

International Symposium on “Spirituality, Culture, and Chinese Societies:
Interdisciplinary and Interfaith Dialogues”

「靈性、文化與華人社會：跨學科與跨信仰對談」國際學術研討會

Session 1

Spirituality, Religions and the (Trans)Formation of Chinese Identity

The Sinicization of Chinese Religions

From Above and Below

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Since 2015, Xi Jinping has been calling for the “Sinicization” of Chinese religions. What is Sinicization under the Xi Jinping regime? What does it mean? What effects is it having on Chinese religions? Where will it lead?

The framework for religious policy promulgated in 1982 was a defensive framework – allowing religion to survive while discouraging its spread and protecting society from, its influence. The new policy of Sinicization is more active. It wants to transform religion to make it serve the Party-State.

The term Sinicization (*zhongguohua*) has been used by various religious groups such as Christians to denote an effort to adapt to Chinese culture. This also goes by terms such as inculturation or indigenization. But in Xi Jinping’s parlance, it means something different: a top down effort to use the power of the state to make religion “match the needs of China’s development and the great traditional [Confucian] culture and pro-actively fit into the Chinese [Marxist] characteristics of a socialist society.” All religions, even Daoism, are to be sinicized, no matter how deeply rooted they are rooted in Chinese culture.

While the Xi Jinping regime fashions its official rhetoric, religious believers at different levels of Chinese society are using the term Sinicization either to sincerely attempt to adapt to their cultural context or to protect their faith by offering lip service to government demands – or some combination of the two.

At one level there are academic scholars, such as historians, philosophers, literature experts, or social scientists at universities or research institutes. Closer to the level of lived religious experience are leaders of religious institutions – Buddhist monastics, Christian ministers and priests, Muslim imams. In all these cases religious leaders struggle to balance parts of their tradition that they believe to be fundamental and universal with changing local imperatives. But the government’s version of Sinicization may conflict with theirs if the government officials think that these supposed core beliefs and practices conflict with the characteristics of a Chinese socialist society. A final level of understanding of Sinicization is that of ordinary lay believers. All such believers would have varied reactions to the Sinicization program. Many probably would simply not want to be bothered by it.

There is one group of religions that the government’s Sinicization program does not affect – although in some ways they are the most Sinicized of all. These are the New Religious Movements, which in many ways are even more Chinese than many of the other religious groups discussed here. For the current government, such groups – designated *xie jiao* -- have to be eliminated precisely because they evoke too many themes from Chinese traditions, particularly traditions of rebellion against oppressive authority.

Overall, the new administrative measures to implement Sinicization have resulted in weakening religious communities. Nonetheless, state control over religion is not, and probably can never be, complete. Beyond tactics of resistance, religious intellectuals and leaders can try to embrace the government’s version of Sinicization in ways that transform its meanings and redirect its impacts.

Also, Control over the leaders doesn’t necessarily lead to control over the religiously practicing masses. So a complex religious ecology continues to evolve, producing an irrepressible diversity that the homogenizing project of Sinicization from above fails to contain.