

Testimony of Nina Shea
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Religious Freedom in China: The Case of Bishop James Su Zhimin

Thank you, Chairman Smith, for holding these important hearings on Religious Freedom in China, with a specific focus on Bishop James Su Zhimin. The Bishop's struggle, at great personal cost, to worship God according to his conscience is emblematic of the larger struggle for religious freedom, for all people of faith, in China at this time.

Catholic Bishop James Su Zhimin, if still alive, has been detained without due process for some 40 years, in total. While leading a religious procession in 1996, Bishop Su was taken into police custody and promptly ranked among China's legions of disappeared religious prisoners. Since then, China's authorities have refused to provide any information on his case, not even on whether he is alive or dead.

Bishop Su's crime was to refuse membership in the government-established Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. Religious registration in China should not be confused with registration for tax exemption or for zoning requirements, as in the United States. To register is to agree to submit to Chinese Communist Party priorities and oversight.

Previously, beginning in the Mao era, Bishop Su had been held intermittently for 26 years either in prison or forced labor camps and subjected to merciless beatings and other torture by the authorities. Once, security police beat him with a wooden board until it splintered, at which point they dismantled a door frame to continue the beatings until that too shattered. Another time, he was bound by the wrists and suspended from the ceiling while being beaten. In another prison episode, he was placed in a closet sized chamber, hip-deep in water, so that he could neither sit nor sleep for several days. Bishop Su has been subjected to a lifetime of cruel punishment for simply praying without the authorization of the Chinese Communist Party.

Throughout his life, Bishop Su has remained in communion with Rome, and he was appointed the bishop of Baoding diocese in Hebei province, by Pope John Paul II. According to the Catholic outlet UCA News, though a Chinese official gave the bishop's nephew hope that information on the bishop would be provided with improved relations with the Vatican, even after the signing of the Sino-Vatican agreement of 2018, none was.

Bishop Su's case is an important symbol of China's contempt for religious freedom. He represents one of the many compelling reasons why Pope Francis should not renew the provisional Sino-Vatican agreement, which is set to expire in September. Vatican diplomats

should understand that renewing a religious accord with Beijing at this time will harm the Chinese Church and its moral standing, while allowing one of the world's most repressive regimes to exploit its soft power. Beijing's promises for a renewed pact must be evaluated in the context of Bishop Su's tragic case. They must also be seen in the light of the reinvigorated persecution of the Catholic and Protestant underground churches more broadly and the CCP's recent effort to meld the Patriotic Catholic Association and the Three-Self Protestant Association with its own orthodoxy under Pres. Xi's new policy of "sinicization." Moreover, religious oppression against the churches has intensified in China during the current pandemic period when Beijing has taken advantage of the world's distraction.

Beijing's persecution and repressive treatment of the Chinese churches should trouble all China observers, whether Christian or not. These churches have constituted the largest nationwide movement with a culture and belief system distinct from that of the Chinese state. Courageous doctors, lawyers, scientists, and journalists dissent, but they can do so only individually or in small groups outside any national institutional support. Since the 1980s, the church—Protestants and Catholics, open and underground—had survived with more ideological independence than any other civil-society organization in China. As Bishop Su's case reminds us, Christians have long been persecuted and restricted under the CCP, but the current comprehensive push by Beijing threatens to be devastating to the faith. It signals the advance of totalitarianism, just as China is rising as a world power.

Before discussing how President Xi and the CCP has treated the Christian Church in recent months, however, I wish to recognize that the Uighur Muslim community has been facing probable genocide since 2018. It was in that year that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights found that over 1 million Uighur Muslims were interned in concentration camps and forced to work in government approved factories and sweatshops. New reports assert discriminatory restrictions on Uighur family size that include forced sterilizations and abortions and the forcible separation of Uighur children and parents – all among the hallmarks of genocide under international law. Also, it is important to note the ongoing religious oppression of the Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong and the Church of the Almighty God sect, some of whose members reportedly are being subjected to organ harvesting for medical transplant, just as Falun Gong members were in past decades. There can be no doubt – China's ruling party is waging a war on religion across-the-board within its borders. Against this backdrop, any secret new deal reached with the Vatican must be seen as the height of cynicism.

Apart from Bishop Su, other Christian leaders are also being persecuted. As the coronavirus spread, Chinese authorities made examples of two internationally renowned underground Christian leaders. On December 30, as news about the coronavirus circulated on social media, Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church, a Protestant house church, was sentenced to an unusually long prison term, nine years, for "inciting subversion." (More typical for Christian leaders in recent years have been detentions of four or six months.) On Easter Sunday, his church's leadership were jailed for praying online.

Under the 2018 Vatican agreement, Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin of Mindong, Fujian province, had been demoted to the position of auxiliary bishop, to make way for a bishop preferred by the government. Guo was pushed out of his home on January 15, the day that China initiated its

highest-level emergency response to the virus. This time, the 61-year-old prelate was stripped of his human dignity and forced to sleep on the doorstep of the church administrative building for rejecting membership in the PCA. After international criticism, he regained access to his apartment, but with its utilities shut off.

In the ensuing months, 20 underground Catholic priests, followers of the bishop, disappeared into detention after rejecting the PCA pledge of “independence, autonomy, and self-administration of the Church in China” —meaning independence from Catholic teaching and any degree of Vatican governance. One was Father Huang Jintong, tortured with four days of sleep deprivation. He signed the registration to join the PCA but not before trying, in keeping with a Vatican suggestion in June 2019, to add his intent to “remain faithful to the Catholic doctrine.” On June 19, 70-year old Catholic bishop Augustine Cui Tai, of the underground church in Xuanhua Diocese, Hebei province, was reported detained. Bishop Cui has been intermittently detained for long periods without due process, over the past 13 years. He has been occasionally freed for Chinese holidays and during the 6 months of the pandemic crisis this year, and he has always been forced to return to his prison. Hong Kong’s Cardinal Joseph Zen, bishop emeritus, had been right to warn that the Vatican’s silence on the rights of its faithful, unregistered churches in its 2018 agreement would allow China to “succeed in eliminating the underground church with the help of the Vatican.”

Even some official churches are being shut. In Henan province on March 10, hundreds of officials used excavators to demolish a Three-Self church. For asking why, the church’s guard, a man in his 70s, was beaten until his ribs broke, according to a report in the online magazine *Bitter Winter*, the respected source on China’s religious repression. Donghu, a Three-Self church in Xining, the capital of Qinghai province, was destroyed on Easter. In Anhui, Jiangsu, Shandong, and other provinces, the exteriors of hundreds of Three-Self churches were secularized, their crosses toppled—250 churches in Anhui alone. The century old cross was removed from a Catholic church in Henan province on Easter, prompting Shanren Shenfu, a priest with the PCA, to wryly remark that “now, when a cross is removed, Christians must be calm and smile,” describing the Catholic self-censorship deemed to be in the spirit of the Sino–Vatican agreement, whose contents, including its concessions to the CCP, are kept secret to this day. In Anhui province on April 18, the cross was torn from Our Lady of the Rosary Church, with the cooperation of a PCA priest who explained that he feared that, if he had resisted, the church would have been closed and the building put to secular use.

In an ominous sign for the future of the Chinese Church, whose numbers had been surging in recent decades, Beijing took new measures to sharply curb the knowledge and practice of Christianity within its borders and to enlist the remaining church institutions in the tasks of party indoctrination and propaganda.

January saw the announcement of a new Bible-translation project, under CCP supervision. (The Quran is also undergoing government retranslation to align it with sinicization, to Uighur consternation.) Ying Fuk Tsang, director of the divinity school at Hong Kong’s Chinese University, observed that sinicization implies that the Bible is subject to “political scrutiny.” He predicts that verses, such as those on end times, that are out of sync with CCP views will be “banned or constrained.”

On February 1, Beijing imposed 41 articles of new restrictions “implementing the values of socialism.” Religious organizations must now “spread the principles and policies of the CCP,” ensure that “religious personnel and religious citizens . . . support the CCP leadership,” and establish “a learning system” in CCP policies. To facilitate that effort, the CCP provides “Study the Great Nation,” an app, dedicated to Xi’s sayings, that has a back door to the user’s social media, contacts, and Internet history.

All churches are prohibited from admitting minors, instructing them in Christianity, and encouraging them to consider priestly or ministerial vocations, leaving in doubt whether the faith will be transmitted to the next generation. A Three-Self pastor lamented in a blog the lack of Christian knowledge among adult congregants, noting that they loudly shout slogans, such as “Live for the Lord,” without knowing the meaning. He wrote that scholarship at seminaries is at “training” or entry level, with state-approved Christian journals limited in availability and content. In July 2019, for example, a commentary in *Heavenly Wind*, the sole magazine of the Three-Self Church, conflated Proverbs 14:21 with Confucius’s sayings. At the hands of an agent of the officially atheistic CCP’s United Front Work Department, such biblical reinterpretations aren’t simple exercises in inculturation or translation. In light of the new religious rules in January, the Chinese Church fears that the words of Jesus and the Old Testament scribes and prophets are being replaced and distorted for political objectives. Already, under CCP supervision, images of the Virgin Mary are being replaced on church walls with pictures of Pres. Xi and traditional Christians hymns, with “My Motherland and I” during worship services.

In Fujian province, church leaders were directed, among other restrictions, not to “distribute religious printed material without a serial number,” leading the Catholic pontifical outlet *AsiaNews* to conclude that there is at present “a slow and inexorable suffocation of the Chinese Church, both official and underground.” If Hong Kong’s new national security law affects religious freedom there as well, as Cardinal Zen predicts it will, this will be another blow to Chinese Christianity, which depends on Hong Kong as an important center for independent scholarship, information, and meetings with coreligionists from around the world.

In the case of Uighurs, China is using sheer brutality to suppress and control religious belief for political purposes. China’s tens of millions of Christians are being dominated more quietly. In all cases, Beijing employs cyber technology to trace, surveille, cancel, punish and indoctrinate. It is of paramount importance that the US government bar American companies from collaborating in any such repression, hold offending Chinese officials and entities accountable, and support efforts to circumvent China’s Internet censorship and cyber tyranny.