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CHINA: Tight state controls on religious education

By Magda Hornemann, Forum 18

China does not allow religious communities to run schools for children, even though regulations do not forbid the provision of religious education to minors. Nor is religious education provided in state schools. For students beyond school age, only state-approved religious groups affiliated with China's five state-backed monopoly faiths are allowed to apply to set up institutions for the study of their faith or training of clergy, Forum 18 News Service notes. Restrictions are especially tight in Tibet and Xinjiang. The state limits the number of such institutions and their size. Establishing new colleges is cumbersome and long drawn out, even when successful. Their curricula must include "politics" and "patriotic" education, as defined by the state. The state also discourages religious activity on general university campuses. These restrictions reflect the authoritarian state's desire to control religious groups, including by intervening in the training of their leaders and the level of education of their members.

Only state-approved religious groups affiliated with China's five state-backed monopoly faiths are allowed to apply to set up educational institutions for the study of their faith or training of clergy, Forum 18 News Service notes. State regulations and practices determine how many and how big such institutions can be and what they can and cannot teach. In addition, they must teach subjects within a government-imposed curriculum. Religious educational institutions in Tibet and Xinjiang are under even tighter state control than in other regions of China.

Informal religious education outside state control is possible, though difficult, while education abroad is an "alternative". However, this option is usually available only for those who have completed religious studies in China.

Faith-based primary and secondary schools are not permitted to be established even though state regulations do not expressly forbid their establishment. Moreover, there is no form of religious education within state-controlled primary and secondary schools.

Religious education is important because it involves the freedom to impart and to learn more about one's faith or other faiths. The restrictions reflect the authoritarian state's desire to exercise control over religious groups, including by intervening in the training of their leaders and the level of education of their members.

Hong Kong and Macau – both Special Administrative Regions of China – are not subject to these state controls on religious education.

Religious education in China

At a basic level, China's state of religious education can be measured by the number of formal religious institutions of education. According to the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), the government agency tasked with overseeing religious affairs, as of July 2011 there were 92 religious colleges and universities servicing hundreds of millions of Chinese religious adherents. These institutions produced over 40,000 graduates in the 30 years up to July 2011, according to SARA's figures.

Most of these institutions appear to be post-secondary institutions training individuals for religious careers. Among them is the famous Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, which is affiliated with the officially-approved Protestant Christian group, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

The Chinese government recognises the right of religious groups to establish religious educational institutions. Such rights, however, extend only to the five state-sponsored faith structures, for Buddhism, Taoism, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity and Islam. Individuals are implicitly excluded from founding religious educational establishments, whether on a profit or not-for-profit basis.

Religious groups not officially permitted by the state – including the Vatican-loyal Catholic Church, unregistered Protestant house churches, or Jehovah's Witnesses – or those that are slightly tolerated – including Protestant denominations like Seventh-day Adventists which maintain some self-identity within the state-approved Protestant body, or the tiny Chinese Orthodox Church – have no possibility for formal religious education.

State regulations

Article 9 of China's Regulations on Religious Affairs, promulgated in 2004, sets out the conditions under which such state-approved religious groups can establish and maintain religious educational institutions. Those conditions provide for curriculum plans, qualified students, financial resources, qualified instructors and administrators, and appropriate facilities. Article 10 of the Regulations also allows China's five state-sponsored religious groups to receive foreign students for religious studies in their state-approved colleges in China.

In December 2006, SARA promulgated a set of regulations on the setting up of religious educational institutions entitled "Rules for Establishing Religious Academies and Colleges" (hereafter referred to as regulations on religious educational institutions). The regulations provide additional details on the requirements for setting up a religious educational institution in China. It also provides opportunities for the state to intervene in the operations of religious educational institutions. Before discussing those restrictive measures, we will take a brief look at the types of religious schools that the Chinese state allows.

According to this set of regulations, religious educational institutions in China generally fall under two categories. The first category has to do with whether an institution is "national-level" or "provincial-level". In fact, according to Article 3 of the regulations on religious educational institutions, only religious groups, ostensibly officially-approved ones, that operate at the national level and in provinces, autonomous regions, and directly-administered municipalities (e.g. Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing) are permitted to establish religious educational institutions.

Article 6 further stipulates that in provinces and regions where religious educational institutions exist, the state will "generally" not permit the establishment of new religious educational institutions. In this manner, the state effectively makes it difficult for non-approved religious groups to establish new religious educational institutions.

Long drawn-out approval process

If an applicant meets these conditions, in addition to other qualifications that must be met, including those mentioned in the Regulations on Religious Affairs, the applicant can still expect a long drawn-out approval process. According to Articles 10 - 14 of the regulations on religious educational establishments, an applicant must apply for state approval to prepare for the institution's establishment.

The "preparatory" stage is ostensibly intended to be a period during which the applying institution attempts to meet all the required conditions. During the preparatory stage, the applying institution cannot recruit students. After the conditions have been met, at the end of the preparatory stage, which can last no longer than three years, the applying institution must submit another application for state approval to officially open the institution.

Religious educational institutions are also officially defined in terms of their academic levels. The regulations on religious educational institutions provide for the establishment of religious schools at two academic levels: "higher-level" and "intermediate-level". Higher-level institutions are university-equivalent institutions while intermediate-level ones may be at the senior high school level or at the post-secondary vocational school level.

Article 7 of the regulations on religious educational institutions stipulates that students at intermediate-level institutions must have completed nine years of compulsory education before attending those institutions. This means that the regulations allow for students to receive formal religious education as early as the age of 14, which is the approximate age of a student completing the ninth grade.

This fact contradicts the common understanding that Chinese laws and regulations do not permit children under the age of 18 to receive religious education. Indeed, even the infamous 1982 "Document 19" by the Communist Party of China (CPC) does not explicitly forbid minors from engaging in religious activities. Of course, this omission in the regulations has not prevented Chinese authorities from cracking down on unapproved efforts to provide religious education to minors (see F18News 18 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=491).

Compulsory politics

Interestingly, these regulations on religious educational institutions do not address the issue of school curriculum directly. However, some Chinese religious academic institutions provide information about the contents of their curricula openly. For example, Jianzhen Buddhist University, which is located in Jiangsu Province's Yangzhou City, about three hours' travelling time from Shanghai, publishes its undergraduate curriculum on its website (http://www.jianzhen.net/view.asp?id=12106). Jianzhen is sponsored by the Jiangsu provincial state-approved Buddhist association. It is a national-level institution approved by SARA.

According to the published information, courses directly related to Buddhist studies at Jianzhen constitute a very small component of the overall curricular requirements. In contrast, students spend a significant part of their time studying the English and Japanese languages, reflecting in part the fact that this institution was created as the first foreign language-focused Buddhist training institution in China.

Interestingly, however, students at the university are expected to complete eight "politics" courses. During their first year, students at Jianzhen must complete a course entitled "An Introduction to Religious Policy and Regulations" and another on "Current Politics and Theories". The latter course must be taken during each of the four years of studies at the university.

During their second year, students are expected to enrol in a course entitled "Patriotism and Religion". During the third year, the other requisite course is entitled "Education on Ideological Morality and Core Values". The last remaining course, to be completed during students' fourth year, is entitled "Theory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics".

Curriculum, teachers

Given the importance of political studies in the curriculum, it should be unsurprising that studies on politically-sensitive areas – such as eschatology (beliefs about the end of the world), on the way religion interacts with politics, or on the history of a religious community in China since the Communists took power in 1949 – would be impossible or difficult in a state-approved religious college. Designated textbooks reflect this situation.

For instance, neither of the two undergraduate textbooks on the history of Buddhism in China that are required by the Buddhist Academy of China, the most prestigious Buddhist academic institution in China, address the development of Buddhism in China since 1949 (http://www.zgfxy.cn/Announce/2013/03/18/1603001339.html). The two textbooks' authors, one of whom was Japanese, were well-known scholars of Buddhism. Both have been recognised by the state and the mainstream Buddhist community in contemporary China, though this might not have been a factor in the selection of the books.

A review of the undergraduate curriculum at the Buddhist Academy of China also suggests that students there have very limited access to printed materials for their studies. For example, only the two aforementioned texts have been assigned for the study of the history of Buddhism in China, an important subject that has been the topic of many publications.

While the approved religious education institutions do not appear to use internet resources as part of their course materials, nothing prevents students from seeking further study materials – in Chinese or other languages they might know – on the internet. China operates an extensive system of internet censorship, which includes blocking a range of religious websites (see F18News 21 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366). However, materials for academic study of religion do not appear to be targeted for blocking.

In this kind of educational setting, teachers are especially important from the state's perspective because instructors are in a position to manage the students, both physically and with respect to the transmission of ideas.

According to Article 18 of a trial regulation on the qualifications and appointment of instructors in religious colleges and universities, which went into effect on 1 January 2013, instructors in those colleges and universities are responsible for the students' "political education" (http://www.sara.gov.cn/zcfg/bmgz/17897.htm). This essentially involves educating students on relevant state polices and regulations. The aforementioned "politics" courses at Jianzhen Buddhist University offer a glimpse of the content of political education.

Therefore, the state has every reason to control the process of teachers' appointment. Indeed, the trial regulation appears to require that applicants for a faculty position in those colleges and universities have obtained the approval of the government offices in the localities in which they are registered residents, the approval of the state-approved religious group that has jurisdiction over the religious educational institution in question, and ultimately the religious college's appointment committee.

Gaining admission

Now that a potential student applicant has some knowledge about the curriculum content of a religious educational institution, the vital question is how to gain admission into one's institution of choice. Indeed, institutional and bureaucratic hurdles that an applicant must overcome to gain admission are significant. That relatively few approved schools exist means that these institutions are unlikely to meet the demand of China's growing religious communities.

In addition, budgetary constraints mean that the religious educational institutions are unable to accommodate the large majority of applicants. For example, the Buddhist Academy of China has indicated that it can accept only 45 new undergraduate students and 5 new graduate students for admission in 2013.

Although Forum 18 is unaware of specific measures to limit the size of faculties in Chinese religious colleges and universities, it is not difficult to surmise that those faculties suffer a serious shortage of personnel, given the extremely limited number of students admitted.

These institutions' budgetary constraints are the result of inadequate state subsidies. Private donations, much of which may be foreign in nature, are insufficient and student tuition fees do not serve as an adequate revenue source because students in religious

colleges and universities are often impoverished. This is precisely the situation that faces Protestant Christian colleges in China as described by Carsten Vala, an expert on Protestant Christianity in China.

In this sense, the predicament of religious educational institutions in China mirrors that for non-government organisations and other civil society groups. The state is ultimately the controller of most of the country's economic resources, while individuals and social groups - for a variety of reasons - lack the will, capacity or both to support non-state undertakings.

Choosing students

These institutional barriers have given the state considerable room to choose students who best fit the state's ideal, notes Vala. The state seeks individuals who not only possess the skills, knowledge and potential to succeed in a career in the religious sector, but who will also be prepared to adhere to the state's policies and rules.

In his article "Pathways to the Pulpit: Leadership Training in 'Patriotic' and Unregistered Chinese Protestant Churches," which appeared in the 2009 edited volume "Making Religion, Making the State", Vala described the "rigorous and lengthy application process" for admission to state-approved Protestant Christian seminaries.

During this process, not only must the applicant successfully complete the entrance exam that is designed "to test basic scriptural, historical, and political knowledge," the local religious affairs bureau must also conduct "political background checks" to ensure that the applicant has "no record of illegal Christian activity or criminal behaviour". Vala also described a case in which the local religious affairs bureau denied an otherwise qualified applicant the opportunity to take the entrance exam. The religious affairs bureau claimed that the applicant's excellent foreign language skills "made him a risk for emigration after seminary graduation".

Based on information provided about its recruitment on its website, the Buddhist Academy of China appears also to follow a similar procedure in its admission process.

In essence, while anyone may technically apply for religious studies and the educational institutions are purportedly responsible for admission decisions, in practice the state and the state-approved religious groups wield considerable power over which students will or will not be admitted.

After religious education

Forum 18 is unaware of any written restrictions on the employment and academic paths of graduates of Chinese religious colleges and universities. One would assume that armed with a degree from a state-accredited institution a graduate of Chinese religious colleges and universities should have no problem finding employment in religious institutions affiliated with state-approved religious groups. However, Vala's research indicates that local religious leaders and the graduates' connections with those leaders may exercise stronger influences on the graduates' employment prospects in the religious communities than their academic credentials.

As indicated above, another path for graduates is to pursue studies abroad. In fact, Article 10 of the 2004 Regulations on Religious Affairs allows China's five state-sponsored religious groups to send religious students to study abroad. However, those opportunities are likely to be limited. Forum 18 does not have systematic information on the consequences of individuals who have returned from overseas studying.

Nonetheless, for a few individuals, foreign religious education can have positive employment consequences. For example, Rev. Ambroise Wang, a vice president of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, earned a doctorate in theology from Switzerland's University of Basel. According to Vala, the expert on Protestant Christianity in China, many Chinese Protestant Christians who study abroad, particularly in Singapore, have chosen to remain in foreign countries rather than returning to China, for financial and doctrinal reasons.

Professional v. informal

The officially approved religious education establishments in China lay emphasis on the training of religious professionals. However, many religious adherents participate in religious education in more informal settings and are not necessarily interested in pursuing "professional" religious careers. Some information exists about such informal study, though it is not especially well documented.

For example, in 2009 Forum 18 learned that ethnic Chinese in Beijing were studying Tibetan Buddhism in unofficial settings and from instructors who were unaffiliated with state-approved Buddhist groups. In addition, as Forum 18 has reported, there are documented accounts of unofficial provision of religious education to children among Christian communities in China. Lastly, there are unapproved religious education programmes that provide training to individuals who aspire to pursue religious careers. Among these, the well-documented ones involve those created by and for unregistered Protestant Christian churches (see F18News 18 January 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=491).

Students' religious freedom?

Not especially well documented is the presence of religious activities in non-religious academic institutions. Officially, religious activities are not permitted on campuses. Foreigners are especially warned against engaging in such activities, as stipulated in Article 33 of the 2000 regulation on foreign students in Chinese universities (http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/fwxx/content_2267063.htm).

Yet, unapproved religious activities continue among students in Chinese universities, Forum 18 has learned over the past several years. Many of those activities involve Protestant Christianity, notably the presence of Christian groups initiated by foreigners.

The government appears only recently to have decided to act against religious activities on campus, particularly those by foreigners, though discreetly. However, given that religious activities on Chinese university campuses are often created by foreigners with the participation of Chinese students, it is safe to assume that the recent state action is targeted indirectly against Chinese students.

The CPC Central Committee issued a directive in May 2011 urging university administrations to discourage foreign religious activities on university campuses. (A university faculty member showed the document to Forum 18 in Beijing in 2011. In December 2012, the China Aid Association, an organisation with close connections to unregistered Protestant groups in China, released the same document.) Forum 18 is unclear the extent to which this directive is being implemented.

Harsher restrictions in Tibet and Xinjiang

Restrictions on religious education in Tibet and Xinjiang seem to be tighter than in other parts of China. This is unsurprising, since the Chinese government views Tibet and Xinjiang primarily as issues that have direct connections to China's core interest of territorial sovereignty.

The regulations and official practices with respect to religious education in Xinjiang have been especially harsh, even in comparison with the situation in Tibet. For instance, only in Xinjiang are there legal restrictions against minors participating in religious activities, even though Article 15 of Tibet's measures to implement the national Law on the Protection of Minors makes it clear that parents and guardians are not permitted to force minors to enter (Buddhist) monasteries and nunneries.

Article 14 of Xinjiang's measures to implement the national Law on the Protection of Minors stipulates that parents and guardians are not to allow children under their charge to pursue religious activities. According to the "Kashgar Daily", in May 2012 nine Uyghur Muslim men in Xinjiang were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for either operating illegal religious schools for minors or for providing religious instruction. The following month, June 2012, local police raided a local religious school that resulted in injuries to 12 children, the Associated Press reported.

An important shared characteristic of the religious education situation between Tibet and Xinjiang is the frequency and intensity of state-imposed "patriotic" education campaigns in those regions. Patriotic education campaigns have been directed at both instructors and students. In Tibet's case, these have involved monks and nuns at all levels. In March 2013, the English version of China's "Global Times" newspaper, which is sponsored by the CPC-sponsored "People's Daily" and the Chinese central government's information office, published a report on patriotic education in Tibetan monasteries that offers a glimpse of the patriotic education curriculum there (http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/767918.shtml).

According to the "Global Times" report, patriotic education in Tibetan monasteries involves weekly or bi-weekly study sessions and monthly lectures that address China's laws and regulations, notably those covering religion. According to the report, such patriotic education was added to the religious education curriculum of Tibetan monasteries only in 2008, in the aftermath of the major unrest in Tibet which took place several months before the Beijing Olympics.

The curriculum in Tibet has recently added messages to discourage self-immolation by Tibetan monks and nuns, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy noted on 8 February 2013. The effectiveness of patriotic education, however, remains in question. Even the "Global Times" report expressed ambivalence about this.

Is State undermining own policy objective?

The objective of China's state policy on religion is to regulate the scope and content of religious activities to ensure that religious groups do not become independent vis-a-vis the state or forces for social instability and political subversion. The state's restrictive measures with respect to religious education reflect this goal. However, evidence suggests that state measures are actually undermining this policy objective.

For instance, the state's intention to train Protestant Christian pastors is to have those individuals become a means by which the state can exercise control over the Protestant community in China, Vala maintains. However, with so few state-trained and approved pastors, the state is increasingly concerned that it does not have the capacity to control the growing Protestant community.

Moreover, many pastors have left state churches to work for unregistered churches, due to their perception that state churches do not adhere to Biblical teachings. State restrictions have thus strengthened Protestant Christian groups that are not approved by the state.

Similarly, rather than winning the hearts and minds of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the Chinese state's policy has only fostered a greater sense of their collective identity. Uyghur students and teachers are aware that the intended result of state measures is to assimilate the Uyghurs to become "Chinese", according to Graham Adams, a pseudonymous expert on Chinese ethnic policy in a series of three late 2012 articles on Xinjiang for "The Diplomat". However, the Uyghurs are resisting. Adams pointed out that ever more Uyghur students and teachers wear traditional hats and headscarves openly in defiance of the state's ban on such headgear. According to the state, these head coverings have religious connotations.

Given the increasing demand for access to religious education, the state could choose to relax the restrictions on the qualifications of the applicants and provide institutional support to as many interested and qualified applicants as possible. However, doing so might in fact further jeopardise the state's interests. As Vala pointed out for Protestant Christianity in China, admitting more applicants is likely to mean a relaxation of academic standards.

According to Vala, doing so would mean that the political review component of the application process might become more obvious. Candidates with superior academic qualifications but who were denied admission would be more likely to focus their attention on the results of their political reviews, thereby leading to greater disillusionment with the state and the state-approved churches. Of course, there is also the increased possibility that more seminary graduates would leave state-approved churches for unregistered ones due to doctrinal considerations.

Therefore, the state is likely to face a number of policy options, none of which it will find especially attractive. This means that the current approach to religious education is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, even though evidence suggests that it has not been very successful and is likely to become ever less successful over time. (END)

For analyses of other aspects of freedom of religion and belief in China, see http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3.

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