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Religion Encountering the Leader's Personality Cult in China Today: A Policy Perspective

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Abstract

China under the officially atheist Chinese Communist Party (hereafter the CCP) since 1949 has formally upheld an oppressive policy toward religion. Notwithstanding that, the party-state has often tolerated and selectively supported certain religious practices such as Buddhism and Chinese folk religions that deemed useful for its social, economic, and even diplomatic objectives. However, no religious institution permitted to acquire enough social influence to challenge the Party's ultimate authority. Further, since Xi Jinping (hereafter XJP) took office as CCP leader in 2012, China has seen the emergence of a Mao-style personality cult centered on him. Up to now, scholarship has been largely preoccupied with the impact of XJP personality cult on China's political ecology. While relatively, little attention has given to its substantial impact on religious activity in this party-state. Therefore, besides reviewing the CCP's religious policies over the past more than 70 years, this paper will investigate the causes and manifestations of XJP personality cult, particularly in so far as it has affected Chinese religions. Based on the author's direct observations of religious communities in China, especially Buddhist institutions, this paper argues that the intensification of XJP's personality cult in recent years has ushered in a nationwide Sinicization of religion. This has amounted to the harassment of Islam and Christianity. They both regarded as foreign religions, while Buddhists, the largest

population of believers in China, tolerated if they stay obedient to the CCP. As a result, Buddhism's institutions have effectively become "paralyzed" in as much as they cannot act freely, instead serving the CCP's ideological propaganda to avoid persecution.

Keywords: China's Religious Policy, Personality Cult of XJP, Impact, and Religious Institutions

I. A Brief Review of China's Religious Policies

After Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, the CCP) established the People's Republic China in 1949, the party-state set up institutions to oversee all forms of religious expression, with particular attention to each religious community. In practice, religious leaders were co-opted; national associations were established under state control to manage the affairs of five state-recognized religions, *Buddhism*, *Daoism*, *Islam*, *Catholicism*, and *Protestantism*. Given Marxism-Leninism's ideological promotion of atheism, Mao and his revolutionary colleagues vigorously denounced religion-based societies (along with other nongovernmental organizations), and so these institutions were shut down from 1951 onward. Clerics from various religious traditions sent to re-education camps to make them good citizens and productive laborers through communist indoctrination, while Buddhist monastic assets were confiscated and re-distributed (Ashiwa, Y., and D.L. Wank, 2009). As a result, religious institutions subsumed within the state in service of the CCP's rule. The Chinese Constitution, enacted in 1957 and then amended in 1958, grants citizens the right to "enjoy freedom of religious belief," but it limits this practice to "normal religious activities" within a prescribed scope, while forbidding religious groups from showing allegiance to any foreign authority (Bell, A. S., 2016). The term "normal" in this case is ambiguous, leaving room for the party-state to make broad interpretations and thereby enforce strict control over religious communities, which faced the threat of being branded as heretics if they ran into state disapproval. Under the guise of attacking foreign influence through religion, the party-state has often harassed religious institutions, particularly the Catholic and Protestant churches, perceived as having foreign connections (Chai, W., M. Chai, 2013). Thus from a constitutional standpoint Chinese citizens have religious freedom, but they can only practice it in ways that the CCP defines as acceptable (Chang, K., 2018). Religious institutions repeatedly victimized under a number of sociopolitical movements that Mao encouraged during his nearly three decades of rule until 1976 (Dikötter, F., 2011).

Most notably, in the Great Forward Leap (1958-1962), Mao sought to mobilize the population and resources for the sake of accelerating national industrial development (Chang, K, 2018). Accordingly, any assets still owned by religious institutions were confiscated. Clerics vilified for eating the rice of socialism without payment and compelled to join the productive labor force. In the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Economy, E. C, 2018). Mao appealed to the enthusiasm of young people to smash the old world to establish a new policy that he utilized to sustain his declining authority and the power in the CCP apparatus—religious institutions as “backward” forces became the primary targets of radical attacks carried out by Mao’s Red Guards throughout the country. Temples, churches, mosques, monasteries, and cemeteries ransacked and closed down; both clergy and believers ridiculed or physically tortured (Goossaert, V., D. A, 2011). As a result, all visible traces of religion within Chinese society seemingly wiped out. Moreover, the academic study of religion in China was either refashioned as an instrument of CCP policy or forced to undergo a “trial” and “baptism” of the “raging fire of the proletarian revolution” (as popularly phrased at that time). Another outcome of these sociopolitical movements was the rise of a cult of reverence for Mao (He, G, 2011), as enshrined within the ideology of Maoism. Manufactured and promoted from 1959 onward by the People’s Liberation Army, Maoism analogically functioned as a substitute religion for China. Mao himself became the object of intensive veneration among the Chinese people during his lifetime; his thoughts studied as dogma, and the episodes of his life, especially in association with the CCP, such as the Long March, were elevated to the status of national mythology. As a safeguard against social dissent, the army called in to enforce mandatory rituals of worship to restore order, such as the daily reading of Mao’s Little Red Book and performances to display loyalty. The cult of Mao lives on today, as many still worship him just as they would their ancestors. Many look at him today as an exceptional personality deserving of veneration; millions annually visit his birthplace (Leese, D, 2011), making it a center of pilgrimage. The ongoing popularity of the Mao Cult in today’s China shows us the durability of Chinese religiosity, even in this revised form, despite of the party-state’s inimical attitude towards formal expressions of religion (Johnson, I, 2018). Rather than risk state disfavor from practicing traditional religion, these Maoists worship past or current powerful CCP leaders, thereby avoiding persecution.



Fig.1: Mao worshiped as “the Buddha of Universal Heaven Sage”
Zhou Enlai at his left and Zhu De at his right
Hong'en Si (Red Benevolence Temple) in Mianyang, Sichuan Province.

Following the death of Mao in 1976, Deng Xiaoping emerged as the paramount leader of China and launched economic reforms and opening-up policies by the end of 1978, which facilitated China's rapid growth in subsequent decades. In 1982, the CCP Central Committee formulated a policy paper known as “The Basic Viewpoints and Policy on the Religious Affairs during the Socialist Period of Our Country”, which has become known as Document No. 19. This text promulgates that religious affairs should be handled with care, religious believers should rally towards the central aim of economic construction, and religious freedom should be allowed as long as believers love the nation, support the CCP's rule, and observe socialist laws (Khan, S. W, 2018). However, in other respects, Document No. 19 also reaffirms the CCP's atheist attitude: it forecasts that religion should eventually wither away, thus atheist propaganda should be relentlessly applied. Document No. 19 has served as a basis for both tolerance and restriction in the CCP's religious policies since then. Thanks to its growing economic strength and a modicum of tolerance toward religious activities, China has seen an astounding revival of religion since the late 1970's. According to the 1997 statistics, there were 100 million believers, 85,000 religious sites (churches, mosques, and temples), 300,000 clergy, and 3,000 organizations. Buddhism, at that time, had more than 13,000 temples and monasteries and 200,000 monks and nuns, while, additionally, Tibetan Buddhism has over 3,000 monasteries, 120,000 lamas, and 1,700 living Buddhas. Daoism has 1,500 temples and 25,000 masters. In Islam, there were 30,000 mosques (Koesel, K. J, 2014), 40,000 imams, and 18 million believers. Catholicism had over 4,000 churches, 4,000 clergy, and 4 million believers. Protestantism had 12,000 churches, over 25,000 meeting places, 18,000 clerics, and 10 million believers (Laliberté,

A, 2011). These statistics imply a rapid expansion of religious activities taking place in the post-Mao era. This kind of expansion continued when the CCP was under the leadership of both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, who further promoted China's growth, particularly after integrating its economy into the global market by joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (D. A. Palmer et al, 2011). The uncertainties caused by this rapid industrialization and urbanization among China's citizens, with some prosperous while others remained poor, drove more and more of them to seek religious remedies for their fate in the emerging market economy. Even so, scholars such as Yoshiko Ashiwa have observed that many religious sites restored or built in this period are indeed fronts for state-sponsored tourism and museums, and contain few "real" temples and churches. Meanwhile, numerous unregistered churches that are thriving are not visible in the official statistics. This boom in religious tourism has supplemented local and state revenues, but at the same time, it has ignited disputes between religious institutions and local governments over profit redistribution, as well as infighting among residential clergies over monastic property and leadership (Z. Ji, G. Fisher, and A. Laliberté, 2019). Such disputes are usually solve by political intervention, while infighting among clergies often results in the party has enhanced political control and manipulation of religious affairs. Religion thus revived in the three decades after Mao, but it mainly driven by state-backed economic motivations and was prone to corruption.

Since taking office in 2012, XJP has mainly continued the religious policies of his predecessors in guaranteeing the constitutional freedom to normal religious activities. However, at the same time, he has reiterated the CCP's leadership over religions and its right to manage religious affairs and he has warned party members against putting faith in religion, calling it a kind of "spiritual anesthesia" as a way of superimposing CCP ideology (Laliberté, A., et al, 2011). In September 2017, the party-state revised its longstanding policy on regulating religious affairs to allow state-registered religious organizations to possess property, publish literature, train and approve clergy, and collect donations. But at the same time it imposed restrictions on religious schooling and the times and locations of religious celebrations, as well as rules for monitoring online religious activity, which also compelled the reporting of donations that exceed 100,000 yuan (around \$ 15,900). The party-state then re-enforced its legal protection of the freedom of religious belief by publishing a white paper in 2018, known as "China's Policies and Practice on Protecting the Freedom of Religious Beliefs," as an official (Macfarquhar, R., and M. Schoenhals, 2006) response to the US State Department's criticism of China's policies on religious freedom in

its annual International Religious Freedom Reports. Further, according to a report by the research and advocacy group Freedom House in 2017, the CCP under XJP has drawn religious groups into a tightening of control over civic society (MacInnis, D. E, 1989). Lastly, at the fourth plenum of the CCP Central Committee, which adjourned on 31 October 2019, the CCP stated, “government, military, and schools; north, south, east, west and center—the Party leads everything.” Given this premise, CCP outlets at all levels granted the prerogative to impose their will on a wide spectrum of religious thought and practices, though often in the disguise of rule by law. China since 2012 has thus seen the emergence of a personality cult of XJP—something not seen since the days of Mao (Madsen, R, 2020). This new personality cult has particular causes and manifestations, affecting the religions in China in multiple ways, as we will see in the following sections.

II. Personality Cult of XJP

The outside world has been critically looking at XJP personality cult and its impact on China's domestic and foreign policies. However, a dearth of attention has paid toward the roots of its emergence in China. To examine the cause of this personality cult it is quite necessary to know XJP's early life (McGredor, R. Xi Jinping, 2019). In the telling and retelling of XJP's early life, he, after his father had denounced by Mao's Red Guards in 1969, went to work in the Shaanxi countryside. Not yet, sixteen years, the boy made a favorable impression in a number of ways. As subsequently described in popular lore: volunteering for rural labor; willingness to work almost without rest; showing a capacity to accept whatever hardship came his way; putting up with insects that frequently bit him; carrying enormous loads up mountain paths. Thereby inspiring villagers' approval and further, the way villagers came to see him off when he finally left the countryside to resume his studies (Tan, C, 2019). All this had become the stuff of a legend whereby XJP's countryside experiences allowed him to understand the basic condition of China and its people and inspired him to apply on himself sincerely for the people. This hagiographic account obviously later doctored and thus acquired a certain romance about it, like that of a Chinese Zen monk who found enlightenment through his wanderings, who had spent years in the wilderness to bring light to China. XJP himself is to this day an enthusiast of heroism, believing that China needs such individuals to realize its national rejuvenation. XJP's story tells us that his early life was not easy. Even so, he left out the harsh lessons that the Cultural Revolution taught him, although his family had severely impact in that movement. After coming to power XJP made it very clear that any attempt to look critically at any episode of the history of the CCP would be tantamount to “historical nihilism” (Torignian, J,

2018).” By burying the political reality of the past, XJP seemingly tried to align his leadership with Mao. As Joseph Torigan from Princeton University has pointed out, what XJP experienced in the Cultural Revolution was undoubtedly formative for four of his key personal traits: toughness, idealism, pragmatism, and cautiousness. Here, I would rather add stubbornness and heroism as well. By stubbornness, we can say he has shown less flexibility and has taken a consistent hard line in dealing with both domestic and foreign affairs. He has shown this perseverance even when facing widespread criticism, as seen in his response to the Hong Kong anti-governmental protest. This sort of “heroism” could be used for aptly describe his overconfidence in his personal efficacy. In line with this overconfident outlook, he has established a number of small governmental working groups with himself as chair to supervise state affairs in almost all fields, and he has sought to put into effect his vision that China should lead the world in high technology, with labels reading “Made in China 2050”. As a revolutionary princeling born and educated in Mao’s era, it is not possible for XJP to be immune from the former’s ideological influence. He did indeed take (Walder, A. G, 2019). Mao as a model of success and power, and subsequently copied his style of authoritarian rule. I highly believe the heroism, deeply rooted in XJP inner mind, has served as a primary drive for him to create a personality cult with himself as superhero for a new era (Weber, M., H. Gerth and C. W. Mills, 2009).

Another reason for XJP and his loyalists to promote a personality cult in his first term is the enormous level of insecurity that he had faced in the early days after he took office in 2012. As a seasoned official from an impeccable CCP lineage, XJP surged to become the successor to the fifth-generation CCP leadership in 2007 as a compromise after the power struggle between the “Shanghai Gang” with Jiang Zemin as its titular head and the clique clustered around the China Youth League led by Hu Jintao, who was then the sitting leader. XJP lacked a power base either in the CCP apparatus or in the public at large. The political atmosphere was in flux when XJP took office in 2012. This situation caused him tremendous anxiety about his position and China’s future. Moreover, he was mindful of threats posed by longstanding cabals and cliques within the CCP that could potentially undermine his authority. Some unverified sources have reported that XJP opponents from the military even plotted several assassinations attempts against him in 2012 and 2013, although they failed. Given this political environment, XJP could not afford to delay in establishing himself (Welch, H, 1972). From that point, a personality cult, promoted as a popular sentiment among the public, would have worked as a reliable countermeasure against the opposing

factions. Mao had similarly pursued such an aim in the Cultural Revolution, when he instigated millions of commoners to attack his "enemies" in the CCP establishment.

The making of XJP personality cult started when he took office in 2012 and thereupon manifested as: 1) inventing XJP as a national leader bearing the wisdom and vision to realize China's national rejuvenation. 2) Cultivating XJP as a leader who is both admirable and approachable for the public. 3) Designing XJP as a courageous individual who stands at the forefront to meet challenges from both within and without (Xi, J. Xi Jinping, 2014).

XJP as a national leader. As early as November 2012, when XJP ascended to the top CCP post, he and his loyalists launched the concept of Chinese Dream as a thematic vision of his coming rule. He referred this concept many times to his first national address as the head of state on 17 March 2013. In his own words, XJP said:

"We must make persistent efforts, press ahead with indomitable will, continue to push forward the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

In short, XJP dreamed to make China great again as it was in ancient times, and he believed this was all what the Chinese people wanted. Under the earnest promotion by the CCP propaganda, the China Dream arts sometimes along with XJP images had thus occupied all kinds of public spaces and advertisement billboards throughout the country, even the spaces of public walls in religious institutions; the concept itself also become a symbol of certain sacredness, functioning to integrate the society (Yang, F, 2018).

To enhance Chinese nationalism in the guise of patriotism inspired by China Dream, XJP and his loyalists have reiterated the long and enormous humiliation the imperialist powers, West or East had brought to China from 1839 until 1949, particularly the military invasion by Japanese imperialists. Under his direction, the National People's Congress designated 13 December as National Memorial Day for Nanjing Massacre victims in February 2014. XJP himself attended the annual memorial ceremonies consecutively in 2017 and 2018, held in Nanjing where, according to China's estimate, the invading Japanese troops brutally had about 300,000 Chinese civilians and unnamed soldiers killed, and 200,000 women raped after they captured the city on 13 December 1937. As a result, Chinese nationalism was thus re-provoked and reached its higher point under XJP, while he regarded as the leader who would lead the Chinese Nation to withstand foreign humiliation and do great, if not so, at least dream great.

To promulgate XJP wisdom of governance, his speechwriters often quoted Confucius and other ancient Chinese thinkers to address state affairs. In 2015, his propagandists even published a book to install him as insightful commentator to ancient Chinese teachings in

multiple fields. This entire well served the goal to generate broader public acknowledgement of XJP being a thoughtful and visionary leader since he was emulating Chinese ancient wisdom to rule China.

XJP as an admirable and approachable leader for the public. The CCP Propaganda Department has carefully cultivated the political image of XJP as both admirable and approachable. Under state promotion, a Peking-Opera verse circulated nationwide about Xi's visit to a pork bun restaurant, where he displayed his unassuming personal characteristics by waiting in line with everyone else. Articles referring to XJP as Xi Dada (meaning "Uncle Xi" or "Big Daddy Xi") and a video, "Xi Dada loves Peng Mama," highlighting Xi's relationship with his wife Peng Liyuan, were widely propagated through the Internet. Meanwhile, a song advising, "If you want to marry, marry someone like Xi Dada," also won significant online popularity. Besides these propagandistic endeavors, in 2015 Xi initiated a nationwide poverty-uplift campaign with a deadline of 2020 to eradicate poverty in China under state subsidies, notwithstanding its questionable sustainability. Apparently, XJP tried to engender a public perception of his charismatic authority through the internet that bears around 800 million users in China. In doing so, he portrayed as a "tireless, self-sacrificing servant of the people and their welfare." With this public perception in place, he increasingly centralized power on himself. It is worth keeping mind in considering XJP'S public persona that sociologist Max Weber had once predicted that charismatic authority led especially well to authoritarianism. Following these public initiatives, XJP confirmed at the core of CCP leadership in 2016, thus becoming an authority over everything within China.

XJP as a courageous leader. In the past seven years, XJP's courage in standing up to the US-led international containment of China's rise, and deep-rooted corrupt elements within the CCP itself, has been highly praised. XJP has acknowledged that the public hates the rich, especially governmental officials who have enriched from bribes. Months after taking office in 2012, he launched a nationwide anti-corruption campaign sweeping from top to bottom with the rhetoric of mercilessly hitting "tigers" (a derogative term referring to high-ranking officials implicated in corruption) and beating "flies" (junior officials convicted of corruption). By 2018, this campaign has uncovered over 1.5 million officials guilty of corruption-related charges, according to the official estimate. Through such anti-corruption efforts, XJP had his opponents trialed. His courage in sacking big "tigers," such as Zhou Yongkang, one of the powerful and feared standing members of the CCP Politburo under Jiang Zemin, is highly cherished among the populace. He thereby won the people's hearts, but also made enemies among the CCP elites. The CCP officialdom having long collaborated

in various corruptions, have turned to XJP side for fear of removed or demoted by corruption charges. Consolidating his authority, XJP was emboldened to sell the Chinese model of governance on the US-dominated global stage from 2017 onward. After enshrining his *Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* in the Chinese Constitution in 2017, he went so far as to abolish the presidential term limit in 2018. All these moves have contributed to making Xi China's most powerful China's since Mao.

Xi's personality cult, which reached its peak by 2018, has impacting religion in China. One such outcome is the forcible Sinicization of religion, whereby three of the five state-recognized belief systems (excepting indigenous Daoism and long localized Buddhism) categorized as being of foreign origin. As early as May 2015, XJP, at the Central United Front Work Conference held in Beijing, proposed to Sinicize religion as a means to integrate socially influential religious organizations and individuals into the CCP's system of rule. For XJP and his CCP colleagues, the Sinicization of religion can play a significant role in solving contemporary societal problems that impact religion, such as infiltration, subversion, and sabotage by malcontents, as well as terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities, and religious extremist activities in light of rising religion-related violence across the world.

In this circumstance, the party-state has been trying to make the practice of religion more Chinese and compatible with CCP principles. One aspect of these efforts is to indoctrinate more than one million Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang through state-organized re-education camps in the name of de-radicalization and anti-terrorism. It has estimated that in Southern Xinjiang thousands of mosques have been demolished under the direction of the CCP, while mosques defined as heritage sites to be preserved have ordered to fly Chinese national flags and hang propaganda banners on their walls. In Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the party-state has enforced the removal of Islamic symbols, restrictions in the use of Arabic, substituting quotes from XJP for those from the Quran, and enlisting imams to spread CCP ideology.



Fig.2: A Mosque flies the Chinese national flag in the ancient Tuyuq Valley
Outside of Turfan, Xinjiang, (Credited by A. S. Tyson).

As for West-originated Christianity, the party-state has imposed “thought reform” in name of “promoting Chinese Christianity” by re-translating and annotating the Bible to find commonalities with XJP’s doctrine of socialism with Chinese Characteristics to establish a “correct understanding” of the text. Similar to what had happened to Islamic mosques in Xinjiang and Ningxia; churches across Henan province in central China have forced amid pressure from the local government to replace the Ten Commandments passed down from Moses with XJP’s quotes. Such moves, reminiscent of the CCP’s Sinicization of Marxism as Maoism in 1950s-1960s, have served XJP’s campaign of Sinicizing religion for the purpose of ensuring the CCP’s continued supremacy over Chinese religious life. In effect, religion has been contained at a controllable level, and religious institutions tamed into obedience to the party-state’s policies.

If Xi’s Sinicization of religion did not directly arise from his personality cult, it at least inspired by it. Inasmuch as CCP propaganda had consistently relied on nationalism in producing XJP’s personality cult, we can consider Sinicizing religion in doctrine and practice to make it more Chinese as a key component of remaking religious institutions in accord with the CCP’s vision of Chinese society. The party-state’s tolerance of hundreds if not thousands of unregistered folk temples in China further suggests that XJP’s manipulation of religion is consistent with his nationalist policies since he selectively targets religions with foreign origins while being more tolerant of “native” religious traditions. For the party-state, Buddhism, Daoism, and particularly folk religions, seen as more authentically Chinese religions, as compared to Islam and Christianity. Moreover, inasmuch as folk religions have no overarching organizational structure and no central authority to pose challenges to the

CCP, they easily tolerated. Chinese folk practices have prospered as an aspect of traditional Chinese cultural heritage within the otherwise oppressive policies on religion that XJP inherited and perpetuated to the CCPs advantage.

In order for Xi to assert his sole authority over both the CCP and the public at large, he must perforce continue to keep an eye on any potential rivals for authority, including those found in religious doctrine, such as God or the Buddha. By promoting his quotes and the nationalism-tainted Chinese Dream arts as new symbols to display in churches, mosques and temples across China, XJP clearly expresses his strong determination to extend his influence over the great mass of religious communities to make himself in effect a national “god” with absolute authority. With Xi in this deity-like role, religious institutions in China are thus paralyzed, being unable to act on their own and instead playing socio-religious roles in line with Xi’s intentions, as we will discuss in the following section.

III. Religious institutions in China Today

Under the CCP’s Sinicizing policies, which, as implemented, often entail the violent persecution of religions of foreign origin, religious institutions have been co-opted to serve the party-state’s aims. As noted, this has had the side effect of effectively paralyzing these institutions, with the result that they fail to fulfill the religious and social roles the public needs from them. Taking Buddhist institutions as a case study, this section will consider how and to what degree religious institutions paralyzed in China Today.

Buddhists make up the largest religious category hosting more than 100 million believers in China according to its official estimate. The overall number of Chinese religious adherents is very difficult to accurately measure because many believers do not follow the state-organized religions and said to practice Chinese folk religion and follow spiritual practices with underground house churches or banned religious groups. They account for many unregistered adherents. Notwithstanding this situation, Buddhism, in addition to its synthesis in Chinese folk practices, had been tolerated and tactically approved by the party-state, whether under Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao or the incumbent XJP. For Chinese leaders, supporting the growth of Buddhism helped bolster the image of China’s peaceful rise, contributed to the CCP’s goal of creating a “harmonious society” and could help China’s diplomacy with its Buddhist neighbors such as Thailand. With such officially “positive” support, Buddhism has steadily expanded in various forms, even while its institutions have long contaminated by all types of corruption, primarily money misuse and sexual scandals.



Fig. 3: XJP's sculpture worshiped, along with Mao's and Bodhisattva Guanyin

At a Buddhist temple in Jiangsu province, (credited by Zhang Peng from Getty Images).

The whole Buddhist community was shocked to see the CCP's 2017 sack without a trial of the monk Xuecheng from his positions as leader of the China Buddhist Association (hereafter CBA) and standing member of the National Political Advisory Board on Ethnic and Religious Affairs, due to unverified accusations of sexual harassment brought by two of his female disciples. As China's then highest-ranking monk, and rising from humble origins, Xuecheng had revered for his careful disposition, and had long favored by the government for his loyalty prior to the scandals that jeopardized his positions. Rumors suggest that he remains under house confinement at a rural temple in Fujian, his home province. The position he had held in the CBA is still vacant, prompting certain ambitious Buddhist leaders intensely compete for candidacy.

With its head removed by sexual allegations, the semi-governmental CBA, officially established in 1953, has since been without adequate direction to the extent that it has lost the moral authority to impart ethical guidelines for its followers and mobilize sufficient human and material resources for any grand activities as before. Another outcome is that the leaders heading the subordinate Buddhist associations in different provinces and municipalities have increasingly turned to the party-state or local government for consultation and direction. The CCP and its religious regulators have also assumed the role of shoring up the CBA. In the outcome, the low profile that CBA has kept since Xuecheng's dismissal in 2017 indicates this national-level Buddhist institution's reduction in religious authority. In the past two years, the most prominent activity organized in the name of the CBA was the China-installed Panchen Lama's official visit to the Thai Buddhist Sangha in

May 2019. Xuecheng's case illustrates that political winds can quickly shift in China, so maintaining a positive, collaborative relationship with the party-state is important to religious communities and their leaders for survival. To avoid Xuecheng's fate, Buddhist leaders collaborate in state-promoted religious tourism, and are tending to exercise extreme caution in managing temple affairs and organizing religious activities. In the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, Central China since early January 2020, the Buddhist communities, like other religious groups, have wanted to step up to help the people of Wuhan, as in collecting material donations and comforting the impacted with Buddhist teachings. Although religious philanthropy has had a long tradition in Chinese history, none of these Buddhist communities are brave enough to first take a stand without the party-state's assent, according to several informants in this study, who prefer remaining anonymous for their own safety. They are allowed to do is simply to put forward the CCP's propaganda on its decisive and adept handling of the deadly virus, which has continued to spread globally and cause widespread panic. This study surveyed the posts at official WeChat (The tweeter-alike popular social media in China) accounts or websites run by national and provincial associations of China's five registered religions from 10 January to 10 March 2020 as seen below:

Religious Association	Total Number of We-Chat Posts	Number of Posts on Covid-19 Fight	Number of Posts on Donations	Number of CCP Propaganda
China Taoist Association	125	60	35	30
China Buddhist Association	59	38	10	11
China Islamic Association	56	17	35	4
China Catholic Association	50	24	20	6
China Protestant Association	33	14	7	11

Chart 1. Number of We-chat Posts by the National Associations of Five State-Registered Beliefs in China from 10 January to 10 March 2020.

* Among the posts on Covid-19 fight, the CCP, especially XJP's prudent efforts and guidelines to combat the Covid-19 often come prior to what each national association and its subordinate associations had done to implement the party-state's policy to control and prevent the spread of this deadly virus in China.

**The propaganda published by the CCP or its local outlets to demonstrate their efforts to combat the Covid-19 had forwarded by religious associations of different levels.

The figures above tell us that the religious institutions had done virtually little practical to help the infected or impacted in China other than re-posting state or local governments' propaganda and displaying their loyal implementation of CCP's decrees on Covid-19 fight. However, the situation had shifted after Xi and other top CCP officials symbolically donated their personal funds to fight the virus on 27 February 2020. The religious communities called at that time to make "voluntary" contributions towards this nationwide effort. However, informants reported that when, where, and how much each institution was to donate directed by the government. It has become apparent, then, that religious institutions in China have sufficiently tamed to stay in line with the party-state's policies from fear of being prosecuting. They look to XJP, the most powerful "god" of new China, for "right" direction on which to act, thereby sacrificing the role expected of them among the public. They are paralyzed and exist primarily for servicing the CCP.

IV. Conclusion

When XJP took office at the top of the CCP in 2012, he was far from being the undisputed leader that the world would later see. He faced enormous opposition from his political rivals and lacked a power base among the public as well. Taking Mao as a model of heroic success and power, XJP set about to orchestrate a personality cult centered on himself to win broader popular support. He enhanced that with a sweeping anti-corruption campaign from early 2013 onwards to consolidate the power within the CCP. With his rivals removed through corruption-charges and his personality cult spreading throughout China, he had eventually centralized all the power in himself, becoming leader of China with a level of absolute authority not seen since Mao. XJP's personality thus became an integral feature of Chinese nationalism, which he deliberately abetted among the public, thereby promulgating a new era of Sinicized religion in China from 2015 up to today. As this movement pervaded deeper and wider within China, both Islam and Christianity, being ostensibly of foreign origin and having a grid organizational structure, have therefore encountered ongoing heavy-handed suppression. A large number of mosques were demolished in Xinjiang, and other Muslim-associated places in Northwestern China, such as heritage mosques, were order to fly the national flag and hang Xi's quotes or CCP propaganda banners. Meanwhile, Christian churches were force to replace the Ten Commandments with Xi's quotes or passages from the Chinese Dream, Xi's signature vision for a new era in which the Chinese nation will regain former greatness. Further,

following from the notorious re-educational camps in Xinjiang, where more than 100 Uyghur Muslims have been detained for political indoctrination, all of XJP's moves have served to assure the CCP's supremacy over religion. XJP now sits at the pinnacle of this system as a new, all-powerful national god.

Like his two predecessors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao did, XJP tolerates and selectively supports Buddhism, Daoism, and Chinese folk religions, which are regarded as authentic Chinese beliefs that are helpful to the party-state's social, economic and diplomatic endeavors. Thanks to XJP's consistent predilection for Chinese nationalism, Buddhism and Chinese folk religions have thus enjoyed a steady expansion in recent years. Nevertheless, they remain subdued in line with the party-state's policy of enforcing loyalty, and they typically look to the XJP-led CCP for direction. This has particularly been true for Buddhism, which has the largest following in China.

Buddhist communities in China were shocked at seeing the party-state's sack of their leader Xuecheng, without a trial, based on an unverified sexual scandal in September 2017. Yet, out of fear of being prosecuted, Buddhist leaders of various levels follow an ethic of extreme caution and hence become very hesitant about fulfilling the normal socio-religious roles that the public expects of them. Their unproductive response in China's ongoing coronavirus challenge suggests that Chinese Buddhist institutions have indeed become paralyzed, as their only real work in the sphere of religion is to serve the CCP. Given this premise, true faith in Buddhism within China currently seems destined to decline despite its superficial physical expansion in the form of building more temples. As a result, more and more believers will turn to Chinese folk religions, including even unregistered house churches, for spiritual blessing or worldly gains.

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