

Atheist Privilege, Religious Penalty? The Socioeconomic Consequences of Religiosity in Contemporary China

Brian McPhail

INTRODUCTION

Numerous research studies have explored the effects of religion on socioeconomic status and social inequality; however, the bulk of this work has been limited to the study of denominations in the United States. Little attention has been paid to the socioeconomic differences between religious groups in other nations. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China, religion has made a remarkable comeback. The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) religious ban nearly eradicated religion from Chinese society, but today 20% of the population now claims to be religious. Over the same period, China has boasted unprecedented rates of economic growth, which has been accompanied by the rapid increase of income inequality. In less than three decades, the Gini coefficient has nearly doubled from 0.30 in 1980 to 0.55 in 2012 (Xie and Zhou 2014). Although researchers have used government policy, geographic location, education, and race/ethnicity to explain the burgeoning social inequality (Li, Sato, and Sicular 2013; Xie and Zhou 2014; C. Wang, Wan, and Yang 2014), the role of religion has yet to be considered.

Taking a Marxist stance towards religion, the CCP has aggressively promoted atheism among the Chinese people and marginalized religious believers. China's constitution grants the freedom of religious belief, but the CCP heavily restricts religious activities and political tensions with notable religious groups persist. The political consequences of being religious in China have received a lot of attention, but has China's history of religious suppression and the privileged position of atheism in China's political system resulted in socioeconomic disadvantages for religious groups? As China's social landscape continues to shift, this analysis draws attention to the under-recognized impact of religious factors in the stratification of Chinese society.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars have been studying the socioeconomic differences between religious groups since the early 20th-century. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, the predominant theoretical perspective on religion and inequality in the United States claimed that religion primarily served to maintain social cohesion by explaining and legitimating social inequality in theological terms: those at the top deserved their abundance, which was indicative of God's earthly and eternal blessings, while those at the bottom could be comforted by promises of eternal rewards (Davis and Moore 1945; Davidson and Pyle 2006). Described as fair play theory, this approach followed the expectation that the structural changes of modernization would lead to the convergence of class and status distinctions (Knottnerus 1987), and by implication that denominational divisions would slowly disappear (Herberg 1983; Wuthnow 1989; Park and Reimer 2002). But numerous studies have demonstrated that differences between religious groups have persisted over time (Smith and Faris 2005; Lehrer 1999; Davidson and Pyle 2011), and an alternative theory developed to explain the social hierarchy of religious groups. Fair shares theory highlights the divisive role of religious groups themselves in producing and sustaining social inequality. Arguing from a Weberian social conflict framework, Davidson and Pyle (2006; 2008) claim that religion—just like race, class, or gender—is a basis for unequal access to power, privilege, and prestige. Under the necessary conditions of religious prejudice, competition, and differential power, the religious group on top aims to preserve its advantages, and inequalities become semi-permanent in the form of religious stratification (Pyle and Davidson 2003). Studies in the United States have found significant effects of religion on access to power, privilege, and prestige (Keister 2003; Pyle 2006). Today, modern Chinese society appears to have the necessary conditions for religious stratification to emerge. Socioeconomic inequality has risen dramatically, and social class distinctions are becoming more pronounced. Additionally, Communist ideology has promoted prejudices against religion, created a shortage economy and competition in the religious marketplace (F. Yang 2011), and consolidated power in the hands of the militantly atheist CCP. Based on these realities, atheism would seem to sit atop a religious stratification structure in China.

Research Question and Hypothesis

The aim of this study is to examine the socioeconomic differences among China's religious groups to determine whether or not atheism enjoys greater social and economic privilege in contemporary Chinese society. More specifically, can income inequality in Chinese society be partially explained by religion? Is there a "religion penalty" in China whereby the income levels of religious believers are lower than those of atheists?

In the following analysis, I use annual personal income as the dependent variable and religious belief as the primary independent variable. In addition, I include gender, education, political affiliation, and location as controls. Based on fair shares theory and the political preference of atheism in China, I hypothesize that religious belief will be negatively associated with income. In other words, religious individuals will have lower annual incomes than atheists, even when accounting for the influence of gender, education, political affiliation, and location. Additionally, I expect positive associations between annual personal income and being male, having a college degree, being a Communist Party member, and living in an urban area.

METHODS

Data

Data for this analysis come from the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (SLSC), a national multi-stage probability sample ($N = 7,021$) of Chinese citizens (above 16 years of age) in mainland China. As the most comprehensive survey of Chinese religion to date, the SLSC collected extensive data on the religious beliefs, practices, and affiliations of the Chinese people. In addition to religion variables, the survey includes relevant demographic and socioeconomic information for each respondent. My analysis excludes all non-working individuals, university students, and retirees, as well as observations with missing data in any of the variables included in the models. The resulting sample size for this study is $N = 4,686$.

Measures

Dependent Variable

In separate survey items the SLSC asked urban residents ($N = 5,427$) to provide their total *monthly* personal income and rural residents ($N = 1,738$) their *annual* personal income within pre-defined income range categories in Chinese *renminbi* (RMB). To obtain a single annual income measure by which I could compare all respondents, I recoded the rural annual income categories with the mid-points of each range and the urban monthly income categories with the mid-points of each range multiplied by 12. I then combined the results into a new continuous variable. The original urban income variable has missing data for 926 of the observations (17%). My analyses demonstrated no discernible systematic pattern of missingness, so I dropped these observations from the models.

Independent Variable

Religious belief is the primary independent variable of my analysis, for which I include 3 different measures: 1) whether or not respondents have religious belief, 2) self-identification with a specific religious group, and 3) whether or not respondents are devout atheists. By measuring religious belief in these three different ways, the models each provide different insight into the effect of religion on income. First, the dichotomous variable *religious belief* measures the respondents' affirmation of having religious belief (1 = yes and 0 = no). The survey item reads "Do you have any religious belief?" Next, self-identification with a specific religious group is represented by a series of dummy coded variables for each of the five officially recognized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam) as well as Confucianism. The omitted category is the group of respondents who claimed no religious affiliation on survey. Respondents were allowed to identify belief in more than one religion, but only 1% of respondents did so. Because the survey captures the order of the selections, I coded their first selection as their primary religious belief. Finally, I define *pure atheism* as a religious category for individuals who affiliate with no religious group, espouse no religious beliefs, participate in no religious activities, and practice no religious rituals. To measure *pure atheism*, I created a new dichotomous variable based on responses to 30 selected SLSC survey items on respondents'

religiosity. I coded respondents who gave no affirmative response for any of these items to be a member of the pure atheism group (1 = pure atheist, 0 = not).

Control Variables

I control for location, gender, political affiliation, and education, all of which could be strongly associated with annual income. Prior research demonstrates that income inequality is starkest along the urban/rural divide, so I measure *urban* residency using a dichotomous variable (1 = urban and 0 = rural). Likewise, I include *gender* in the models as a dichotomous variable (1 = male and 0 = female). I recoded political affiliation to obtain the dichotomous measure of *Party Membership*, in which members of the Communist Party and Communist Youth League = 1 and non-members = 0. I also recoded education level as holding a *college degree* or not (1 = college degree and 0 = no college degree).

Analytic Plan

My analytic plan has three primary steps. First, I obtain frequencies, percentages, and mean and standard deviation of annual income for each of my independent and control variables. Next, I estimate a bivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model for each of the 3 measures of religious belief (affirmation of religious belief, self-identification with a religious group, and pure atheism). Finally, I add the control variables and estimate a multivariate regression model for each measure of religious belief to determine if there is a change in the effect of religious belief on the dependent variable annual income. I chose ordinary least squares regression because my primary dependent variable annual income is a continuous variable.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) for all of the variables in the analysis, by annual personal income. The mean annual personal income for those without religious belief (13,939 RMB) and for those who do not self-identify with any religious group (13,919 RMB) are nearly the same as the mean annual personal income of the entire sample (14,031 RMB). Respondents who report having religious belief have a higher mean annual personal income (14,538 RMB) than those who do not (13,939 RMB). Additionally, Buddhists (14,612 RMB), Confucianists (31,286 RMB), Catholics (18,625 RMB), and Muslims (18,300 RMB) have a higher mean annual personal incomes than the overall sample (14,031 RMB), respondents with no religious affiliation (13,919 RMB), or who are Daoist (11,625 RMB) or Protestant (11,998 RMB).

As expected, the mean annual personal income of urban residents (17,566 RMB) is greater than rural residents (5,120 RMB), that of males (16,167 RMB) is greater than females (11,652 RMB), that of Communist Party members is greater than non-members (13,252 RMB), and that of individuals with a college degree or higher (26,447 RMB) is greater than individuals without a college degree (13,133 RMB).

Table 2 presents 6 OLS regression models with annual personal income as the dependent variable, estimated by religion. In Models 1-3, three different measures of religion are included as regressors: religious belief (Model 1), identification with a specific religious group (Model 2), and pure atheism (Model 3). Models 4-6 repeat the regressions with the set of control variables that includes gender, education, political affiliation, and location.

Among the first three models, the only statistically significant relationship ($p < .001$) is the positive association between Confucianism and annual personal income in Model 2. The average annual personal income of respondents who self-identified with Confucianism as a religion is 17,367 RMB more than the reference category, respondents who did not self-identify with any religious group. The other models reveal no significant differences in income between those who are religious and those who are not.

When the control variables are included in Models 4-6, the measured effects of religion on annual personal income increase considerably; however, the direction of the associations are in the opposite direction than I hypothesized. Model 4 suggests that when controlling for gender, education, political affiliation, and location, having religious belief is *positively* correlated with income: Chinese with religious belief have a mean annual personal income that is 1,288 RMB greater than Chinese without religious belief, a statistically significant difference at the 99% confidence level. In model Model 5, the introduction of the control variables reduces

the positive effect of Confucianism on income observed in Model 2 by 7,365 RMB, but the positive effect of Buddhism on income becomes significant. Buddhists have an average income that is 1,208 RMB more than those without a religious affiliation.

Because the religious self-identification variable is actually a more specific measurement of the religious belief variable, we can closely compare Models 4 and 5. Of the 722 respondents who have religious belief, only 15 claimed to have no religious affiliation. And of the 3,964 respondents who claimed to have *no* religious belief, 197 self-identified with Buddhism, 8 with Daoism, 6 with Confucianism, 15 with Protestantism, and 1 with Islam. Despite these few conflicting responses, there is substantial overlap between the two variables. The positive effect of religious belief on income in Model 4 appears to be primarily due to the strong effect of Buddhism and Confucianism on income as estimated in Model 5, but the small numbers of respondents who self-identified with Confucianism (and Catholicism) cast doubt on the meaningfulness of the estimated effects of these variables on annual personal income.

Model 6 reveals a significant negative effect of Pure Atheism on annual personal income, further disconfirming my hypothesis. Also controlling for gender, education, political affiliation, and location, Model 6 estimates the mean annual personal income for Pure Atheists, those who do not believe, practice, participate, or affiliate with religion to be 1,794 RMB less than everyone else. The most irreligious individuals in China, the most devout atheists, have significantly lower income than the rest of the population, which includes the moderately irreligious and the religious.

Overall, the regression coefficients of the control variables yield few surprises. Being male, having a college degree, and living in an urban area all have significant positive effects on annual personal income; however, the effect of Party membership is minimally positive and not statistically significant. Table 1 reveals a difference of 5,225 RMB in mean annual personal income between Communist Party members and non-members, but this difference disappears in the regression models, suggesting that religion, gender, education, and location actually account for the observed difference in income by political affiliation.

DISCUSSION

Using data from the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (SLSC), this study presents an analysis of annual personal income by religion. Although atheism remains China's state ideology and maintains substantial political privilege, these findings suggest that there in fact no observed income advantage for non-believers and no income disadvantage for believers. In fact, the results suggest that believers in Buddhism have *higher* incomes than non-believers, and that pure atheists have *lower* incomes than everyone else, including religious believers. According to this analysis, there is no support for the hypothesis that there is a socioeconomic penalty for religious individuals in China. The political preference for atheism and the political suppression of religion in China appear to have little effect on an individual's annual income. During and immediately after the Mao era, political power was the key to economic success (Harding 2010; F. Wang 2008), but since the economic reforms of the 1980s, two alternative paths to career success have identified: higher education and entrepreneurship (Dickson and Rublee 2000). Despite being out-of-favor in China's political sphere, religious individuals may be particularly adept at improving their economic lives by these other paths. Further study of the relationship between religion and education and business ownership is needed before additional claims about the role of religion in social inequality can be made.

An important consideration for future research is to continue exploring alternative ways of measuring religiosity, in particular religious practice. The emphasis on religious *orthopraxis* (doing the right things), as opposed to *orthodoxy* (believing the right things) or belonging to the right religious group, suggests that measures of religious belief and religious affiliation inadequately capture the religious identities of Chinese people. Furthermore, explorations of alternative measures of socioeconomic status such as education level and job prestige might provide other insights that can advance our understanding of the role of religion in shaping social inequality in mainland China.

Table 1: Mean Personal Annual Income by Independent Variables

		Annual Personal Income in RMB			
		n	Percent	Mean	Std Dev
Religious Belief	Yes	722	15.4	14538	13921
	No	3964	84.6	13939	13087
Religious Self-ID	None	3752	80.1	13919	12992
	Buddhism	770	16.4	14612	14459
	Daoism	20	0.4	11625	12064
	Confucianism	7	0.1	31286	20702
	Protestantism	109	2.3	11998	9859
	Catholicism	8	0.2	18625	17871
	Islam	20	0.4	18300	13127
Pure Atheism	Pure Atheism	229	4.9	14054	9449
	Other	4457	95.1	14030	13385
Location	Urban	3355	71.6	17566	13983
	Rural	1331	28.4	5120	3395
Gender	Male	2469	52.7	16167	14235
	Female	2217	47.3	11652	11534
Communist Party	Member	864	18.4	17477	13004
	Non-member	3822	81.6	13252	13145
Education	College Degree	316	6.7	26447	19603
	No College Degree	4370	93.3	13133	12154
	All	4686	100.0	14031	13219

Table 2: OLS Regression Coefficients Predicting Annual Personal Income

Annual Personal Income in RMB						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Religious Belief	599.31			1,287.62**		
Buddhism		693.39			1,207.96**	
Daoism		-2,294.06			-1,040.36	
Confucianism		17,366.66***			10,002.03*	
Protestantism		-1,921.30			80.65	
Catholicism		4,705.94			4,472.42	
Islam		4,380.94			1,710.23	
Pure Atheism			23.46			-1,793.55*
Urban				11,500.50***	11,477.76***	11,568.37***
Male				3,973.66***	3,960.53***	3,917.31***
Party Member				199.76	150.27	130.70
College Degree				9,604.52***	9,523.55***	9,571.24***
Constant	13,938.85***	13,919.06***	14,030.04***	2,820.68***	2,831.06***	3,102.80***
N	4,686	4,686	4,686	4,686	4,686	4,686
R ²	0.0003	0.004	0.0000	0.24	0.24	0.24
Adjusted R ²	0.0001	0.003	-0.0002	0.24	0.24	0.24

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

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