



Changing perceived importance of religion in mainland China, 1990–2012: An age-period-cohort analysis



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ABSTRACT

The comprehensive social reform and relaxation of religious regulation in mainland China have encouraged scholars to propose a revival thesis of religion, predicting a rising prevalence of religious adherence in the Reform Era. This study extends the revival thesis by focusing attention on people's subjective religiosity, and investigates age, period, and cohort effects on the transition in perceived importance of religion from 1990 to 2012. Capitalizing on the repeated cross-sectional data of the China sample in the World Values Survey, this study shows that (1) The senior population, relative to the younger counterpart, attaches greater importance to religion. (2) The net period effect suggests that Chinese citizens' perceived importance of religion follows an upward trend by the early 2000s, but no significant growth is detected henceforward. (3) The cohorts who experienced the anti-religion Mao's Era in their adolescent life course stage have an evidently lower probability of viewing religion to be important, in relation to the cohorts of the Reform Era. Theoretical implications of the empirical age-period-cohort patterns for the religious economies theory and change of Chinese religious landscape are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Relaxation of state control on religion, by deregulating religious supply, has been identified by scholars of religious economies as a social force that boosts religious vitality (e.g., Iannaccone et al., 1997; Finke, 1997; Finke and Martin, 2014; Stark and Finke, 2000; Yang, 2006). In light of the draconian oppression of various religions during the Mao's Era and the ensuing softening of religious policies by allowing for certain religious freedom since the 1980s, mainland China serves as a good case to test this theory. Previous studies, in this regard, have documented a notable growth in the number of religious adherents in Reform-Era China, based on which a *revival thesis* of religion has been proposed (e.g., Chau and Yuet, 2010; Lu, 2012; Stark and Liu, 2011; Stark and Wang, 2015; Yang, 2010, 2011, 2014).

The revival thesis, albeit well received in the literature, still has room for further refinement. First, the revival thesis, as such, sets its foundation mainly on a comparison between the Mao's Era and the Reform Era. Since almost all kinds of religions were eradicated from the entire society during the Cultural Revolution (Tang and Wiest, 1993), it comes as no surprise if we witness religious rejuvenation in the Reform period in comparison with the situation before 1978. Relatively, the trajectory of people's religious life *since the onset of the Reform* bears more theoretical and practical significances, as this question informs

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us of whether the resurgence of various religions stands for a prelude to a continuous and uninterrupted religious growth, or a temporary “rebound” after a long-time suppression (e.g., [Hu and Yang, 2014](#)).

Second, one's religiosity, as widely discussed in the literature of the sociology of religion, should be conceptualized to be a multidimensional construct (e.g., [Glock and Stark, 1965](#); [Lenski, 1961](#); [Neff and Alan, 2006](#)). In prior research of the revival thesis, however, most empirical evidence are based on “objective” indicators, such as the number of religious followers, while the *subjective* aspect of one's religiosity is understudied ([Stark and Finke, 2000](#): 103). This partial focus could be misleading, as illuminated by the well-known belonging-versus-believing debate ([Davie, 1994, 2007](#); [Hervieu-Leger, 2000, 2006](#); [Kasselstrand, 2015](#)), and in a sense, it deserves special attention in studies of Chinese religions, since many Chinese religions are equipped with neither an explicit religious identity nor an institutionalized organizational pattern ([Leamaster and Hu, 2014](#); [Hunter and Chan, 1993](#); [Lian, 2010](#); [Madsen, 1998](#); [Yang, 1961](#)). Hence, the prevalence rate of religious adherence *itself* could be insufficient to reveal the whole picture of the Chinese religious landscape, so to better understand the revival thesis, subjective measures should be introduced and examined.

Third, the rapid and comprehensive social reform over the past decades in mainland China makes it tempting to attribute religious transition to changing historical conditions. To be sure, this line of thinking underscores one major mechanism that regulates the trajectory of religions in China (that is, period effect), especially in light of the concerted reform. But it overlooks age and cohort effects. This overlook should be avoided, because, for one thing, the perceived significance of religion often varies across the life course (e.g., seniors are more religiously oriented than the middle-aged persons), so religious transition could be potentially linked to China's rapid population aging ([Chen and Powell, 2012](#)). For another thing, people of different cohorts, due to their distinct formative experiences, cultivate unique patterns of religious engagement and perception, so the revival thesis could also be possibly driven by the inter-cohort variations and generational replacement ([Hu and Leamaster, 2015](#); [Yan, 2010](#)). Thus, besides period effect, it is necessary to look into age and cohort effects in order to tease out the more nuanced mechanisms undergirding a particular transitioning pattern of religion.

This study, by investigating age, period, and cohort effects on Chinese citizens' perceived importance of religion in everyday life (PIR henceforth), fills in the abovementioned gaps. Our findings respond to the religious economies theory by illustrating that, in mainland China, change in PIR is not as responsive to the relative opening of a religious market as to the state's ability to retain hegemony over culture and social identity, directing us to a *political economic analysis* of religious market ([Yang, 2011](#)). Also, the persisting cohort effect of the Mao's Era echoes the similar research conducted in other socialist societies (e.g., [Froese, 2008](#)) by questioning the presumed constant religious demand in the religious economies paradigm. In this regard, cross-national differences in religious life might be at play. More discussions are reserved in the concluding section.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Relaxation of religious control and religious revival

Religious competition is the core concept in the religious economies theory. According to this theory, an unregulated religious market is featured by free competition, where various religious agents, as the “suppliers” of religious goods, are motivated to work hard and efficiently to recruit new members, consequently raising overall religious supply. Assuming a constant state of people's religious demand, more supply of religious goods fosters the overall religious vitality of a society. In this case, religious regulation, due to its restriction on competition, hurts overall religious participation ([Iannaccone et al., 1997](#); [Finke, 1997](#); [Stark and Finke, 2000](#)).

Following this line of thinking, scholars of religious economies hypothesize that the relaxation of religious regulation, by restoring religious competition and increasing religious supply in a society, should be followed by a tendency of religious revival ([Finke, 1990](#); [Stark and Finke, 2000](#); [Stark et al., 2005](#); [Stark, 2006](#)). This *deregulation-growth hypothesis* has been supported by studies conducted in developed nations, such as the U.S., (e.g., [Iannaccone, 1991](#)), and transitioning societies, such as the Soviet successor states after the collapse of the Soviet Communism ([Greeley, 2002](#); [Froese, 2004, 2008](#); [Evans and Northmore-Ball, 2012](#)). Studies on Asian societies generally depict a similar picture ([Hu and Leamaster, 2013](#); [Lu et al., 2008](#)).

2.2. The case of mainland China

In relation to previously examined cases, Mainland China stands out in that the state regulation of religion in the Reform Era is relaxed but not entirely lifted. Through the patriotic religious associations, the religious affairs bureau, and the United Front department, the state in contemporary China still exerts surveillance over people's religious life ([Fallman, 2010](#); [Leung, 2005](#); [Potter, 2003](#); [Qu, 2011](#)). Moreover, religious policies in the Reform Era may fluctuate (e.g., [Chan, 2004](#)). Hence, it is inappropriate to overstate the discontinuity from the Mao's Era to the Reform Era in terms of the state-religion relationship. In light of this, the religious market in contemporary China should not be characterized with full competition. Instead, as identified by Fenggang Yang's triple-color model ([Yang, 2006](#)), the religious market under the influences of the state in the Reform Era has been *segmented into several niches*. Also, certain religions, such as the state-approved ones, are bestowed with certain privileges that are derived from political support and government access. This situation determines that the religious market in mainland China is more of being *oligopolistic* ([Yang, 2011](#): chapter seven).

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