



Religious Trends in China Today And their Social and Political Implications

Fenggang Yang, Ph.D.

Director of Center on Religion and Chinese Society

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana

fyang@purdue.edu

765-494-2641

<http://www.purdue.edu/crcs>

Religious Trends in China Today

- 1. All religions have been growing, despite rigid religious regulations;**
- 2. Christianity has been growing the fastest;**
- 3. Buddhism has more believers, but may not have more members;**
- 4. Daoism is the smallest religion in organization, but Daoist-based folk/popular beliefs and practices may have the largest number of believers or practitioners ;**
- 5. Islam is an ethnic religion, but not all people of the ten ethnic minorities are Muslims, and it has begun to attract Han converts;**
- 6. Atheism is waning, but persisting.**
- 7. Confucianism is reviving, but is it a religion? Who cares?**
- 8. Qigong flourished in the 1980s and 1990s? Is it done and gone?**
- 9. Religious freedom has been increasing, but the religious regulations are outdated.**

Some of the large questions

- Why religions are reviving in China?
- Why some religions grow faster than others?
- What are the social and political implications of the religious growths?
 - On economy
 - On politics
 - On social life
 - On international relations

1. All religions have been growing in China despite rigid religious regulations

- Government-provided statistics of five major religions

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Triple Religious Markets in China

TABLE 1. Official Statistics of Five Religions in China

	Catholic	Protestant	Islamic	Buddhist	Daoist
	Believers (million)	Believers (million)	Population (million)	Believers (million)	Believers (million)
Early 1950s ^a	2.7	0.7	8.0		
1956 ^b	3.0	0.8	10.0	Several tens of millions	10.0
1982 ^a	3.0	3.0	10.0		
1991 ^c	3.5	4.5	17.0		
1995 ^d	4.0	10.0	18.0		
	Clergy	Clergy	Clergy	Monks/Nuns	Monks/Nuns
1982 ^a	3,400	5,900	20,000	27,000	2,600
1995 ^d	4,300	18,000	40,000	200,000	25,700
	Churches and meeting points	Churches and meeting points	Mosques	Temples	Temples
1995 ^d	4,377	37,000	36,200	13,000	1,557

1. All religions have been growing in China despite rigid religious regulations

- Official updates since 1995:
 - “over one hundred million believers” (March 2005, “White paper on human rights in China”)
 - Based on an internal religious census in 1995-96;
 - Was uttered by Premier Zhou Enlai in the 1950s;
 - Who dare to update this official number?
 - How about saying “three hundred million believers?” (reported in the official China Daily in February 2007 based on a survey with no details)

1. All religions have been growing in China despite rigid religious regulations

Religion in China is more diverse than many Americans realize

- The red, black, and gray markets of religion in China
 - Five major religions: approved, underground, in-between
 - Minor, localized religions:
 - Orthodox Christianity in the northeast and northwest,
 - Mazu on southeast coastal provinces,
 - Ethnic minority religions:
 - Dongba beliefs of Naxi People, Buluotuo beliefs of Zhuang People
 - Shamanism in northern ethnic groups
 - Sectarian or cultic religions from other countries:
 - Children of God/the Family
 - Baha'i, Mormonism, Unification Church. . .
 - Sectarian or cultic religions originated in China:
 - yiguandao (Unity Way) . . .
 - Judaism: recovery and recruitment
 - Popular religious beliefs and practices – spiritualities

2. Christianity grows the fastest

- Government reports
- Wild estimates:
 - Up to 130 millions (*Christianity Today*, May 2008, Vol. 52, No. 5)
 - attributed to Ye Xiaowen (SARA Director)
- A Historian in 2003:
 - about 50 million Protestants
 - “Today, on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe” (Bays 2003:488)

	Catholics (million)	Protestants (million)	All Christians (million)
Early 1950s^a	2.7	0.7	3.4
1956^b	3.0	0.8	3.8
1982^a	3.0	3.0	6
1991^c	3.5	4.5	8
1995^d	4	10	14
2007	5	18	23
Informed estimates	12	50+	65?

Christianity-related sects and cults

TABLE 2. A Partial List of Indigenous, Christianity-Related Sectarian or Cultic Groups that Had Spread across Provincial Borders and Were Banned by the Chinese Government

	Cult/Sect	Chinese name	Founder/Key leader	Origin	Year founded/ spread	Year banned
1	Shouters ^a	<i>Huhan pai</i>	Witness Lee (Li Changshou)	United States	1960s/1970s	1983
2	Shouters 2 ^a	<i>Changshouzhuzhu jiao</i>	He Enjie/Zhao Weishan	China	1980s	1996
3	Established King ^a	<i>Beili wang</i>	Wu Yangming	Anhui	1988	1995
4	Lightning from the East (All Mighty God; Actual God) ^a	<i>Dongfang shandian/Quanneng Shen/ Shiji Shen</i>	Deng?/Zhao Weishan	Henan	1991	1999
5	Lord God Sect ^a	<i>Zhushen jiao</i>	Liu Jiaguo	Hunan	1993	1995
6	Lingling Sect	<i>Lingling jiao</i>	Hua Xuehe	Jiangsu	1983	1991
7	All Scope Church ^b	<i>Quanfanwei jiaohui</i>	Xu Yongze	Henan	1984	1988
8	South China Church ^b	<i>Huanan jiaohui</i>	Gong Shengliang	Hubei	1990	2001
9	Disciples Sect (Narrow gate)	<i>Mentu hui (kuangye zhai men)</i>	Ji Sanbao	Shaanxi	1989	1990
10	Three Ranks of Servants	<i>Sanban puren</i>	Xu Shengguang; Huo Congguang	Anhui	1980s	1999
11	Cold Water Sect	<i>Lengshui jiao</i>	Wu Huanxing?	Guangdong	1985 or 1988	1991 or 1999
12	China Gospel Fellowship ^c	<i>Zhonghua fuyin tuanqi</i>	Shen Yiping; Feng Jianguo	Henan	1980s	?
13	China Fangcheng Church (China for Christ) ^c	<i>Zhongguo fangcheng tuandui (Huarenguizhu jiaohui)</i>	Zhang Rongliang; Zheng Shuqian	Henan	1980s	?
14	China Blessings Church ^c	<i>Zhonghua mengfu tuandui</i>	Zheng Xianqi	Anhui	1980s	?
15	China Truth Church ^c	<i>Zhonghua zhenli tuandui</i>	Jiang Yuxiang	Anhui	1980s	?
16	Commune Sect	<i>Fanwugongyong pai</i>	Liang Jiaye	Shandong	1991	1994
17	Disciples Faith Sect	<i>Shitu xinxin hui</i>	Zuo Kun	Shanghai or Beijing	1995	?
18	Resurrection Sect	<i>Fuhuo Dao</i>	Guo Guangxu; Wen Qiuhui	Henan	1996	1999

3. Buddhism probably has more believers than Christianity but not necessarily in membership

- Buddhist Association of China: 100 million
 - Religious identity vs. religious practice
 - Are you a Buddhist? No!
 - Do you worship the Buddha? Yes!
 - Self-identity vs. organizational affiliation
 - Do you believe in Buddhism? Yes.
 - Have you taken refuge in the three jewels? No.
- Personal interests among CC Party top leaders
- Government promotions of Buddhism
 - The World Forum of Buddhism (April 2006)
 - RAB or BAB?
(Bureau of Religious Affairs, or Bureau of Buddhist Affairs)
 - Media favoritism
- Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism spreads
 - among urban Han people in eastern parts of China

4. Daoism is the smallest religion in organization but Daoist-based folk/popular beliefs and practices may have the largest number of believers or practitioners

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- **government promotions of Daoism: The International Forum of *Dao de jing* (April 2007)**
- **Popularity of numerology – the Opening of the Olympics (2008,8,8,8,8)**
- **Popularity of *feng shui***
- **A research report by the State Administration College (2007): a majority of government officials hold “superstitious” beliefs**

5. Islam is ethnicized in China

- Ten ethnic minority groups claim Islam as their religion
- 7 of the ethnic groups live mostly in Xinjiang
- 50+ percent of the Muslim population in China live in Xinjiang
- Culturally assimilated Hui people are spread all over China
- Not every Hui or Uygur person practices Islam
- Islam has attracted converts among Han people
(the ethnic majority, over 90 percent of the Chinese population)
 - Proselytization in China and through the internet
 - Migrant workers in the Middle-east converted, brought Islam home

6. Atheism is waning, but persisting

- Continuous propaganda efforts
 - School system
 - Mass media
 - Sporadic political campaigns
 - But have become less visible and less effective
- CC Party membership: required to be **atheist**
 - but not all CC Party members are atheist
 - a majority of officials are “superstitious”
 - believing and practicing
in the name of anything **but religion**
 - CCP promotes Confucianism and ancestral worship

7. Confucianism is reviving

- Supports coming
 - from the masses
 - from scholars
 - from overseas Chinese, and
 - from the CC Party-state authorities
- But is it a religion?
- Will it be made a religion?
- or even the State Religion?



8. Qigong: Done and Gone?

- Qigong (chi-kung):
 - a kind of traditional practice
 - can be quasi-religious or semi-religious
 - flourished in the 1980s and 1990s
 - hundreds of groups or sects
 - including Falun Gong
 - Zhong gong, Xiang gong,
 - all were banned in 1999, along with Falun gong

8. Qigong: Done and Gone?

TABLE 3. A Partial List of Widespread, Major Qigong Groups by 1999

	Name	Chinese name	Founder	Origin	Founding year	Year banned
1	Guolin New Qigong	Guolin Xinqigong	Guo Lin	Beijing	1979	1999
2	Flying Crane Gong	Hexiangzhuang	Zhao xx, Pang Ming	Beijing	1980	1999
3	China Wisdom Power Gong	Huaxia Zhineng Gong	Pang Ming	Hebei	1985	1999
4	Qian Dragon-Gate Gong	Qianzi Longmen gong	Su Xueliang	Beijing	1980s	1999
5	Yanxin Qigong	Yanxin Qigong	Yan Xin	Sichuan	1985	1999
6	Daoist Dragon-Gate Sect	Daojia Longmen pai	Wang Liping	Beijing	1985?	1999
7	Greater Nature Center Gong	Daziran Zhongxin Gong	Zhang Xiangyu	Qinghai	1985	1990
8	Wisdom Lotus Gong	Huilian Gong	Chen Linfeng	Beijing	1986	1999
9	Zhong Gong	Zhong Gong	Zhang Hongbao	Beijing	1987	1999
10	Huitong Dantian Gong	Huitong Dantian Gong	Zhang Yulei	Baoding, Hebei	1987	1999
11	Jingjin Neidan Gong	Jingjin Neidan Gong	Wang Qinyu	Chengdu, Sichuan	1987?	1999
12	Fragrance Gong	Xiang Gong	Tian Ruisheng	Luoyang, Henan	1988	1999
13	Zhonghua Shengong	Zhonghua Shengong	Zhu Zhenggao	Qingdao, Shandong	1988	1999
14	All Dimensions Return to One	Wanfa Guiyi	Zhang Xiaoping (fozi)	Huhhot, Neimong	1989	1995
15	Bodhi Gong	Puti gong	Di Yuming	Guangdong, Guangdong	1991	1999
16	Shenchang Bodily Science	Shenchang Renti Keji	Shen Chang	Suzhou, Jiangsu	1991	1999
17	Falun Gong	Falun Gong	Li Hongzhi	Jilin	1992	1999

8. Qigong: Done and Gone?

- Is it forbidden or free to practice qigong?
- Both, and more complex:
 - The sectarian qigong groups are still banned;
 - but the “health qigong” has been reinstated;
 - actually, being promoted by the government since 2004
 - Will it appear at the Olympic Opening Ceremony?
 - You will likely see it at public parks

**9. religious freedom has been increasing in practice,
but the tenets of religious regulations
have not changed since 1982**

- **Or since 1979: Set by Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter**
- **Or, back to 1958: No denominations were allowed**
- **Is today the best time in terms of religious freedom?**
 - **It is many times better than the 1980s:**
 - **more temples, mosques and churches today**
 - **It is hundreds or thousands of times better than the Cultural Revolution in 1966-1976:**
 - **all religions were banned then**
 - **But not better than the 1950s under the CCP:**
 - **the religious policy today is no substantial difference from that of 1958**

9. religious freedom has been increasing in practice, but the tenets of religious regulations have not changed since 1982

- What **religious freedom**?
 - “The freedom of religious beliefs”:
 - has always be written in the Constitution
 - but the Constitution was shelved
 - The freedom of religious exercise:
 - Restricted!
- Religious Freedom is not only the individuals’ right to believe
- But also the individuals’ right to organize to practice
- It is not giving favoritism to certain religions (e.g., Buddhism)
- But equal treatment of all approved religions (e.g., Christianity)
 - And the denominations within a religion

Some of the large questions

- **Why religions are reviving in China?**
 - Economic reforms: market economy with greater uncertainty
 - Social structural changes: *danwei* vs. self-reliance
 - Greater social space because of the CCP priorities: Economy
 - Ineffective enforcements of the outdated regulations
- **Why some religions grow faster than others?**
 - A million-dollar question
 - Speculations:
 - Varied institutional strengths
 - The desire for Westernization, modernization, globalization, or national identity?

Social and political implications of the religious changes

- Developing a market economy that has ethics
- Maintaining a political system with social stability
 - politics: faith-based, ideology-driven parties;
 - civil society: faith-based social organizations;
 - market: faith-based economic ethics;
 - family: faith-based familial ethics
- Is the emerging superpower a blessing or a curse to the Chinese and the neighbors in the global village?
 - If China breaks, all the hells break
 - refugees and emigrants
 - If China holds together, the arts of superpowership
 - Marxism-Leninism-Maoism dictatorship
 - Constitutionalism with freedom and equality (Christianity)
 - Imperialism with nationalism (Confucianism + Buddhism)