. Because of the heightened need for control, the central government raises the priority of religious control, directing local governments to carry out widespread repression. In this case, local government officials become less lenient, and repression becomes less selective among churches.

Likewise, changes in the government's projected national image also results in the government's changed method of justification for its religious policies.

*1b. As the desired national image changes from passive to assertive, the central government's method of justifying religious policies shifts from reactive to proactive.*

A more peaceful and benign national image results in a reactive approach to justifying religious policies. This entails post-hoc justifications of repressive religious policies as a response to international criticism. However, as the projected national image becomes more aggressive, the method of justification also becomes more proactive. Instead of offering rationalizations in the aftermath of repression and as a response to global admonition, the central government chooses to prepare legal justifications and make policy announcements to rationalize subsequent repression.

In short, I expect that as threats to regime stability increases and as China's projected national image shifts from passive to assertive, the central government increasingly prioritizes religious control as a nation-wide policy and employs proactive rationalizations.

This theory of religious control provides the first step to answering the puzzle of selective repression. As the top level of government in charge of deciding the direction of religious policies throughout the country, the central government is key to understanding repression. Put differently, why certain churches are repressed over others depends on the specific repressors, being the local government officials. But why local officials are repressing in a certain manner requires a look at one step above—the central government. As the central government juggles between the pressures from domestic and international audiences, its prioritization of religious control adjusts accordingly. And changes in levels of prioritization determine the local officials' implementation of repressive policies, and ultimately, the resulting selective repression.

## **Methodology**

I evaluate these theoretical propositions by performing text analysis of news articles, drawing insights from interviews, and triangulating through a review of secondary sources. Using newspaper articles as a source has limits in that they are intended for the public audience and most likely do not contain classified directives or plans unfit for the public eye. At the same time, articles are useful in understanding the government's official stance on religion. They offer a way of gauging the government's changing policies and attitudes toward religion that may be difficult to grasp otherwise. Analyzing the Chinese government's publicized statements with the help of primary and secondary sources will be useful in assessing the government's approach toward religion.

For the text analysis portion, I compile a total of 2266 unique news articles from *People's Daily* between 2016 and 2021.<sup>57</sup> *People's Daily* (人民日报, *renminribao*) is the largest newspaper group and an official platform for the CCP, which publishes headlines, official statements, leaders' speeches, government documents, and opinion pieces, among many others. Using *People's Daily Archive* (人民数据, *renminshuju*), a database containing all articles published by *People's Daily* since 1946, I collect articles containing the Chinese word for "religion" (宗教, *zongjiao*) in the article's title or text between 2016 and 2021. Table 2.1 lists the number of articles on religion published each year.

| <b>Year</b>  | <b>Articles on Religion</b> |
|--------------|-----------------------------|
| 2016         | 533                         |
| 2017         | 478                         |
| 2018         | 405                         |
| 2019         | 354                         |
| 2020         | 199                         |
| 2021         | 297                         |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>2266</i>                 |

**Table 2.1: Number of Articles on Religion 2016-2021**

This six-year period was chosen to reflect several years before and after the crafting and passing of the new religious regulations in 2018, and to overlap with my years of fieldwork between 2016 and 2019 in China. All news articles belonged to 83 different categories. The top 15 most frequently used categories are listed in Table 2.2 below.

| <b>Category (English)</b> | <b>Category (Chinese)</b> | <b>Article Count</b> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Important News            | 要闻                        | 1086                 |
| International             | 国际                        | 292                  |
| Supplementary             | 副刊                        | 148                  |
| Theory                    | 理论                        | 113                  |
| Comprehensive             | 综合                        | 93                   |
| International Supplement  | 国际副刊                      | 61                   |
| Politics                  | 政治                        | 54                   |
| Document                  | 文件                        | 47                   |
| Academic                  | 学术                        | 40                   |
| Culture                   | 文化                        | 37                   |
| Holiday Life              | 假日生活                      | 29                   |
| Cultural Heritage         | 文化遗产                      | 27                   |
| Commentary                | 评论                        | 27                   |
| Observation               | 观察                        | 19                   |
| Literary Critique         | 文艺评论                      | 13                   |

**Table 2.2: Categories and the Number of Articles**

<sup>57</sup> Duplicate articles or those with the same title and content that have been published in multiple versions of the paper are omitted. While counting multiple publications of the same article may hold meaning of its own (such as the importance of the article), I give greater weight to multiple articles on the same topic written in varying perspectives and formats by different writers.

As the variety of categories listed in Table 2.2 suggests, a majority of articles collected through a simple search of “religion” do not produce insight about the government’s *political* attitudes toward religion. However, the search reveals how and to what lengths this state-sponsored newspaper chooses to report on religion over time.

Some article categories place religion closer to politics. The “Important News” (要闻, *yaowen*) category includes pressing reports, a substantial amount of which include speeches made by Party leaders such as President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang. The “Documents” (文件, *wenjian*) category contains white papers, policy documents, and lists of newly appointed officials that are related to religion. Similarly, categories labeled “Politics” (政治, *zhengzhi*) or “International” (国际, *guoji*) often include reports about extremist religious groups both domestic and abroad. Other categories place religion farther away from politics. For example, articles in the “Culture” (文化, *wenhua*) category often introduce ancient artefacts that have religious roots or adopt the style of a religious tradition. The “Reading” (读书, *dushu*) category presents newly published books related to the topic of religion.

Using these articles, I perform a search related to the aforementioned domestic and international pressures. Then I map the frequency of these articles (as a proportion of the total number of religion-related articles) each year to locate trends in publication. Additionally, I calculate the frequency of specific words (as a proportion of the total number of words) in each article to find the most representative articles and perform secondary analysis of the content. Finally, I use the word2vec feature using Python to calculate how the proximity of certain word combinations changes over the years.

## **Empirical Evidence: Prioritization of Religious Control**

This section first highlights the changing continuous pressures as evident in newspaper articles related to religion. After analyzing how these pressures in both domestic and international forms change over time, I explore specific incidents to see how the government’s approach to religion has shifted correspondingly.

### *Changing Domestic Pressures*

Domestic pressures having to do with regime stability are assessed through articles containing the term “stability” (稳定, *wending*). While not all of these articles are related to regime stability—for example, some refer to economic stability and regional stability—many of these articles show the government’s concerns toward specific factors that threaten the well-being of the regime. More importantly, the articles demonstrate that the government perceives religion to be in the same context as these threats to domestic stability.

The top three articles with the most mentions of the word “stability” can help to understand the government’s concerns toward religion and regime stability. The State Council Information Office published a document on January 12, 2017, titled “China’s Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation Policy.” In this document, religion is introduced in the context of counterterrorism:

We must not engage in "double standards" on the issue of counter-terrorism, and we must not associate terrorism with a specific country, ethnicity, or religion. (January 12, 2017; 51 mentions of stability)<sup>58</sup>

The second article titled, "New Era of China's National Security" was published on July 25, 2019, and contains the following excerpt:

Disputes over territorial and maritime rights and interests, as well as ethnic and religious conflicts among some countries still exist, and regional security hotspots are emerging from time to time. The risks and challenges against national security cannot be ignored. China continues to maintain political stability, national unity, and social stability. (July 25, 2019; 32 mentions of stability)<sup>59</sup>

In addition to religious conflicts, the same article argues that Taiwanese separatist forces "have always been the biggest real threat to peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."<sup>60</sup> Immediately following is the mention of separatist forces fighting for "Tibet independence" as another "threat to national security and social stability."<sup>61</sup>

Another article from March 6, 2021 printed Premier Li Keqiang's speech on "The Report on the Work of the Government," reviewing government accomplishments from the previous year. In a section titled "Regional Ethnic Autonomy System, and Religion and Work for Overseas Chinese," Li states,

...we must uphold and improve the system of regional ethnic autonomy, fully implement the party's ethnic policy, forge a sense of community of the Chinese nation, and promote the common unity and struggle of all ethnic groups for common prosperity and development. Fully implement the party's basic policy on religious work, and actively guide religion to adapt to socialist society. (March 6, 2021; 32 mentions of stability)<sup>62</sup>

In the same speech, Li emphasizes the need to "resolutely prevent and contain external forces from interfering in Hong Kong and Macao affairs, support Hong Kong and Macao to develop their economies, improve people's livelihood, and maintain long-term prosperity and stability."<sup>63</sup>

These examples show that religion is relevant to regime stability as much as it relates to religious conflicts. Religion is also seen in the same light as the government's domestic concerns about maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the separatist forces in Taiwan and Tibet, and external forces meddling in Hong Kong and Macao affairs.

More importantly, the domestic pressures felt by the central government regarding regime stability have increased over the years. I search for articles containing words related to stability (稳定, *wending*), extremism (极端, *jiduan*), and illegal (非法, *feifa*), and regions associated with domestic stability such as Hong Kong (香港, *xianggang*), Taiwan (台湾, *taiwan*), Xinjiang (新疆, *xinjiang*), and Tibet (西藏, *xizang*). Although the number of religion-

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<sup>58</sup> State Council Information Office, "China's Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation Policy," *Renmin Ribao*, January 12, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> July 25, 2019. "新时代的中国国防" (New Era of China's National Security)

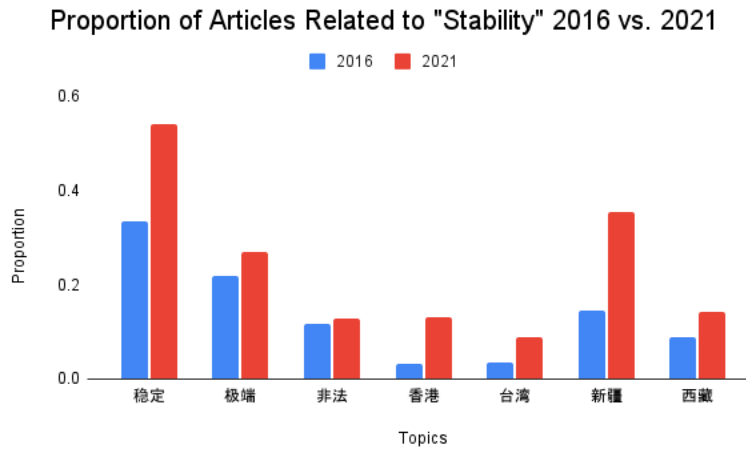
<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> March 6, 2021. "李克强作的政府工作报告" (Li Keqiang's Report on the Work of the Government)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

related articles published per year decreases almost by half from 533 articles in 2016 to 297 in 2021, the proportion of stability-related articles increases over the years.



**Figure 2.3: Proportion of Articles Related to Stability 2016 vs. 2021**

Figure 2.3 shows that the mention of stability and stability-related words in religion-related articles increases over time, from 33% of the articles in 2016 to 54.4% of the articles in 2021. Each article is counted once and is calculated as a proportion out of the total number of articles that year for comparison across six years. Additionally, Word2vec’s similarity feature shows that the terms “China” and “stability” grow more similar from 0.05 in 2016 to 0.48 in 2021.<sup>64</sup> While one cannot interpret these numbers to mean that China has become more stable over the years, what one can conclude is that the Chinese government, through its official news outlet, has been paying increased attention to stability over the years.

Furthermore, how the government perceives the concept of stability also shifts between 2016 and 2021. In 2016, clusters of articles related to stability and religion were mostly associated with foreign countries. For example, in January, President Xi met with leaders from Egypt to discuss strengthening the two countries’ strategic partnership. In the discussions, there were references to terrorism as a hindrance to regional stability, and the need to “oppose linking terrorism with specific countries, ethnic groups, and religions.”<sup>65</sup> However, the government’s commitment to delink religion from terrorism is immediately thrown aside in its conversation with Russia in June 2016: “China and Russia firmly condemn all forms of terrorism. No act of terror can be excused for ideological, religious, political, racial, ethnic or other motives.”<sup>66</sup> Similar discussions were held regarding the threat that terrorism and its link to religion pose to the regional stability shared with Iraq (March 2016), Asia (April 2016), and Uzbekistan (June 2016). Word2vec’s similar-by-word feature also lists Syria’s humanitarian crisis as one of the words associated with stability in 2016.

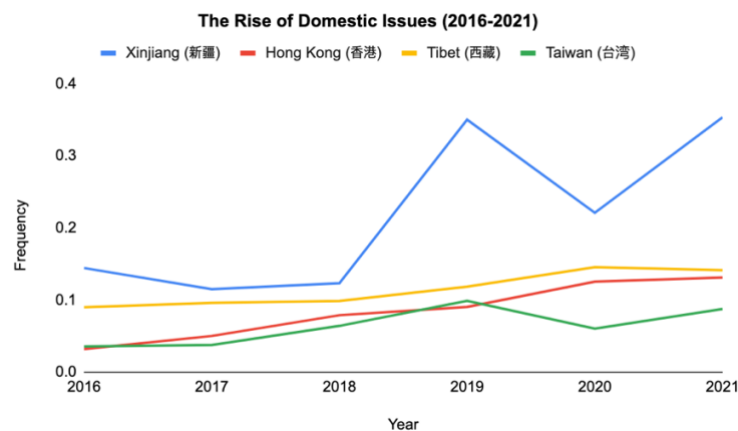
<sup>64</sup> Word2vec’s similarity feature provides a mathematical calculation of the cosine similarity between two words in a document regardless of the frequency of words (as calculated by the Euclidean distance).

<sup>65</sup> January 22, 2016. “中华人民共和国和阿拉伯埃及共和国关于加强两国全面战略伙伴关系的五年实施纲要”(Five-Year Implementation Plan of the People’s Republic of China and the Arab Republic of Egypt on Strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Two Countries)

<sup>66</sup> June 26, 2016. “中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦联合声明”(Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation)



In contrast, analysis of articles from 2021 shows the government’s shift to discussions of domestic factors in relation to regime stability. Word2vec’s similar-by-word feature reveals top words most similar to “stability” in 2021 to be related to Hong Kong—e.g., Hong Kong, democracy, Basic Law, general election, Special Administrative Region, Constitution, legislative council, law, and nation. The article with the most concentrated usage of the term “Hong Kong” is from December 21, 2021, titled “Democracy Development in Hong Kong under ‘One Country, Two Systems’” published by the State Council Information Office.<sup>67</sup> The document repeatedly criticizes anti-China rioters (反中乱港分子, *fanzhong luangang fenzi*) for “collud[ing] with external hostile forces... and obstruct[ing] the development of democracy” in Hong Kong.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the rioters are accused of “splitting the country and subverting the regime, intending to turn Hong Kong into a bridgehead for the implementation of color revolutions,... and endangering national security.”<sup>69</sup>



**Figure 2.4: Proportion of Articles Related to Domestic Issues, 2016-2021**

Additionally, articles related to Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan have also increased over the years (Figure 2.4). The biggest difference among the years is evident in the topic of Xinjiang, which increased from 14.4% of all religion-related articles in 2016 to 35.4% in 2021. Many of these articles belonged to a series called “Xinjiang is a Good Place” (新疆是个好地方, *xinjiang shige haodifang*). Each of these articles—21 articles in 2021 alone—represents a video conference held with or in different countries including the United States, Malaysia, Switzerland, and Senegal, and even in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, presenting a harmonious Xinjiang region rich with culture and history and on its path out of poverty and into development. Another article from November 2021 reported the victims of the July 28 terrorist attacks in Xinjiang stressing the importance and effectiveness of the government’s counterterrorism and deradicalization efforts in Xinjiang.<sup>70</sup> The tone of these articles on Xinjiang stands in stark

<sup>67</sup> December 21, 2021. “一国两制”下香港的民主发展” (Democracy Development in Hong Kong under "One Country, Two Systems")

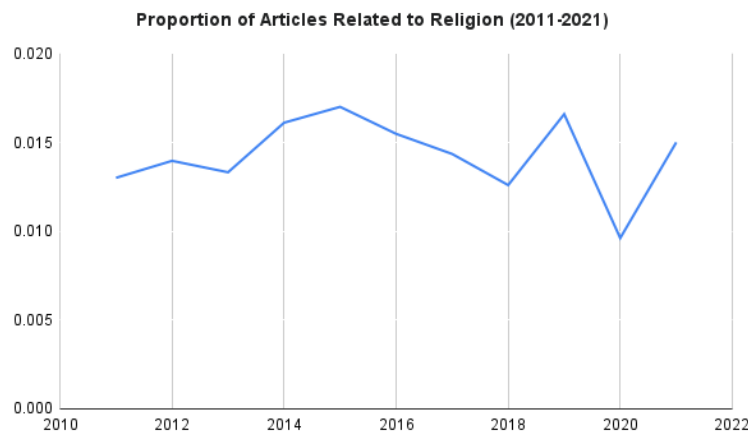
<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> November 18, 2021. “我非常珍惜现在安定祥和的幸福生活’——新疆维吾尔自治区第六十场涉疆问题新闻发布会在京举行” (“I cherish the currently stable and peaceful, happy life." - The 60th Xinjiang-related press conference in Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region held in Beijing)

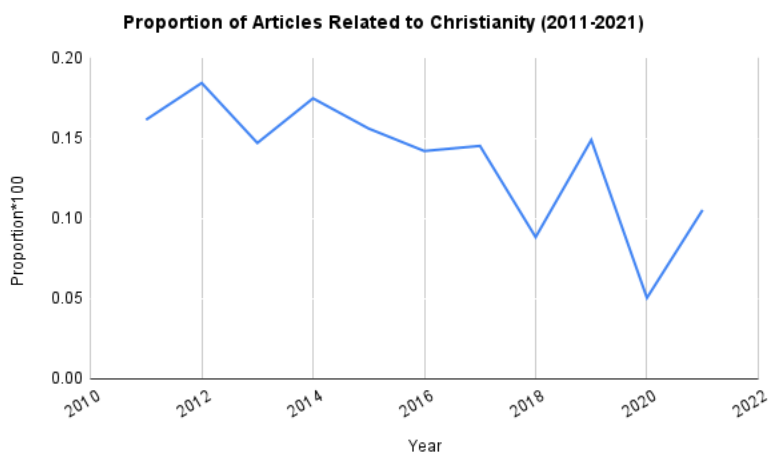
contrast to that of international media, which ranges from harsh criticism to desperate beseechment.

The positivity in these articles hint at another subtle finding—topics that are *not* mentioned in the newspapers.



**Figure 2.5: Proportion of Articles Related to Religion, 2011-2021**

As Figure 2.5 shows, the mention of “religion” in all news articles fluctuates over the years, most likely due to its wide usage in relation to all article categories ranging from history and art to politics and holiday life. However, the mention of “Christianity” (Figure 2.6 below) in all articles noticeably decreases over a ten-year period between 2011 and 2021.<sup>71</sup>



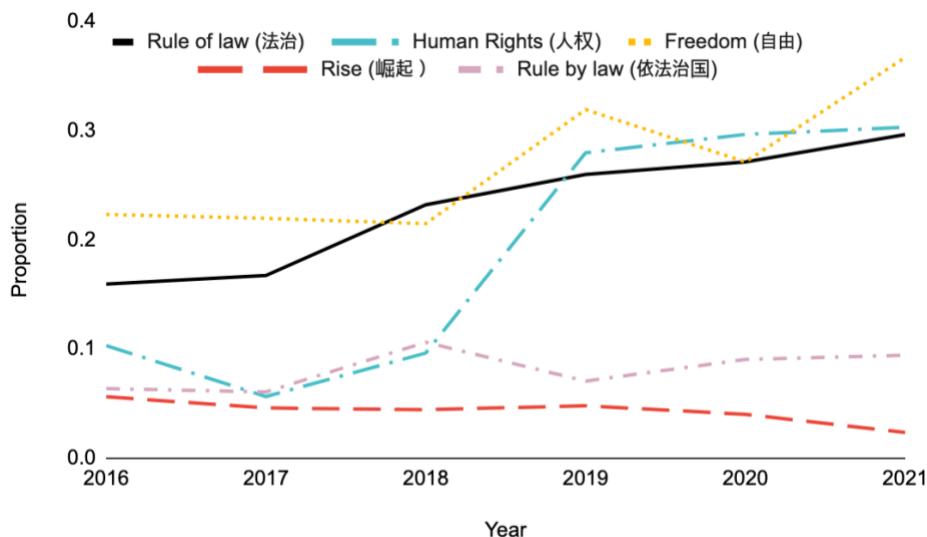
**Figure 2.6: Proportion of Articles Related to Christianity, 2011-2021**

On the surface, this is a surprising trend considering that there has been a perceptible increase in the international focus on Chinese Christianity. Interviews with Chinese pastors also confirm both the noticeable growth of the religion as well as the tightening of religious restrictions in the later 2010s. These trends suggest that although articles can be a good way to gauge government attitudes on a topic, the lack of articles can also indicate the government’s intent to maintain control without rousing the society.

<sup>71</sup> The search accounted for all variations of the term, such as Christ (基督, *jidu*) and Christianity (基督教, *jidujiao*).

## Changing International Pressures

International pressures are pressures felt by the central government due to its desire to project a national image to the international audience. An analysis of news articles demonstrates that China’s desired national image shifts from passive to assertive between 2016 and 2021. The two key concepts that stand out from religion-related articles in this period are “peaceful rise” and “rule-of-law.”<sup>72</sup>



**Figure 2.7: “Peaceful Rise” and “Rule-of-Law” Related Articles (2016-2021)**

Similar to measures of regime stability, articles demonstrate that the government’s projected national image shifts over time. Figure 2.7 shows that, on the one hand, the frequency of articles containing the term “rise” declines consistently over the years. Usage of the word “rise” in the peaceful rise context only appears in 2016 and 2017. As President Xi paid his first visit to the Middle East in January 2016, an article praised China’s peaceful rise as it “contains valuable experience...injecting strong positive energy into the peace and development” of the region.<sup>73</sup> Another article in August 2016 sends a strong warning against Christian human rights activists, stating:

<sup>72</sup> The “Peaceful rise” concept is measured by the term “rise” (崛起, jueqi) which is a part of the coined phrase “Peaceful Rise” (和平崛起, heping jueqi). While the word “peace” is commonly used in other contexts, “rise” is a term most often associated with a country, region, or person’s elevated status, making it a better term to represent the concept. The concept of “rule of law” is measured through articles containing the terms “rule of law” (法治, fazhi) and related concepts such as “rule by law” (依法治国, yifazhiguo), “human rights” (人权, renquan) and “freedom” (自由, ziyou).

<sup>73</sup> January 19, 2016. “为中东和平发展注入强大正能量——写在 2016 年习近平主席首次出访之际”(Injecting strong positive energy into the peace and development of the Middle East——Written on President Xi Jinping’s first visit in 2016)

Any attempt to undermine China's harmony and stability, subvert China's state power, and prevent China's peaceful rise is destined to be unpopular, and will be severely punished by the law, leading to a shameful failure in the end.<sup>74</sup>

Yet another article in September 2017 speaks of the developing countries' collective peaceful rise in the context of the One Belt, One Road initiative.<sup>75</sup> The most recent article in the dataset that contained the term was in 2021, regarding the Party's efforts in "promoting the rise of the central region" in its broader focus on national rejuvenation.<sup>76</sup> These articles show that the government's projection of a peaceful and defensive nation is no more in 2021; recent references to its goals to develop different regions further imply that China has already completed its rise.

On the other hand, the number of articles containing concepts related to the rule of law increases over the years. Ever since President Jiang Zemin introduced the term in 1997, the Chinese government has consistently expressed its desire to develop into a rule of law nation through President Xi's judicial reforms in 2012, the Party's declaration to build a "socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics" in 2014, and an amendment to constitutionalize Party leadership in 2018. And in January 2021, the Central Committee of the CCP published "China's Plan on Building the Rule of Law (2020-2025)" which was "formulated in order to coordinate and promote the construction of the rule of law in China."<sup>77</sup> The plan lays out the proposal to apply the rule of law to not only "governing the country" but also to foreign policy, as it is used to "strengthen multilateral and bilateral dialogues...and advance foreign exchanges" especially in efforts to "jointly combat...religious extremist forces."<sup>78</sup>

In addition, the "rule of law" narrative is accompanied by discussions of human rights, including religious rights. The document contains the following paragraph on building a people-centered rule-of-law system:

Adhere to the establishment of the rule of law for the people, rely on the people, and promote the all-round development of people. Strive to make the people feel fairness and justice in every legal system, every law enforcement decision, and every judicial case. Strengthen the protection of human rights and the rule of law, the property and rights of citizens. Legal persons and other organizations shall not be restricted or deprived for legal reasons and without legal procedures.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> August 6, 2016. "人民根本利益国家法律尊严不容挑战——周世锋胡石根翟岩民勾洪国颠覆国家政权犯罪案件警示录" ("The fundamental interests of the people and the dignity of the state's laws cannot be challenged" - Zhou Shifeng, Hu Shigen, Zhai Yanmin, Gou Hongguo, and the criminal case of subverting state power.)

<sup>75</sup> September 20, 2017. "创新合作 推动共建共享" (Innovative cooperation to promote co-construction and sharing)

<sup>76</sup> November 17, 2021. "中共中央关于党的百年奋斗重大成就和历史经验的决议" (Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the major achievements and historical experience of the party's century-long struggle)

<sup>77</sup> January 11, 2021. "法治中国建设规划 (2020—2025 年)" (Construction Plan for the Rule of Law in China (2020-2025))

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, 中共中央印发《法治中国建设规划(2020—2025 年)》

*Plan on Building the Rule of Law in China (2020-2025)* Official: [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-01/10/content\\_5578659.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-01/10/content_5578659.htm); English Translation;

<https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/%E6%B3%95%E6%B2%BB%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E5%BB%BA%E8%AE%BE%E8%A7%84%E5%88%92%E5%BC%882020-2025%E5%B9%B4%EF%BC%89/>

The last sentence emphasizes the importance of ensuring legal procedures for all citizens, a principle which is reflected in the government's diligence in assigning state crimes to religious leaders and paralleled in the creation of new and more comprehensive religious regulations in 2018.

Finally, to many that voice doubt about whether the traditional understanding of the rule of law is equivalent to that imagined by the Chinese leadership, the document states, that the country can “learn from the useful experience of foreign rule of law” albeit “based on [China's] basic national conditions, ...comprehensive factors such as economic and social development, ...changes in the needs of the people, [and] the essence of Chinese legal culture.”<sup>80</sup> Although China's final conception of a rule-of-law nation may differ from that of the West, the Chinese government wants the world to see that China is striving for the same goal.

### *The Central Government's Approach to Religious Control*

Amidst these changing pressures, the central government finds itself in a conundrum in controlling religion. On the one hand, the government needs to use repression to maintain regime stability, but on the other hand, repression can hurt its national image. How the central government chooses to manage religion depends on the pressures at hand, and manifests through specific incidents.

In the early to mid-2010s, pressures to maintain regime stability were verbalized in relation to external threats to the region. The government was concerned with terrorism and humanitarian crises related to religion in other countries, while threats originating domestically were not pronounced. Meanwhile, this period also overlapped with China's “peaceful rise” narrative. This meant that the government was not facing immediate threats and could pursue a more relaxed approach to religious control. Accordingly, the government did not prioritize repression at the national level, and when met with criticism, responded with post-hoc, reactive justifications.

For example, from 2013 to 2015, government officials demolished over 1,200 church crosses in Zhejiang province as a part of the “Three Rectifications and One Demolition” campaign. Though the campaign was created to “address illegal structures,” an internal government document from the province later showed that the government was specifically targeting “excessive religious sites and overly popular religious activities” while specifying only Christianity.<sup>81</sup> The issue sparked outrage among international media and organizations. The *New York Times* alone published 18 articles specifically on this issue.

The campaign itself was perceived as an initiative created and led by the provincial-level government, hinting at the high level of discretion the local governments wielded in managing religion at the time. The growth of Christianity was especially apparent in Zhejiang, also known as China's Jerusalem, which was why the provincial government of Zhejiang took the task upon itself to implement a province-wide campaign.<sup>82</sup> In a private conversation with government

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ian Johnson, “Church-State Clash in China Coalesces around a Toppled Spire,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2014, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/asia/church-state-clash-in-china-coalesces-around-a-toppled-spire.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/asia/church-state-clash-in-china-coalesces-around-a-toppled-spire.html?_r=0)

<sup>82</sup> Christian Shepherd and Stella Qiu, “In ‘China's Jerusalem’, Christians Say Faith Trumps Official Sunday School Ban,” *Reuters*, December 23, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-religion-education/in-chinas-jerusalem-christians-say-faith-trumps-official-sunday-school-ban-idUSKBN1EI025>

officials and pastors, Open Doors USA found that the campaign was not accompanied by an “increase in persecution on a national level,” and that the central government “had nothing to do with the ‘anti-cross campaign’ in Zhejiang province.”<sup>83</sup>

While the campaign was implemented at the local level, Chinese official news outlets still published statements to justify the repression, in order to address domestic and international criticism. Out of a total of five articles in *People’s Daily* that mention the campaign, none of them addresses the issue of persecution directly—in fact, religion is never mentioned in these articles—but all articles instead provide justifications for the campaign in strictly legal terms. One article from June 2015 highlights the benefits of the campaign in bringing about rural reform and development, beautifying the environment, and strengthening Party organizations.<sup>84</sup> However, the article also mentions the importance of “cracking down on illegal forces that endanger the leadership of Party organizations,” hinting at the dangers of the growth of Christian churches. Notably, in the *Global Times*, an English-language newspaper under the *People’s Daily*, articles provide a more direct defense to address the accusations that the campaign was used for religious persecution. An article from September 2015 states,

The “three revise and one demolition” campaign, aimed at “revising” old neighborhoods, old industrial sites and removing “illegal” structures by 2015, began to attract public attention in 2014 when religious structures, especially churches, were being targeted. China bans the construction of buildings without the necessary documents and approval from local authorities, and it also requires new buildings to follow the registered information. More than half of the nearly 4,000 Christian churches in Zhejiang lack a license to operate, including a property ownership certificate, the Xinhua News Agency reported... “There is no exception in the campaign,” said the commentary.<sup>85</sup>

This case shows that the central government had facilitated selective repression by providing local governments with the authority to determine religious policies appropriate to their regions. Moreover, the government responded with post-hoc justifications to address pressures that were putting its peaceful narrative at risk. For the domestic audience, it provided legal justifications without mentioning religion in the context; for the international audience, it defended itself against rumors of targeted persecution of Christians.

Starting in the late 2010s, the central government began to discuss more domestic concerns in relation to stability, including extremism in Xinjiang and Tibet and anti-China rioters in Hong Kong. The same period also coincided with a more assertive national image that emphasized China’s efforts to transition to a rule-of-law nation. In this context, the central government pulled back the discretion over religious policy implementation previously given to local governments, and instead directed them to prioritize religious control nationwide. Furthermore, as the government adopted a more aggressive and forward-looking stance in its national narrative, it also began to provide rationalizations for its increased repression proactively.

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<sup>83</sup> Janelle P, “The Demolition of Crosses in China,” *Open Doors USA*, August 27, 2015, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/take-action/pray/the-demolition-of-crosses-in-china/>

<sup>84</sup> June 8, 2015, “加强农村党建工作 巩固党的执政基础——全国农村基层党建工作座谈会发言摘编”(Strengthening the Rural Party Building Work and Consolidating the Party's Governing Foundation——Excerpts from the Speech at the National Rural Grass-roots Party Building Work Symposium)

<sup>85</sup> “Zhejiang Fights Rumors on Cross Removal, Church Demolitions,” *The Global Times*, September 7, 2015, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/940926.shtml>



Religious repression in the late 2010s demonstrates the government's changed stance toward religion. During this period, many Chinese pastors of underground churches made international headlines because their churches were shut down and they themselves were arrested. Pastor Jin Tianming, the former senior pastor of Shouwang Church, was put under house arrest, and his church was repeatedly persecuted and eventually shut down in 2019. Pastor Jin Mingri, the senior pastor of Zion Church, has been forbidden to leave the country, and his church was shuttered in 2018. Pastor Wang Yi, the pastor of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, was sentenced to 9 years in prison, and his church was closed down in 2019. These pastors and their churches had all received massive international media coverage for voicing opposition against the Chinese government and being charged with "incitement to subvert state power."<sup>86</sup> However, none of these people or issues appeared in China's official newspaper.

This finding is more striking compared to how activists charged with similar crimes had been reported in the early to mid-2010s. More than a handful of the articles in 2016 directly address the crimes of lawyers—such as Zhou Shifeng, Hu Shigen, Zhai Yanmin, Li Heping, and several others—who have used "illegal religious activities as a platform to recruit lawyers and petitioners" in order to "subvert state power."<sup>87</sup> All of these activists were members of the local underground Christian church, and some were providing legal counsel and representation for persecuted Christians. These articles were published in the "Important News" and "Politics" categories, underscoring the severity of the crimes that the government had attributed to these activists.

Along with the earlier finding that the mention of religion has been disappearing from the official newspaper, the omission of these significant incidents on religious leaders suggests that the government no longer feels the need to defend itself to international critics or justify every instance in which it is accused of violating human rights. In addition to the increase in articles related to the rule-of-law, the government has also crafted, published, and continued to promote the new religious regulations which took effect in early 2018. Unlike the previous instances where repression was followed by post-hoc explanations defending the government's acts to an external audience, increased and indeterminate repression starting in 2018 was *preceded* by the announcement of the new regulations, providing the rationale *ex ante*. This switched order demonstrates China's proactive efforts to promote its assertive image—by declaring the legal restrictions early on—while continuing and even intensifying the level of repression upon churches.

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<sup>86</sup> Ian Johnson, "This Chinese Christian Was Charged with Trying to Subvert the State," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/25/world/asia/pastor-wang-yi-detention.html>

<sup>87</sup> August 5, 2016, "一个“死磕律师”的收场——聚焦北京锋锐律所主任周世锋案庭审," (The End of a "Deadly Fighting Lawyer" -- Focusing on the Trial of Zhou Shifeng, Director of Beijing Fengrui Law Firm); August 5, 2016, "周世锋案一审当庭宣判 颠覆国家政权罪名成立 被告人被判处有期徒刑七年, 表示认罪悔罪不上诉," (Zhou Shifeng was convicted of subversion of state power in court at the first instance. The defendant was sentenced to seven years in prison, and he pleaded guilty and repented without appealing); August 6, 2016. "人民根本利益国家法律尊严不容挑战——周世锋胡石根翟岩民勾洪国颠覆国家政权犯罪案件警示录"( "The fundamental interests of the people and the dignity of the state's laws cannot be challenged" - Zhou Shifeng, Hu Shigen, Zhai Yanmin, Gou Hongguo, and the criminal case of subverting state power.); August 6, 2016, "勾洪国颠覆国家政权案一审宣判被告人当庭表示不上诉," (Gou Hongguo's case of subversion of state power was pronounced at the first instance. The defendant said in court that he would not appeal); August 6, 2016, "周世锋胡石根翟岩民勾洪国颠覆国家政权案一审公开开庭审理并当庭宣判四名被告人均当庭表示认罪服法不上诉," (Zhou Shifeng, Hu Shigen, Zhai Yanmin, and Gou Hongguo's case of subversion of state power opened in the first instance, and the four defendants all pleaded guilty in court and did not appeal.)

In fact, other issues less directly related to religion, such as the Hong Kong protests, have also been dealt with in a similar manner. International media has frequently broadcasted the crackdown on Hong Kong protesters and reported on the use of fire water cannons and tear gas on Hong Kong citizens. In 2021 alone, the *New York Times* reported a total of 328 articles on the issue, with 113 in the World category, 17 in the Opinion category, and 15 in the U.S. category.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, China's official newspaper has stayed relatively silent on the matter. Articles related to the issue of Basic Law and protests in Hong Kong have been few and sparse. Only five articles between 2016 and 2021 mention Hong Kong and protests in the same article, and only three of them are written in relation to the Basic Law, while the other two mention Hong Kong and protests in separate contexts. Instead of reporting on protests, the newspaper has published articles introducing and promoting the new Hong Kong National Security Law (香港特别行政区维护国家安全法, *xianggang tebiexingzhengqu weihuguojiaanquanfa*) in 2020, and reiterating the "One Country, Two Systems" through the Basic Law of Hong Kong.

What differentiates China's approach in the late 2010s from the early to mid 2010s is that even in periods without pressing incidents, the Chinese government has been actively constructing its image abroad through the press. Through this image, China has been building up and publicizing new legal infrastructures ahead of policy changes. Some of these efforts in the religious policy realm include articles about the sinicization of religion (宗教中国化, *zongjiao zhongguohua*), the sinicization of Christianity specifically (基督教中国化, *jidujiao zhongguohua*), and the new *Regulations on Religious Affairs* (宗教事务条例, *zongjiao shiwu tiaoli*).

## Conclusion

This chapter began with the goal of understanding selective repression from a bird's-eye view. Examining the central government's role in the repression of Protestant churches is important because the central government sets the broader direction of religious control throughout the nation. I theorized that the central government's approach toward religion is influenced by continuous pressures to use repression (to maintain regime stability) and avoid repression (to protect its national image). Through an analysis of all articles related to religion in the *People's Daily* from 2016 to 2021, I found that when the government is less strained by domestic threats to regime stability and pursues a "peaceful" national image, its control of religion is less prioritized and carried out more loosely while defending each act of repression afterwards. Contrastingly, when the government faces increased domestic threats to regime stability and also pursues a more assertive national image, it prioritizes restrictions on religion accompanied with proactive rationalizations.

Depending on which of these general guidelines toward religion gets passed down from the central government, local government officials carry out repressive religious policies upon churches and churchgoers. The next chapter shows how local government officials play a role in selective repression as they are caught between directions from above, the central government, and the relations with below, the religious communities. As a preview, when religious control is not a priority (as directed by the central government), local officials are led to enact selective

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<sup>88</sup> An example of an article in the "U.S." category reports President Biden's deferment of deporting Hong Kong residents in America.



repression, choosing to repress or not depending on their relationships with religious communities. But when the central government chooses to prioritize religious control, this translates to heightened threat perception on the part of local government officials, resulting in indiscriminate repression of churches.

While domestic and international pressures seem to shift and intensify together, the dilemma exists for the government because these pressures and their impacts are not so clearly detached from each other. For instance, the government's concerns for regime stability are directly related to the national image it wants to project, thereby influencing the government's use of the press. Likewise, the government's efforts toward building a certain national image are also connected to regime stability, as domestic and international perceptions of China can help to strengthen or weaken the leadership's legitimacy.

In terms of repression, the government chose to allow selective repression in part because it was pursuing a defensive national image. Individual cases of repression can be more easily justified, and if not, the central government can separate itself from the act by blaming the local government's poor discretion. Similarly, the government's shift to prioritize religion was influenced by the increase in its national confidence and strength towards both domestic and international audiences. Though the threat of religion may have increased, the government may have also grown strong enough to enact stricter religious restrictions without the need to defend its decisions to the world.

And this strength—or more precisely, the outward display of strength—is further confirmed by the fact that both the mentions of Christianity as well as references to escalated incidents are increasingly difficult to find in the news. Although the exact intentions and calculations behind the leadership are hidden from the public, these articles (and the lack thereof) provide a clue into the central government's concerns regarding its power and legitimacy. Whether such concerns are aggravated by the whims and motives of local governments will be followed up in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3:

### Local Officials' Predicament: Serving as Agent and Governor

<sup>3</sup> For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. <sup>4</sup> For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. <sup>6</sup> This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

Romans 13:3-6

As subordinate agents to the central government, local government officials, or cadres, carry out central directives upon society. They have been described to follow the center's directions driven by the need for positive evaluation and promotion. At one extreme, local officials are depicted as executing top-down demands with little regard to local situations and communities' reactions. At the same time, local officials are themselves leaders of their regions, be it province, city, or county, governing local politics and guiding policy implementation. Therefore, they have also been portrayed as wielding power of their own, and agency separate from higher government. At this end of the spectrum, officials do not always comply with the center's demands, and their decisions are influenced by personal relationships and self-interest.

Both depictions of Chinese local officials are partially valid. However, a better understanding of local officials combines both aspects to provide a more complex portrayal.

Meng and Su (2021) exemplify this approach in their “sandwich model of local policymaking.”<sup>89</sup> According to the authors, officials are “sandwiched between the higher-level government and the local citizenry,” where they need to make decisions while being constrained by top-down mechanisms of oversight and the bottom-up societal pressures on government responsiveness regarding services provision.”<sup>90</sup> The authors find that local officials selectively respond to superiors’ directives depending on public opinion, and that throughout this process, their policy preferences significantly influence their decisions. Although their findings are focused on local officials’ decision-making in the realm of economic investment and social welfare spending, parallels can be drawn to the religious realm as well.

In the religious realm, local officials find themselves in a similar predicament. Officials are, again, sandwiched by pressure from central government above and religious communities below. Huang (2014) presents the dilemma local officials face in the religious realm by looking at the case of registered True Jesus Churches in China. Huang argues that both local officials and religious leaders find themselves in a pressure-filled environment, the former from their superiors, and the latter from their congregation. However, local officials and religious leaders can reach a common ground out of pragmatism; the former accommodates for better policy implementation, while the latter also plays along for “material benefits,” “elevated social status,” personal needs,” and “religious freedom without political interference.”<sup>91</sup> In this fashion, local officials have to deal with relations within the nexus (*vis-à-vis* religious leaders) and outside the nexus (with higher-level government). Although Huang presents a dyadic picture of the religion-state relationship, his insights parallel the point this chapter tries to get across: that local officials are pulled in both directions by the central government and religious communities, and that their policy implementation depends on these divergent relationships.

In this way, this chapter explains selective repression through the middle level, or the level of local officials. Theories in this chapter build upon existing literature on local policy implementation and state-society relations as a basis for understanding selective policy implementation in the religious realm. I argue that as local officials struggle between pleasing the central government and utilizing the churches to their benefit, their decision to implement repressive policies upon churches also varies. They take into consideration both their prospects for promotion as well as the usefulness (or threat) of churches in relational and material terms. I use process tracing and qualitative case studies as well as insights from interviews with pastors from 2016 to 2019 to illustrate that the local officials’ selective implementation of repressive policies varies with Party priorities and local relationships. And their implementation style ultimately explains the *tactics* of selective repression.

Understanding local officials’ selective implementation of religious policies highlights the role and agency of local officials as they handle directives from above while also considering the threat and utility of the churches in their locale. At the same time, this chapter emphasizes the importance of the central government’s directions as they influence local officials’ calculations and ultimately, their style of policy implementation. In this way, the study not only contributes to the scholarship on central-local dynamics, but also provides a sneak peek into the mind of the Party, and more broadly, the mind of a prominent authoritarian leadership, as it manages the threat of religion.

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<sup>89</sup> Tianguang Meng and Zheng Su, “When Top-Down Meets Bottom-Up: Local Officials and Selective Responsiveness within Fiscal Policymaking in China,” *World Development*, Vol. 142, June 2021.

<sup>90</sup> Meng and Su, 2021, p. 3.

<sup>91</sup> Huang, 2014, p. 710.

## Extant Literature

Local policy implementation in China is a widely studied topic because local officials play a versatile role as an agent of the central government and a governor to local communities. *Selective* policy implementation deserves a closer analysis because it brings both of these roles—as agents and as governors—into question. Being selective with which policies to implement (instead of all) raises skepticism about local officials’ accountability as the central government’s agents; and being selective with the target population raises questions about the local officials’ roles as governors to the local communities.

### *Central-Local Relations*

As lower-level agents of the Chinese Party-state, local officials are expected to show compliance to higher-level authorities by carrying out their responsibilities. Whether officials are accountable in fulfilling their responsibilities is monitored, evaluated, and ultimately rewarded or punished through the cadre management system. Manion (1985) describes this system in detail: “the appointment, promotion, transfer and removal of leading cadres is based, in principle at least, on their qualifications and performance as evaluated regularly” through four mechanisms: self-assessment, assessment of competence, political investigation, and screening.<sup>92</sup> Through this process, the evaluation system serves as the central government’s “instrument of internal monitoring and compliance among the leading local cadres in order to achieve a positive outcome of evaluation.”<sup>93</sup> Given this system, selective policy implementation calls into question the local officials’ accountability as agents as well as the broader dynamic of central-local relations.

Existing studies offer several reasons for why local officials selectively implement policies. One explanation is the problem of capacity—that the local government is limited in resources and thus cannot perfectly implement all policies even if it desired to do so.<sup>94</sup> Local governments often lack “adequate personnel, is poorly funded, and suffers low prestige,” and rural village officials, especially, are known to suffer from a “relative dearth of economic resources.”<sup>95</sup> Specific to the control of religion, local officials’ limited capacity is exacerbated by the fact that Protestantism is only one of five officially approved religions to manage, let alone unapproved religions and cults.<sup>96</sup> For instance, a raid to close down a sizeable church, such as the Shouwang Church, involves the collaboration of hundreds of police officers from multiple security bureaus to surround the church to keep the religious out, block off public spaces to disperse and prevent alternative gatherings, detain religious leaders, and confiscate materials, for

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<sup>92</sup> Melanie Manion, “The Cadre Management System, Post-Mao: The Appointment, Promotion, Transfer and Removal of Party and State Leaders,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 102 (June, 1985), p. 226-229.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Heberer and Rene Trappel, “Evaluation Processes, Local Cadres’ Behavior and Local Development Processes,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (November 2013): p. 1066.

<sup>94</sup> Whether this desire to repress all churches exists is debated. One can dismiss the feasibility of such a task, given the size of the country and the growth of Protestantism; Another can see it as unnecessary, that any religion under sufficient control can be safe and even beneficial.

<sup>95</sup> Wright and Zimmerman-Liu, 2013, p. 11.

<sup>96</sup> Carsten Vala, “The State-Religion Relationship in Contemporary China: Corporatism with Hegemony,” in Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath ed. *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaption, Survival and Resistance* (2013), p. 104.

weeks at a time.<sup>97</sup> Relatedly, Teets (2015)' work on local policy innovation also acknowledges the significance of resource constraints.<sup>98</sup>

Additionally, selective policy implementation may occur as the product of directions from the central government (Shirk 1993; Montinola, Qian and Weingast 1995; Heilmann 2008). In other words, local officials may demonstrate compliance by implementing select policies depending on the center's varying policy priorities. O'Brien and Li (1999) find that local officials, "insofar as they know that only some targets really matter," distinguish between the policy targets that must be met (hard) versus ones that are nonbinding (soft), and execute only the hard targets.<sup>99</sup> In this way, local officials are "assigned responsibilities of varying importance" and focus on implementing only select policies for the specific incentives that follow.<sup>100</sup> Likewise, the choice not to implement a policy may be the result of "the center's half-hearted promotion."<sup>101</sup> According to this logic, selective repression may imply both the central government's priorities as well as the presence of incentives for local officials to carry it out.

Ironically, selective policy implementation can also be the result of local deviance from the center. According to this explanation, local officials on the ground have more agency to implement policies in ways that benefit themselves (Cai 2004; Smith 2009). This may be the result of flaws in the incentive system for local officials (Mei and Pearson 2014), or the central government's difficulty of monitoring local official behavior (Oi 1999), or officials' prioritization of "local imperatives" (O'Brien and Li 1999, p. 176). The previous example of local officials selectively implementing hard policy targets also has its flip side: they neglect to carry out soft policy targets. In this sense, selective policy implementation can be viewed as both an "important source of policy innovation" (Mei and Pearson 2014) as well as a failure of proper policy implementation (Cai 2004; Hillman 2010; Smith 2010; Zhou 2010; Gao 2015) that brings "unintended consequences unwelcome to the center."<sup>102</sup>

Likewise, using the same logic of selective implementation produces differing interpretations of the central-local power dynamic. For example, a successful implementation of repressive religious policies in a local district could imply the strength of the central government in attaining the local government's compliance, or suggest that the local incentives have lined up with the central objectives. Conversely, when repressive religious policies are selectively carried out, this could be interpreted as selectivity demanded by the top or direct defiance from the bottom. Additionally, when repressive religious policies are not carried out broadly, it could be the result of the central government allowing for, and the local government seeking, innovation from the bottom, or of miscommunication between the levels of governments.

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<sup>97</sup> Andrew Jacobs, "China Detains Church Members Over Public Praying," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/10/world/asia/10china.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Although resource constraints are not the focus of her argument, Teets mentions that "poorer regions with significant resource constraints" may have "few opportunities for...experiment[ation]." Jessica C. Teets, "The Politics of Innovation in China: Local Officials as Policy Entrepreneurs." *Issues and Studies*, 51, no. 2 (2015). p. 90.

<sup>99</sup> Kevin J. O'Brien and Lianjiang Li, "Selective Policy Implementation in Rural China." *Comparative Politics*, 31, no. 2, (1999), pp. 174-175.

<sup>100</sup> Yongshun Cai and Lin Zhu, "Disciplining Local Officials in China: The Case of Conflict Management." *The China Journal*, 70 (2013), p. 101.

<sup>101</sup> O'Brien and Li, 1999, p. 169.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

## *Local Officials-Society Relations*

Local officials' selective policy implementation can also be in the form of choosing select targets instead of policies. Given the same set of regulations, officials may choose to implement them differently on select targets of society, which raises questions about the local officials' roles as governors to the local society.

One explanation attributes selectivity to government decision-making. In this explanation, local officials' relationship with society can be depicted in a top-down manner, where they implement regulations upon local citizens without much regard to citizens' opinions (Bennett 1972; [Harding 1981](#); [White 1990](#); [O'Brien and Li 1999](#); [Kennedy and Chen 2018](#)). In this portrayal, the local government operates under the strict control of the central government and is motivated by a combination of promotion and resource allocation to implement even the policies undesired by citizens, such as family planning, tax collection, and even religious repression. However, this top-down explanation still does not address why certain targets are chosen over others. More importantly, this one-directional dynamic has undergone revision over time in practice and in literature. Contemporary scholarship tends to describe China's local state-society relations as "multidirectional and fluid rather than unilaterally dominated."<sup>103</sup>

The question of why local officials choose certain targets for policy implementation can be explored by looking at the different types of relationships officials have built with members of society. In one form, the relationship can be another principal-agent dynamic, with the principal being local community members instead of higher-level government ([Dai and Spires 2018](#); [Tsai and Liao 2020](#); [Wang and Liu 2022](#)). In this type of dynamic, local officials are attune to the needs and attitudes of the community members and implement policies accordingly. For example, in Tsai and Liao (2020)'s study on poverty alleviation in China, provincial, county, and sub-county level cadres are paired with poor households and their work performance is partly evaluated by these households, whose satisfaction is directly tied to cadres' bonus and promotion.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, this dynamic can be expressed as 'responsive authoritarianism' ([Reilly 2011](#); [Weller 2012](#); ; [Stockmann 2013](#); [Heurlin 2016](#)). According to Heurlin, this concept refers to a government that "proactively monitors citizen opposition to state policies and selectively responds with policy changes when it gauges opposition to be particularly widespread."<sup>105</sup> The logic suggests that local officials are receptive to citizens' needs and may choose not to repress those that express opposition, or in periods where they gauge pervasive discontent in society.

Officials can also be in a mutually beneficial relationship with society. The concept underlying this relationship is a well-known Chinese principle called *guanxi*, which means relationship or connectedness. Guanxi is "based on reciprocity... where one does favors for others as social investments, clearly expecting something in return."<sup>106</sup> Thomas Gold (1985) explains why this principle is necessary in China in this following excerpt:

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<sup>103</sup> Raymond Yu Wang and Qing Liu. "Probing NGO-Community Interactions through Village Cadres and Principal-Agent Relationships: Local Effects on the Operation of NGO Projects in Rural China." *Journal of Contemporary China*, 31, no. 135 (2022), p. 446.

<sup>104</sup> Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Xingmiu Liao. "Mobilizing Cadre Incentives in Policy Implementation: Poverty Alleviation in a Chinese County," *China Information* 34, no. 1 (2020), pp. 55-56.

<sup>105</sup> Christopher Heurlin, *Responsive Authoritarianism in China*. Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 3.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas B. Gold, "After Comradship: Personal Relations in China Since the Cultural Revolution." *The China Quarterly* 104 (1985), p. 660.

In any society where goods - necessities and luxuries - are scarce, but especially in a socialist society where most goods are bureaucratically distributed, connections are vital for access to them. The reliance on instrumental personal relations based on *guanxi* to accomplish tasks China also reveals a lack of respect for law, regulations, and for the concept of everyone being equally subject to universal standards of and morality. As the people see it, *guanxi* is the basis for personal relations because it works; playing by the rules takes much longer - if it ever bears fruit - and is something only the very naive or inept would resort to. Thus, the crime is not to use *guanxi*; the crime is to be caught. (Gold, 1985, p. 662)

In this way, personal relationships allow local officials with increased access to goods that they may not be able to access otherwise as well as ability and efficiency in accomplishing tasks (Walder 1983). According to this explanation, local officials may only carry out repressive policies upon those with whom they do not have such connections.

A more formalized version of this third dynamic hinging upon personal relationships can be seen in the form of corporatism (Oi 1992; Edin 2003; Vala 2013; Hsu and Hasmath 2013; Wang, Ye and Franco 2014), and in some versions, a patron-client relationship between officials and citizens (Oi 1985; Paik 2018). Unlike the previously described mutually beneficial relationship, local officials and citizens in this version have a power imbalance, with local officials having the upper hand. For example, Kang (2020)'s study of the NGO sector after the Sichuan earthquake finds that local officials can coopt NGOs into providing services to meet officials needs in exchange for officials' provision of resources that are necessary for NGO survival.<sup>107</sup> Mattingly (2019) also argues that civil society groups can serve as local officials' "hidden tools of informal control" in drawing compliance on areas such as protests, land requisitions, and mandatory birth quotas.<sup>108</sup> In this relationship, local officials are afforded more flexibility and authority in their policy implementation, and can choose not to repress churches that are useful to them.

Existing explanations of selective policy implementation are not all mutually exclusive of each other, nor are they comparable at the same level. Taken together, they help to establish that local officials' relationships with both the central government and the local communities help to explain different aspects of the selective policy implementation process. At the same time, the divergence of interpretations arising from existing literature necessitates a closer look at how local implementation plays out—and why it occurs selectively—in the religious policy realm in China.

## Theory of Religious Policy Implementation

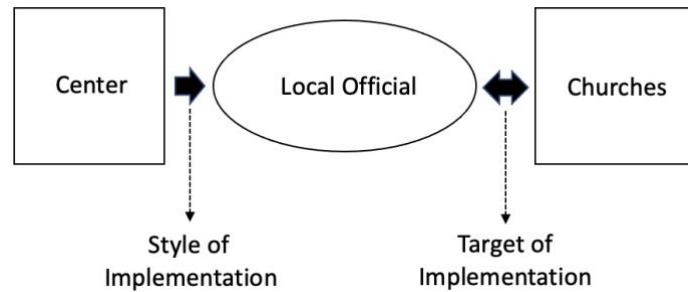
Based on existing literature, I develop a theoretical framework for how to understand the local officials' calculations behind religious policy implementation. As detailed in the diagram (Figure 3.1) below, I argue that the manner in which local officials implement religious policies in their area of jurisdiction depends on two factors: the center's directions and the official's view of churches' characteristics.

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<sup>107</sup> Yi Kang, "Dispersed Domination through Patron-Clientelism: The Evolution of the Local State-NGO Relationship in Post-Disaster Sichuan," *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 124 (2020), p. 599.

<sup>108</sup> Daniel C. Mattingly, *The art of political control in China*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 3.





**Figure 3.1: Theories of Local Official’s Religious Policy Implementation**

The center’s directions, as communicated to local officials, determine the officials’ *style* of implementation, and in combination with the officials’ view of the church will determine the *target* of implementation (or the specific church’s chance of being repressed). The following two sections elaborate on each component of this figure.

*Central Government’s Directions → Style of Implementation*

The central government’s directions determine the local official’s style of implementing repressive policies upon churches.<sup>109</sup> These directions entail the central government’s prioritization of religious management. As explained in Chapter 2, when the control of religion is not a priority, the central government gives directions for more lenience, providing more discretion to local governments. But when the central government prioritizes tighter control of religion, it directs the local government to adjust the style of policy implementation accordingly. Such policy directions have been found in other policy realms as well. Kennedy and Chen (2018) call it a “policy push,” where the central government “demonstrate[s] central commitment to specific policies or even an ongoing campaign” in a “relatively short, focused and intense administrative burst.”<sup>110</sup>

Local officials comply in such situations, because of the cadre management system that lies at the core of their relationship. Cadres who desire to maintain their position or to get promoted behave in ways that would yield a positive evaluation by their seniors. This logic drives local cadres’ style of policy implementation. To the extent that local officials value their relationship with the central government, the central government’s directions determine the officials’ boundaries of creativity, compliance, and lenience with regards to implementing repressive policies upon local churches.

(1) Creativity

First, how clearly the central government communicates its directions to the local government directly influences the kind of creativity with which local officials interpret and implement religious policies. The most direct way for local officials to receive a positive

<sup>109</sup> By “style,” I refer to general patterns of implementing policies rather than the specific repressive policies themselves;

<sup>110</sup> John James Kennedy and Dan Chen. “State Capacity and Cadre Mobilization in China: The Elasticity of Policy Implementation,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27, no. 111 (2018), p. 394.



evaluation and secure their promotion is to signal compliance by implementing policies in a way desired by their superiors. This, in turn, will depend on the clarity of the superiors' directions. Strong priorities from the central government are communicated through clear directions, which leave little room for creative interpretation by local officials. Policies under low priority are handed down through ambiguous directions, or "mixed signals" (Stern and O'Brien 1999), to which local officials reciprocate with creativity, without knowing where the boundaries are for permitted action.<sup>111</sup>

## (2) Compliance

Second, local officials' attention to central government's priorities also determines their level of compliance. When the central government does not prioritize strict religious control, local officials have less incentive to implement repressive policies. Executing an unfavorable policy upon the local community might cause more inconvenience than benefits. It may be more beneficial for local cadres to argue that their locale is free of religious problems, especially since repressing more churches may be equivalent to "airing their dirty laundry." However, when religious control becomes a national priority, there is less room for negligence on the part of local officials.

## (3) Lenience

Third, the central government's directions influence local officials' lenience toward churches based on their personal connections. Local officials may put their personal relationships above their responsibilities to implement policies. Vala (2013) sums up this point nicely:

Policies that are "on the books" may be bent, ignored or violated altogether by Protestant association leaders or pastors who have developed a relationship of trust with their [Religious Affairs Bureau] (RAB) counterparts... Also, it means that uniform, standardized implementation of policies is unlikely because of the fragmented nature of the state and the personal trust relationships.<sup>112</sup>

Personal connections often lead to relaxed policy implementation for the local population but can also be extremely beneficial for the local officials.<sup>113</sup> These connections are mutually dependent and create different dynamics depending on how much control over religion is prioritized by the central government. When the central government prioritizes tighter control of religion, personal connections become less important as the local official's perception of threat in churches is enhanced, thereby increasing the risk of repression for churches with observable threatening characteristics. Conversely, when religion is not a priority for the central government, local

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<sup>111</sup> Stern, Rachel E., and Kevin J. O'Brien. "Politics at the boundary: mixed signals and the Chinese state." *Modern China* 38.2 (2012), p. 186.

<sup>112</sup> Carsten Vala, "How China's Religious Affairs Bureaucracy Works," *China Source*, December 4, 2013, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/how-chinas-religious-affairs-bureaucracy-works/>.

<sup>113</sup> Many officials have gathered "off-budgetary funds" by collecting "extra fees and surcharges on public goods and services, expropriations and fines collected from local businesses or individuals, kickbacks and bribes paid to local government agencies, and the illicit diversion of budgetary funds so as to create off-budgetary enterprises." Alvin Y. So, "Peasant Conflict and the Local Predatory State in the Chinese Countryside," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 34:3-4, 2017, p. 567.

officials will be more lenient toward the general population and selective on whom to repress, lowering their threat perception and raising their radar for utility. In this way, this third component, lenience, is directly related to the following section on selecting targets.

*Official's View of the Church → Target of Implementation*

Building on directions from the central government, how local officials perceive an individual church determines the target of repression. Table 3.2 theorizes local officials' calculations behind selecting their target.

**Table 3.2: Theories on Target of Implementation**

|                | Determining Relationship         |  | Hypothesis  |
|----------------|----------------------------------|--|---|
| Threat Theory  | Official's Perception of threat  | ↔ Church's threatening characteristics | As church's threat (in relation to official's perception of threat) ↑, church's chance of being repressed ↑ |
| Utility Theory | Official's Perception of Utility | ↔ Church's useful characteristics      | As church's utility (in relation to official's needs) ↑, church's chance of being repressed ↓               |

I divide the ways in which local officials view each church into two broad categories – threat and utility. The logic of threat and utility resembles Kang and Heng (2008)'s “system of graduated controls,” where the government uses different control strategies over social organizations “according to the capacities...to challenge the state and the value of the public goods they provide.”<sup>114</sup> Similarly, I theorize that a local official is more likely to repress a church if the church's threat is perceived to be greater than its utility.

First, local officials evaluate the threat they perceive in each church through the threatening characteristics of the church. Based on this relationship between the officials' perception and the church's threatening characteristics, I hypothesize that as this threat is higher, the church's chance of being repressed also increases.

Officials may perceive threat from these churches in the following categories: collective action potential that may cause social turmoil (and even democratization), religious doctrines that challenge Party ideology, and infiltration of foreign influence. Although these threats in churches reflect broader concerns for the Party, I equate them with the local official's own apprehensions. This is because local officials, as Party members, are trained to be wary of churches as they carry these elements of threat<sup>115</sup>, and understand that losing control over these churches has direct consequences on exactly these grounds. For example, local officials see that a Christmas gathering of thousands of people is potentially as dangerous as a local protest of similar size.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Xiaoguang Kang and Han Heng, "Graduated Controls: The State-Society Relationship in Contemporary China," *Modern China*, 34, no. 1 (2008), p. 36.

<sup>115</sup> These threats are communicated externally through the *Constitution*, as well as through internally circulated documents. See for example: Asia Watch Committee, “Vigilance Against Infiltration by Religious Forces from Abroad,” *Freedom of Religion in China* (Human Rights Watch/Asia: 1992), pp. 66-68.

<sup>116</sup> Lily Kuo, “Chinese Cities Crack Down on Christmas Celebrations,” *The Guardian*, December 24, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/24/china-cracks-down-on-christmas-celebrations>.

Following these categories of threat, the church's threatening characteristics can be manifested in different ways – large prayer groups that encourage inviting newcomers, sermons that stress orthodox Christian doctrines or emphasize the building of a Christian community, and church leadership that includes foreign missionaries, among others. These manifestations are partially the basis upon which local officials evaluate the church.

Second, local officials evaluate their needs in relation to the utility the church can provide. Accordingly, as the church's utility increases, the chance that officials will repress the church decreases. This theory is based on the general logic of corporatism literature ([Schmitter 1974](#); [Collier and Collier 1979](#); [Williamson 1989](#); [Molina and Rhodes 2002](#)), where organized interest groups are “recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.”<sup>117</sup> It is important to note not only the group interests that are represented in this corporatist system, but also the “maintenance of political stability, or governability” that the system serves to promote.<sup>118</sup> Vala applies this corporatist logic to the case of China by explaining that the CCP has organized religions into “national associational structures that act as bridges between the Party-state and the...[registered] churches affiliated with the association.”<sup>119</sup>

Under utility theory, officials' needs may include financial needs, reputational needs, and assistance in public goods provision, among others; church's ability to fulfill these needs can be demonstrated by its congregational size, wealth, involvedness in the community, etc. It is also important to point out that the church's utility is strictly dependent on utility *while in operation*. In other words, the reputational benefits (i.e., in terms of prospects for job promotion) of shutting down a church is not considered in this framework.

Both threat and utility theories are relative rather than absolute because the resulting chance of repression varies depending on officials' perception. Moreover, while church characteristics are objective elements, officials' perception is a subjective matter. Churches with similar characteristics in both threat and utility may be perceived differently conditional upon officials' perception of different types of threats (e.g., collective action, ideological, foreign) and utility (their needs) at the time. More importantly, officials' perception is influenced by the center's directions. For example, ahead of important political events, such as the National People's Congress (NPC) sessions, the central government may tighten its control over the management of religion and thereby also increase the sensitivity with which local officials perceive the threatening characteristics of churches.

In summary, a church's chance of experiencing repression depends on both how the official views the church, and the directions passed down from the Center. It is only the combination of these two theories that delivers an understanding of selective religious policy implementation in China.

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<sup>117</sup> Philippe C. Schmitter, "Still the Century of Corporatism?" *The Review of politics* 36, no. 1 (1974), pp. 93-94.

<sup>118</sup> Peter J. Williamson, *Corporatism in Perspective: An Introductory Guide to Corporatist Theory*. Sage Publications, 1989, p. 3.

<sup>119</sup> However, due to China's divergence from the three assumptions of corporatism “associational legitimacy,” “clear boundaries between associations and other illegal groups,” and “mutual respect between associations and the state,” Vala labels the case of China as “corporatist structures with hegemonic agenda.” Carsten Vala, “The State-Religion Relationship in Contemporary China: Corporatism with Hegemony,” in Jennifer Hsu and Reza Hasmath ed. *The Chinese Corporatist State: Adaptation, Survival and Resistance* (2013).

## Evaluating Theory: Local Religious Policy Implementation

In the religious realm, local officials have implemented policies neither uniformly nor across all subjects. As Wright and Zimmerman-Liu (2013) note, local authorities have been “subject to little central oversight” in implementing religious regulations, including the one requiring unregistered churches to register or discontinue their operation.<sup>120</sup> Without knowing which factor has caused a crack in the implementation of regulations, what is certain is that for decades since ratification, religious regulations had “remained almost completely unrealized” and thus provided a limited amount of breathing room for select religious communities.<sup>121</sup> Put simply, officials have been selective in implementing repressive policies upon churches.

In fact, local policy implementation, regardless of location and especially before the adoption of the new *Regulations* in 2018, were selectively repressive. Reny (2018) labels the local officials’ way of implementation as toleration, explaining that officials “choose not to use force against underground churches, in spite of their awareness of the latter’s existence.”<sup>122</sup> In fact, many unregistered pastors from sizable churches (with a congregation of over thirty people) reported to having periodic meetings for coffee with an official from the public security bureau (PSB). Aside from having regular information-sharing meetings with officials, these religious leaders were still able to continue to operate their unregistered house churches. However, not all pastors were treated with lenience. Other house church pastors spoke of their Sunday services being interrupted, their church members and themselves being detained, and their churches getting shut down.

In this way, when religion did not constitute a priority for the central government, that is, when the leadership did not have the need to urgently address religious matters, it allowed local officials to be more creative in interpreting rules, less compliant in following rules, and more selective in choosing targets.<sup>123</sup> More specifically, creativity in interpreting policies came from the need to please the superiors, knowing that religious was a continuing source of concern for the Party. However, creative implementation also meant that local officials did not know how far they could go with their creativity.

The case of Zhejiang demonstrates this point. Between 2013 and 2015, demolitions of thousands of church crosses in Wenzhou and other cities in Zhejiang province were widely discussed in both Chinese and international media. However, interviews of religious leaders both in Wenzhou and in other cities revealed that this large-scale repression was the result of a province-level official’s solitary decision-making. An interviewee shared the following:

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<sup>120</sup> Teresa Wright and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, “Engaging and Evading the Party-State: Unofficial Chinese Protestant Groups in China’s Reform Era,” *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 1:1, (2013), p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> Wright and Zimmerman-Liu, 2013, p. 4-5; Lauren B. Homer, “Registration of Chinese Protestant House Churches Under China’s 2005 Regulation on Religious Affairs: Resolving the Implementation Impasse,” *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 52 No. 1, 2010, p. 50.

<sup>122</sup> Marie-Eve Reny. *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China*. Oxford University Press, 2018; Marie-Eve Reny, *Thinking Beyond Formal Institutions: Why Local Governments in China Tolerate Underground Protestant Churches*. 2012. University of Toronto, PhD Dissertation, p.4.

<sup>123</sup> The logic is similar to Matland’s ‘ambiguity-conflict model,’ except I would argue that the top-down model applies in situation of low ambiguity and *high* political conflict in the case of China. Richard E. Matland, “Synthesizing the Implementation Literature: The Ambiguity-Conflict Model of Policy Implementation”, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Policy*, 5 (April 1995), 145–74.

“The official wanted to get promoted, so he needed something to show. Yes, what he did was huge, and was covered by foreign reporters too. But no one would do this on his own without knowing that the central government would probably be okay with it. He must have gotten separate directions from above....or he just miscalculated.”<sup>124</sup>

In other words, the demolition of crosses was a creative application of regulations, and the scale at which it was implemented implies that this creativity was done without clear knowledge of the center’s boundaries.

Creativity is also related to the second component of implementation style: compliance. Creatively implementing policies can be one form of demonstrating compliance to higher government. The desire to please the central government may encourage local officials to show off their achievement in their localities, like in the Zhejiang case. At the same time, too much discretion in interpreting regulations can lead officials astray from original policies, resulting in lower compliance. Cross demolitions in Zhejiang have also been interpreted both ways—some believe the campaign was policy experimentation by the most compliant provincial leader, while others believe the campaign was far from what the central government intended for local governments.

Compliance can also be interpreted and demonstrated in a different way. Another way for local officials to both satisfy higher government and save on local resources was to not have any problems with religion. In other words, local officials could prove their competency by showing that there was no need to control religion because a sizable religious population did not exist in their area. This kind of calculation led to deflection of responsibilities. Local officials often encouraged churches to migrate to another area that was not within their jurisdiction.<sup>125</sup> Similarly, local officials encouraged foreign missionaries to enter and leave the country through airports in a different city than their own in order to pass the blame (of having foreign missionaries) to another locality. A missionary recalled, “The official told me next time I should enter through a different city, and that we (himself, me, and the church I minister) would all be satisfied this way.”<sup>126</sup> This example also demonstrates that during this period, local officials were able to overlook the threatening elements despite their objective existence—in this case, the threat of foreign influence.

Additionally, more discretion given to local officials in implementing religious policies also meant that they could be lenient and selective in their choice of targets. Without the central government prioritizing religious control, local officials were not primed to be more perceptive of the threats in churches (as they would be when directed to tighten religious control), nor were they free to seek out only utility. This balance meant that choosing the target to implement repressive policies remained largely in their discretion.

Homer (2010) argues that under the previous set of religious regulations, “churches and government officials rel[ied] on personal relationships, local regulations, and a nuanced politically based détente to govern their relationship, without clear national legal standards.”<sup>127</sup> This meant that a local official’s personal relationship with the local community led to either a lenient or a strict style of policy implementation depending on the official’s perception of the church. A church that carried more threat than utility – by having an influential pastor or having a large congregation of more than a thousand (e.g., Shouwang Church) – was forced to shut

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with scholar AYB1203, Beijing, 2016.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with pastor PYB1188, Beijing.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with missionary MNA1180, U.S., 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Homer, 2010, p. 51.



down if it did not have strong connections to local officials. In contrast, the same type of large church with an influential pastor (e.g., Zion Church) continued to exist by maintaining good relationships with the local government.

Holding personal relationships in high regard meant that officials' relationship with the pastor or church determined how they would perceive the church's threat and utility. Pastor C in Shanghai shared that he had continued a ten-year long relationship with a local RAB official who had been pestering him to register with the government. When asked why the official did not just shut down the church, the pastor answered that it was their good relationship that prevented harsh policies from getting implemented on the church, then proceeded to show me a celebratory text the pastor had just received from the official for his birthday.<sup>128</sup> For Pastor C, his friendship with the local official made him and his church more useful than threatening to the local government.

Even without personal relationships, local officials found churches useful in other ways. Pastor D from an eastern province described a time in early 2010s when a local official visited the church with the intent of closing it down. The pastor prevented his church from getting shuttered by telling the local official how much his church had contributed to the community:

I told him, 'We didn't do any harm. You should ask around.' We did a lot of community work. Over there, there are lots of people doing construction work. Our church provided free food. On Christmas and Thanksgiving, we fed hundreds of people free food for three days. We also go to areas with ethnic minorities. This is the kind of work we do. The official quietly listened to what I told him, and said, 'If you need help next time, come find us.' And he left.<sup>129</sup>

Pastor D's experience is a direct example of how a church's usefulness can influence local officials' perception of the church, and ultimately affect whether the church becomes a target of repression.

Conversely, the lack of a good personal relationship between the official and the church often led to negative outcomes. Pastor E from an eastern province—whom I interviewed in a secluded building with curtains closed and phones turned off due to the fear of wiretapping—shared that his bad blood with the local TSPM secretary got his previous church shut down and himself put in prison. He stated, "We studied in seminary together. He wanted to be a leader, but I had a knack for drawing the crowd. After I left the TSPM and set up a house church, he noticed that it was growing quickly and came after me."<sup>130</sup> In this way, selective repression left to the discretion of local officials meant they had the authority to decide both in favor of and against implementing repressive policies.

Local implementation of religious policies seems to have taken a drastic turn in the late 2010s after the new *Regulations* took effect. Under the direction of President Xi, the revised *2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs* added significant modifications to the *Regulations* that had served China since 2005.<sup>131</sup> The new *2018 Regulations* tightened restrictions on

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<sup>128</sup> Interview with pastor PYS1193, Shanghai, 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ1141, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with pastor PYL1139, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>131</sup> The new *Regulations* is referred to as the *2018 Regulations* for the date it went into effect. State Council, *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, 26 August 2017, [http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content\\_5223282.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm). "China Revises Regulation on Religious Affairs," The State Council, 7 September 2017, [http://english.gov.cn/policies/latest\\_releases/2017/09/07/content\\_281475842719170.htm](http://english.gov.cn/policies/latest_releases/2017/09/07/content_281475842719170.htm)

education<sup>132</sup>, religious credentials<sup>133</sup>, finances<sup>134</sup>, donations<sup>135</sup>, church registration<sup>136</sup>, and religious materials and services on the Internet.<sup>137</sup>

These rules came into effect along with President Xi's *Five-Year Plan for Chinese Christianity*.<sup>138</sup> The *Five-Year Plan* calls for "Protestant churches in China" to make a "positive contribution" to the "new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics."<sup>139</sup> The *Plan* also calls for the Bible to be reinterpreted to "establish a correct view...in conformity with the situation in China."<sup>140</sup> In addition, worship services, hymns, pastoral clothing, and church buildings are encouraged to "integrate...Chinese elements including spiritual qualities of the Chinese nation reflecting Chinese characteristics."<sup>141</sup>

Xi's tightening grip on religious matters is also reflected in structural changes as well, as the United Front Work Department (UFWD) directly took over the responsibilities originally held by State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) in order to supervise religions affairs at the national level, strengthen the united work on religion, reinforce religions' sinicization (*zhongguohua*, 中国化), and actively guide religion's adaptation to socialism.<sup>142</sup> Many interviewees in the latter half of 2018 have also noted this change of structure and emphasized the importance of understanding this change and what it means for the religious communities.

When religion began to constitute a priority starting in the late 2010s, the central government made known its policy preference and provided clearer directions to local governments, leaving less room for creativity. The new *Religious Regulations* and other Party documents clearly spelled out in legal terms the details of what would or would not be allowed. Therefore, local officials began to implement policies according to the central government's directions.

For example, the Party launched the 'Sinicization of Christianity' campaign in 2018 to replace foreign influence in Chinese churches with socialist values and Chinese culture.<sup>143</sup> This campaign has roots in the past, but also breaks new ground in "taking off the tether of the West" (*tuoxia xifang de jianfu*) and "indigenizing" (*bentuhua*, or *bensehua*) Protestantism by encouraging Chinese over Western hymns, incorporating Chinese-style architecture into

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<sup>132</sup> *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, 2018, Articles 9, 11.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 36, 39.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 20.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 57.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 41.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 45-48.

<sup>138</sup> "Protestant Five-Year Plan for Chinese Christianity," *Union of Catholic Asian News*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/protestant-five-year-plan-for-chinese-christianity/82107>.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.* These plans have already been transformed into policy changes at the local level. Responding to this call, the TSPM has already announced a policy to raise national flags at every church "to strengthen awareness of respect to the flag and preserve the flag's dignity." Siqu Cao, "Religious Sites in China to Raise National Flag to Enhance National Identity," *Global Times*, 31 July 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1113145.shtml>.

<sup>142</sup> "Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Issues 'Plan for Deepening Reform of Party and Government Agencies'" [中共中央印发“深化党和国家机构改革方案 (Zhonggong zhongyang yinfa “shenhua dang he guojia jigou gaige fang’an”)], *Xinhua*, 21 March 18, sec. 1(14).

<sup>143</sup> The Sinicization campaign is a part of a broader effort by the Xi administration to assimilate ethnic and religious groups while promoting Chinese culture. See, for example, David R. Stroup, 'Why Xi Jinping's Xinjiang policy is a major change in China's ethnic politics', *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2019; *Tuijin woguo jidujiao zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao* [*Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity*], 2018-2022', *Jidujiao quanguo lianghui* [CCCTSPM], December 2017, <http://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283>.

churches, advocating that pastors wear traditional Chinese garb, inserting Chinese folktales into the Bible, and displaying the national flag at all times.<sup>144</sup> Upon receiving these clear guidelines from the leadership, local officials had little room for creativity and implemented religious policies as written. Just several months after the campaign, Zhejiang Province had already flaunted its achievements through its Religious Affairs Bureau website and through the *Global Times*. The *Global Times* article notes that “flags have been raised at all 69 religious sites - including Christian churches and Buddhist temples - in the city of Lanxi in East China's Zhejiang Province to “have patriotism guide devotion to religions.”<sup>145</sup> This example stands in direct contrast to the cross-demolitions case in Zhejiang, where creativity seemed to know no bounds.

Room for creativity may have decreased, but compliance has increased with the central government’s push for stricter religious control. Ignoring the problem of religion or deflecting responsibilities of religious management to other locales no longer represented an option for the local officials. Instead, local officials began to implement repressive policies even if it meant uncovering more problems and using local government resources. A missionary who was deported from China stated, “Before, they told me to use a different city airport. But this time, they immediately fined me and took away my visa.”<sup>146</sup> Similarly, many interviewees I met in 2018 complained about local officials’ newfound determination to install security cameras in all churches as directed by higher government. Pastor F from a small eastern city remarked at the end of the interview that he had to rush back to his church to meet with local officials. His church was the last one in the city without security cameras, and the officials made it clear that they would be installed that day. Officials’ upgraded compliance, relative to the years before, shows they are very cognizant of the government’s priorities.

Furthermore, local officials’ perception of church characteristics (in terms of threat and utility) has also been affected by the center’s change of stance. Since the new *Regulations* made clear the importance of religious matters and the Party has stepped in to take care of this “threat,” utility has not easily offset the threat churches carry and represent. Moreover, the utility of churches themselves is seen to be in decline. Pastor D, who had defended his church from repression before, stated that Protestant churches and foreign missionaries alike have already “done all the good they could,” and that “unlike before when more churches and missionaries meant more schools and hospitals were getting built, now the only thing the community gains is another seminary.”<sup>147</sup>

At the same time, personal connections that allowed officials to be selectively lenient with churches also began to lose their power in the late 2010s, as the perception of threat in these churches became heightened as a result of the government’s directions. When I first interviewed Pastor Jin Mingri, the renowned head pastor of Zion Church in Beijing, he had prided himself on being able to navigate the repressive environment by maintaining good relationships with local

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<sup>144</sup> Chapter II, Part 4, ‘Protestant five-year plan.’ Religious authorities in Hualong District, Henan have encouraged wearing clothing that includes ‘Chinese traditional cultural elements’ (*zhongguo chuantong wenhua yuansu de fuzhuang*). This often means ‘Tang suits’ (*tangzhuang*) for ushers and red clergy stoles with embroidered gold crosses for pastors. ‘Hualongqu jidujiao, tianzhujiao zongjiao tuanti kaizhan “sitongyi” huodong changyishu’ [‘Hualong District’s Christian and Catholic organizations launch the “Four Unifications” initiative proposal’], Hualongqu jidujiao xiehui [Hualong District Christian Council] and Hualong tianzhujiao aiguoahui [Hualong District Patriotic Catholic Association], May 15, 2019. (<http://hlq.rootinhenan.com/rootinhenan/html/2019/5/12111.htm>).

<sup>145</sup> Cao 2018.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with missionary, MNA1180, United States.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ1141, eastern province, 2019.



officials.<sup>148</sup> Pastor Jin originally served ten years as a pastor at a registered church before leaving the TSPM system to establish an unregistered church. Because of his existing ties to the government, he chose to be transparent with local officials about his church operations. He stated in a *Frontline* interview with Evan Osnos in 2008:

“They requested me to write reports to explain what I’m doing. I complied and explained who we are, what we want to do, and I gave them a schedule of our activities. We’ve been in operation for about a year now, and have not been interrupted.”<sup>149</sup>

The Pastor also mentioned to me that he would inform local officials of summer programs he would host at his church, inviting Christian college students from the U.S. as teachers for the program. However, after the government’s change of approach to religion starting in 2018, Pastor Jin’s church was one of the first to get shut down. His church was shuttered in September 2018 for his refusal to install security cameras, and the pastor himself was prohibited from leaving the country and billed 1.2 million yuan for his crimes.<sup>150</sup> Once the government took a hardline stance against religion, the pastor’s reputation in the community, friendship with officials, and intentional transparency were not enough to outweigh the threat the pastor and the church posed to the government.

## Implications of Religious Policy Implementation

The fact that the post-2018 change in the center’s priorities is immediately reflected in local policy implementation, and that the priority change is clearly initiated from the top signify that the Chinese system is working in a top-down manner. However, one can also argue that the creativity with which the local officials implement policies feeds back into the policymaking system and thereby turn the local government into collaborators with the central government.

Additionally, one of the main points asserted by this chapter is that a powerful central government has strongly proclaimed its priorities at the end of the 2010s and that the local government has submitted to the center’s demands. This assertion stands in direct contrast to studies on decentralization that claim that power has shifted from the center to the local. Here, my findings closely resemble those of Edin (2003) who argues that “the reason behind the failure to implement some policies... is not so much inadequate control over local leaders as the centre’s own priorities and conflicting policies.”<sup>151</sup> In line with Edin’s interpretation, local deviance before 2018 implies that the center had not set religious control as top priority.

Setting the post-2018 changes aside, the way local officials implement religious policies carries further implications for Chinese domestic politics. The fact that the central government’s priorities are immediately reflected in local implementation suggests intentionality in decentralized governance. Furthermore, the same kind of central-local dynamic can be expected

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with Pastor Jin Mingri, Beijing, 2016.

<sup>149</sup> Evan Osnos, “Extended Interview: Jin Mingri,” *Frontline PBS*, 2008, [https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china\\_705/interview/extended.html](https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china_705/interview/extended.html)

<sup>150</sup> Benjamin Haas, “‘We are Scared, but We Have Jesus’: China and its War on Christianity,” *The Guardian*, September 28, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/28/we-are-scared-but-we-have-jesus-china-and-its-war-on-christianity>.

<sup>151</sup> Maria Edin, “‘State Capacity and Local Agent Control in China: CCP Cadre Management from a Township Perspective,” *China Quarterly*, 173 (March 2003): p. 36.

in other policy realms. Since the religious realm proved that local deviance can be created or avoided depending on the central government's priorities and directions, this suggests that other realms can also follow this route. At the same time, the religious realm has its own idiosyncrasies such as a traumatic history and a unique system of policymaking organizations. If other realms do not follow suit, these idiosyncrasies can be the point at which to begin searching for answers regarding the ways different policy realms respond to the center's priorities.

Emerging changes in religious policy implementation also carry implications for China's domestic politics. The Xi administration may be willing to undertake big structural changes to reset priorities—ones that had remained stable for decades. This is not surprising, as the leadership may modify “institutional design either to overcome problems in implementation or to achieve political objectives.”<sup>152</sup> Some interpret this recent change as a part of President Xi Jinping's “hardline turn” in the Party's “united front work,” and an attempt to address a “renewed urgency given the increased complexity of society and the growth of new groups such as religious communities.”<sup>153</sup> Religious scholars have also noticed and explained the power transition to the UFWD as reflecting the “unlimited expansion of the Party's power, interfering directly [with] the basic rights of citizens.”<sup>154</sup> The fact that the central government has replaced SARA, an organization with history as long as the PRC's own history, signals not only the government's willingness to make changes, but more importantly its ability to do so. More importantly, this structural change also provides support for the idea that China is now willing to put the Party first, and to openly imbue its policy realms with Party ideology.

Although the Party has always been at the core of Chinese politics, this kind of bold move has startled even its own citizens. The *Global Times* reported that “some internet users questioned whether raising a national flag at a religious site was a violation of the principle of separation of politics and religion.”<sup>155</sup> This concern among the domestic population is reflected in an analysis of the new *Regulations* by Pastor Wang Yi and a joint statement against the new *Regulations*' encroachment on religious freedom signed by 439 pastors.<sup>156</sup> In this way, the domestic religious community, at large, has clearly received the message from the government that the Party is now in charge, and some are willing to stand in opposition.

It is difficult to determine which of the two—selective repression guided by local government discretion or prioritization of religious control directed by the central government—better signals Party's confidence and regime strength. It may be the case that selective repression was the result of the Party's toleration of Protestantism because it was manageable, and that increased repression was due to the Party's loss of control over the religion's rapid growth. However, it could also be the case that the Party has simply grown stronger and more stable and thus has more resources to expend in repressive efforts and is not fazed by international criticism. Regardless of which explanation, repression has increased, and this does not bode well

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<sup>152</sup> Yasheng Huang, “Administrative Monitoring in China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (Sep., 1995), p. 841.

<sup>153</sup> AR Report 2018.

<sup>154</sup> Zhicheng Wang, “Goodbye to the Religious Affairs Bureau: Religions are Now Under the Direct Control of the Party,” 22 March 2018, *AsiaNews.it*, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Goodbye-to-the-Religious-Affairs-Bureau:-religions-are-now-under-the-direct-control-of-the-Party-43427.html>; Joann Pittman, “Goodbye SARA,” *ChinaSource*, 2 April 2018, <https://www.chinasource.org/blog/posts/goodbye-sara>.

<sup>155</sup> Cao, *Global Times*, 2018.

<sup>156</sup> SCI China Correspondent, “439\* Chinese Christian Leaders—and Counting—Sign Joint Statement Affirming Religious Freedom,” *The St. Charles Institute*, 5 September 2018, <http://www.stcharlesinstitute.org/voices/2018/9/4/198-chinese-christian-leadersand-countingsign-public-joint-statement>.

for other segments of society, including other religions as well as NGOs. Government treatment of Protestant churches and of other societal groups have always moved in parallel, and there is no evidence to expect otherwise this time either.

On a hopeful note, Chinese society is also in transition, diversifying their strategies and involving international assistance, as in the case of Pastor Wang Yi's petition. Accordingly, the theory of selective repression does not end with the government's policy making and implementation. As the next chapter reveals, Protestant pastors themselves also have the agency in operating the churches in ways that may or may not threaten the Chinese government, finally completing the third piece of the puzzle of selective repression.

## Chapter 4:

# Protestant Pastors' Double Bind: Obeying God and the Government

<sup>14</sup> “Teacher...is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”

“Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.”

<sup>16</sup> They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

<sup>17</sup> Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

Mark 12:14-17

Being a pastor can be challenging because it is a spiritually ordained job situated in a secular world. Unlike secular occupations, the typical process of becoming a pastor entails baptism, to confirm one’s faith in the religion; education, to build expertise about the religion; and ordination, to mark the earning of the title in the denomination. The method of choice may vary at each step of the process depending on circumstances. For example, receiving baptism may involve immersing in the baptismal water at a church in front of the congregation, entering a lake with a baptizing pastor, or dipping one’s body in a bathtub with the help of a pastor. Education may be attained through a formal theological seminary or informal study sessions with a foreign missionary. Ordination may be done officially through a denomination or casually through another pastor.

Though the details of the process may vary, the general sequence of the process remains similar regardless of country. After ordination, a pastor may find a church to begin serving or start one's own church. In many countries, such as the United States, registering the church with the government is not required except to file for tax-exempt status. This means that theoretically, one can operate a church and its activities in complete seclusion from society. Even when registration is required, maintaining the balance may not be logistically difficult if duties for God and for the country can be compartmentalized. Operationally speaking, involvement with the secular world—i.e., government and politics—is often an intentionally made decision. One can choose to isolate oneself from worldly matters just as easily as one can enmesh oneself in them. Spiritually speaking, separating the religious and the secular world may be more difficult if each world calls for different values—for example, on issues such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, etc.—and expects one to endorse one side or the other.

Like in other countries, Protestant pastors in China juggle having to abide by government rules and obey God's commands. But unlike in other countries, Chinese Pastors are constantly forced to choose one side over the other, and showing commitment to one side often means letting down or even betraying the other side. In other words, just by virtue of being a pastor automatically communicates not only one's religious belief, but also one's political stance. This means that the type of pastor one is and the type of church one leads can be, and often are, seen as the result of one's conscious and deliberate choice. Admittedly, there are cases where things do not go the way they want. For example, some pastors want to register with the government but cannot afford to, or are not allowed to join; in contrast, some pastors do not believe in the TSPM system, but stay connected to it to operate. But never did I encounter a case where a person was caught off guard by the government's choice to repress his or her church; rather, most were very aware of possible consequences and even overprepared to experience repression. Simply put, most pastors choose the type of ministry they lead and are cognizant of what their decisions entail.

Although they are situated in the same religious environment, Protestant pastors in China are in no way a homogenous group of people that can be characterized in any singular manner. Aside from their faith in the same God—though the uniformity of their faith is also questionable—pastors vary widely in their worldviews and religious practices. Of all the things they vary in, one of the significant differences is in their view of authority, consisting of God and the government. Pastors' beliefs are important because they dictate the position they choose to take among the community of churches as well as with the government as they carry out their religious activities. And the kind of religious position they choose ultimately explains their chance of experiencing repression and the method of repression by the government.

In fact, pastors' conscious decision-making is central to this chapter. In Chapters 2 and 3, I studied selective repression at the level of the central government and the local officials. I argued that the central government's dilemma between addressing domestic and international pressures explained the overall direction of repression, or how much the government prioritized the control of religion at the time. Similarly, local officials' predicament between the central government and religious communities explained the repressive style, or the ways in which repression was implemented upon churches.

This chapter explains selective repression by looking at the level of society, or Protestant pastors. While the decision to repress rests in the hands of the state, the state's selective treatment of churches necessitates observing the characteristics of the repressed. Therefore, I invert the research puzzle into the following: why do individual church leaders display variations

in behaviors that invoke different forms of repression? Facing common incentives and a strong oppressive state, why do some pastors comply, some do not, and some split the difference?

I argue that similar to the previous two actors, Protestant pastors also find themselves stuck in a double bind. Pastors have to reconcile their faith with the harsh reality they face in China and end up having to decide between abiding by government rules and obeying God's commands. Their divergent beliefs toward the authority of God and that of the government explain the variations in their religious behavior and hence, their varying experience of repression. In other words, depending on how they view and position themselves in relation to the government and God, pastors' actions range from working within the government system to actively petitioning the government for religious freedom. This, in turn, explains why some are repressed and some are not, but from a close observation of the repressed (or not repressed) instead of the repressor.

I evaluate this bottom-up theory using empirical evidence from an original set of 121 interviews I conducted with Protestant pastors in various Chinese cities from 2016 to 2019, and 30 supplementary interviews with missionaries and academics from South Korea and the United States.<sup>157</sup> I find that aside from their belief in the same God, Chinese pastors vary widely in their worldviews and religious practices. Pastors belong to one of the five types of beliefs regarding God and the government: *Fighter*, *Avoider*, *Persister*, *Supporter*, and *Enforcer*. These divergent belief types influence their ministry style which, in turn, explains the risk and method of repression they face from the government. I conclude by considering implications of the theory and findings.

## Bottom-Up Theory of Selective Repression

I offer a bottom-up theory to understanding selective repression by arguing that selective repression is partially explained by the characteristics of the repressed. The theory is built upon two assumptions. First, *states use repression to eliminate threat to its (leadership or regime) stability*. The first assumption is an attempt to understand *why* states use repression and is based on existing works that argue that “leaders perceive repression to be more useful as real or perceived threats to their position in power increases,” and that “repression is a response to internal or external political challenges.” (Gurr 1986; [Davenport 1995](#); [Hill Jr. and Jones 2014](#))

The second assumption states that *repression is selective because only some units display threatening characteristics*. This assumption focuses on explaining the *selectiveness* of repression. Selectivity does not necessarily imply intentional targeting, but rather can result from limits in capacity or random design. However, existing studies suggest repression is non-random regarding issue areas ([Göbel 2021](#)) and observable characteristics of groups ([Lorentzen 2017](#)). This suggests that even if targets were chosen at random or due to a capacity problem, choices are still made within a universe of targets that hold certain characteristics, again, bringing us back to the question of selectiveness. Therefore, I propose to examine selectiveness by focusing on the characteristics of the repressed.

These two assumptions combine to posit that states seek to eliminate threat to their power by selectively repressing units that display threatening characteristics. This bottom-up approach converts the original research question, why states repress selectively, into the following: why

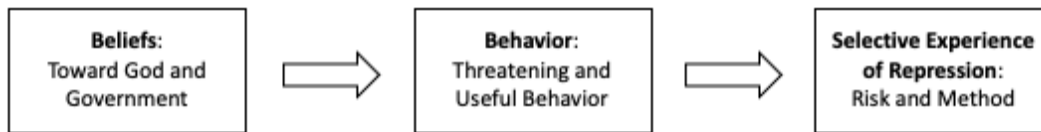
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<sup>157</sup> By looking at coastal cities from north to south, this analysis attempts to draw broader conclusions at the national level.

some churches display threatening characteristics while others do not. By reframing the question,<sup>158</sup> agency can be taken away from the repressor and be put on the repressed.<sup>159</sup> Observing the characteristics of the repressed enables us to consider the beliefs and motivations of the repressed in choosing to display those characteristics as well as the specific characteristics of civil society and particular ideologies that the government finds threatening enough to use repression.

I theorize that the selectiveness in repressing religious communities can be explained by the differences in religious leaders' beliefs. Admittedly, looking at beliefs as explanation for repression requires one additional step beyond just looking at behavior. However, stopping at behaviors as determinants of repression immediately raises the question of where behaviors come from, to which I answer that behaviors are rooted in beliefs. At the same time, identifying the beliefs as determinants of repression also begets the question of where beliefs come from, but the source of beliefs is harder to pin down and may traverse into supernatural boundaries.

Assuming that both pastors and government officials are rational actors, I claim that pastors and officials both behave based on how they evaluate the outcome of their behaviors, which is determined by their beliefs.<sup>160</sup> Figure 4.1 below demonstrates this logic.



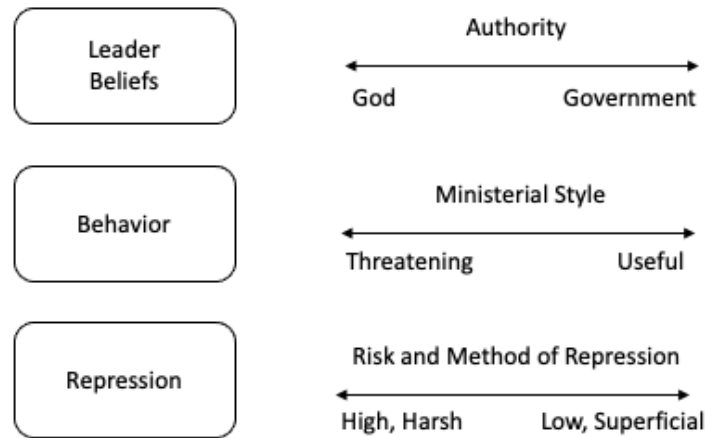
**Figure 4.1: Bottom-Up Theory of Selective Repression**

Religious leaders' beliefs toward the authority of God and the government shape how they evaluate the repressive situation and calculate consequences of their religious behavior. These views toward repression and outcomes of behavior then become the basis of their threatening and useful behaviors toward the government. Ultimately, these behaviors explain the varying levels of risk and methods of repression encountered by the pastors and churches. Figure 4.2 below illustrates the dilemma that summarizes each stage of the process.

<sup>158</sup> Fu and Simmons argue that “ethnography encourages us to think differently about the objects of our analysis” and that “new “units” or political processes emerge as relevant when we use ethnographic tools.” Diana Fu and Erica S. Simmons. “Ethnographic Approaches to Contentious Politics: The What, How, and Why.” *Comparative Political Studies* (2021), p. 14.

<sup>159</sup> Looking at the repressed for reasons of repression may draw criticism for finding fault for bullying in the victims' behavior. Without assigning blame, I seek to identify behavior that the repressor finds threatening.

<sup>160</sup> Religion and religious beliefs are often brushed aside in the discussion of rationality, as scholars argue that “rationality in the sense of weighing up costs and benefits, of ends as well as means, is not relevant when the end is absolute and when the means are clearly prescribed by the religious tradition.” Stephen Sharot, “Beyond Christianity: a critique of the rational choice theory of religion from a Weberian and comparative religions perspective,” *Sociology of Religion* 63.4 (2002): 432. However, people of the same religious tradition do not hold uniform views on what the end is and what measures they should take. We can apply the “same type of reasoning, of weighing costs and benefits...in the consumption of religion as it is in the consumption of “secular commodities.”” Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, p. 36.



**Figure 4.2: Bottom-Up Theory: Dilemmas of Each Stage**

First, religious leaders' beliefs about the authority of God and the government form the basis of how they perceive repression and appropriate behavior. Religious people in a repressive regime are positioned to choose between God and the government, as each claims to be the sole authority in people's lives. Pastors that value the authority of God at one extreme value that of the government to be minimal. Conversely, those that prioritize the government's authority at the other extreme discount the authority of God.<sup>161</sup> Both extremes pit God and the government as two competing and mutually exclusive choices. People positioned in between them hold different views of how both authorities can coexist and form different rankings of the two.

Based on where their beliefs are positioned, pastors' views on repression range from evaluating it as harmful to their faith to concluding that it is absolutely necessary. These evaluations, in turn, are directly related to how pastors calculate the costs and benefits of their future behavior. Pastors that place God in the position of greatest authority view repression as a hindrance to God's rule and see the need to bring change to the government and its repressive policies. Following this perspective, they believe that efforts to bring about this change—for example, through activism—will be rewarded either through improvements in the religious environment, or in heaven. In contrast, those that prioritize the authority of the government interpret repressive policies as necessary to maintain proper control over religion and believe that efforts to create and continue repression will be beneficial for their nation and themselves. Pastors who hold beliefs positioned in between the extremes hold mixed views on repression and evaluate the appropriate course of action according to these views.

Second, the ways in which pastors evaluate repression and the consequence of their behavior determine their behavior—their style of ministry. Akin to the rational choice logic, pastors choose action that is “likely to give them the greatest satisfaction” by “anticipat[ing] the outcomes of alternative courses of action...on the basis of the information that they have about the conditions under which they are acting.” (Scott 2000) In other words, pastors interpret the constraints and information they have in the repressive environment which then form the basis of evaluating the outcomes of different behaviors. Where pastors may deviate from traditional

<sup>161</sup> This idea of relative authority is similar to the concept from the rational choice theory, where one “construct[s] preference curves that measure the relative utility of one object against another.” John Scott, “Rational choice theory.” *Understanding contemporary society: Theories of the present* 129 (2000): 671-85.



rational choice logic is in their preferences shaped by religious faith. For some pastors, their most preferred outcome is to see God's plans come to fruition more than ensuring their own bodily safety. This means that a course of action that leads to repression may, for some, be deemed their best course of action if it accomplishes God's will.

Pastors that believe repression is harmful to their beliefs oppose repressive policies and engage in a style of ministry that displays more threat than usefulness to the government. Some choose to fight in order to eliminate repression; others choose to avoid repression altogether by conducting religious activities while hidden from the government. Those at the other end of the spectrum view repression as necessary and see acts to aid repression as rewarding. Therefore, they choose useful over threatening behavior by actively complying with repressive policies and building close ties with officials. In this way, pastors' behaviors are manifested in two types: threatening behavior (compliance with government rules) and useful behavior (relationship with the government.)

Third, the government represses pastors and their churches based on their behavior.<sup>162</sup> Simply put, pastors that display more useful than threatening behavior face low risks of repression and if repressed, encounter relatively superficial methods of repression. Pastors that display more threatening than useful behavior face higher risks of repression and the methods of repression also may be harsher.

Together these three statements combine to posit that selective repression occurs depending on religious leaders' beliefs. There are two necessary scope conditions to apply this theory. First, the subjects are religious communities in a repressive regime. Second, the religion's doctrines suggest a competing authority that the government finds threatening to its own. Bound by these scope conditions, the main theoretical expectation is that pastors with differing beliefs toward God and the government will encounter different experiences with repression. More specifically, I put forth the following hypotheses:

*H1: Pastors that value the authority of God over that of the government display more threatening behavior and less useful behavior, thereby facing higher risk and harsher methods of repression.*

*H2: Pastors that value the authority of the government over that of God display more useful behavior and less threatening behavior, thereby facing lower risk and superficial methods of repression.*

## **Research Design**

I evaluate my theory through an original set of 121 interviews conducted in various Chinese cities from 2016 to 2019.<sup>163</sup> Interviewees consist of pastors from both official and unofficial churches and were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and Korean depending on the

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<sup>162</sup> I emphasize visible, manifested behavior and not professed beliefs or intended behavior, since beliefs and intentions may be subjectively interpreted, but behavior can be objectively identified by the government.

<sup>163</sup> By looking at coastal cities from north to south, this analysis attempts to draw broader conclusions at the national level.

language preferred by the interviewee.<sup>164</sup> Table 4.3 below shows the composition of interview subjects organized by gender, registration status and experience of repression.

**Table 4.3: Composition of Interviewees**

|                        | <u>Registered</u> |        | <u>Unregistered</u> |        | <b>Overall</b> |        |
|------------------------|-------------------|--------|---------------------|--------|----------------|--------|
|                        | Male              | Female | Male                | Female | Male           | Female |
| Repressed              | 11                | 7      | 35                  | 27     | 46             | 34     |
| Not Repressed          | 12                | 2      | 11                  | 16     | 23             | 18     |
| <b>Total Repressed</b> | 23                | 9      | 46                  | 43     | 69             | 52     |

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulty of locating willing participants, interviewees were gathered through snowball sampling with multiple sample seeds. I also directly approached pastors in churches that were locatable through the Baidu search engine and Baidu Maps (*baidu ditu*) in every city of study. The initial cities were chosen based on their reputation to be the hubs of Christianity to take advantage of the greatest number of Christian churches and cases of repression; later cities were added to maximize variation. In sum, I conducted interviews in 15 cities spanning 7 provinces in the northeastern, eastern, southeastern, and southwestern parts of China.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, each lasting an average of 1.5 to 2 hours. Questions covered, but were not limited to, the following topics: pastors' religious background, ministerial history, church registration status and operational details, specifics of their faith, relations with local officials and the government, experience of repression, past and current views of the government and repression, their speculations about reasons for repression, and predictions about the future of Chinese Protestantism.

One concern with inferring the conditions for selective repression through interview data was that most statements were made after the repressive incidents. Since these observations may be biased through one's "selective memory or...self-serving motives, such as post-hoc rationalizing," I was especially cognizant of how I conducted and coded the interviews.<sup>165</sup> I carefully structured interview questions to first inquire about their faith and their past ministry and then to inquire about more sensitive issues regarding their relationship with the government and experiences with repression. Likewise, I accounted for possible bias arising from any combination of the following: interviewer effect, a nonrepresentative sample, and self-censorship out of fear of repercussions (from the government).<sup>166</sup>

I use these interviews as empirical evidence to evaluate the hypotheses. To elaborate, I utilize statements and scriptural references from interviews to identify the typology of pastors according to their beliefs. Next, I measure pastors' behavior operationalized into two types – threatening and useful behavior (to the government). I measure threatening behavior by unregistered status, involvement of foreigners, sermons that include anti-government messages, community outreach activities, and activism. Useful behavior can be subjective based on the pastor's relationship with the government, so I operationalize it as the frequency and depth of

<sup>164</sup> Some Chinese pastors were of Korean descent (*chaoxianzu*, 朝鲜族). They often held separate worship services for Han Chinese congregants using Mandarin Chinese and Korean ethnics using Korean.

<sup>165</sup> Robert Mikecz, "Interviewing elites: Addressing methodological issues." *Qualitative inquiry* 18.6 (2012), p. 491.

<sup>166</sup> I noticed that the interviewer effect (interviewee's eagerness to share more of their stories of repression to an interviewer wanting to listen) and self-censorship (regarding sharing sensitive information about government repression) mostly offset each other.

communication (i.e., no relationship, regular communication, active membership in the government, leadership in the government). Then I assess the risk of repression by the experience of repression following pastors' behavior, and record methods of repression operationalized into categories of *personal* repression – arrests, detainment, physical violence, and ideological training; *operational* repression – reassignment of personnel, fines, service interruptions and church closings; and *structural* repression – flag and security camera installations, clothing requirements, cross demolitions, among others. These categories are listed in order of harsh to superficial.

I employ the logic of process tracing and cross-case comparisons to evaluate the hypotheses. Within the logic of process tracing, I focus on the use of causal-process observations (CPOs) as explicated by Mahoney (2012).<sup>167</sup> Mahoney argues that when it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between the cause and the outcome, one can identify a factor for which the cause is necessary, and which itself is sufficient for the outcome.<sup>168</sup> Following his interpretation, I supplement the causal arrow between pastors' beliefs and repression by introducing an intervening mechanism—pastors' behavior. In short, I corroborate my theory by first, showing that pastors' beliefs are necessary for their behavior, and second, finding that pastors' behavior is sufficient for explaining the risk and method of repression.

As Fu and Simmons (2021) argue, ethnography is a “crucial methodological tool” to “shed light on...hidden processes” in studying contention in illiberal contexts.<sup>169</sup> Qualitative analysis can explore the “particular structures or conditions [that] helped to produce actions.”<sup>170</sup> By putting the focus on pastors' beliefs rather than only behavior, I am able to answer not only the “what” and “how,” but also the “why” behind these actions.<sup>171</sup> Ultimately, insights gained from this analysis also elucidate the reasons behind the government's selective repression.

## Empirical Evidence

One of the main dichotomies in the Bible—between works and grace—is relevant to the current discussion because one's understanding of it partly determines one's views toward God and the government (and its regulations). Since the mankind's fall to sin through Adam and Eve, man had to atone for his sins in order to receive salvation and enter heaven. The law of Moses, dictated to Moses by God, served as a guide to atonement, so that man could keep order, maintain faith, and receive salvation. It is only with the coming of Jesus and his crucifixion that the pathway to salvation changed from one's obedience to the law (works) to God's grace for those that believe in Jesus (grace). As salvation became separated from works, and as "Teachers of the Law" came to represent an oppositional figure to Jesus by questioning Jesus and plotting his downfall, many believers came to associate not only the Law of Moses but all subsequent rules and regulations with the outmoded and incorrect path to salvation. As a result, some churches' emphasis on law-keeping began to receive heretical accusations, and some believers

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<sup>167</sup> Mahoney gives credit to Collier, Brady and Seawright (2010) for the conceptual discovery.

<sup>168</sup> He states, “...while X being necessary for Y is in doubt, the status of M being sufficient for Y and of X being necessary for M might be more readily established. These established or obtainable findings can be used to make a logical inference about whether X is necessary for Y.” James Mahoney, "The logic of process tracing tests in the social sciences." *Sociological Methods & Research* 41.4 (2012), p. 10.

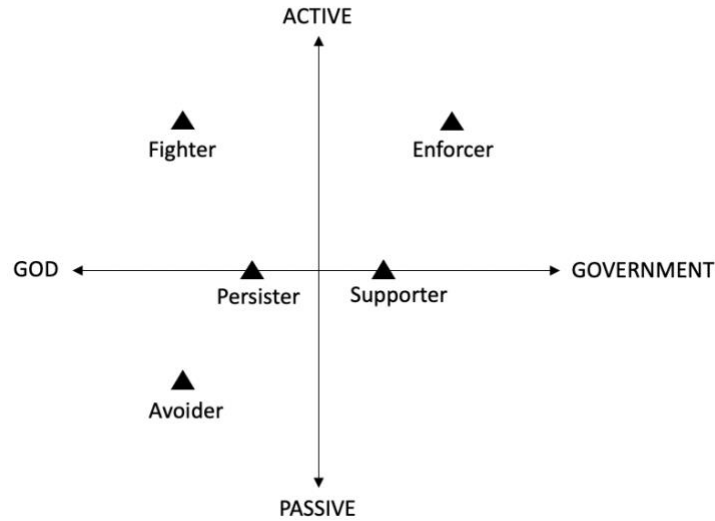
<sup>169</sup> Fu and Simmons, 2021, p. 5-6.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. p. 3, 8, 20.

even came to view the law itself as adversarial to the correct Christian faith. In this way, how Chinese pastors view the authority of God and the law vary partially depending on their interpretation of grace and works.

Insights gained from interviews suggest that although they are situated in the same religious environment, Protestant pastors are in no way a homogenous group of people. These pastors' varying beliefs take place along the spectrum between God and the government, and they can be categorized into five types as shown in Figure 4.4. A summary table of all five belief types, behaviors, and experiences of repression is provided in Table 4.5.



**Figure 4.4: Chinese Pastors' Belief Types**

The horizontal axis represents pastors' view toward authority. The vertical axis represents the degree with which pastors act on their view of repression. For example, the Fighter highly values the authority of God over the government and actively fights against repressive policies.

**Table 4.5: Summary of Belief Types, Behavior, and Repression**

| <b>Pastor Types</b> | <b>Position between God and Govt</b>  | <b>View of Repression</b>                   | <b>View on Consequences of Behavior</b> | <b>Behavior</b>        | <b>Experience of Repression</b> | <b>Method of Repression</b> |
|---------------------|---|---|---|------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Fighter</i>      | God has highest authority, Govt should be changed or overthrown             | Must fight against repression               | Will be rewarded for fighting           | Threat=1, Usefulness=0 | High                            | Personal, Operational       |
| <i>Avoider</i>      | Same as above, but Govt should be avoided                                   | Must avoid repression                       | Avoiding is the best strategy           | Threat > Usefulness    | Medium                          | Personal, Operational       |
| <i>Persister</i>    | Govt rules to be followed within God's rules                                | Part of God's plan                          | Will be rewarded for accepting          | Threat = Usefulness    | Medium                          | Operational, Structural     |
| <i>Supporter</i>    | God's rules to be followed within Government rules                          | Necessary rule-keeping                      | Good for religion, Good for nation      | Threat < Usefulness    | Low                             | Structural                  |
| <i>Enforcer</i>     | Government has highest authority, Religion should be managed, or overthrown | Necessary to maintain control over religion | Good for nation                         | Threat=0, Usefulness=1 | None                            | N/A                         |

### 1. Fighters

Fighters value the authority of God at the extreme and that of the government to be minimal. They declare their obedience to God and see compliance with the government as sacrilegious. Accordingly, they view the TSPM as an instrument of the government and registering with the TSPM as an act of establishing loyalty to the government instead of God. They view repression, or the government's policies toward religion, as something to be fought against and eliminated.

Interviewees of this type specifically problematized the following elements in being associated with the government and the TSPM. First, they believed that registering with the TSPM brings on unnecessary meddling by the government in religious affairs. For them, having autonomy over how to manage and finance a church was one of the most basic ways to prove that the church was unconstrained by the shackles of the world. However, rejecting government interference in church affairs is not necessarily equal to supporting the separation of church and state. Many pastors genuinely desired to have Protestant faith guide government decision-making, often citing President Donald J. Trump as an admirable and prepared global leader due to his professed Christian beliefs.<sup>172</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Interview with pastor PYL1138, eastern province, 2019.

Second, Fighters refuse to register with the TSPM because they see theological differences between their own faith and the one held by registered pastors. These doctrinal differences mostly originate from variations in religious upbringing, which determine the direction in which they will operate the church as well as the scriptural guidance they will provide to the congregation.<sup>173</sup> Based on this reasoning, Fighters tend to neither register with the government nor build relationships with local officials. Out of 14 pastors whose beliefs belong to the Fighter category, none was registered with the government, and all but three did not develop relationships with local officials. Pastors stated that having government oversight over church operations and finance is equal to being the head of a church, implying that their intentional disconnect from the government and its rules originated from their view of authority and interpretation of what compliance with the law means.<sup>174</sup>

The three pastors that had regular communications with local officials each led a large church (of congregation size greater than 300) and held a renowned reputation in his respective local community. Due to their prominent positions in the region, they were forced into a relationship with the local government; at the same time, these pastors chose to utilize these relationships to further their cause. One pastor remarked about his regular interactions with a local official:

We have tea frequently. I tell him my plans for the church and my demands for the government. If he doesn't like what he hears, he knows where I live and where I work.<sup>175</sup>

In addition to not registering or forming relations with the government, Fighters calculate efforts to fix the repressive environment as rewarding for both the religion and himself, and therefore, outwardly engage in activism. Activism, as reported by the interviewees, consisted of posting oppositional statements online (using WeChat and Weibo as forums), making public speeches, organizing movements and protests, communicating with international media, and contacting international organizations. Some interviewees had roused up their congregants to directly petition the government en masse, saying “we thought they would have to listen to us after all these letters.”<sup>176</sup> Pastors like Wang Yi are well-known for publishing his opposition to the new *Regulations*' encroachment on religious freedom and collecting over 400 signatures from pastors in China.<sup>177</sup>

These behaviors have been met with high proportion and harsh methods of repression. In fact, all but 3 out of 14 Fighters had been repressed by the government, and the most reported methods of repression were both operational and personal forms of repression. When asked about the government's reasons behind repression, all pastors referred to their registration status, some mentioned their lack of (or even soured) relations with local officials, and some blamed their politically controversial sermons. One explained,

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<sup>173</sup> Educational background plays a significant role during this religious upbringing to shape one's faith.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with pastors PYC1126 and MYC1123, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with pastor PYS1193, Shanghai, 2017.

<sup>176</sup> Interview with pastor PYS1191, southeastern province, 2017.

<sup>177</sup> SCI China Correspondent, “439\* Chinese Christian Leaders—and Counting—Sign Joint Statement Affirming Religious Freedom,” *The St. Charles Institute*, 5 September 2018, <http://www.stcharlesinstitute.org/voices/2018/9/4/198-chinese-christian-leadersand-countingsign-public-joint-statement>.

Registration is how the government keeps tabs on you. They can't get rid of you, so they at least want to know everything about you. It's all about control and transparency.<sup>178</sup>

Another pastor, who had a growing congregation due to his forthright sermons, described his experience,

They interrupted the Sunday service. They took notes on all congregants' names, identification numbers and addresses. They arrested me and kept me at their office all day. When I asked what I did wrong, they just said my church had illegally gathered.<sup>179</sup>

The pastor was later fined and encountered several more unexpected visits with warnings until the church was shut down. Yet another pastor reported that after organizing conferences with foreign pastors, his international travel was blocked through visa denials.<sup>180</sup> In this way, pastors' accounts of repression lend support to the idea that the government represses based on pastors' threatening behavior and relationship with the government.

## 2. Avoiders

Holding God's commands above all else and regarding government rules as unholy and blasphemous can also drive pastors to operate in hiding. Avoiders, like Fighters, rank God highly over the government, but see the government as an entity to be avoided rather than fought. Pastors of both Fighter and Avoider types recited the following verses to support their position:

We... know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified. (Galatians 2:15-16)

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Romans 3:28)

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Galatians 5:18)

These verses point to the common themes of the law's powerlessness in justifying oneself before God, and contrastingly, one's freedom or "release" from the law due to Jesus' death. While Fighters use these verses as justification to pursue faith at the cost of violating government rules, Avoiders quote these verses as basis for practicing faith in private. This kind of belief may arise from one or more of the following: custom—this is how their parents and other elders practiced religious faith; disgust—at the government and the harsh realities they face in everyday religious practice; or helplessness—believing that nothing they do can change the status quo. 45 out of 121 interviewees belonged to this group.

With this view toward God and the government, Avoiders interpret repression as undesirable but also inevitable; hence, they believe that staying separate from affairs concerning the government will be rewarding in the end. A pastor from Chengdu, the same city in which Pastor Wang Yi had ministered, stated,

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<sup>178</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ1145, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ1141, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with pastor PYS1161, southeastern province, 2018. Nevertheless, he had booked another trip to San Francisco in the same month of the interview.

People like Wang Yi are doing what they think is right. I pray for them and their success. But look where he is now. Where is his church? My priority is to my church. I need to keep pastoring my flock of sheep.<sup>181</sup>

Others shared similar concerns hinting that fighting the government is often out of one's own desires to gain influence and reputation rather than for God.<sup>182</sup>

Accordingly, Avoiders decide that isolating his church and himself from government oversight—by not registering nor building ties with the government—is the appropriate course of behavior. All but one Avoiders were unregistered, and did not have communication with local officials, instead conducting religious activities underground. One pastor had registered in order to complete formal education at a seminary. More than half of Avoiders reported having communications with foreign churches.

Pastors that stay hidden from the government have a low chance of experiencing repression as long as they maintain their invisibility from the government. This is self-explanatory, since officials cannot repress a pastor or church of whose existence they are not aware. At the same time, pastors whose secret operations are discovered face an increased risk of repression. While their risk of getting repressed (67%) were not as high as the activist group due to many pastors' success at hiding and their less offensive behavior—that is, not engaging in direct activism—their offense is amplified by concealment. For a government that seeks security through transparency of its subjects, religious leaders and congregations meeting in secret is exactly the danger it desires to squash. A pastor of a different belief type quipped that secrecy was precisely the reason for repression:

It's all a matter of communication. The government has no choice but to repress because churches keep hiding. If you're faultless, don't hide and don't change your phone number! Talk to the government and they won't be wary of you anymore.<sup>183</sup>

When caught in operation, Avoiders experienced repression ranging from operational (e.g., warnings, fines, and shutdowns) to personal (e.g., fines, arrests, and detainment) types. These methods resembled ones encountered by Fighters; however, Fighters on average experienced harsher forms of personal repression (e.g., house arrests, incarceration) due to their individual activism.

### 3. Persisters

Persisters do not believe that the two authorities are mutually exclusive. Rather, they view the government as a part of God's plan, and repressive policies as part of God's design to refine their faith. With this view, they interpret the repressive environment as one for them to bear with as well as learn from and believe that a certain amount of compliance with government rules that does not cross their religious boundaries is necessary and rewarding for their faith. About a third, or 41 out of 121 pastors, belonged to the Persister type.

Persisters tended to have similar theological upbringing as pastors in the previous groups. They had completed education at either a state-approved seminary where they realized the perils of adapting TSPM ways in operation and in theology, or through informal training at a house

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<sup>181</sup> Interview with pastor PYC1127, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with pastor PYS1188, eastern province, 2017.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with pastor PYC1128, southwestern province, 2019.



church or through religious friends. However, due to various reasons, such as adopting the beliefs of elders in the church or changing beliefs due to the repressive environment, Persisters diverged to accept the government and its actions as part of God's plan. The following are verses mentioned during interviews that represent these pastors' stance toward the law and regulations:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17)

What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." (Romans 7:7)

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law... What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means! (Romans 3:31; 6:15)

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. (Matthew 5:18)

These verses stress the purpose of the law to recognize sin and the importance of upholding the law as followers of God. Persisters prioritize grace but also believe that this grace encompasses the current religious situation. Law, as cruel as it may be, is not to be opposed or rejected, but rather tolerated and embraced within the grand scheme that God has prepared for them. Abolishing existing regulations is not a choice, because as repressive as they are, they, along with the government, are put in place for a purpose. This particular view is clearly explained by a pastor:

Christians in China are like the Israelites in Palestine. Just as God chastised the Israelites through Babylon, I believe the Chinese government is the whip in God's hands. When we go astray in our faith and when leaders fall, God purifies the church. God uses external forces to purify the church, separate out the wheat from the chaff. When churches get persecuted, chaff falls away. Because God continues to use the whip on us, Chinese churches continue to grow and build stronger faith. China's church will most definitely be used by God, and the government is just one of the tools in God's hands.<sup>184</sup>

This chaff metaphor was echoed by many interviewed pastors that belonged to this type. While these pastors all acknowledge the harsh environment that they need to wade through and hope for the situation to improve, they also view repression as intentionally designed by God to purify and strengthen Chinese Christianity. Rejecting the law or fighting to change the law would be equivalent to defying God's plan. Unlike Avoiders, Persisters were neither disheartened nor helpless. Rather, they displayed positivity unrivaled by pastors of other types—an aura that developed from optimism, that the persecution is indicative of God's special plan for Chinese Christianity, and pride that accompanied this hope. This belief has fueled their energy to survive the repressive times.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Interview with pastor PYC1128, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>185</sup> However, just as important—and nevertheless tautological—is the fact this belief in God's plan fuels the pastors' pride in their special status as the leaders of future Christianity, which, in turn, naturally bolsters their belief.

Accordingly, Persisters believe that they will be rewarded for accepting and working within the repressive environment; their choice of action is mixed between threatening and useful behaviors. This can take the form of registering with the TSPM or remaining unregistered but maintaining a steady relationship with local officials. Over a quarter of interviewees were registered, and almost three quarters of interviewees engaged in regular communication with officials. Some conceded to the shortcomings within the TSPM system, yet joined, or attempted to join, the TSPM system because it presumably was also designed by God. For example, a pastor from Beijing chose to register as a branch of a larger TSPM church, so that his church could enjoy autonomy while also being legally protected under the umbrella of a TSPM church.<sup>186</sup> He believed this was a smart tactic bestowed upon him by God. Another pastor from a southern province refused to register with the government out of principle but maintained regular communications with local religious officials.<sup>187</sup> Some met regularly with officials but also regularly invited foreign pastors to preach. Some were registered but also participated in domestic and international mission trips to spread the gospel. Out of the pastor types that value God's authority over the government, Persisters had the highest rate of registration and more frequent communication with the government.

In terms of repression, Persisters operating in secret are outwardly identical to Avoiders; hence, their chance of experiencing repression and the method of repression depend on whether or not the government becomes aware of their existence. Conversely, Persisters that register with the TSPM, those that register as a subsidiary of a TSPM church, or those who are in regular communication with the local religious bureau—face a different kind of risk when it comes to repression. While these pastors and their churches are not exactly perceived as a threat to the government because of their visibility and transparency, the government's awareness of their existence itself poses a risk. In other words, their experience of repression (76%) is lower than if they had been discovered opposing the government (79%), but higher than if they had tried to stay hidden from the government but were found (67%).<sup>188</sup> Repression, in these cases, has been carried out in less severe ways compared to the Fighter, and has ranged from operational (collecting small fines, installing security cameras, actively exercising age limits and prohibiting Sunday Schools) to personal methods in the worst case.

#### 4. Supporters

Supporters are the reverse version of the Persisters. While Persisters seek to follow government rules within God's rules, Supporters seek to follow God's rules within government rules. They prioritize the government over God and view religious faith as a personal right that can be pursued—on level with other rights granted by the Constitution—but strictly within the rules set for the society. 17 out of 121 interviewees belonged to this type. The following are some of the scriptures mentioned during interviews:

Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."  
(Matthew 12:17)

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<sup>186</sup> Interview with pastor PYB1208, eastern province, 2016.

<sup>187</sup> Interview with pastor PYC1132, southern province, 2019.

<sup>188</sup> The Avoiders have a different point of comparison because their experience of repression may have more to do with their ability to stay hidden and the chance of their neighbors reporting them to officials, than their own threatening behaviors. It is likely the case that the measured repression for avoiders is high in my study because the avoiders that were willing to be interviewed were already more out in the open and vulnerable to repression.

But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. (James 1:25)

Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. (Galatians 3:21)

Supporters believe the law is neither to be replaced by grace (like Fighters), nor to be upheld for a different purpose (like Persisters). The law is beyond just instrumental to keeping order, but necessary to living a righteous life, receiving salvation, and attaining eternal freedom. Supporters view the law as originating from God, and therefore, to be regarded as sacred in itself. Ironically, the famous Matthews verse, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” was a popular quote for both Persisters and Supporters. Persisters used it to justify compliance with the law; Supporters used it to emphasize separation between law and faith. Many Supporters were brought up and educated in TSPM settings. As TSPM doctrines tend to emphasize being a good citizen, these pastors also have such principles ingrained in their faith. This kind of mindset is also reflected in their sermons repeatedly stressing moral lessons and patriotic messages over religious precepts.

Supporters view others who do not obey the law as heretics, and some of them as unworthy of being labeled pastors: “Those activists are not only violating Chinese law, but also disobeying God’s commands.”<sup>189</sup> Supporters would never verbally confess to having beliefs that prioritize the government over God. However, the rigidity of the law leads Supporters to more often choose compliance with regulations over faith, which happens to be more pliable, and therefore, more easily justifiable when not followed.

It is the unwavering belief that the government and its regulations serve as guiding posts on the path to salvation that encourages Supporters to register as TSPM pastors and follow the steps laid out by the TSPM system. While both Supporters and Persisters may choose to register, they are differentiated by compliance in other areas. For example, upon orders to sinicize Christianity, Persisters have mostly expressed reluctance, while Supporters have required ushers to wear Chinese garments and engaged in competition with other churches to appear more sinicized. Approximately 94% of all respondents in this group were registered, and all of them had close relationships with the local government.

In addition, Supporters act as a channel of communication between the government and local churches. Their ability to juggle both positions allows them to represent the needs of both the government and the religious community, often taking credit when either side performs a commendable act. When asked about the growth of Chinese churches, the head pastor of a large congregation and also a local TSPM representative stated, “Yes, we are the chosen nation, the next Israel.”<sup>190</sup> But when questioned about the government’s repressive regulations, he quickly changed positions saying, “the government is doing its job in weeding out the heretics (*yiduan*, 异端) from the real believers. They have regulated religion for so long that they are better at discerning them than we are.”<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Interview with pastor PYB1205, northeastern province, 2016.

<sup>190</sup> Interview with pastor PYL1138, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

At the same time, serving in this position also amasses judgment and disapproval from pastors of previous types. Fighters called these Supporters "bats," "politicians," and "government puppets."<sup>192</sup> A Persister type pastor commented about a Supporter type pastor:

I went to seminary with the guy so I know him. We say he is a politician, not a pastor, because he has political aspirations and is skilled at realizing them. But mind you—he is certainly not a bad person. I do not doubt his faith. It is not my place to do so. We are just...different.<sup>193</sup>

Judgment and disapproval are passed in the other direction as well. Many Supporters see unregistered pastors as uncivil lawbreakers who understand neither the government's efforts and accomplishments nor God's greater purpose for China. They use the word "activists" instead of "pastors" or "ministers" to refer to unregistered pastors. As a result of this antagonism, one of the notable behaviors of Supporters was tipping off the police with information on unregistered churches in the area. A TSPM pastor of this type stated, "They were engaging in illegal religious activities. Ordinary churchgoers cannot decipher authentic faith. It is our duty to report these churches."<sup>194</sup> This adversarial relationship among pastors also influences behavior and thereby affects their respective chance of being subject to repression.

Supporters do not face the same risk of repression as do the previous types. Because they are not only adapted to, but also integral to the TSPM system, their chance of experiencing harsh repression is small, and the little risk they do face arises from political quagmires or setbacks in personal relationships. Less than half of the pastors in this type reported government activities defined as repression in my study. More importantly, the repression faced by these pastors has been at most structural, such as regulations that require the installment of security cameras inside the sanctuary and putting up flags and government banners at the front of the church building. Moreover, unlike the previous types of pastors that would consider these regulations as encroachments on their religious freedom and thus, as acts of repression, Supporters readily comply with the law. Regarding the security cameras, a pastor retorted, "The government needs to keep an eye on heretics spreading dangerous messages. We have nothing to hide."<sup>195</sup> In this way, a regulation that is considered repressive to other groups is just another law to uphold—or for some, more commands from God to be revered—for Supporters.

## 5. Enforcers

Lastly, Enforcers weigh the government's authority as the utmost priority and discount that of God.<sup>196</sup> They are the counterpart to Fighters—they put the nation before God, and therefore use faith as a tool to serve national purpose. Considering their occupation in the religious realm, this type is the rarest to find, and pastors certainly would not admit to belonging in this category. I call out this type to serve more of an analytic purpose rather than represent real pastors I have met. Nonetheless, there were four pastors whose behavior suggested that their beliefs may belong to this type.

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<sup>192</sup> Interview with pastor PYB1204, eastern province, 2016.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with pastor PYB1208, eastern province, 2016.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with pastor PYS1195, southeastern province, 2017.

<sup>195</sup> Interview with pastor PYA1171, northeastern province, 2018.

<sup>196</sup> This idea of relative authority is similar to the relative utility concept from the rational choice theory, where one "construct[s] preference curves that measure the relative utility of one object against another." (Scott, RCT 2000)

As a pastor, prioritizing the government means adopting the government's perspective in dealing with religious affairs. Depending on developments in the religious environment, the government's objectives may vary from censoring dangerous elements within churches to decreasing the number of churches altogether. Regardless of which objective, Enforcers believe their work is performed in the best interest of the country as well as their own career.

It is rarely the case that pastors begin ministry with this type of faith from the outset, since there would not be much occupational merit to being a pastor if faith was not central in their consideration. Rather, pastors' belief may have transformed into the Enforcer type over time, presumably due to external reasons. For example, one may have tired of being a pastor in a repressive environment and decided to pursue more comfort by working for the government while giving up one's faith entirely. Another may have seen the benefits other registered pastors got to reap and followed in their steps while also changing their views on faith. Yet another may have vowed to change the system from within and worked to climb the TSPM hierarchy but lost their initial goals in the process. In any case, this type of belief is more apparent in their behavior than in their words.

Enforcers view repression as necessary and effective way of adapting religion to the needs of the nation or eliminating it as a whole. They also believe in the value of their participation in realizing this outcome. Whereas Supporters maintain good terms with the government through full compliance, Enforcers are presumably deeply enmeshed in the TSPM system and serving in high posts within the government. Unlike the previous types of pastors who may assist with implementing government regulations motivated by various beliefs, Enforcers are directly involved in managing churches and setting the future trajectory of religion in the area. That is not to say that all pastors who actively participate in government initiatives belong to this category. However, when compliance with a government regulation directly contradicts principles of faith, one's enthusiastic compliance may betray where one's priorities reside. Moreover, Enforcers engage in ultra-nationalist behavior, often being involved in the creation of repressive policies, or helping to set the government's broader stance toward religion.

It is no surprise that Enforcers have the least (little to none) experience with repression. None of the Enforcers I interviewed reported repression. Instead, pastors of this type have been the ones helping to implement repression—that is, formulate the details of the regulations, identify target churches and work in conjunction with the public security bureau to determine when and how to execute the law. Whereas the previous types of pastors, at best, comply with repressive regulations albeit with different attitudes and motivations, this last type of pastor is leading repression, helping to fill in the details of the regulations and imagining a more acceptable religious environment for the Chinese government.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I analyzed selective repression by moving the focal point to the characteristics of the repressed. I theorized that selective repression can be explained in part by looking at pastors' behavior—threatening behavior as seen through their compliance with the law and useful behavior as seen through their relationship with the government—and that this behavior, in turn, can be explained by pastors' beliefs. I found that pastors whose beliefs prioritize the authority of the government over God, such as the Supporter and the Enforcer, are more accepting of regulations and have good relations with the government. Therefore, they

experience repression less, and when repressed, encounter less harsh forms of repression, such as structural repression. Pastors that place the authority of God over the government, such as the Fighter, the Avoider, and the Persister, go along with government rules less and mostly do not maintain strong lines of communications with officials. As a result, they face higher risks and harsher methods of repression, with a mixture of personal and operational types of repression.

Several implications follow. First, observing the characteristics of the repressed reveals important information about the repressor. Especially for research on state repression, for which systematic data collection is difficult and often dangerous, this study suggests that approaching the topic from the bottom-up also offers valuable insights into the behavior of the repressor. And these insights add to those from previous chapters. Whereas Chapters 2 and 3 respectively explained why the central government tightened its hold on religion, and why local officials shifted its implementation style, this chapter shows why these churches were chosen as targets of repression.

Second, discovering patterns in selective repression implies that the CCP's calculations are explainable. The Communist Party has been continuously increasing its efforts to strengthen its citizens' ideological support for the Party through propaganda banners on streets, YouTube videos, and Xi Jinping's call to realize the Chinese Dream. These efforts seem to be products of rational calculations when considering that people's behaviors are rooted in their beliefs. In other words, if beliefs ultimately decide people's behavior, then the best way to maintain control over society would be to target people's beliefs. It appears that the Party has always been conscious of the power of beliefs and ideology.

Finally, this study finds that pastors choose behavior with full awareness of its repercussions. Some pastors deliberately choose to defy rules despite risks of repression, while other pastors willfully facilitate repression knowing its effects on religious freedom. Likewise, different backgrounds—for example, growing up in a house church versus getting educated in a TSPM environment—can converge to the same kinds of beliefs and behaviors, while the same set of Bible verses can justify multiple paths to observing religious faith. These observations substantiate both the concepts of resilience and diversity of faiths when it comes to Protestant communities in China.

## Chapter 5:

### Conclusion

<sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Romans 5:3-5

This study began with the puzzle of selective repression. Protestant churches of similar size, pastoral background, theological foundations, and registration status were receiving differential treatment from the government. Some churches were allowed to hold services every Sunday, while others were forced to shut down, give up the building lease, and disperse gatherings. Why were some churches facing repression while others continued to operate without interruption? And why was a strong authoritarian country like China choosing to repress only select parts of religion?

The question in this specific form is new. Similar questions have been asked regarding why states repress society ([Rummel 1995](#); [Cingranelli and Richards 1999](#); [Moore 2000](#); [Davenport 2007](#); [Carey 2010](#); [Escribà-Folch 2013](#); [Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014](#); [O'Brien and Deng 2015](#); [Ritter and Conrad 2016](#)), what kinds of characteristics of states explain the tendency to repress ([Mitchell and McCormick 1988](#); [Poe and Tate 1994](#); [Davenport 1996](#); [Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2005](#); [Keith, Tate and Poe 2009](#); [Hill Jr. & Jones 2014](#)), and why some parts of society protest against the government ([Lipsky 1968](#); [Jordan and Maloney 1997](#); [Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2013](#)). But these questions have regarded repression mostly as a product of the repressor's traits (such as regime type and level of economic development)<sup>197</sup> or as a response to

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<sup>197</sup> See previous citations.

threat ([Davenport 1995](#); [Gartner and Regan 1996](#); [Carey 2010](#)), both of which cases assume threat to be uniform. Answers to these types of questions are not as useful in the understanding the specific case of China, where repression has been carried out by the same Communist state upon Protestant churches, and churches, in return, have also not posed a uniform threat to the government. In this way, the framing of the question itself is a contribution to the study of repression.

To address this puzzle, I presented a three-part framework consisting of three levels of Chinese society: the central government, local government officials, and Protestant pastors. First, the central government guides the broader direction of religious management ([Chapter 2](#)). Depending on the domestic and international pressures it faces at the time, the central government decides on how much to prioritize religious repression as a nationwide policy. Based on text analysis of newspaper articles from 2016 to 2021, I found that as both domestic and international pressures increased and changed in nature, the central government's prioritization of religious policies also increased, with directions shifting from selective repression in the early to mid 2010s to indiscriminate repression starting in the late 2010s. Its changing approach towards religion has directly influenced the local government officials' threat perception of local churches.

Second, local government officials determine how religious policies get implemented on the ground ([Chapter 3](#)). Juggling the directives from the central government and relationships with church leaders on the ground, local officials choose the style and target of repression. Using process tracing and cross-case comparisons, I showed that when religious control is not communicated as a national priority by the central government, local officials have more discretion to interpret regulations creatively and to be deflective in implementing restrictive regulations. Due to the low threat perception toward churches, local officials often choose not to repress churches and their leaders with whom they have developed friendships or beneficial relationships. In contrast, when the central government prioritizes religious repression, local officials' threat perception toward churches is heightened, thereby resulting in less lenience and relationship-based treatment of churches. During this period, local officials execute repressive religious policies regardless of existing relationships with church pastors. They also demonstrate less creativity in interpreting religious policies and higher compliance in executing them.

Third, the church characteristics upon which local officials base their evaluation are largely decided by the pastors ([Chapter 4](#)). As Protestant pastors balance their beliefs between obeying God's commands and abiding by the government's regulations, they contribute to how threatening or useful a church is to the government. Pastors that prioritize the authority of God over the government partake in more threatening behavior, such as actively proselytizing, communicating with foreign churches and organizations, and staying hidden from the government. Conversely, pastors that revere the government over God are more useful to the government as they guide their church to contribute to local government activities and stay in close communication with officials. Analysis of pastors' beliefs offers a bottom-up way to understand selective repression.

Separately, each of these three theories explains an important aspect of religious control in China. The theory on the central government speaks to religion as a national priority; the theory on local government officials addresses local policy implementation; and the theory on pastors provides insight into the beliefs and behaviors of religious followers in China. At the same time, selective repression is not wholly explainable as a national policy, not only the result



of a local official's decision to implement the policy, and not entirely attributable to how pastors guide their churches.

When put together, the three theories produce more than their sum. As three key pieces of the puzzle, the theories combine to offer a thorough explanation of selective repression in ways each theory cannot on its own. Why a church is repressed has as much to do with the pastor's beliefs that led him to involve the church in prohibited behaviors, as the local officials' heightened threat perception in evaluating the church and the central government's directives to strengthen religious control at the time. Likewise, a church may continue to operate because of the central government's lax religious policies, the local officials' close relationship with the church, and the pastor's beliefs that put his loyalties closer to the government.

In this way, this study contributes to the repression literature by offering an inclusive, multi-level explanation of selective repression. This study is not one that divides the repressor from the repressed, and especially not one that blames the repressor and victimizes the repressed. Rather, actors in this study each and all are important decisionmakers in their domain. The central government, local officials, and pastors each have agency and power (albeit to varying degrees) to influence repression beyond what has been allotted them in the conventional framing of 'repressor vs. repressed.'

However, these actors are also constrained in their decisions by the influence of other actors. For local officials, they are sandwiched between the other two actors in this framework, the central government and pastors. Their agency in policy implementation is largely affected by the directions dropped upon them by their superiors and the demands made from them by members of society. Additionally, depending on national priorities, local officials also may take into consideration the accomplishments and progress made by officials of neighboring locales. When selectivity and experimentation are encouraged by higher levels of government, local officials may view others in similar levels of government as competitors for promotion, and adjust their policy implementation to match or outperform others.

The decisions of the other two actors, the central government and pastors, are also constrained by actors outside of this three-level framework. Government leaders have to pay attention to international criticism as much as domestic discontent. As Chapter 2 has shown, the central government's decisions are sometimes overturned with strong requests from other state leaders, and their overall strategies have to take into consideration the reactions of the domestic and international audience. Likewise, pastors have to pay heed to God's commandments as much as government regulations. And beyond this framework, pastors' beliefs and behaviors are also influenced by the opinions of their congregation, actions of their predecessors, precedents set by religious leaders elsewhere, and advice and resources provided by foreign churches and organizations. From this perspective, the decisions of all three actors are not solely up to their whims but shaped by a multitude of actors and components.

This multi-actor explanation of selective repression also carries important implications specific to the study of Chinese politics. Analysis of the central government confirms existing studies that show the Communist leadership collecting and being mindful of the opinions of the domestic and international audience. Not only is it attentive, but the Party has also grown strong and confident to the point of proactively promoting a national image and filtering the news of topics it does not want discussed publicly (i.e., Christianity).

Chapter 3 on local officials also helps to reconfigure our existing understandings of central-local relations and local policy implementation in China. Observing how repression is selectively carried out highlights the agency that local officials have over the choice of how and

upon whom to carry out repression, a concept that has not been explicitly explored in the realm of religion. However, the chapter also suggests that this agency has limits, and that the balance of power seems to have tilted toward the side of the central government in the Xi era.

Finally, the beliefs and behaviors of Protestant pastors are deconstructed not from the perspective of dissidents with the potential to overthrow the regime. Rather, the study takes the opposite approach of tracing the path from pastors' beliefs to behaviors, some of which the government may find threatening and others which the government may find useful in the management of religion. At all levels of explanations, the study highlights the need for depth and nuance in the study of repression as well as in the analyses of actors that are related to it.

## **Lessons beyond Protestantism in China**

Theories from this study can also be useful in exploring other contexts as long as they meet the following two scope conditions: first, the repressed subjects are religious communities in a repressive regime; and second, the religious doctrines suggest a competing authority that the government finds threatening to its own. However, a loose application of these conditions broadens up the generalizability of the theories to different religions, non-religious societal actors, non-religious policy realms, and other authoritarian countries.

Other religions in China can take the place of Protestantism in this theory of selective repression when the second scope condition is met—that the religious doctrines suggest a competing authority threatening to the government. For instance, Catholicism and Islam are both monotheistic religions repressed by the Communist government in China.<sup>198</sup> Accordingly, government repression of Catholic and Muslim communities in China can be explained to some extent by the theories in this study. The central government's approach to religion is as applicable to Protestantism as it is to Catholicism, Islam and other religions in China; and this has been evident in the government's crackdown across all religions starting in 2018. Similarly, how local officials evaluate the threat of each religious community may partially depend on their relationship with the local priests and imams. And how each priest or imam leads his or her congregation can also be explained by where their beliefs are positioned between God and the government.

But some elements of Catholicism and Islam differentiate them from Protestantism and require theoretical adjustments. With a sovereign government in the Vatican, Catholicism has an explicit political authority other than God. Therefore, applying the theory of selective repression to Catholic churches in China would need to take into account how each of the three levels of actors considers this separate authority. On one hand, having an explicit political entity may represent a greater threat to the Chinese government; on the other hand, it may offer a channel for conversation and lessen the amount of threat the government perceives in its presence. At times, a physical threat may be easier to deal with than an ideological and spiritual threat.

For Islam, the threat perceived by the government gets complicated due to the issue of ethnic minorities. With a concentration of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, a province in the northwestern region of China, the Chinese government has treated Muslim communities as both a religious and a political threat. Thus, the theory of selective repression would have to account for the threat of extremism and separatism that the government perceives in these Muslim

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<sup>198</sup> Catholicism is especially similar to Protestantism in that they both are branches of Christianity with different doctrinal interpretations, and how the two religions arrived in China through Western imperialism is also similar.

communities but not in other religious communities. In contrast, Muslim communities outside of Xinjiang have better integrated with society, but are also facing increasing measures of repression and sinicization under the Xi administration. Selective repression of these Muslim communities, especially since 2018, likely resembles that of other religious communities including Protestant ones.

However, Islam's situation in China would not be paralleled in, for example, Iran, another authoritarian regime (with elements of theocracy and democracy). Unlike in China where religion has always posed a threat to the leadership's legitimacy, throughout Iranian history, religion has served as a source of political legitimacy. Shi'i Islam has been the official state religion and the dominant religion closely intertwined with politics, while other sects of Islam and minority religions have faced repression. To the extent that religious repression in Iran originates from the leadership's perception of threat in these minority religions, it can also be explained using theories from this study. At the same time, reports of increased persecution during national and global crises suggest that the Iranian government may not face the same type of domestic and international pressures as does the Chinese leadership.

Buddhism is an example of a religion that does not fit the scope conditions but may still be partially explained by the theories of selective repression. As the largest religion in China, Buddhism, excluding Tibetan Buddhism, has maintained a relatively harmonious relationship with the Chinese government for its innocuous doctrines and its role in shaping Chinese culture. Buddhism's relatively safe operations despite its popularity have much to do with its lack of a competing authority that can threaten the government. In fact, starting in the late 2010s, the Chinese leadership began to use Buddhism more aggressively to "preserv[e] domestic social stability," "diffus[e] restiveness in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)" and "increase its influence in nearby regions by acquiring predominant access to powerful Buddhist organizations."<sup>199</sup> Nevertheless, also in the same period, Buddhist monasteries have encountered repression, as temples were shut down and sinicization efforts were enforced. The fact that Buddhism is no longer safe from repression implies that the government has also begun to perceive the religion as a threat to its stability, albeit in a different form than other monotheistic religions. In this context, theories from this study may be able to explain the actions of local officials and Buddhist monks. Additionally, examining the repression of Buddhist temples may broaden the scope of my theories.

Parallels can also be drawn to understand the repression of non-religious entities in China and other authoritarian regimes. For example, repression of religious freedom has often been accompanied with repression of other civil liberties, such as the freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Likewise, repression of religious communities in China has also often coincided with repression of other parts of civil society, such as NGOs. Like religious entities, NGOs are also required to register with the government and registration status has different implications for the operation of the organization.<sup>200</sup> Similarly, religious organizations are often subject to similar guidelines as NGOs: *Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations* contains Article 75 prohibiting organizations from "illegally fund[ing] religious activities."<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Jayadeva Ranade, "Buddhism: a New Frontier in the China-India Rivalry," *Carnegie India*, Marcy 17, 2017, <https://carnegieindia.org/2017/03/17/buddhism-new-frontier-in-china-india-rivalry-pub-68326>

<sup>200</sup> Franceschini, Ivan, and Elisa Nesossi. "State repression of Chinese labor NGOs: a chilling effect?." *The China Journal* 80, no. 1 (2018): 111-129.

<sup>201</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, "Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations (CECC Full Translation)," Issued: October 25, 1998, Article 75.

Although NGOs do not religiously follow an authority figure, the fact that they are under a constant watch of the government implies that the government perceives threat in NGOs. Based on the dissertation's findings, I expect the central government to also tighten its control over NGOs and other parts of civil society in response to changing threats, and for local officials to adjust their implementation strategies accordingly. And similar to Protestant churches, NGOs may take on characteristics based on how their leaders and members find a balance between pursuing their organizational goals and principles and complying with government regulations.

In this way, findings from this research may represent only a part of the same elephant that has stuck around for a while, or the beginnings of a new period and new patterns of Party dominance, local governance, and broader civil society. This is a new puzzle which only a continued examination of repression across broader policy realms and over a longer timeline can solve.

## **Aftermath of Repression**

I want to conclude at the start of this new puzzle, by previewing the aftermath of selective repression in China. The ways in which actors have received and responded to the new religious regulations under Xi have us returning to the idea of agency and domains. When selective repression was the mode by which religion was controlled, the central government retained limited agency over how the regulations would be implemented, in what style, and upon which churches. In this way, its domain of power was also capped at setting broad directions for the local government. And this limited domain is what allowed the central government to encourage experimentation on the part of the local government (e.g., the cross-demolition campaign in Zhejiang), and to pull out from the line of fire upon global criticism. In contrast, by prioritizing religious control and increasing the reach of repressive policies nationwide, the central government has simultaneously expanded its power as well as the domain in which it is exercised. Although the increased power and domain leave less room for experimentation and blame-shifting, the central government has also found other ways to codify religious restrictions and diminish the visibility of religion in its official newspaper.

To some extent, local government officials are on the opposite side of the scale—when the agency and domain of the central government increases, those of the local officials decrease, and vice versa. Since the central government has mandated a stricter protocol toward religion, local governments have had less wiggle room to let churches pass based on their existing relationships. At the same time, the relationship between central and local governments cannot be simplified into one of antagonism, because it is also one of hierarchy. This means that when the central government strengthens its authority and expands its domain, local governments also gain more room to exercise their power. More power in the center can mean more resources given to, and higher standards expected of, local governments to implement more demanding policies upon churches. Therefore, from the perspective of churches, local governments may seem stronger and more authoritative with the centralization of power. In short, with increasing repression, the local government's power and the flexibility of its use with respect to the central government may have decreased, but its authority with respect to society may have increased as a result.

Finally, Protestant pastors are left with a decreased domain of power and increased agency. Pastors receive signals from the government about acceptable behavior, reconfigure

what they hear to be compatible with their faith and church-building, and then translate policies and guidelines for their congregations. The domain in which they operate has decreased with stricter government regulations, but within the limited domain, pastors are actively reinterpreting the boundaries to maintain agency.

As explained in Chapter 4, pastors with different beliefs about how to reconcile the clash between God's commands and government regulations ultimately choose to behave differently. Those at the extreme ends of the spectrum, either actively opposing the government in pursuit of God's objectives (i.e., Fighters) or siding entirely with the government at the cost of religious faith (i.e., Enforcers) have continued to exercise agency each in their own ways. Religious leaders arrested and detained for activism have continued to express their opinions through other means, such as borrowing the voice of foreign journalists and international organizations. Pastors that prioritize government authority have also maintained their close positions to the government by actively staying relevant to Party objectives. However, pastors positioned at these extremes are also fewer in number.

In fact, most pastors are concentrated somewhere in between the two extremes. Whether they have beliefs that categorize them as Persisters or Supporters, these pastors are continually adjusting to the shifting boundaries set by government policies and becoming their own agents in reinterpreting their domain of power. These "in-the-middle" pastors are making changes to the way they operate the church, such as finding safe topics to preach, ridding their church of foreign connections, and keeping the size of their congregation size small.<sup>202</sup> And these changes are often accompanied with sympathetic views of the Party's motives and goals, making the changes less as a one-sided sacrifice on the part of the pastors, and more as adjustments made within the tolerable boundaries set by their belief system.<sup>203</sup>

In this way, the story of selective repression in China is not just about how pastors survive in a repressive authoritarian regime. Some fight and some show support, but many others continue a balancing act with the authorities, traversing a fine line between what they can concede and what they need to protect. Despite these fissures in the Protestant community, what is clear is that regardless of different types of beliefs, pastors in their own ways are all exercising agency within their given space.

Nor is the story of selective repression only about the pastors. Flexibility and versatility are required of all actors, including the central leadership guiding the national agenda, local officials implementing policies, and pastors preparing for and reacting to the policies. None of the actors central to this study are free of constraints or have absolute power over the outcomes. Despite increasing repression, it is still unlikely that the central leadership will be able to root out all elements of religion from society; or that the local officials will become the final arbiter of religious management; or that pastors will encounter a government that is welcoming of religion in the near future.

But having limits on power also has not, and does not have to take away the agency of actors. This dissertation has shown that every actor, from a national government to a religious individual, finds ways to respond to pressures, resolve dilemmas, and reinvent pathways towards their goal. And some are even pushing beyond predetermined limits to expand their boundaries. The Xi administration has undertaken regulatory and structural changes to reset priorities for religious control, even at the expense of replacing rules and institutions that had been in place for

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<sup>202</sup> Sarah Lee and Kevin J. O'Brien. "Adapting in Difficult Circumstances: Protestant Pastors and the Xi Jinping Effect," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30, no. 132 (2021): pp. 902-914.

<sup>203</sup> Lee and O'Brien, 2021, p. 908.

decades. The leadership is asserting its willingness and, perhaps more importantly, its ability to put the Party first, and to openly imbue its policy realms with revamped Party ideology. But the society is also far from stationary. Protestant communities are fighting a multilayered battle—for some, a spiritual battle to broaden the perimeters of God’s kingdom on earth; for a select few, a legal battle to expand the boundaries of their religious freedom, but for most, a personal battle to stretch their threshold for tolerance and perseverance. Repression may have confined them to worship in a small apartment, but no amount of room and no set of walls could contain their devotion to faith.

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August 3, 2016, “颠覆国家政权” (Subversion of State Power)

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August 5, 2016, “一个“死磕律师”的收场——聚焦北京锋锐律所主任周世锋案庭审,” (The End of a "Deadly Fighting Lawyer" -- Focusing on the Trial of Zhou Shifeng, Director of Beijing Fengrui Law Firm)

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August 6, 2016. “人民根本利益国家法律尊严不容挑战——周世锋胡石根翟岩民勾洪国颠覆国家政权犯罪案件警示录”(“The fundamental interests of the people and the dignity of the state's laws cannot be challenged” - Zhou Shifeng, Hu Shigen, Zhai Yanmin, Gou Hongguo, and the criminal case of subverting state power.)

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