CRM RESEARCH REPORT / CRM-RP-2026-010

Freedom of Religion or Belief: Religious Governance, Identity Risk and International Protection in China, 2016–2026

Covering Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Protestants, Catholics, Falun Gong and unregistered religious activity.

INSTITUTION	EVIDENCE CUT-OFF	VERSION
China Rights Monitor	28 July 2026	1.0 / Institutional

DOCUMENTING TRUTH. DEFENDING RIGHTS.

Executive summary

International law, Chinese religious regulations, UN and government reports, community material, judgments and asylum country information.

This institutional report covers the period from 2016 to 2026, with China as its principal jurisdictional focus. It is prepared for courts, law firms, protection decision-makers, international organisations and specialist human-rights bodies. It separates allegations, verified facts, institutional findings and CRM analysis, and it does not substitute institutional reputation for source-level scrutiny.

Research design and evidence hierarchy

CRM conducted a structured desk review of UN treaty-body and special-procedure material, legislation, judgments, government and parliamentary records, enforcement documents, research with a disclosed methodology, and reputable reporting used for chronology. Each proposition was assessed for provenance, date, jurisdiction, procedural stage, corroboration, contrary material and limitations. Primary law and original official records receive the highest presumptive weight, but relevance and currency remain necessary.

China-focused analytical framework

The analysis begins with formal legal authority and institutional competence, then tests observable implementation, practical access to safeguards and the availability of effective remedy. National-security exceptions, administrative discretion, Party-state coordination, professional regulation and digital governance are considered separately. General country evidence is not treated as an automatic finding about an individual case.

Principal findings

01 Freedom of religion or belief protects belief, change, non-belief and individual or communal manifestation; registration does not extinguish basic rights.

02 Since 2018, regulations, online controls and sinicisation have brought organisations, venues, clergy, finance, education and digital activity under dense governance.

03 Risk varies by region, group, leadership role, visibility, overseas links and prior sanctions; religious identity alone does not determine persecution.

04 In Xinjiang, religious restrictions interact with mass detention, cultural and language policy, family separation and data surveillance.

05 In Tibet, governance reaches monasteries, reincarnation, education, language and political loyalty; treatment of Dalai Lama-related expression is a key indicator.

06 Protection cases should verify belief history, visibility, community evidence, digital footprint and conduct reasonably expected on return.

Institutional mechanisms and risk indicators

01 Registration and venue controls create enforcement points through status, leases, fire rules, finance and youth participation.

02 Sinicisation, flag-raising, political study and approved texts affect doctrinal autonomy.

03 Online preaching, groups, donations and cross-border content face licensing and platform control.

04 Family teaching, Sunday schools, monastery education and school policy can trigger intervention.

05 Business, public-order, xiejiao, national-security and administrative provisions may be used.

06 Religion, language, ethnicity and political identity overlap strongly in Xinjiang and Tibet.

Selected cases and documentary record

01 Xinjiang

02 Uyghurs and other Muslims

03 OHCHR documented religious restrictions combined with mass detention, family separation and surveillance.

04 Tibetan areas

05 Tibetan Buddhist institutions and believers

06 Monastery governance, religious education, language, reincarnation and political expression remain under scrutiny.

07 Henan, Zhejiang, Anhui and others

08 House churches

09 Closures, pastoral detention and finance or publication cases show regional and leadership-based variation.

10 Multiple jurisdictions

11 Underground Catholic communities

12 Appointments, registration and loyalty requirements continue to affect unregistered clergy and believers.

13 Multiple jurisdictions

14 Falun Gong practitioners

15 Arrest, sentencing and ill-treatment allegations persist; identity, activity and provenance require case-specific verification.

16 Online space

17 Online religious dissemination

18 Licensing, accounts, livestreaming and cross-border content rules extend to individuals and clergy.

Professional evidential use

01 Protection decisions should separate belief, visibility and return risk and avoid theological testing as a substitute for credibility assessment.

02 Verify community letters, attendance, role, public expression, digital records and police or administrative documents.

03 Country evidence should specify region, denomination, registration, leadership role and cut-off.

04 Assess whether concealment of belief is compatible with dignity and protection principles.

05 Where estimates differ, present ranges and methods rather than selecting a single figure.

Forensic use requires a transparent bridge between general country material and the individual facts. A source schedule should identify the exact proposition supported, original-language title, issuing body, date, paragraph or page, stable URL, access date, source tier and any qualification. Authentication difficulties created by secrecy or fear of retaliation must be addressed expressly rather than converted automatically into an adverse inference.

Recommendations and accountability pathways

Limitations and update protocol

Research on China is constrained by censorship, inaccessible proceedings, risk to interviewees, uneven regional coverage, translation and the inability to inspect some sites or classified records. Quantitative totals differ by definition and cut-off. CRM records these limitations, avoids unsupported extrapolation and will issue a revised version when a correction materially affects a finding.

Conclusion

Professional reliability depends on verifiable references, a disclosed method, clear distinctions between types of evidence and conclusions proportionate to the record. The report should be read with its cited primary material and updated for the procedural date of any case in which it is relied upon.

Principal references

Tier I · ICCPR Article 18 and Human Rights Committee General Comment 22
https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-religion-or-belief/international-standards

Tier I · OHCHR Xinjiang Assessment
https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ohchr-assessment-human-rights-concerns-xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region

Tier II · USCIRF 2025 Annual Report
https://www.uscirf.gov/annual-reports

Tier II · USCIRF: State-Controlled Religion in China
https://www.uscirf.gov/events/hearings/state-controlled-religion-china

Tier II · CECC 2025 Annual Report
https://www.cecc.gov/publications/annual-reports/2025-annual-report

Tier II · UK Home Office CPIN: Falun Gong, China
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/china-country-policy-and-information-notes

Suggested citation

CHINA RIGHTS MONITOR, *Freedom of Religion or Belief: Religious Governance, Identity Risk and International Protection in China, 2016–2026*, CRM-RP-2026-010, version 1.0 (28 July 2026).