China cracks down on Protestants

by [Robert Marquand](#) in the [March 4, 2015](#) issue

([*The Christian Science Monitor*](#)) Prospective Communist Party members in the region of China where Christianity is growing the fastest must renounce religious belief, and current party members must write letters stating their rejection of faith, according to a new mandate by authorities in Zhejiang Province.

The policy comes amid extended and systematic harassment of Protestant churches in Zhejiang. More than 450 church buildings have been desecrated or destroyed since November 2013. Chinese analysts quoted in state-run media say the new vetting of party members for religious belief is part of a larger campaign in Beijing against "hostile foreign forces" infiltrating China.

Wenzhou, the capital of Zhejiang, on the prosperous east coast, is sometimes referred to as "China's Jerusalem" for its high number of devout Protestants—at least 1 million in a city of 8 million. The area is known for its business acumen and overseas population.

Officially, Communist Party members have long been expected to embrace atheism and Marxism enthusiastically. But oversight of religious practice has been lax in many parts of China for the past 20 years, and in places like Zhejiang it has been an open secret that some families of party members are actively practicing Christianity.

Zhejiang officials spelled out the policy on January 29, according to the state-run *Global Times*, based in Beijing: "Checking on religious beliefs is the first step towards approving applicants to the Party, and Party members found to have participated in or embrace religions will be required to 'rectify' their beliefs."

For the first time, the attack on churches has gone beyond the large unofficial "house" church movement to reach the officially approved Protestant churches that are part of the Three Self Movement.

In December, a party-mandated ban on Christmas celebrations in Zhejiang was seen as an effort to single out Christians at a time when Beijing has been promoting Buddhist faith. China—which has five official faiths, Islam, Taoism, Protestantism,

Catholicism, and Buddhism—announced last summer that it was creating its own official version of Christian theology.

Christians in Zhejiang say the policy against them is carefully designed to foment a collective psychological taint on their faith among ordinary Chinese, yet not be so severe as to cause international sanction.

The *Global Times* quoted Li Yunlong, a professor from a prominent party college in Beijing, who gave his interpretation of the latest move.

"Party members are banned from joining religions," said Li. "Believing in communism and atheism is a basic requirement to become a party member."

Li said that Zhejiang authorities stressed this basic requirement due to the local situation, adding he hopes this will set an example to other provinces.

"This could be a part of efforts against the penetration of Western hostile forces," Li said.

The vetting of new party members may also be due to the attractiveness of Christianity to an urban and educated generation of young Chinese who no longer see biblical faith and their Chinese identity as incompatible.

The new Zhejiang policy is "the newest escalation of the national campaign against religious freedom in almost all sectors of the society in China," said Bob Fu, a Chinese-born Christian who runs a group in Texas that monitors religious persecution in his home country. "The religious freedom of [Communist Party] members, like any other citizens of China's society, should be guaranteed as enshrined in the Chinese constitution and international human rights norms, including rights of choice for religious faith and freedom of conscience."

This article was edited on February 17, 2014.