

**Adapting in Difficult Circumstances:  
Protestant Pastors and the Xi Jinping Effect**

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## **Adapting in Difficult Circumstances: Protestant Pastors and the Xi Jinping Effect**

Abstract:

To understand the consequences of Xi Jinping's rise, we must look down as well as up. Even in the face of increased repression, people on the ground have a say over how it unfolds, and their accommodations affect the shape it takes. Many pastors in China are adapting to harsher policies and new ideological narratives by striving to lessen the threat Protestantism is perceived to pose. They are seeking to reduce 1) ideological competition, by not preaching about politics, dissociating themselves from dissidents, and expressing support for the China Dream, 2) security concerns, by striving to become financially self-sufficient, cutting off ties to foreign missionaries and calling for the creation of a truly Chinese church, and 3) collective action fears, by dividing congregations, avoiding networking, and viewing the small church model as part of God's plan. Out of necessity and sometimes belief, they are finding ways to pursue God's work within Xi's strictures. In the course of adjusting Protestant practice and incorporating the China Dream and Sinicization of Christianity into their faith, they are aiming to show that they and their congregations can live with and are being steeled by repression.

## Adapting in Difficult Circumstances: Protestant Pastors and the Xi Jinping Effect

What are the consequences of leadership change at the top? When scholars assess the impact of Xi Jinping's rise, there are many avenues to pursue. First, they may question how much change has occurred in a certain area or attribute what is new to the deepening of existing trends or structural factors distinct from Xi.<sup>1</sup> But even for those who persuasively argue that a powerful leader has considerable agency—when Xi acts or speaks things change—evaluating the effects of his ascent takes researchers in several directions. Some, naturally enough, focus on elite politics. This leads to consideration of changes in leadership succession norms, the make-up of the Party, and cadre promotion practices.<sup>2</sup> Others point to institutional changes, including the creation of a number of new commissions that Xi presides over, the revamping of Party-military relations and an emphasis on 'top-level design'.<sup>3</sup> Still others draw attention to Xi's signature policies, such as the anti-corruption campaign, the Belt and Road Initiative or the effort to turn China into a 'great power'.<sup>4</sup> Nor has the growing importance of ideology been neglected,

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wedeman, 'The Xi Jinping effect on leadership politics'; Martin King Whyte, 'Xi Jinping confronts inequality: bold leadership or modest steps'; Alexsia Chan, 'Pliable citizenship and migrant inequality in the Xi Jinping era'; Brantly Womack, 'The new normal of China's relations with Southeast Asia'; Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Understanding the Xi Jinping effect', all in Ashley Esarey and Rongbin Han, eds., *The Xi Jinping Era: Assessing Political Leadership in Contemporary China*, in preparation.

<sup>2</sup> Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era: Reassessing Collective Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016); Zhengxu Wang and Jinghan Zeng, 'Xi Jinping: the game changer of Chinese elite politics?', *Contemporary Politics* 22(4), (2016), pp. 469-486; Jérôme Doyon, 'Clientelism by design: personnel politics under Xi Jinping', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 47(3), (2018), pp. 87-110; Joseph Fewsmith, 'The 19th party congress: ringing in Xi Jinping's new age', *China Leadership Monitor* 55, (2018), pp. 1-22.

<sup>3</sup> David M. Lampton, 'Xi Jinping and the national security commission: policy coordination and political power', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(95), (2015), pp. 759-777; Chien-wen Kou, 'Xi Jinping in command: solving the principal-agent problem in CCP-PLA relations?', *China Quarterly* 232, (2017), pp. 866-885; Sangkuk Lee, 'An institutional analysis of Xi Jinping's centralization of power', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(105), (2017), pp. 325-336.

<sup>4</sup> Rumi Aoyama, "'One belt, one road": China's new global strategy', *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 5(2), (2016), pp. 3-22; Peter Ferdinand, 'Westward ho—the China dream and

including signs that Xi Jinping Thought will be enshrined next to Mao Zedong Thought,<sup>5</sup> and a revival of Marxism and governance techniques such as campaigns, work teams, and party rectification.<sup>6</sup>

In the Banff conference on the Xi effect that produced this special section, and also in an accompanying book,<sup>7</sup> society received limited attention. When it appeared, two themes stood out: continuity (e.g. in efforts to address inequality) and increased repression.<sup>8</sup> Life has certainly become more difficult for intellectuals, rights-protection lawyers, Uighurs and many religious believers since 2012. But in accounts of those harmed by the changes Xi's regime has wrought,

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'one belt, one road': Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping', *International Affairs* 92(4), (2016), pp. 941-957; Kevin G. Cai, 'The one belt, one road and the Asian infrastructure investment bank: Beijing's new strategy of geoeconomics and geopolitics', *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(114), (2018), pp. 831-847; Suisheng Zhao, 'The Xi Jinping effect on Chinese diplomacy: becoming a great power to pursue the China dream of national rejuvenation,' in Esarey and Han, eds., *The Xi Jinping Era: Assessing Political Leadership in Contemporary China*.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Buckley, 'China enshrines "Xi Jinping thought", elevating leader to Mao-like status', *New York Times*, 24 October 2017. As of September 2020, the official designation remains 'Xi Jinping thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era'.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Cheek, 'Xi Jinping's counter-reformation: party helmsmanship and the reassertion of ideological governance in historical perspective', *Journal of Contemporary China*, this issue; Xing Lu, 'Rhetorical construction of the ideal Chinese leader in President Xi Jinping's overseas speeches', *China Media Research* 13(1), (2017), pp. 74-82; Kerry Brown and Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 'Ideology in the era of Xi Jinping', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23(3), (2018), pp. 323-339; Kyle Jaros and Jennifer Pan, 'China's newsmakers: official media coverage and political shifts in the Xi Jinping era', *China Quarterly* 233, (2018), pp. 111-136; Kristen E. Looney, *Mobilizing for Development: The Modernization of Rural East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); Kevin J. O'Brien and Yanhua Deng, 'Preventing protest one person at a time: psychological coercion and relational repression in China,' *China Review* 17(2), (2017), pp. 179-201.

<sup>7</sup> Esarey and Han, eds., *The Xi Jinping Era: Assessing Political Leadership in Contemporary China*.

<sup>8</sup> On continuity in social policy see Whyte, 'Xi Jinping confronts inequality: bold leadership or modest steps?'; Chan, 'Pliable citizenship and migrant inequality in the Xi Jinping era'. On increasing repression, see Chih-Jou Chen, Deng Kai, and David Demes, 'The institutionalization and implementation of "total surveillance" under Xi Jinping'; Amy Anderson, 'War on fear: loyalty for life in the surveillance state of Xinjiang under Xi Jinping', all in Esarey and Han, eds., *The Xi Jinping Era: Assessing Political Leadership in Contemporary China*.

there is one tendency that ought to be avoided: treating them solely as victims. Even comparatively powerless people are subjects as well as objects and retain agency of their own. How they react to coercive policies and other efforts to influence their behavior and thought affects the extent of change that occurs and the shape that it takes. Repression, in other words, is not a one-way street: social actors can sometimes find ways to live with it, while still trying to achieve their ends. This is a reminder that there is a bottom-up element to the Xi effect and that the consequences of leadership change are mutually constituted by society and the state.

Building on Stern and O'Brien's 'state reflected in society' approach,<sup>9</sup> we evaluate the consequences of Xi's rise by examining how Protestant pastors have received and responded to new policies and ideological constructs. Protestantism showcases the dynamic between leadership initiative and societal adaptation particularly well because pastors have always had a complicated and fraught relationship with the Communist Party, with religious affairs bureau cadres and pastors both playing a part in the degree to which religious policy tightened in difficult times and loosened in better times.<sup>10</sup> Protestant ministers receive signals from the government about acceptable behavior, reconfigure what they hear to be compatible with their faith and church-building, and then translate policies and guidelines for their congregations. All of this is part of a continuing dance with the authorities, in which pastors must repeatedly demonstrate that their churches are not an ideological, security or collective action threat, despite the alternative belief system their faith represents, their foreign ties, and the protests that

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<sup>9</sup> Rachel E. Stern and Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Politics at the boundary: mixed signals and the Chinese state', *Modern China* 38(2), (2012), pp. 174-98.

<sup>10</sup> Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Marie-Eve Reny, *Authoritarian Containment: Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Carsten T. Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

sometimes break out when the authorities, for example, demolish crosses or close a mega-church. Without ever being able to prove they are innocent of all the charges leveled against them, many pastors are busy finding ways to show they can pursue God's work within Xi's new strictures, and to work with the government rather than against it. They are striving to demonstrate that there is not a contradiction between what the regime demands of them and what their flock needs: that conflict can be reduced and that they are not as threatening as they are perceived to be.

Although the Xi effect on Protestants begins with understanding new policies and the ideological tenets behind them, the bulk of our analysis centers on how recent regulations and Party efforts to redirect Protestant behavior and thought have been understood and accommodated in everyday religious practice. Based on 120 in-depth interviews with Protestant pastors from fifteen cities, we find that ministers, however difficult their position, are far from passive victims of repression but instead are maneuvering inside the box they are confined in, helping shape the space within which Protestantism operates, and exerting meaningful influence over what the Xi effect amounts to on the ground.<sup>11</sup>

### **Religious Policy in the Xi Era: Growing Repression to Address Perceived Threats**

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<sup>11</sup> Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author between 2017 and 2019. The pastors ranged in age from the early 30s to the late 80s and included both males and females. Interviewees were affiliated with both unregistered house churches and registered 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement' (TSPM) churches in several coastal provinces and the southwest. Although studies of Protestantism in China have typically differentiated between house and TSPM churches, this distinction has become more blurred in the Xi era as repression has targeted both unregistered and registered churches and pastors. Interviewees' responses were not clearly distinguishable by affiliation and this led us to focus on commonalities and what Charles Tilly calls 'universalizing comparison', rather than variation-finding. Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984), chapter 6.

There are three main reasons that the Party has always been wary of Protestants. First, their religious faith is viewed as an ideological threat because they are loyal to an authority other than the Party, and many put the laws of the Bible above the laws of the nation. Like devout Christians elsewhere, belief in God and the afterlife can create ‘intensely committed followers willing to sacrifice for the cause, including willing martyrs with altered understandings of obstacles and opportunities’.<sup>12</sup> The transformative faith of many Chinese Protestants is seen to be in competition with ideological teachings that an atheist ruling party uses to legitimize its leadership, and can provide an alternative means to fill the spiritual void ‘created by the country’s breakneck growth and rush to get rich’.<sup>13</sup> Second, Protestant churches raise the specter of foreign influence. Centuries after Matteo Ricci initiated the Western missionary movement in China, Christianity returned backed by gunboats through the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, and has since served as a painful reminder of western imperialism and China’s national humiliation in the Opium War.<sup>14</sup> Since 1949, nearly every law and regulation related to religion has emphasized the need to root out foreign influence,<sup>15</sup> and there have been repeated calls to make churches ‘self-

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<sup>12</sup> Ron Aminzade and Elizabeth J. Perry, ‘The sacred, religious, and secular in contentious politics: blurring boundaries’, in Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, Sidney Tarrow, William H. Sewell, and Charles Tilly, *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> Heike Holbig, ‘Ideology after the end of ideology. China and the quest for autocratic legitimation’, *Democratization* 20(1), (2013), p. 64; Benjamin Kang Lim and Ben Blanchard, ‘Xi Jinping hopes traditional faiths can fill moral void in China’, *Reuters*, September 29, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-vacuum/xi-jinping-hopes-traditional-faiths-can-fill-moral-void-in-china-sources-idUSBRE98S0GS20130929>.

<sup>14</sup> David H. Adeney, *China: The Church’s Long March* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1985), p. 33; Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China*, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> Article 36, *Constitution of the People’s Republic of China*, 1982, <http://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html> (accessed August 30, 2020); Chapter I, Article 4, *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, State Administration of Religious Affairs, 2004, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/regulations-on-religious-affairs> (accessed August 29, 2020); Chapter I, Article 5, *Regulations on Religious Affairs*, State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2017, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/flfg/330350.jhtml> (accessed August

governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating'.<sup>16</sup> Third, Protestant churches are thought to be a collective action threat because they draw together tens, hundreds or even thousands of people regularly. China's history of protest and a Leninist fear of organizations outside Party control have led the government to be vigilant about self-arranged group activities, whether it be a crowd of older women doing *tai chi* in a park or an online chat group. Especially when a competing belief system and foreign ties are added to the mix, Protestant believers' desire to gather together to worship, and their willingness to complain or take to the streets when services are disrupted or a church is closed down, make them a potential source of social and political instability.

In the Xi era, these perceived threats have been addressed by adopting a raft of repressive measures to hold Protestants in line. To start with, the Party has sought to keep a lid on challenges to its ideological primacy by monitoring sermons. This occurs even though most pastors seldom stray into politics or question the Party line. Many pastors before Xi's rise speculated about occasional unannounced visits by local officials or Party spies sent to observe their Sunday sermons.<sup>17</sup> The recent installation of security cameras inside church buildings has turned this into an everyday reality.<sup>18</sup> Beyond digital surveillance, the Party is also ready to use

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30, 2020); Section IV, *White Paper--Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, Beijing: 1997, <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zjxy/t36492.htm> (accessed August 30, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> This is a guiding principle for all TSPM churches in China as laid out in the Constitution of the National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China. '*Zhongguo jidujiao sanzhi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui zhangcheng*', National Religious Affairs Administration (*guojia zongjiao shiwuju*), November 30, 2018, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/zjttzd/338065.jhtml>.

<sup>17</sup> A pastor (Interview PYB11887, Beijing, 2017) noted, 'Since my church is small, I notice visitors sitting in the congregation. It's only after the church was closed down that I realized he was probably sent by the government'.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Fifield, 'With wider crackdowns on religion, Xi's China seeks to put state stamp on faith' *The Washington Post*, September 15, 2018.

force to confront challenges to its position as a ‘sacralized object of faith’,<sup>19</sup> its ability to define correct thought, and its right to chart China’s path forward. In recent years, the government has detained an increasing number of Protestant ministers who speak out against demolition of crosses, religious persecution, and limitations on religious autonomy. Like human rights advocates and rights-protection lawyers, pastors who express discontent can face heavy fines and years in prison. Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church, for instance, was jailed in 2019 after voicing disapproval online of the government’s mistreatment of house churches and for drafting a petition to separate church and state and increase religious freedom.<sup>20</sup> One minister whose church’s name was the same as Wang’s and others who led congregations in his Chengdu neighborhood also suffered interrogation, arrest and closure of their churches.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond warding off ideological challenges and the ‘subversion of state power’,<sup>22</sup> the Xi administration has also sought to combat the perceived security threat arising from Protestants’ ties to foreign countries.<sup>23</sup> Local officials now closely monitor overseas donations to Chinese churches and religious activities by foreigners residing in China. Whereas regulations prior to Xi laid out general rules for handling financial transactions and internal accounting, a 2018 measure specifically required registered churches to ‘derive their funding solely from legitimate sources’

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<sup>19</sup> Gerda Wielander, ‘Fundamentalism with Chinese characteristics: Xi Jinping and faith’, in Esarey and Han, eds., *The Xi Jinping Era: Assessing Political Leadership in Contemporary China*.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Mozur and Ian Johnson, ‘China sentences Wang Yi, Christian pastor, to 9 years in prison’, *The New York Times*, December 30, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11329, southwestern province, 2019; Interview with pastor PYC11279, Chengdu, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> This is what Wang Yi was charged with, along with ‘illegal business operations.’ Mozur and Johnson, ‘China sentences Wang Yi, Christian pastor, to 9 years in prison’.

<sup>23</sup> Xi’s efforts to root out foreign influence are a continuation of policies that trace back to the creation of the TSPM organization in 1954.

(*zijin laiyuan qudao hefa*),<sup>24</sup> and to only accept overseas donations under 10,000 yuan (US\$1462) that are in ‘accordance with relevant provisions’.<sup>25</sup> Foreign donors, in addition to foreign money, are also being increasingly segregated from domestic Protestants, as regulations require separate locations for worship and forbid foreigners from proselytizing to Chinese nationals.<sup>26</sup> The number of deportations of foreign missionaries has also spiked since Xi’s ascent.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the Party has addressed the collective action potential present in big groups by shuttering hundreds of churches. Local religious affairs bureau officials, with the help of the police, have raided and closed down churches of varying sizes, from Fujian’s Yongfu Zhijia Church, with its congregation of thirty to forty people, to Beijing’s Zion Church, with its over 1,500 churchgoers.<sup>28</sup> Pastors from unregistered churches whom we interviewed mentioned the number thirty as the size of a congregation it is wise to stay below to lessen the risk of being shut down.<sup>29</sup> Officials have also banned domestic and international ‘praise conferences’ (*zanmei*

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<sup>24</sup> Article 20, *2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs*.

<sup>25</sup> Article 57, *2018 Regulations on Religious Affairs*. These provisions specify the level of government to report donations, depending on their size. They also define acceptable donations to be those that ‘do not attach political conditions and do not interfere with China’s religious affairs.’ *Guanyu jieshou jingwai zongjiao zuzhi he geren juanzeng shenpi quanxian wenti de tongzhi*, State Administration for Religious Affairs (*Guowuyuan zongjiao shiwuju*), July 30, 1993, <https://www.pkulaw.com/chl/cdfeec2e72a32cd3bdfb.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Article 17, ‘Rules for the implementation of the provisions on the administration of religious activities of aliens within the territory of the People’s Republic of China’, State Administration for Religious Affairs, January 11, 2011, <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=1673&CGid=> (accessed: September 1, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Kyung hoon Kim, ‘China broadens crackdown on foreign missionaries’, *The Globe and Mail*, August 24, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> ChinaAid Association, ‘2018 Annual Report: Chinese Government Persecution of Churches and Christians in Mainland China’, <https://www.chinaaid.org/p/annual-persecution-reports.html> (accessed September 2, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> This small-size preference only applies to unregistered churches since most seek to stay hidden, unlike TSPM churches, which are visible by default. Interviews with pastors PYB12086,

*juhui*), leadership seminars, and missionary work meetings while blocking travel by pastors to assist small rural churches or to participate in conferences abroad.<sup>30</sup> In addition to discouraging physical gatherings, the authorities have increased monitoring of online religious activities. Most of the pastors we interviewed assumed that their WeChat app and their mobile phones were being tapped, and many used terms such as ‘boss’ and ‘teacher’ to refer to themselves, and ‘company’ to refer to their church, when communicating with other believers.<sup>31</sup> They said that the intensity of surveillance had increased markedly in recent years and that hi-tech techniques were being employed (and would soon be deployed) that they could scarcely have imagined in the past.<sup>32</sup>

### **Beyond Repression: Redirecting Protestant Practice and Thought**

Repression is designed to deter Protestants from engaging in undesirable activities. But during the Xi era, while repression has continued and intensified, the authorities have also sought to redirect Protestant practice and thought in less heavy-handed ways. In other words, if enhanced repression focuses on stamping out undesirable aspects of religion, redirecting encourages pastors and their congregation to take on desired activities and ways of thinking, and to fit Protestantism into the political system in a new, less problematic place. This approach to

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Beijing, 2016; WYB11867, Beijing, 2016; PYA11798, northeastern province, 2018; PYQ11519, eastern province, 2019; PYC11319, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Pastors report being limited to ministering in specific cities. International travel is often blocked through visa denials or in person at the airport. Interview with pastor PYS11907, eastern province, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Using such terms resembles how online users use coded language to avoid triggering content filters and censorship. On the internet, see Anna Fifield, ‘These are the secret code words that let you criticize the Chinese government’, *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> As one pastor (Interview PYS11668, northeastern province, 2018) explained regarding new means of surveillance, ‘Why do you think they want to install security cameras in churches? They’re using facial recognition to identify and track churchgoers.’

channeling behavior and influencing how Protestants understand their faith is another component of tamping down the ideological, security and collective action threats that the Party believes Protestantism poses.

On the ideological front, the authorities have used the China Dream narrative to recruit religious believers to help ‘realize the nation’s great rejuvenation’.<sup>33</sup> This effort aims to boost the ‘national consciousness’ (*guojia yishi*) of the faithful and to put an end to an oft-heard lament that ‘one more Christian amounts to one fewer Chinese’ (*duo yige jidutu jiu shao yige zhongguoren*).<sup>34</sup> For Protestant pastors, contributing to the China Dream entails always placing their identity as Chinese citizens first and never forgetting that they have responsibilities to the nation and the state.<sup>35</sup> On the ground, this translates into, for example, writing and delivering lectures on patriotism at government-sponsored conferences, and making a place for socialism in the theology they preach to their congregation.<sup>36</sup> It also means maintaining better lines of communication between local officials and churches, not only so religious affairs bureau cadres can gauge what pastors are thinking, but also to keep pastors up-to-date on the latest developments in Party policy.

With reference to the foreign threat posed by a faith that began outside China and has hundreds of millions of believers worldwide, the Party launched the ‘Sinicization of Christianity’

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Making “Chinese dream” a reality’, *China Daily*, December 8, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Xu Xiaohong, head of the National Committee of the TSPM, said this in a speech to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. ‘*Xu Xiaohong: jianchi woguo jidujiao zhongguohua fangxiang jiji yu shehuizhuyi shehui xiangshiying*’, *Xinhua*, March 11, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019lh/2019-03/11/c\\_1124221042.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019lh/2019-03/11/c_1124221042.htm).

<sup>35</sup> Chapter II, Part 1, ‘Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity,’ *Union of Catholic Asian News*, 20 April 2018, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/protestant-five-year-plan-for-chinese-christianity/82107>.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*; Interviews with pastors PY12086 and PY12076, Beijing, 2017; Interview with pastor PY11329, Qingdao, 2019.

in 2018 to replace foreign influence in Chinese churches with socialist values and Chinese culture.<sup>37</sup> This campaign has roots in the past, but also breaks new ground in ‘taking off the tether of the West’ (*tuoxia xifang de jianfu*) and ‘indigenizing’ (*bentuhua*, or *bensehua*)<sup>38</sup> Protestantism by encouraging Chinese over Western hymns, incorporating Chinese-style architecture into churches, advocating that pastors wear traditional Chinese garb, inserting Chinese folktales into the Bible, and displaying the national flag at all times.<sup>39</sup> These changes are designed to purify Protestantism and fill the void left by the reduction of foreign cultural and ideological elements so that ‘Christianity in China’ can become ‘Chinese Christianity.’<sup>40</sup>

The Xi administration has also taken steps to redirect the collective action potential of churches in a less contentious direction. Although ramped-up repression discourages large gatherings and networking among churches, the China Dream and the Sinicization of Christianity provide an alternative imaginary to oppositional collective action: religious believers joining with other Chinese to help rejuvenate the nation while also rejuvenating the Chinese church. A group of Protestants studying the Bible at a café may be considered a threat, but the same group singing Chinese-style hymns and listening to a sermon packed with Chinese

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<sup>37</sup> The Sinicization campaign is a part of a broader effort by the Xi administration to assimilate ethnic and religious groups while promoting Chinese culture. See, for example, David R. Stroup, ‘Why Xi Jinping’s Xinjiang policy is a major change in China’s ethnic politics’, *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2019; ‘Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity (*tuijin woguo jidujiao zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao*), 2018-2022’, *jidujiao quanguo lianghui (CCCTSPM)*, December 2017, <http://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283>.

<sup>38</sup> Chapter II, Part 4, ‘Protestant five-year plan.’

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Religious authorities in Hualong District, Henan have encouraged wearing clothing that includes ‘Chinese traditional cultural elements’ (*zhongguo chuantong wenhua yuansu de fuzhuang*). This often means ‘Tang suits’ (*tangzhuang*) for ushers and red clergy stoles with embroidered gold crosses for pastors. *Hualongqu jidujiao, tianzhujiao zongjiao tuanti kaizhan “sitongyi” huodong changyishu*, *Hualongqu jidujiao xiehui* and *Hualongqu tianzhujiao aiguhui*, May 15, 2019. (<http://hlq.rootinhenan.com/rootinhenan/html/2019/5/12111.htm>).

<sup>40</sup> Chapter I, Part 1, ‘Protestant five-year plan.’

folktales can represent strength and hope for the nation. The Five-Year Plan for Protestants also encourages churches to showcase Chinese culture by displaying calligraphy, seal carving and paper cutting, as well as traditional painting.<sup>41</sup> In all these ways, Xi's China dream tells Protestants who are willing to sign onto it that, with some conditions, they too can be included in China's 'New Era'.<sup>42</sup>

### **Adapting: Accommodating Repression and Embracing Xi Jinping Thought**

Most of the pastors we interviewed say that they have learned to live with the regime's policies on religion. Despite reports of widespread discontent about cross demolitions, church closures and arrests and imprisonments,<sup>43</sup> they are trying to make the best of a difficult situation and are actively seeking to allay concerns that Protestantism generates an ideological, security, and collective action threat to the regime. Strikingly, some pastors have even appeared to incorporate into their own faith the China Dream and Sinicization of Christianity narratives offered up by the Xi administration. Their ability to maneuver in a deteriorating environment is rooted in a worldview that persisting and being steeled through repression is all part of God's plan.

#### *Ideological Threat*

Many of our interviewees said that one way they strive to show Protestantism is harmless is through the content of their sermons. The authorities may monitor what pastors say from the

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<sup>41</sup> Chapter II, Part 4, 'Protestant five-year plan'.

<sup>42</sup> Chris Buckley, 'Xi Jinping thought explained: a new ideology for a new era', *The New York Times*, February 26, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> 'Chinese Christians hold protest on church roof to protect cross', *Reuters*, August 6, 2015; Kinling Lo and Viola Zhou, 'Underground Christians in China use faith and tech to reach out to followers at Easter amid Covid-19 crisis', *South China Morning Post*, April 13, 2020.

pulpit, but there is little to hear because they eschew political or anti-government messages. Pastors with close ties to officialdom are notorious for their anodyne sermons filled with innocuous moral lessons that are neither political nor even religious. Avoiding religious topics is both advisable and no great problem, many argue, because advocating faith in God, and not the Party, can be just as sensitive and problematic as sermons criticizing the government. In contrast, pastors from unregistered churches who maintain more distance from the state are more likely to preach about God's kingdom, the Resurrection, and the afterlife. Even so, most of them also stay away from issues that might suggest frustration with Party rule or divided loyalties. When asked why politics never comes up in his sermons, one pastor quipped, 'Jesus lived in Rome and did not object to the government. Why should we do what Jesus himself did not do'?<sup>44</sup> Many interviewees clearly distinguished between suitable subjects for sermons – such as love and filial piety – and worldly matters with which the church should not (and need not) concern itself.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, these pastors are also keen to demonstrate that their beliefs are compatible with Party policies and precepts by dissociating themselves from activists who speak out against restrictions on religious belief and practice. When asked about ministers who challenged the regime for its human rights violations, most notably Pastor Wang Yi, many interviewees expressed disapproval, distancing themselves from Wang and his movement and arguing that they were 'doing politics' (*gao zhengzhi*) and not ministry. One pastor remarked: 'He's a social activist. Pastors should teach the Bible, not be involved in social movements. Opposition is not

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11329, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Reny reports a pastor saying that he 'believed he could criticize the government, but not in the church'. She finds, however, that pastors typically refrain from mentioning politics and also try to show that there is no 'political intention' underlying their religious practice. Marie-Eve Reny, 'Compliant defiance: informality and survival among Protestant house churches in China', *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(111), (2018), p. 482.

faith. Real faith is helping through love. Jesus never opposed the Roman government'.<sup>46</sup> At most, a handful of interviewees offered qualified support for Wang, saying that in theory anyone should be able to request that religious rights be respected, but that they themselves never signed petitions and were not the sort of person who participated in movements that criticized the authorities and made radical demands.

Beyond steering clear of politics and activists, many seek to dispel concerns that they hold anti-government views by expressing support for the ideological constructs that the authorities have been promoting.<sup>47</sup> Instead of being resentful about new restrictions, they convey an open-minded and sympathetic view of the Party's motives. For instance, some interviewees, including even those whose churches had been shut down, attributed repression to missteps they or their fellow pastors had made. One pastor berated other ministers for their secrecy and argued that it inevitably led to suspicions. He also echoed the government line on maintaining close and regular contact with the authorities by saying: 'It's all a matter of communication. The government has no choice but to repress because churches keep hiding. If you're faultless, don't hide and don't change your phone number! Talk to the government and they won't be wary of you anymore'.<sup>48</sup> Many interviewees also claimed tighter control of religion was understandable given the upsurge in the number of Protestants and the difficulties of ruling such a large and diverse country:

Christianity is growing faster than the Party. Of course they're worried.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11289, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Emily Dunn, 'Netizens of heaven: contesting orthodoxies on the Chinese Protestant web', *Asian Studies Review* 31(4), (2007), p. 455.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11289, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with pastor PYA11768, northeastern province, 2018.

China is a gigantic country. I would do the same [detain leaders and shut down churches] to keep the country under control.<sup>50</sup>

These pastors were more than willing to explain away repression and affirm the China Dream as they rationalized harsh policies as a reasonable price to pay for national development. One pastor explicitly referred to the China Dream in his justification of more restrictions:

China is building the new Silk Road through the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (*yidai yilu*), which is central to fulfilling the China Dream. In the process, Muslim countries have expressed discontent toward Chinese missionaries who are using the Initiative as an opportunity to evangelize in their countries. If Christianity is an obstacle to the Chinese economy growing globally, then the government will strike to get rid of that obstacle.<sup>51</sup>

For many of our interviewees, it was understandable that the authorities viewed Protestantism as an ideological rival, and the best way to reduce this concern was to watch what they preached, keep a safe distance from dissidents, and even come to believe in (or at least profess to believe in) the Party’s approach to religion. Whether what they say and do always reflects their real views is an open question, but whatever the case, the accommodations they make help shape Protestant practice on the ground.

### *Security Threat*

Many of our interviewees are aggressively shedding connections to foreign countries that lead churches to be perceived as a security threat. Since Christianity took root in China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, overseas missionaries have played a large role in offering hands-on guidance in establishing churches, training leaders, leading Bible study groups, providing financial support, and managing church operations. As the number of Protestants exploded in the 1980s, churches

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with pastor PYD11568, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ11419, eastern province, 2019.

too closely associated with missionaries came to be seen as possible vehicles for foreigners to ‘build up anti-motherland, anti-government underground forces’.<sup>52</sup> To free their churches of outside influence and achieve self-sufficiency, many pastors we interviewed were focused on finding and training more domestic staff, so that Chinese congregants could take on positions once held by missionaries. One proudly explained: ‘Our church lacks money, but we have people. We have a person who is good at selling things, one who is good at managing companies, one who is good at doing business, one who is good at teaching’.<sup>53</sup> Many other interviewees emphasized how they had reduced (or eliminated) reliance on foreign donations. One pastor described how the rent for his church buildings was paid off the previous year: ‘A brother at the church bought a piece of land, prayed, and that land was included in the government’s redevelopment project and became worth a lot of money. I reminded him where the money came from, and he provided a generous offering to our church’.<sup>54</sup> All of these efforts have taken many Protestant churches closer to the Party ideal of being ‘self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating’.

Beyond revamping their staffing and financing, pastors are also reducing communication and ties with foreigners. Interviewees were fully aware of the government’s stance on foreign influence. When asked why Protestantism is monitored so closely, nearly all of them pointed to the complicated history of Christianity in China and the Party’s fear of outside forces shaping what people think. When asked about how to avoid government interference in running their churches, pastors frequently mentioned not involving missionaries in church affairs and not

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<sup>52</sup> Asia Watch Committee, ‘Vigilance against infiltration by religious forces from abroad’, *Freedom of Religion in China* (Human Rights Watch/Asia, 1992), pp. 66-68.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11329, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11698, northeastern province, 2018.

inviting foreign pastors to give sermons. One interviewee whose education was heavily influenced by American missionaries and American theology said that he no longer associated with or allowed visits by overseas ministers to the point of being perceived by them as a ‘heretic’ (*yiduan*).<sup>55</sup> Another stressed that even doing an interview could make him look suspicious because he would be seen as providing information to a foreign scholar.<sup>56</sup> He added that an exception was made in the first author’s case only because the ‘interviewer did not look foreign’.<sup>57</sup> In fact, many interviewees proudly claimed to have severed all international connections and felt confident this would serve them well when the next government inspection took place.<sup>58</sup>

These actions are more than a response to regulations designed to reduce foreign influence. They also reflect a degree of buy-in to the larger project of Sinicizing Christianity. Many interviewees expressed growing pride and determination to minister a purely Chinese church. One excitedly explained how Chinese and resilient Protestantism is: ‘Throughout the Cultural Revolution and years of persecution, Chinese churches have survived without foreign missionaries, without Westerners, without being above ground, without a physical location, without anything. That’s the Chinese church I serve.’<sup>59</sup> Another went even further in defending

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11329, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ11419, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Some interviewees valued support provided by foreign Protestants. Pastors who maintained ties with overseas churches tended to be more antagonistic towards the Party and more outspoken in fighting for religious rights. Vala suggests possible variation by type of church and a pastor’s age. He argues that young pastors in TSPM churches are more willing to learn from and cooperate with foreigners because they have ‘no memory of pre-1949 foreign exploitation, reject the anti-foreign perspective...and see considerable benefits in foreign cooperation’. Carsten Vala, ‘Protestant resistance and activism in China’s official churches’, in Teresa Wright, ed., *Handbook of Protest and Religion in China*, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), p. 319.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with pastor PYS11937, eastern province, 2017.

the government's efforts to make Protestantism more Chinese: 'People are mistaken. Sinicization is not a problem at all. We're Chinese, so we put up the Chinese flag. You Americans also put up the American flag in buildings. When we preach, it's better to use Chinese folktales because we Chinese can relate to them better than to Western anecdotes'.<sup>60</sup> Not all interviewees shared his enthusiasm for Sinicization, but most agreed that it is time for Chinese churches to stand on their own. Although Chinese Protestantism still bears the imprint of missionary efforts, in its history, operations, and theology, and many pastors are quick to acknowledge that their churches have benefitted from overseas assistance, most are just as ready to argue that the era when foreign guidance and help was needed has run its course.<sup>61</sup>

### *Collective Action Threat*

Over a dozen of our interviewees have sought to address concerns about collective action by splitting their congregations into groups of ten to twenty. It is a big decision to break up a church and requires a commitment to train additional leaders, find new locations for services and other meetings, and coordinate schedules. One pastor explained that after being forced to relocate several times, he decided to turn his church into several house churches that worshipped separately. He taught lay brothers how to prepare sermons and lead services, personally checked in on each congregation weekly, and reunited the full group monthly.<sup>62</sup> Another pastor described a protocol he drew up after other churches in the neighborhood were shut down.<sup>63</sup> In the event of a raid or closure, his congregation would know where and when to meet the following week.

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ11469, eastern province, 2019.

<sup>61</sup> The increase in deportations of missionaries in recent years has made the end of this era even more clear.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with pastor PYS11618, northeastern province, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with pastor PYQ11519, southwestern province, 2019.

Some interviewees did question the wisdom and practicality of separating into smaller churches, noting that a dollop of security was gained at the cost of losing the decorum and formality of collective worship,<sup>64</sup> but many said this was a tradeoff worth making (or at least contemplating).

Pastors are not only decreasing the size of their congregations; many are also reducing their interaction with other churches. In particular, most of our interviewees are refraining from building and taking part in cross-church networks.<sup>65</sup> This has not always been the case. In the early 2000s, church leaders often came together to host conferences and organize seminars for Chinese students studying abroad. Pastors from different parts of China, especially those who had attended the same seminary, often kept close ties with each other and their congregants collaborated on community outreach. In the Xi era, however, pastors have shied away from this and have begun to break off relations with other ministers and their congregations. This has occurred for a number of reasons, some unrelated to relations with the authorities.<sup>66</sup> But one of the motives for severing ties with fellow pastors is fear of repercussions. Many of our interviewees recounted measures that the authorities took when they sought to collaborate with other churches or engage multiple congregations in community projects.<sup>67</sup> More than a few had

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<sup>64</sup> These ministers were worried that worshipping in homes on weekdays without ordained pastors would lead congregants to forget the correct order of worship (prayer, hymns, sermon, benediction) and they would just share what was happening in their lives, pray and eat, and then go their separate ways.

<sup>65</sup> Koesel similarly found that churches were kept small and ‘self-contained, rather than being dependent on other units,’ and argued that this was done to protect the larger network of churches to which individual churches belonged. Karrie Koesel, ‘The rise of a Chinese house church: the organizational weapon’, *The China Quarterly* 215, (2013), p. 584.

<sup>66</sup> One pastor (Interview PYC11329, southwestern province, 2019) noted: ‘When I used to be at a big church, as my influence grew, the other pastors began to be on guard around me and to treat me as a rival’. Others mentioned avoiding interaction with pastors who held different opinions about how to view TSPM churches, whether to pursue (or keep) official registration, and how to interpret the Bible.

<sup>67</sup> Koesel explains the ‘unexpected consequence’ that community outreach can have by ‘strengthen[ing] the existing social capital enjoyed by churches and their linkages with the local

even witnessed or experienced the authorities stymieing network-building, as attempts to participate in a multi-church forum were thwarted by the local police, permission to travel to an overseas conference was revoked at the airport, and ministers who sought to go abroad were monitored closely and visited by officials who threatened to close their church.

Breaking up congregations and cutting ties to other churches are more than a reaction to repressive policies. Many interviewees argued that big churches are not suitable for China. They said that in contrast to large congregations that have multiple pastors rotating to preach sermons, smaller congregations allow believers to have closer interactions and form deeper personal relationships with each other and the pastor. A minister in Chengdu explained, ‘worshipping in small groups is one of the advantages we have; people bond in ways that they can’t in a big church’.<sup>68</sup> Some saw value in not emulating pastors who sought to increase the number of congregants and built churches with hundreds of pews, towering steeples, and huge sanctuaries. Several said that the cross-demolition campaign in Wenzhou was proof that God was reprimanding those who had gone astray by constructing grandiose buildings. Pastors who shared his view often said that God had ‘blessed’ (*zhufu*) China with modest-sized churches. According to them, staying small and dispersed kept them safe, reduced the risk of permanent closure, and promoted the development of Chinese Christianity.

For some pastors, all these accommodations are simply an effort to hang on in the face of growing repression. They and their churches are in a difficult position and they are doing what

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community,’ and becoming an ‘effective evangelism tool to expand the size of the church’. Karrie Koesel, ‘Official Protestantism in China’, *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 6, (2019), p. 89.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11269, southwestern province, 2019.

they must to survive.<sup>69</sup> For most of our interviewees, however, there is also a larger purpose at work. Experiencing and figuring out how to adapt to repression is said to be a part of God's grand plan. These pastors may be deluded about their ability to dispel the threats the Party perceives, and they may not be able to create much more space for their churches to operate. But they do seem to believe that God is giving them a test that they must do everything they can to pass, and that in the end they will emerge stronger than before. Consider the imagery of violence, death and rejuvenation in the following remarks:

God used the Boxer Rebellion and the Cultural Revolution to revive and purify the church in China. I believe God has shed these martyrs' blood to lay the foundation for Christianity in China today.<sup>70</sup>

Christians in China are like the Israelites in Palestine. Just as God chastised the Israelites through Babylon, I believe the Chinese government is the whip in God's hands. When we go astray in our faith and when leaders fall, God purifies the church. God uses external forces to purify the church, separate out the wheat from the chaff. When churches get persecuted, chaff falls away. Because God continues to use the whip on us, Chinese churches continue to grow and build stronger faith. China's church will most definitely be used by God, and the government is just one of the tools in God's hands.<sup>71</sup>

These are not instrumental rationalizations that justify why pastors and their churches have no choice but to live with Xi's policies. They are based on a worldview that accords both the government and believers a critical role in fulfilling God's design for Chinese Christianity. And God's plan, including the small church model and extensive cooperation with the regime, is neither generic nor limited in scope. It is specific to China but has worldwide implications. As one pastor put it:

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<sup>69</sup> Reny argues that pastors are engaging in 'compliant defiance', and following informal rules to 'earn respect and reassure those officials they are not a threat to political stability'. Reny, 'Compliant defiance', p. 473.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with pastor PYB12066, northeastern province, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with pastor PYJ11449, eastern province, 2019.

Church growth is declining all over the world, in Europe, and even in South Korea. Only China's churches are growing. I believe the future of global evangelism is in China's hands. Just as God used Rome at the beginning, He will use China for the final evangelization.<sup>72</sup>

### **The Xi Jinping Effect and Protestant Thought and Practice**

Many of the consequences of Xi Jinping's ascent concern high politics, including his disruption of leadership succession norms and a more assertive approach to foreign affairs. But when we turn to social policy and low politics, change does not mean much unless it affects practice on the ground. Societal actors always have a say over how an initiative unfolds, even if it involves more repression and limiting the space within which they can operate. This means that Protestant pastors, perched as they are between the authorities and a congregation, find themselves on the frontlines when translating new strictures and ideological precepts into action, and have become willing (or unwilling) partners in making the regime's policies real. As with Stern and Hassid's 'control parables', where potential protesters talk themselves out of popular action,<sup>73</sup> our interviewees have been participating in the government's work and helping the state achieve its aims. Pastors, in this way, are having a discernable influence over how religious policy plays out, and to understand how Xi's rule has affected Protestant thought and practice, we must look down as well as up.

The Party's approach to Protestantism has always started from the belief that pastors and their churches pose an ideological, security, and collective action threat to the regime. Under Xi, increasingly harsh policies, such as recording sermons and arresting more dissidents, prohibiting foreign funding and influence, and shuttering churches and monitoring online activities, are all

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with pastor PYC11289, southwestern province, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Rachel E. Stern and Jonathan Hassid, 'Amplifying silence: uncertainty and control parables in contemporary China', *Comparative Political Studies* 45(10), (2012), pp. 1230-1254.

designed to address this concern. The Party has also sought to redirect Protestant thought and practice with new narratives, such as the China Dream and the Sinicization of Christianity, both of which offer believers a guide to rethink the place of religion in the Xi era. Many pastors have responded to these policies and constructs by creatively adapting to the circumstances they find themselves in. In ways big and small, they have sought to reduce 1) ideological competition, by not preaching about politics, dissociating themselves from dissidents, and expressing support for the China Dream; 2) security concerns, by striving to become financially self-sufficient, cutting off ties to foreign missionaries and calling for the creation of a truly Chinese church; and 3) collective action fears, by dividing their congregations, avoiding networking, and viewing the small church model that the Party prefers as part of God's plan.

Their dance with the authorities is partly driven by what pastors say they must do and partly by what seems to be belief. Even after 120 interviews throughout China, it is difficult to estimate how much of adapting is a matter of grudging compliance, acceptance of the inevitable, or active consent. It is always a challenge to understand a person's motivations, and some of our interviewees may be wearing a mask,<sup>74</sup> or their faces may be growing to fit the mask. Others may be true believers. Whatever the case, their cooperative, sympathetic stance and accommodations are shaping religious thought and practice, as they seek to turn Protestantism into a religion the Party can fully approve of and even find useful.

In the best-case scenario, these pastors are suggesting a path toward mutual co-existence and the tamping down of conflict. Our interviewees were certainly doing everything they could

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<sup>74</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). On difficulties in determining whether behavior is sincere or strategic, see Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Rightful resistance revisited', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 40(6), (2013), p. 1057.

to diminish the perception that Protestantism is a threat and to persuade their congregations that new restrictions do not matter much for what is important about being a Christian. Still, accommodating has taken place almost exclusively on one side, as pastors steer away from anything conceivably oppositional and seek to put the lie to the idea that they are the firebrands they are sometimes portrayed to be.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, there are few indications so far that their efforts have been noticed or will elicit a positive response. Our interviewees have accepted the hand that the Party has dealt them, but are still waiting for signs that the regime will back off on repression and work with them to slot Protestantism into the political landscape in a less contentious place.

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<sup>75</sup> This view is common in Party accounts and also in the international press. Our interviewees are more reminiscent of recipients of the state-sanctioned ‘National Outstanding Lawyer Award’, who distance themselves from activist lawyers engaged in rights-protection work. See Lawrence J. Liu and Rachel E. Stern, ‘State-adjacent professionals: how Chinese lawyers participate in political life’, forthcoming in *The China Quarterly*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741020000>.