

ARTICLE

Self-censorship in communist China: text analysis of sermons from state-registered churches

Sarah Lee 

Political Science, Baylor University, USA
Email: sarah_lee7@baylor.edu

Abstract

State-registered religion is puzzling because it can be portrayed as both an opponent and a partner of the state. While registered religions need to be receptive to the rules of the government, they also need to satisfy the needs of their congregants. In light of the Communist Party's increasing repression, I investigate how this complex positioning between the government and the congregation has influenced the content of sermons in state-approved Protestant churches. Using computational text analysis on sermons from a state-approved Protestant church in China between 2009 and 2021, I analyze the pastors' degree and composition of self-censorship in their receptiveness to changes over time, as well as to politically and religiously sensitive dates. By focusing on sermons shared in state-approved churches, I shed light on the complex positions in which these Party-registered pastors maneuver. This research also contributes to the broader discussion of civil rights and state-society relations in the context of a strong authoritarian state.

Keywords: authoritarianism; censorship; sermons; state-registered religion; text analysis

Introduction

How do we understand the relationship between *state-registered* religion¹ and the state in authoritarian regimes? Religion in various forms of existence can be beneficial to the government by bringing stability and peace to society, yet with the same power, it can also incite people to revolt against the regime. It is this latter potential that perpetuates the threat of religion in the perspective of authoritarian governments. To alleviate this threat, many states have kept religion under close watch through registration with the government.

On the one hand, registered religious groups can be seen as compliant and harmless because they are vetted through a difficult registration process. Many scholars describe state-registered religions as akin to coopted organizations of the government (Howe, 2021; Payne, 2010). On the other hand, state-registered religious groups still

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Religion and Politics Section of the American Political Science Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

carry elements of threat inherent in all religions. Even after registration, many registered groups do not receive their guaranteed benefits, have the possibility of getting their registration status revoked, and are not safe from censorship and repression. Given this contrast, are registered religious groups political entities that carry a potential threat to the government, harmless partners of the government, or something in between the two? And how do these registered religions demonstrate their loyalty to the government while maintaining their religious identities and regularly preaching religious messages to the people? The relationship between registered religious groups and the government begins with how the government perceives them but is continuously molded and complicated by how the groups position themselves in the political arena.

In this article, these questions are examined in the context of state-registered Protestant churches² in authoritarian China. The Chinese government requires Protestant churches to register with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), a government-sanctioned patriotic religious association, in order to operate legally. A registered church gains the legal right to worship and hold services, but with less autonomy in the choice of locations, pastors, or ideology. In contrast, a church that does not register with the TSPM enjoys the autonomy of operating without direct government oversight but faces risks of persecution in all these areas. In this way, state-sanctioned Protestant churches in China have often been perceived as a tool of the Chinese Communist Party, while unregistered churches have long symbolized opposition to the government. However, recent state repression of both registered and unregistered churches and a nationwide mandate to install security cameras inside church buildings bring into question the role and position of registered churches in authoritarian China. Thus, I explore elements of threat and compliance in registered Protestant churches in China by analyzing self-censorship in their sermon content.

In this study, I theorize that state-registered religions both allay the threat perceived by the state and satisfy their congregation by engaging in self-censorship. I begin with Jansen (1988)'s definition of censorship—"all socially structured proscriptions or prescriptions which inhibit or prohibit dissemination of ideas, information, images, and other messages"—and borrow Bar-Tal (2017, 41)'s definition of *self-censorship*—"the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles." Combined, I use a more inclusive definition of *self-censorship*: the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding, regulating, and selectively sharing ideas, information, images, and other messages in the absence of formal obstacles. I interpret the absence of formal obstacles to mean that the speaker has the latitude to decide the topic and content of speech without direct, point-by-point censorship and interference by the government.

I evaluate the theory by conducting text analysis on 1974 sermons from a prominent state-registered Protestant church in Beijing. Specifically, I use both unsupervised and supervised machine learning methods to explore the broad trends in sermon topics across the years from 2009 to 2021 and measure the sermons' self-censorship on specific political and religious dates in China. I find that the registered church sermons display broad changes over time and self-censorship in response to specific dates. As neither blatantly subversive nor overtly supportive of the regime, these sermons and their subtle changes suggest that China's state-sanctioned Protestant churches are more complex than conventionally believed.

This paper offers an in-depth view of where registered Protestantism currently stands in relation to Chinese politics while using a widely neglected, but nonetheless invaluable, resource—sermons. Sermons provide a firsthand look into the religious phenomenon that is not only widespread and influential in Chinese society, but also extensively controlled by the government. From an academic perspective, inspecting the level of self-censorship in the sermons of state-sanctioned religious organizations can add to existing discussions of civil society and resistance that have so far been heavily focused on underground churches. Focusing on official churches instead can provide nuance to current understandings of the Chinese regime, as these pastors tread the fine line between what they consider to be allowed and censored by the government and what they think is desired by society. In this way, this research contributes to the discussion of religion and politics as they become central to the future of China's authoritarian regime and growing civil society.

Theorizing state-registered religion

Between opposition and partnership

State-registered religion is puzzling because it can be portrayed as both an opponent and a partner of the state. On one hand, registered religious groups represent opposition to the regime because they carry inherently threatening characteristics of a religion. First, religion suggests belief in a higher being that transcends secular government. 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” (Aminzade and Perry, 2001, 161). Second, religion constitutes and strengthens civil society (Booth and Richard, 1998; Mueller and Seligson, 1994).³ Putnam and Campbell (2010) find that religious citizens are more likely to vote and participate in protests and political rallies. Gill (2006, 60) also finds church attendance is the “strongest predictor of civil engagement in Brazil.” Third, religion is often connected to foreign countries, thereby carrying dangers of foreign influence. Western religions, in particular, have direct historical ties to imperialism as well as to democratization around the world (Anderson, 2006; Herold, 2015). For example, Protestant emphasis on “religious autonomy and self-directed moral character, rather than obedience” and missionaries’ efforts to instill a “spirit of independence, insubordination, and discontent” have been especially daunting for authoritarian governments (Jacobs, 2002, 55; Zebich-Knos, 2002, 33).

Given religion’s inherent threat, authoritarian governments have adopted various ways of managing religion, from repression to cooptation. The most fundamental method of control is through the requirement of registration. In contrast to democracies, where registration status may be accompanied by benefits, such as tax exemption, autocracies often make the registration process itself difficult, requiring religious groups to satisfy a series of conditions to gain registration status. In this way, the government not only collects information on religious entities but also limits the number of functioning religious groups through the registration requirement.

Additionally, registration does not guarantee that religions will operate free from harm. In Azerbaijan, registered religious organizations were required to

reregister—for the third time—by satisfying additional rules in 2009; in Belarus, registered organizations encountered harsher requirements while being compelled to reregister (Sarkissian, 2015, 34, 81). At times, registered organizations do not have their rights protected by the law. In Georgia, the law did not specify how to transfer property ownership from a private individual to a registered religious group, diminishing the benefits of registration (Sarkissian, 2015, 108). Moreover, registration status can be revoked by the government, as seen in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Singapore in 1972 or in the Waqeffana Followers Association in Ethiopia in 2004 (Debele, 2018). Finally, registered groups are not exempt from repression, as seen in the case of recent China under the Sinicization efforts.⁴

At the same time, registration can also be the beginning of a deeply formed partnership between the government and religion. Some scholars describe state-registered religions as coopted organizations of the government (Howe, 2021; Payne, 2010). This theory is based on the logic of corporatism (Collier and Collier, 1979; Schmitter, 1979, 13; Williamson, 1989), where organized interest groups are “recognized or licensed (if not created) by the state and granted a deliberate representational monopoly within their respective categories in exchange for observing certain controls on their selection of leaders and articulation of demands and supports.” It is important to note not only the group interests that are represented in this corporatist system, but also the “maintenance of political stability, or governability” that the system serves to promote (Williamson, 1989, 3). For example, the Gada institution in Ethiopia is portrayed as a “collaborator in the state's attempt to insert itself in every aspect of societal life” (Debele, 2018, 33); Singaporean leaders utilized religious teachings to “bolster moral education” in the country (Thio, 2006, 219); and Turkish political parties began to represent Islam at the state level to win votes against a secular state (Oztürk, 2019).

Adding to this rocky and unbalanced relationship, censorship is one of the main methods used by the state to keep watch over registered religions (and other social groups) to make sure they stay as partners, not opposition. Censorship is an important tool, especially for autocracies, because they need to repress ideas that are “threatening to the state's narrative” (Dukalskis, 2017, 4). With recent developments in technology, autocrats' “digital toolkit” has expanded to the online sphere, often reinforcing and even substituting conventional methods of control over society (Keremoglu and Weidmann, 2020, 2, 6, 7).⁵ In this type of environment, citizens get punished for saying the wrong thing (Snegovaya, 2021), cleverly avoid censorship altogether (Roberts et al., 2019), or engage in self-censorship (Robinson and Tannenbergh, 2019; Shen and Truex, 2021).

Satisfying a double audience

Registered religious groups have a limited set of responses to censorship due to their open visibility to the government. Their complex position makes their sermon messages to congregants both a potential call for protest and a vessel for government propaganda. Sermon content perceived as a threat to the government may range from being explicitly political, such as criticizing the government (e.g., mentioning flaws of leadership or policies), to not directly oppositional but nonetheless encouraging collective action (e.g., highlighting the importance of gathering or the efficacy of

collaboration), to seemingly apolitical but stressing certain religious elements (e.g., emphasizing the authority of God above all else), to even the absence of certain messages (e.g., promoting new government initiatives). As this range of possibilities suggests, sermons are easily perceived as threats, topics of threat are subjective, and which topics will beget trouble are unclear.

To avoid repercussions, registered religions need to signal their compliance with the state. In sermons, compliance can be demonstrated when elements of threat are self-censored. Religious leaders can refrain from mentioning political topics, messages about collective action, provocative Biblical stories, or deeply religious doctrines. Biblical stories that may warrant unwanted government scrutiny depending on the way they are preached include suffering of Israelites under an oppressive government (e.g., Exodus), persecution and martyrdom of believers (e.g., John the Baptist), Jesus' competing authority to kings since birth, juxtaposition of foolish kings with the omniscient God (e.g., Rehoboam), subservience of leaders as they seek wisdom from God (e.g., David), etc. However, there are just as many stories and verses that suggest the opposite—to observe the rules set by the government. This means that another way of demonstrating compliance is to increasingly discuss topics that may be encouraged by the government. A similarity shared with threat is that self-censorship is difficult to detect. Without published guidelines for what topics are allowed or prohibited, avoiding the government's reprimand becomes a constant guessing game.

At the same time, scrutiny does not only come from above, but also from below. If pleasing the government (or avoiding censorship) is the only objective, then religious leaders can repeatedly preach a set of safe sermons once they figure out the censor-free formula. However, pastors preach sermons to a congregation with the intent to educate and influence the listeners' thoughts and actions with religious doctrines. This signifies that pastors, by definition of their vocation and by spiritual obligation, need to be cognizant of the congregation's needs and desires. As Garner (2007, 47) describes preaching as a "communicative event," speakers need to speak in a way that is "situated, appropriate, and meaningful to the hearers."

Literature on the political economy of religion suggests another reason why religious leaders need to answer to their congregation. Religious groups are described by Gill (2003, 121) as "membership maximizers or, at a minimum, prefer to minimize membership losses" because leaders want to maximize the number of people that share their belief while also securing "financial contributions and volunteer labor." In this way, churchgoers become "consumers" who can "freely choose" the kind of faith to purchase as a "product." (Bankston, 2002, 311) On the demand side, Iannaccone (1991) finds that believers also display higher rates of church attendance and belief in a competitive religious market, fueling the cycle of religious competition and the growth of religion. A competitive religious market suggests that for religious leaders, finding safe topics to preach is not the only requirement they need to fulfill—they also need to find topics that will satisfy their congregants.

Theory and observable implications

Drawing from existing literature, I theorize that state-registered religions both allay the threat perceived by the state and satisfy their congregation by engaging in

Table 1. Theory, observable implications, and operationalization

Theory	Observable implications	Operationalization
Registered religions self-censor to the needs of their congregants and under the demands of the government	Sermons reflect broad changes in content over time.	• E.g., increase in deeper expositions of the religious doctrine (as opposed to moral lessons)
	Sermons reflect changes in content on important dates.	• E.g., topics catered to specific dates, such as politically sensitive dates, religious holidays, and national holidays.

self-censorship. First, if registered religious groups are in competition with other religious groups in drawing congregants, then they should be receptive to the needs of their congregation—e.g., by improving the quality of their sermons—in order to secure more attendees. Second, if registered religious entities want to avoid repression, they should abide by government rules and be sensitive to the political situation through self-censorship. If they are not sensitive to the political environment—e.g., by preaching on politically provocative topics—they would most likely face punishment.

My theory produces the following observable implications (Table 1), in order of broad to specific.

First, at a broader level, *sermons at registered churches should reflect broad changes in content over time*. In a country where there are rules on what can be said and negative consequences for breaking them, pastors can get by with only preaching on safe topics. However, if significant changes are detected in sermon content over time, and if these changes are neither irritating to, nor in favor of, the government, this implies that pastors are mindful of the government, but also have an ulterior objective—satisfying the needs of the congregation. It is important to point out here that the pastors are not caught in a black-and-white dilemma between pro-regime (as directed by the government) and anti-regime (as desired by the congregation). In fact, many registered church congregants are pro-regime and approve of nationalistic elements in sermons. Rather, pastors are attentive to the needs of both audiences (which may overlap at points), and sensitive topics are only a part of their broader considerations of sermon quality.

What constitutes a satisfactory sermon for the congregation is not set in stone. Some approve of sermons that thoroughly explain the Bible, while others want sermons that reflect current affairs and contain blunt political criticisms. Additionally, high-quality sermons are not the only requirement in a churchgoer's decision to attend a church, and sermons at unregistered churches are not guaranteed to be more political and less safe in content.⁶ Even so, sermons are the main way in which pastors communicate with the congregants, and one of the most visible qualities of a church. Without clear standards, pastors are careful to avoid politically sensitive topics, but still see themselves in competition with other churches in the region and are incentivized by their congregants to diversify sermon topics, explore richer religious topics, and increase the relevance of their sermons to the current environment.

Second, and at a more specific level, *sermons at registered churches should reflect changes in content specific to important dates*. Again, as compliant citizens and as membership maximizers, registered pastors are expected to stay within permitted boundaries set by the government while crafting sophisticated sermons that go beyond mere moral lessons. This means specific dates or not, topics related to politics are not expected to be present in sermons unless in ways that are subtle or that put the government in a positive light. Even in sermons that contain patriotic or nationalistic messages, moderation is expected because the boundaries of censorship and the expectations of the congregation are both unclear.

Accordingly, pastors are likely to preach sermons that are appropriate and catered to important dates, and these sermons should be distinguishable from sermons given around non-important dates. On politically sensitive dates, I expect pastors to preach less about politics and more about relevant and appropriate religious topics—for example, emphasizing compliance over agency and progress. In such sermons, the religious component (as opposed to innocuous moral messages) can satisfy the congregation while the emphasis on compliance can pass government scrutiny. On religious holidays, I expect sermon content to be less political and more catered to the significance of those specific dates than on other ordinary topics. Sermons related to the specific religious holiday (e.g., Christmas) engage the churchgoers who have come to celebrate the holiday while also placating the government by steering clear of political topics. Finally, on national holidays, I expect sermon content to be less catered to the meaning of the holiday than on religious holidays. As explained previously, the unclear and often divergent preferences of the congregation should bring pastors to mention politics less (or at most, in moderation) even on national holidays. At the same time, sermon content should be more positive and uplifting to match the holidays' celebratory nature.

Registered protestant churches in China

I examine this theory in the context of registered Protestant churches in China, where there exists a discrepancy between religious freedom guaranteed by the state constitution and hardline atheism endorsed by the Party. Article 36 of the revised State Constitution (1982) guarantees the freedoms of religious belief, and numerous Party propagandas emphasize the importance of having faith, but also define this faith to be based on socialist values and not in religion.⁷ Moreover, the Party itself is officially atheist and forbids its members, including retired Party officials, from having religious faith and participating in religious activities.

The government's management of religion in society has also been contradictory, ranging from cooptation and careful consent to downright persecution. State-registered pastors and churches have not been exempt from state repression, despite their registration and close communication with the government. The "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" campaign, which demolished more than 1300 crosses from state-sanctioned churches in Zhejiang Province from 2013 to 2015, is evidence of registered churches' insecure positioning in the Chinese regime. State-registered pastors, most of whom train at state-sanctioned seminaries, get ordained at state-registered churches, and register with local TSPM associations, tread an

awkward position between the diverging stances of the government. Studies (Ashiwa and Wank, 2009; Lai, 2006; Vala, 2017) point out the duality of registered churches as they stay “connected to state organs but also are loyal to their constituents and lobby on their behalf” (Liu and White, 2019, 567).

While there is no officially published list of suggested or censored sermon topics, scholars have found evidence of push from above. For example, Buchholz (2018, 123) finds that the government pressures churches to promote patriotic theology while prohibiting heretical and political messages. Others find these pressures regarding sermon content begin earlier during the seminary years, where pastors are required to train in patriotic education (Huang and Yang, 2005; Jing and Koesel, 2024; Koesel et al., 2019; Kuo, 2011).

Perhaps as a result, pastors from registered churches in China have a reputation of preaching messages “filled with innocuous moral lessons that are neither political nor even religious.” (Lee and O’Brien, 2021, 908) Religious topics, such as God’s kingdom, Jesus’ resurrection, and heaven, are also known to be mentioned less compared to messages about family, work, and other day-to-day topics. Reny (2018, 482) shows that these anodyne messages are not entirely attributable to simple theological foundations, but more due to pastors’ awareness of prohibited topics and intent to show that there is no deviant political intention underlying their religious practice. Not only that, Hunter and Chan (1996, 77) observe that state-registered churches in China criticize “foreign governments and the capitalist economic system,” while “fully endorsing CCP policies.” Such sermons, whether anodyne or pro-government, can be desirable for the government because they aid in creating a more harmonious society and improving the work ethic of citizens, while also expressing Party loyalty on the part of registered pastors.

However, pressures are put on pastors not only regarding sermon content but also its quality. The following is a quote from an unregistered pastor I interviewed in 2017:

The congregation is not dumb. Why do you think the TSPM is out to eliminate unregistered churches? It is because they see us as competition. We have better sermons, and people have ears. If they don’t get rid of house churches, registered churches will soon lose all their churchgoers.

A registered pastor from Beijing provided a different perspective:

The government scolds us registered pastors to give better, more persuasive sermons. I believe TSPM churches are alive thanks to house churches. The government helps us because they need us to keep the house churches in check.

Regardless of which point of view, several registered pastors admitted in interviews that their sermons needed improvement—especially compared to unregistered churches—and vowed to “study more.” An updated and systematic analysis is required to understand how pastors self-censor sermons to not only cater to the government but also be receptive to their churchgoers. For example, deeper expositions of the religious doctrine that do not contradict government rules while also satiating the intellectual cravings of the congregants can be one solution to satisfying both audiences.

Self-censorship, by definition, requires measuring what is not said but would have been said otherwise. There is much weight put on the speakers' original intent, which is difficult to capture because it may differ from the words spoken. The difficulty is compounded by the absence of official lists of censored topics or records of what pastors would have said in a non-repressive environment. Therefore, I measure instead the relative change in topics to estimate self-censorship. When sermons spoken during specific time periods differ significantly from those in other time periods, and when other factors remain constant, this suggests intentional choice of topics. Combined with the authoritarian context in which topics are chosen and preached, relative change in topics can help measure self-censorship.

Data and methodology

Case selection

China is a good place to study state-registered religions for three reasons. First, state-registered religions in China must maneuver between religious freedom guaranteed by the government and atheism endorsed by the Communist Party. Second, state-registered religions tread a fine line between being useful and threatening to the Chinese government. Although most registered pastors are educated and ordained through government-sanctioned seminaries and registered with the local patriotic association, they still carry the same elements of threat that religion, in general, and Protestantism, in particular, pose to China. Third, and as a result, state-registered religions in China have received variations in government treatment, ranging from cooperation to persecution. When combined, these three reasons make the status of state-registered churches ambiguous, necessitating a closer observation.

Due to the sensitive nature of religion in China, available primary sources specific to registered Protestant churches are limited to official government documents of religious laws and online websites of state-registered churches. According to the TSPM website, there are only 21 registered churches "open to the public" in Beijing, fewer with functioning webpages, and only one with published sermon content on its church website. This one church has been publishing full, translatable Chinese sermons on its website since May 2009.

Though limited, this specific church provides significant analytical advantages. Since this church is one of the biggest official churches in Beijing, its visibility to the government, central location, and openness to the public both in-person and online make it the most likely case to experience censorship or engage in self-censorship. Along a similar logic, the church is the "least likely" case and a "hard-test" to display any bit of deviance from what the government would want, so that if any element of it were to be detected, it would amplify the findings' implications and generalizability to less-prominent churches in smaller and more distant cities as well. Finally, although produced from one church, it does provide a longitudinal dataset spanning multiple years. Selecting this church not only maximizes the number of observations I can make, due to the number of sermon transcripts available, but also allows me to track the evolution of topics over the years.

Table 2. Summary description of sermon data

Item	Value	Years	# of Transcripts in Chinese (Total # of Posts)
Total # of sermons	1974	2009	62 (63)
# of Chinese transcripts	1259	2010	107 (107)
Date of first transcript	05/24/2009	2011	106 (106)
Date of last transcript	06/25/2021	2012	106 (106)
# of Pastors (Incl. guests)	105	2013	104 (104)
# of Pastors with > 10 sermons	16	2014	99 (140)
		2015	100 (158)
		2016	109 (158)
		2017	112 (155)
		2018	107 (170)
		2019	107 (196)
		2020	106 (360)
		2021	34 (151)

Data collection

Using Python, I extracted a total of 1974 sermon data, with dates ranging from May 24, 2009, to June 25, 2021. There is a total of 4416 days, or 630 Sundays, between the two dates. The number of sermons is more than triple the number of weeks because the church uploads multiple sermon videos each Sunday (usually up to two services with sermons on different topics) and on important holidays that may not fall on a Sunday, such as Christmas.⁸ Out of 1974 sermons, 1259 sermons are accompanied with transcripts in Chinese and 12 with full transcripts in English.⁹ Table 2 provides a summary description of the sermon data and the number of transcripts available and collected per year.

The website lists 17 pastors and religious leaders working at the church. These pastors alternate and also invite guest ministers to preach sermons. Foreign pastors who participate as guest speakers are treated similarly to Chinese pastors in my study. This is because they are invited to participate for their ideological closeness to the TSPM church and often hold continuing positions that allow them to return to preach. Foreign pastors act like Chinese pastors in their speech and behavior, and thus, the Chinese government treats them the same in terms of monitoring and censorship. Therefore, these foreign pastors are unlikely to speak on topics that may be deemed sensitive by the government.¹⁰ Including these foreign speakers, the dataset counts a total of 105 unique speakers from 2009 to 2021, with 16 pastors who have given 10 or more sermons.

Methodology

The outcome variable is the prevalence and content of topics in sermons as measured through both unsupervised and supervised machine learning methods.¹¹ I use Python 3

(Anaconda distribution) for web-scraping, data building, translating, and text mining, and R version 1.3.1093 for pre-processing, structural topic modeling (STM), t-tests, and visualizations. Specifically for preprocessing Chinese text, I use Jieba, an open-source Chinese word segmentation module.

For the unsupervised portion of analysis, I use the STM by Roberts et al. (2019), which incorporates covariates into the analysis. Using STM and Jieba, I preprocess the Chinese text by removing punctuations, standard and custom stopwords, and tokenizing the text. Next, I identify the number of topics that demonstrate the best fit with sermon content based on the conventional method (Mimno and Lee, 2014; Roberts et al., 2019) of comparing performance on measures of held-out likelihood, semantic coherence, residuals fit, and exclusivity of topics. Appendices A and C provide the diagnostic graphs for each measure. For each of the topics, I consider the highest probability, FREX, Lift, and Score words to determine the appropriate topic label.

Explanatory variables vary by hypothesis. For the first hypothesis, I evaluate two variables of time—time as divided into before and after 2018 and time in years, from 2009 to 2021. I chose 2018 as a cutoff point for three reasons. First, 2018 is the year the government made significant regulatory and structural changes in the religious realm. It passed the new *Religious Regulations*, reflecting the government's changed stance toward the control of religion, from a decentralized method of allowing local officials to manage religion to a more centralized, top-down approach of implementing the regulations more broadly. Moreover, the Party also took direct control over managing religion by moving responsibility away from the State Administration for Religious Affairs, a state institution, and putting it into the hands of the United Front Work Department. The change signaled the Xi administration's resolve to control religion at the national level. Second, scholars, international media, as well as the pastors on the ground, remarked on the significance of 2018 and noticed the tightening of government control over religion starting in 2018. Lavicka and Chen (2023, 265) state, "one should view the . . . revised Regulation . . . and these five new measures as efforts to . . . re-shape religious order in Xi's era." Multiple pastors also referenced the 19th Chinese Communist Party National Congress held in late 2017 as a significant development in the Party's religious policy. Accordingly, a significant policy change introduced in 2018, noted by pastors, was the mandatory installation of security cameras. During my visits, many pastors complained about the strictness with which the installation was implemented and how it was unavoidable this time for not only the Christian churches but also other religious sites. This changed environment and increased censorship should serve as a hard test to detect topical change in sermons that are not in line with the government's directions. Third, 2018 allows ample time (more than three years, from 2018 to a part of 2021) to serve as a comparison to pre-2018 years.¹²

For the second hypothesis, I estimate the distribution of sermon topics based on whether or not the sermons are given on selected important days. The selection of dates is important because the dates (as the independent variable) determine whether any change in sermon content is detected in the analysis. Truex (2019) and Steinhardt (2021), in their studies of preemptive repression of dissidents around focal events, both choose dates that are "known in advance that have high salience and reduce

problems of coordination for citizens seeking to act collectively.” (Truex, 2019, 1035) Since the subjects in my study are pastors—whom I consider one-step removed from the political scene compared to protest-planning dissidents—I use a broader definition of key dates to be the following: dates known in advance and of regular occurrence that have high salience for both the religious communities and the government. This broader definition is chosen based on the assumptions that pastors are less likely to be mindful of more specific one-time events and that they are also not the priority targets of preemptive action by the government on these specific dates. For salience to both the pastors and the government, I choose dates with regular occurrence (e.g., holidays and annual meetings) and omit others that are one-time occurrences or less relevant for pastors (e.g., Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, German President’s visit to Shanghai, etc.).

Following the logic that sermons may be threatening if they are explicitly political, insufficiently nationalistic, or deeply religious, I produce three sets of important days to observe: politically sensitive days, national holidays, and religious days. Appendix B lists the selected days, their specific dates each year from 2009 to 2021, and their observation periods. I draw political dates from the “China Profile - Timeline” from BBC News and the list of dates in Radio Free Asia’s article on China’s “stability maintenance system” and cross-check the dates with Truex (2019) and Steinhardt (2021). On politically sensitive dates, collective activities are actively discouraged by the government. The first is the anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, or the June 4th Incident in Chinese, which was a student-led, pro-democracy demonstration involving military crackdowns and civilian deaths. Second is the 1959 Tibetan Uprising, which is annually commemorated on March 10 through protests by domestic and international pro-Tibetan groups.¹³ Third is the *lianghui* (两会), which is the annual plenary session of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC). Cai (2010, 101) has found that collective social movements target attention from officials and the media by scheduling around important meetings such as the *lianghui*. Many pastors also confirmed these dates as significant and in their past and current religious operations and admitted to exercising extra vigilance on and around these dates.

National holidays are chosen according to China’s “Golden Weeks,” or three seven-day holidays implemented by the government, due to their political and cultural significance. These include National Day on October 1st, the Chinese New Year, ranging between late January and mid-February, and Labor Day on May 1st.¹⁴ The three politically sensitive dates and the three national holidays chosen for this study overlap with focal events from Truex (2019) and Steinhardt (2021). Focal events omitted from my dataset are tested for validation in the supplemental analysis.

Religious holidays are selected based on their religious prominence and confirmed with Chinese pastors. The chosen dates are Christmas, which celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ; Easter, which celebrates Jesus’ resurrection; and Pentecost, which commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit and the beginnings of the Christian church. Christmas is on December 25th, Easter falls between late March and late April, and the Pentecost is in late May or early June.

Building upon these sets of politically sensitive dates, national holidays, and religious holidays, I create an observation period starting a week before and ending a

Table 3. Dictionary of topics and English translations

Topic	Words included in the dictionary	English translations
<i>Sin</i>	罪, 罪恶, 犯罪, 违反	Sin, crime, offense, violation
<i>Community</i>	团体, 共同体, 一起, 公共, 组织, 志愿, 小组	Group, community, together, public, organization, voluntary, group
<i>Cross</i>	十字架, 独生, 受难, 钉, 墓地, 髑髅地	Cross, only son, Suffer, Nail, Golgotha, graveyard, Calvary
<i>Politics</i>	政治, 公安, 警察, 官员, 政府, 执政, 共产党, 社会主义, 领导人, 习近平, 主席, 革命, 反抗	Politics, public security, police, officials, government, ruling, resistance, communist party, socialism, leader, Xi Jinping, chairman/secretary, revolution,
<i>Family</i>	家庭, 家族, 家人, 母亲, 妈妈, 父亲, 爸爸, 父母, 孩子, 儿子, 女儿, 亲戚, 妻子, 太太, 关夫, 老伴儿, 爱人, 孝敬	Family, mother, mom, Father, dad, parent, child, son, daughter, relative, wife, husband, lover, filial piety
<i>Nationalism</i>	爱国, 中国, 主席, 我国, 民族, 国家, 大国	Patriotic, China, chairman, our country, nation, great power
<i>Religion</i>	基督教, 以色列, 教堂, 耶和華, 教会, 宗教, 天堂, 天国, 基督徒, 主, 基督, 门徒, 信徒, 信仰, 圣经	Christianity, Israel, church, Jehovah, religion, heaven, Christian, lord, Christ, disciple, believer, faith, bible,

week after each selected date of each year. This is to account for the fact that the chosen dates do not always fall on a Sunday, and that pastors may talk about a special holiday a week before or after the actual date. Sermons given within this period are coded as 1, and sermons that are given on ordinary days are coded as 0.¹⁵

The supervised portion, based on a dictionary-based text analysis method, serves as supplemental analysis. I create a dictionary of topics and their words based on the expectation that sermons may contain (or not) explicitly political, anodyne, or religious content to be deemed threatening or compliant. I select basic topics—*Politics*, *Community*, *Sin*, *Nationalism*, *Family*, *Religion*, and *Cross*—in order to cast a wide net for detecting these topics in sermons. Details on the selection of topics and creation of dictionaries are provided in Appendix H. Using these dictionaries, I measure the frequency of each topic in each sermon and then divide each topic frequency by the number of tokens in that sermon. This topic proportion per sermon (measured over the observation periods) becomes the outcome variable. Table 3 below lists the dictionary topics, words, and their English translations.

Analysis

Based on STM diagnostics (Appendix A), I find the top 11 topics of words that are prevalent in all sermons. Table 4 below lists the topic labels and the keywords (produced by the STM package) that I used to identify the topic, in order of highest to lowest prevalence.

All 11 topics listed in Table 4 are, at face value, neither threatening to nor supportive of the government. Even the topic of *Exodus*, which can be deemed threatening when used to discuss the sufferings of Israelites under Egypt or the mass Exodus

Table 4. Eleven topics prevalent in Chinese sermons

Topic	Keywords
Christian living	Thessalonians, called to be, discover oneself, image creation, influence, outlook on life, salt, God-given, values, take responsibility, every word and deed
New testament	Jews, Pharisees, Gospel of John, Cross, Jerusalem, Matthew, Sabbath, Mary, Luke, Galilee, raised your head, in adultery, power of death, collaborating
Gospel	Cross, Messiah, Matthew, Luke, Shepherd, First, Good News, Twelve, John, Easter, Jews, Mark, do you love me, good news, Easter, piety, wind and sea
Kings	Jehovah, Solomon, Israel, King Solomon, Coming of God, Kings, Man, Samuel, Anointed, Sin, Saul, hiding place, husband, distinguish right from wrong, refuge
Exodus	Israel, Jordan River, Forty years, Exodus, Land of Honey, Land of Slaves, Midian, Hivites, Judges, Deuteronomy
Family	Son, Marriage life, one accord, grumbling, Timothy, Biblical, Growing, Young people, married life, Timothy, eldest son, marriage relationship, love wife
Suffering/perseverance	High Priest, Cross, Israel, Revelation, Garden of Eden, Ephesus, heavenly calling, Perseverance, Holy Father, Gains and Losses, did not retaliate
Journey and mission	Ephesus, Barnabas, Christians, Esther, Antioch, Cornelius, Seminary, Damascus, Macedonia, one accord, Babylon, Epaphras, Macedonia, Asia, Aquila, Greek
Old Testament	Abraham, Jehovah, Centurion, Nineveh, Rebekah, Sodom, Bethel, faith justification, John, God's call, Nineveh, Native Land, Faith-based, Isaac
Christmas	Mary, Mary, Christmas, Immanuel, John, Luke, Elizabeth, John the Baptist, Isaiah, Christians, Israel, Messiah, sense of mission, Trinity, Merry Christmas
Healing/Provision	Vineyard, Mary, Sabbath, Little Woman, Jerusalem, Christian, Levite, Matthew, Leprosy, Jethro, Surely Healed, deputy, Seventh Day, Deliberate Sin

of Israelites from their oppressors, is filled with uncontroversial keywords like “Forty Years” and “Land of Honey” to put the focus on the people’s hopeful journey to the Promised Land. These topics lend support to the expectation that registered church sermons, regardless of important dates, should generally be void of threat, and that any notable changes should be subtle in context.

Likewise, the topic of *Christian living* constituted the largest proportion in the corpus of sermons. Words such as “called to be,” “discover oneself,” “image creation,” “influence,” “outlook on life,” “values,” “take responsibility,” “every word and deed,” and “worldview” suggest directions for how to live an exemplary and responsible Christian life. References to the Book of Thessalonians are relevant, as these are from Paul’s letters to the new believers on “how to live in order to please God” and not “impurely” as the “pagans” live (*New International Version*, 1 Thess. 4). Similarly, phrases such as “if the salt loses its saltiness” (*yanruo shile wei*, 盐若失了味) indicate

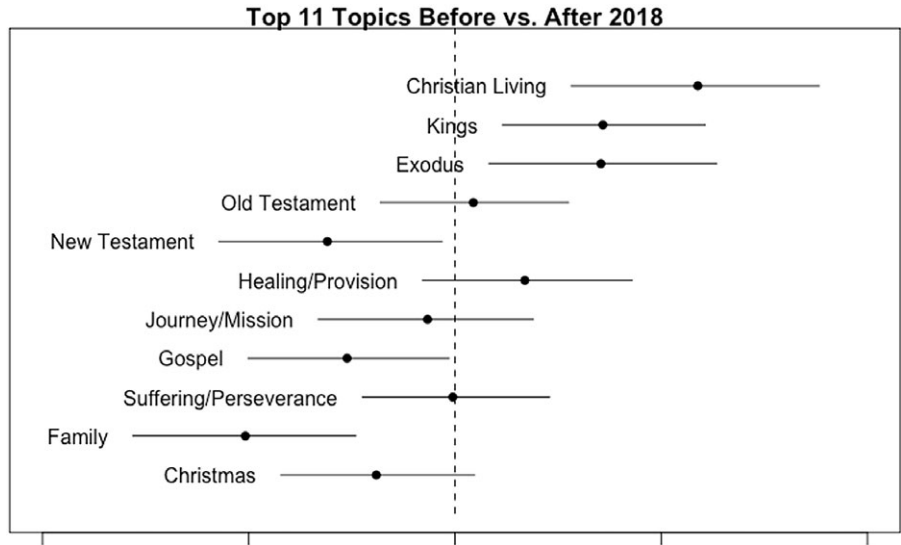


Figure 1. Prevalence of top 11 Sermon topics before and after 2018.

the responsibility of Christians to fulfill the purpose for which they were created (*New International Version*, Matt. 5: 13).

Other topics vary in their semantic coherence. Topics such as *Kings*, *Exodus*, and *Christmas* are easy to derive from their keywords. For instance, the keywords for the topic of *Exodus* are specifically related to the books in the Bible detailing the Israelites' departure from slavery in Egypt and journey to Canaan, the "land flowing with milk and honey." (Ex. 3:8) In contrast, keywords for topics such as *Old Testament* and *New Testament* have a wider spread in meaning, and thus the topic labels themselves have broader coverage.

H1: Sermons reflect broad changes in content over time.

Based on these 11 topics, I find support for the first hypothesis. First, using the year 2018 as a cutoff point, I find that sermons vary in topics before and after 2018. Figure 1 illustrates the 11 topics plotted according to their correlation with the years before or after 2018.

Topics on the *New Testament*, *Gospel*, and *Family* are significantly more prevalent before 2018 compared to after 2018. Table 5 lists the coefficients, standard errors, *t*-statistic, and *p*-values for the four topics.

The finding that these topics do not continue to be prevalent past 2018 goes against conventional wisdom, because they are regularly visited topics, some of which—such as the topic on *Family*—are reinforced by annual celebrations such as Mother's Day.

A closer look at the most representative sermons determined by the model provides more insight. For the topic of *Family*, the most representative sermon is from May 2010, when the pastor preached on filial piety, telling children to "put aside their arrogance to honor their parents and understand their needs" and parents to "learn to

Table 5. Significant topics before 2018

	Estimate	SE	T-statistic	Pr(> t)
New testament	−0.032812	0.013530	−2.425	0.0154*
Gospel	−0.02754	0.01290	−2.134	0.033*
Family	−0.062522	0.014464	−4.322	1.66e−05****

Significance codes: * $p < 0.05$, **** $p < 0.0001$.

Notes: Negative “estimate” indicates greater topic proportion before 2018 compared to after 2018.

Table 6. Significant topics since 2018

	Estimate	SE	T-statistic	Pr(> t)
Christian living	0.067462	0.014020	4.812	1.68e−06****
Kings	0.040764	0.012791	3.187	0.00147**
Exodus	0.041311	0.014316	2.886	0.00397**

Significance codes: ** $p < 0.01$, **** $p < 0.0001$.

Notes: Positive “estimate” indicates greater topic proportion since 2018 compared to before 2018.

have complete acceptance” of their children. In comparison, the sermon that best represented the same topic after 2018 was from April 2020, when the pastor acknowledged the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, her message contains stories of her visit to the ICU and desperate phone calls with family. She concludes her message by urging the congregation to reflect on the times parents were pushed aside for “trivial matters and frictions in life” and to “understand God’s heart and grace in this terrible situation.” These examples demonstrate that sermons’ use of the topic of *Family* has shifted from designing the whole sermon around lessons on filial duty before 2018 to specifically using family as an anecdote to discuss the pandemic and God’s grace after 2018.

Conversely, I find that topics such as *Christian living*, *Kings*, and *Exodus* are significantly more prevalent after 2018 compared to before 2018 (Table 6).

The two most representative sermons on the topic of *Kings* are from after 2018, specifically from October 2019 and 2020, with each sermon on King Solomon and King David. Both sermons draw lessons from the kings’ admirable virtues—Solomon, who asked the Lord for wisdom, a heart to love, and a body free from death, and David, who established good relations with God, performed God’s will, and relied on God to change his ways. In contrast, the most representative sermon from before 2018 is from November 2010, where the pastor briefly references King Nebuchadnezzar as a backdrop to demonstrate Daniel’s steadfast trust in God despite challenges. These examples show that before 2018, the topic of *Kings* was used as a quick reference, whereas after 2018, the same topic was used to present key figures from which to learn admirable characteristics.

While direct content comparisons are difficult to make, I find support for the expectation that pastors adjust the content of their sermons to the changing times. Topics that are more prevalent before 2018 tend to be on basic platitudes, such as how

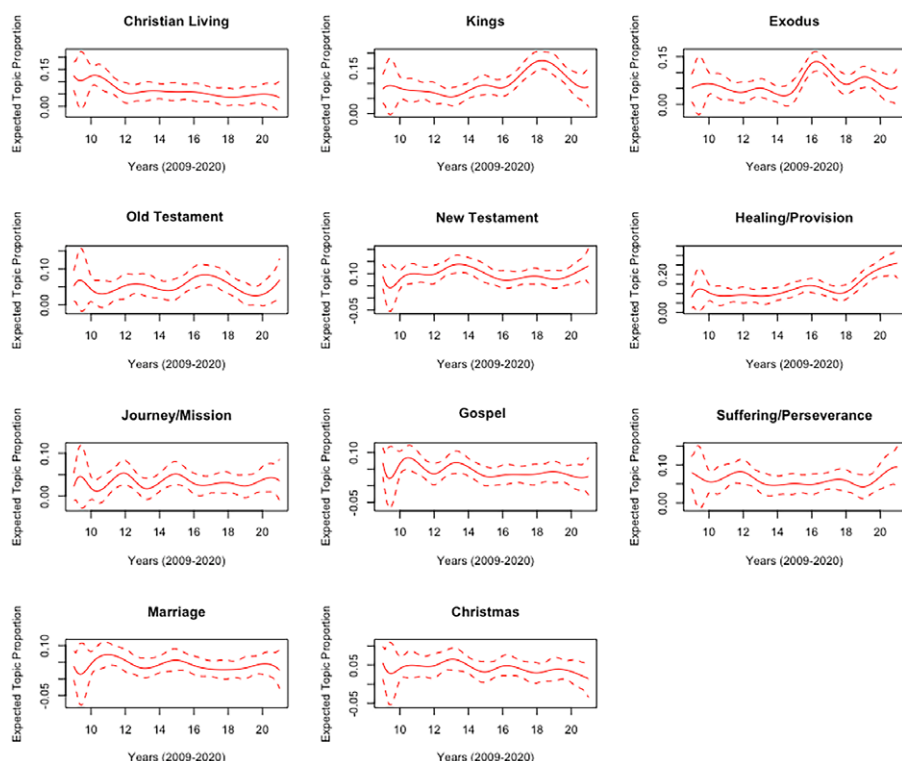


Figure 2. Individual topic prevalence trends (2009–2021).

to be a good husband and wife, and rudimentary Christian doctrines presented in the New Testament. As these topics become less relevant after 2018, topics on more advanced religious ideology, such as guidelines to living a Christian life, lessons to learn from kings from the Old Testament, and parallels to be drawn from the Israelites' Exodus and journey to the Promised Land, become more relevant after 2018. This interpretation is in line with the expectation that pastors would add more depth and diversity to religious discussions in order to satisfy the growing standards of the congregation, while also not deviating from the guidelines of the government.

Sermons' changing trends over time are further verified by repeating the analysis for the period between 2009 and 2021 (Figure 2).

Similar to the comparison of sermons before and after 2018, topics such as *Christian Living*, *Kings*, *Exodus*, *New Testament*, *Healing/Provision*, and *Journey/Mission* display significant spikes and dips during the period between 2009 and 2020. For example, sermons on *Healing/Provision* gradually increase over the years, peak around 2016, and decrease until they shoot upwards beginning in 2018. In contrast, sermons related to the topic of the *New Testament* peaked around 2013 and started to gradually decrease. While determining the causes of each of the peaks and dips is beyond the scope of this study, a significant increase or decrease in topic prevalence over the years suggests that pastors adapt to the changing times and that their sermons shift in topics.

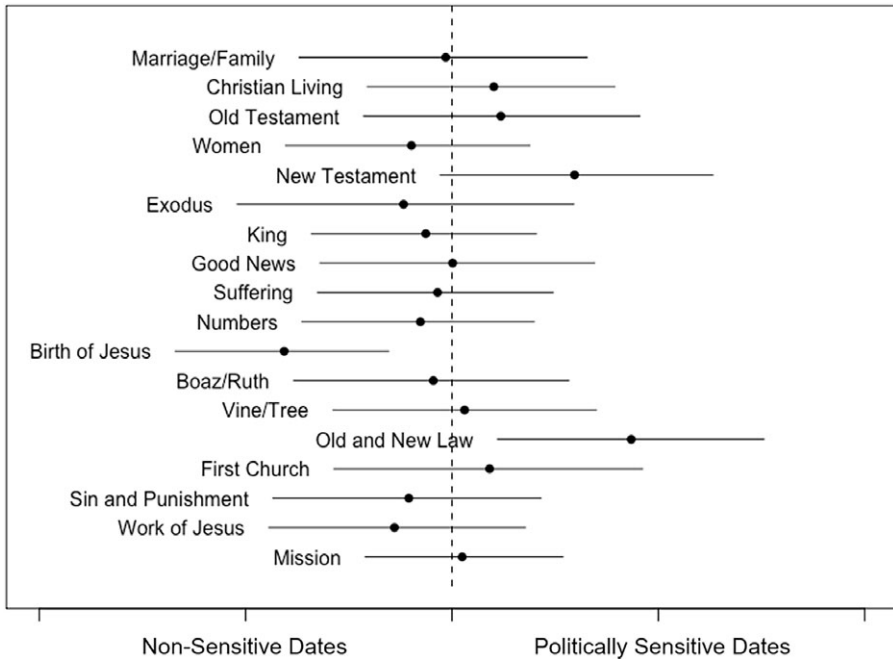


Figure 3. Prevalence of topics on politically sensitive vs. non-sensitive dates.

H2: Sermons at registered churches reflect changes in content on important dates.

Next, I find support for the second hypothesis by comparing topic prevalence on politically sensitive days, religious holidays, and national holidays to other days of the year. Supplemental analysis is performed through the dictionary method, and the summary and complete results are provided in Appendices F and G.

Politically sensitive days

First, Figure 3 lists the top 18 topics in all sermons and illustrates how their prevalence varies between politically sensitive and non-sensitive dates. Appendix C shows the diagnostic values used to determine the number of topics; Appendix D lists all 18 labeled topics and their key words.

Table 7 below lists the estimates, standard errors, t -statistics, and p -values for the two topics that are significantly prevalent on politically sensitive and non-sensitive dates.

I find that sermons on the *Birth of Jesus* are more prevalent on non-sensitive dates and are significantly less prevalent on sensitive dates ($p = 0.002$). The three most representative sermons on the *Birth of Jesus* on non-sensitive dates are expectedly on Christmas, in the years 2013, 2014, and 2016. Representative sermons on politically sensitive dates show a noticeably reduced mention of Jesus' birth. A sermon around the Tibet Uprising Day in March 2021 mentions Jesus' birth to highlight the

Table 7. Significant topics on sensitive vs. non-sensitive dates

	Estimate	SE	T-statistic	Pr(> t)
Birth of Jesus	−0.040672	0.013155	−3.092	0.00203**
Old and new law	0.043202	0.016725	2.583	0.00991**

Significance codes: ** $p < 0.01$.

Notes: A negative “estimate” indicates lower topic prevalence during politically sensitive dates compared to other days of the year. Conversely, a positive estimate indicates greater topic prevalence on politically sensitive dates.

importance of salvation through the “coming of Jesus Christ.” Similarly, a sermon around the same dates in 2011 provides an uplifting message on how precious each person is that Jesus was “born for us and was crucified for us.”

Contrastingly, sermons on the *Old and New Law* are significantly more prevalent on politically sensitive dates than on non-sensitive dates ($p < 0.01$). The topic of *Old and New Law* refers to sermons that discuss how the new law under God’s grace differs from the traditional law supported by the Pharisees. In a sermon given around the Tibet Uprising Day in 2017, the pastor speaks of Nicodemus as a model Pharisee and an official of the Jewish ruling council who “know[s] the Jewish law best,” is an “academic,” and is “respected by everyone.” However, he explains that even Nicodemus is not guaranteed to enter the kingdom of God. Since the path to heaven is not the same then and now, one must be born again and be baptized by the water and the Holy Spirit. Another sermon given in 2013 around the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Protests (June 4th) again references the Pharisees to juxtapose the “righteousness obtained by fulfilling the laws and regulations” pursued by the Pharisees with “righteousness gained by faith” through God. In this way, the pastor emphasizes that the “ethical standards of the kingdom of heaven” are “higher than [those] of the law.”

It is likely that the *Birth of Jesus* topic is significantly correlated with non-sensitive dates, not necessarily due to pastors’ censorship during sensitive dates, but because of the topic’s overwhelming relevance to Christmas. In contrast, there is no ready explanation for the significant prevalence of the topic of *Old and New Law* on sensitive dates. I do find several common patterns in the representative sermons: first, describing the Pharisees as the embodiment of an ideal citizen—that is, an official, academic, righteous, law-abiding and respectable; second, disconfirming any guarantees to salvation; third, urging believers to engage in reflection and introspection; and fourth, assigning the ultimate agency (in finding the path to heaven) to Jesus and God’s grace. Based on these patterns, I conjecture that these sermons encourage churchgoers to engage in reexamining their lives as Christians and reconsider their confidence in salvation. Instead of explicitly prohibiting certain behaviors on sensitive dates, these sermons can encourage people to stay home and reevaluate their conduct.

Supplemental analysis also adds strength to these findings. I find that basic words related to *Family* are mentioned in significantly smaller proportions around the Tiananmen Square Protests anniversary than on other days. In contrast, topics on the cross and salvation are significantly more prevalent ($p = 0.046$) in sermons around the Tiananmen anniversary than on other days of the year. In sum, the findings complement my expectation that sermons around sensitive dates demonstrate a higher prevalence of topics related to the religious doctrine.

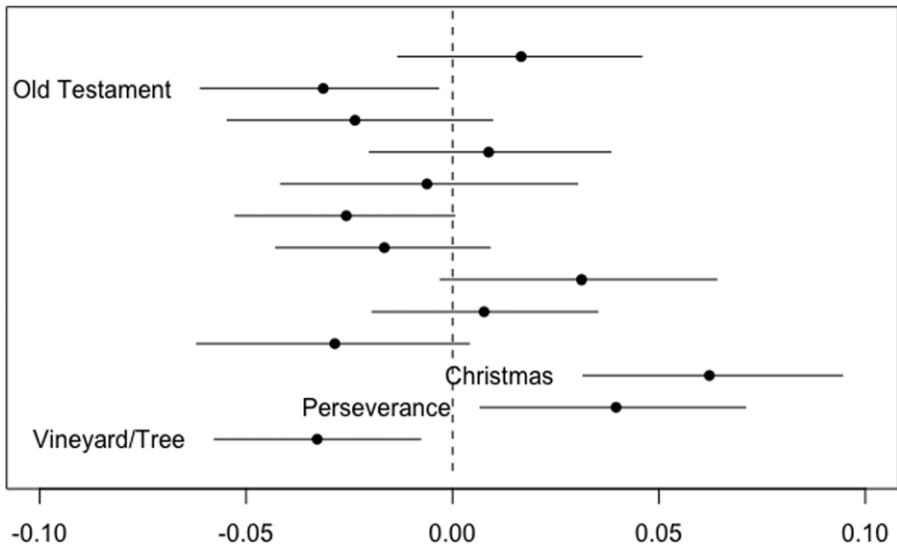


Figure 4. Prevalence of topics on religious holidays vs. non-holidays.

Religious holidays

Sermons given on religious holidays also differ from those given on other days of the year.

Figure 4 demonstrates the prevalence of 4 topics that are significantly different depending on whether or not the sermon is given on a religious holiday. Table 8 lists the coefficients and their significance.

Topics on *Old Testament* and *Vineyard/Tree* are discussed significantly less ($p = 0.0348$ and 0.0092 , respectively) during religious holidays, most likely because these holidays have specific religious significance that are prioritized in sermons given on those dates.¹⁶

The more interesting result is the topic of *Perseverance*, which is significantly more prevalent ($p = 0.0161$) on religious holidays than on non-holidays. As one of the less semantically coherent topics, it requires further analysis of the full sermon text. In a representative sermon from Easter in 2010, the pastor preaches on how to endure through relationships so that one can “not only . . . hear God’s gospel and God’s love,” but also “see and experience God’s love” through these relationships. On Christmas 2014, another representative sermon included an anecdote about an elder who persevered through cancer to build and serve the church. As such, sermons on religious holidays not only focus on the significance of the holiday, but also carry specific religious messages the pastor wants to convey to a larger audience.

These findings are supported in the supplemental analysis as well. Topics related to the *Cross*, or Jesus’ crucifixion, are discussed in greater proportions around Easter than on other days. The difference in proportions is significant at greater than 99.99% level. Conversely, topics related to *Family* are discussed less around Easter than on other days throughout the year ($p = 0.0003$). This could be explained by pastors’

Table 8. Significant topics on religious holidays vs. non-holidays

	Estimate	SE	T-statistic	Pr(> t)
Old testament	−0.031473	0.014893	−2.113	0.0348*
Christmas	0.06237	0.01593	3.917	9.46e−05***
Perseverance	0.039409	0.016359	2.409	0.0161*
Vineyard/tree	−0.032453	0.012442	−2.608	0.0092**

Significance codes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Notes: A negative “estimate” indicates lower topic prevalence during religious holidays compared to other days of the year. Conversely, a positive estimate indicates greater topic proportion during the holidays.

emphasis on Jesus, the crucifixion, and the resurrection rather than their intentional avoidance of sermons related to family on Easter.

More surprisingly, general words related to *Religion*, such as God and Christianity, are mentioned in significantly smaller proportions around Easter than on other days ($p = 0.0077$). One interpretation is that basic religious words are mentioned in high proportions throughout the year and give way to more Easter-specific words around Easter. A similar result is found with words on *Religion* around Christmas ($p = 0.009$). Pastors more often use Christmas-specific terms—e.g., “birth,” “manger,” “star,” “Mary,” and “Christmas”—rather than basic religious terms around Christmas.

National holidays

Third, I find that sermons given on national holidays are less catered to the specific date than they would be on religious holidays, but also contain more optimistic religious messages.

Figure 5 illustrates that the topic on *Christmas* is significantly more prevalent among non-holidays, while the topic on *Mission/Journey* is significantly more prevalent on national holidays. Table 9 lists the coefficients and significance of these two topics.

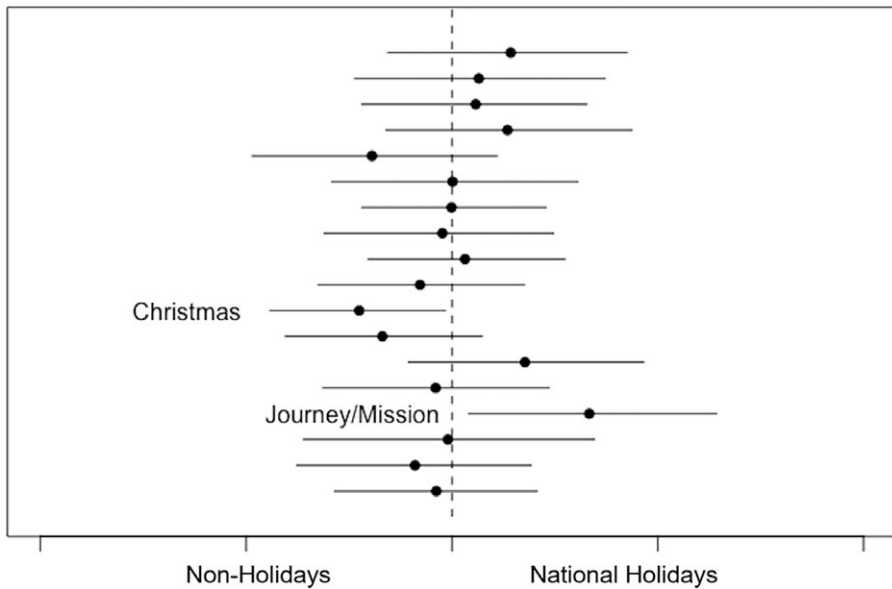
Consistent with previous analyses, the prevalence of *Christmas* on non-national holidays is largely due to its concentrated prevalence on Christmas, which is over-represented as a non-national holiday in this analysis. However, the prevalence of *Journey/Mission* on national holidays is more notable. One explanation is that pastors seem to avoid heavy topics around celebratory occasions. This would explain why sermons on national holidays tend to focus on the missionary journeys taken by Barnabas and Paul and on the establishment of the first church in Antioch. Similarly, supplemental analysis shows that topics on the *Cross* and *Sin* are both discussed in smaller proportions around dates such as the Chinese New Year and National Day. Words that make up the *Politics* topic, such as “politics,” “government,” and “officials,” are also mentioned in significantly smaller proportions around National Day and Labor Day than on other days. In contrast, basic words related to the nation tend to be spoken more around National Day and Labor Day, but the results are not statistically significant ($p = 0.09$). Basic words related to *Religion* also take up a significantly smaller proportion of sermons around Labor Day than on other days.

Table 9. Significant topics on national holidays vs. non-holidays

	Estimate	SE	T-statistic	Pr(> t)
Christmas	-0.022515	0.010864	-2.072	0.0384*
Journey/mission	0.033394	0.015640	2.135	0.0329*

Significance codes: * $p < 0.05$.

Notes: A negative “estimate” indicates lower topic prevalence during national holidays compared to other days of the year. Conversely, a positive estimate indicates greater topic prevalence during the holidays.

**Figure 5.** Prevalence of topics on national holidays vs. non-holidays.

Findings show significant changes in sermon content in the periods before and after the passing of the new *Religious Regulations* in 2018, over the period between 2009 and 2021, and on important dates, including politically sensitive days, national holidays, and religious holidays. While these topical changes do not confirm the intent behind pastors' self-censorship, they do hint at pastors' deliberate choice of speech. Moreover, in these same three comparisons of time, no other factor aside from self-censorship serves as an explanation for changes in sermon content. Aside from the government's tightened control of religion starting in 2018, factors such as religious doctrines, theological education, church characteristics, congregant demographics, religious market, and competition among churches do not show significant breaks between 2009 and 2021. Pastoral styles and preferences also fail to explain the topical change, as the analysis is based on sermons preached by hundreds of pastors. These factors further lose explanatory power when trying to understand why topics change between specific dates. Instead, the study finds support for the idea that pastors preach different content due to their positioning between the government and the congregation.

Conclusion

This study suggests that registered pastors and their churches, as reflected in their sermons, are complex. State-registered religious leaders are incentivized to both comply with the government and satisfy their congregation. Analysis of their sermons provides support for the expectation that their contents reflect broad changes in content over time. Between 2009 and 2021, and between the periods before and after 2018, sermons from state-registered churches have changed to focus on more profound religious topics than simple, ethical lessons. Additionally, pastors engage in self-censorship on important dates relative to non-important dates. On politically sensitive days, sermons tend to focus more on deeply religious topics. On religious holidays, sermons emphasize the meaning of the particular holiday, while also carrying more pointed (as opposed to basic) religious messages for the congregation. Finally, on national holidays, sermons contain more positive religious messages compared to basic religious or political topics. While this analysis finds support for self-censorship in specific time periods, the mandatory installation of security cameras and increased online monitoring suggest that pastors need to engage in self-censorship continuously, albeit to a lesser degree than on important dates.

There are many avenues to explore on the topic of state-registered church sermons and censorship. Current analysis can be supported with additional data from other registered churches in China. Sermons from house churches can also complement this analysis by serving as a point of comparison. Unregistered church sermons may produce bigger changes in sermon content on key dates due to the church's low profile, or smaller changes due to increased monitoring resulting from a less friendly relationship between the pastor and local officials. Similarly, registered church sermons from other countries can be incorporated to examine whether the patterns discovered here are specific to China or generalizable to registered churches beyond China. Moreover, with proper data, this analysis can be transformed from focusing on self-censorship to understanding state censorship. Furthermore, on a broader level, this study can pave the way for exploring how other types of state-registered groups—e.g., environmental organizations, labor organizations, local associations—maneuver government scrutiny while simultaneously accommodating the needs of group members.

Furthermore, findings suggest that it would be unfair to label registered religious leaders only as partners of the Party who endorse Party propaganda in sermons. It would also be incorrect to assume that they will only preach on agreeable moral lessons due to complacency or fear of repression. Rather, these pastors are sophisticated actors who search for ways to improve the quality of their sermons in order to satisfy (and maximize the number of) churchgoers, but also do so within the boundaries set by the government. This means that regardless of whether a “hidden transcript” exists, their public transcript, as literally demonstrated through sermons, must cater to both audiences.¹⁷ As such, the sermons tracked over time do not reflect any loosening of the regime's control over religion—but rather the opposite is true starting in 2018—and do not show pastors negotiating their relations with the government for more freedom. In this way, registered churches certainly do not constitute the part of civil society about which the Party needs to worry. At the same

time, these pastors can be seen as “reshaping” the space in which Protestantism operates in China (Lee and O’Brien, 2021, 4).

Finally, understanding the Chinese regime is also complicated. While we cannot prove whether these sermons are indeed the result of censorship from the top or self-censorship from the bottom, what is clear is that these sermon transcripts have been publicly posted online for many years. However, the recent tightening of the Party’s religious control under the Xi administration has also intensified in the online arena, and these sermons were taken down along with the website.¹⁸ If public online postings of sermons can be read as the Party’s confidence in being able to tolerate a broader range of topics in sermons, then explicit regulations to install security cameras inside church buildings and efforts to further control online activities cast doubt on this confidence. On this point, the study suggests that ultimately, self-censorship may not be enough to satisfy the government. While sermons in the last three years of analysis do not show significant degradation—but rather demonstrate improvement—in quality despite increased censorship, whether and how they change in the coming years may be the key to understanding both the future of Protestantism and authoritarian China.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048326100315>.

Financial support. This research was funded by the National Science Foundation [#1747183] and the Global Religion Research Initiative at the University of Notre Dame.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

Notes

1. I use the labels “state-registered,” “state-approved,” and “state-sanctioned” interchangeably throughout the paper to denote groups that are legally registered with the government.
2. Here, the unit “church” refers to a gathering of people under a single church name, rather than the entire religion.
3. Civil society can lead to democratization by “mediating between citizen and state, mobilizing and conveying citizens’ interests to government, constraining government behavior by stimulating citizen activism, and inculcating democratic values.” However, the discussion on civil society and democracy remains open.
4. 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, Stroup (2019) and the “Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity” (2017).
5. For example, censorship and self-censorship are also evident in academia, as scholars receive both clear and unclear guidance from multiple institutional and social sources regarding materials to censor in their research (Leng and Plantan, 2025).
6. In fact, people who attend unregistered churches are not automatically anti-government. People may choose between attending registered and unregistered churches for different reasons, such as personal relations, location, church size, etc. Additionally, house churches are also subject to government rules and interference. There are accounts that show house churches also experience censorship and self-censorship, but their underground nature suggests a marked difference in the degree of government monitoring (and the churches’ awareness of it).
7. Propaganda banners show the phrase, “人民有信仰，国民有希望，国家有力量 (*renmin you xinyang, guomin you xiwang, guojia you liliang*), meaning “The people have faith. The nation has hope. The state has strength.” See Hernández (2018).

8. There are up to seven worship services every Sunday and several worship services regularly scheduled throughout the week, except Monday.
9. These English transcripts are provided for sermons preached in English. Large churches in China often offer worship services in multiple languages to attract English-speakers and encourage the growth of the church. At a registered church, this can also be a way for the government to keep a close eye on the materials preached to foreign religious communities within Chinese territory.
10. For example, one of the foreign speakers included in my dataset is Pastor Andrew Palau. In the *China Christian Daily*, Palau is reported to have visited with a delegation from the Luis Palau Association, which has enjoyed “years of friendship” with CCC & TSPM and the Church of China, according to Palau himself (Zhang, 2023). During the visit, Palau discussed the “goals of sinicizing Christianity” with the Chinese leadership and extended an invitation for Chinese pastors to preach in the United States. As Palau’s visit suggests, invited foreign pastors are not only approved by the Chinese authorities but already on friendly terms with the official TSPM, so much so that they are often invited back to preach again and—similar to other TSPM pastors—suffer criticism from Chinese Christians who hold anti-government views (*Washington Times* 2005).
11. Roberts et al., (2019, 2) define *prevalence* as “how much of a document is associated with a topic” and content as the “words used within a topic.”
12. Years 2013 and 2014, though notable for the cross-demolition campaign in Zhejiang, were not chosen for similar reasons. First, the campaign, while impactful, was still perceived as a local event limited to a specific province. The responsibility for executing the campaign was also largely put on one provincial leader, while some put the blame on those local churches that opted for gaudy building designs that could only irk the government. Accordingly, some scholars and pastors viewed this event as largely about building code violations. For example, Cao (2017, 35, 38) argues that the Zhejiang campaign should not be seen as an “anti-Christian movement,” but rather as an effort to “satisfy . . . the visual impression of the inspection team” that is in line with the themes of “national construction and rejuvenation.” Second, pastors also did not perceive it as a turning point in the religious environment despite acknowledging the tragic outcomes of the campaign.
13. The same observation period also includes International Women’s Day (March 8), which sparks activities by women’s rights activists.
14. Labor Day was discontinued as a Golden Week in 2008, but remains a national holiday, and is still selected for its political and cultural significance.
15. For example, Christmas in 2015 was on a Friday. I make the observation period span from December 18th to December 31st and then analyze the sermons given during this period.
16. *Christmas* is found to be discussed significantly more ($p < 0.001$) on religious holidays than on ordinary days because it is one of the religious holidays chosen for the study.
17. This is in line with Vala (2017)’s claim that the public transcript is an “arena of negotiation.” See other studies (Huang and Yang, 2005; Jing and Koesel, 2024; Mok, 2025; Reny, 2018) discussing the private vs. public transcripts in the context of registered pastors in China.
18. A new version of the church website reappeared in mid-2025 with a different domain and no trace of English services (or any sermon older than 2021).

References

- ‘Obey Chinese law’: Xi issues warning to foreign NGOs in China during his US swing as fears of impending crackdown grow. *The South China Morning Post*, Sept. 23, 2015. Available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1860724/foreign-ngos-china-have-obey-chinese-law-president-xi>
- Aminzade R and Perry EJ (2001) The sacred, religious, and secular in contentious politics: Blurring boundaries, In Aminzade RR, Goldstone JA, McAdam D, Perry EJ, Tarrow S, Sewell WH and Tilly C (eds), *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 161.
- Anderson J (2006) Does god matter, and if so whose god? Religion and democratization. In Anderson J (ed), *Religion, Democracy and Democratization*. New York: Routledge, 192–217.
- Ashiwa Y and Wank DL (2009) *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bankston III CL (2002) Rationality, choice, and the religious economy: Individual and collective rationality in supply and demand. *Review of Religious Research* 43(4), 311.

- Bar-Tal D** (2017) Self-censorship as a socio-political-psychological phenomenon: Conception and research. *Advances in Political Psychology* 38(Suppl. 1), 41.
- Booth JA and Richard PB** (1998) Civil society, political capital, and democratization in Central America. *The Journal of Politics* 60(3), 780.
- Buchholz M** (2018) Newly rising urban churches in China and their relationship to the party state: A review of recent publications. *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 11(1–2), 117–130.
- Cai Y** (2010) *Collective Resistance in China: Why Popular Protests Succeed or Fail*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 101.
- Cao N** (2017) Spatial modernity, party building, and local governance: Putting the Christian cross-removal campaign in context. *The China Review* 17(1), 29–52.
- “China Profile – Timeline,”** BBC News, July 29, 2019. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13017882>
- “Christians Slam Evangelist’s Pro-Beijing Remarks,”** *Washington Times*, Nov. 27, 2005. Available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/nov/27/20051127-115544-7472r/>
- Collier R and Collier D** (1979) Inducements versus Constraints: Disaggregating “Corporatism.” *American Political Science Review* 73(4), 967–986.
- Constitution of the People’s Republic of China***. December 4, 1982. <https://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html>
- Debele SB** (2018) Religion and politics in Post-1991 Ethiopia. *Religion, State and Society* 46(1), 33.
- Deng Z** (2011) *State and Civil Society: The Chinese Perspective*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co.
- Di K** China’s stability maintenance system kicks into high gear on ‘sensitive dates’. *Radio Free Asia*, March 16, 2024. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/security-sensitive-03142024170746.html>
- Dukalskis A** (2017) *The Authoritarian Public Sphere: Legitimation and Autocratic Power in North Korea, Burma, and China*. New York: Routledge, 4.
- Edwards B and Foley M** (1996) The paradox of civil society. *The Journal of Democracy* 7(3), 39.
- Garner M** (2007) Preaching as a communicative event: A discourse analysis of sermons by Robert Rollock (1555–1599). *Reformation & Renaissance Review* 9(1), 45–70.
- Gill A** (2003) A political economy of religion. In Jelen TG (ed), *Sacred Markets, Sacred Canopies: Essays on Religious Markets and Religious Pluralism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 121.
- Gill A** (2006) Weber in Latin America: Is protestant growth enabling the consolidation of democratic capitalism? In Anderson J (ed), *Religion, Democracy and Democratization*. New York: Routledge, 60.
- “Guojia zongjiaojiaofu fabu zhonghua renmin gonghe guo jingnei waiguoren zongjiaohuodong guanli guiding shishi zize”,** *Renmin Ribao*, 27 September 2000.
- Hassner R** (2015) Review: Choreographies of shared sacred sites: Religion, politics and conflict resolution. *Perspectives on Politics* 13(03), 877.
- Hernández JC** The propaganda I see on my morning commute. *The New York Times*, Jan. 28, 2018. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/28/world/asia/beijing-propaganda-xi-jinping.html>
- Herold AL** (2015) Tocqueville on religion, the enlightenment, and the democratic soul. *American Political Science Review* 109(03), 524.
- Howe AE** (2021) To co-opt or coerce? State capacity, regime strategy, and organized religion in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 6(4), 389–404.
- Huang J and Yang F** (2005) The cross faces the loudspeakers: A village church perseveres under state power. In Yang F and Tamney J (eds), *State, Market, and Religions in Chinese Societies*. Leiden: Brill, 41–62.
- “Protestant five-year plan for Chinese Christianity”** (tuijin woguo jidujiao zhongguohua wunian gongzuo guihua gangyao), 2018–2022’, jidujiao quanguo lianghui (CCCTSPM), December 2017. Available at <https://www.ccctspm.org/cppccinfo/10283>
- Hunter A and Chan KK** (1996) *Protestantism in Contemporary China*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Iannaccone LR** (1991) The consequences of religious market structure: Adam Smith and the economics of religion. *Rationality and Society* 3(2), 156–177.
- Jacobs SM** (2002) Malawi: A historical study of religion, political leadership, and state power. In Mainuddin RG (ed), *Religion and Politics in the Developing World*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 55.
- Jansen SC** (1988) *Censorship: The Knot that Binds Power and Knowledge*. New York: Oxford University Press, 221.

- Jing P and Koesel KJ** (2024) Church and State in contemporary China: Securing Christianity. *Politics and Religion* 17(1), 107–137.
- Keremoglu E and Weidmann NB** (2020) How dictators control the internet: A review essay. *Comparative Political Studies* 53(10–11), 1690–1703.
- King G, Pan J and Roberts ME** (2013) How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression. *American Political Science Review* 107(2), 1–18.
- Koesel KJ** (2014) *Religion and Authoritarianism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 4.
- Koesel KJ, Hu Y and Pine J** (2019) Official protestantism in China. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 6(1), 71–98.
- Kuo C** (2011) Chinese religious reform. *Asian Survey* 51(6), 1042–1064.
- Lai HH** (2006) Religious policies in post-totalitarian China: Maintaining political monopoly over a reviving society. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 11(1), 55–77.
- Lambert T** The Present Religious Policy of the Chinese Communist Party,” *Religion, State, and Society*. 29:2. (2001) p. 121.
- Lavicka M and Yu-Wen Chen J** (2023) New measures for governing religions in Xi’s China. *China Report* 59(3), 259–274.
- Lee JT** (2007) Christianity in contemporary China. *Journal of Church and State* 49(2), 283.
- Lee S and O’Brien KJ** (2021) Adapting in difficult circumstances: Protestant pastors and the Xi Jinping effect. *Journal of Contemporary China* 30(132), 908.
- Leng N and Plantan E** (2025) Disappearing research: Academic control and self-censorship in China. *The China Journal* 94(1), 107–133.
- Liu J and White C** (2019) Old pastor and local bureaucrats: Recasting church-State relations in contemporary China. *Modern China* 45(5), 564–590.
- Lutz JG** (2000) China and protestantism: Historical perspectives, 1807–1949. In Uhappy S Jr. and Wu X (eds), *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*. New York: East Gate Book, 179–194.
- Mimno D and Lee M** (2014) Low-dimensional embeddings for interpretable anchor-based topic inference. Proceedings of the 2014 conference on empirical methods in natural language processing (EMNLP).
- Mok CWJ** (2025) (En)countering State-led Sinicization: Critical discursive responses from Roman Catholics in China. *The China Quarterly* 261, 162–182.
- Mueller E and Seligson R** (1994) Civic culture and democracy: The question of causal relationships. *American Political Science Review* 88, 3.
- Öztürk AE** (2019) An alternative reading of religion and authoritarianism: The new logic between religion and state in the AKP’s New Turkey. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19(1), 79–98.
- Payne DP** (2010) Spiritual security, the Russian orthodox Church, and the Russian foreign ministry: Collaboration or cooptation? *Journal of Church and State* 52(4), Autumn 712–727.
- Putnam RD** (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Putnam RD and Campbell DE** (2010) *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Reny M** (2018) Compliant defiance: Informality and survival among protestant house churches in China. *Journal of Contemporary China* 27(111), 482.
- Roberts ME, Stewart BM and Tingley D** (2019) STM: An R package for structural topic models. *Journal of Statistical Software* 91, 1–40.
- Robinson D and Tannenber M** (2019) Self-censorship of regime support in authoritarian states: Evidence from list experiments in China. *Research & Politics* 6(3), 2053168019856449.
- Sarkissian A** (2015) *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schmitter PC** (1979) Still the century of corporatism? In Schmitter PC and Lehmbruch G (eds), *Trends Toward Corporatist Intermediation*. London: SAGE, 7–52.
- Shen X and Truex R** (2021) In search of self-censorship. *British Journal of Political Science* 51(4), 1672–1684.
- Snegovaya M** Russia’s latest crackdown on dissent is much more sweeping than ever before. *Washington Post*, August 25, 2021. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/25/russias-latest-crackdown-dissent-is-much-more-sweeping-than-ever-before>.

- Steinhardt HC** “Defending stability under threat: Sensitive periods and the repression of protest in Urban China.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 30.130 (2021): 526–549.
- Stroup DR** Why Xi Jinping’s Xinjiang policy is a major change in China’s ethnic politics. *The Washington Post*, November 19, 2019.
- Thio L** (2006) Control, co-optation and co-operation: Managing religious harmony in Singapore’s multi-ethnic, quasi-secular state. *Hastings Constitutional Law Quarterly* 197, 219.
- Toft M, Philpott D and Shah T** (2011) *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*. New York: Norton & Company Inc.
- Truex R** (2019) Focal points, dissident calendars, and preemptive repression. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(4), 1032–1052.
- Tsai L** (2007) *Accountability without Democracy: Solidary Groups and Public Goods Provision in Rural China*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Vala C** (2017) *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?* New York: Routledge, 1–214.
- Williamson PJ** (1989) *Corporatism in Perspective: An Introductory Guide to Corporatist Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Yang CK** (1967) *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Zebich-Knos M** (2002) Mexico: Christianity and the struggle for collective identity. In Mainuddin RG (ed), *Religion and Politics in the Developing World*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 3.
- Zhang J** Andrew Palau visits China, inviting Wu Wei to preach in American Churches. *China Christian Daily*, December 11th, 2023. Available at <https://chinachristiandaily.com/news/church-ministries/2023-12-12/andrew-palau-visits-china-inviting-wu-wei-to-preach-in-american-churches-13507>

Sarah Lee is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Baylor University. Her research interests include religion and politics, authoritarian regimes, and repression. She received her PhD and MA in Political Science from U.C. Berkeley, an MA in International Relations from Peking University and a BA in Government from Dartmouth College.