

# “Unless the grain dies”: Unregistered Churches in China

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## Introduction

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), individual religious faith comes under the jurisdiction of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department (UFWD), under whose auspices umbrella organizations represent the officially recognized religions. Protestantism is represented by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (三自愛國運動, TSPM), a committee founded in the 1950s after the PRC's participation in the Korean War by Chinese Protestant leaders to remove foreign influences, especially American, from their churches. Catholicism, in turn, is overseen by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (中國天主教愛國會, CCPA), which performs a parallel role in structuring state control over Catholic life.

Together, these semi-governmental associations have emerged as the principal institutional channels through which authorities in Beijing seek to manage Protestant and Catholic communities in China. Churches and congregations that operate without registering or being recognized by these state institutions are, by definition of falling outside of official jurisdiction, “unregistered churches” (未註冊教會).<sup>1</sup> These churches' very refusal to integrate into state control marks them as structurally non-compliant, placing them in a legal gray zone: at best tolerated, sometimes pressured or disrupted, most of the time under surveillance.

Within this system, the Beijing Zion Church has become one of the most prominent and heavily targeted urban house churches in contemporary China. Founded in 2007 by Pastor Jin (Ezra) Mingri, Zion Church drew heavily from the ranks of urban professionals and university-educated believers, cultivating a sizable congregation and a network of affiliated fellowships across multiple cities.<sup>2</sup>

For over a decade, the Zion Church pursued a “public but unregistered” model: renting out commercial spaces, holding large Sunday services, and engaging in social ministries while refusing to join the TSPM or submit to the full suite of patriotic-religious controls. This strategy allowed the church to operate with relative openness until 2018, when a cluster of regulations consolidated the state's formal authority over Christian activity: the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA). A national crackdown on unregistered churches resulted in the shutting down of its main sanctuary in Beijing, its clergy under restrictions,

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<sup>1</sup> House churches, underground churches and “Christian villages” are used to describe various forms of underground churches in China. Typically, house or family churches are used to describe those of Protestant denominations, and underground for that of Catholics. For the sake of brevity, this research will use the term “unregistered church” when describing non-officially registered churches in China.

<sup>2</sup> Evan Osnos, “FRONTLINE/World: Jesus in China,” *PBS*, 2008, [https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china\\_705/interview/extended.html](https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/china_705/interview/extended.html) (accessed November 24, 2025).

and its institutional infrastructure fractured. In the years that followed, the Zion Church adapted by decentralizing its physical gatherings and making extensive use of digital tools: video conferencing, online prayer meetings, and dispersed small groups. In doing so, the Zion Church has come to embody a new phase of China's unregistered church movement, shaped by post-COVID, digital forms of worship and congregation.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores contemporary religious control in China through the lens of the recent crackdown on the Beijing Zion Church. This research paper draws on interviews with both pastors and lay members of unregistered churches in China, individuals who personally experienced the crackdowns, as well as those with ties to actors exercising religious control and doling out crackdowns on behalf of the Chinese government.

We explore the following questions:

- How is the notion of the “unregistered church” constructed, contested, and applied in China?
- What conditions do unregistered churches currently face, and how do their leaders and members theologically interpret and respond to intensifying repression?
- How are high-level legal and policy frameworks on religion (2018–2025) translated into concrete administrative and coercive measures at the local level in dealings with unregistered churches?
- How do frontline civil servants and grassroots bureaucrats understand, negotiate, and implement these religious policies, and how do their perceptions and incentives shape the everyday governance of religion in contemporary China?

The story of the Beijing Zion Church, and indeed, many other unregistered churches, is not only a story of the faithful persevering through oppression. It is one which hope and faith are challenged and in turn, given meaning to, by suffering and sacrifices. It is the “last of human freedom” described by Victor Frankl<sup>3</sup>: one that denies the pain and fear from becoming controlled.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach based on documentary analysis combined with in-depth interviews. Its primary aim is not to produce a statistically

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<sup>3</sup> “The last of human freedoms: to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers, which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you become the plaything to circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity...” Victor Frankl, “Man’s Search For Ultimate Meaning,” 2006, p. 6.

representative account of unregistered Christianity in China, but to reconstruct how religious control is experienced, interpreted, and enacted by different actors. It thereby uses the crackdown on the Beijing Zion Church as a case study to illuminate broader dynamics of state–church relations in China.

Conducting research on religion in the PRC has long involved negotiating bureaucratic hurdles and political sensitivities, but the period since 2018, with the announcement of the RRA, and especially 2020–2025, has been marked by a measurable tightening of restrictions. While the ongoing clampdown is rarely enforced upon researchers and scholars in the field, the same cannot be said for research participants.<sup>4</sup> This one-sided risk was perhaps most pronounced when one of the planned participants was arrested, days before a scheduled interview, as part of the 2025 Beijing Zion Church crackdown. Regulatory changes, including new measures on online religious activity and information control, have also significantly increased the risks associated with discussing unregistered religious life with foreign researchers.

These developments directly shape the knowledge produced in this paper. Researcher access to physical field sites associated with Beijing Zion Church and other unregistered churches has been impossible since 2018. Lay members within China can only be reached through intermediaries, and even then, infrequently. Officials and frontline bureaucrats involved in religious management are, for the most part, unreachable through formal channels, and those who did agree to speak to Religioscope did so on the explicit condition of strict anonymity and the avoidance of sensitive institutional identifiers.

In response to these constraints, the research in this paper relies on a combination of interviews with a Zion Church pastor who is currently outside mainland China and maintains relatively safer communication channels; conversations with individuals familiar with frontline religious management, including local officials, neighborhood-level actors, and intermediaries who previously worked with religious affairs bureaus or United Front offices. All spoke from outside China and after leaving their posts, a context that shaped both what they were willing to disclose and how they reflected on their past actions. The research also draws on documentary materials, including sermons, pastoral letters, social media posts, church notices, eviction letters, legal documents, photographs, and media

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<sup>4</sup> For a survey of scholars reporting the research climate in 2018 China, see Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex. “Repressive Experiences among China Scholars: New Evidence from Survey Data.” *The China Quarterly* 242 (June 2020): 349–375. While only 9% of China scholars report having been “taken for tea” by authorities within the past ten years, in a follow-up study, they noted that “a Western affiliation can make would-be informants decline an interview, and even the interviews that can take place are more muted than they would have been a decade ago.” See Rory Truex. “Researching China in Hard Times.” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57, no. 1, (2024): 146–48.

reports. In the specific case of the Beijing Zion Church, open-source materials (such as news coverage, NGO reports, and court records where accessible) are combined with letters and photographs shared by participants and published with their consent.

These adaptive strategies reflect practical limitations. Following Alpermann's argument that, under tightening authoritarian control, researchers have a responsibility to avoid exposing interlocutors to heightened risk,<sup>5</sup> this study refrains from in-country fieldwork with unregistered believers and current officials and instead privileges diasporic and retrospective perspectives. This inevitably creates a "diasporic" shift in tone and material and will be addressed in later sections.

Given the heightened risks posed to interviewees, the study adopts a deliberately cautious ethical stance. All participants are anonymized unless they are already publicly identifiable figures. Identifying details are altered or omitted where necessary to protect individuals and small communities. In line with Alpermann's argument that formal "procedural ethics" cannot substitute for an ongoing, context-sensitive assessment of harm in authoritarian settings,<sup>6</sup> this research project privileges the safety of interlocutors over the pursuit of ideal-type data and accepts the resulting limitations on access and detail.

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<sup>5</sup> Björn Alpermann, "Ethics in Social Science Research on China," *Made in China Journal*, June 27, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



*Haidan Christian Church in Beijing, one of the largest churches operated by the TSPM in the capital. Of note is the red billboard on the right, touting the twelve core principles of socialism in China. Source: Wikimedia.*

Since the 1950s, Protestant and Catholic life in the People’s Republic of China has been channelled through two key state associations. Protestants are represented by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and its partner, the China Christian Council (CCC); Catholics by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). Founded to promote “self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation” and to sever organizational and financial ties with foreign missions, these bodies have become the primary institutional interface between the Party-state and “normal” religious activity. Structurally embedded in the United Front system, they are expected both to transmit Party directives downward and to channel information and loyalty upward, thereby transforming (or, as some might describe, “sinicizing”) Christianity into a manageable, patriotic and politically harmless social force.<sup>7</sup>

Legal recognition for Protestant congregations normally requires affiliation with the TSPM/CCPA and registration of venues for religious activities under the Regulations on

<sup>7</sup> Elena Vishnevskaya, “The People’s Republic of China and Christianity: A Brief Introduction,” *Education About Asia* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2022), <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Vishnevskaya-Winter-2022.pdf>. Also, article 2 of Measures for the Administration of Religious Venues (宗教活动场所管理办法), a state legislation, dictates that: “Religious venues shall uphold the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the socialist system, thoroughly implement Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, rules, and the provisions on the administration of religious affairs, practice core socialist values, uphold the principle of developing religions in the Chinese context, adhere to the principle of maintaining independence, self-reliance, and self-governance, and safeguard national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony, and social stability.”

Religious Affairs. This involves demonstrating a stable congregation and fixed site, accepting supervision by local religious affairs bureaus and patriotic-church authorities, and having clergy recognized as “religious personnel,” typically through training in state-approved seminaries where ideological education in sinicization and socialist values is mandatory.<sup>8</sup>

For Catholics, the CCPA and the state-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Bishops’ Conference (中國天主教主教團) historically claimed the right to recommend and ordain priests and bishops, often without a papal mandate, producing the well-known split between “open” CCPA-aligned clergy and “unregistered” clergy ordained with papal approval but without state consent.<sup>9</sup> In principle, unregistered congregations or clergy can regularize their status by joining the patriotic associations and registering their venues; in practice, this process is selective and political, favoring leaders deemed ideologically reliable or willing to compromise.<sup>10</sup>

No other denominations are officially recognized in China under this structure, with the exception of the Chinese Orthodox Church<sup>11</sup> and organizations like the Beijing International Church Fellowship (BICF) and International Church of Shanghai (ICS), which are only open to foreign Christians. In an interview with a Hong Kong Christian that frequently traveled to Beijing for work, the interviewee recounted an incident when police officers showed up during a congregation in BICF and checked everyone for identification. Those who had Chinese citizenship were taken away, and the church was closed for two weeks. Since then,

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<sup>8</sup> Peitong Jing and Karrie J. Koesel, “Church and State in Contemporary China: Securing Christianity,” *Politics and Religion* 17, no. 1 (2024): 1–31.

<sup>9</sup> Since the papacy of John Paul II, the Holy See has pursued reconciliation between the CCPA and underground Catholics who refuse to recognize the organization. The CCPA is in conflict with the Vatican over the appointment of bishops without the approval of the Holy See. In 2018, both sides reached an agreement: Pope Francis stated that “Chinese Catholics joining the CCPA should not be seen as disloyal to the Vatican” and recognized all bishops appointed by the CCPA and revoked their previous de facto excommunication, and the CCPA canceled a planned ordination of candidates not approved by the Holy See. However, breaches of the agreement occur.

<sup>10</sup> On the process for registration with CCPA can be affected by allegiance to the Vatican, please refer to “Religious Policies in Post-Totalitarian China: Maintaining Political Monopoly over a Reviving Society,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2006): 55–77.

<sup>11</sup> At present, there are only three communities in Mainland China with regular weekly services and resident clergy. The Beijing community meets at the restored Church of the Dormition in the grounds of the Russian Embassy in Dongzhimen; the Shanghai community at the Russian Consulate; and the Church of the Intercession, Harbin, is the only one open to Chinese nationals for regular worship. It is worth noting that the orthodox church in China is largely supported by the Russian government, with little enthusiasm reciprocated by their Chinese counterparts. See Dmitry Ushakov and Drozdova (2025) for further details.

staff members have checked with renewed vigor the passports of individuals wanting to enter the church premises.

On the basis of this architecture, official Chinese figures put the registered Christian population at around 44 million in 2018, including roughly 38 million Protestants in TSPM/CCC churches and about 6 million Catholics in CCPA structures, worshipping in some 60,000 approved Protestant venues and over 6,000 registered Catholic churches and chapels.<sup>12</sup>



*The Early Rain Covenant Church, one of the most politically outspoken unregistered churches in China, continued worship outdoors on the 18th of December, 2018, after their main site was closed down. After the service ended, more were detained. Source: Taiwan Church News Network.*

These numbers, however, only capture communities that accept state oversight; they exclude a vast, diverse landscape of unregistered congregations. Synthesizing academic and NGO sources, a 2020 World Religion Database report suggests that there are about 95.9 million Christians in China, accounting for 7% of the country's population; the total number of Christians, registered and unregistered, likely falls somewhere between 60 and

<sup>12</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief: A White Paper* (中国保障宗教信仰自由的政策和实践白皮书) (Beijing, 2018), <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/37884/Document/1626520/1626520.htm>.

100 million, with tens of millions, often estimated in the 40–80 million range, worshipping specifically in house churches and unregistered Catholic communities.<sup>13</sup>

### Three Models of Unregistered Churches

The concept of an “unregistered church” can only be understood in contrast to the state apparatus that “monopolizes” the legality of churches. Rather than being in direct defiance of authority, it is perhaps more apt to understand them as existing in the vacuum of authority. From rural villages, living rooms of private households to shiny offices, spaces and people where the state’s reach fades are where unregistered churches blossom. From the 1980s through the early 2010s, these communities expanded rapidly under conditions of partial tolerance and fragmented enforcement, producing the densely populated unregistered Christian landscape within which high-profile congregations such as Shouwang, Early Rain, Living Stone, and Zion emerged.

Moreover, the post-Mao revival of Christianity in China produced not a single “unregistered church” form, but a spectrum of organizational models shaped by region, class, and historical timing. For analytical purposes, this section distinguishes three models of unregistered churches: rural family churches, older urban house churches, and Zion-style city congregations. All three share a refusal to enter the TSPM/CCPA framework and an insistence on independent leadership, but they embody different ways of being “unregistered.”

#### The First Model

Rural family churches emerged most visibly in the 1980s and 1990s in agrarian villages and townships, often as outgrowths of pre-1949 revivalist movements or local networks that had survived the Mao years in semi-clandestine form. Typically meeting in farmhouses, village courtyards, or simple sheds, these churches rely on lay preachers with limited formal education and attract congregations skewed towards older women and the rural poor. Larger settlements that formed around the Christian faith are sometimes referred to as Christian villages.<sup>14</sup> Their ministries combine healing, moral exhortation, and mutual aid,

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<sup>13</sup> For an estimation of the number of Christians in China and statistical hoops researchers had to jump through in order to arrive at that number, please refer to Conrad Hackett and Yunping Tong, “The Growth of Christianity in China May Have Come to an End,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 11 (January 2025).

<sup>14</sup> Eriberto P. Lozada, *God Aboveground: Catholic Church, Postsocialist State, and Transnational Processes in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001). Michel Chambon, *Making Christ Present in China: Actor-Network Theory and the Anthropology of Christianity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). Both ethnographies of Christian villages in China were conducted before the recent wave of crackdowns in 2018. The rurality and underground nature of these congregations mean that members are

effectively filling a void in intangible social care left by the collapse of collective welfare. In many such communities, the house church functions not only as a religious fellowship but also as a primary provider of emotional support, informal counseling, and crisis assistance for elderly villagers and “left-behind” family members.<sup>15</sup> Over time, due to economic or political pressure, or even human trafficking, some of these groups migrated towards urban settings, both within China and overseas,<sup>16</sup> linked to larger itinerant-preacher networks.<sup>17</sup>



*A sermon in an urban house church in Beijing, 2025. Source: China Aid.*

unlikely to have a digital or official presence, as noted in Xu’s 2018 study of an anonymous Christian village in Haikou.

<sup>15</sup> Karrie J. Koesel, “The Rise of a Chinese House Church: The Organizational Weapon,” *The China Quarterly* 215 (September 2013): 575–577.

<sup>16</sup> See Alice Yeh, “Holy Landings: Catholic Politics and Mobilities in Transnational China” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2022), for further research on the transnational networks built by migrant rural pastors from China in Midtown, New York, [https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/4764/files/Yeh\\_uchicago\\_0330D\\_16435.pdf](https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/4764/files/Yeh_uchicago_0330D_16435.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting, though a full treatment of this subject lies beyond the scope of this paper, that many unregistered churches are linked to wider networks that function almost like “franchises” or loose federations. The Fangcheng Fellowship, founded by Li Tian’en (李天恩) in the early 1970s, is widely regarded as one of the largest such house-church networks, based in Henan Province with an estimated membership of several million across China. The Tanghe Fellowship, also known as the Chinese Gospel Fellowship, established by Feng Jianguo (馮建國) in the 1980s, is usually identified as the second-largest network, likewise centered on Henan and explicitly describing itself as a loose fellowship drawing on diverse Christian traditions. Both fellowships have been strongly shaped by Pentecostal-style worship and prayer, influenced from the late 1980s onward by Dennis Balcombe, pastor of the independent Pentecostal Christian Revival Church in Kowloon, Hong Kong.

## The Second Model

Unregistered churches and urban house churches represent an adaptation of this family-church ethos to city environments. True to the “house church” label, such congregations are conducted in someone’s (usually the pastor’s) own private dormitory and typically number between ten and twenty regular participants. Services include Bible study, prayer, and simple worship without formal liturgy or visible religious symbols.<sup>18</sup> These urban house churches maintain the low profile of family churches: minimal signage, shifting venues, and avoidance of media. New members are often recruited based on referrals and, like most other congregations, church life becomes the center of their social life, even as the lack of clear institutional boundaries leaves them vulnerable to internal conflicts and the overreach of charismatic leaders.

One of our interview participants, Stacy, who hailed from a family of house church pastors in Shanghai from 1990 to 2008, recounted her childhood:

Our church, well, my home, was really very casual. Any sense of “sacredness” you had to picture for yourself; you didn’t feel like you were entering some holy space. It was just a very domestic environment—people sitting on the sofa, we’d buy lots of little stools, and everyone would be crammed together in the living room. When I was studying for Gaokao<sup>19</sup> and didn’t have the time for church activities, I could hear people saying, “Oh, the pastor’s daughter doesn’t even join us today?” through my bedroom walls.

## The Third Model

Dubbed “new urban churches” (新興城市家庭教會), that model is made up of large, professionalized urban churches that are still unregistered to the state system but operate in public. These new churches usually occupy freshly renovated commercial leases and lean towards young professionals and university students for recruits.<sup>20</sup> Their sense of modernity often does not stop in appearance, but also in governance and organizational skills, with transparent finances, corporatizations and different outreach branches. At a

<sup>18</sup> For a first-hand comparison of worship, theology and fellowship activities between TSPM and unregistered house churches, please refer to Luke Wesley, “The Future of the Church in China: Why China’s House Churches Will Prevail,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* (August 2022), <https://aptspress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AJPS-25.2-Luke-Wesley.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> The National College Entrance Examination, commonly abbreviated as the Gaokao (高考), is the annual nationally coordinated undergraduate admission exam in China. It was well known for both its difficulty and importance to a student’s future.

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth analysis of a new church targeting university students in Guangzhou, please refer to Xiaochen Yu and Wei Tao, “Place Attachment in Urban Unofficially Sacred Sites: A Case Study of the MT Youth House Church in Guangzhou (都市非正式神圣场所中的地方依恋——广州青年家庭教会 MT 小家案例).” *Tropical Geography* 37, no. 1 (2017): 91–101.

glance, they are no different to the modern East-Asian churches one may see in Hong Kong or Taiwan, with their openness to the public and connection to secular society. This new form of unregistered church has been heralded as one of the biggest developments for Christianity in China in recent decades, to the extent that some TSPM/CCPA churches have even been adapting their model of church governance to align with these newer institutions.<sup>21</sup>

The Beijing Zion Church is almost a textbook case for this model. Founded in 2007 by Pastor Jin (Ezra) Mingri, who, like Stacy's father, received training from TSPM and later broke off ties with the organization, Zion grew from a small office fellowship into a multi-service congregation that rented an entire floor of a commercial building, converting a former nightclub into a 500-seat worship hall. In an interview with a pastor of the Beijing Zion Church, Sean, he recalled how the congregation grew in size:

At the beginning there were just two families, fewer than twenty people, meeting in a tiny office. But within just ten years, the church grew rapidly. Our meeting space expanded from that small office to a large conference room, then two conference rooms knocked together, and then we moved from the fifth floor of the office building down to the third floor and rented out the entire third floor. That whole third floor had originally been a nightclub... we completely renovated what had been the nightclub, making it very spacious and bright, and turned it into a place of worship. Off the entrance hall, there was even a café, a kind of café-bookstore. White-collar workers from nearby offices in the same building or in the surrounding community could come over on their breaks, at lunchtime, to have a coffee at a very low price and read our literature. Non-Christians also had the chance, through this space, to come into contact with the faith.

What distinguishes new churches is not only scale and style, but an explicit commitment to visibility: Zion's leaders deliberately refused not only TSPM incorporation, but also the traditional underground instinct to keep a low profile. Instead, they sought to inhabit the city as an open yet unregistered church, arguing that the church's calling was public witness, not clandestine survival. While Sean is optimistic that this openness would be a "third alternative" for Christians in China, it also places them in a different risk category from rural churches or living-room congregations.

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<sup>21</sup> *Gospel Herald*, "Pastor Liu Tongsu: The Rise of New Urban House Churches Is a Significant Change in the Past Decade" (劉同蘇牧師：新興城市家庭教會崛起是近十年顯著變化), *Gospelherald.com.hk*, 2025, <https://www.gospelherald.com.hk/news/37wsskdbwxf0>.



*A Sunday worship in Beijing Zion Church before its closure in 2018. Source: Beijing Zion Church.*

While all three models occupy legal gray zones, rural and older urban house churches can often remain beneath the enforcement radar, or negotiate local tolerance, so long as they stay small and neighborhood-based. New churches, by contrast, stand out physically and digitally, and thus more readily trigger the Party-state's concern with scale, visibility, and independent organizations.

These three models, then, are not mutually exclusive types but points along a continuum. In many cities, they coexist and bleed into one another: rural migrants carry family-church habits into urban house churches, while crackdowns on large new churches often push believers back into smaller, living-room-style gatherings that resemble older family churches. This dynamic is important in order to understand the logic of Christian repression in China and will be expanded upon later.

## **Pathways Into Unregistered Christian Communities**

Why do people take the risk of joining unregistered churches when legal, visible TSPM churches exist? Our interviews suggest that this choice is driven less by considerations of convenience or aesthetics than by questions of authority, the forms of spiritual life deemed possible, and the type of community believers seek to inhabit.

First, recurring motive concerns authority and ecclesiology. Stacy, the daughter of a former underground pastor, describes her father's path as a gradual disillusionment within the TSPM. Identified as "talent" in an official congregation, he was encouraged towards

seminary and higher positions, but the deeper he went, the more he felt he had entered a “power game” rather than a spiritual vocation: meetings revolved around pleasing superiors, negotiating with local officials, aligning with political expectations, and “decisions about ministry were shaped less by Scripture than by Party considerations.” At a certain point, she recalls, “He concluded he could not stay there long,” left the official structure, and began hosting a small congregation in their living room instead. Her father starting an unregistered church was not an act of defiance for its own sake, but the only way he saw serving God without being folded into a political apparatus he no longer trusted.

Unlike Stacy, who was born into a Christian family, Sean had a choice, and his road to conversion is quite interesting:

I am from a family of bureaucrats and officials, privileged in every sense of the word. Due to this upbringing, I saw religion as superstition, opium to the people, as Marx said. When I was studying at university in Beijing, I first heard the gospel through a foreign English teacher and decided to go to church, not as someone seeking God, but as someone who wanted to argue with Christians.

At first I treated Christianity like Buddhism, Islam, and Falun Gong, just one more religion. Later I came to believe in Jesus because I realized this is not just a religion; it is a real faith. There is a qualitative difference between *faith* and *religion*. In the Christian faith, in the holy scripture, I found the ultimate truth and the meaning and value of life. During that time I got closer and closer to the Bible, and I also had zero-distance contact with Christians. Emotionally and experientially, this was a huge shock, because before going to church, I thought they were just like people burning incense at temples, only going to God to get benefits, a kind of transactional, mutually exploitative relationship. But I discovered it wasn't like that. They had a very sincere faith, not counting the cost, and the joy, peace, and character they showed were things I had never experienced in school, in society, or even in my own family.

When I debated them in their church, my attitude was definitely very confrontational. I said many things that were even insulting and even blasphemous against God. When I think back on it now, I find it completely unacceptable. But even when I was in that very hostile state, the Christians accepted me and served me without counting the cost.<sup>22</sup>

This distinction between faith and religion is a fundamental factor in understanding his decision not to join the TSPM system: “I don't regard the Three-Self church as a biblically faithful church. Scripture is very clear that the only head of the church is Jesus Christ...that head can only be one; the only head is Jesus Christ. You can't add anything else.” In his view, “In the Three-Self-church, it's really the authorities who have the final say, not Christ. So, at the most basic level, I don't think that is in accordance with the Bible.” For him, the state

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<sup>22</sup> When asked whether he remembers what “blasphemy” he had spoken at the time, he said, “I speak not evil now. [sic]”

churches entered a transactional relationship with the government, trading piety for official sanctions.



*A group representing the CCPA of Wuhu City, Anhui, attending an exchange activity in Nanjing and Wuxi, the red banner reads: "Patriotism and religious devotion go hand in hand, writing a new chapter on the path of sinicization." Source: Catholic Church in China.*

This sentiment is widely shared by adherents of unregistered churches. In a study of Chinese Christians in Fujian, an unregistered church priest was demanded by local officials to "be a good citizen and follow the law," to which his reply was:

There are two ways to follow the law. We do not deny the principle of law in society. But we are also Catholics. If the law of society conflicts with our faith and our conscience, we are obliged to obey the law passively. If the government disagrees, they can arrest us. We will take it.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Shun-hing Chan, "Changing Church and State Relations in Contemporary China: The Case of Mindong Diocese, Fujian Province," *The China Quarterly* 212 (November 2012): 993.

What does following the law mean? Frank, a Chinese Christian who converted to Catholicism while studying abroad, shared their shock when they returned to China and attended their first sermon in a CCPA church:

I expected the Chinese church would be somewhat different to the ones I attended in Europe. They were mostly liberal and reform-minded, after all. Even still, I was shocked. I was not expecting a 30-minute-long rant against gays and lesbians during the sermon. The pastor did not even base it upon any biblical verse; he made the argument based on “reversing the demographic effects of the one-child policy.” It felt like a political education class rather than a sermon.

Granted, this is a single experience, but others in the field also noted the trend of sinicizing Catholicism and Protestantism has taken on high gear ever since 2018.<sup>24</sup> This form of “sinicization” goes beyond localization, heading straight into the territory of creating patriotic Christians.<sup>25</sup> This effort has seen some success, but it cannot be assessed in isolation, or merely by counting how many patriotic Christians it creates; it must be understood together with the broader toolkit of legal, administrative, and coercive measures that structure religious control in the PRC.

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<sup>24</sup> Xiaoxuan Wang, “Standardization, Bureaucratization, and Convergence: The Transformation of Governance of Religion in Urbanizing China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 3 (2021): 627.

<sup>25</sup> In academic discussions, the sinicization of Christianity can refer either to the translation and acculturation of Christian belief and practice within Chinese culture and society (for example, studies of Christian and missionary activity in eighteenth-century China), or—an increasingly dominant usage—to the subsumption of Christianity into a state-defined mainstream ideology. See Simon Chow, “The Sinicization of Christianity in Mainland China,” *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 43 (November 2025), for a brief overview, and Nanlai Cao, “Elite Christianity and Spiritual Nationalism,” *Chinese Sociological Review* 45, no. 2 (2012): 27–47, for a case study of Wenzhou, where hundreds of unregistered church sites were demolished and a cadre of TSPM/CCPA-ordained clergy was installed.

In his book *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Lipsky argues that frontline workers, such as police officers, teachers, social workers, and immigration officers, have high discretion and chronic resource constraints, i.e., too many cases, too little time, unclear or conflicting rules. To cope, they develop informal routines: shortcuts, “rules of thumb,” and ways of categorizing clients (who is “cooperative,” who is a “troublemaker,” what can be safely ignored).<sup>26</sup> These coping practices effectively reshape policy on the ground. What the law says is one thing; what citizens actually experience depends on how street-level bureaucrats choose to interpret, soften, ignore, or strictly enforce it. In Lipsky’s famous formulation, they are “de facto policymakers,” because their day-to-day decisions collectively determine who gets services, who gets punished, and how rules really work.

In China, religious control at the street-level is carried out by a layered bureaucracy in which 1) neighborhood committees function as local spotters, 2) the police are responsible for enforcement, and 3) municipal governments issue planning permits for religious sites while also acting as intermediaries between higher-level authorities and local administrative apparatus when intervention is required. Together, they translate China’s religious regulations into practice through selective enforcement, negotiated “rectification,” and quiet toleration, essentially, turning abstract control into a lived reality for unregistered churches. Instead of having a central government agency that fields its agents, the main burden of religious control falls upon the shoulders of local police officers and planning clerks, roles that many hardly associate with religious matters. This is because, in China, religion is a technocratic matter.

The state defines what is “religion” and what is “superstitious,” and this top-down definition carries legal weight. Unregistered churches, by virtue of not being government-affiliated, are handled under the portfolio of “cult management” and governed through an institutional logic developed for “evil cults” (xie jiao 邪教) and threats to stability.<sup>27</sup> Most Protestant house churches are not formally designated as xie jiao, and they rarely appear on the official cult lists. But because they are unregistered and exist outside the state-mandated system, they are often managed with the same toolkit and institutions developed for cult work.

Since 2018, a cluster of regulations has consolidated the state’s formal authority over Christian activity: the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA), the Measures for the

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> The definition of “evil cults” has been arbitrary in Chinese criminal law, see (Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience (CAPLC) et al.) for a case study on how the criminal law prescribed towards “cults” had been prescribed against the Church of Almighty God.

Administration of Internet Religious Information Services<sup>28</sup>, and the Administrative Measures for Religious Activity Venues<sup>29</sup>. Together they articulate a simple but consequential template: lawful religious life is to be conducted by registered organizations, at approved sites, under certified personnel, both offline and online; unregistered congregations and improvised venues are structurally outside the legal order, and thus, may be subjected to persecution.

Rather than a coherent “legal regime,” these texts are better read as part of what Wang (2021) calls the standardization and bureaucratization of religious governance in an urbanizing, data-saturated China. Regulations define religious venues as discrete, registrable units (*dan wei* 单位) with land titles, bank accounts, social credit codes, and digital files; they mandate financial transparency, CCTV coverage, and integration into grid-management systems. In essence, this approach reframes the problem of religious freedom into technocratic regulations that are expected to be followed.

Within this framework, clauses on “illegal venues,” “unauthorized online religious information,” or “aiding illegal religious activities” function as a toolbox rather than a rigid script. They give local officials multiple handles with which to classify a house church as an “illegal religious site,” an “unlicensed online religious information provider,” or an “illegal organization” engaged in “fraud” or “cult-like” activities, depending on what is administratively convenient or politically required at a given moment. Law and regulations thus provide the repertoire of possible charges, while policy in practice is produced where that repertoire meets the constraints and incentives of street-level bureaucracy.

The above paints a rough sketch of the “who” and “how” of religious control in China, but what motivates the “street-level bureaucracy” to take on unregistered churches?

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<sup>28</sup> National Religious Affairs Administration, Cyberspace Administration of China, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, Ministry of State Security, and Ministry of Public Security, *Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services* (互联网宗教信息服务管理办法), vol. 17, art. 6 (2021), <https://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=39108&lib=law>.

<sup>29</sup> National Religious Affairs Administration, *Measures for the Administration of Religious Venues* (宗教活动场所管理办法), vol. 19, art. 3 (2023), <https://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=41703&lib=law>.



*Before the demolition of Liangwang Catholic Church in 2018, church members hung a banner saying, “We support national development but strongly protest the demolition. Citizens can have faith, residents can have hope and the country can have power.” Source: UCA News.*

## Performance Targets and Everyday Discretion

As Lipsky highlights, local authorities’ priorities are shaped by two forces: performance evaluation and resource constraints.<sup>30</sup> Every police station faces a long list of tasks: petty crimes of all manner, calls from the public, and a log of ongoing investigations. According to an interviewee privy to matters of civil services, officers choose what to prioritize based on two questions: (1) does it generate direct fiscal income through fines, funds and goods that can feed back into their own operating budget, and (2) is it linked to a performance indicator handed down by more senior authorities? According to one interviewee, cracking down on a harmless family church “brings no money” and yields little performance credit, and therefore usually sinks to the bottom of the list.

“Raiding churches is a rather thankless task. We seldom get service merits<sup>31</sup> from those missions, nor were there many assets to be seized. Unlike other cults, they usually don’t

<sup>30</sup> Lipsky, 2010, pp. 33, 49.

<sup>31</sup> Merits (功) are a crucial part of the civil service in China. Awarded as a token of recognition for bravery, integrity or completion of a major mission, merits grant tangible rewards like extra salary and additional privileges, as well as a key benchmark for promotions. See Podger and Chan, 2015, for a general literature review on how the merit system is implemented in China.

have much cash or luxury items to be added into our annual budget,” a former Chinese police officer told Religioscope during an interview.

In routine times, governance is fragmented and negotiated: street-level actors quietly bracket off low-risk religious activities in order to cope with more urgent tasks. If a local family church is “basically harmless” and has never caused trouble, the officer in charge often prefers to know where it meets, what it is doing, and be confident it is “safe,” rather than shut it down and face the fallout.

“Unregistered churches are communal in nature, and we as the police often rely on this communal network to facilitate our work, may it be an ongoing investigation or as a thermometer on local sentiments,” a former police official told Religioscope. Local officers largely prefer meeting unregistered church leaders in person to keep tabs on the situation and give informal warnings when necessary. A scholar researching unregistered churches in China for decades recounted in an interview with Religioscope that relationships between officers and pastors are often cordial, even confiding that operations against churches were not popular among the ranks, as they mostly take place on a Sunday morning, robbing them of an entire weekend. Managing churches via proxies and through informal meetings is, therefore, the path of least resistance to many street-level bureaucrats. It gives ground for further escalation if their “advice” is not heeded and lowers the risk of triggering protests and public sentiment by compartmentalizing church leaders from other members.

This configuration maps closely with Zhou’s notion of “routine governance and campaign-style governance.”<sup>32</sup> He distinguishes between “routine governance” and “campaign-style governance” in China to explain how the state actually rules. Routine governance is everyday administration: fragmented, under-resourced, and reliant on local discretion, with many rules only loosely enforced. Campaign-style governance, by contrast, is episodic and highly mobilized: higher authorities launch “special rectification” drives, set hard numerical targets, and concentrate personnel and resources for short bursts of intense enforcement. Campaigns temporarily override normal bureaucratic constraints and signal political priorities, but they are costly and unsustainable, so the system repeatedly falls back into routine, producing the characteristic rhythm of long gray zones punctuated by sudden crackdowns.

In many ways, unregistered churches are “managed” by the police like unlicensed vendors. It is impossible to arrest all of them and instead of eradication, they are monitored, managed, and carefully separated from “normal society,” and their illegality is tolerated

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<sup>32</sup> Xuegwang Zhou, “Mobilizational State: Further Exploration in the Institutional Logic of State Governance in China (运动型治理机制：中国国家治理的制度逻辑再思考),” *Open Times* (開放時代), no. 9 (2012): 100–120, [https://web.stanford.edu/~xgzhou/zhou\\_12\\_campaign\\_CH.pdf](https://web.stanford.edu/~xgzhou/zhou_12_campaign_CH.pdf).

until further notice. In return, the churches, like vendors fleeing from any officers showing up, enter into negotiations with state power, mapping out strategies for survival and growth in this game of cat-and-mouse.

The same church can spend years under this informal protection and then suddenly be raided. As one of our interviewees noted, the trigger may be a campaign target or a formal complaint that enters the electronic reporting system and must be “resolved” for assessment purposes. Once a case is logged in a ticketing system, whether through the “the mayor’s letterbox” or an internal bureau portal, it produces a digital trace that appears in annual evaluation tables. If it is not closed, it drags down performance scores and exposes the responsible officer to accountability. The interviewee added, “Once a report exists in the system, you must find a way to close the case. Failure to do so will lead to a deduction in periodic evaluations (扣考核) and may lead to further disciplinary actions.” A rather amusing illustration of these bureaucratic incentives involved a vengeful divorcee who repeatedly abused the ticketing system to report his ex-wife as a “cult follower” to her place of work. As recounted by an interviewee: “She worked in the province-level bureau of education, and for high risers like that, they have to be ideologically ‘spotless’, and her ex-husband put her through a regime of internal audits by constantly making those reports. Eventually, even though everyone knows it is a bogus case, the paperwork he created proved to be too much for everyone involved, and she was quietly transferred away.” The system channels conflicts towards “solutions” that maximize administrative expediency rather than strict rule compliance.

This preference for institutional convenience explains why the tools of control are often indirect. One common tactic, repeatedly mentioned by interviewees, is to pressure landlords rather than raid congregations head-on. A landlord who rents an office or a commercial space to an unregistered church may be summoned to the police station or the local religious-affairs bureau, shown the relevant articles of the Regulations on Religious Affairs about “aiding illegal religious activities,” and warned that failure to “cooperate” could result in fines, safety inspections, or problems with business licenses.<sup>33</sup> Indeed a whole suite of regulations is often employed in this way: while noise complaints and fire hazards are often used against urban churches, rural redevelopment plans are also invoked as a pretext to demolish unregistered rural churches.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Articles 68 and 71 of the RRA implicitly covered anyone who aids in illegal religious activities, which includes landlords and property managers.

<sup>34</sup> Wang, 2021, pp. 8–11.

The result is almost always the same: the church is informed that “for personal reasons” the landlord must terminate the lease. No formal ban is issued, but the congregation is repeatedly pushed back into more precarious, smaller, or more invisible spaces.

A second instrument of enforcement, especially visible after 2018, is surveillance technology. Even officially registered venues are increasingly required to install CCTV cameras covering entrances, sanctuaries, and sometimes offices, with live feeds accessible to the public security organs. In some cities, “rectification notices” to major temples and churches explicitly listed full camera coverage as a condition for continued operation. For unregistered churches, similar demands were used as a lever: agreeing to full-camera installation was framed as a possible path to tolerance, while refusal could be cited as evidence of “non-cooperation” and used to justify closure. In both registered and unregistered settings, cameras make physical worship spaces legible and penetrable to the state, even when no officer is physically present. Combined with China’s facial recognition software and “social credit” system, these cameras provide a constant stream of demographic data to local authorities.<sup>35</sup> When a church grows beyond a certain size, officials know when and where to do the culling.

## Special Rectification Program

In China, the term “special rectification program” (專項整治工作) denotes a form of administrative campaign that concentrates enforcement personnel, equipment, and resources over a short period to carry out high-profile administrative inspections and heavy, rapid penalties in order to tackle certain market behaviors, specific industries, or prominent social problems.<sup>36</sup> A less discussed part of Chinese politics, these programs serve as the main conduit that channels high-level political decisions into action. They come in all sizes and directions, from crackdowns on major financial crime to tackling fly-tipping, to the recent campaign to “clear the Internet from negative sentiments”,<sup>37</sup> and in the case of this paper: the dismantling of unregistered churches.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, pp. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Yimeng Xu, “Christianity in Rural China: A Case Study of Haikou Town,” *Kokusai Bunka Kenkyū* (國際文化研究) 4, no. 4 (2018), Fukuoka Jo Gakuin University, <https://fukujo.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/2000545/files/kokusai004004.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> BBC News Chinese. “China Launches Campaign to Keep Killjoys off the Internet (中国网信办展开‘清朗’行动，整肃负面情绪).” *BBC News Chinese*, September 26, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/articles/cjw712wqg8jo/simp>.

Special rectification programs reframe specific issues as political priorities and inject them into the very top of the evaluation system. Campaigns may be triggered by a fire or death at a religious gathering, by media attention, or by a higher-level leader's contingent interest.

**基督教聚会点调查表**

街道、镇：(盖章) 填表时间：

聚会点名称				
地址				
<b>场所信息</b>				
住宅	房主姓名		联系电话	
宾馆、酒店	负责人姓名		联系电话	
聚会点负责人	联系电话			
牧师、传道人	联系电话			
<b>信徒情况</b>				
人数		男		女
年龄结构	60岁以上	人；40-60岁	人；20-40岁	人
<b>户籍人口与外来人口比重：</b>				
类型(括号内打勾)	1. 依法登记的聚会点( )； 2. 愿意接受政府和三自管理( )； 3. 愿意接受政府管理，不愿意接受三自管理( )； 4. 不愿意接受政府管理，也不愿意接受三自管理( )；			
其它说明事项：				
填表人：				

A "Christian Meeting Point Survey Form" issued in Beijing, 2018. This form is filled out in detail by local government personnel based on their surveys of various churches. It includes the name, address, and location of the meeting point; the homeowner's name and contact number; and information about the church's pastor, preacher, and members. They must also specify whether these churches are legally registered meeting points and whether they are willing to accept government and TSPM management. Source: China Aid.

In an interview with Religioscope, a source retold why such programs unfold: "It may seem arbitrary and out of nowhere, but there is always a strong reason behind these programs, since the cost and risks are quite substantial. One time, a family member of a high-level official joined an unregistered church, and to save his own skin, ordered a program against them. It took several months of preparation throughout the city." Once an initiative like

“clean up illegal religious activities” or “strike hard against cults” is launched, numerical targets appear in evaluation tables, and local police are mobilized to deliver visible results.

In 2018 a nationwide program was prescribed against unregistered churches after the RRA was signed into effect. In Henan, authorities sent officials to known congregations demanding that church leaders abide by the law. Members were forced to sign letters of admission and declare that from now on they would only worship in state-appointed TSPM churches. Pastors were detained. Over 600 churches across the province were raided and demolished; liturgical symbols—most notably crosses—were torn down and forbidden to be displayed in public.<sup>38</sup>

For a field as opaque as unregistered Christianity, such unusually precise figures, backed by local notices, photographs of demolitions, and internal work summaries, are striking. Extraordinary bureaucracy generates extraordinary paperwork: post-campaign reports, slide decks, and local news items that count demolished crosses and shuttered venues, like hunting trophies, as evidence that performance targets have been met and that responsible officials have successfully implemented the will of the central government.

Yet these impressive numbers raise a basic question: why, after repeated campaigns, do unregistered churches persist? The answer lies partly in the nature of the campaigns themselves. Special rectification programs are time-bound and target-driven. They are not designed to permanently eliminate a phenomenon so much as to periodically reassert control, send signals upward, and reshape the visible landscape: removing crosses from skylines, driving gatherings out of conspicuous venues, and forcing leaders to lie low. Once the campaign cycle ends and attention shifts elsewhere, local practice reverts to the pattern described earlier: a negotiated coexistence of selective enforcement and non-legality (*fa wai* 法外, outside the law).<sup>39</sup> In this sense, campaigns function as episodic “shock therapy” for unregistered church communities, not as a sustained policy of total eradication.

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<sup>38</sup> Singgwong Ngan (顏聖光), “Investigation Report on the Special Campaign to Regulate Rural Christian Affairs in Accordance with the Law in Henan Province (河南省「依法規範農村基督教事務專項行動」調查報告),” *Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture*, Chinese University of Hong Kong, April 2019, <https://www.cscrc.org/newsletter/41/164.pdf>.

<sup>39</sup> On the effects of non-legal status on Christians in China—particularly when they seek to assume greater social responsibility—see Brent Fulton, *China’s Urban Christians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), chap. 5.



Billboards from the Department of Civil Affairs and the Ethnic & Religious Affairs Bureau of Beijing's Chaoyang District, notifying the closure of Beijing Zion Church in September 2018. Source: Sean Long, Facebook account.

These campaigns also have unintended effects. Closing hundreds of small, physical venues in Henan or Jiangsu does not erase demand; it pushes believers into more modular, mobile forms. Large established urban churches broke down into home meetings, office fellowships, and increasingly, online networks.

## Case Study: Zion Church 2018–2025

In 2018, after years of relative freedom in a rented, renovated nightclub floor, the Zion Church refused a government demand to install 24 CCTV cameras on its main site, nominally on fire safety grounds. Officials responded with escalating harassment of members. They were phoned, visited at home, approached at their workplaces, and pressured to promise not to attend Zion. In August, the landlord terminated its ten-year lease with the church due to government pressure. A month later, this campaign culminated in a raid by some 70 officers: the Chaoyang civil affairs bureau declared the Zion Church “illegal,” shut its main venue, and later levied a hefty fine.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Tessa Wong and Kelly Ng, “Zion Church: China’s Arrest of 30 Christians Sparks Fears of a Bigger

Forced out of its building, Zion reconstituted itself as a dispersed network, relying on home and office gatherings anchored by recorded and online worship. After the 2018 shutdown, Pastor Jin launched a “walking worship” plan: Sunday services were broken down into audio segments, and believers met in groups of five or six, put on headphones, and quietly walked through city streets and parks while listening, praying, and worshipping together. Sean noted that the sense of tight-knit community was also retained by having members attend online worship in offline groups and encouraging them to have group discussions in person.<sup>41</sup> Despite the 2018 closure of its main sanctuary, by 2020, the church had grown into a community of roughly 5,000 regular worshippers across nearly fifty cities, relying heavily on online preaching and flexible local gatherings.<sup>42</sup> At its peak, a single online session was attended by over 3000 members.<sup>43</sup> Sean recounted the rapid growth by quoting early Christian apologist Tertullian:

There is an imprisoned pastor who once said, “The Christian life is a life of victory.” We are bound to win in the end, because Jesus has already won. Usually, wherever there is oppression, there is also revival. Tertullian once said that, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

Before the previous round of persecution and the sealing of our premises in 2018, Zion Church was just a local church in Beijing. After 2018, we have already spread throughout the whole country.

This digital and trans-local resilience set the stage for a second, more severe wave of repression. Beyond the 2022 Measures for the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services, the National Religious Affairs Administration in September 2025 issued a new “Code of Conduct” for clergy online, forbidding preaching, the performance of rituals, fundraising, or evangelism outside licensed platforms, banning proselytizing to minors, and prohibiting the use of personal accounts, livestreams, WeChat groups, or short-video apps for religious instruction. These rules “effectively criminalize spontaneous religious expression online” and require all legitimate content to be patriotic, Party-aligned, and scrubbed of anything that might “incite subversion” or “undermine social stability.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Yiyin Lin (林宜瑩), “The CCP’s Massive Crackdown on Zion Church Has Reignited Religious Persecution (中共大舉搜捕錫安教會，宗教逼迫再起),” *Taiwan Church News Network* (TCNN, 台灣教會公報新聞網), December 10, 2025, <https://tcnn.org.tw/archives/260934>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Yaxue Cao, “A Home in God: The Story of Detained Pastor Jin Mingri and China’s City Churches, Part Two,” *China Change*, November 4, 2025, <https://chinachange.org/2025/11/04/a-home-in-god-the-story-of-detained-pastor-jin-mingri-and-chinas-city-churches-part-two/>.

<sup>44</sup> Edward Ross, “New Regulations in China Target Online Religious Content,” *Christian Daily*, September 19, 2025, <https://www.christiandaily.com/news/new-regulations-in-china-target-online-religious-content>.

Within this legal framework, Zion's post-2018 strategy of online sermons no longer inhabits a gray zone; it is precisely what the law now names as illicit. In an interview with Religioscope, a Zion church member confided that:

It can feel helpless, at times, but life and faith will find its way. When they banned using zoom calls for sermons, we switched to other platforms. When those were banned, we learned to use VPNs. We even shared family plans to save a dollar or two. There is always a way.



*Zion church site in Jiangxu before and after its raid in 2018.*

*Source: Sean Long, Facebook account.*

A month later, in October this year, police launched a coordinated operation in at least seven provinces, detaining around thirty pastors and staff and interrogating scores of members; in November eighteen leaders, including founding pastor Jin, were formally arrested in Beihai on the charge of “illegally using information networks,” a formulation widely understood to criminalize Zion's online preaching and organizational work. Rights

groups describe this as the largest single-church crackdown since the Cultural Revolution,<sup>45</sup> marking the culmination of a seven-year trajectory in which Zion's refusal to register and its creative use of digital space transformed it, in the eyes of the state, from an awkward anomaly into an intolerable test case.

Even in detention, however, resistance continues in a register the state struggles to control: reports in December noted that Pastor Jin has been fasting and praying in custody, behavior authorities have classified as a “hunger strike,” and some supporters outside have also taken up fasting as an act of solidarity.<sup>46</sup>

## The ontology of martyrdom

This brings us back to the central question: why do unregistered churches persist? Part of the answer lies in how unregistered Christians themselves interpret these recurring cycles of campaigns and crackdowns. For Sean, the turning point in his life was already framed in apocalyptic, world-ending terms. He describes the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake as not only a national disaster but as “an invisible earthquake” in his own life: watching lives lost and families shattered, he “couldn't stop crying” and felt, for the first time, an overwhelming urgency for people's souls and a call to “use [his] whole life and all [his] time to preach the gospel and build up the church.”

That earthquake also saw the emergence of explicitly Christian NGOs such as “China Christian Action Love” (中國基督徒愛心行動). Hundreds of unregistered churches across 12 provinces banded together and sent volunteers to the most affected areas. Briefly tolerated as channels of disaster relief, these groups received recognition from the Department of Civil Affairs in Wuhan, before being folded back under tighter control.<sup>47</sup> It was the first and final year of unregistered churches officially participating in social affairs.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), “China: Police Formally Arrest 18 Leaders from Zion Church,” *CSW.org.uk*, November 20, 2025, <https://www.csw.org.uk/2025/11/20/press/6670/article.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Anita Chang, “Pastor Ezra Jin Mingri Detained in Beihai; Fasting and Praying Treated by Authorities as Hunger Strike,” *ChinaAid*, December 5, 2025, <https://chinaaid.org/news/pastor-ezra-jin-mingri-detained-in-beihai-fasting-and-praying-treated-by-authorities-as-hunger-strike/>.

<sup>47</sup> Wind, “A Factual Report on the Wenchuan Earthquake Relief Efforts of ‘Chinese Christians’ Loving Actions’ (〈中国基督徒爱心行动〉汶川地震救援行动纪实报导),” *Zyesu.com*, May 20, 2008, <https://zyesu.com/love/wind/191.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> The scrutiny faced by Christian NGOs is further enforced by article 56 of the RRA, which states that “religious groups, religious schools, religious activity sites, and religious professionals may lawfully initiate

When the wave of repression later hit Zion, this earlier experience provided the template: suffering was not random misfortune but part of a larger spiritual struggle. In conversations with Religioscope, Sean repeatedly reached for Pauline’s language of “spiritual warfare” and “putting on the full armor of God,”<sup>49</sup> depicting police summons, interrogations, and even the loss of Zion’s main venue as moments in which believers were trained to stand, to tell the truth, and to discover whether their faith was mere religion or genuine trust. When asked what he thinks of the Chinese state and its apparatus, his remark was lucid:

The most important principle is in Ephesians Chapter 6 Verse 12, which says: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

So, including this current “church case,” our interpretation is that it is *spiritual warfare*. The rulers and authorities are visible, and their persecution of us is visible too; they put our pastors and co-workers into prison. All of that is very concrete.

But the Scripture reminds us: they are not our enemies. The church’s mission is never to overthrow some particular regime. The real enemy is behind these visible rulers and authorities, those who rule this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. They are the true enemies, the enemies of the cross.

Interviews with a senior observer of Christianity in China added a further layer: many believers, he noted, have come to see pressure itself as part of the “fate” of the unregistered church, something like one of the recurring seasons of the year. If a congregation refuses state incorporation, “It accepts that this will be its long-term condition.” The occasional visits from religious affairs officials, the pastor being “invited for tea,”<sup>50</sup> sporadic Sunday-morning disruptions all become part of their daily lives, as common as prayers and sermons.

Mentally removed from the background, this harassment may have gained ritualistic significance. When asked about how they see their oppression by the Chinese government, multiple interviewees from the unregistered church community quoted, “To suffer for the Lord is glory.” Thus, the narrative of prosecution is reinterpreted as both inevitable and honorable, rather than as a sign that something has gone wrong. Most rank-and-file members, he suggests, hardly encounter the state directly; they are aware of the risks, but these typically fall on the leadership. Some even interpret the very growth of Christianity in China as evidence that persecution has purified and strengthened the church, in contrast to the perceived complacency and nationalism of some official congregations. In their

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public interest charitable endeavors. Public interest charitable activities must not be used to proselytize by any organization or individual.”

<sup>49</sup> Ephesians 6:11. Revised Standard Version.

<sup>50</sup> A popular euphemism of being summoned for a “meeting” by state security apparatus.

theology, constraint and expansion are causally linked: state pressure tests motives, winnows out nominal believers, and forces churches to pray, evangelize, and innovate with greater intensity.

This everyday acceptance is intertwined with a kind of tactical fatalism. When new regulations appear, for example, the ban on unlicensed online religious content, most unregistered churches do not immediately abandon online worship. As one interviewee puts it, they “wait to see how it will be enforced.” Given that the church’s very existence is already beyond legal terms, one more law does not fundamentally alter the community’s calculus. Enforcement is expected to be selective and exemplary. If the authorities choose them as a “sample,” they will face the consequences; if not, they continue as before. In practice, this means that, even after enforcement campaigns, many communities resume meeting. Perhaps smaller, more fragmented, more cautious, but still there. “If they were the sort of people who stopped doing something just because a regulation appeared,” the same interviewee remarked wryly, “they would not be running house churches in the first place.”

Taken together, these testimonies suggest that special rectification programs and everyday harassment do not simply cower unregistered Christians into silence. They fold themselves into a pre-existing “language” of persecution, sacrifice, and spiritual warfare that allows believers to reclaim a measure of agency. In other words, if punishment is inevitable, interpreting it as participating in Christ’s suffering and as a “sowing of seed” (John 12:24) allows them to deny the state the final word on what that punishment means.

From Sean’s perspective as a Zion pastor, the same process is experienced as persecution and spiritual testing with a distinctively urban, organizational inflection. He describes Zion’s trajectory from two families in a small office to a highly organized “new urban church” that deliberately chose openness, renting commercial floors, running a café–book space, and offering multilingual services, as a “third path” to both hidden congregations and the TSPM. The demands to register, to submit to the camera installation, and to accept the framing of Zion as an “illegal organization” appear not as neutral enforcement of general rules but as a direct assault on the church’s calling to remain independent of state control. In his account, the elastic accusations leveled against Zion: “illegal organization,” “illegal business operations,” “illegal use of information networks” are instruments that allow the state to punish spiritual obedience while preserving the appearance of legal rationality. In the language of believers, congregants are the “grains” that must fall to the ground under legal oppression in order to bear much fruit.

## Conclusion

This paper has used the case of the Zion Church to illustrate a wider, more tangled field: the evolving governance of China's unregistered churches under tightening control from 2018 to 2025. Rather than a simple narrative of "Christians oppressed by the state," the material points to a grayer and more intricate reality. On one side stands a dense array of legal and administrative tools—regulations on venues and clergy, targeted rectification campaigns, online content bans, performance indicators, landlord pressure, cameras and complaint systems. On the other stand rural family fellowships, living-room congregations, and new urban churches, such as Zion, which rent office floors, build networks, and move nimbly between physical and digital spaces. Between them are street-level cadres, landlords, and TSPM leaders who negotiate, delay, selectively enforce, or quietly protect as often as they punish.

There is no robust freedom of religion in this landscape; unregistered churches are formally illegal, and even registered bodies are tightly supervised. Chinese Christianity is treated not only as a "belief" to be managed, but as a potential conduit of foreign influence and, more importantly, as a social force not created by the Party, a dangerous capability of generating trust, leadership and trans-local networks on its own terms. Zion's trajectory makes this dynamic visible. For nearly a decade, it was tolerated as an unregistered yet semi-public "city church"; in 2018, it was disciplined for resisting surveillance, then dispersed, digitized, and finally recast in 2025 as a criminal "network" operating through illegal information channels. What the state ultimately finds intolerable is not faith as such, but faith that organizes, connects, and endures outside the patriotic framework.

Yet believers do not primarily experience their lives through the lens of governance. Sean's description of an "invisible earthquake" in 2008, his reading of Zion's repression as spiritual warfare; Stacy's recollection of a private home turned into a sanctuary; the interviewee who likens crackdown campaigns to recurring seasons, all point to what might be described as a theology of oppression. Campaigns, summonses, and closures are interpreted through a grammar of cross-bearing, testing, and sowing in tears. For some, growth itself is understood through suffering: persecution purifies belief, exposes nominal adherence, and compels institutional improvisation. This theology can be both empowering and costly. It challenges the authority of the state to determine the meaning of punishment, but it may also lead to the widespread imposition of heavy burdens on pastors, families, women, and children.

The central contribution of this paper is therefore twofold. First, it cautions against a flattened narrative of "Christians persecuted by the state" that erases complexity. Variations between churches, degrees of repression, spaces of negotiated tolerance, and the agency of both believers and grassroots officials point to a complex landscape that a

binary model cannot capture. Second, it also cautions against interpretative frameworks that romanticize suffering and overlook its uneven, embodied costs. What emerges instead is a shifting gray zone in which law, fear and KPI-driven campaigns coexist with everyday accommodations, digital creativity, and persistent forms of communal religious practices.