

**China's Religious Freedom Violations: Domestic Repression and Malign Influence Abroad  
December 14, 2022**

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Thank you for the invitation to meet with commissioners of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom to discuss the deteriorating status of religious freedom in China.

In recent years, the Chinese government has steadily increased the oppression and control of Christians particularly through the use of technology. The techno-authoritarianism in China has begun to reach new extremes under Xi Jinping in his third term as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Continuing the policy goal of “Sinicization”, or recreating religion to better reflect CCP ideals, COVID-19 introduced a new form of virtual persecution for Christians. As the nation banned gatherings, churches decided to hold services online. This resulted in Christians being taken into custody for holding online gatherings. Even virtual prayer meetings were banned.

In a brazen attempt to control communication of people of faith, China's State Administration for Religious Affairs published the “Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services” on its website on December 20, 2021. It was created through joint efforts spanning across five departments: State Administration for Religious Affairs, Cyberspace Administration of China, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of Public Security, and Ministry of State Security.

According to the regulations, no organization or individual may conduct any religious information service on the Internet unless permission is obtained from a provincial government department. Only religious groups, schools, and organizations with valid permits can conduct online sermons. Without one, no organization or individual may teach on the Internet, conduct religious education and training, publish sermons, repost or link related content, organize religious activities on the Internet, or live broadcast or record and broadcast religious ceremonies.

Now, prior administrative authorization is required before any religious content can be published on any social media or self-media. If internet religious activities (text, pictures, and videos related to religion are treated as religious activities) happen without prior administrative authorization, the Internet Service Provider must cooperate with religious affairs departments and public security organs to terminate the service; individuals and organizations who perform online religious activities without an “Internet Religious Information Service License” will be listed as untrustworthy.

The content posted by these individuals, groups, or organizations must conform to the government's political agendas like “harmonious society, advancement of the times, healthy and civilized”, and must guide believers to “love the country and abide by the law”.

Anyone who posts content with the purpose of “inciting the state power using religion”, “objecting to the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership,” “obstructing the socialism system,” “damaging national reunification,” or “harming the unity of various ethnic groups and social stability” are to be punished.

Since the law came into effect on March 1, 2021, Christian WeChat accounts and groups became a main area of suppression. This is an especially cruel limitation amid the long, strict lockdowns of China’s zero-COVID policy that forbids gatherings and movement of individuals outside their homes.

Shortly after on April 4, members of Early Rain Covenant Church’s Ran Yunfei were unable to send book recommendations in a WeChat group due to the word ‘Christ’ being in violation of the new law in the categories including but not limited to pornography, gambling, and drug abuse, excessive marketing, and incitement. Unfortunately, the group administrator had to replace part of the word “Christ” to pass censorship.

Similarly, the Shenzhen Trinity Harvest Gospel Church was raided on July 11, 2021, during an online service. National security agents, police officers, and staff of the Religious Affairs Bureau broke into Pastor Mao Zhibin and Elder Chu Yanqing’s room and arrested. Desperate for fellowship after months of isolation, members drove two hours to a remote beach on April 16, 2022, for baptisms. However, when someone posted the baptism pictures and videos to WeChat, Pastor Mao received a phone call half an hour later from the Management of Health Hotline (12320), asking him to verify his identity and confirm where he is traveling from in the name of COVID prevention. Several minutes later, a local county official and several police officers arrived at their restaurant. Under the excuse of COVID prevention, they checked the IDs, scanned their COVID QR codes, and performed a facial recognition scan on each church member present. To Pastor Mao’s surprise, one police officer already had the baptism videos from WeChat on his cell phone. He was shocked by how fast the authorities responded.

Regarding the experience, Pastor Mao Zhibin [wrote](#):

As Christians, we get special attention from the government. When we eat lunch, a county official sits next to us and waits. As soon as they scanned our COVID QR code and performed a facial recognition scan after lunch, many of my pictures appeared on the officer’s cell phone. It was truly impressive. I majored in Information Management at my university. With the data collected from WeChat and hundreds of millions of surveillance cameras and processed with artificial intelligence algorithms, the power is way beyond any other totalitarian regime. However, God is still in control. We just need to trust Him and follow him.

Along with the online censorship of Christians, the Chinese authorities also sought to track their movements through required COVID QR codes, facial recognition technology, and CCTV cameras in and around churches and homes. The surveillance system can virtually keep track of all citizen’s movements.

However, this technology is not contained within China's border. It is being weaponized in the growing transnational repression of Chinese Christians around the world. This is China reaching across borders to silence dissent among diasporas and exiles, through illegal deportations, abductions, digital threats, and family intimidation. While the CCP has a broad and extensive history of this, the case of the Mayflower Church is one that will continue to develop this year.

In an unprecedented move, a church made up of 28 adults and 32 children from Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church led by Pastor Pan Yongguang began arriving on Jeju Island, Republic of Korea (ROK) in November 2019 from the People's Republic of China after enduring religious persecution by the Chinese government. The asylum seekers have been nicknamed the "Mayflower Church" for their commitment in seeking the freedom to practice their faith with their community.

Detailed in a [report](#) by CSW, the church has faced harassment by the Chinese Communist Party since its founding in 2012 with refusal to install CCTV cameras in the church, frequent interrogations of leaders, and pressure to join the state sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement. The revised Regulations on Religious Affairs came into effect in February 2018 targeting unregistered churches and became a turning point for the Shenzhen Holy Reformed Church.

After a majority of the church members voted to flee the persecution by the Chinese government, 60 members flew to Jeju Island, a visa-free location for Chinese passport holders. As reported in the [Wall Street Journal](#) in June 2021, the group began working through the immigration system to seek protection and asylum in the Republic of Korea. All, including the children, were denied at least once. Due to consistently low refugee acceptance rates in the ROK, the group's chances of being granted asylum there were virtually zero.

Meanwhile, threats against the church members continued from the CCP who were using technology to manipulate their return to China. The PRC Consulate in Jeju called members of the church, accusing them of "treason" and "subversion of state power", a charge often used to silence and imprison Chinese pastors. Authorities demanded their immediate return to face the consequences of their actions and to recant their accusations of persecution.

Family members of the church who remained in China have seen a dramatic increase in the harassment and interrogations by the Chinese Public Security Bureau agents. The questioning often focused on asking the asylum seekers to return to China, telling them not to collaborate with overseas groups, and that the U.S. will not help them. Chinese authorities sought to locate Pastor Pan and the others by forcing family members in China to urge the asylum seekers to reactivate their WeChat accounts. The pressure from the mainland was mounting for the group to return to China.

Having exhausted the ROK asylum system, facing the loss of their legal status, and fearing refoolment, the group voted to leave Jeju to seek UNHCR refugee status in Bangkok, Thailand. However, one family of four remained in Jeju as the PRC Consulate refused to issue a passport to their newborn baby claiming their asylum application was "illegal." After another Wall Street

Journal [report](#) was published, the Consulate officer called and offered to issue the baby a passport if the family denounced their asylum claims and issued an apology.

Most of the group submitted their refugee applications to the UNHCR Bangkok office on September 5 and completed their first interviews. Twelve of those families have received their cards while three others are still waiting. None have received notice for the next refugee determination interview.

Now, the Thai government has refused to renew the tourist visas for the church members which began to expire on October 5. According to the travel agent who proctored their one-month visa extensions, the Chinese Embassy demanded the Thai government to send their passports to be “examined.” Both human rights groups and U.S. embassy officials view this as transnational repression by China. An [AP report](#) highlights the constant harassment, surveillance, and fear of the church members especially considering the Thai government’s history of repatriating Chinese dissidents.

There are now 64 asylum seekers with multiple births since they left China three years ago. The church members in Jeju and Bangkok must be protected from forcible repatriation to China, where they face grave threats to their personal safety and freedom.

Despite the difficulty of the situation, there are a few recommendations for congressional actions to counter the CCP's transnational repression to protect those like the Mayflowers church members.

First, the United States should immediately consider the 64 credible asylum seekers for Priority I refugee resettlement and status designation. The United States must intervene to ensure the safety of the group and offer asylum where their right to freedom of religion or belief is protected as the appropriate durable solution in line with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Second, I recommend the creation of a joint data base between the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and the Congressional Executive Commission on China to better track cases of the CCP’s transnational repression toward religious freedom and human rights expatriates and advocates.

China has harnessed technology to control the voices of dissidents and persecution survivors even when they are seemingly safe outside of China. We must ensure their safety. The harassment and intimidation by the long arm of the Chinese Communist Party of Christians and other people of faith cannot go unchecked.