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# Measuring Religion in China

*Many Chinese adults practice religion or hold religious beliefs, but only 1 in 10 formally identify with a religion*

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This report is a collaborative effort by Pew Research Center staff. Find related reports online at [pewresearch.org/religion](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion).

This report benefitted from the feedback of six eminent scholars, who have asked to remain anonymous. While the analysis for this report was guided by our consultations with these advisers, the Center is solely responsible for the interpretation and reporting of the data.

## How we did this

This report aims to explain the challenges of measuring religion and religious trends in China. These challenges include the shortcomings of available data, the awkward fit of categories used in other parts of the world, and the impact of culture and politics on religious activity in China.

Since Pew Research Center, like other non-Chinese organizations, is not allowed to conduct surveys in China, in this report we analyze surveys conducted by academic groups in China, including the [Chinese General Social Survey](#) (CGSS), the [China Family Panel Studies](#) (CFPS), the [China Labor-force Dynamics Survey](#) (CLDS) and the [World Values Survey](#) (WVS). We also analyze Chinese government data, which is primarily released by China’s State Council and the National Religious Affairs Administration (formerly known as the State Administration for Religious Affairs), and data from state-run religious associations, such as the [China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement](#) (CCC and TSPM) and the [Islamic Association of China](#).

We explain how religion in China – and in East Asia more broadly – is distinct from religion elsewhere. Questions that measure Abrahamic forms of religion (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are not sufficient to describe the breadth of religious beliefs and customs in East Asia. To capture the Chinese religious landscape as fully as possible, we consider a wide range of survey questions. For example, we present findings from questions about cultural beliefs and practices that also have spiritual or religious elements, such as gravesite visits and belief in *fengshui* (风水).

Throughout the report, we include Chinese terms because translations to English are often imprecise or incomplete. The [Key terms](#) section explains words and phrases that appear in the report’s Overview. A complete glossary can be found in [Appendix A](#).

For context, we provide a summary of the [recent history of the Chinese government’s policies toward religion](#). Refer to the [Methodology](#) for technical details, as well as a discussion of [why surveys by Chinese universities may or may not be trustworthy](#). Read the section on [current scholarship](#) to understand other reasons why social scientists may shy away from research on religion in contemporary China.

This report is part of the Pew-Templeton [Global Religious Futures project](#), a broader effort by Pew Research Center to measure religious change and assess its impact on societies around the world. The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John Templeton Foundation fund the Global Religious Futures project.

## Key terms

In Chinese, there's no single, literal equivalent of the English word "religion." Various terms are used for different kinds of beliefs and practices, reflecting nuances that get lost in translation. Chinese authorities show varying levels of tolerance for different categories of "religion," even though the lines between them are often blurry. [Appendix A](#) has a complete glossary.

***zongjiao* (宗教) = religion:** The most common Chinese translation of "religion," *zongjiao* is usually understood as a form of organized religion. The Chinese government officially recognizes five *zongjiao*: Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism. Affiliations, beliefs and practices closely associated with these religions are typically described as *zongjiao*. Confucianism, as well as folk beliefs and practices, are *not* typically considered *zongjiao*.

***xisu* (习俗) = traditional custom:** Many popular rituals, such as [Confucius veneration](#) and temple festivals where folk deities – e.g., the [goddess of the sea/Mazu](#) (妈祖) and [other local deities](#) – are worshipped are characterized as *xisu* rather than *zongjiao*. Similarly, it is often considered a custom to venerate ancestors' spirits, [observe the \(Hungry\) Ghost Festival](#) in Lunar July, and [make offerings and pray to the god of wealth](#) or [burn incense and make wishes](#) at a temple during Chinese New Year. The government often tolerates and even encourages these practices because they are considered Chinese cultural traditions, even though they are centered on spirits or deities.

***mixin* (迷信) = superstition:** Most traditional Chinese religious activities outside *zongjiao* and *xisu* are categorized as *mixin* and officially banned. For instance, Chinese law [forbids sorcery and witchcraft](#), which the government associates with fraud and other crimes. Practices it deems benign – such as [fortune telling](#) and [fengshui](#) (风水) – are tolerated. The line between custom and superstition is fuzzy. For example, some Chinese people consider fortune telling and fengshui to be customs, not superstitions. And while rituals such as burning "spirit money" and offering sacrifices of food and drink at ancestors' gravesites are generally considered customs, they may be viewed as [slipping into superstition](#) when the ritual involves setting off firecrackers at the gravesite to ward off evil spirits or [burning paper models of houses or cars](#).

***xiejiao* (邪教) = evil cults:** Since 1999, the government has intensified crackdowns on [groups it labels as xiejiao](#), including *Falun Gong* (法轮功), the Children of God, the Unification Church, and the World Elijah Gospel Mission Society.

***xinyang, xin, xiangxin* = belief/believe:** Chinese surveys use these words to ask about belief. Each has slightly different meanings. In this report, all three are translated as “belief” or “believe,” but we note the corresponding Chinese term when appropriate.

***xinyang* (信仰) = firm belief in or commitment to a theory, thought or philosophy.** Commonly used to indicate formal commitment or serious conviction.

***xin* (信) = trust/have no doubts in or worship/venerate.** Common usage includes “*xin jiao*,” meaning to “believe in a religion.”

***xiangxin* (相信) = trust/have no doubts in.** Typically implies weaker commitment than *xin*. Does not connote worship or veneration.

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# Measuring Religion in China

*Many Chinese adults practice religion or hold religious beliefs, but only 1 in 10 formally identify with a religion*

By virtue of its huge population, China is important to any effort to assess global religious trends. But determining how many people in China are religious today, and whether their religious identities, beliefs and practices have changed over the past decade, is difficult for many reasons. The challenges facing independent researchers include not just the Chinese government's tight control of information and the Communist Party's skepticism toward religion, but also linguistic and conceptual differences between religion in East Asia and other regions.

Because Pew Research Center has not conducted its own survey about religion in China, the Center's demographers combed through data from various other sources – primarily surveys run by Chinese universities – to discern recent trends.

Depending on the source used, estimates of the share of Chinese people who can be described as religious in some way – because they identify with a religion, hold religious beliefs or engage in practices that have a spiritual or religious component – range from less than 10% to more than 50%.

For example, only 10% of Chinese adults identified with any religious group in the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS).<sup>1</sup> The Chinese language wording of this question – “What is your religious (*zongjiao* 宗教) belief (*xinyang* 信仰)?” – is understood in China to measure formal commitment to an organized religion or value system. Similarly, just 13% of

## In China, religious beliefs and practices are more common ...

*% of adults in China who say they do the following*



## ... than formal religious identity



\* Frequency shown is a few times a year or more.

Note: “Say they have a religion” based on a Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) question asking respondents to choose a religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*) from a list.

Source: 2018 CGSS, for data on religious identity; 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), for data on belief in deities; 2016 CFPS, for data on incense burning.

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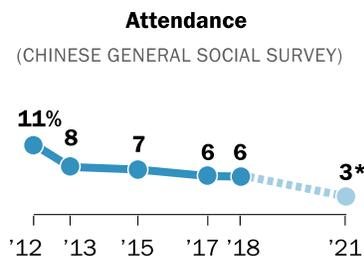
<sup>1</sup> The 2018 CGSS is the most recent wave of this long-running survey that was able to cover nearly all of China. It was conducted in 28 of mainland China's 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the latest CGSS wave, in 2021, covered only 19 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. In the 2021 wave, 7% of respondents identified with any religious group.

Chinese adults say religion (*zongjiao*) is “very important” or “rather important” in their lives, according to the 2018 World Values Survey. Although these measures have fluctuated over time, none have clearly risen over the last 10 to 15 years.

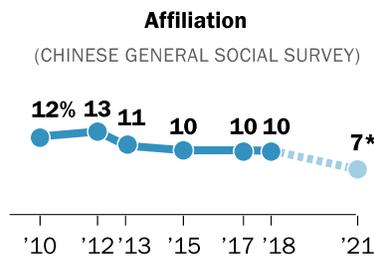
## Survey questions that focus on formal measures of organized religion suggest that religious commitment in China remains low

% of adults in China who ...

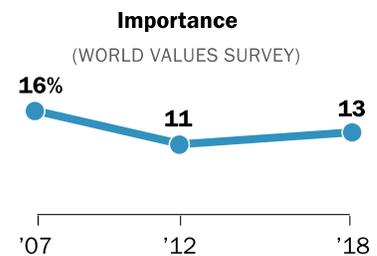
... say they attend religious (*zongjiao*) activities a few times a year or more



... identify with a religion (*zongjiao*)



... say religion (*zongjiao*) is ‘very’ or ‘rather’ important in their life



\* Because the Chinese General Social Survey’s (CGSS) 2021 data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and in fewer provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (19) than in previous waves (28-31), the 2021 numbers are not directly comparable with previous years. Pandemic lockdowns also may have reduced religious activity in 2021.

Note: *Zongjiao* typically refers to beliefs and practices closely tied to organized religion. It does not generally capture beliefs and practices associated with traditional Chinese religions. The CGSS’s affiliation response options include: No religious belief, Buddhism, Taoism, Folk belief, Islam/Hui religion, Catholicism, Protestantism and Other.

Sources: CGSS, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021; World Values Survey, 2007, 2012, 2018.

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On the other hand, surveys indicate that religion plays a much bigger role in China when the definition is widened to include survey questions on spirituality, customs and superstitions.

For example, 33% of Chinese adults say they believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, according to the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) survey.<sup>2</sup> The 2016 CFPS shows that 26% of Chinese adults burn incense at least a few times a year – a practice that, in China, typically involves making wishes to Buddha, a bodhisattva or other deities and often [indicates hope in divine intervention](#).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In China, both “Buddha” and “bodhisattva” are commonly used to refer to Buddhist deities. For more detail, read [Chapter 3](#) on Buddhism.

<sup>3</sup> Translated literally, the 2016 CFPS survey question asks how often respondents burn incense to pay respects to Buddha. This literal translation may be misleading because the phrase is commonly used to describe the broader act of venerating one or more deities of traditional Chinese religions. To capture the substantive meaning of this question, this report alternately summarizes the measure as burning incense “to worship/venerate deities” or “to worship/venerate Buddha and other deities.” The CFPS did not pose this question to Muslims or Christians, so the finding that 26% of Chinese adults burn incense at least a few times a year assumes that Muslims and Christians do not burn incense to worship Buddha.

However, just 4% of Chinese adults claim Buddhism as their religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*), according to the 2018 CGSS.

### What ‘religion’ means in China

The discrepancy is partly due to linguistics: The closest translation of the English word “religion” in Chinese is *zongjiao*, a term Chinese scholars adopted [in the early 20th century](#) when they were working with Western texts and needed to translate “religion.” To this day, *zongjiao* – like the terms *shūkyō* in Japanese and *jonggyo* in Korean – refers primarily to organized forms of religion, particularly those with professional clergy and institutional or governmental oversight. *Zongjiao* does *not* typically refer to diffuse religious beliefs and practices, which many Chinese people consider to be matters of custom (*xisu* 习俗) or superstition (*mixin* 迷信) instead.

(For more explanation of Chinese terms used in this Overview, refer to the [Key terms section](#).)

Moreover, many Chinese people’s understanding of *zongjiao* may be influenced by the government’s view that religion reflects a [backward mindset incompatible with socialism](#). In state media, for example, the term *zongjiao* is used alongside superstition to indicate [corruption](#) and [wavering loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party](#).

But there is another reason why it is hard to pin down the number of people in China who are religious. It is a conceptual problem: Western definitions of religion and measures of religious participation – such as attendance at congregational worship services – fit the monotheistic religions of Christianity, Islam and Judaism but are less suited to traditional beliefs and practices in East Asia.

In China, as well as in neighboring countries such as [Japan](#) and [South Korea](#), there are many beliefs (such as in spirits) and practices (such as visiting shrines and making offerings to ancestors) that might be considered religious, broadly speaking. But there is little emphasis on membership in congregations or denominations, except among Christians and Muslims in these countries.

In East Asia, the boundaries between philosophical, cultural and religious traditions – such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Shintoism, Taoism and folk religions with local deities and regional festivals – are often unclear. People may practice elements of *multiple* traditions without knowing

or caring about the boundaries between those traditions, and often without considering themselves to have *any* formal religion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Yang, Fenggang. 2018. [“Religion in the Global East: Challenges and Opportunities for the Social Scientific Study of Religion.”](#) Religions. Also refer to Sun, Anna. 2019. [“Turning Ghosts into Ancestors in Contemporary Urban China.”](#) Harvard Divinity Bulletin.

### Accordion box: How important is religion in China compared with other places?

Since 1981, a global network of scholars at major universities has conducted the World Values Survey (WVS) in many countries, including China. In recent years, these surveys have included two questions about the importance of religion. One asks how important religion is in the lives of the survey respondents. The other asks how important it is to teach religion to children.

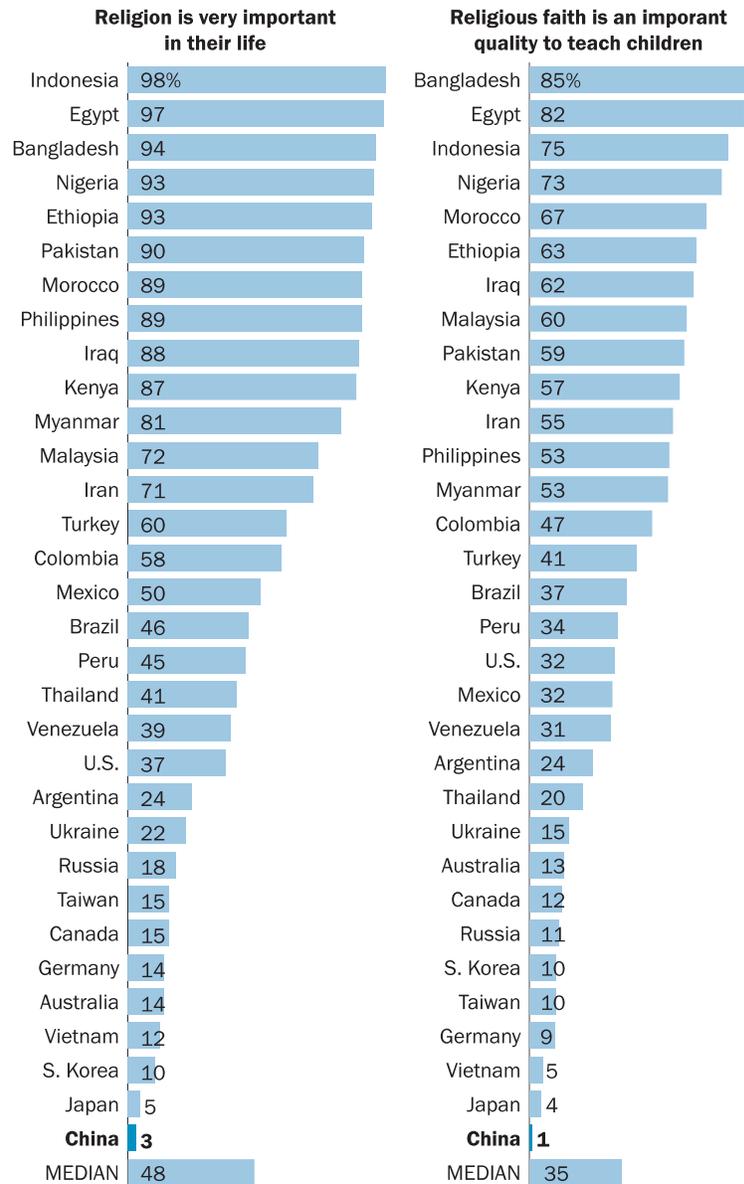
Across 32 places with populations of 20 million or more, the WVS finds a median of 48% of adults say religion is “very” important in their lives. No public has a smaller share of adults who say religion is very important than mainland China (3%), although other places in East Asia also rank low.

In Japan, just 5% of WVS respondents say religion is very important to them. Somewhat larger numbers in South Korea (10%) and Taiwan (15%) say the same.

East Asian publics also tend *not* to assign high importance to teaching religion to children. When asked to choose up to five qualities out of a list of 11 that are important to teach children, Chinese (1%) and Japanese (4%) adults are the least likely to choose religious faith. By comparison, across all 32 places, a median of 35% of adults say

### Chinese and Japanese are the least likely to say religion is ‘very important’ in their lives

% of adults ages 18 and older who say ...



Note: In some parts of Asia, such as mainland China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the translation of the word “religion” does not typically encompass traditional beliefs and practices. Myanmar is also called Burma.

Source: World Values Survey, 2017-2022.

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religious faith is one of the five most important qualities to impart to children.

However, scholars caution that these questions about the importance of religion may not be directly comparable across countries for linguistic, cultural and political reasons. In China and some other parts of East Asia, including Japan and South Korea, the term “religion” is understood primarily to mean formal, institutionalized religions.

Specifically, the Chinese word for religion in the WVS is *zongjiao* (宗教), which connotes five officially sanctioned religious traditions and does not necessarily capture the full range of Chinese customs and superstitions that might be considered religious or spiritual. In the Chinese version of the WVS question about qualities to impart to children, religion is phrased as *qiancheng de zongjiao xinyang* (虔诚的宗教信仰), which means “devout religious belief.”

## Government restrictions on religion

Another challenge in measuring religion in China is that some affiliations, beliefs and practices are less officially acceptable than others – and thus, presumably, less comfortable for Chinese people to disclose in surveys.

Although the government formally recognizes five religions – Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism – it closely monitors their houses of worship, clergy appointments and funding. Many activities that could help to maintain or expand these five zongjiao groups are banned, including proselytizing and organized religious education for children, such as Sunday schools or religious summer camps.

Enforcement has varied over time and by province, but [since President Xi Jinping came to power](#) in 2012, local officials have been less likely to overlook such activities. Religions that are not officially recognized, including those practiced mainly by ethnic minorities or foreigners, also are subject to a host of controls. Some groups, such as *Falun Gong* (法轮功), are completely banned.

(For more detail, read the section on [how Chinese government policies toward religion have changed](#) in recent decades.)

In addition, some zongjiao groups, particularly Muslims, face harsh treatment. The U.S. government estimates that Chinese authorities have [detained more than 1 million Chinese Muslims](#), primarily Uyghurs, in “specially built internment camps.” The U.S. State Department has [described abuses against Muslims](#) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region as crimes against humanity and genocide. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has said the detention of predominantly Muslim groups and deprivation of their fundamental rights [“may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity,”](#) though the UN report [avoids the controversial term “genocide.”](#) For its part, the Chinese government has denied all allegations of [genocide](#), [torture](#), [forced organ harvesting](#) and [sterilizations](#) involving Muslims. Chinese authorities describe their treatment of Muslims as [education](#) and [counter-terrorism](#) efforts.

Christian groups also have accused China of religious persecution. For example, the government has [arrested “underground” Catholic bishops and priests](#) who are not affiliated with the official Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, as well as Protestants who attend unauthorized places of worship also known as [“house churches”](#) (*jiating jiaohui* 家庭教会). Some Christians reportedly have been [held in internment camps](#).

Because of these policies toward Muslims, Christians and other religious groups, China consistently ranks among the countries with the highest levels of government restrictions on religion, according to [Pew Research Center's annual reports on the topic](#).

For all the linguistic, cultural and political reasons described above, many Chinese people may be reluctant to associate themselves with religion (zongjiao) or to consider themselves to have a religious belief (zongjiao xinyang). Some zongjiao adherents may choose not to reveal this identity in surveys. (For more discussion of this issue, read [“Can Chinese survey data be trusted?”](#))

Because of political sensitivity, studying religion in China also can be a minefield for scholars.

### **Accordion box: Challenges facing scholars of religion in China**

Scholarly interest in the scientific study of religion in contemporary China seemed to be rising at the beginning of this century. In 2004, Purdue University sociologist [Fenggang Yang](#) organized the first annual [Conference of the Social Scientific Study of Religion in China](#) and a related training program. The conference was held each year until 2020. Hundreds of Chinese scholars attended for training on social scientific approaches to religion, opportunities to present research, and publishing advice. Training programs emerged in the United States for scholars from China and non-Chinese scholars studying religion in China, especially at the [Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University](#), which later evolved into the [Center on Religion and the Global East](#). New [journals and edited volumes emerged](#) to publish the results of this scholarly activity.

However, in recent years, studying modern religion in China has become more problematic. While some scholars continue to research the current state of religion in China, others have abandoned the field due to Chinese government policies that discourage the study of sensitive topics. Scholars who continue to focus on religion do so with increased caution about the scope of their research and how they present their findings. Such trepidation is not limited to scholars living in China, nor is it exclusive to those studying religion. A [2018 survey of more than 500 scholars](#) outside mainland China who study Chinese society, conducted by political scientists at the University of Missouri and Princeton University, found that the Chinese government monitors research activity and sometimes retaliates against researchers.

About 9% of the survey's [respondents said they had been "invited to tea"](#) to discuss their research with Chinese authorities. Access to archives was denied to roughly a quarter of those who asked for it. In addition, 5% reported difficulties getting travel visas, and about 2% were formally banned from visiting China. Scholars researching Xinjiang and Muslims were among those most likely to report visa complications and interviews with authorities.

In their [analysis of this survey data](#), researchers Sheena Chestnut Greitens and Rory Truex conclude that the Chinese government creates ambiguity to intimidate scholars. Two-thirds of respondents said their research was sensitive, and some changed a project's focus or abandoned a project altogether because of its sensitivity. However, most did not report any direct intervention from a government official. Respondents were slightly more likely to say that a government official had issued a warning to them through a colleague than to say an official had approached them directly.

Another factor limiting knowledge about the state of religion in China is restrictions on survey research and ambiguity about what may be permissible in surveys. In recent years, it has become increasingly difficult and, in some cases, impossible for foreign organizations to partner with Chinese institutions to conduct surveys in China. Furthermore, the staff of Chinese survey organizations may be uncertain which religion questions will elicit pushback from the government, and they may be highly cautious when considering whether to include religion measures in surveys of general attitudes and behaviors.

To our knowledge, the only surveys still collecting national data on religion in China are academic surveys, such as the Chinese General Social Survey and the China Family Panel Studies, which are supported directly or indirectly by Chinese government funding. For many years, Pew Research Center has been interested in collaborating on a survey of religion and spirituality in China. However, after investigating the possibility of doing so with various partners in China, we concluded that, given government restrictions, we could not carry out a

survey dedicated to religion at this time.

## Some Chinese spiritual beliefs and practices are more common than others

% of adults in China who say they ...



### Visited gravesite(s) of family members at least once in the last year<sup>1</sup>

Gravesite visits frequently involve burning paper money and offering food and drink to deceased ancestors.



### Believe in fengshui<sup>2</sup>

Fengshui, literally wind and water, is a traditional Chinese practice of arranging objects and physical space to achieve harmony and ensure good luck in life.



### Believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva<sup>2</sup>

This may include believing that Buddha or Buddhist deities can intervene in worldly affairs.



### Burn incense to deities a few times a year or more<sup>3</sup>

Burning incense is believed to open up communication with deities so they can more readily hear people's wishes.



### Care 'very much' about choosing auspicious days for special events<sup>1</sup>

This practice usually involves using the Chinese almanac, a divination guide, to choose lucky days for events such as weddings and relocations.



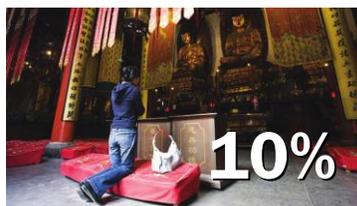
### Believe in Taoist deities<sup>2</sup>

There are more than 2,000 deities in the Taoist pantheon. Popular deities include the god of wealth, earth god, and the three deities of happiness, prosperity and longevity.



### Believe in ghosts<sup>2</sup>

In Chinese tradition, a ghost is the spirit of a dead person, and Lunar July is the month when ghosts are allowed to visit the living world.



### Visited a site to pray for good fortune at least twice in the last year<sup>1</sup>

Chinese people commonly pray to deities for good fortune in school, business and health when visiting a temple, shrine or sacred site.



### Wear a charm to ward off bad luck<sup>1</sup>

Common lucky charms or amulets in China include jade carvings of Buddha and Buddhist or Taoist blessing bags.

Source: "1" denotes data from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey, "2" from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), and "3" from the 2016 CFPS.

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## Cultural traditions with spiritual underpinnings

In addition to the formal zongjiao measures and explicitly spiritual ones (belief in Buddha, burning incense) previously discussed, this report also analyzes several widely practiced rituals and customs that are considered cultural but may have religious or spiritual dimensions.

These traditions are observed by many Chinese people with and without a zongjiao affiliation. Chinese surveys have not asked respondents whether they perceive spiritual significance in these beliefs and practices, and the available data does not tie these activities to specific religions.

### *Gravesite visits*

Three-quarters of Chinese adults [visited a family member's gravesite](#) at least once in the last year, according to the 2018 CGSS. Visiting gravesites, especially on the [Qingming Festival](#) (*Qingming Jie* 清明节), or [Tomb Sweeping Day](#), is part of the Confucian tradition of ancestor veneration (*jizu* 祭祖 or *jisi zuxian* 祭祀祖先). It commonly involves rituals with religious underpinnings, such as burning incense and ["spirit money" or joss paper](#), making offerings of food and drink, and making wishes to ancestors.<sup>5</sup>

However, not all Chinese people engage in these rituals when visiting gravesites. For instance, some Chinese Christians may observe Tomb Sweeping Day to honor their parents or loved ones, yet intentionally [distance themselves from ancestor worship](#) by refraining from making wishes, burning "spirit money" or leaving offerings.

### *Fengshui*

Nearly half of Chinese adults (47%) believe in *fengshui* (风水), according to the 2018 CFPS. [Fengshui](#) is a traditional Chinese practice of arranging objects and physical space to promote harmony between humans and the environment. Although people who practice fengshui may not think of it as a religious concept, it has roots in Taoism and sometimes involves belief in divine intervention.

Related practices include [selecting auspicious days](#) for important occasions and [consulting fengshui masters](#) to ward off bad luck.

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<sup>5</sup> Sun, Anna. 2019. ["Turning Ghosts into Ancestors in Contemporary Urban China."](#) Harvard Divinity Bulletin.

### *Auspicious days*

Six-in-ten Chinese adults (62%) say they care either “somewhat” or “very much” whether special occasions take place on an auspicious day or an inauspicious day, according to the 2018 CGSS. Choosing an auspicious day usually involves consulting the [Chinese almanac](#) or a fengshui expert. About a quarter of adults (24%) say they care *very much* about selecting auspicious days for special occasions, which can include weddings, funerals or moving to a new home.

### *Good fortune*

Other traditional customs are less common. For instance, 24% of Chinese adults say they visited a site – typically a temple or shrine – to pray for wealth or good fortune in school, business or other matters in the past year, according to the 2018 CGSS. This includes 10% who did so twice or more in the past year. And 8% of Chinese adults say they carry a lucky charm or amulet to bring them good fortune or keep them safe from harm.

### **Mixing of beliefs**

Many Chinese people engage in beliefs and rituals from multiple religious traditions. Chinese surveys do not ask respondents to state how often they do this, but a Pew Research Center analysis of data from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) indicates that combinations are quite common.

For example, about 40% of Chinese adults say they believe in at least one of the following: Buddha and/or a bodhisattva; Taoist deities; ghosts; and other gods or religious figures, such as Jesus Christ and Allah. And 20% believe in more than one of these religious concepts or deities. When *fengshui* (风水), a practice with Taoist underpinnings, is included, the share of Chinese adults who believe in *both* fengshui and at least one of these other ideas reaches 28%. The CFPS survey asks respondents whether they believe in each of the deities and religious concepts in a list. The Chinese term for “belief” (*xiangxin* 相信) used in this question does not necessarily connote *religious* faith. Refer to the [Key terms section](#) for more detail.

Some Chinese people who believe in figures associated with monotheistic religions, such as Allah and Jesus, also believe in traditional Chinese deities or supernatural forces. For example, about 7% of Chinese adults say they believe in Jesus Christ and/or *Tianzhu* (天主), a word used by Chinese Catholics for God. But only 2% hold such beliefs while rejecting all other deities and supernatural forces.

These are among the key findings of a Pew Research Center analysis of data on religion in China, part of the [Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project](#), which seeks [to understand global religious change](#) and its impact on societies.

The remainder of this report includes:

- A chapter on signs of [religious change in China](#)
  - Chapters on the major religious groups in China: [Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese folk religions](#), [Buddhism](#), [Christianity](#), [Islam](#) and [non-religion](#).
  - A brief history of [Chinese government policy toward religion](#)
- For a discussion of how the data in this report compares with estimates published in earlier Center reports, refer to [the Methodology](#).

## 1. Religious change in China

It is unclear whether there has been any significant change since 2010 in the percentage of Chinese adults who identify with a religion or engage in religious beliefs or practices.

Some scholars have relied on a mix of fieldwork studies, claims by religious organizations, journalists' observations and government statistics to suggest that [China is experiencing a surge of religion](#) and is perhaps even on a path to [having a Christian majority by 2050](#).

However, more than a decade's worth of data from the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), the World Values Survey (WVS) and other large-scale surveys provides no clear confirmation of rising levels of religious identity in China, at least not as embodied by formal *zongjiao* (宗教) affiliation and worship attendance.

Changes in traditional beliefs and practices beyond *zongjiao* are difficult to quantify, due to a lack of comparable measures over time. Although several Chinese surveys have included questions about traditional beliefs and practices at least once, their wording and/or methodology have changed from wave to wave. As a result, these surveys cannot reliably measure change over time in traditional beliefs and practices.

In short, this report finds no empirical survey evidence that China has experienced a surge in religion since 2010 – but also cannot firmly rule it out, given the many sources of uncertainty.

### *Zongjiao* measures

Overall, survey measures on *zongjiao* identity and practice, which capture a narrow and relatively formal range of religious engagement, have generally been stable since 2010, and in some cases seem to have decreased. According to the CGSS, 12% of Chinese adults claimed a religious affiliation (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰) in 2010. While this may seem slightly higher than the 10% who claimed a religious affiliation in 2018, the difference is within the margin of sampling error and is not statistically significant.

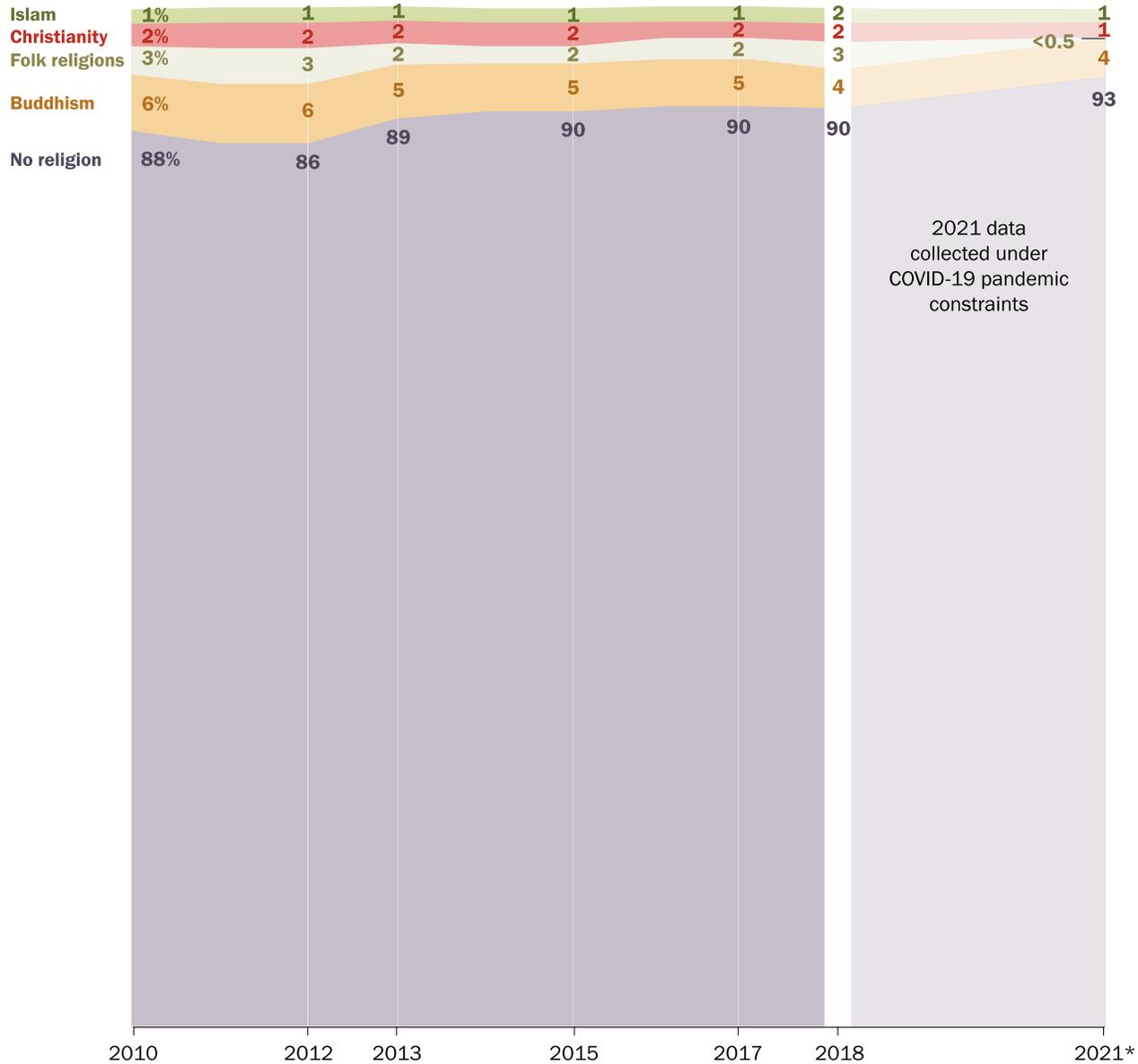
More recently, the 2021 CGSS found 7% of respondents identified with any religion. However, the 2021 wave covered fewer provinces and therefore may not be directly comparable with earlier waves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The 2018 CGSS was conducted in 28 of mainland China's 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The most recent CGSS wave, in 2021, was conducted in 19 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. Refer to the [Methodology](#) for a detailed discussion of the 2021 CGSS.

### In China, no clear evidence of rising religious (*zongjiao*) affiliation

% of adults in China who identify with \_\_\_\_\_



\* Because 2021 data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and in fewer provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (19) than in previous waves (28-31), the 2021 numbers are not directly comparable with previous years.

Note: Based on the question "What is your religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*)?" Response options were: No religious belief, Buddhism, Taoism, Folk belief (such as worship of *Mazu* and *Guan Gong*), Islam/Hui religion, Catholicism, Protestantism, or Other. "Other" category comprises <0.5% of respondents each year and is not shown.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021.

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The CGSS does not show a significant increase in the shares of self-identified Catholics, Muslims, Protestants or Taoists during this period, and it indicates that the share of Chinese adults who formally identify with Buddhism dropped slightly.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, fewer Chinese adults reported attending religious (zongjiao) activities. In 2012, 11% of respondents said they attended religious activities at least a few times a year. By 2018, 6% said they did so, a decline that *is* statistically significant. In the 2021 CGSS, just 3% of respondents reported attending zongjiao activities – though the 2021 figure may have been affected by a combination of [COVID-19 pandemic](#) restrictions and more sporadic sampling in China’s various regions.

What about the roughly one-in-ten respondents who claim a religious affiliation? Has their level of religious activity increased? The available data suggest the answer is “no.” The share of religiously affiliated Chinese adults who say they attend religious (zongjiao) activities at least a few times a year dropped from 53% in 2012 to 45% in 2018. In 2021, just 35% of religiously affiliated Chinese adults reported attending religious activities at least a few times a year – though, again, 2021 could be an anomalous year because of the pandemic.

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<sup>7</sup> Read [Chapter 4](#) for a detailed discussion of data on Chinese Christians, including the challenges of measuring them in surveys.

Between [early 2020](#), when the coronavirus broke out in Wuhan, China, and the end of 2022, when the Chinese government reopened the country, all places of worship in China experienced temporary or long-term shutdowns as part of the central [government's "zero-COVID" policy](#).

Initially, in early 2020, all religious sites in China were closed, and gatherings were banned in an effort to contain the virus. Later that year, [many sites reopened](#) after the outbreaks in their local areas had subsided, but [some sites remained closed](#). And some that reopened were subsequently shut down again due to fresh [outbreaks](#) or [rebounding cases](#) of COVID-19.

During the pandemic, some Chinese people engaged *remotely* in religious activities, such as virtually [venerating ancestors](#) on Tomb Sweeping Day (also known as the [Qingming Festival](#)) and [attending Taoist services online](#). But it is unclear how virtual participation in zongjiao activities may have affected the way respondents answered the zongjiao attendance question in the 2021 CGSS.

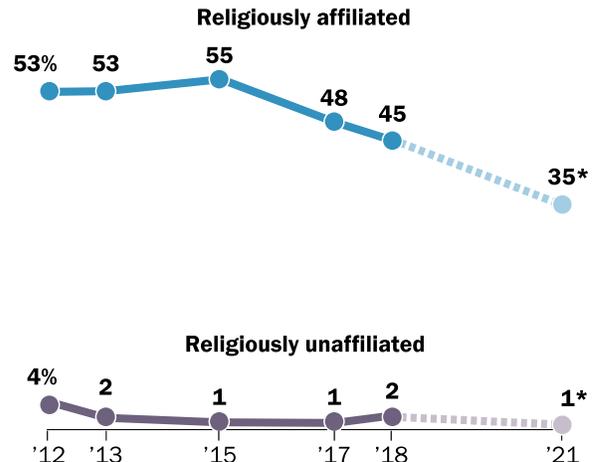
### Differences by age

An analysis of age patterns in the 2018 CGSS paints a mixed picture. For example, young adults are slightly less likely than older Chinese people to say they attend zongjiao activities. About 5% of Chinese adults under 35 in 2018 said they attend zongjiao activities a few times a year or more, compared with 8% of those ages 55 and above.

Surveys also indicate that younger adults are less likely than those ages 55 and older to care “very much” about choosing auspicious days for special occasions (18% vs. 29%), according to the 2018 CGSS. And younger adults are less likely to burn incense to worship Buddha and other deities, according to the 2016 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) survey.

## Religious participation in China seems to be declining

% of adults in China who say they attend religious (zongjiao) activities at least a few times a year



\* During the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 data was collected in fewer provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (19) than in previous waves (28-31). Furthermore, pandemic lockdowns may have reduced attendance in 2021.

Note: Religious affiliation based on survey question “What is your religious belief (zongjiao xinyang)?” which typically implies a formal commitment to organized religion. Zongjiao activities may be viewed as those tied to formal religious practices and may exclude traditional Chinese customs and rituals with spiritual underpinnings. Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2021.

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However, some folk religious beliefs and practices are *more* common among young Chinese adults than among their elders.

For example, 29% of adults under 35 reported in the 2018 CGSS that they had visited a place – typically a shrine or temple – to pray for good fortune in school, health or business in the past year, compared with 17% of those ages 55 and older. Adults under 35 also are somewhat more likely than older Chinese to believe in ghosts and in *fengshui* (风水), the 2018 CFPS finds.

There is no clear pattern by age group on several other measures, such as belief in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva or belief in heaven or hell.

(For more on how Chinese survey respondents may interpret these questions, read the [discussion of Chinese religious traditions in Chapter 2.](#))

## Older Chinese adults slightly more likely to attend *zongjiao* activities and burn incense, but younger adults more likely to visit a site to pray for good luck

% of adults in China adults who say they ...

	Ages			Oldest- youngest
	18-34	35-54	55+	Diff
Care ‘very much’ about choosing auspicious days for special events <sup>3</sup>	18%	26%	29%	<b>11</b>
Believe in Taoist deities, also known as immortals <sup>2</sup>	13	19	23	<b>10</b>
Burn incense to worship Buddha and other deities at least a few times a year <sup>4</sup>	20	29	26	<b>6</b>
Visited gravesite(s) of family members at least once in the last year <sup>3</sup>	69	80	75	6
Attend <i>zongjiao</i> (religion) activities at least a few times a year <sup>3</sup>	5	6	8	<b>3</b>
Believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva <sup>2</sup>	30	35	32	2
Consider <i>zongjiao</i> very important <sup>1</sup>	3	3	4	1
Believe hell exists <sup>1</sup>	15	9	12	-3
Believe heaven exists <sup>1</sup>	15	10	12	-3
Wear a charm to ward off bad luck <sup>3</sup>	9	8	6	-3
Believe in <i>fengshui</i> <sup>2</sup>	48	50	43	<b>-5</b>
Believe in ghosts <sup>2</sup>	15	9	8	<b>-7</b>
Believe afterlife exists <sup>1</sup>	17	8	10	<b>-7</b>
Visited a site to pray for good luck at least once in the last year <sup>3</sup>	29	25	17	<b>-12</b>

Note: Differences calculated from unrounded numbers. Figures assume that Christians and Muslims never burn incense because the survey did not ask them this question. Statistically significant differences are in **bold**. The 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) “believe in” questions used the term *xiangxin*, which does not always have a religious connotation. Refer to Appendix B for details on measures used in each survey.

Source: “1” denotes questions from the 2018 World Values Survey; “2” from the 2018 CFPS; “3” from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey; and “4” from the 2016 CFPS. “Measuring Religion in China”

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## Official numbers of worship sites and personnel

Government figures on places of worship, as well as data on tourism at religious heritage sites, generally rose for traditional Chinese religions between 2009 and 2018. By contrast, the numbers of officially registered Protestant and Catholic churches and Islamic mosques remained virtually unchanged.

Meanwhile, the numbers of officially registered religious personnel have followed different trajectories, with some religious groups (such as Buddhist monks and nuns) experiencing increases and others (such as Taoist clergy) facing declines.

**Accordion box: A note on government statistics**

In this report, government statistics refer to data and estimates published by the Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party, state-controlled agencies (such as the Buddhist Association of China) and organizations that are directly supervised by the State Council of China (such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences). However, little information is available about the methods used to produce such statistics. In some cases, there may be reason to doubt their reliability or completeness.

According to China's State Council Information Office (SCIO), the total number of religious sites registered with the five official religious associations increased by 11%, from about 130,000 in 2009 to 144,000 in 2018, largely due to a surge in Buddhist and Taoist temples. The overall increase in worship sites outpaced Chinese population growth of around 6% during that time.

The SCIO does not track folk religion venues, as there is no supervisory religious association for folk belief. But data from several Chinese provinces that publish regional counts of folk religion temples indicates that these far outnumber the total number of registered worship sites.<sup>8</sup> (For more about worship sites tied to traditional Chinese religions, read [“How many Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian and folk religious sites are there in China?”](#))

While the SCIO's count of religious venues is the most comprehensive dataset available, it has limitations: The figures do not include unregistered or unauthorized sites, and [some authorized religious sites also appear to be missing](#). One possible explanation for this inconsistency is that the Chinese words for “register” – *dengji* (登记) or *zhuce* (注册) – are ambiguous. They can mean either “put on local government record” or “granted formal registration.” When local authorities report that they have “registered” a site, it is not always clear which of those two events has occurred.

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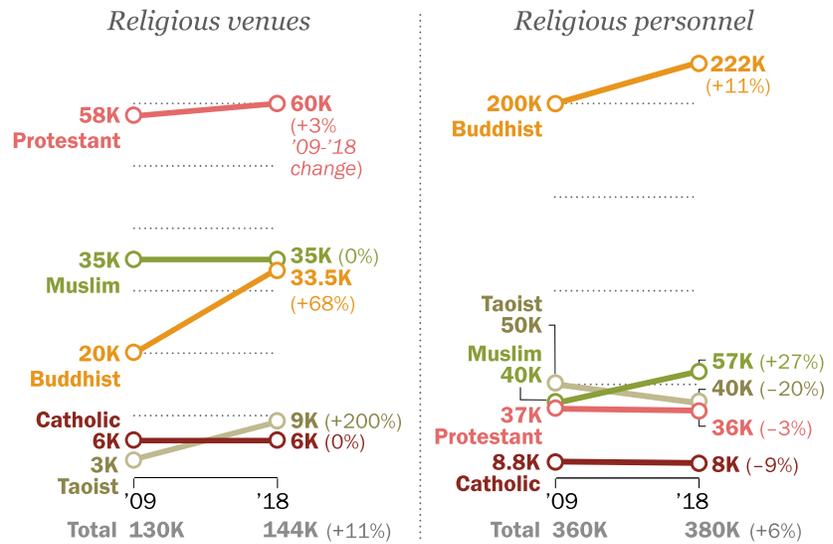
<sup>8</sup> These provinces include [Fujian](#), [Zhejiang](#), [Guangdong](#), [Jiangsu](#) and [Sichuan](#).

Because local authorities across China have intensified their efforts since 2017 to absorb *unauthorized* places of worship into the official system (banning unauthorized churches that refuse to join the state-controlled associations), one might have expected to see an increase in the number of *authorized* Christian worship sites in recent years.<sup>9</sup>

However, government figures show no growth in the numbers of formally registered Protestant and Catholic sites between 2009 and 2018, the latest year for which official figures are available.

The next section presents government data on Taoist and Buddhist religious sites and personnel. Parallel discussions for other religions can be found in the [Christianity chapter](#) and the [folk religion section](#).

## In China, uneven growth in officially registered worship sites and religious personnel



Note: Religious venues include temples, mosques, churches (and Christian places of assembly). Numbers may not add up due to rounding. Official counts of religious personnel include Taoist priests, fully ordained Buddhist monks and nuns, Christian ministers (including Catholic nuns) and Muslim imams.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Chinese official estimates. Refer to the Methodology for details.  
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<sup>9</sup> In recent years, local authorities have been enforcing laws against religious activity in unauthorized venues more strictly following [revisions to the "Regulations on Religious Affairs."](#) Consequences for unauthorized activity range widely, but immediate retribution applies to groups found to be guilty of "foreign infiltration," those whose leaders reject affiliation with the state-run church or refuse government oversight, and those seen to be associated with groups labeled as "evil cults."

### Taoist and Buddhist worship sites and clergy

The number of officially registered Taoist temples tripled from 3,000 in 2009 to 9,000 in 2018, according to the SCIO.<sup>10</sup> The number of officially registered Buddhist temples rose by about 68% during that time, from 20,000 to 33,500.

There is some evidence that most or all of this growth took place in the early part of that period.<sup>11</sup> In 2012, the director of the National Religious Affairs Administration (formerly the State Administration for Religious Affairs), Wang Zuoan, shared numbers of Buddhist and Taoist temples that were identical to those released by SCIO in 2018, and the same figures were published again by [People's Daily](#), the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper.<sup>12</sup>

The increase in the number of registered temples associated with traditional Chinese religions was due, at least in part, to preferential government treatment. In the early 2010s, state and local authorities – eager to boost their local economies and cultural pride by promoting religious tourism – often permitted and even encouraged the construction or renovation of Buddhist, Taoist and folk religion temples.

By 2012, religious venues – which are mostly Buddhist and Taoist – reportedly [accounted for nearly half the country's top-rated](#) (or [5A-rated](#)) tourist sites.<sup>13</sup>

However, the surge in temple construction and registrations did not last, as the government in 2012 started to crack down on developers who built temples or erected Buddha statues to earn profits from religious tourism. Following guidelines to combat what authorities described as [“the commercialization of Buddhism and Taoism.”](#) local authorities began [tearing down large, outdoor Buddha statues](#) in unauthorized temples and terminating the construction of unregistered temples. In 2017, the [state intensified these efforts](#), banning any [commercially oriented temple construction](#) altogether.

In addition, the number of Taoist and Buddhist clergy did not keep pace with the increase in temples between 2009 and 2018. Taoist clergy dropped by about 20% during this time to 40,000, while Buddhist clergy rose by around 11% to 222,000, according to the SCIO. (Taoist clergy include Taoist priests as well as monks and nuns who have gone through the ritual of ordination;

<sup>10</sup> These statistics do not include unregistered or unauthorized religious sites; not all authorized religious sites are included, either.

<sup>11</sup> The growth may not necessarily be driven by the construction of new sites; it could be a result of the increased registration of existing, unauthorized temples.

<sup>12</sup> Likewise, the 2009 estimates may have come from a previous year. It could be that SCIO has been working with outdated or inexact estimates, or that the growth took place between 2009 and 2012, then stalled as government policies on temple construction tightened.

<sup>13</sup> Chan, Kim-Kwong, and Graeme Lang. 2016. “Religious Diversity and the State in China.” In Dawson, Andrew, ed. “The Politics and Practice of Religious Diversity: National Contexts, Global Issues.”

Buddhist clergy refer only to [fully ordained monks and nuns](#).)

These different trajectories may have multiple causes, including that new temples meant to serve tourists may require fewer religious personnel. Meanwhile, as China's economy has expanded and more people move to cities, [monastic life seems to be gradually losing appeal](#). Even at-home Taoist priests (*huoju daoshi* 火居道士) may [find it difficult to continue the tradition](#) of passing down clergy positions from generation to generation.

In addition, the government's ban on religious education for children and a law requiring all children to attend schools for a minimum of nine years have [added extra challenges for religious groups](#) that largely rely on monastic education to train monks and nuns.

## Religious tourism

Government data indicates that tourist destinations featuring religion, such as [Mount Jiuhua](#), a Buddhist sacred site, and [Mount Wudang](#), a Taoist holy place with around 200 temples, experienced large increases in visitors between 2010 and 2019.

These gains correspond with an overall boom in domestic tourism in China. In the decade before the coronavirus outbreak, the annual number of domestic tourist visits nearly tripled, from [2.1 billion in 2010](#) to [6.0 billion in 2019](#), according to China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

While visitors who travel to religious sites are not necessarily pilgrims, many engage in religious activities at temples and shrines, such as [praying for good fortune](#).<sup>14</sup> A [study of tourists to Hanshan Temple](#) found that fewer than one-in-six said they visited just for sightseeing, while about half said

## Sharp increase in Chinese visitors to tourist sites since 2010, including Buddhist sacred mountains

*Number of tourists (in millions)*

Tourists	2010	2019	% change
All domestic tourism	2,103	6,006	186%
<b>Buddhist sacred sites</b>			
Mount Wutai	3.2	10.1	215
Mount Jiuhua	4.0	11.3	183
Mount Putuo	4.8	9.8	105
Mount Emei	2.0	4.0	97
<b>Taoist sacred sites</b>			
Mount Wudang	2.3	10.3	348
Mount Longhu	6.6	26.6	303

Note: Separate tourism statistics for the other two Taoist sacred sites are not available.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Chinese government tourism statistics.

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<sup>14</sup> Shepard, R J. 2018. "When Sacred Space Becomes a Heritage Place: Pilgrimage, Worship, and Tourism in Contemporary China." International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage.

they had multiple reasons for the trip, including sightseeing, praying for good fortune and engaging with Buddhist history.

A [different survey](#), conducted in 2014, found that about 17% of visitors to Mount Wudang described their trip as a pilgrimage, although fewer than 3% identified as Taoist.

## 2. Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese folk religions

Relatively few Chinese adults formally identify with religious and philosophical traditions that originated in China – in large part because, unlike Abrahamic religions, these traditions do not emphasize membership. Moreover, Chinese people generally do not refer to these traditions as religion (*zongjiao* 宗教).

But Confucianism, Taoism and folk religions nevertheless have a role in the lives of many Chinese people. While a tiny share of Chinese adults describe themselves as believing in (*xinyang* 信仰) Taoism (*Daojiao* 道教), Confucianism (*Rujiao* 儒教 or *Rujia sixiang* 儒家思想) or folk religions (*minjian xinyang* 民间信仰), far more say they hold beliefs or engage in practices tied to these traditions.

And even though the Chinese government does not consider Confucianism to be a religion, some of its characteristics are within scholars' conception of religion. For instance, the Confucian ritual of ancestor worship (*jizu* 祭祖) – [an expression of filial piety](#) (*xiao* 孝) toward deceased family members – often entails [a belief in ancestral spirits](#) and their supernatural power to intervene in earthly affairs.

Buddhism, which is considered a “traditional Chinese” religion even though it originated in India, has strong links to these other belief systems. ([Read Chapter 3 on Buddhism.](#))

Confucianism, Taoism, folk religions and Buddhism are often deeply intertwined, and the differences among them can be indistinguishable to Chinese people. For example, Confucian teachings on ancestor veneration permeate China's

### Confucianism

Named after the sage Confucius (b. 551 B.C.E.), Confucianism is one of the most important philosophical traditions in China. Although it's widely considered a spiritual philosophy, some scholars classify it as a religion. Its beliefs center on a pervasive, invisible divine power – *tian* (天), usually translated as “heaven” – that controls humans' fate and destiny. Confucian teachings focus on filial piety (*xiao* 孝), loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and benevolence (*ren* 仁).

### Taoism (religious)

Founded by Zhang Daoling, religious Taoism (*Daojiao* 道教) dates to the second century C.E. The principal teachings of religious Taoism – similar to philosophical Taoism – focus on nonaction and harmony with the Tao, or universal order. Traditional practices include meditation; [self-discipline in diet, exercise and sex](#); and rituals to promote harmony with the heavenly order or higher forces of the cosmos.

### Chinese folk religions

Also called folk belief or *minjian xinyang* (民间信仰), Chinese folk religions were recorded as early as [the Shang dynasty](#) (c.1600-1046 B.C.E), well before Confucianism and Taoism. Folk religions [originated in shamanism](#), and today include a broad range of beliefs and practices directed at supernatural forces – such as fortune telling and making wishes to ancestors and gods. Folk deities include the goddess of the sea (*Mazu* 妈祖) and the god of wealth (*caishen* 财神).

spiritual traditions, such as in the Buddhist Ullambana festival (*Yulanpen Jie* 盂兰盆节) and Taoist Zhongyuan festival (*Zhongyuan Jie* 中元节). Both events take place annually in Lunar July, a time when ghosts, including deceased ancestors, are believed to visit the world of the living. And both festivals incorporate filial piety (*xiao*), as manifested during a ritual in which ancestral spirits are commemorated and “rescued” from their suffering.

Folk beliefs and practices, meanwhile, incorporate Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist concepts and also turn them into distinctly folk religious elements. For instance, the popular folk deity, the goddess of mercy (*Guanyin* 观音), was originally the Buddhist figure Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva of compassion often depicted as genderless or male. In Chinese folk religion, Guanyin is understood as a goddess who [answers all prayers](#), including requests for wealth, health, good fortune and [giving birth to a son](#).

Historically, Confucianism, Taoism and folk religions – along with Buddhism – have helped shape Chinese people’s understanding of the universe. Even today, these traditions are tied to Chinese social norms and the country’s national holidays. Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, which in the past were frequently referred to as the “Three Teachings,” typically garner more support from educated elites and authorities than do folk religions, which historically have been marginalized as “illegitimate” and “unorthodox.”<sup>15</sup>

Confucianism in particular serves as a morality template for many Chinese. In recent decades, there has been growing discussion in Chinese society about “moral decline,” and commentators sometimes blame [gruesome or senseless crimes](#) on China’s loss of a “moral compass.”

In 2015, the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) included a question about Confucianism and moral values: “Some people say the moral conditions in society are not ideal. If we were to restore moral values in society, what role do you think the Confucian tradition should play?” About two-thirds of respondents said efforts would need to rely at least partly on the Confucian tradition.

Authorities in China often differentiate between traditional beliefs and practices they consider to be “custom,” which are tolerated, versus those that are “superstition” and therefore discouraged or banned. (Some superstitious activities deemed to be “harmless” are allowed.) These distinctions may be blurry and subjective, but they are at least partly rooted in the history of Confucianism, Taoism and folk religion in China.

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<sup>15</sup> Chau, Adam Yuet. 2009. “Expanding the Space of Popular Religion: Local Temple Activism and the Politics of Legitimation in Contemporary Rural China.” In Ashiwa, Yoshiko, and David L. Wank, eds. “Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China.”



A Chinese family performs the ritual of ancestor worship during Lunar July, when the deceased are believed to visit the world of the living. (STR/AFP via Getty Images)

### **Festivals and traditions honoring ancestors**

The Confucian practice of paying respects to deceased ancestors as if they were living is observed across religious traditions during the month of Lunar July, a time when tradition teaches that the gate of the underworld opens, and ghosts and spirits, including deceased ancestors, are allowed to visit the world of the living.

**Folk religion:** (Hungry) Ghost Festival (*Gui Jie* 鬼节)

People make offerings of food and “spirit money” to ghosts and ancestors.

**Buddhism:** Ullambana Festival (*Yulanpen Jie* 盂兰盆节)

A festival centered on filial piety and gratitude to all beings. Buddhist monks traditionally perform a ritual called “releasing the flaming mouth” to rescue ghosts, including ancestors, from their suffering.

**Taoism:** Zhongyuan Festival (*Zhongyuan Jie* 中元节)

The Taoist deity, Ruler of the Earth, is believed to pardon ghosts of their sins. Taoist priests perform Zhongyuan fasting and offering rituals to rescue ghosts, including ancestors, from their suffering.

## Accordion box: History of Confucianism, Taoism and folk religions in China

Folk practices have their roots in shamanistic activities (*wushu* 巫术), which were recorded as early as the Shang dynasty (c.1600-1046 B.C.E.). Historical records indicate that Chinese elites engaged in fortune telling through diviners' reading of [oracle bones](#). Shamans (*wu* 巫), who at times held great prestige in royal courts, performed rituals such as rain-making ceremonies to break droughts.<sup>16</sup>

Confucianism emerged from the teachings of the philosopher Confucius, who was born in what is today Shandong province on China's east coast in the sixth century B.C.E. His philosophy was captured by his disciples in "The Analects" (*Lunyu* 论语), published years after his death. "The Analects" is among Confucianism's foundational texts, a collection that is known as the [Four Books](#) and [Five Classics](#) (*Sishuwujing* 四书五经).

There is a close link between Confucianism and shamanism. Scholars have argued that some Confucian concepts, including parts of the [five constants](#) (*wuchang* 五常), have their roots in shamanistic rituals.<sup>17</sup> Confucianism became state ideology during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) and took hold among Chinese elites. Shamanistic activities continued to be practiced by common people, morphing into the veneration of ancestors, heroes and local deities, and ultimately influenced some Buddhist and Taoist rituals, such as the [\(Hungry\) Ghost Festival](#).<sup>18</sup>

Religious Taoism, [influenced by a Taoist philosophy](#) that dates back to the sixth century B.C.E., [first emerged as a sect](#), founded by [Zhang Daoling](#), during the second century C.E. But it was not until centuries later that aristocrats, reacting to the growing religion of Buddhism and seeking to preserve and defend Indigenous religious traditions, began identifying as "Taoist" and collecting Taoist texts.<sup>19</sup> Religious Taoism's principal teachings, similar to those of Taoist philosophy, focus on nonaction and harmony with the Tao, or universal order. Religious Taoism's teachings also include [internal alchemy](#) (*neidan* 内丹), self-cultivation and spiritual refinement through meditation.

During the Southern and Northern dynasties (420-589), Taoism gained some credibility among the ruling classes as a legitimate guiding philosophy, and together with Buddhism and Confucianism [came to be recognized](#) as one of the ["Three Teachings."](#) During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), emperors both regulated and promoted Taoist practices. Early Ming rulers controlled the number of ordained Taoists in the state and established temples throughout the kingdom for Taoist liturgies to be held in support of the state. They also occasionally invited Taoists to the royal court. [Emperor Jiajing](#) (1522-1566) – a devout Taoist known for his fascination with immortality, divination and alchemy – is one of Taoism's best-known imperial adherents. Taoism fell out of favor with the ruling class during the Qing dynasty (1636–1911), when the emperors espoused Confucianism and Buddhism.

Starting in the late 19th century, intellectuals, political leaders and other elites – drawn initially to Western ideals of science and modernity, and later to Communist ideology – soured on traditional Chinese belief systems. This

<sup>16</sup> Schafer, Edward H. 1951. ["Ritual Exposure in Ancient China."](#) Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies. Also refer to Michael, Thomas. 2015. ["Shamanism Theory and the Early Chinese Wu."](#) Journal of the American Academy of Religion.

<sup>17</sup> Rošker, Jana S. 2020. ["Li Zehou's ethics and the importance of Confucian kinship relations: the power of shamanistic rituality and the consolidation of relationalism \(關係主義\)."](#) Asian Philosophy.

<sup>18</sup> Yang, Mayfair. 2015. ["Shamanism and Spirit Possession in Chinese Modernity: Some Preliminary Reflections on a Gendered Religiosity of the Body."](#) Review of Religion and Chinese Society.

<sup>19</sup> For more on the history of Taoism, refer to Kirkland, Russell and Norman J, Girardot. 2004. "Taoism: The Enduring Tradition."

backlash came in waves and from different angles, producing a new vocabulary and framework to discuss and evaluate religious concepts.

During the late Qing period (roughly 1900-1911), Chinese scholars, influenced by Protestant ideals of religion, began to use the term *zongjiao* (宗教) to refer to organized religions, particularly those with professional clergy and institutional oversight. Around the same time, they adopted the new term *mixin* (迷信), meaning blind belief or superstition, to describe folk religions (*minjian xinyang* 民间信仰), and religious activities and beliefs outside *zongjiao* and Confucian orthodoxy. Some of this framework of separating *zongjiao* religion from other belief systems remains in place today.

In the 1920s, the government of the Republic of China launched a campaign against superstition, tearing down temples and shrines dedicated to folk deities.<sup>20</sup> However, due partly to the fact that folk religious temples often housed deities of various religious traditions, local authorities did not fully implement the policy. Around the same time, during the [New Culture Movement](#), intellectuals blamed traditional Confucian values for China's political weakness and advocated for Western values, especially science and democracy.<sup>21</sup>

After the Communist Party took power, folk religions and Confucianism were attacked further during the [socialist campaign](#) in the 1950s and the [Cultural Revolution](#) of 1966 to 1976. In 1982, the government [accepted the legitimacy of zongjiao religion](#), but folk religions remained illegal. Authorities continued to denounce the “superstitious practices” of folk religions and strictly forbade sorcerers and witches, though folk activities that the government did not deem as harmful – such as *fengshui* (风水) and worshipping the goddess of sea, *Mazu* (妈祖) – were largely tolerated and sometimes encouraged.

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<sup>20</sup> Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. 2010. [“The Religious Question in Modern China.”](#) Also refer to Poon, Shuk-Wah. 2008. [“Religion, Modernity, and Urban Space: The City God Temple in Republican Guangzhou.”](#) Modern China.

<sup>21</sup> Chen, Joseph T. 1970. [“The May Fourth Movement Redefined.”](#) Modern Asian Studies.

## Beliefs and practices

Beliefs and practices tied to Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese folk religions generally fall into three broad areas: filial piety (*xiao* 孝) and ancestor worship (*jizu* 祭祖), veneration of deities and ghosts, and beliefs that involve supernatural forces, such as *fengshui* (风水).<sup>22</sup>

While some of these concepts appear to be distinctly Confucian (ancestor worship), Taoist (belief in Taoist deities), folk religious (caring about auspicious days) or even Buddhist (belief in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva), they defy clear categorization. There is a lot of overlap among these traditions, and Confucianism, Taoism, folk religion (and Buddhism) all are considered to be part of traditional Chinese culture.

In addition, Chinese people often engage in religious beliefs and practices with a range of origins without distinction. Folk religion in particular blends elements from a variety of Chinese traditions, so separating folk beliefs and practices from more “orthodox” belief systems is particularly difficult.

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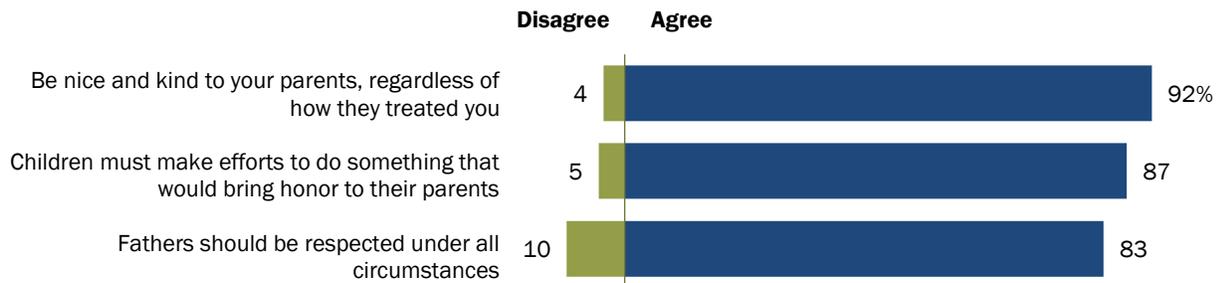
<sup>22</sup> Yang, Fenggang, and Anning Hu. 2012. [“Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan.”](#) Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. Also refer to Zhang, Chunni, Yunfeng Lu, and He Sheng. 2021. [“Exploring Chinese Folk Religion: Popularity, Diffuseness, and Diversities.”](#) Chinese Journal of Sociology.

## Filial piety and ancestor worship

In its basic form, [filial piety](#) (xiao) refers to one’s duties and indebtedness to parents, even after their death. These duties include respect, obedience and care for parents and elderly family members.

### Chinese overwhelmingly agree with the Confucian values of ‘filial piety’

*Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about filial piety (xiao)?*



Note: Based on adults in China. Family values tied to filial piety (xiao) – respect for and obedience to parents and elders – are widely perceived in China to be Confucian teachings. Numbers combine response options ranging from “strongly” to “somewhat” agree (or disagree). Those who did not answer or answered neither agree nor disagree are not shown.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2017.

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In Confucian teachings, ancestor veneration – and the associated ancestral rite (*jili* 祭礼) described in Confucian texts – is [an expression of filial piety](#). Confucianism’s tenet of filial piety is a pillar of social norms across East Asia and parts of Southeast Asia.

As described in “The Analects,” the ancestor veneration ceremony or rite involves fasting in preparation, wearing ceremonial costumes, and offering elaborate meals to deceased ancestors. One is expected to perform the rites carefully and pay respects to the deceased as if they were living. Confucius was said to insist that venerating ancestors is not a religious act but a form of [fulfilling filial responsibilities](#). Still, the ceremony entails the belief that deceased ancestors continue to exist.

Other Chinese religious traditions have adapted the concept of ancestor veneration in their own way. In Chinese folk religion, for example, failure to venerate one’s ancestors properly brings divine punishment, and the spirits of the dead who were not venerated by their living descendants become [“wandering ghosts.”](#)

In China today, ancestor veneration rituals, such as those performed during gravesite visits, are typically steeped in folk religion. Gravesite visits often involve rituals with religious underpinnings, such as burning incense and [“spirit money” or joss paper](#), making offerings of food and drink, and making wishes to ancestors.<sup>23</sup>

Three-quarters of Chinese adults report that they [visited a family member’s gravesite](#) at least once in the last year, according to the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS).

The survey did not ask what rituals people perform at gravesites. Some Chinese people may not engage in any activity that has spiritual or religious underpinnings while caring for an ancestor’s grave. But ethnographic research suggests that Chinese people typically [burn incense and “spirit money”](#) when visiting family members’ gravesites.

While most Chinese people venerate ancestors, very few do it as frequently as tradition dictates. Custom calls for paying respects to ancestors at a family gravesite three times a year: on Tomb Sweeping Day, during the [Chinese New Year](#) and on the [anniversary of an ancestor’s death](#).

In 2018, only 14% of adults in China said they had visited a family member’s gravesite three times or more in the past year.

Many Chinese people oppose cremations because they are viewed as violating the Confucian understanding of respect for the dead.<sup>24</sup> Since 1956, the Chinese government, citing the amount of arable [land devoted to burials](#), has [promoted cremation](#), but the cremation rate has remained [far below the government’s target](#).

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### Men in China are more likely than women to visit ancestors’ gravesites

*% of adults in China who say they visited a gravesite(s) of family members \_\_\_\_ in the last year*

	Women	Men	All
Never	30%	18%	24%
Once	36	40	38
Twice	21	25	23
Three+ times	11	16	14

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2018. “Measuring Religion in China”

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<sup>23</sup> Sun, Anna. 2019. “[Turning Ghosts into Ancestors in Contemporary Urban China](#).” Harvard Divinity Bulletin.

<sup>24</sup> Ebrey, Patricia. 1990. “[Cremation in Sung China](#).” The American Historical Review.

## Deity worship

In Chinese religious tradition, supernatural beings typically include gods – or deities – and ghosts, i.e., the spirits of the dead. While the spirits of deceased ancestors fall into the category of “ghosts”(gui 鬼), Chinese people rarely use this term to describe their own deceased ancestors.

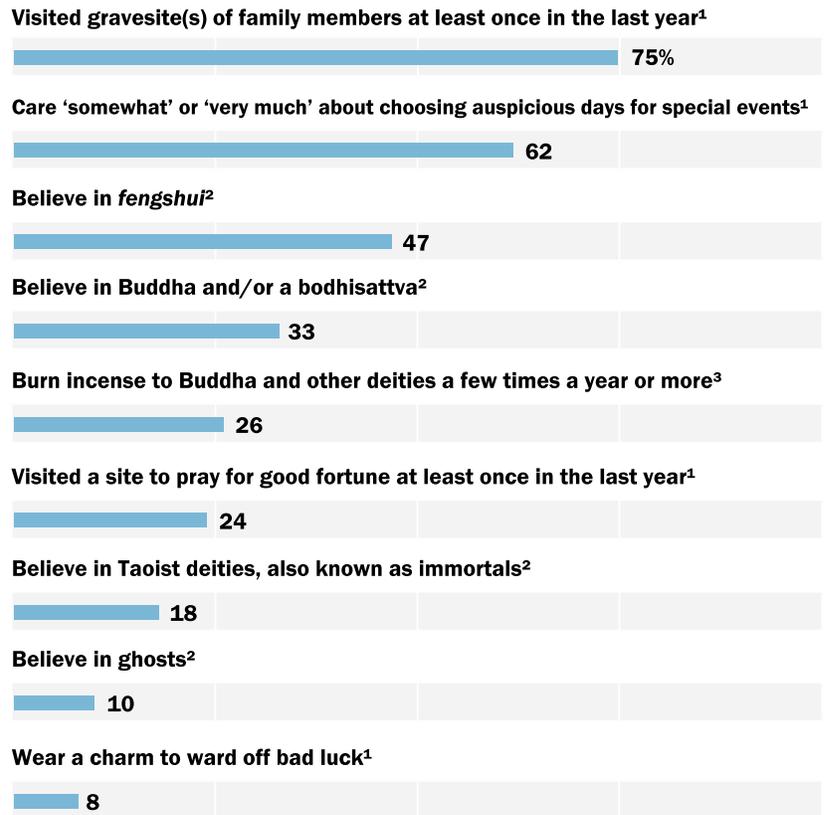
Gods, which are usually viewed as benevolent and having the power to intervene in worldly affairs, are believed to reside in heaven, Earth or the underworld. They follow a divine hierarchical structure and oversee a jurisdiction in accordance with their position. They may include Buddhist figures, Taoist immortals (*shenxian* 神仙) and local deities outside of the Buddhist or Taoist pantheons.

Gods can also be the spirits of human heroes. For instance, Lord Guan (*Guan Gong* 关公)

was originally a renowned military general, Guan Yu (160-220 C.E.). He was worshipped by ordinary people as the god of war after his death, and later also by Confucian elites, who extolled Guan Yu as a moral exemplar of loyalty and honesty. Guan Yu was also granted the Buddhist rank of bodhisattva during the Sui dynasty (581-618), and the Taoist title of Emperor Guan during the reign of Song Emperor Huizong in the 12th century.

## Some Chinese traditional beliefs and practices are more common than others

% of adults in China who say they ...



Source: “1” denotes questions from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey; “2” from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), “believe in” is worded as *xiangxin*, a term that does not always have a religious connotation; and “3” from the 2016 CFPS. Refer to Appendix B for details on measures used in each survey. “Measuring Religion in China”

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Ghosts are often believed to possess the power to intervene in worldly affairs, but they can be malevolent and are of a lower rank than gods. Ghosts are usually confined to the underworld, except during the month of Lunar July, also known as “Ghost Month,” when the gate of the underworld opens and ghosts are allowed to visit the world of the living. It is believed that making food offerings and burning “spirit money” can appease ghosts and [prevent them from harming the living](#).

Belief in deities, including Buddha and/or a bodhisattva and immortals, is more common than belief in ghosts. For example, 18% of Chinese adults express belief in immortals, compared with 10% of adults who believe in ghosts, according to the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS).

Because some gods are venerated across religious traditions, it is not always clear which religion(s) such practices fall into. For instance, burning incense to pay respects to Buddha (*shaoxiangbaifo* 烧香拜佛) may appear to be a Buddhist practice, but this activity is found across Chinese religious traditions.<sup>25</sup> Some people may burn incense to pay respects to Buddha while incorporating distinctly folk religion practices, such as simultaneously making wishes to Buddha.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, it is unclear whether a person who says they believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva should be considered a Buddhist or a practitioner of folk religion.

Burning incense (*shaoxiang* 烧香) – usually [incense sticks](#) – is believed to open up communication with gods so they can more readily hear people’s wishes. It is an essential component of venerating or paying respects to deities and ancestors, and in Chinese folk religious traditions, burning incense is typically accompanied by making wishes (*xuyuan* 许愿). Today, the term *shaoxiangbaifo* is commonly used to describe the act of venerating one or more deities of traditional Chinese religions.

Roughly a quarter of Chinese adults (26%) say they burn incense – at home or in temples – to pay respect to Buddha or deities a few times a year or more, including 11% who do so at least once a month, according to the 2016 CFPS.<sup>27</sup> And 24% say they visited a particular destination – typically a temple or shrine – to pray for good fortune in school, business or other matters in the past year, according to the 2018 CGSS.

<sup>25</sup> Chau, Adam Yuet. 2006. “Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China.”

<sup>26</sup> Wong, Wai Yip. “Defining Chinese Folk Religion: A Methodological Interpretation.” *Asian Philosophy*.

<sup>27</sup> The 2016 CFPS survey asks only respondents who did not identify as Christian or Muslim about their incense burning activities. This analysis assumes they never burn incense to worship Buddha.

These measures suggest that most Chinese people are not *frequently* engaged in traditional religious activities. However, this low level of engagement is consistent with Chinese religious tradition, where people are *not* expected to pay respects to a god or gods regularly.

Rather, as some scholars have argued, religious engagement in China largely revolves around efficacy (*ling* 灵 or *lingyan* 灵验) – how well a particular god or ritual responds to a person’s request – and believers are “consumers” who choose from the full array of gods and religious rituals when the need arises.<sup>28</sup>

### Supernatural forces

In Chinese religious tradition, apart from gods and ghosts, supernatural forces, such as fate (*ming* 命), fortune (*yun* 运) and fengshui may affect or even largely shape one’s life.<sup>29</sup> While *ming* is predestined and immutable, *yun* changes. There are a variety of divination practices believed to bring good fortune or ward off bad luck, such as **fengshui** maneuvering – the practice of arranging objects to create harmony between individuals and their environment – wearing lucky charms, and selecting auspicious days for special occasions.<sup>30</sup>

Chinese people commonly describe these practices as custom or superstition (*mixin* 迷信), though they are known to have Taoist underpinnings. It is not always clear whether the practice should be considered *religious* or which religious tradition it falls under. For instance, some people may consider their fengshui practice to be *scientific*, while others

### Some Chinese adults believe in multiple deities

% of adults in China who believe in (*xiangxin*) the following

	Multiple beliefs including ...	Only ...
Fengshui	47%	19%
Buddha and or/a bodhisattva	33	5
Taoist deities (immortals)	18	1
Ghosts	10	1
Jesus Christ and/or <i>Tianzhu</i>	7	2
Allah	3	<0.5
Any of the above	59	-
Any two or more of the above	32	-

#### Most common combinations

Fengshui, and Buddha and/or a bodhisattva	9
Fengshui, Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, and immortals	6
Fengshui, Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, immortals, and ghosts	4

Note: *Tianzhu* is the word for God used by Chinese Catholics.

*Xiangxin* does not always have a religious connotation.

Source: China Family Panel Studies, 2018.

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<sup>28</sup> Chau, Adam Yuet. 2011. “Modalities of Doing Religion and Ritual Polytypy: Evaluating the Religious Market Model from the Perspective of Chinese Religious History.” Religion.

<sup>29</sup> Zhang, Chunni, Yunfeng Lu, and He Sheng. 2021. “Exploring Chinese Folk Religion: Popularity, Diffuseness, and Diversities.” Chinese Journal of Sociology.

<sup>30</sup> There are also divination techniques that reveal one’s fate, such as palm reading and face reading. Refer to Yang, Fenggang, and Anning Hu. 2012. “Mapping Chinese Folk Religion in Mainland China and Taiwan.” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion.

may [hire Taoist priests](#) to perform fengshui activities in a folk religious way, and still others may practice it in a purely Taoist way, as part of [Taoist health rituals](#).

Approximately six-in-ten adults (62%) say they care “somewhat” or “very much” about choosing an auspicious day for special occasions, according to the 2018 CGSS. Almost half (47%) believe in fengshui, according to the 2018 CFPS. And 8% of Chinese adults say they carry a lucky charm or amulet to bring good fortune or keep them safe from harm.

### **Mixing of beliefs and practices**

Traditional Chinese religious or spiritual beliefs and practices are not mutually exclusive. Beliefs in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, immortals and fengshui overlap considerably, and few Chinese hold only one belief. For example, just 5% of adults say they believe in (*xiangxin* 相信) Buddha exclusively, compared with 9% of adults who say they believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva and fengshui at the same time. An additional 6% also believe in Taoist immortals.

There are significant differences on these belief and practice measures across demographic groups. On average, women, older adults and people with less educational attainment tend to be more engaged in folk religion.

For example, women are consistently more likely than men to say they burn incense to venerate Buddha or other deities. They are also more likely to believe in folk deities, fengshui and auspicious days. However, women are less likely to visit the gravesite(s) of family members, as men are primarily responsible for performing that ritual, according to custom.

## Women in China more likely than men to engage in folk beliefs and practices

*% of adults in China who say they ...*

	Women	Men	Women-men Diff
Believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva <sup>2</sup>	38%	28%	<b>10</b>
Burn incense to worship Buddha and other deities at least a few times a year <sup>4</sup>	30	21	<b>8</b>
Believe in Taoist deities, also known as immortals <sup>2</sup>	22	14	<b>8</b>
Visited a site to pray for good luck at least once in the last year <sup>3</sup>	27	21	<b>6</b>
Care 'very much' about choosing auspicious days for special events <sup>3</sup>	27	21	<b>6</b>
Believe in <i>fengshui</i> <sup>2</sup>	49	45	<b>5</b>
Believe hell exists <sup>1</sup>	13	10	<b>3</b>
Believe in ghosts <sup>2</sup>	12	9	<b>3</b>
Believe afterlife exists <sup>1</sup>	13	10	<b>3</b>
Attend religious ( <i>zongjiao</i> ) activities at least a few times a year <sup>3</sup>	7	5	<b>3</b>
Believe heaven exists <sup>1</sup>	14	11	<b>3</b>
Consider <i>zongjiao</i> very important <sup>1</sup>	4	3	<b>1</b>
Wear a charm to ward off bad luck <sup>3</sup>	8	8	<b>1</b>
Visited gravesite(s) of family members at least once in the last year <sup>3</sup>	68	81	<b>-12</b>

Note: This analysis assumes Christians and Muslims never burn incense because the survey did not ask them this question. Statistically significant differences are in **bold**.

Source: "1" denotes questions from the 2018 World Values Survey; "2" from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), "believe in" is worded as *xiangxin*, a term that does not always have a religious connotation; "3" from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey; and "4" from the 2016 CFPS. Refer to Appendix B for details on measures used in each survey. "Measuring Religion in China"

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## Affiliation

The share of Chinese adults who describe their religion (*zongjiao*) as Confucianism, Taoism or folk religion is much smaller than the share who engage with beliefs and practices from these traditions.

The most common of these identities is folk religion, but still, only about 3% of adults in China identify as adherents of folk religions, according to the 2018 CGSS.<sup>31</sup>

The CGSS is the only national survey that includes “folk religion” in the religious affiliation question, and it presents worshipping *Mazu* (妈祖), the goddess of sea, or *Guan Gong* (关公), commonly venerated as the god of wealth, as examples of folk religion.

The CGSS question may not capture some adults who worship other folk deities, such as the [goddess of mercy](#) (*Guanyin* 观音), [earth gods](#) (*tudigong* 土地公), [dragon king](#) (*longwang* 龙王) or [Silkworm Mother](#) (*Cangu Nainai* 蚕姑奶奶).

Some Chinese people who engage in deity worshipping may not consider themselves *religious* in the formal sense because folk religion is commonly regarded as superstition in China, which [the government discourages](#).

In addition, scholars have noted that practitioners of folk religion sometimes refer to all forms of folk religion as Buddhism and claim Buddhist affiliation, even though they mostly practice folk religion. (Read [Chapter 3 for details on Buddhism in China](#)).<sup>32</sup>

Many people in China do not consider Confucianism to be a religion. This report does not analyze Confucianism as a religious affiliation, and we do not make any estimate of the number of Confucians in China. Taoism is one of the five religions recognized by the government (along with Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam and Protestantism), but very few Chinese adults identify as Taoists in the 2018 CGSS.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The 2018 CGSS was conducted in 28 of mainland China’s 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The 2021 CGSS was conducted in 19 of China’s 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. In the 2021 CGSS, fewer than 0.5% of respondents identified as adherents of folk religion.

<sup>32</sup> Lu, Yunfeng, Byron Johnson, and Rodney Stark. 2008. “[Deregulation and The Religious Market in Taiwan: A Research Note](#).” *The Sociological Quarterly*. Also refer to Leamaster, Reid. J., and Anning Hu. 2014. “[Popular Buddhists: The Relationship between Popular Religious Involvement and Buddhist Identity in Contemporary China](#).” *Sociology of Religion*.

<sup>33</sup> Fewer than 0.5% of Chinese adults identified as Taoist in both the 2018 CGSS, which was conducted in 28 of mainland China’s 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, and the 2021 CGSS, which was conducted in 19 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions.

## Sidebar: How many Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian and folk religious sites are there in China today?

For various reasons, it is unclear exactly how many traditional Chinese worship sites (temples and shrines with Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian or folk religious elements) there are across China today. Nor is it clear which sites are most common. This sidebar describes the government’s official statistics as well as some unofficial estimates based on surveys of “neighborhood committees,” explaining why neither set of numbers is wholly reliable.

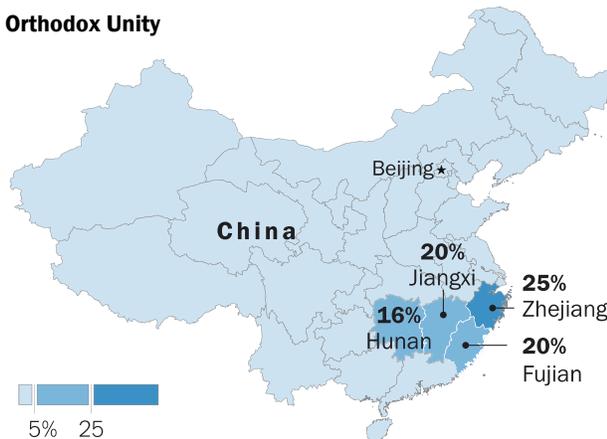
### Official data

Chinese government statistics show a total of 43,000 temples – about 34,000 Buddhist sites and 9,000 Taoist sites – across the country as of 2018. However, this count covers only *officially registered* Buddhist and Taoist venues, which typically include a monastery or housing for monks or nuns, as well as a prayer hall that is open to the public for worship.

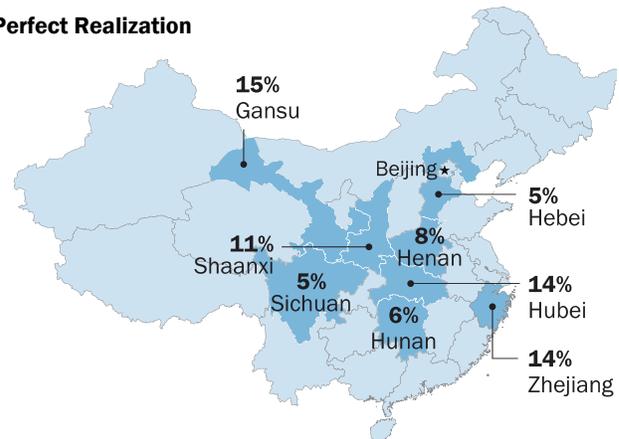
## Taoism: Most Orthodox Unity temples are in the South, while Perfect Realization sites are scattered across China

*% of Taoist temples in each province, among all Taoist temples in China, by tradition*

### Orthodox Unity



### Perfect Realization



Note: Only provinces with Taoist temples (*gong* or *guan*), accounting for 8% or more of the total, are labeled. “Perfect Realization” refers to *Quanzhen*; “Orthodox Unity” refers to *Zhengyi*. Data is only available for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data accessed on the National Religious Affairs Administration of China website in July 2023. “Measuring Religion in China”

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Buddhist temples (*si* 寺 or *siyuan* 寺院) included in the official statistics are categorized based on their school: Han, Tibetan or Theravada. (Refer to [the Buddhism chapter](#) for more details.) Taoist temples (*gong* 宫 or *guan* 观) are usually classified as belonging either to the [Perfect Realization tradition](#) (*Quanzhen* 全真) or to the [Orthodox Unity tradition](#) (*Zhengyi* 正一).<sup>34</sup> According to the [official figures](#), somewhat more Taoist temples belong to Orthodox Unity (4,338) than to Perfect Realization (4,011).<sup>35</sup> Also, the Perfect Realization tradition has a stronger presence in northern China, while Orthodox Unity tends to be more widespread in southern regions, according to data from the National Religious Affairs Administration of China.

Buddhist or Taoist sites without formal registration are excluded from the official statistics. It is possible that the number of unregistered Buddhist and Taoist sites far exceeds those registered, given the high bar for registration, such as having steady income and qualified clergy. In addition, the managers of many sites may have little incentive to register, because local authorities often permit unregistered Buddhist or Taoist venues to operate without much difficulty.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, folk religion sites – which are mostly shrines and temples – are not tracked closely by the government since folk religion is not one of China’s five official religions and does not have its own supervisory agency.

In 2015, the Chinese government issued, for the first time, a national document urging local governments to regulate folk religion and its sites. However, registration requirements for folk religion sites vary widely by province. For instance, in [Guangdong province](#), any folk religion site seeking to register must have a minimum building area of 500 square meters (5,382 square feet), while in [Hunan province](#), the requirement is just 50 square meters. These inconsistencies add to the challenge of estimating the number of folk religious sites across China.

Although Confucianism is not officially recognized by the government as a religion, there is a [national association that tracks Confucian temples](#) (*wenmiao* 文庙 or *kongmiao* 孔庙). Traditionally, these were sacred places reserved for educated elites to worship Confucius. Today, they are open to all visitors. Government statistics show 1,600 Confucian temples across China. However, this count does not include ancestral halls or temples (*zongci* 宗祠 or *citang* 祠堂) – places of worship dedicated to ancestors of the same family lineage, which are closely tied to Confucianism.

### **Estimating numbers of worship sites from surveys of local jurisdictions**

Survey data provides an alternative way to estimate the prevalence of traditional religious sites. The 2014 China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS) of neighborhood committees – the smallest administrative unit in China – indicates that 35% of such committees have in their jurisdiction at least one temple or shrine associated with traditional Chinese religions, such as a temple with a Buddhist connection (*simiao* 寺庙), a Taoist temple that

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<sup>34</sup> Quanzhen Taoism is characterized by a monastic focus and emphasis on self-cultivation through self-discipline and meditation. It also encourages blending elements of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, such as studying the “Heart Sutra” (*Xinjing* 心经), “*Daodejing*” (道德经), and the classic Confucian principle of filial piety (“*Xiaojing*” 孝经). Zhengyi Taoism is non-monastic, and its priests are allowed to marry. The Zhengyi sect is the only [surviving liturgical tradition of Taoism](#).

<sup>35</sup> The information on Taoist temples was accessed on the National Religious Affairs Administration of China (NRAA) website in July 2023. The website does not state when the data was gathered.

<sup>36</sup> Chang, Kuei-min. 2016. [“Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China.”](#) Also refer to Weller, Robert P. 2014. [“The Politics of Increasing Religious Diversity in China.”](#) Daedalus.

includes a monastery (*dao guan* 道观), an ancestral hall (zongci or citang), or a folk temple dedicated to an earth god (*tudi ci* 土地祠) or shrine dedicated to other local deities (*shenkan* 神龛).

All told, the CLDS data suggests there may have been as many as 280,000 traditional worship sites in China in 2014.<sup>37</sup> However, that figure also may be low. Although the survey asked about the presence of temples without specifying their registration status, it is possible that neighborhood committees reported only temples that had received some type of government approval, such as formal registration or at least tacit consent from local officials.

#### Ancestral halls

The CLDS report on neighborhood committees shows that about 13% of such committees have in their jurisdiction at least one ancestral hall (zongci or citang). Neighborhood committees in rural areas, known as “villagers’ committees,” are particularly likely to have at least one site dedicated to ancestors (16%). A neighborhood committee generally represents between **1,000 and 3,000 households**, while a villagers’ committee is comprised of an average of around 370 households.<sup>38</sup>

These numbers suggest there are more than 102,000 ancestral halls in China. But this may be a conservative estimate, because 7% of neighborhood committees report having two or more ancestral temples in the survey.

#### Buddhism

CLDS data indicates there were more than 190,000 Buddhist temples (*simiao*) in China, far greater than the government’s count of 34,000 officially registered Buddhist sites. However, that 190,000 figure could overstate the number of Buddhist venues with a monastery, because the term “*simiao*” is also sometimes used to describe any temple or shrine that houses Buddhist deities along with various other traditional Chinese religious deities.

#### Taoism

As for Taoist temples, CLDS data indicates that only 1% of neighborhood committees have at least one such temple in their jurisdiction. However, this count is based on a survey question asking about *dao guan*, which are

### Prevalence of traditional religious worship sites in China

% of neighborhood committees in China, by community type, with at least one \_\_\_\_ in their jurisdiction

	Rural	Urban	Total
<i>Simiao</i> 寺庙	30%	15%	25%
Folk religious temple 土地祠/神龛	27	7	19
Ancestral hall/temple 宗祠/祠堂	16	8	13
<i>Dao guan</i> 道观	1	<0.5	1
<b>Any of the above</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>35</b>

Note: While the word *simiao* usually refers to Buddhist sites, some may use it to describe any temples dedicated to traditional Chinese deities. The China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS) uses the word *tudi ci* for folk religious temple; *tudi ci* are a type of folk temple dedicated to an earth god. *Dao guan* refers to Taoist temples with resident monks or nuns.

Source: 2014 CLDS.  
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<sup>37</sup> The estimate is calculated using the numbers of neighborhood committees in China and the share of neighborhood committees with at least one Buddhist temple in their jurisdiction. This calculation also takes into account rural versus urban differences. [China had 585,000 villagers’ committees in rural areas](#) and 96,693 residents’ committees in urban areas as of 2014.

<sup>38</sup> The estimate is calculated using the numbers of [households](#) and [villagers’ committees](#) in China as of 2020.

temples with resident Taoist monks or nuns. It does not account for worship sites with some looser Taoist connection, such as temples or shrines that house Taoist deities along with various other traditional Chinese religious deities.

### *Folk religion*

Folk religious temples, measured by the presence of temples (tudi ci) or local shrines (shenkan), seem to be relatively common in China, being present in 19% of neighborhood committees, according to the 2014 CLDS. Neighborhood committees in rural areas are particularly likely to have a site dedicated to local folk deities (27%). However, not all folk religious sites are dedicated *solely* to local folk deities, national heroes, trade gods, and/or other so-called “tutelage” or protector gods (such as the mountain god). In fact, it is common for folk religious temples also to house Buddhist or Taoist figures.

As a result, the CLDS-based estimate that there are at least 165,000 folk temples (tudi ci) or local shrines (shenkan) might not count some sites that house Buddhist or Taoist deities together with folk deities, thus leading to a possible undercount of folk religious sites in China.

Furthermore, while the CLDS data may seem to suggest that Buddhist temples are the most common variety in China, this conclusion may not be warranted, due to the complex interconnections of Buddhism, Taoism and folk religion. Some temples or shrines may not fall neatly under one religious category, because they house multiple Buddhist, Taoist and folk deities at the same time.

There is some evidence suggesting the number of temples that fall outside of official statistics declined in the past decade when local authorities tightened controls over folk religion. For example, [in Zhejiang, 35,000 folk religious sites were listed in 2013](#), but that number [dropped by half to 17,000 in 2020](#) as sites that failed to meet the government’s registration requirement were [demolished, closed or converted](#) into secular facilities.

### 3. Buddhism

Buddhism (*Fojiao* 佛教) is the largest officially recognized religion in China. The share of Buddhists in China ranges from 4% to 33%, depending on the measure used and whether it is based on surveys that ask about formal affiliation with Buddhism or beliefs and practices associated with Buddhism.

The share of Chinese adults who formally identify (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰) with Buddhism is about 4%, representing about 42 million adults, according to the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS).<sup>39</sup>

But 33% of Chinese adults, representing about 362 million adults, believe in (*xiangxin* 相信) Buddha (*fo* 佛) and/or a bodhisattva (*pusa* 菩萨), according to the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) survey – though this number also includes many people who believe in other religious figures as well, such as Jesus Christ or Taoist immortals.<sup>40</sup>

Buddhism in China has three main branches. Han Buddhism, or [Chinese Buddhism](#), accounts for the vast majority of the country's Buddhists, as measured by the

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#### Estimates on China's share of Buddhists vary widely depending on the measure used

% of adults in China who \_\_\_\_, based on the following questions

<b>Identify with or believe in Buddhism</b>	<b>What is your religious belief (<i>zongjiao xinyang</i>)?</b> 您的宗教信仰是什么 Response options included folk religion Survey: 2018 CGSS	4%
	<b>Which religion (<i>zongjiao</i>) do you believe in (<i>xinyang</i>)?</b> 您信仰哪个宗教 Response options did not include folk religion Survey: 2018 WVS	9
	<b>To which religion (<i>zongjiao</i>) do you belong (<i>shuyu</i>)?</b> 您属于什么宗教 Response options did not include folk religion Survey: 2016 CFPS	9
<b>Practice Buddhism</b>	<b>How often do you burn incense to worship Buddha and other deities?</b> 您烧香/拜佛的频率有多高 Response option shown: a few times a year or more Survey: 2016 CFPS	26
<b>Believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva</b>	<b>Do you believe in (<i>xiangxin</i>) Buddha and/or a bodhisattva?</b> 您是否相信佛或菩萨 Survey: 2018 CFPS	33

Note: Both *xinyang* and *xiangxin* can be translated as “believe/belief in,” but *xinyang* typically implies a formal commitment or serious conviction, while *xiangxin* typically implies weaker commitment.

Source: China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), 2016 and 2018; Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), 2018; World Values Survey (WVS), 2018.

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<sup>39</sup> The 2018 CGSS was conducted in 28 of mainland China's 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The 2021 CGSS was reported from 19 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. In the 2021 CGSS, like the 2018 CGSS, 4% of respondents identified as Buddhist.

<sup>40</sup> In China, both “Buddha” and “bodhisattva” are commonly used to refer to Buddhist deities.

number of registered temples. (Refer to [Geographic distribution of Buddhist temples](#) for more detail.)

[Tibetan Buddhism](#) and [Theravada Buddhism](#) are practiced primarily by ethnic minorities in the Tibetan Plateau, Inner Mongolia and along the southern borders with Myanmar, also called Burma, and Laos. In China, the word “Buddhism” typically refers to Han Buddhism.

Although Buddhism originated in India, Han Buddhism has developed distinctly Chinese characteristics while also influencing [older Chinese belief systems](#). Han Buddhists generally espouse the Confucian ideal of filial piety (*xiao* 孝) and have adopted practices that align with ancestor worship, such as praying for the well-being of deceased ancestors.<sup>41</sup> They also have incorporated the Taoist practice of breathing exercises.

In the past decade, government policies have been relatively [lenient toward Han Buddhism](#). President Xi Jinping [has extolled \(Han\) Buddhism](#) as one of the essential forms of [Chinese traditional faith](#) with a role to play in restoring morality, and has commended it for having [“integrated ... with the indigenous Confucianism and Taoism.”](#)

## How many Buddhists are there in China?

As with Taoism and folk religion in China, assessing the size of the Buddhist population is challenging due to Buddhism’s blurry boundaries with other traditional Chinese religions. Unlike Christianity and Islam, Buddhism does not require exclusivity of belief or practice. Buddhists do not need to affiliate with a local temple or Buddhist association, nor must they participate in the formal ritual of [“taking refuge”](#) (*guiyi* 皈依) to identify with Buddhism.

As a result, survey questions that measure Buddhist self-identification (i.e., “What is your religious belief?” “Which religion do you believe in?” and “To which religion do you belong?”) fail to capture adults who engage in Buddhist beliefs and/or practices but do not consider themselves formally affiliated with Buddhism. Survey questions that ask about Buddhist affiliation tend to produce much lower estimates than those that ask about belief in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, or about the burning of incense to pay respects to Buddha and other deities (*shaoxiangbaifo* 烧香拜佛).

That said, belief and practice measures are not a wholly accurate proxy for Buddhist identity, either. Because of Buddhism’s embeddedness in Chinese folk religion, seemingly Buddhist measures are not exclusively Buddhist, and may also capture folk religion practitioners. For

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<sup>41</sup> Some scholars, citing filial piety as an important moral teaching of Buddhism, argue that Buddhists didn’t borrow the concept from Confucianism. For example, read Guang, Xing. 2016. [“The Teaching and Practice of Filial Piety in Buddhism.”](#) Journal of Law and Religion.

instance, the Buddhist figure of Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva often depicted as genderless or male, has evolved into an important folk deity, the [goddess of mercy](#) (*Guanyin* 观音), which makes it unclear whether a person worshipping a bodhisattva is a Buddhist or a practitioner of folk religion. (Refer to [Chapter 2 for a discussion of how Buddhism intertwines with other Chinese religious traditions](#).)

Meanwhile, Chinese people sometimes do not distinguish between certain concepts in folk religion and Buddhism. In southern Fujian, for example, people commonly refer to all types of folk religion as Buddhism (*Fojiao* 佛教).<sup>42</sup> In other words, some people who primarily practice folk religion may choose “Buddhism” as their religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*) in surveys, especially when “folk religion” is not offered as an option. Indeed, surveys that give respondents the option to self-identify with “folk religion” tend to produce lower Buddhist estimates than those that do not offer “folk religion” as an option.

Moreover, there is a varied understanding of what it means to “be Buddhist.” Some Chinese who worship Buddha as one of many folk deities may describe themselves as “believing in Buddha” (*xinfo* 信佛), while those who are devoted to studying Buddhist scriptures may say they are “studying Buddha” (*xuefo* 学佛) or refer to themselves as “Buddha’s disciples” (*fomen dizi* 佛门弟子). Others may believe that only Buddhist monks and nuns should claim Buddhism as their *zongjiao* (宗教) or *zongjiao xinyang*.

While it may be possible to approximate the number of Buddhists based on the share of adults who engage in *distinctly* Buddhist rituals and activities – such as “taking refuge” and chanting Buddhist sutras – there is a shortage of data on these measures. The last publicly available national survey to ask questions about clearly Buddhist rituals and activities was the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents, which found that only a small fraction of Chinese adults had undergone the formal ritual of conversion (2%), recited Buddhist prayers (1%) or occasionally read Buddhist scriptures (1%).

Even the [Buddhist Association of China](#) – the official supervisory agency for Buddhist affairs in China – provides population estimates that it says are based on “incomplete statistics” (*bu wanquan tongji* 不完全统计). In 2017, it estimated that China had more than 100 million Buddhists, equivalent to more than 9% of the adult population. How this estimate was derived is unclear.

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<sup>42</sup> Colijn, Bram. 2018. [“The Concept of Religion in Modern China: A Grassroots Perspective.”](#) Exchange.

## Buddhist beliefs and practices

### Belief in Buddha

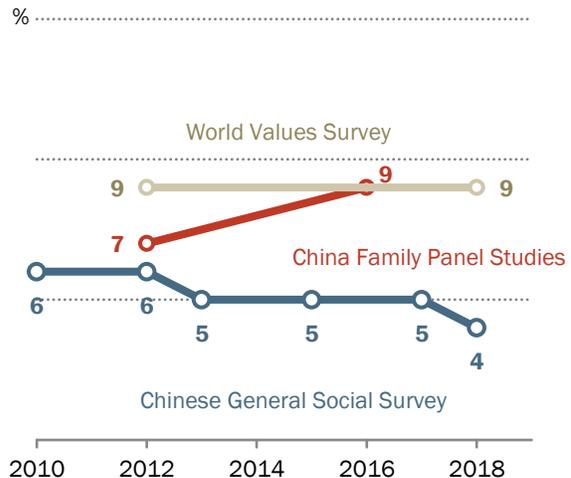
Fully 33% of Chinese adults say they believe in (xiangxin) Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, according to the 2018 CFPS survey.<sup>43</sup> This figure includes those who chose one or more additional deities from among the response options, such as “Taoist immortals,” “Jesus Christ,” “Catholic God” and “Allah.” The share of Chinese adults who say they believe in Buddha and no other deities is 16%.

### Burning incense to worship Buddha (and other deities)

About a third of Chinese adults say in the 2016 China Family Panel Studies survey they burn incense to worship Buddha and other deities at least once a year (35%), including 26% who engage in such practice a few times a year or more. Again, questions about Buddha – such as those that measure belief in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva or the burning of incense to worship Buddha and other deities – are not distinctly or exclusively Buddhist. (Refer to [discussion in previous section](#).)

### Fewer than 1 in 10 Chinese adults formally identify with Buddhism

*% of adults in China who say their religion (zongjiao) is Buddhism in each survey*



Note: Only the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) includes “folk religion” (*minjian xinyang*) as a response option along with Buddhism. In the other surveys, folk religion adherents may choose the Buddhism option.  
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<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the 2014 CFPS found that 17% of Chinese adults believe in “Buddha and/or a bodhisattva.” The discrepancy is partially because the 2014 CFPS asks about belief using the word *xin* (信) which implies a greater religious conviction compared with *xiangxin*, which does not necessarily have a religious connotation. For more, refer to the [Key terms](#) and [Methodology](#) sections

## Zongjiao affiliation

In the 2018 CGSS – which includes a “folk religion” option – 4% of Chinese adults said their zongjiao xinyang is Buddhism. Estimates of Buddhist affiliation from surveys that do *not* offer the folk religion option, such as the CFPS and World Values Survey (WVS), are as high as 9%.<sup>44</sup>

One advantage of the CGSS, which is the only survey that includes “folk religion” as a response option, is that it may help differentiate Buddhists from folk religion practitioners who might otherwise choose the “Buddhism” response option. Another advantage of the CGSS is that it measures formal affiliation with Buddhism using similar methods across waves, and it produces Buddhist estimates that do not swing dramatically between waves. The CGSS estimate of the Buddhist population is conservative relative to the other sources, and it seems to trend slightly downward over time.

The WVS and CFPS each have only two publicly available datasets with a consistent measure of Buddhist affiliation. They provide less information about change over time than the CGSS.

As discussed earlier, zongjiao-focused questions do not capture the full scope of traditional Chinese religions, including Buddhism. Still, zongjiao affiliation measures provide useful context.<sup>45</sup>

Not surprisingly, surveys show that adults who claim Buddhism (Fojiao) as their religion (zongjiao) tend to be more actively engaged in zongjiao religious practice than those who believe in

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### Stronger religious commitment is more closely linked to formal Buddhist identity than to belief in Buddha

Among adults in China who \_\_\_\_, % of those who ...

	... Consider religion very important	... Burn incense at least once a month
Identify with Buddhism	30%	43%
Believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva	10	22

Note: This survey's Chinese wording for “belief” is *xiangxin*, which may not imply religious commitment. Identity measure based on question about *zongjiao*, which typically refers to belief in organized religion and connotes formal religious affiliation.

Source: China Family Panel Studies, 2016 and 2018.

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<sup>44</sup> In some waves between 2011 and 2017, the CGSS allowed respondents to choose more than one answer to the zongjiao belief question, but very few respondents did so. For instance, in the 2017 CGSS, only 33 respondents out of the total 12,582 said they have more than one zongjiao belief. Excluding or including such adults makes little difference in the Buddhist estimate. Refer to the [Methodology](#).

<sup>45</sup> For more on the differences between these measures, refer to Zhang, Chunni, and Yunfeng Lu. 2020. “[The Measure of Chinese Religions: Denomination-Based or Deity-Based?](#)” *Chinese Journal of Sociology*.

(xiangxin) Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, and they are also more likely to consider zongjiao very important in their lives, according to the CFPS.<sup>46</sup>

### **Accordion box: History of Buddhism in China**

Buddhism is the oldest “foreign” religion in China, introduced during the Han period (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) by traveling monks from India and Central Asia. In its earliest days, it was primarily practiced by foreign monks and merchants. Chinese people were forbidden to build or join monasteries, and Buddha was viewed as a foreign deity.

It was not until the late Han dynasty that Buddhism started to attract Chinese converts and develop into “Han Buddhism” by incorporating concepts and practices from homegrown Chinese traditions. Han Buddhism, currently the dominant strain in China, flourished in the Tang dynasty (618-907), and under imperial patronage, [numerous Buddhist temples and shrines](#) were built across the country.<sup>47</sup>

Tibetan Buddhism is the second largest branch in China, practiced primarily by Tibetan and Mongolian ethnic groups. Since its introduction to the [Tibetan Plateau](#), Buddhism in that area has absorbed the shamanistic features of the Indigenous Tibetan religion, [Bon](#).<sup>48</sup> Tibetan Buddhism started to spread to other parts of China, particularly the northern regions of Inner Mongolia and Beijing, after being [promoted by imperial rulers](#) first during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and later by the Qing dynasty (1636-1911).

In 1959, during the Chinese military’s suppression of Tibetan uprisings against Chinese communist rule, Tensin Gyatso – the 14th Dalai Lama and both a political and spiritual leader of the Tibetan people – [fled to India](#). Since the 1990s, [worshipping the Dalai Lama](#) or [displaying his image](#) in Tibetan areas has been effectively banned as the Chinese government considers him to be a [“separatist.”](#)<sup>49</sup>

In recent decades, Tibetan Buddhism has gained some influence [among the Han majority](#). Some research suggests that charismatic teachers of Tibetan Buddhism (e.g., reincarnated lamas) and Tibet’s pristine landscape are particularly appealing to Han Chinese in cities.<sup>50</sup> Tibetan Buddhist visual symbols, such as [thangkas](#), or scroll art, as well as ritual practices such as mantra chanting, have also generated interest in the religion.

Theravada Buddhism was introduced to China in areas bordering Myanmar, also called Burma, and Laos around the seventh century, though the religion did not gain a large following [until the 16th century](#). It is prevalent among [Dai people](#), who have blended in elements of traditional animist beliefs. Even today, reports indicate that [almost every Dai village has a sacred forest](#) where Dai people believe gods and ancestral spirits live. Theravada Buddhists have held on to some old traditions, such as [sending boys to be monks for a temporary period](#),

<sup>46</sup> The analysis includes only respondents who were interviewed in both the 2016 and 2018 CFPS waves, to explore the difference between those who claim a Buddhist identity (asked in 2016) and those who believe in (xiangxin) Buddha (asked in 2018).

<sup>47</sup> Ch’en, Kenneth K. S. 1972. “Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey.”

<sup>48</sup> [Tibetan areas in China consist of three regions](#): Central (or U-Tsang), Kham and Amdo. The Central area is largely today’s Tibet Autonomous Region, while the other two areas are now part of the Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan and Gansu provinces.

<sup>49</sup> Barnett, Robert. 2012. [“Restrictions and Their Anomalies: The Third Forum and the Regulation of Religion in Tibet.”](#) Journal of Current Chinese Affairs.

<sup>50</sup> Esler, Joshua Paul. 2013. [“Tibetan Buddhism and Han Chinese: Superscribing New Meaning on the Tibetan Tradition in Modern Greater China.”](#)

although this practice has come under scrutiny due to the intensifying restrictions on religious education for children.

During the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, Buddhism was among the primary targets of Communist Red Guards. Buddhist temples and statues were destroyed, and Buddhist monks were forced to return to lay lives.

## Geographic distribution of Buddhist temples

In China, Buddhist temples are known as *si* (寺) or *siyuan* (寺院). They often consist of several buildings, including a monument housing a sacred Buddhist relic as well as a monastery or housing for monks or nuns, and a prayer hall that is open to the public for worship.

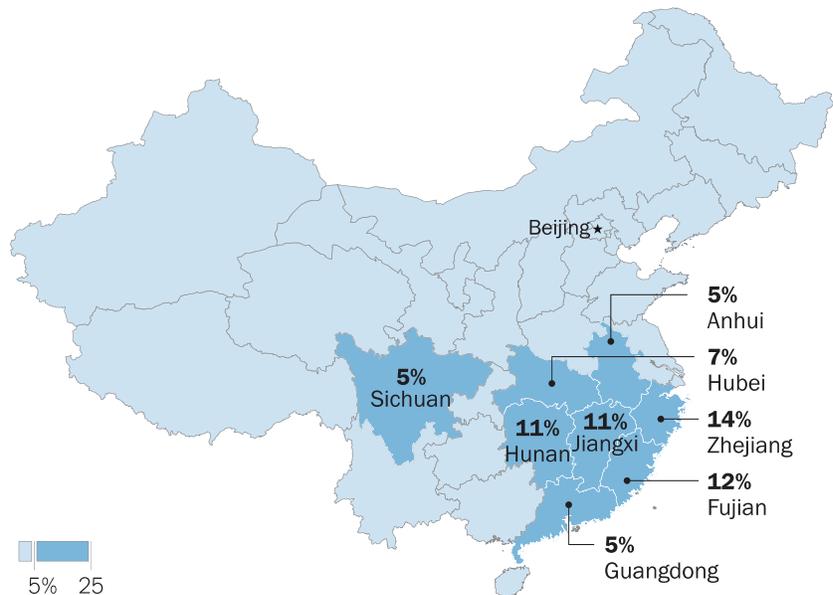
*Simiao* (寺庙), which is another term for Buddhist temples, can also refer to any temples or shrines that house Buddhist deities, along with various other traditional Chinese religious deities.

The [National Religious Affairs Administration](#) (NRAA), which measures officially registered Buddhist temples with a monastery, found that there are about 34,000 such venues in China.<sup>51</sup> Han Buddhist temples are most common (28,528), followed by Tibetan (3,857) and Theravada (1,705) temples.

However, these numbers do not include unregistered Buddhist temples. To be officially registered, religious venues in China must meet specific requirements, including having a steady income and

## Han Buddhist temples are found across China, with a heavy concentration in the South and East

*% of Han Buddhist temples in each province, among all Han Buddhist temples in China*



Note: Data is only available for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data accessed on the National Religious Affairs Administration of China website in July 2023. "Measuring Religion in China"

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<sup>51</sup> The information of Buddhist temples was accessed on the NRAA website in July 2023. The website does not state when the data were gathered.

qualified clergy. Some temple managers may have little incentive to register because local authorities often permit unregistered Buddhist temples to operate normally (even though they crack down on [unregistered churches](#).)<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, official statistics fail to count some folk temples (*miao* 庙) that also house Buddhist deities along with various other traditional Chinese religious deities.

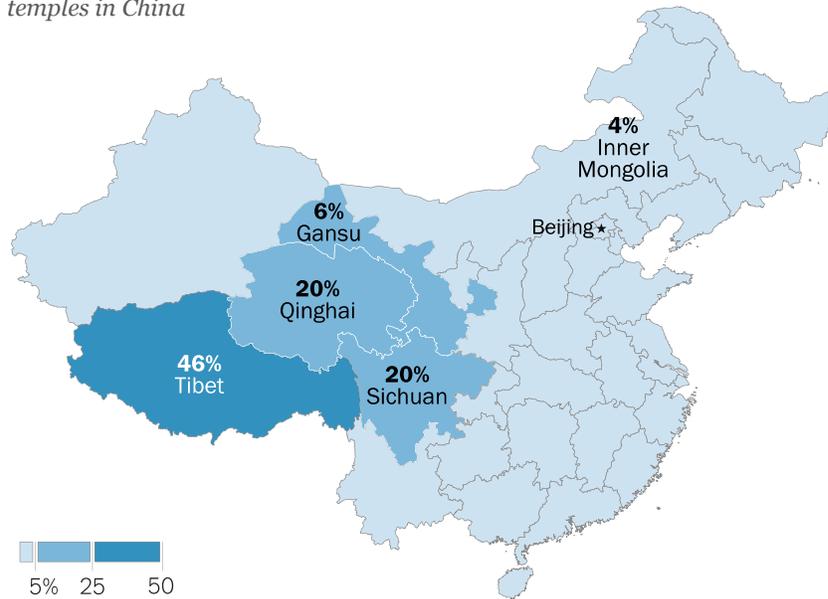
The 2014 China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS) of neighborhood committees – the smallest administrative unit in China – which asks neighborhood committee staff about the presence of Buddhist temples (*simiao*) in their jurisdiction, indicates that temples with some type of Buddhist connection are far more common than NRAA data indicates.

A Pew Research Center analysis of the 2014 CLDS suggests that there are at least 192,000 such temples (*simiao*) dedicated at least partially to Buddhist deities in China, more than five times the officially registered number of Buddhist temples. Officially registered temples usually have resident monks and nuns, which is not necessarily true for unregistered temples. (For more on other types of traditional Chinese worship sites, refer to the [“How many Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian and folk religion sites are there in China?”](#) sidebar.)

According to NRAA, Han Buddhist temples are widespread throughout the country, with a heavy concentration in the southeastern provinces of Zhejiang, Guangdong, Fujian, Hunan, Hubei and

## Most of China’s temples for Tibetan Buddhism are in the southwestern provinces

*% of Tibetan Buddhist temples in each province, among all Tibetan Buddhist temples in China*



Note: Data is available only for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data accessed on the National Religious Affairs Administration of China website in July 2023.

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<sup>52</sup> Chang, Kuei-min. 2016. [“Spiritual State, Material Temple: The Political Economy of Religious Revival in China.”](#) Also refer to Weller, Robert P. 2014. [“The Politics of Increasing Religious Diversity in China.”](#) Daedalus.

Jiangxi. This concentration is likely tied to higher rates of economic development in these areas, which may have helped accelerate temple construction and repairs after the Cultural Revolution.

Tibetan Buddhist temples are largely confined to the southwestern region known as the Tibetan Plateau, which encompasses the Tibet Autonomous Region established by the Chinese government in 1965, as well as portions of the neighboring provinces of Sichuan and Qinghai. (In this report, Tibet refers to the Tibet Autonomous Region.) Nearly 86% of China's Tibetan Buddhist temples are found in Tibet, Sichuan and Qinghai.

All Theravada Buddhist temples registered with the NRAA are found in the southwestern Yunnan province, particularly in areas heavily populated by Dai people, such as [Xishuangbanna prefecture](#).

## 4. Christianity

There is a range of estimates for the number of Christians in China, partly because different researchers use varying sources and methods, and partly because some analyses make adjustments to account for limitations in survey and government data.<sup>53</sup>

### Estimates of the number of Christians in China vary, depending on the measure used

% of adults in China who \_\_\_\_, based on the following questions

<b>Identify with Christianity (including Protestantism, Catholicism or other Christianity)</b>	<b>To which religion (zongjiao) do you belong (shuyu)?</b> 您属于什么宗教 Survey: 2016 CFPS	3%
	<b>Which religion (zongjiao) do you believe in (xinyang)?</b> 您信仰哪个宗教 Survey: 2018 WVS	2
	<b>What is your religious belief (zongjiao xinyang)?</b> 您的宗教信仰是什么 Survey: 2018 CGSS	2
<b>Practice Christianity</b>	<b>How often do you attend worship services (zuo libai)?</b> 您做礼拜的频率有多高 Response option shown: once a year or more Survey: 2016 CFPS	3*
<b>Believe in Christian God (Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu)</b>	<b>Do you believe in (xiangxin) Jesus Christ?</b> 您是否相信耶稣基督 <b>Do you believe in (xiangxin) Tianzhu?</b> 您是否相信天主 Survey: 2018 CFPS	7**

\* Since *zuo libai* refers to the type of ritual worship common to Christians and Muslims, this question is not posed to respondents who told interviewers that they identify with Buddhism or Taoism. The 3% shown here represents Chinese adults who identify with Christianity or non-religion and engage in *zuo libai* at least annually, as a share of all Chinese adults.

\*\* The share who report that they believe in Jesus Christ is 6%, and the share who say they believe in *Tianzhu* is 4%. The 7% figure reported above includes the 3% who said they believed in *both* and reflects the share who said yes to *either* question.

Note: Both *xinyang* and *xiangxin* can be translated as “believe/belief in” in English, but *xinyang* typically implies a formal commitment or serious conviction, while *xiangxin* does not always have a religious connotation. *Tianzhu* is the word for God used by Chinese Catholics. Source: Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), 2018; World Values Survey (WVS), 2018; China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), 2016 and 2018.

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<sup>53</sup> In this report, government data refers to statistics and estimates published by the Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party, state-controlled agencies and organizations directly supervised by the State Council of China.

One perspective is provided by responses to the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) question “What is your religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰)?” In 2018, the CGSS found that roughly 2% of Chinese adults, or about 20 million people, self-identify with Christianity in this way.<sup>54</sup> According to this survey, Protestants account for roughly 90% of Chinese Christians, or about 18 million adults, while the remainder are mostly Catholics. Smaller groups, which include [Orthodox Christians](#), are fewer than 1% of Christian adults in China.<sup>55</sup>

Other national surveys, which use slightly different question wording, report similar shares. In the 2018 World Values Survey, 2% of Chinese adults said they believe in (*xinyang* 信仰) Christianity, and in the 2016 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) survey, 3% said they belong to (*shuyu* 属于) Christianity.

Some media reports and academic papers have suggested the Christian share may be larger, with estimates as high as 7% ([100 million](#)) or 9% ([130 million](#)) of the total population, including children. No national surveys that measure formal Christian affiliation – by asking people which religion (*zongjiao*) they identify with – come close to these figures.

However, survey questions that measure Christian *beliefs and practices* provide evidence that the number of people with some connection to Christian faith is greater than *zongjiao* measures reveal.

For example, the cumulative share of Chinese adults who say they “believe in” (*xiangxin*) Jesus Christ and/or *Tianzhu* (天主, the word Chinese Catholics use for God) is 7%, or roughly 81 million adults, according to the 2018 CFPS survey.

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<sup>54</sup> The 2018 CGSS was conducted in 28 of mainland China’s 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The 2021 CGSS was conducted in 19 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. In the 2021 CGSS, about 1% of respondents identified with Christianity.

<sup>55</sup> In Chinese vernacular and in some surveys, the blanket term “Christianity” (*Jidujiao* 基督教) is often used to refer to Protestantism (*Jiduxinjiao* 基督新教), while Catholicism (*Tianzhujiao* 天主教) and other branches of Christianity are typically referred to by their specific names. In this report, Christianity is used inclusively to refer to Protestant, Catholic and other varieties of Christian faith.

## Chinese General Social Survey finds 2% of Chinese adults formally identify with Christianity

Question wording	Christianity	Protestantism	Catholicism	Other
<b>To which religion (zongjiao) do you belong (shuyu)?</b> 您属于什么宗教 Survey: 2016 CFPS	3%	2%	<0.5%	*
<b>Which religion (zongjiao) do you believe in (xinyang)?</b> 您信仰哪个宗教 Survey: 2018 WVS	2	2	<0.5	<0.5
<b>What is your religious belief (zongjiao xinyang)?</b> 您的宗教信仰是什么 Survey: 2018 CGSS	2	2	<0.5	<0.5

\* The only specific types of Christian identity measured in the 2016 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) are Protestantism and Catholicism. Note: Numbers may not add up due to rounding. The differences in the share of adults identifying with Christianity are not statistically significant across surveys. "Other" category comprises smaller Christian groups (e.g., Orthodox Christians). Source: Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), 2018; World Values Survey (WVS), 2018; CFPS, 2016. "Measuring Religion in China"

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Some scholars argue that this measure may be a better alternative than zongjiao xinyang, citing a core Christian teaching that one should never deny belief in God (including Jesus Christ or Tianzhu) regardless of the circumstances.<sup>56</sup>

But these figures encompass those who also believe in one or more non-Christian deities, such as Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, immortals (Taoist deities) or Allah. The share of Chinese adults who say they believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu and do not believe in these other deities is about 3%.

## Many Chinese adults who believe in Jesus Christ also believe in other religious figures

% of adults in China who believe in (xiangxin) ...

Multiple beliefs, including Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu	7%
Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu without believing in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, immortals or Allah	3
Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu without believing in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, immortals, Allah or ghosts	2
Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu without believing in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, immortals, Allah, ghosts or fengshui	2

Note: The word *xiangxin* means "believe in" but does not always have a religious connotation. The survey question asking about belief in (xiangxin) Jesus Christ is commonly understood as "Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior?" *Tianzhu* is the word for God used by Chinese Catholics. Immortals refers to Taoist deities. Source: China Family Panel Studies, 2018.

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<sup>56</sup> Lu, Yunfeng, Yue Wu, and Chundi Zhang. 2019. "How Many Protestants are There in China: An Estimate Based on China Family Panel Studies" (in Chinese). Open Times.

## Challenges of measuring Christianity in China

### Political sensitivity

Counting Christians in China is difficult for several reasons. Officially, only churches authorized by the government are allowed to operate. But, in reality, many Christians worship in unauthorized venues known as “underground churches” (*dixia jiaohui* 地下教会) or “house churches” (*jiating jiaohui* 家庭教会). These Christians may be reluctant to reveal their identity. Likewise, members of the Chinese Communist Party, who are prohibited from holding a religious affiliation, might not disclose their Christian affiliation.<sup>57</sup>

In recent years, the government has tightened control over Christian activities outside of registered venues, [banned unauthorized evangelization online](#), and [intensified its crackdown](#) on unauthorized Protestant meeting points and underground Catholic churches, making Christianity a very sensitive topic in China. In addition, President Xi Jinping has called for the “[Sinicization of religions](#),” a strategy that particularly affects non-traditional belief systems, including [Christianity](#) and [Islam](#).

(For more, read the Methodology section “[Exploring the underreporting of zongjiao affiliation in Chinese surveys](#)” and discussion of [Xi Jinping’s Sinicization campaign](#).)

### Self-identification versus belief and practice

Measuring Christianity in China is also difficult because, as discussed in other chapters, conventional measures of self-identification based on zongjiao do not fully capture the breadth of religious experience in China. And even though Christianity and Islam, unlike Buddhism or folk religions, emphasize exclusivity in belief and practice, many Chinese who engage in Christian practice or even consider themselves to be worshippers of Jesus Christ or Tianzhu may not necessarily identify with Christianity when asked about their zongjiao xinyang.

Looking cumulatively at the broadest, most inclusive survey measures of Christian affinity, as many as 8% of Chinese adults have some degree of connection to Christianity because they formally identify as Christian, believe in the Christian God or report a type of worship attendance common to Christians.

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<sup>57</sup> A [2011 study by researchers at Baylor University](#) found that Christians who attended house churches in China were more likely than others to refuse to participate in a survey. Among house church participants who agreed to be interviewed, roughly one-in-ten did not admit to being Christian in the survey. For more discussions on surveying Christians in China, read [the China methodology of our 2011 Global Christianity report](#).

In other words, a broad approach to measuring Christian affinity generates a considerably larger estimate of the number of people with some connection to Christianity than the much smaller share who say Christianity is their zongjiao.

### Sampling issues

Sampling coverage, which is tied to the geographic concentration of China's Christians, may affect the accuracy of Christian estimates. Roughly [a quarter of China's Catholics live in the northern province of Hebei](#), and they tend to cluster in rural "Catholic villages," where the vast majority of residents follow Catholicism.<sup>58</sup> As a result, Catholic survey estimates may vary depending on how many such villages are included in the sample. Similarly, it is consequential whether Protestants are proportionately represented. For example, surveys may yield a slightly lower Protestant estimate if Wenzhou – said to be the [most Christian city in China](#) – is excluded from the sample.

Some researchers argue that surveys that undersample ethnic minority groups may undercount Christians. However, the minority groups in question are relatively small in proportion to China's population, and Bible distribution figures suggest they make up a small fraction of all Chinese Christians.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Madsen, Richard. 2003. "[Catholic Revival during the Reform Era.](#)" *The China Quarterly*.

<sup>59</sup> Research suggests that due in part to [Protestant missionary activity](#) in the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou in the early 20th century, several ethnic minority groups, such as [Lisus and Miaos](#), are disproportionately Protestant Christians. As of 2016, the Amity Printing Company – the printing arm of the China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (CCC and TSPM) – had distributed [74 million Bible copies](#) in China, including [around 640,000](#) in ethnic minority languages.

## Recent change in Christian measures

Some [scholars](#) and [journalists](#) have argued in recent decades that [Christianity in China](#) is growing rapidly. Indeed, Christianity flourished after China entered an era of economic reforms and “opening up” to the world in the 1980s. But recent surveys that measure zongjiao affiliation do not offer much evidence that Christian growth continued after 2010.

According to the CGSS, about 2% of adults (23.2 million) in China self-identified as Christian in 2010, versus 2% (19.9 million) in the 2018 survey – a gap that is not statistically significant.<sup>60</sup> (In the 2021 CGSS, 1% of respondents identified as Christian. However, this wave did not cover as many regions as previous waves of the CGSS, so the results may not be directly comparable.<sup>61</sup>)

Since measures of Christian belief and practice have not been repeated consistently in surveys, we cannot track how beliefs and practices associated with Christianity have changed since 2010 in the Chinese public. We don’t know, for example, whether overall belief in Jesus Christ or attendance at Christian worship services (*zuo libai* 做礼拜) has risen, declined or remained stable.

One of the few repeated survey measures of religious commitment is the broad measure of zongjiao activity, which has been included in all recent CGSS waves. Among those who identify as Christian, reports of zongjiao activity levels are roughly stable. In 2010, 38% of Christians said they engaged in zongjiao activities at least once a week, while in 2018, 35% said so – a difference that is not statistically significant.

Unfortunately, we cannot be certain how survey patterns are affected by political circumstances. There could be a real increase in the share of Chinese adults who identify with Christianity that is

## Surveys do not provide clear evidence that Christianity in China is growing

*% of adults in China who formally identify with Christianity in each survey*



Note: These surveys all asked about *zongjiao* (religion) or *zongjiao xinyang* (religious belief), but question wording differed slightly. Read Appendix B for details on measures used in each survey. “Measuring Religion in China”

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<sup>60</sup> Estimates for self-identified Christians are calculated using unrounded numbers.

<sup>61</sup> The 2021 CGSS data was collected in fewer provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (19) than in previous waves (28-31) and therefore may not be directly comparable to earlier waves.

hidden from survey measurement. For example, it is possible there has been growth in Christian affiliation that is offset in surveys by growing reluctance among respondents to identify as Christian due to [the government's intensifying scrutiny of Christian religious activity](#). While that is a hypothetical possibility, there is no way to know from the available survey data whether it is actually the case.

It is also possible that the share of Christians who do not reveal their identity in surveys may have remained roughly stable since 2010. In that case, the apparent leveling off (“plateau”) in Christian identification in recent surveys could be an accurate reflection of the overall pattern, even if surveys fail to capture the full number of Chinese Christians.

## Traits associated with formal Christian affiliation

While survey questions that ask about formal zongjiao affiliation have limitations, they capture a subset of Christians who are more religious by several measures than those who say they believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu.

According to data from the 2016 and 2018 CFPS surveys, 68% of adults who self-identify as Christians believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu exclusively (i.e., without believing in other deities, including Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, immortals or Allah).<sup>62</sup>

By contrast, among all those who say they believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu, only 40% indicate they hold this belief exclusively.

Adults who formally identify with Christianity also are more likely to say religion (zongjiao) is very important in their lives than are those who say they believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu but do not necessarily formally identify with Christianity (61% vs. 29%), according to the CFPS. And they are more likely to say they attend worship services once a week or more (55% vs. 21%).

According to the 2018 CGSS, respondents who choose Christianity as their zongjiao xinyang are older and have lower educational attainment than the average Chinese adult. The majority (72%) are women.

### Stronger religious commitment is more closely linked to formal Christian identity than to Christian belief

Among adults in China who \_\_\_\_, % of those who ...

	... Consider religion very important	... Attend worship services once a week or more
Identify with Christianity	61%	55%
Believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu	29	21

Note: "Identify with Christianity" includes respondents who chose Protestantism or Catholicism as the *zongjiao* (religion) they belong to. In this question, belief is translated as *xiangxin*, which does not always have a religious connotation. Although most respondents who identify as Christian also believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu (79%), many who believe in Jesus Christ and/or Tianzhu do not formally identify as Christian (73%).

Source: China Family Panel Studies, 2016 and 2018.

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### Chinese who formally identify with Christianity tend to be female, older and have lower levels of education

% of adults in China in each group

	Women	Ages 55+	Some high school education or more
Among self-identified Christians	72%	46%	20%
Among all Chinese adults	49	29	34

Note: "Self-identified Christians" includes respondents who chose Protestantism, Catholicism or "Other Christianity" as their religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*).

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2018.

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<sup>62</sup> This analysis is based on data collected among the same adult respondents (about 28,000) in the 2016 and 2018 waves of the CFPS to obtain information on each respondent's religious identity, practice and belief. This is because the 2016 survey asks about religious identity and practice, while the 2018 survey asks only about religious belief. For more about the CFPS, read [the Methodology](#).

## Christian houses of worship

### Protestant churches and meeting points

There are two types of officially sanctioned Protestant places of worship in China: churches (*jiaotang* 教堂) and meeting points (*juhuidian* 聚会点). A meeting point is not different from a church functionally, but it may not look like a church building; it can be an apartment or office space and usually holds fewer congregants.

For instance, [Haidian Church](#) in Beijing hosts an average of roughly 7,000 people for worship services, while [its affiliated meeting points](#) each hold between 150 and 500 people.

In 2009, Protestant venues totaled 55,000 (including roughly 24,000 registered churches and 31,000 meeting points), according to the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Since then, China's Protestant supervisory agencies have not broken out churches and meeting points separately.<sup>63</sup> According to China's State Council Information Office, there were roughly 60,000 legal Protestant venues in 2018, largely unchanged from a total of [58,000](#) venues in 2009.<sup>64</sup> These do not include Protestant house churches or unauthorized meeting points.

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<sup>63</sup> The Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Committee, together with the China Christian Council (CCC), manage Protestant religious affairs. These two organizations are often abbreviated as the "Two Committees" (*lianghui* 两会) and referred to as "CCC and TSPM."

<sup>64</sup> Chinese government agencies customarily report figures rounded to 10,000 (*wan* 万). It is unclear why the CCC and the TSPM reported a total of about 55,000 venues in 2009 (24,000 churches, plus 31,000 meeting points) while the SCIO says there were about 58,000.

Not all registered meeting points are included in the official statistics of formally registered Protestant venues, a discrepancy that might be explained, at least in part, by the ambiguous meaning of the Chinese words for “register” (*dengji* 登记 or *zhuce* 注册). These words can mean either “granted formal registration” or “put on local government record.” The latter may not appear in official statistics.

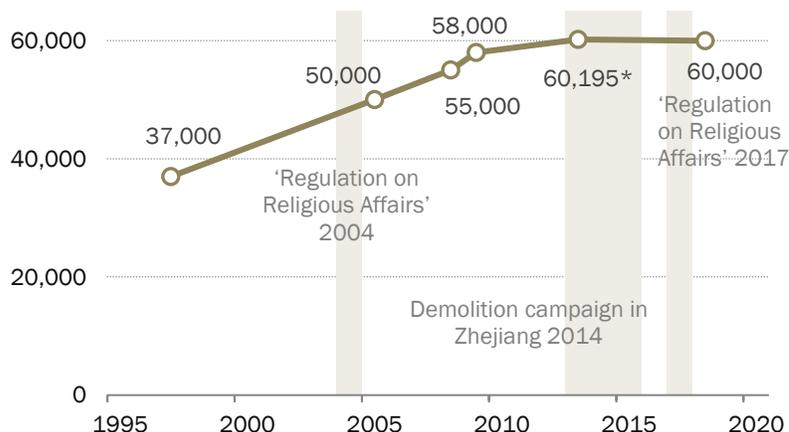
For instance, [Haidian Church](#) in Beijing has more than [50 authorized meeting points](#), but the CCC and TSPM [consider none of the affiliated meeting points a registered venue](#), even though some of them [function much like independent churches](#), hosting their own worship services and baptisms.

The number of registered Protestant venues, which increased substantially between 1997 and 2008, has roughly leveled off since then.

After 2013, some Protestant churches in Zhejiang – the province with China’s highest concentration of officially registered Christian venues – were affected by the [“Three Rectifications and One Demolition”](#) campaign which led to the

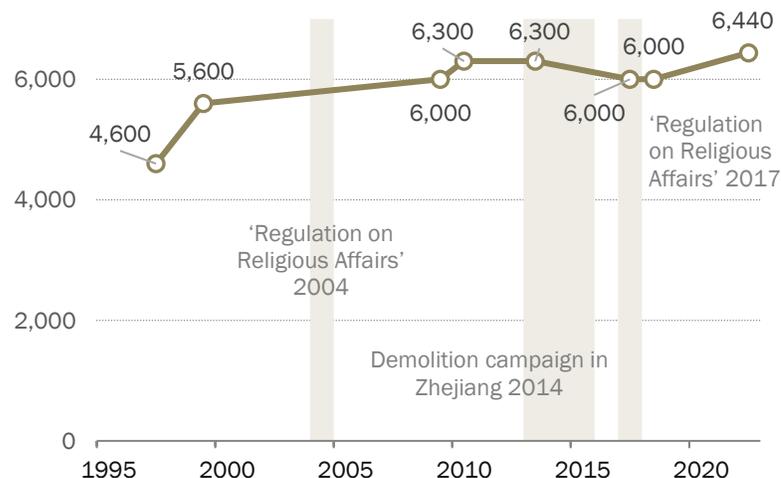
## China’s crackdown on Christian venues appears to have halted the rise in Protestant churches ...

Number of officially registered Protestant venues in China



## ... and slowed Catholic church registrations

Number of officially registered Catholic venues in China



\* 60,195 figure is calculated using the 2008 estimate (55,000) and the number of newly registered venues between 2008 and 2013 (5,195).

Note: Official venues refer to churches and meeting points that are registered with the government. Places of worship that are not officially registered are excluded from the official statistics. Official figures in China are customarily rounded to 10,000 (*wan* 万).

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of statistics published by the Chinese government or agencies directly controlled/supervised by the state. Documents include State Council White Paper on Religious Freedom, 1997 and 2018; Blue Book on Religion, 2010.

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demolition of some [officially sanctioned churches that violated zoning regulations](#). News reports indicate that officially registered churches later also were demolished in other provinces, including [Anhui](#), [Fujian](#), [Henan](#) and [Shanxi](#).

Since 2017, following an update of the [“Regulation on Religious Affairs,”](#) authorities have been more strictly implementing policies on unauthorized religious activity. Their strategy has included putting more pressure on venues to affiliate with the TSPM and submit to government oversight, while [cracking down](#) on those that resist.

The government’s plan for unauthorized Protestant meeting points has not necessarily led to an increase in official venues, due in part to the ambiguous meaning of “register.” For example, in [Tianjin](#), less than 10% of the total 643 authorized TSPM Protestant meetings have been granted a certificate of registration as of 2019. Similarly, [Hohhot](#), the capital city of Inner Mongolia, has 480 authorized Protestant meeting points, but only 67 of them have been formally registered.

In addition, [some scholars believe](#) that local officials in China tend to underreport evidence of religious activity in order to appear compliant with the state’s goal to contain religion. For example, in the Fengxian district of Shanghai, local officials continued to refer to [just 24 registered Christian worship sites in 2019](#), even though in 2018, they reported [having accepted 73 \(out of 86\) unauthorized Christian sites](#) into the official system.

For similar reasons, the trend in the number of registered Protestant clergy seems to conflict with recent government policy [pushing for registration](#). Between 2009 and 2018, the number of official Protestant clergy (pastors, ministers and ordained elders) declined slightly from around [37,000](#) to [36,000](#). This trend also appears to conflict with the CCC and TSPM’s emphasis on training Protestant clergy for the official system; [around 6,300 students](#) graduated from theological seminaries between 2013 and 2018.

### **Catholic churches and relations with the Vatican**

Government statistics on the numbers of officially registered Catholic venues and personnel – which include only those affiliated with the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) – point in slightly different directions.

On the one hand, the number of official Catholic personnel (bishops, priests and nuns) declined from 8,800 in 2009 to 8,000 in 2018. On the other hand, according to official statistics, the number of Catholic venues has grown slightly. In 2022, [there were 6,440 officially registered venues](#) (including 4,202 churches and 2,238 sites of worship), [up from 6,000 in 2009](#). (Estimates of churches and worship sites for other years are unavailable.)

Like Protestantism, there are two branches of the Catholic Church in China: the official church and underground churches (*dixia jiaohui* 地下教会). The former refers to churches that have joined the CPA, which is controlled by the [National Religious Affairs Administration](#), formerly known as the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

The Chinese government has always been wary of underground Catholic churches. Local [authorities usually closely monitor covert Catholic activities](#) and [pressure priests and bishops](#) to join the CPA as part of an ongoing program to [“educate and convert underground Catholic forces.”](#)

This division dates back to the 1950s purge of foreign influence, when the government expelled missionaries and urged Catholic churches to cut ties with the Vatican. Many Catholic laity and clergy who remained loyal to the Vatican carried their faith in secret. During that period, the government recruited several Vatican-ordained bishops to form the CPA and appoint bishops based on the principle of “self-election and self-ordination” (*zixuanzisheng* 自选自圣) independently of the Vatican.

Underground churches are made up of clergy and laity who reject China’s authority to select bishops and insist on loyalty to the Vatican, while CPA churches pledge loyalty to the Chinese government and espouse the principle of *zixuanzisheng*.<sup>65</sup> As of 2018, there were seven CPA bishops whom the Vatican had not approved, and an estimated [30 to 40 underground bishops](#) whom the Chinese government did not recognize.<sup>66</sup>

In 2018, China’s relationship with the Vatican was recalibrated when the [Vatican signed an agreement](#) allowing the Chinese government to appoint bishops while giving the pope veto power. Since then, [Pope Francis has recognized seven previously excommunicated](#) “self-elected and self-ordained” Chinese bishops, while China has appointed [eight underground bishops](#) as CPA clergy, bringing the [total number of bishops to 66 as of 2022](#).

Since signing the deal with the Vatican, the government has stepped up efforts to [bring Catholic churches into the CPA](#) and [intensified its pressure](#) on those that refuse to join.

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<sup>65</sup> Madsen, Richard. 2003. [“Catholic Revival during the Reform Era.”](#) The China Quarterly.

<sup>66</sup> While bishops ordained by the Chinese government were not approved by the Vatican, many of these bishops did [seek papal approval](#), and as of 2018, only seven such bishops were ordained without a pontifical mandate and were excommunicated by the Vatican.

## Geographic distribution of churches

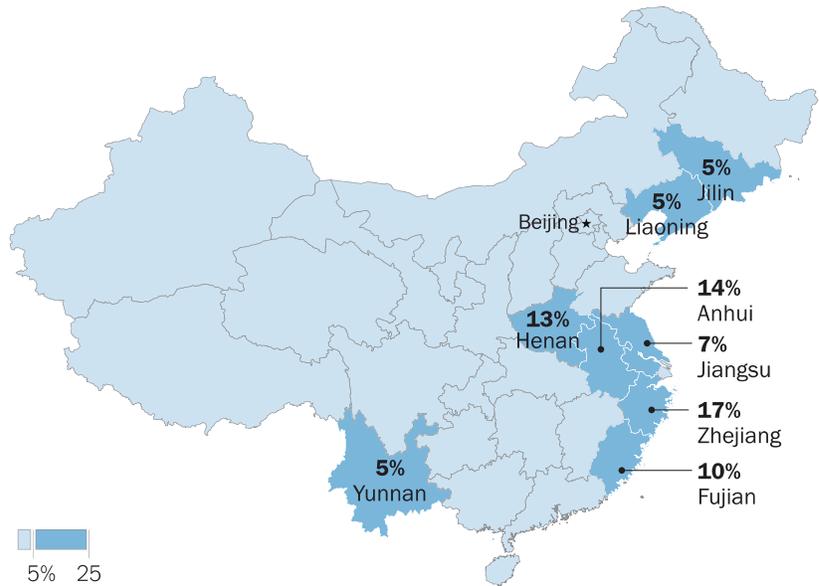
The most recent data on the distribution of Christian worship venues in China is from the 2004 National Economic Census, which shows that Protestant and Catholic churches were concentrated in coastal areas, reflecting the arrival of Christian missionaries by sea.<sup>67</sup>

(Even though the number of officially registered Protestant and Catholic churches has almost quadrupled since the 2004 enumeration, the data still offers a valuable snapshot of geographic patterns.<sup>68</sup>)

In 2004, Protestant churches were most numerous in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang (with a 17% share of all Protestant churches in China), followed by the central province of Henan (13%). Zhejiang is home to Wenzhou city, often called [“China’s Jerusalem.”](#) while Henan is known as [“the Galilee of China.”](#) These distribution patterns may have changed because in 2013 several provincial governments started increasing [demolitions of “illegally constructed” churches](#) to [curb Christianity’s public presence](#). [Zhejiang](#) was particularly affected.

### Protestant churches in China were concentrated in coastal areas, as of 2004

*% of Protestant worship sites in each province, among all such sites in China*



Note: Only provinces with 5% or more of China’s Protestant churches are labeled. Data is only available for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the 2004 China Economic Census, accessed through the Center on Religion and the Global East at Purdue University. “Measuring Religion in China”

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<sup>67</sup> China’s economic census considers officially registered religious sites to be economic entities and provides data on their geographic distribution. The 2004 data in this analysis was accessed through the [Online Spiritual Atlas of China](#), provided by Purdue University’s Center on Religion and the Global East. This dataset allows researchers to examine the geographic distribution of officially registered religious sites in China for the first time. Refer to Yang, Fenggang. 2018. [“Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts.”](#)

<sup>68</sup> While the census is conducted every five years, religion data in more recent waves has not been made available.

Catholic churches were most numerous in the northern province of Hebei (13%), home to about [a quarter of China's Catholics](#), followed by the coastal regions of Fujian (12%) and Zhejiang (12%).

### In 2004, China's Catholic churches were most numerous in Hebei, where many Catholics live

*% of Catholic religious sites in each province, among all such sites in China*



Note: Only provinces with 5% or more of China's Catholic churches are labeled. Data is only available for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the 2004 China Economic Census, accessed through the Center on Religion and the Global East at Purdue University. "Measuring Religion in China"

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## Accordion box: History of Christianity in China

Christianity was introduced to China during the Tang dynasty in the seventh century, probably by [Syriac missionaries of Nestorian Christianity](#) who traveled the Silk Road. The religion did not gain a wide foothold until Jesuit missionaries arrived in the 16th century.<sup>69</sup>

The Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci is the most widely known foreign evangelist in China from that time. His strategy of cultural accommodation, such as [tolerating the veneration of Confucius and ancestors](#), helped facilitate conversion among Chinese people. Catholicism continued to expand gradually in China during the 16th century.

China's relationship with Catholicism subsequently deteriorated. In 1721, the Qing emperor Kangxi, driven by conflicts with papal leadership over the acceptance of traditional Chinese rituals among Catholic converts, forbade the preaching of Catholicism. His successor Yongzheng enforced the ban, and [in 1724 condemned Catholicism as heterodox](#). The emperor also ordered the deportation of most Catholic missionaries.

Protestant Christianity was largely absent from China until the 19th century, but it grew quickly after treaties between Western powers and Chinese governments following the [First and Second Opium Wars](#) forced the lifting of restrictions on foreign access – including missionary activity – in certain Chinese coastal areas. This colonial expansion coincided with an evangelical revival in Britain and the United States, leading to a surge in missionary activity in many countries around the world. In China, Protestantism expanded rapidly in the 19th and early 20th centuries in urban areas, as Anglicans, Methodists and other Protestants established schools and hospitals.

The tide for Christianity turned briefly in the early 1920s, when a growing [anti-imperialist movement](#) pushed back against Christian expansion. Christianity was labeled an agent of imperialism, and many missionaries were forced to leave.<sup>70</sup> During the decade under Chiang Kai-shek's [Nationalist rule](#) (1928-1937), Chinese Christians and foreign missionaries experienced a friendly political environment. Several home-grown Christian movements, such as the True Jesus Church and the Little Flock, were allowed to expand. These Christian denominations continued to attract converts during the period of intense turmoil caused by Japan's invasion of China (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949). By 1949, among the total of 540 million people in China, there were about 700,000 Protestants and 2.7 million Catholics, according to [Chinese government estimates](#).

In the 1950s, following the Communist revolution and the establishment of an officially atheist state, oversight of religious activities became much tighter and more organized. The Chinese government launched the Three-Self Patriotic Movement to reduce outside influence on Christians. Focused on promoting “self-government, self-support and self-propagation” of churches, the program urged Chinese Christian individuals and organizations to cut ties with foreign entities, including the Vatican.<sup>71</sup> As part of this movement, the government established “patriotic organizations” to manage and monitor each religious group, including separate agencies to oversee Catholic and Protestant affairs.<sup>72</sup> By the late 1950s, virtually all foreign Christian missionaries had been expelled.

During the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, religious activity was banned. Communist Red Guards

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<sup>69</sup> For detailed discussion on the history of Christianity in China, read Bays, Daniel H. 2011. “A New History of Christianity in China.”

<sup>70</sup> Bays, Daniel H. 2011. “A New History of Christianity in China.”

<sup>71</sup> Madsen, Richard. 2003. “[Catholic Revival during the Reform Era](#).” *The China Quarterly*.

<sup>72</sup> The government established the Catholic Patriotic Association in 1957 to oversee all Catholic activities. The Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Committee, together with the China Christian Council (CCC), manage Protestant religious affairs. These two organizations are often abbreviated as the “Two Committees” (*lianghui* 两会) and referred to as “CCC and TSPM.”

persecuted many Christians, especially clergy, and destroyed church buildings. Christianity revived in the 1980s after China lifted the ban on religious activities and opened up to the world. There is little exact data on religious affiliation during that time, but official statistics suggest that the number of Protestants who worship in registered churches more than tripled between 1982 and 1997, from 3 million to 10 million, while China's total population increased by about 22%.

## Sidebar: How the number of Protestants, Catholics in China has changed

Over the past decade, some Western scholars and journalists have claimed that [Protestant Christianity is booming in China](#). Some data from the Chinese government and Christian organizations seem to support these claims. However, a closer examination raises questions.

### Government estimates

The Chinese government, which has been publishing statistics on Christians sporadically since 1949, [estimates that the number of Protestants may have grown](#) from 700,000 in 1949 to 38 million in 2018. However, the 1949 and 2018 numbers do not seem to be directly comparable, because the Chinese government has changed its sourcing and methodology without making appropriate adjustments, and it does not always state whether children are included.<sup>73</sup>

It also is unclear to what extent the jump from 2008 (20 million) to 2016 (28 million) is driven by new converts or by recategorizing Christians who previously worshipped in unregistered churches. Since 2008, the CCC and TSPM have been carrying out a program of “connecting unauthorized meeting points with an official church” (*yitangdaidian* 以堂帶点) as a new way of regulating unauthorized churches. Under this program, unauthorized meeting points whose leaders agree to affiliate with an official church gain legal status, as they are now considered a branch of a registered church. In other words, an official church could see its membership grow not only through conversion but also by taking in previously unauthorized meeting points.<sup>74</sup>

Below is a table summarizing all the official estimates of China’s Protestant population that Pew Research Center has found, along with corresponding notes about their origin and what they include.

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<sup>73</sup> For instance, some government statistics exclude Protestants worshipping in unregistered churches because the China Christian Council (CCC) and Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) [denied the existence of underground churches](#).

<sup>74</sup> There is evidence suggesting the growth of the number of Protestants in the CCC and TSPM is largely due to inclusion of previously unauthorized meeting points. In 2011, TSPM president Elder Fu Xianwei claimed that the number of Protestants worshipping in the official system increased to [25 million from 23 million in 2010](#). The increase of 2 million within one year significantly outpaced that of annual baptisms into the official system; a total of [2.4 million baptisms](#) in the official church were recorded between 2007 and 2012.

## Historical estimates, whose reliability and comparability varies, show an increasing number of Chinese Protestants ...

*Chinese official estimates of Protestants in China\**

Year	Protestants (millions)	% of Chinese population	Unregistered churches included?	Data sourcing	Total Chinese population (millions)
1949	0.7	-	Not applicable	1982 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Document 19	542
1982	3	-	Unknown	1982 CCP Document 19	1,013
1997	10	-	No	1997 State Council of the People's Republic of China White Paper on Religious Freedom	1,238
2005	16	-	No	China Christian Council (CCC) President Rev. Cao Shengjie in an interview with the privately-owned Oriental Outlook Magazine	1,305
2008	20	-	No	Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) President Elder Fu Xianwei in a speech to Hong Kong churches	1,330
2010	23	2%	Yes	2010 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) Blue Book on Religion, based on 2009 Christian Household Survey	1,348
2011	25	-	No	TSPM President Elder Fu Xianwei in a speech during an official visit to Taiwan	1,357
2011	23-40	2%-3%	Yes	2011 CASS Blue Book on Religion	1,357
2014	23-40	2%-3%	Yes	State-owned People's Daily article on ceremony celebrating TSPM's 60th anniversary	1,385
2016	28	-	No	TSPM President Elder Fu Xianwei in an interview in the iFeng newspaper	1,402
2018	38	-	Yes	2018 State Council of the People's Republic of China White Paper on Religious Freedom	1,417

## ... but surveys find no clear evidence of a recent rise in self-identified Protestants

*Chinese General Social Survey estimates of Protestant Christian adults in China*

Year	Protestants (millions)	% of Chinese adult population
2010	21	2
2012	25	2
2013	20	2
2015	23	2
2017	16	1
2018	18	2

\* It is unclear whether these government estimates are for Christians of all ages or solely adults. Only 2010 and 2011 estimates for Protestants are known to include children. Percentages in the “%” column are rounded based on those published in the original source. Source: Chinese General Social Survey. Chinese population data from the UN Population Division's World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision, and from the China Statistical Yearbook (1949 population estimate). “Measuring Religion in China”

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## Claims by advocacy groups

International nonprofit organizations and advocacy groups also have published data claiming that Protestants in China have increased sharply. For example, the U.S.-based interdenominational Christian ministry Asia Harvest estimates there were [109.7 million Protestant Christians](#) of all ages in China in 2020 (8% of the country's total population), up from an estimated [86.9 million](#) (6% of the population) in 2010.<sup>75</sup> Asia Harvest's assessment is based on a secondary analysis of published sources (including government estimates) and interviews with leaders of unregistered churches who granted its research team access to their membership statistics. Asia Harvest may have overcounted Protestants in the official system. Its 2020 estimate of 39.8 million TSPM Protestants is larger than both the 2016 government estimate of Protestants in registered churches (28 million) and the 2018 government estimate of Protestants in registered and unregistered churches (38 million).

Meanwhile, qualitative research points in various directions. On the one hand, [CCC and TSPM leaders](#) and senior clergy tend to agree that many rural churches are [losing members and revenue](#) because young people are leaving for city jobs.<sup>76</sup> (In 2022, China had 296 million such migrant workers, according to [China's National Bureau of Statistics](#).) On the other hand, many urban churches seem to be thriving, with official churches reportedly becoming crowded and house churches expanding their worship sites to accommodate an inflow of rural Christians.<sup>77</sup> In particular, some scholars consider the rise of "newly emerging urban churches" – whose members are often young and highly educated professionals and sometimes [returnees from study abroad](#) – an important indicator of Chinese people's increased interest in Protestantism.<sup>78</sup>

That said, church membership is not a reliable indicator. For one thing, membership rosters may double-count migrants who have been enumerated both by their rural "home" church and their "receiving" church in the city. Church rosters may also fail to account for members leaving Christianity. An analysis of Christian identification over time using China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) data suggests significant flows both into and out of Christianity.

Among adults who identified with Christianity (3%) in the 2016 CFPS, about a third had *not* claimed Christianity as their religion when they were previously interviewed in 2012, suggesting that roughly 1% of Chinese adults converted to Christianity between the two survey years.

Meanwhile, among adults who identified with Christianity (2%) in the 2012 CFPS, about a quarter no longer did when asked again about their religion in the 2016 survey. And roughly one-in-five of the adults who self-identified as Christian in 2012 claimed no belief in either Jesus Christ or Tianzhu when reinterviewed in 2018. In other words, while many Chinese people [convert to Christianity](#), some Chinese Christians apparently also leave the faith.

<sup>75</sup> Among the total 110 million Protestant Christians, about 40 million belong to the state-approved church and 70 million are independents, some of whom may be considered heterodox, [according to Asia Harvest](#).

<sup>76</sup> Research finds that rural churches often have three times as many attendants during the Spring Festival, when migrant workers go home to see their families. Read Qi, Gubo, Zhenhua Liang, and Xiaoyun Li. 2014. "[Christian Conversion and the Re-Imagining of Illness and Healthcare in Rural China](#)." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*. Also refer to Yang, Yi. 2018. "[Rise and decline of rural church in China](#)."

<sup>77</sup> For example, read Koeseel, Karrie J. 2013. "[The Rise of a Chinese House Church: The Organizational Weapon](#)." *The China Quarterly*. Also refer to Sanchez, Jamie. 2022. "[Rural-to-Urban Migrants: Possibilities for New Churches in China's Cities](#)." *Missiology*.

<sup>78</sup> Vala, Carsten T. 2017. "The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?" Also refer to Huang, Jianbo. 2014. "[Being Christians in Urbanizing China: The Epistemological Tensions of the Rural Churches in the City](#)." *Current Anthropology*.

### **Are Catholics declining as a share of China's population?**

While there are conflicting signals about the trajectory of China's Protestant population, all available sources suggest that China's Catholic population is not growing. It is unclear whether the trends are influenced by a possible reluctance among Catholics to identify themselves or engage in church activities, given the impasse between China's government and the Vatican in the years before a seminal rapprochement in 2018.

According to government figures, the number of people associated with the state-approved Catholic Church held steady at roughly 6 million (less than 0.5% of China's population), between 2010 and 2018.

Baptism statistics from the church-run Faith Press (*Xinde She* 信德社) indicate that the numbers of people entering Catholicism may be declining. From the early 2000s to 2010, state-approved churches baptized [approximately 100,000](#) people each year (mostly adults, as children under 18 are not allowed to convert to any religion). By [2017](#) and [2018](#), the annual number of Catholic baptisms had fallen by half, to about 48,000.

Data on mainland China that includes "underground" Catholics, gathered by the Holy Spirit Study Centre (HSSC) in Hong Kong, also indicates a decline. According to their analysis, the number of Catholics in China peaked at 12 million in [2005](#) and slipped to 10 million by [2020](#). Consistently, the estimated number of ordinations, religious vocations, seminarians and sisters in both official and underground Catholic churches also fell [during this period](#).

In addition, Asia Harvest's study, which typically produces higher Christian estimates than other sources do, suggests little growth of Catholicism in China. According to Asia Harvest, the number of Catholics remained steady at about 20 million between [2010](#) and [2020](#). This includes about 8.3 million people affiliated with the official Catholic Patriotic Association and 11.7 million Catholics outside officially recognized churches.

## Official estimates suggest China's Catholic population has been stable since 2010 ...

*Chinese official estimates of Catholics in China\**

Year	Catholics (millions)	"Underground" churches included?	Data sourcing	Total Chinese population (millions)
1949	2.7	Not applicable	1982 Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Document 19	542
1982	3	Unknown	1982 CCP Document 19	1,013
1997	4	No	1997 State Council of the People's Republic of China White Paper on Religious Freedom	1,238
1999	5	No	Letter from the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China to Chinese Catholics	1,255
2008	5.6	No	Bishop Liu Bainian, cited in an article published in "Catholic Church in China," a journal run by the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA)	1,330
2010	5.7	No	2010 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Blue Book on Religion (based on statistics from the Faith Institute for Cultural Studies, a church-run organization based in Hebei province)	1,348
2011	6	No	President of the CPA in China, Bishop Fang Xingyao, cited in article in the state-owned China Daily	1,357
2014	6	No	Bishop Ma Yinglin, vice president of the CPA, in a speech during the Ninth Congress of Catholic Representatives in China	1,402
2018	6	No	2018 State Council of the People's Republic of China White Paper on Religious Freedom	1,417

## ... and surveys find no growth among self-identified Catholics

*Chinese General Social Survey estimates of Catholic Christian adults in China*

Year	Catholics (millions)	% of Chinese adult population
2010	3	<0.5
2012	2	0.5
2013	3	0.5
2015	2	0.5
2017	2	0.5
2018	2	0.5

\* It is unclear whether these government estimates are for Catholics of all ages or solely adults. The sources cited did not provide percentages of the Catholic share of the population.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey. Chinese population data from the UN Population Division's World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision, and from the China Statistical Yearbook (1949 population estimate).  
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## 5. Islam

The vast majority of Chinese Muslim adults come from 10 ethnic minority groups that traditionally practice Islam, the two largest being the [Hui](#) people and the [Uyghur](#) people. Most of China's Muslims live in the country's northwestern region, particularly in the areas of Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang.

Because there is heavy overlap between religion and ethnicity among these minority groups, there is less uncertainty about the size of China's Muslim population than there is about some of its other religious groups, such as Buddhists and Christians.

Chinese authorities and international scholars generally estimate there are 18 million Muslim adults in China. Pew Research Center's estimate is in the same ballpark but slightly lower, at about 17 million, for reasons discussed below.

Notwithstanding the relative consensus around Muslim population numbers, studying Islam in China comes with many challenges. To begin with, the Chinese government has been accused by international organizations of [human rights abuses](#) and [genocide](#) against Uyghurs and other Muslims. [Some Chinese Muslim scholars](#) have reportedly been detained, while some foreigners who study Islam in China have been [barred from traveling to the country](#).

In this climate, Chinese Muslims may hesitate to discuss their religious identity, beliefs or practices with survey researchers, and some may have moved away (or been pushed away) from their traditional religion. Compounding the uncertainty, the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), a key source of data, has not been conducted in Xinjiang – home to nearly all Uyghurs in China – since 2013.

(Read more discussion of the [challenges of studying Muslims in China](#) and [a summary of media coverage on Xinjiang](#).)

### Roughly 9 in 10 Chinese Muslims are either Hui or Uyghur

*Government-designated ethnic groups that traditionally practice Islam*

	Number of adults	% of all Muslim ethnic groups	% of all Chinese adults
Hui	8,291,749	46%	0.75%
Uyghur	7,717,361	43	0.69
Kazakh	1,094,518	6	0.10
Dongxiang	466,976	3	0.04
Kirgiz	140,601	1	0.01
Salar	101,781	1	0.01
Tajik	35,771	<0.5	<0.01
Baoan	14,703	<0.5	<0.01
Uzbek	8,766	<0.5	<0.01
Tatar	2,646	<0.5	<0.01
All Muslim ethnic groups	17,874,872	100	1.61

Note: "All Muslim ethnic groups" account for 1.61% of China's adult population. In surveys, a small share of people in these ethnic groups do not identify as Muslim and a small share of Han Chinese do identify as Muslim.

Source: Census of China, 2020. "Measuring Religion in China"

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### **Accordion box: History of Islam in China**

Islam was brought to China in the [seventh century](#) by Arab and Persian merchants who settled in port cities on China's southeastern coast. But it wasn't until the Mongol conquest in the 13th century, and the subsequent arrival of more permanent settlers from Central Asia, that Islam began to spread inland.

These Muslim minorities eventually became known, collectively, as the [Hui people](#). The Hui came to include Muslims of Arab and Persian origin as well as [Tibetans](#) and [Han Chinese](#) who converted to Islam and even some non-Muslims, such as [Chinese Jews](#), known as "Blue-hat Huis."<sup>79</sup> As the Chinese empire grew, it gained new ethnic minorities from adjacent regions who had converted to Islam in prior centuries. The largest of these is today's Uyghur people, who originated as Turkic nomads in the Central Asian Altai mountains, in the northern tip of modern-day Xinjiang bordering Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia.

Since the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949, authorities have variously encouraged, tolerated and suppressed self-rule and cultural expression among Uyghurs, Huis and other ethnic minorities. Beginning in the 1950s, the Chinese government created "ethnic autonomous regions" (such as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) to make it easier for ethnic minorities to preserve their traditions. But during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), religious activities were prohibited for all Chinese, regardless of ethnic background.

In recent years, Muslims in Xinjiang – including Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities, such as Kazakhs and Uzbeks – have been harshly persecuted. The [U.S. government has called the treatment of Uyghur Muslims a genocide](#), an accusation the [Chinese government has repeatedly rejected](#).

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<sup>79</sup> Historically, "Hui" was a label for members of any ethnic groups who practiced Islam and was also used to describe people who practiced Judaism. In 1954, the Chinese government officially recognized Hui as an ethnic identity. Under this official classification, some groups that used to be labeled as Hui no longer assume that ethnicity. For example, "Blue-hat Huis" (i.e., Chinese Jews) now do not fall into any official ethnic category, and Tibetan Huis are recognized as Tibetan instead of Hui. Read Atwill, David G. 2014. ["A Tibetan by Any Other Name: The Case of Muslim Tibetans and Ambiguous Ethno-Religious Identities."](#) Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie. Also refer to Gladney, Dru C. 1991. "Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic."

## How many Muslims are there in China?

Pew Research Center’s estimate of the number of Chinese Muslims differs from those typically cited by the Chinese government.

China’s 10 traditionally Muslim ethnic groups are among 56 ethnicities measured in the Chinese census. Official estimates of the size of China’s Muslim population – including those generated by the [Islamic Association of China](#), the government agency that oversees Islamic affairs – typically add up the total populations of the traditionally Muslim ethnic groups, assuming that every member of those 10 groups, without exception, is Muslim, and that there are absolutely no Muslims among the Han majority.

By this method of estimation, there were roughly 18 million Muslim adults in China in 2020, accounting for 1.6% of China’s adult population. The two largest of the sub-groups were Hui (8.3 million adults), followed by Uyghurs (7.7 million adults).<sup>80</sup>

However, there are limitations to using ethnicity as a proxy for Muslim identity.

First, this approach assumes that all members of predominantly Muslim ethnic groups identify as Muslim, which surveys indicate is not the case. For example, 7% of Hui adults do *not* identify as Muslim, according to data from the 2017 and 2018 CGSS. Likewise, older survey data indicates that about 6% of Uyghurs did not identify as Muslim, as of about 2012.<sup>81</sup> (Since then, there has been no survey with a sufficient sample size to analyze Muslim identification among Uyghurs.)

Second, the conventional estimation approach fails to account for Muslim converts of other ethnicities, especially those from the Han majority. Although Han Muslims are rare – only about one in every 1,500 Han adults say their religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰) is Islam, according to surveys – they still could add up to substantial numbers, given that there are 1.02 billion Han adults in China.

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### Most Chinese Uyghurs and Huis identify as Muslim

*% of adults in each ethnic group who say Islam is their religious belief (zongjiao xinyang)*

Uyghur	94%
Hui	93
Han	<0.5

Note: Han is China’s majority ethnicity. *Zongjiao xinyang* typically refers to belief in organized religion and connotes formal religious affiliation.

Source: Pooled data from the 2017 and 2018 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). Uyghur estimates come from aggregated 2010 and 2012 CGSS data. “Measuring Religion in China”

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<sup>80</sup> When children are included, Uyghurs are the largest ethnic group that traditionally practice Islam, with a total population of 11.8 million, followed by Hui (11.4 million), according to the 2020 Chinese census.

<sup>81</sup> Both the pooled 2010 and 2012 CGSS, as well as the 2012 China Labor-force Dynamics Survey find about 94% of Uyghur adults identify with Islam.

To correct for these issues, Pew Research Center demographers estimate that roughly 90% of people in China's 10 Muslim-majority ethnic groups identify as Muslims and that roughly 700,000 Han Chinese identify with Islam, yielding a total estimate of about 17 million Muslims in China, or around 2% of the adult population. By contrast, the Islamic Association of China's method – adding up the entire populations of the 10 Muslim-majority ethnic groups and assuming that no one in the Han majority is Muslim – yields an estimate that is higher by nearly 1 million adults.

(Read the Methodology for more details on [estimating the number of Muslims in China](#).)

## Demographic traits

Most Uyghur and Hui people belong to the Sunni branch of Islam, but they differ in other ways.

Culturally, Hui people, who began a period of rapid assimilation into the mainstream Han Chinese culture during 14th century, have a good deal in common with the Han majority, including the Han Chinese language and surnames. By contrast, Uyghurs – who until the last century had limited interactions with the Han Chinese – mainly speak Uyghur, a Turkic language. They also differ in appearance and culture from the Han majority.

In addition, Hui and Uyghur people differ on several sociodemographic measures. Uyghurs, on average, are less likely to live in cities and have fewer years of education than the Hui, who are similar to the Han majority on these measures. About 17% of Uyghur people have an urban household registration, or urban *hukou* (户口), compared with around 40% of Hui and Han people, according to the [2020 Chinese census](#). Around 5% of Uyghur adults (ages 18 and older) have a college degree or more education, while roughly 10% of Hui and Han adults are college educated.

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### China's Muslim ethnic groups are relatively young

	Under 15	Ages 15-59	60+
All Chinese	18%	63%	19%
Predominantly Muslim ethnic groups	27	62	11

Note: "Predominantly Muslim ethnic groups" refers to 10 ethnic groups that traditionally practice Islam in China.

Source: Census of China, 2020.

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## Fertility

In the past decade, predominantly Muslim ethnic groups have grown more quickly than the majority Han population.

Between the 2010 and 2020 censuses, the number of adults in predominantly Muslim ethnic groups grew by 9% to 17.9 million, while the Han majority grew 5% to 1.02 billion.

This disparity may have resulted, at least in part, from the Chinese government's less stringent controls on family size for minorities under the one-child policy, which was in effect from 1980 to 2016. While Han Chinese were restricted to having one child per family (or two, if they met [certain conditions](#)), ethnic minorities were allowed to have as many as three children per family.

The relatively young age structure of the Muslim population also fuels population growth: 27% of people in China's predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities are younger than 15, compared with 17% of the ethnic Han majority, according to the 2020 Chinese census.

Also, according to Chinese censuses, the total fertility rate among Uyghur women was 1.84 children per woman in 2010 and 1.99 in 2000, substantially higher than the rate among both Hui women (1.42 in 2010 and 1.53 in 2000) and Han women (1.15 in 2010 and 1.18 in 2000).<sup>82</sup> Fertility rates by ethnicity from the 2020 census were not available when this report was written.

In recent years, however, there have been [reports of forced birth control methods imposed on Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic groups in Xinjiang](#), including mandatory pregnancy checks and sterilizations, as well as

## China's Muslim majority ethnic groups

*Government-designated ethnic groups that traditionally practice Islam*

	Millions	Total adults
2020	17.9	1.61%
2010	16.4	1.56%
2000	12.9	1.44%

Source: Census of China, 2000, 2010 and 2020.

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## In the past decade, China's predominantly Muslim ethnic groups grew faster than the Han majority

*Number of adults in China, by ethnicity (in millions)*

Ethnicity	2010	2020	2010-2020 change
All Muslim ethnic groups	16.4	17.9	9%
Hui	7.8	8.3	6%
Uyghur	6.9	7.7	12%
Others	1.7	1.9	8%
Han	970	1,022	5%

Note: Hans are China's majority ethnicity. "Others" refers to eight other ethnic groups that traditionally practice Islam in China.

Source: Census of China, 2010 and 2020.

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<sup>82</sup> Li, Jianxin and Liya Qiu. 2022. "An Analysis on the Fertility of China's Minority Population and its Influencing Factors: Taking the Zhuang, Hui, Manchu, Uyghur, Tibetan and Mongolian Ethnic Groups as Examples" (in Chinese). Journal of Northwestern Ethnic Studies.

coercive IUD implantations and abortions. [Scholars expect that Uyghur growth rates will slow](#) as a result of such measures, while the rate among Han Chinese may rise after the Chinese government relaxed restrictions on family sizes, first in 2016 and again in 2021.

## Beliefs and practices among Hui Muslims

Since Muslims are a small share of China’s population and surveys often omit regions with large Muslim populations, data on the beliefs and practices of Chinese Muslims is sparse. For example, the CGSS has a sufficient number of respondents to reliably report on the beliefs and practices only of Hui Muslims.<sup>83</sup>

In this section, we analyze 2018 CGSS figures on self-identified Hui Muslims and compare them with Chinese adults who formally identify with folk religion, Buddhism or Christianity. Because this analysis relies on respondents who chose a *zongjiao xinyang* in the CGSS survey – or who said a parent or spouse has a *zongjiao xinyang* – it excludes those who may engage with one of these religions but do not formally affiliate with it.

According to this analysis, Hui Muslims are the most likely of China’s major religious groups to grow up with at least one parent who shares their religion.

Among all Hui respondents who claim Islam as their *zongjiao xinyang*, nearly all (96%) grew up with a Muslim mother, much higher than the rate among adults who identify with Buddhism (52%) and self-identified Christians (31%), according to the 2018 CGSS.

This high level of religious similarity among Muslims also reflects the fact that Islam in China rarely draws converts from other religions. Likewise, the low level of similarity between Christians and their parent(s)’ religion during childhood suggests that most of China’s self-identified Christians come from non-Christian backgrounds.

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### Nearly all Hui Muslims in China grew up with a Muslim parent

*Among adults in China who now identify as \_\_\_\_\_, % who had a parent with that religion when respondent was a child*

Adult respondent	Mother	Father
Hui Muslim	96%	98%
Folk religion	87	79
Buddhist	52	43
Christian	31	21

Note: Religious identification is based on a question about *zongjiao xinyang*, which typically refers to belief in organized religion and connotes formal religious affiliation.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2018.

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<sup>83</sup> The CGSS has not been conducted in Xinjiang – home to virtually all Uyghurs – since 2013, so belief and practice estimates for Uyghur Muslims are not reported in this section due to insufficient sample size.

Survey data indicates that Muslims are also the most likely of China's major religious groups to marry within their religion. Most Hui Muslim adults (96%) share the same faith as their spouse or cohabitating partner. The comparable figures are substantially lower among adults who identify with folk religion (78%), Buddhism (45%) and Christianity (38%), according to the 2018 CGSS.

### Recent change in religious activity

In each of the five CGSS waves between 2010 and 2017, roughly half or more of Muslim respondents (47% to 62%) said they attend zongjiao activities at least a few times a year. In 2018, only 30% said so. This could reflect a change in the way Chinese Muslims answer survey questions in the face of increasingly restrictive government policies, or a change in actual behavior, or some of both.

For comparison, in 2018, 73% of Chinese Christians said they participated in zongjiao activities at least a few times a year, as did 51% of adherents of folk religions and 36% of Buddhists. None of these groups registered a significant decline in self-reported zongjiao participation between 2010 and 2018.

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### Chinese Hui Muslims' religious participation has dropped

*% of Hui Muslims who say they attend religious (zongjiao) activities at least a few times a year*

Year	% of Hui Muslims
2010	47%
2012	56
2013	60
2015	62
2017	49
2018	30

Source: Chinese General Social Survey. "Measuring Religion in China"

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## Geographic distribution of Muslims in China

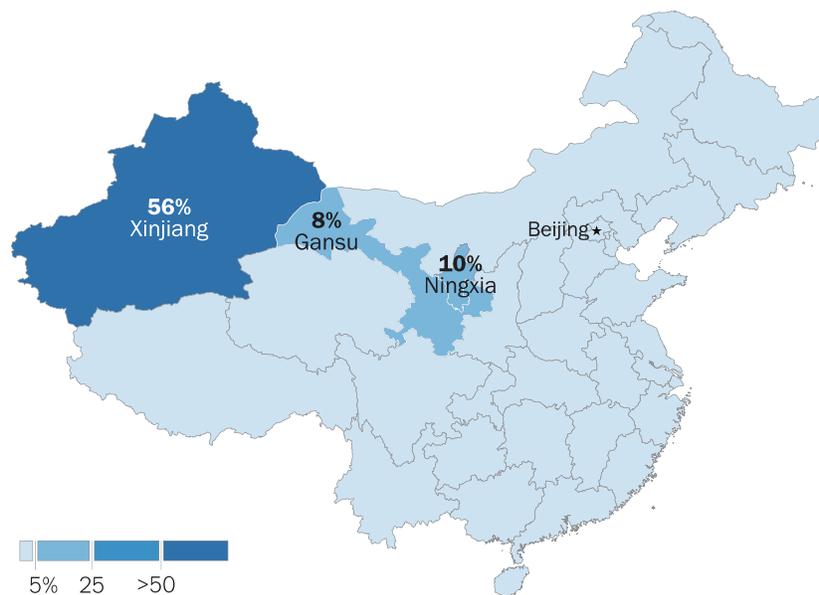
Nearly all of China's Uyghurs (99%) live in one province, Xinjiang. Hui people are more widely dispersed, with an estimated 10% in Xinjiang and 42% in the other northwestern provinces of Gansu, Ningxia and Qinghai. The remaining half are scattered across the country, with a significant concentration in Henan (8%) and Yunnan (6%).

The remaining eight predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, which make up roughly 10% of China's Muslim-majority groups – [Baoan](#), [Dongxiang](#), [Kazakh](#), [Kirgiz](#), [Salar](#), [Tajik](#), [Tatar](#) and [Uzbek](#) peoples – mostly reside in the northwestern provinces of Xinjiang, Gansu and Qinghai. There is a particularly heavy concentration of Kazakh, Kirgiz, Tajik, Tatar and Uzbek people in Xinjiang.

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### China's predominantly Muslim groups are heavily concentrated in the northwest

*Distribution of Chinese Muslim-majority ethnic groups, by province*



Source: Census of China, 2020. Data is only available for mainland China.  
"Measuring Religion in China"

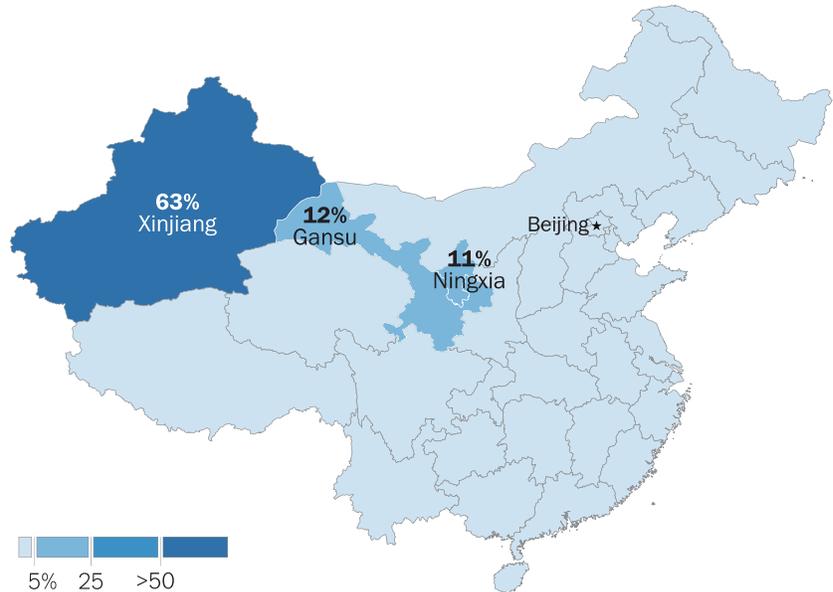
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As of 2014, Xinjiang was home to 63% of China's mosques – about 24,500 of a nationwide total of 39,000 mosques, according to data from the [Islamic Association of China](#). About one-quarter of China's mosques were in other northwestern provinces – Gansu (12%), Ningxia (11%) and Qinghai (3%) – while the remaining 11% of mosques were in other parts of the country.

## 63% of China's mosques are in Xinjiang

*% of mosques in each province, among all mosques in China*



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2014 data from the Chinese government's Islamic Association of China. Data is only available for mainland China. "Measuring Religion in China"

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## Challenges of studying Islam in China

Studying Muslims in China is difficult for several reasons. The vast majority reside in the northwestern provinces of Xinjiang and Ningxia – mountainous, sparsely populated areas that are often excluded in national surveys for practical reasons. And even when Muslims are surveyed, the samples generally are too small to allow separate analysis and reporting of subgroups, such as by age cohort or gender.

Moreover, the CGSS has not been conducted in Xinjiang since 2013, which leaves no way to assess the current religious beliefs and practices of Uyghur adults in Xinjiang – an estimated 43% of all adults in China’s Muslim-majority ethnic groups.

The Chinese government’s treatment of Muslims adds to the challenges. Muslims who are surveyed may be guarded in their responses, while [scholars who study Muslims](#) have faced personal hardship.

For example, [Iham Tohti](#), a Beijing-based economist and Uyghur who criticized Chinese government policies in Xinjiang, was [found guilty of “separatism” in 2014](#) and is serving a life sentence in prison. Rahile Dawut, a professor of Uyghur traditions at Xinjiang University, disappeared ahead of a trip to Beijing in 2017 and has not been heard from since, according to reports in [The New York Times](#) and other media.

U.S. scholars have claimed they were [banned from traveling to China](#) in connection with their work on Uyghurs. German anthropologist [Adrian Zenz](#), whose online investigations have [uncovered extensive visual evidence](#) of conditions in Xinjiang, was sued in 2021 by Chinese companies for his work, which the Chinese Foreign Ministry described as [“malicious smearing acts.”](#) The Washington Post reported.

(For more on these topics, read the sidebar called [“Human rights abuses in China’s Xinjiang region”](#) and our 2022 analysis of [global government restrictions on religion](#).)

Discussions of Muslims’ views and demographic characteristics in this report are based on the CGSS, which is the only nationally representative survey with sufficient sample sizes to allow such an analysis, though the CGSS has not been conducted in Xinjiang since 2013 and CGSS data collected outside of Xinjiang includes few Uyghur respondents.

The number of Hui Muslims in the CGSS is large enough for analysis, but Hui respondents in the CGSS are so geographically concentrated that their survey estimates have large margins of

sampling error on some measures. For instance, the share of Hui Muslim adults who attend religious activities once a week or more (11%) in the 2018 CGSS has a margin of error of plus or minus 8 percentage points, compared with 6 points for Christians and 2 points for Buddhists.

Sampling coverage issues in the CGSS also pose challenges to estimating the number of Muslims in China. Overall, predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities, particularly Huis, are oversampled in the CGSS even though some regions with large minority populations have been omitted in recent waves. The CGSS includes a larger share of Muslim ethnic minorities than China's census and the default CGSS weight does not correct for this imbalance. To address this issue, Center researchers adjusted the weight in the CGSS so that the share of adults in predominantly Muslim ethnic groups matches the share of those ethnic groups in the census. (Read the Methodology for more on [how we estimate the number of Muslims in China](#).)

## Sidebar: Human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang region

The [Chinese government's actions against Uyghur Muslims](#) in the northwestern region of Xinjiang have drawn [international attention and censure](#) in recent years.

Human rights groups have accused China of subjecting hundreds of thousands of Muslims to [mass internment](#), [surveillance](#) and [torture](#). There have been reports of [forced abortions and sterilizations](#), [forced organ harvesting](#), [forced relocation and labor](#), and [forced separation of children](#). Amnesty International has said that China's ["draconian repression of Muslims in Xinjiang amounts to crimes against humanity."](#) and the U.S. State Department has described China's treatment of Uyghurs as [genocide](#). In 2022, the [UN High Commissioner of Human Rights issued a report](#) saying that "serious human rights violations have been committed" in Xinjiang and that "the extent of arbitrary and discriminatory detention of members of Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim groups ... may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity."

The Chinese government has denied these allegations. In July 2022, China reportedly tried to [stop the release of a UN report detailing abuses against Muslims](#). Chinese officials have said [camps in Xinjiang are for vocational education and training](#) and are meant to counter religious extremism and poverty in the region.

Accusations of repression of Uyghurs and other Muslims by the Chinese government date back many years. In 2005, [Human Rights Watch described](#) the "systematic repression of religion ... in Xinjiang as a matter of considered state policy," at a "level of punitive control seemingly designed to entirely refashion Uighur religious identity to the state's purposes."

However, human rights groups say the crackdown intensified after the [2009 riots in Urumqi](#), the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which left nearly 200 people dead. The Chinese government labeled the riots as terrorism [arising from Islamic extremism](#) and expanded regulation and surveillance in the name of de-extremization.

Many religious practices among Uyghurs and other Muslim-majority ethnic groups in Xinjiang that previously were respected as ethnic customs now face tight regulation. For instance, the government has [banned face coverings in public](#); made it illegal for [parents to let children attend religious activities](#) or religious schools; cracked down on "underground" Muslim schools and study groups; and [increased penalties](#) on Muslims who follow traditional Islamic marriage and divorce laws. The Chinese government also has intensified the enforcement of restrictions on the number of children allowed for Uyghur Muslims and [severely punished](#) those who exceed the limit.

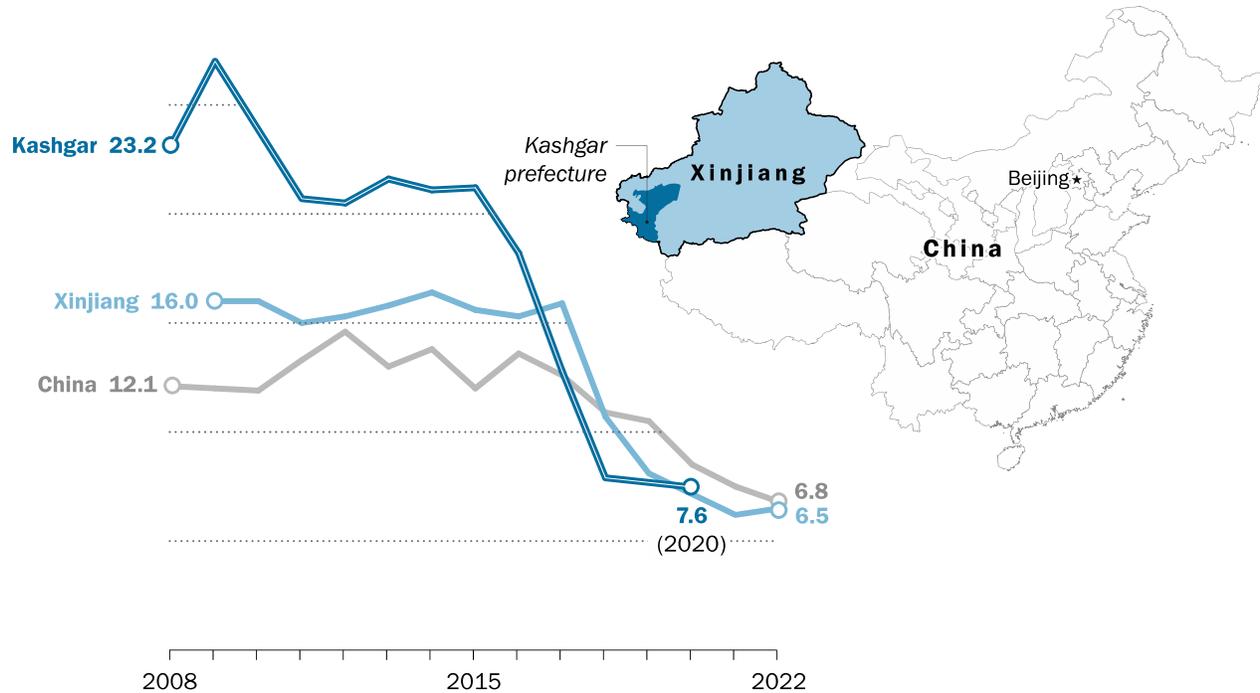
For decades in the 1970s, '80s, '90s and 2000s, the government imposed a "one-child policy" that limited births among Han Chinese, a policy that was often realized with [forced contraceptives, sterilization and abortions](#). During this period, urban Uyghur couples were allowed to have two children and rural Uyghur couples could have three children. In 2016, the [Chinese government relaxed the one-child cap](#) for most of the population while

enforcing birth controls for minorities. In 2021, the policy was again adjusted to allow up to [three children per couple](#), but with no exceptions for ethnic minorities.

[Xinjiang's birthrate has fallen significantly](#) in recent years: In 2019, the region's crude birth rate – the number of births per 1,000 people – [hovered below the national average](#) (10.5) for the first time, at 8.1, nearly half the rate three years earlier, according to the [National Bureau of Statistics of China](#).

## Birth rates in China's Xinjiang region have fallen sharply

Number of newborns per 1,000 people (crude birth rate)



Note: Kashgar is a majority Uyghur (92%) prefecture in southern Xinjiang. The broader Xinjiang region is 45% Uyghur. Data is only available for mainland China.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China. "Measuring Religion in China"

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The decline in the birth rate is particularly pronounced in southern Xinjiang, which has a heavier concentration of ethnic minorities. For instance, between 2016 and 2018, the crude birth rate in Kashgar, a 92% Uyghur prefecture, dropped in half from 18.2 births to 7.9 per 1,000 people. These large changes in fertility patterns coincide with government interventions, which may have been designed to reduce growth in ethnically Muslim populations in Xinjiang.

Moreover, the strict [prohibition on providing formal religious education to children](#) may disrupt the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs and practices among Muslim-majority ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and other parts of China.

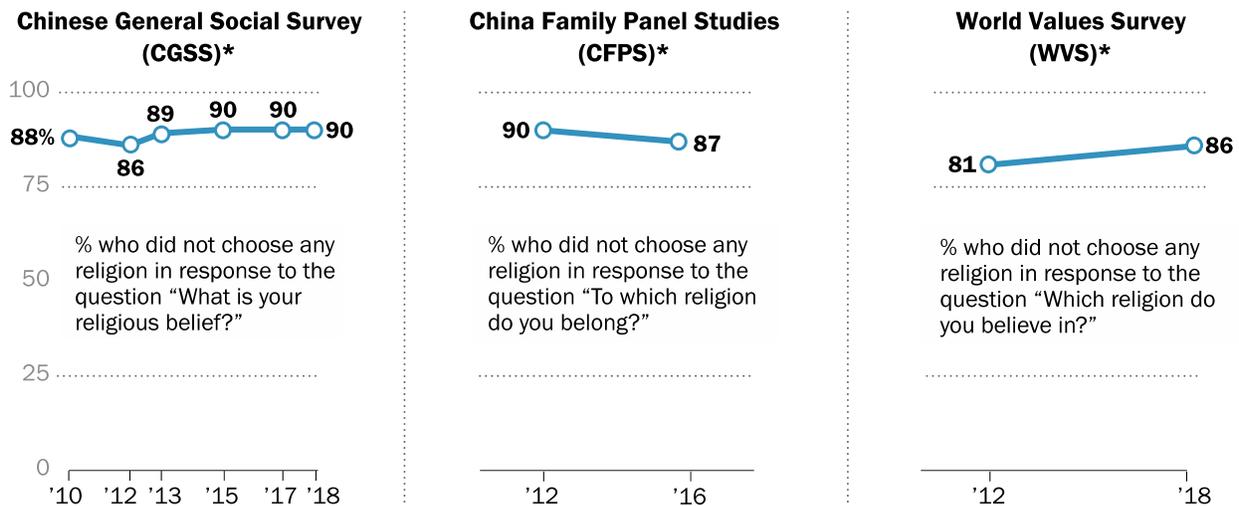
## 6. Non-religion

Many international studies, including from [Pew Research Center](#), compare levels of religious identity and commitment across countries. China [tends to rank high](#) on the lists of countries with the biggest share of people who are – by several measures – secular.

In China, religious affiliation is typically translated as “religious belief,” such as in the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) question “What is your religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰)?” In 2018, 90% of Chinese adults chose the option “No religious belief” in response to this question.<sup>84</sup> By this measure, about 998 million Chinese adults were religiously unaffiliated in

### Surveys find that vast majority of Chinese adults are religiously unaffiliated

*% of adults in China who do not formally identify with any religion*



\* CGSS options included Buddhism, Taoism, Folk belief (such as worship of *Mazu* and *Guan Gong*), Islam/Hui religion, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Other. CFPS options: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam (Hui religion), Protestantism, Catholicism, and Other. WVS options: Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Note: Each of these survey questions use the phrase *zongjiao* or *zongjiao xinyang*, which typically refer to belief in organized religion and connote formal religious affiliation; the terms do not generally capture beliefs tied to traditional Chinese religions. Unaffiliated shares do not include respondents who did not answer this question (6% of respondents in the 2012 WVS, no more than 1% of respondents in other surveys). Refer to Methodology for details.

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2018. Other national studies, including the World Values Survey (WVS), also find that about nine-

<sup>84</sup> The 2018 CGSS was conducted in 28 of mainland China's 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The 2021 CGSS was conducted in 19 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. In the 2021 CGSS, 93% of respondents identified with no religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*). Due to these differences, results from 2021 may not be directly comparable to 2018 and earlier CGSS waves.

in-ten adults in China do not have a *zongjiao xinyang*.

However, questions that translate religion as *zongjiao* (宗教) capture a narrow facet of religion, as the phrase commonly connotes formal membership in a religious organization or a public commitment to a religious belief system. When respondents choose the “no religious belief” (*wu zongjiao xinyang* 无宗教信仰) option in a survey, they might not have in mind a complete lack of religious or spiritual beliefs. For example, they may not associate belief in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva or folk deities with the word “religion” (*zongjiao*).

In addition, some Chinese people may reject *zongjiao* affiliation because they only occasionally engage in *zongjiao* activities, or because they see that the state [disapproves of zongjiao](#).

As a result, the share of people who claim to have “no religion” is far larger than the share who reject any belief in gods or who never engage in spiritual activities. For example, when asked whether they believe in (*xiangxin* 相信) *any* gods or deities, only 61% of Chinese adults say they do not believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, Taoist immortals, Jesus Christ, *Tianzhu* (天主, the word for God used by Chinese Catholics), or Allah, according to the 2018 CFPS. (*Xiangxin*, which is commonly translated as “believe in,” also means to trust or have no doubts in. The term does not always connote worship or veneration.) When the analysis includes belief in supernatural forces or participation in traditional customs with spiritual underpinnings, the rate of non-religion drops even further.

And while the Chinese Communist Party espouses atheism as its official ideology, just one-third of Chinese adults identify as atheist (*wu shen lun zhe* 无神论者), according to the 2018 WVS.

This chapter discusses different ways of looking at non-religion in China, and it explains the advantages and limitations of using *zongjiao* affiliation to estimate the extent of secularism in China.

While it is an exaggeration to say that 90% of China’s population is secular, it also is an exaggeration to suggest that religious and/or spiritual practices are pervasive and frequent.

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## Nearly 4 in 10 Chinese believe in one or more deities

*% of adults in China who believe in (xiangxin) ...*

Buddha and/or a bodhisattva	33%
Immortals	18
Jesus Christ	6
<i>Tianzhu</i>	4
Allah	3
Any of the above	38
None of the above	61

Note: *Xiangxin* does not always have a religious connotation. *Tianzhu* is the word for God used by Chinese Catholics. Immortals refers to Taoist deities. Those who did not answer this question are not shown.

Source: China Family Panel Studies, 2018.

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Common survey measures and categories of analysis tend to ignore traditional customs and may poorly capture beliefs, which overlap and are not consistently detected when question wording and format vary. Ultimately, the best available survey data indicates that in many senses, a considerable portion of China's population rejects supernatural beliefs and does not engage in frequent religious rituals.

### Accordion box: The meaning of *zongjiao xinyang*

China has a long history of spiritual and cultural practices that can broadly be described as religious, but the concept of “religion” is fairly new. The term *zongjiao* (宗教), the closest equivalent to the English word “religion,” was introduced to China in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by scholars seeking a term to use when translating Western texts.

Today, the term *zongjiao* often has negative connotations, and associating with *zongjiao* beliefs or practices is, for many, politically and socially undesirable. In state media, *zongjiao* is often mentioned along with [extremism](#), [violence](#) and [fraud](#). *Zongjiao* beliefs or activities are explicitly banned for [Chinese Communist Party \(CCP\) members](#) and [cadres](#), who are supposed to firmly adhere to communism’s atheist ideology.

Meanwhile, the term *xinyang* (信仰), which literally means “firm belief in” or “commitment to” a theory, thought or philosophy, is commonly used to indicate a *formal* commitment or serious conviction. Surveys such as the Chinese General Social Survey use the combined phrase *zongjiao xinyang* (宗教信仰) to ask about religious affiliation, much in the same way the U.S. General Social Survey, for example, asks “What is your religious preference?” or Pew Research Center in the United States asks “What is your present religion, if any?”

However, stating that one does not have a *zongjiao xinyang* or does not engage in *zongjiao* activities by no means equates to completely abstaining from religion. In fact, Chinese people often engage with beliefs and practices that can be considered religious, broadly speaking, even if they do not associate with religion (*zongjiao*).

This seeming discrepancy can be attributed mainly to China’s distinct categorization of traditional beliefs and activities with spiritual elements or underpinnings.

For example, Chinese people typically refer to beliefs and activities of traditional Chinese religions – such as the common practice of [burning incense to worship Buddha/deities](#) (*shaoxiangbaifo* 烧香拜佛) – as “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信) or “custom” (*xisu* 习俗) instead of *zongjiao*. State-run media also describe some explicitly folk religious activities, such as the [Mazu \(妈祖\) parade](#) and [welcoming the god of wealth](#), as folk “custom” rather than *zongjiao*, even though these activities involve making offerings and praying to deities.

Unlike Christianity and Islam, traditional Chinese religions including Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions do not emphasize membership, commitment to one god, or regular congregational involvement. Rather, some scholars have argued that religious engagement in China largely revolves around efficacy (*ling* 灵 or *lingyan* 灵验) – how well a particular deity or ritual responds to a person’s request.<sup>85</sup> In this view, people engaging in various religious activities are “consumers” choosing among many religious rituals and sometimes mixing elements of multiple traditions.

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<sup>85</sup> Chau, Adam Yuet. 2011. [“Modalities of Doing Religion and Ritual Polytypy: Evaluating the Religious Market Model from the Perspective of Chinese Religious History.”](#) Religion.

## Characteristics of those with no *zongjiao* affiliation

Religious non-affiliation is particularly high among members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): 94% of this group is religiously unaffiliated, according to the 2018 CGSS. This is likely due at least in part to the Chinese government's ban on *zongjiao* affiliation for its members and cadres. Religious non-affiliation is also high among Chinese adults with a college degree or more (94%). This similarity may be due to the correlation between education and CCP membership: CCP members are more likely than other Chinese to have a college degree, and nearly half of college-educated adults are members of the CCP or its Youth League, the survey shows. Refer to the sidebar called [“The Chinese Communist Party's role in China's low levels of \*zongjiao\* religion.”](#)

Chinese from the Han majority (92%) are more likely than people from ethnic minorities (71%) to be religiously unaffiliated, according to the 2018 CGSS.

On the other hand, older adults (ages 55 and older), women, and people living in rural areas are *less* likely to be religiously unaffiliated (88% each).

Not surprisingly, lack of *zongjiao* affiliation correlates with low rates of *zongjiao* engagement: Around 2% of unaffiliated adults participate in *zongjiao* religious activities at least a few times a year, compared with 45% of affiliated adults, according to the 2018 CGSS.

People without a *zongjiao* affiliation also are far less likely than affiliated adults to say *zongjiao* is very important in their lives (1% vs. 18%), according to the 2018 WVS.

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## Chinese Communist Party members more likely to be religiously unaffiliated

*% who say they do not have a zongjiao (religion), among ...*

All adults in China	90%
Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members	94
Non-CCP members	90
College graduate	94
Less than college	89
Han majority	92
Ethnic minorities	71
Ages 18-34	91
35-54	90
55+	88
Men	92
Women	88
Urban	92
Rural	88

Note: Religious affiliation is based on survey question “What is your religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*)?” which typically implies a formal commitment to organized religion. Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2018.

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### Accordion box: Ethnic minorities in China

The Chinese government recognizes 56 ethnic groups, including the majority Han group that makes up 91% of the population.

More than nine-in-ten Han adults are religiously unaffiliated, according to the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS).<sup>86</sup> About 8% of Zhuang adults (the largest ethnic minority) identify with folk religions. Meanwhile, about nine-in-ten of the Hui and Uyghur minorities are Muslim. (Due to a lack of recent data collected in Xinjiang, this estimate for Uyghurs is from 2010 and 2012 CGSS data, and it is unclear whether Muslim identification among Uyghurs has changed since then.)

Because the CGSS does not measure each ethnic identity, it is not possible to quantify the religious composition of all minority groups. But scholars and journalists have found certain religions to be particularly prevalent among certain groups. For example, Buddhism is the dominant religion among [Dai](#) and [Tibetan](#) people. Christianity is often found among [Lisus and Miaos](#), as is [Benzhu worship](#) among Bai people. The [Dongba religion](#) is common among Naxi people.

### Among China's Han majority, 9 in 10 adults are religiously unaffiliated

*% of adults in China who identify with \_\_\_\_\_, by ethnicity*

	Han	Hui	Zhuang	Other
No religion	91%	7%	91%	88%
Buddhism	4	<0.5	1	5
Folk religions	2	<0.5	8	5
Christianity	2	<0.5	<0.5	1
Islam	<0.5	93	<0.5	<0.5

Notes: Religious affiliation is based on survey question "What is your religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*)?" which typically implies a formal commitment to organized religion.

Source: Pooled data of the 2017 and 2018 Chinese General Social Survey waves.

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<sup>86</sup> We aggregated data from the 2017 and 2018 CGSS waves to have enough sample size to analyze different ethnic groups.

## Engagement with traditional beliefs and practices

Nevertheless, Chinese adults without a *zongjiao* xinyang still engage in beliefs and practices associated with traditional Chinese religions, though often to a lesser extent than religiously affiliated adults.

Religiously unaffiliated and affiliated adults are about as likely to perform the Confucian ritual of ancestor worship, with 75% of religiously unaffiliated adults and 70% of affiliated adults saying they visited the gravesite(s) of family members at least once in the past year, according to the 2018 CGSS.

Fully 61% of religiously unaffiliated adults say they care “somewhat” or “very much” about choosing an auspicious day for special occasions, such as weddings and funerals, compared with 66% among religiously affiliated adults, the same survey shows. And 45% of unaffiliated adults say they believe in *fengshui* (风水), compared with 52% of affiliated adults who say this, according to the 2016 and 2018 CFPS waves.

Differences between religiously unaffiliated and affiliated adults are larger on other measures. Unaffiliated adults are far less likely to say they burn incense to pay respects to Buddha or other deities at least a few times a year (21% vs. 55%) and even less likely to do so monthly or more often (8% vs. 34%), according to the 2016 CFPS.

## In China, many adults without *zongjiao* affiliation engage in traditional religious beliefs and practices

% of religiously \_\_\_\_ adults in China who say they ....

	Affiliated	Unaffiliated	Diff
Attend <i>zongjiao</i> (religious) activities at least a few times a year <sup>3</sup>	45%	2%	<b>44</b>
Believe hell exists <sup>1</sup>	42	7	<b>36</b>
Believe heaven exists <sup>1</sup>	42	8	<b>34</b>
Burn incense to worship Buddha and other deities at least a few times a year <sup>4</sup>	55	21	<b>34</b>
Believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva <sup>2</sup>	56	30	<b>26</b>
Believe afterlife exists <sup>1</sup>	35	8	<b>27</b>
Visited a site to pray for good luck at least once in the last year <sup>3</sup>	45	21	<b>23</b>
Believe in Taoist deities, also known as immortals <sup>2</sup>	37	16	<b>21</b>
Consider <i>zongjiao</i> very important <sup>1</sup>	18	1	<b>16</b>
Wear a charm to ward off bad luck <sup>3</sup>	21	7	<b>14</b>
Care ‘very much’ about choosing auspicious days for special events <sup>3</sup>	36	23	<b>13</b>
Believe in ghosts <sup>2</sup>	20	8	<b>11</b>
Believe in <i>fengshui</i> <sup>2</sup>	52	45	<b>6</b>
Visited gravesite(s) of family members at least once in the last year <sup>3</sup>	70	75	-5

Note: Differences are calculated from unrounded numbers. This analysis assumes Christians and Muslims never burn incense because the survey did not ask them this question. Statistically significant differences are in **bold**. Affiliation is measured with a question about *zongjiao* or *zongjiao xinyang*, which typically refer to belief in organized religion and connote formal religious affiliation; the terms do not generally capture beliefs tied to traditional Chinese religions.

Source: “1” denotes questions from the 2018 World Values Survey. “2” is data from the 2016 and 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) waves; “believe in” is worded as *xiangxin*, a term that does not always have a religious connotation. “3” is from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey, and “4” from the 2016 CFPS. Read Appendix B for details on measures used in each survey.

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Unaffiliated adults are less likely than affiliated adults to say they believe in Buddha (30% vs. 56%) and Taoist deities (16% vs. 37%), according to the 2016 and 2018 CFPS waves.<sup>87</sup>

They are also less likely to say they visited a site to pray for good luck in the last year (21% vs. 45%), according to the 2018 CGSS.

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<sup>87</sup> The 2016 wave asks questions on religious affiliation and participation, while the 2018 survey includes measures only of religious beliefs. The fact that the CFPS interviews the same respondents over time allows researchers to explore religious beliefs among the unaffiliated by combining the two datasets.

## Atheism among Chinese adults

Considering the Chinese government’s active promotion of atheism and communism in [schools](#) and [state-run media](#), one might expect most Chinese adults to identify as atheist, a [politically desirable](#) label.

However, only about a third of adults in China (34%) say they are atheist, when asked to choose from three options in the 2018 WVS – a religious person (or a person with zongjiao xinyang), not a religious person, or an atheist (*wu shen lun zhe* 无神论者) – to identify themselves.<sup>88</sup> Roughly half (49%) say they are not a religious person, while 16% say they are a religious person.

In the Chinese translation, “religious person” means a person of zongjiao xinyang. A different wording or question format might produce higher or lower estimates. For instance, it is possible that a much higher share of Chinese adults would answer “an atheist” if forced to choose between “an atheist” and “not an atheist,” as the latter may indicate that one has a zongjiao belief, which is politically undesirable.

College-educated adults are more likely to say they are atheist than those without a college degree (44% vs. 32%). The correlation between education and atheist identity is likely tied to CCP membership patterns. Roughly half of college-educated adults are members of either the CCP or its Youth League, according to the 2018 CGSS. (Refer to the [discussion of the CCP’s role in promoting non-affiliation.](#))

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### College-educated Chinese are more likely to identify as atheist

*Among adults in China with/without college degrees, % who say they are ...*

	Religious	Not Religious	Atheist
Total	16%	49%	34%
College-educated	11	42	44
Less than college	16	51	32

Note: “Religious” is a translation of “a person with *zongjiao xinyang*,” which typically refers to belief in organized religion and connotes formal religious affiliation.

Source: World Values Survey, 2018.

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<sup>88</sup> The 2018 WVS estimate is considerably lower than a widely circulated estimate of 61% based on a [2014 WIN/Gallup International Survey](#). However, unlike the nationally representative WVS, the WIN/Gallup China sample was conducted online and may not be nationally representative. In the 2018 WVS, the Chinese wording of “a religious person” is 有宗教信仰的人, which literally means “a person with zongjiao xinyang.”

## Sidebar: The Chinese Communist Party's role in China's low levels of *zongjiao* religion

In line with the Marxist view that religion is a temporary phenomenon that will fade as societies advance, the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) espouses and promotes atheism, thus stigmatizing belief in and engagement with religion, including *zongjiao* (宗教) and “superstition” (*mixin* 迷信). Children under 18 are constitutionally prohibited from having any religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang* 宗教信仰), and [atheist education](#) begins early.

The CCP has more than [97 million adult members](#). An additional 30 million people are actively seeking affiliation with the CCP, including [21 million](#) whose applications are awaiting review and 10 million who are in the [advanced stages of becoming members](#). To join CCP-affiliated organizations, one must declare a commitment to communism, which requires renouncing any *zongjiao xinyang*, or formal religious affiliation. In addition, almost every [primary school student](#) pledges commitment to the communist cause in order to join the CCP's [Young Pioneers](#), which is considered a great honor, and large numbers of [advanced students](#) are recruited for the [Youth League](#) in middle and high school. Overall, 184 million people belong to the CCP's Young Pioneers and Youth League.

This means that about one-fifth of China's population has an active membership of some kind with the CCP or its youth affiliates.

The CCP bans its members and government officials, including [those who are retired](#), from having *zongjiao xinyang*. In state-run media, holding *zongjiao xinyang* is equated with [wavering loyalty](#) to the CCP and a betrayal of communism. In speeches, President Xi Jinping and other officials stress that [CCP members](#) must be [“unyielding Marxist atheists.”](#)

CCP membership [brings career opportunities and benefits](#), while *zongjiao xinyang* may invite scrutiny and even disadvantage. The popular [national civil service exam](#), where applicants compete for [“golden rice bowl”](#) positions, is an example. Even though applicants, regardless of political or religious background, are in theory guaranteed equal treatment, CCP members are known to [have better chances](#) of securing a position than non-members. By contrast, eligible candidates who have participated in [superstitious](#) or [zongjiao](#) activities risk failing the political background check.

There are also reported instances of Chinese people [losing jobs](#) due to their *zongjiao xinyang*, and of college students being [pressured to renounce their faith](#). The prospect of such complications may discourage people from participating in *zongjiao* activities or disclosing their *zongjiao xinyang*, if they have any, on surveys.

While the CCP imposes a [strict ban on zongjiao activities](#) among officials and CCP members, it tolerates occasional or infrequent engagement in some traditional Chinese religious practices. For example, [visiting temples occasionally](#) is not an indicator of involvement in *zongjiao* or “superstitious” (*mixin*) activities, according to [the CCP's instructions](#). CCP members are also allowed to participate in folk activities with religious elements.

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### 1 in 5 Chinese are tied to a Communist Party organization

*People in China who are members of ...*

	Millions	%
Total	281	19.9
Young Pioneers	110	7.8
Communist Party	97	6.9
Youth League	74	5.2

Note: Percentages are calculated among people of all ages in 2021.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of data from the Chinese Communist Party's official website.

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However, any CCP members who actively practice superstition – such as [carrying many amulets](#) and [frequently consulting fortunetellers](#) – [face expulsion](#).

Likewise, while the CCP's campaigns in favor of atheism may have been effective in discouraging people from engaging in zongjiao or superstitious beliefs and practices, they have not been completely successful.

In fact, a considerable share of CCP members express beliefs in *fengshui* (40%), Buddha and/or a bodhisattva (24%), and Taoist immortals (11%), though those rates are lower than among non-CCP members, according to the 2018 CGSS and other surveys.

Moreover, CCP members are no different from the rest of the adult population in their propensity to engage in customary activities that may not be overtly zongjiao or “superstitious,” such as carrying a lucky charm or amulet, visiting a religious site to pray for good fortune, or visiting the gravesite(s) of family members.

## Many Chinese Communist Party members engage in folk religious beliefs and practices, despite ban on zongjiao and ‘superstition’

% of adults in China who say they ...

	Chinese Communist Party (CCP) member	Non-CCP member	Diff
Visited gravesite(s) of family members at least once in the last year <sup>2</sup>	79%	75%	4
Wear a charm to ward off bad luck <sup>2</sup>	7	8	-1
Believe in ghosts <sup>1</sup>	8	11	-3
Attend <i>zongjiao</i> (religious) activities at least a few times a year <sup>2</sup>	4	6	-3
Consider zongjiao ‘very important’ <sup>3</sup>	4	7	-3
Visited a site to pray for good luck at least once in the last year <sup>2</sup>	19	24	-5
Believe in Taoist deities, also known as immortals <sup>1</sup>	11	19	-8
Believe in <i>fengshui</i> <sup>1</sup>	40	48	-8
Burn incense to worship Buddha and other deities at least a few times a year <sup>3</sup>	18	26	-8
Believe in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva <sup>1</sup>	24	33	-9
Care ‘very much’ about choosing auspicious days for special events <sup>2</sup>	15	25	-9

Note: Differences are calculated from unrounded numbers. This analysis assumes Christians and Muslims never burn incense because the survey did not ask them this question. Statistically significant differences are in **bold**. *Zongjiao* typically refers to belief in organized religion and connotes formal religious affiliation.

Source: “1” denotes questions from the 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS); “believe in” is worded as *xiangxin*, a term that does not always have a religious connotation. “2” is from the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey, and “3” from the 2016 CFPS. Refer to Appendix B for details on measures used in each survey.

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## Government policy toward religion in the People's Republic of China – a brief history

The [Chinese Communist Party \(CCP\) is officially atheist](#), and its members are not permitted to join any religion. The party's attitude aligns with the Marxist view that religion is a temporary historical phenomenon that will disappear as societies advance. Although this stance has not changed in the seven decades since the state's founding, policies on the ground have constantly evolved. For example, the current constitution of the People's Republic of China, adopted in 1982, states that ordinary Chinese citizens enjoy "freedom of religious beliefs" (*zongjiao xinyang ziyou* 宗教信仰自由).

### 1950s: Transition to socialism

After then-Chairman Mao Zedong's CCP established the People's Republic of China in 1949, religion – "the opiate of the masses," according to Karl Marx – quickly became a target.

Political leaders at the time described religion as being linked to "foreign cultural imperialism," "feudalism" and "superstition." Religious groups were persecuted across the board: Buddhist monks for participating in a feudal regime that supported them with donations, and Christians for their ties to foreign missionaries and the Vatican.<sup>89</sup>

In the 1950s, as a part of a nationalization campaign, the government confiscated many temples, churches and mosques for secular use.<sup>90</sup> Foreign missionaries were deported, and churches were urged to cut ties with outside organizations, including the Vatican.<sup>91</sup>

Meanwhile, the government established a Religious Affairs Bureau to oversee religious activities and promoted the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (self-government, self-support and self-propagation) for religious groups. By the late 1950s, patriotic religious associations had been formed to manage and monitor each of five religions – [Buddhism](#) (1953), [Islam](#) (1953), [Protestantism](#) (1954), [Taoism](#) (1957) and [Catholicism](#) (1957).



A close-up of "The Founding Ceremony of the Nation" (1954 revision), a state-commissioned painting showing then-Chairman Mao Zedong proclaiming the establishment of the People's Republic of China on Oct. 1, 1949. (Universal History Archive/UiG via Getty Images)

<sup>89</sup> Leung, Beatrice. 2005. "China's Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity." The China Quarterly.

<sup>90</sup> Goossaert, Vincent, and David A. Palmer. 2011. "The Religious Question in Modern China."

<sup>91</sup> Madsen, Richard. 2003. "Catholic Revival during the Reform Era." The China Quarterly.

### 1966-1976: Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution

During the [Cultural Revolution](#), religion became a target of Mao's campaign to eliminate the "Four Olds" – "old things, old ideas, old customs and old habits." All religious activities were banned, and [religious personnel were persecuted](#). Paramilitary [Red Guards attacked or destroyed](#) many temples, shrines, churches and mosques, and some were abandoned, closed or confiscated.<sup>92</sup> Chinese people who wanted to maintain their faith practiced in secret.

### 1982: Document 19

State policy toward religion shifted after Mao's death in 1976. In 1982, the Central Committee of the CCP issued a [manifesto that came to be known as Document 19](#), in which the CCP acknowledged the [complexity associated with religion](#) and granted its citizens freedom of religious belief (zongjiao xinyang ziyou).

The document also set boundaries for religious freedom by allowing only "normal" religious activities (though it left "normal" undefined) and banning religious education among minors. In addition, the CCP banned party members from practicing or believing in religion and stressed the importance of strengthening atheist education among China's citizens.

In the decades following the Cultural Revolution, the government focused on economic development.

Religious activity began to revive. Temples, mosques and churches closed or confiscated during the Cultural Revolution were allowed to reopen, while those that had been damaged or destroyed were repaired or rebuilt – some with government funds. Buddhist temple construction and activities significantly benefited, as authorities hoped religious tourism would boost the economy.<sup>93</sup>

Government officials in some instances even tolerated religious groups or activities outside the legally sanctioned system. For instance, the popular pastor Samuel Lamb ([Lin Xiangao](#)), who led a large underground Protestant church in Guangdong province, was [generally left to operate freely](#) in the 1980s.



Tibetan students in Beijing learn about Mao Zedong's anti-Confucian campaign in April 1974. (Gamma-Rapho/API via Getty Images)



Tibetan Buddhists walk the kora – repeatedly walking and meditating around a sacred site or temple – in 2021 in front of the Jokhang Temple, Tibet's holiest site, which was attacked by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. (Kevin Frayer/Getty Images)

<sup>92</sup> Yang, Fenggang. 2011. "Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule."

<sup>93</sup> Laliberté, André. 2011. "[Buddhist Revival under State Watch.](#)" *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. Refer also to Ji, Zhe. 2004. "[Buddhism and the State: The New Relationship.](#)" *China Perspectives*.

In this relaxed climate for religion, the traditional practice of *Qigong* (气功) became widespread, by some estimates attracting more than 60 million practitioners across China by the late 1980s. Qigong – a set of exercises and meditative practices related to Buddhism and Taoism – was openly endorsed for its purported health benefits and promoted by high-level officials and leading scientists. Despite its spiritual roots, authorities did not view Qigong as superstition or even religion, instead declaring it a “precious scientific heritage.”<sup>94</sup> During this time, many new *Qigong masters*, who claimed to have supernatural power (*teyi gongneng* 特异功能), emerged. So did new forms of Qigong that incorporated elements of folk, Taoist and Buddhist traditions.

### 1989: Tiananmen Square protests

The student-led, pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, that were ended violently by the government led to tighter regulation in all spheres of life.<sup>95</sup> Authorities cracked down on religious groups outside the official system and arrested their leaders and members, significantly affecting underground churches.

In 1995, China’s leadership labeled 15 religious groups, including 12 with Christian roots, as “evil cults” and banned them. Soon after, it also outlawed some Qigong groups.<sup>96</sup>

*Falun Gong* (法轮功), a spiritual group that emerged in the early 1990s, was officially denounced as an “evil cult” in 1999, following the Zhongnanhai Incident, when thousands of Falun Gong practitioners protested outside the leadership compound of the CCP central committee, demanding official recognition. At the time, Falun Gong claimed to have 70 million adherents in China.

Since then, Falun Gong has been treated harshly. The government established the Office for Preventing and Dealing with the Evil Cult Issue, also known as the 610 Office, to crack down on Falun Gong nationwide.



Student protesters gather in May 1989 in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, to demand greater freedom of speech and democracy. On June 4, the government shut down the protests in what came to be known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. (Peter Turnley/Getty Images)



People participate in a *Falun Gong* (法轮功) morning exercise and mediation group on July 22, 1999, in Guangzhou, China, just hours before the group was declared an illegal organization (or “evil cult”) by the Chinese government. (AFP via Getty Images)

<sup>94</sup> Palmer, David A. 2007. “Qigong fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China.”

<sup>95</sup> Lambert, Anthony P.B. 1990. “The Church in China – Pre- and Post-Tiananmen Square.” Religion in Communist Lands.

<sup>96</sup> Palmer, David A. 2007. “Qigong fever: Body, science, and utopia in China.”

## 2004: 'Regulations on Religious Affairs'

While the government cracked down on these new religious groups, the state policy on five recognized religions [shifted slightly, becoming relatively lenient](#) as political leaders emphasized pushing them to adapt to the socialist society. In 2004, the State Council issued a set of ["Regulations on Religious Affairs."](#)

The document listed rules for religious personnel, sites and activities. It specified that local religious bureaus could exercise legal and administrative authority over religious affairs, such as closing unregistered churches and confiscating properties.

However, the regulations were not always strictly enforced at the local level. Observers say that local authorities managed religious practices with "one eye open and one eye closed" and tolerated "illegal" religious activities as long as "no lines have been crossed."<sup>97</sup>

In other words, local regulations on religious activities under then-

President Hu Jintao's leadership (2003-2013) remained essentially unchanged from the previous decade, as Hu believed religion could contribute to a harmonious society.<sup>98</sup>

## China has declared 25 groups to be 'evil cults'

### Year 'Evil cult'

1995	The Shouters	<b>Groups related to:</b> <b>Christianity</b> <b>Buddhism</b> <b>Qigong</b> <b>Other</b>
1995	Society of Disciples (Mentu Hui)	
1995	Spirit Sect	
1995	Full Scope Church (Quan Fanwei Jiaohui)	
1995	New Testament Church	
1995	Established King Church	
1995	The Church of Almighty God, also known as Eastern Lightning	
1995	<a href="#">Guanyin Method</a>	
1995	Mainland China Administrative Deacon Station	
1995	The Children of God	
1995	Dami Mission	
1995	Blood and Water of Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit Full Gospel Evangelistic Group	
1995	<a href="#">The Yuandun Dharma Gate</a>	
1995	South China Church	
1995	<a href="#">True Buddha School</a>	
1996	World Elijah Gospel Mission Society	
1997	The Unification Church	
1998	Lord God Sect	
1999	<a href="#">Falun Gong</a>	
1999	Three Grades of Servants (San Ban Puren)	
1999	<a href="#">Zhong Gong</a>	
2015	<a href="#">Hua Zang Dharma</a>	
2015	<a href="#">Milky Way Federation</a>	
2020	<a href="#">"Sun and Moon" Qigong</a>	
2021	<a href="#">Lifechanyuan</a>	

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Chinese government documents. "Measuring Religion in China"

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<sup>97</sup> Weller, Robert P. 2014. ["The Politics of Increasing Religious Diversity in China."](#) Daedalus. Also refer to Vala, Carsten T. 2017. "The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God above Party?"

<sup>98</sup> Wu, Keping. 2016. ["The Philanthropic Turn of Religions in Post-Mao China: Bureaucratization, Professionalization, and the Making of a Moral Subject."](#) Modern China. Also refer to Leung, Beatrice. 2005. ["China's Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity."](#) The China Quarterly.

**2015: Xi Jinping's 'Sinicization campaign'**

Since Xi Jinping came to power as the general secretary of the CCP in 2012 and officially took office as China's president in 2013, he has followed a new strategy on religion.

Xi summarized his approach to religious groups in a [speech in 2015](#) that called for the "[Sinicization of religions.](#)" urging all religious groups in China to adapt to socialism by integrating their doctrines, customs and morality with Chinese culture. The campaign particularly affects so-called "foreign" religions. Leaders of [Protestantism](#), [Catholicism](#) and [Islam](#) are expected to [align their teachings and customs](#) with Chinese traditions and "[pledge loyalty](#)" to the state.



Children attend a Holy Communion during Christmas Mass at a Catholic church in Beijing in 2009. Since 2017, the Chinese government has tightened control over religion and strictly enforced the ban on children attending religious services. (Liu Jin/AFP via Getty Images)

His strategy is two-pronged: On the one hand, the government has tightened controls on Islam and Christianity. China's policy toward Muslims includes the detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and a crackdown on underground Quran study groups.

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**Xinjiang is home to 2% of China's total population and 56% of people in traditionally Muslim ethnic groups**

*The government has allegedly detained more than 1 million Muslims in reeducation camps in Xinjiang*



Source: Census of China, 2020, and U.S. State Department International Religious Freedom report for China, 2022.  
"Measuring Religion in China"

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Toward Protestants, the government has reinforced its ban on unauthorized worship sites, forcing house churches to join a state-run association and detaining religious leaders who refuse to cooperate.

Similarly, “underground” Catholics have [faced increased harassment](#), especially after the [Beijing-Vatican deal in 2018](#), which paved the way for the Chinese government and the Holy See to cooperate in appointing bishops.

On the other hand, as Xi has promoted traditional Chinese culture, activities tied to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism have [continued to experience relative leniency](#).

For instance, the government has [allocated funds](#) to protect and repair cultural relics, including [Buddhist grottoes](#), and has [encouraged Taoists to contribute to constructing an “ecological civilization.”](#)

This is not to say that [Confucianism](#), Taoism and [Buddhism](#) have been spared from government control.

These groups, too, have faced increased scrutiny, though to a lesser extent than Islam and Christianity. For example, the government has enacted measures to tackle “outstanding problems” in the Buddhist and Taoist communities, including alleged [commercialization](#), [misconduct by Buddhist leaders](#), and [fake monks](#).



Archbishop Joseph Li Shan leads a Catholic ceremony on Holy Saturday at the South Cathedral in Beijing in March 2018. Later that year, the Vatican announced a historic agreement with China on the appointment of bishops. (Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images)



People dressed as ancient scholars attend a memorial ceremony to mark the 2,571st anniversary of Confucius' birthday at the Confucius Temple in Nanjing, China, on Sept. 28, 2020. (Liu Jianhua/VCG via Getty Images)

The State Council updated its [“Regulations on Religious Affairs”](#) in 2017. Since then, local authorities have intensified efforts to investigate, register and manage unauthorized places of assembly, such as [house churches](#).

In 2018, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), which previously enforced religious policy relatively independently, was renamed the National Religious Affairs Administration and [placed under the direct supervision](#) of the [United Front Work Department](#) (UFWD) – a powerful agency responsible for neutralizing or stifling potential opposition groups that is sometimes referred to as the CCP’s [“magic weapon”](#) – signaling a [tightening](#) of the party’s grip on religion. SARA’s local offices were subsequently absorbed into the UFWD.

In 2021, the government issued a [new regulation on online religious content](#), banning unauthorized religious activities and unregistered religious groups from sharing religious content online.



Muslims wait to attend Friday prayers at the Dongguan Mosque in Xining, China, in 2010. In 2021, the mosque’s main green dome and minaret domes were removed to make the building look more “traditionally” Chinese as part of a national campaign to “Sinicize” religions. (Feng Li/Getty Images)

## Methodology

This report relies primarily on data from seven waves of the Chinese General Social Survey (between 2010-21) and four waves of data from the China Family Panel Studies (between 2012-18) to discuss China’s religious landscape and how it has changed in recent years. Additionally, some analysis uses the China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (between 2012-14), World Values Survey (between 2007-18) and Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (2007).

This Methodology section first describes each of these surveys. Subsequently, it describes how Pew Research Center researchers used these and other sources, including government statistics, to analyze the size of religious groups in China.

### Surveys

#### *Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS)*

The [CGSS](#) is a large-scale cross-sectional survey of Chinese households launched in 2003. Since 2010, it has been conducted by the National Survey Research Center at Renmin University of China. This report relies heavily on six publicly available waves undertaken in 2010, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2018. Each wave includes about 12,000 respondents, sampled across at least 28 of mainland China’s 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, with Hainan, Tibet and Xinjiang excluded from nearly all waves. The 2018 wave included religion modules with additional religion measures. This report also presents results from the two religion questions included in the 2021 wave of about 8,000 respondents, sampled across 19 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The CGSS is funded by Renmin University and, via Project 985, the Chinese government.

(Read [“How the 2021 CGSS compares with surveys in previous years”](#) for more information.)

The CGSS consistently includes questions on religious identity and participation, which makes it useful for analyzing religious affiliation trends among Chinese adults. The CGSS question asks about religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*) – language that implies a formal commitment to an organized religion or value system. The CGSS is the only survey that lists “folk religion (such as worship of *Mazu* and *Guan Gong*)” as a response option. Separately, its 2018 survey asks one third of the respondents (around 4,500 adults) about beliefs and practices commonly associated with folk religions, including frequency of visits to the gravesite(s) of deceased family members. (For more details, read [Appendix B](#).)

Compared with other surveys, the CGSS has a wider sampling coverage.<sup>99</sup> The CGSS covers more of China's regions than many other surveys. The 2010 wave of the CGSS had the most extensive coverage, with respondents from all 31 provincial units in mainland China. After 2013, the CGSS did not include respondents in Xinjiang, where virtually all Uyghurs reside. The Uyghur and Hui ethnic groups make up the vast majority of China's Muslim population. Recent waves of the CGSS underrepresent Uyghurs due to the omission of Xinjiang. However, the Hui are overrepresented in the CGSS when the standard weight is used. The CGSS includes some primary sampling units that are predominantly Hui communities, such as Tongxin, a county in Ningxia that is about 85% Hui. While Hui adults are about 0.7% of the Chinese adult population, they make up 2%-3% of respondents in most CGSS waves.

All CGSS datasets used in this report have been reweighted so that the combined weighted share of ethnic minority respondents, including these Muslim majority ethnic groups, matches the aggregate adult share of these ethnic groups in China's census. (For more details, read the section on [estimating Islam in China](#) later in this Methodology).

### *China Family Panel Studies (CFPS)*

The [CFPS](#) is a longitudinal survey of communities, families and individuals run by Peking University's Institute of Social Science Survey. It has included religion measures since 2012. The CFPS takes place every two years and re-interviews respondents who participated in the baseline survey. This report draws on data from four waves: 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018. When this report was written, the 2018 CFPS was the most current dataset with religion information available to Pew Research Center.<sup>100</sup> Each wave includes about 35,000 adults in more than 13,000 households. The CFPS is funded by Peking University and the government-supervised Natural Science Foundation of China.

Although the CFPS interviews mostly the same respondents over time, different religion measures are used across waves, which makes it challenging to measure religious change. For instance, the 2012 survey measures religious affiliation, while the 2014 survey asks about belief in (*xin*) gods/deities. When similar questions are asked in multiple waves, differences in wording and response categories make it hard to determine the extent to which apparent differences represent real change. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face. The share of interviews conducted over

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<sup>99</sup> The sample of each wave of the CGSS covers at least 28 of mainland China's total 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, compared with 25 or fewer provinces in the CFPS and WVS. Although the CLDS has a sample covering 29 provincial units of China, because the survey is designed to study the population ages 15 to 64, it is not suitable for this analysis.

<sup>100</sup> Although most of the 2020 CFPS data is available to the public, no religion variables have been made public and requests by Pew Research Center researchers for access to these variables were denied.

the phone made up 5% or less in the earlier waves, while about 17% of interviews in each of the 2016 and 2018 surveys were conducted by phone.<sup>101</sup>

In addition, the CFPS survey has a higher rate of missing religion variables than other surveys. For instance, religious affiliation is missing for about 10% of respondents in the 2016 CFPS survey, while nonresponse on the religion variable is typically less than 0.1% in the CGSS. The CFPS's higher proportion of missing data is primarily the result of survey design: The survey allows family members to answer nonattitudinal questions when the respondents are not present in the household at the time of the interview.<sup>102</sup>

The CFPS includes measures of religious beliefs, practices and the importance of religion (*zongjiao*). The most recent wave, conducted in 2018, collected information on belief in various deities – Buddha and/or a bodhisattva, Taoist deities, Allah, Jesus Christ, *Tianzhu* (the word Chinese Catholics use for God) – and other supernatural concepts, such as *fengshui* and ghosts.

The 2016 survey asked about respondents' engagement in specific religious activities such as burning incense or venerating Buddha/deities (*shaoxiangbaifo*) and attending worship services (*zuo libai*). The survey assumed that Buddhists and Taoists do not attend worship services and that Christians and Muslims do not burn incense to worship Buddha. Therefore, the question about burning incense was not asked of Muslim and Christian respondents, and the question about attending worship services was skipped for Buddhists and Taoists. (For more details, read [Appendix B.](#))

### *China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS)*

The [CLDS](#) is a survey project run by the Center for Social Science Survey at Sun Yat-sen University. The CLDS collects data on communities, households and working-age individuals (ages 15 to 64). This report uses data from the 2012 wave, which had more than 15,000 adult respondents, and the 2014 wave, which had more than 21,000 adult respondents. When the report was written, the 2014 CLDS was the most recent dataset available to Pew Research Center. The CLDS is funded by the Guangdong government and China's central government via Project 985. The CLDS collected information on religious affiliation between 2012 and 2018, so this survey can be used to assess religious change among the adult population under age 65 during this period.

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<sup>101</sup> Read the [CFPS user's manual](#) for more about the survey design.

<sup>102</sup> Such missing cases are excluded from this report's analysis as these respondents were not asked any attitudinal questions. Read the [CFPS user's manual](#) for more about the survey design.

However, Pew Research Center did not receive approval to access 2016 and 2018 data due to the CLDS's data sharing policy, which restricts access to university staff/students or independent researchers in China only.

The CLDS data also includes religious site information at the neighborhood committee level. Neighborhood committees – known as villagers' committees (*cunweihui*) in rural areas and as residents' committees (*juweihui*) in cities – are the smallest administrative unit in China.<sup>103</sup> The survey covers between 300 and 400 neighborhood committees in each wave and asks an informed staff member on the committee about whether there are any Buddhist temples, Taoist temples, folk religion shrines, churches, ancestral halls, and mosques in the committee's jurisdiction. (For more details, read [Appendix B.](#))

### *World Values Survey (WVS)*

The [WVS](#) is a research program headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. It's run by an international network of survey researchers. The most recent wave of the China survey (2018) was conducted by the Center of Survey and Public Research at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Data in this report is from three waves. The 2007 and 2012 waves had about 2,000 respondents each. The 2018 wave had 3,036 respondents and was funded by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shandong University, Peking University and Tsinghua University. The 2018 survey consists of respondents from 29 provincial units (Tibet and Xinjiang are excluded).

The WVS survey, despite its relatively small sample size, provides a unique perspective on religious trends in China because it includes questions not asked in other surveys. Besides collecting information on religious affiliation and participation, the survey includes measures of the importance of religion, including the importance of teaching religious faith to children, and a measure of atheist identification. The 2012 and 2018 waves measure belief in life after death, belief in hell, and belief in heaven. (For more details, read [Appendix B.](#))

### *Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (SLSCR)*

The [SLSCR](#) is a nationally representative survey conducted in 2007 by the Chinese polling firm Horizon Research Consultancy Group. The survey follows a multi-stage sampling design and consists of 6,861 adults interviewed in 24 provinces in China (excluding Hainan, Jilin, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tianjin, Tibet and Xinjiang).

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<sup>103</sup> A neighborhood committee generally represents between [1,000 and 3,000 households](#), while a villagers' committee is comprised of an average of around 370 households, calculated using the numbers of [households](#) and [villagers' committees](#) in China as of 2020.

The SLSCR includes detailed questions on religious beliefs and practices, including those relating to Chinese folk religion. The survey includes a wide range of religion measures, such as the practice of burning incense to pay respects to deities at home or in a temple, attending worship services in church, and beliefs in various supernatural beings, including Buddha, Jesus Christ, deities and ghosts.

Several measures of religious beliefs and practices in the SLSCR are similar to measures in the CFPS, but differences in question wording often make it difficult to infer trends by comparing the two surveys. For example, the SLSCR asked respondents about believing in (*xiangxin*) Buddhism or believing in (*xin*) Buddha, while the CFPS measured belief in (*xin*) Buddha and/or a bodhisattva. The former captures respondents who either identify with Buddhism or believe in Buddha, while the latter measures belief in Buddha and/or a bodhisattva. (For more details, read [Appendix B.](#))

### How the 2021 CGSS compares with surveys in previous years

The most recent Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) was conducted roughly between June and September 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. This period encompassed the initial surge of the highly transmissible and aggressive delta variant. Under China’s “zero-COVID” policy, neighborhoods and sometimes entire cities imposed strict lockdowns – including limits on movement outside of homes and closing of public venues – when new local infections were recorded. For instance, neighborhoods in [several cities of Guangdong province were in lockdown](#) in June 2021 due to the spread of the delta variant, and by August, the variant had caused [lockdowns in more than a dozen provinces](#) in China.

Although pandemic constraints may have affected the implementation of the survey across China, it appears the CGSS team did not revise their sampling strategy, according to their description of [the 2021 wave](#). Following the [same sampling plan](#) as in previous years, they selected 125 primary sampling units (PSU) from the national total of 2,762 county-level units, with China’s five metropolitan cities (Shanghai, Beijing,

### Sudden decline in China’s folk religion estimate is likely due to the 2021 CGSS’s omission of some provinces

*% of adults in China who identify with ...*

	2021		2018	
	All 19 provinces	All 28 provinces	In 2021 sample	NOT in 2021 sample
No religion	93.0%	89.9%	91.2%	87.5%
Buddhism	3.7	3.8	3.8	3.7
Folk religion	0.2	2.7	1.2	5.6
Christianity	1.4	1.8	1.9	1.7
Islam	1.3	1.5	1.8	1.0
Other religions	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.4

Note: The 2021 data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and in fewer provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (19) than in the 2018 wave (28).

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2018 and 2021.

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Shenzhen, Chongqing, and Tianjin) each set as a separate self-representative stratum.<sup>104</sup>

However, the CGSS team ended up collecting data in fewer provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (19) in the 2021 wave than in previous years (28-31). In 2018, data was collected in 28 provinces. Pew Research Center emailed the CGSS team to ask for an explanation, but we did not receive a reply. The reason may be that data collection was difficult or impossible in some provinces, such as [Guangdong](#), [Shanghai](#) and [Yunnan](#), during the delta variant outbreaks.

Data collected in the 2021 wave covered provinces where 70% of China’s population resides – as opposed to more than 99% in previous years. Excluding those provinces does not seem to affect demographic measures including age, sex, urbanicity and education, which are corrected by the survey weight. However, the survey weight does not adjust for religious affiliation.

The 2021 estimates of religious affiliation differ from previous waves. For example, in the 2021 CGSS, 0.2% of Chinese adults identify with folk religion (responding that they venerate “*Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.*”), compared with 2.7% in 2018. Meanwhile, the share of Chinese who say they have no religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*) was 3 percentage points higher in 2021 than in 2018 (93% vs. 90%).

A closer look at the data suggests the nine provinces that were missing from the 2021 wave compared with the 2018 wave – Guangdong, Guizhou, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Qinghai, Shanghai, Sichuan, Tianjin and Yunnan – together have a higher share of folk religion adherents than the rest (6% vs. 1%).

Due to these limitations of the 2021 CGSS, the discussion of religious affiliation in this report is primarily based on data collected from 2010 until 2018.

In addition, since the 2021 survey was conducted during a period of severe restrictions on travel and indoor gatherings, we did not use the latest wave to explore the trend of religious (*zongjiao*) participation either. The 2021 CGSS shows that about 3% of Chinese adults reported attending *zongjiao* activities at least a few times a year, down from 6% in 2018.<sup>105</sup> This statistically significant

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### Religious (*zongjiao*) attendance in 2018 and 2021

*% of adults in China who attend religious (*zongjiao*) activities at least a few times a year*

	2018	2021
All adults	6.0%	3.0%
Religiously affiliated	45.2	35.2
Religiously unaffiliated	1.6	0.5

Note: The 2021 data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic and in fewer provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions (19) than in the 2018 waves (28).

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2018 and 2021.

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<sup>104</sup> In the 2010 CGSS, the only wave with information of the primary sampling units available, there were 133 primary sampling units in the final sample. The 2010 CGSS included more provinces than recent waves.

<sup>105</sup> It was 5% when looking at the 19 provinces that were sampled in the 2021 survey.

decline may be a pandemic effect, though it was unclear how respondents who switched to participating in such activities remotely reported their religious attendance, as the CGSS did not specify the ways in which religious activities take place. (Read [Appendix B](#) for details on religion questions in each survey).

## Government data

In this report, government statistics refer to data and estimates published by either the Chinese government, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), or state-controlled agencies and organizations that are directly supervised by the State Council of China. This report uses government statistics to report on several measures, including counts of religious personnel and registered places of worship, tourism, crude birth rates and CCP membership. Below is a summary of government data sources used in the report.

### *Numbers of clergy and registered religious venues*

Government statistics on religious sites and clergy came primarily from the State Council of the People's Republic of China Information Office's White Paper on Religion ([1997](#) and [2018](#)). Pew Research Center researchers also obtained some government statistics from articles published in state-run media. For example, our 2009 official figures came from [a Xinhua news article](#).

In addition, we drew further information on clergy and worship sites from the websites of government agencies on religion, including the [National Religious Affairs Administration](#) (NRAA), formerly known as the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) and five state-run agencies for religions, namely the [Buddhist Association of China](#), the [China Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement](#) (Protestant Christianity), the [Islamic Association of China](#), the [Catholic Patriotic Association](#), and the [Chinese Taoist Association](#). For example, the number of officially registered Buddhist and Taoist temples by province came from the NRAA's website on [worship sites](#), while the province-level data on the distribution of mosques was from the [Islamic Association of China](#).

### *Tourism*

Statistics on tourism came directly from government reports. The number of domestic tourists were from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's annual reports. The number of visits to Jiuhua Mountain scenic area came from [Anhui Bureau of Statistics' annual reports](#) on economic and social development of Chizhou prefecture. The number of visits to Wudang Mountain each year was sourced from [news reports](#).

### *Crude birth rates*

Government statistics of crude birth rates at the national level and in Xinjiang came from [China Statistical Yearbook](#) (2009-22). Those in Kashgar were from annual reports on [economic and social development of Kashgar prefecture](#) (2009-20).

### *CCP members and organizations*

Official figures on CCP members came from [annual reports published by the Organization Department of the CCP Central Committee](#) (2008-21).

## **Estimating Islam in China**

One approach to estimating the number of Muslims in China is to simply add up the members of each traditionally Muslim ethnic group using census data. However, this approach assumes that *all* members of these specific ethnic groups identify as Muslim, though survey data indicates that this is not the case. Roughly 10% of Hui or Uyghur adults do not identify as Muslims, according to the 2010 Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS). Second, this approach fails to consider Muslim converts of other ethnicities, especially among the majority Han population.

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### **After adjusting for ethnic composition, fewer than 2% of adults in China are Muslim**

*% of adults in China who identify as Muslim*

Year	Original weight	New weight
2010	2.9%	1.4%
2018	2.5	1.5

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2010 and 2018.  
"Measuring Religion in China"

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Many surveys exclude Xinjiang, a sparsely populated province where most Chinese Muslims reside.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, most surveys are not weighted to represent China's ethnic composition. To address these issues, we modified the weight in the CGSS – the survey with the most extensive geographic coverage – to match the ethnic composition of China.<sup>107</sup> We adjusted the shares of Huis and Uyghurs (who account for more than 90% of China's predominantly Muslim ethnic

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<sup>106</sup> It is not unusual for survey teams in China to exclude provinces with small populations in national surveys. For instance, the China Family Panel Studies team excludes Hainan, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tibet and Xinjiang in their sample. The 2010 CGSS is the only survey whose sample covers all 31 provincial units of mainland China.

<sup>107</sup> The sample of each CGSS wave (2010-18) covers at least 28 of mainland China's total 31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions, compared with 25 or fewer provinces in the China Family Panel Studies and most waves of the World Values Survey. Although the China Labor-force Dynamics Survey has a sample covering 29 provincial units of China, it is not suitable for this analysis because the survey is designed to study the population ages 15 to 64.

population) and Zhuang adults (China's largest ethnic minority group) to align with their shares in the Chinese census.

In addition, because the CGSS has not been conducted in Xinjiang since 2013 and Xinjiang is home to not only most Uyghurs (99%), but according to the 2020 census, is also home to five other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities – Kazakh (99%), Tajik (99%), Kirgiz (97%), Uzbek (97%) and Tatar (92%) – we made adjustments so that in aggregate, these five ethnic groups are proportionally represented in the CGSS sample.

We used ethnic composition information from the 2010 Chinese census to reweight the CGSS waves conducted between 2010 and 2015, and the latest 2020 census was used to adjust the weight in the 2017, 2018 and 2021 CGSS.

After the weight adjustment, the ethnic composition in the CGSS is comparable with the census. For instance, in the 2018 CGSS, Uyghur and Hui adults, together with five smaller predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, account for roughly 1.6% of the adult population, which is identical to their share in the 2020 census.

This approach assumes the Muslim share among Hui people continues to be a good estimate of the Muslim share among Uyghurs and other Muslim-ethnic groups mostly living in Xinjiang.<sup>108</sup> The 2010 CGSS found about nine-in-ten Hui adults (89%) and Uyghurs (90%) identified as Muslim. Muslims identification was higher among both groups in the 2012 CGSS (96% Hui, 99% Uyghur).

Based on this data, it seems reasonable to assume that Uyghurs and Huis identify as Muslim at similar rates, though more data is needed to gauge how Muslim identification among Huis and Uyghurs may have changed in recent years. After 2013, the CGSS did not collect data in Xinjiang. In any case, adjusting the ethnic composition improves the proportional representation of Muslims in the CGSS by properly representing the aggregate size of traditionally Muslim ethnic groups.

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### With the new weight, the ethnic composition in the survey aligns with the census

*% of adults in China, by ethnicity*

Ethnicity	Original weight	New weight	Census
Han	90.7%	91.8%	91.8%
Hui and Uyghur	2.6	1.6	1.6*
Zhuang	1.6	1.3	1.3
Other ethnic minorities	5.0	5.3	5.3

\* This Hui and Uyghur estimate based on the census also includes five other predominantly ethnic minorities that mostly reside in Xinjiang, including Kazakhs, Kirgizs, Tajiks, Tatars and Uzbeks. Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2018, and census of China, 2020.

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<sup>108</sup> For other analyses, including religious participation, religious upbringing and interfaith marriage, we show only Hui Muslims, using CGSS data.

## Exploring the underreporting of *zongjiao* affiliation in Chinese surveys

Scholars often argue that Chinese surveys that ask about religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*) may suffer from underreporting. They argue that this issue may specifically lead to an undercount of Christians, because some Christians – particularly those who worship in unauthorized churches – may not agree to be interviewed or divulge their religious identity to interviewers.<sup>109</sup>

In recent years, the Chinese government has [tightened control over religion](#) and [intensified crackdowns](#) on unauthorized religious groups and activities. It is possible that surveys now suffer from more underreporting than in the past, as Chinese people are under more pressure to distance themselves from religion (*zongjiao*), especially unauthorized *zongjiao* activities.

However, there has been limited research examining the underreporting of religious affiliation in China using survey data, and we do not know whether the underreporting of *zongjiao* affiliation has become more common in recent years.

### *How zongjiao estimates compare between surveys with different wording*

Chinese surveys that ask about religious affiliation using *zongjiao* as the key concept are comparable, but the question wordings and sequencing of response options are not identical. For example, the CGSS *zongjiao* question is worded as “What is your religious belief (*zongjiao xinyang*)?” and the survey consistently lists “No *zongjiao xinyang*” as the first response option. Meanwhile, the corresponding 2016 CFPS question is “To which *zongjiao* do you belong (*shuyu*)?” with “No *zongjiao xinyang*” offered as the second to last response option. (Read [Appendix B](#) for details on other survey questions).

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<sup>109</sup> Read Stark, Rodney, Byron Johnson and Carson Mencken. 2011. [“Counting China’s Christians: There are as many Christians in China as there are members of the Communist Party.”](#) Stark and his colleagues reported a higher refusal rate among Christians worshipping in unregistered churches compared with the general adult population (62% vs. 38%). Moreover, they posited that about one-in-ten presumed Christians who agreed to be interviewed did not admit to being Christian when asked. Data from this study has not been made public.

These issues may affect zongjiao estimates and contribute to differences between survey results. For example, [some studies](#) have noted the “primacy effect” – i.e., that the first category in a list tends to be over-selected by respondents. In other words, surveys with “No zongjiao xinyang” listed as the first option are likely to produce a higher share of religiously unaffiliated people than surveys that place this option last.

To explore these differences, we look closer at a variety of Christian and Buddhist estimates, by 1) comparing surveys with identical wording but different response orders, using the 2012 and 2018 WVS and 2) by comparing surveys with different wording but the same response orders.

(The CGSS estimate for Buddhist affiliation is omitted from the analysis because unlike other surveys, the CGSS survey includes a “Folk religion” category in the response option. And our analysis shows that surveys with the “Folk religion” option generally produce a lower estimate of adults who identify with Buddhism than surveys without a “Folk religion” response option.)

Our analysis indicates that zongjiao measures generally produce similar results across surveys despite differences in question wording and response orders (at least, when it comes to the placement of the “No zongjiao” option.) The differences in Christian or Buddhist estimates between surveys are not statistically different.

### Surveys with ‘folk religion’ option tend to produce lower estimates of Buddhist affiliation

*% of adults in China who identify with Buddhism*

What is your religion (zongjiao) or religious belief (zongjiao xinyang) ...	Buddhism
<i>‘Folk religion’ is NOT an option</i>	
2012 CFPS	6.9% (±2.2)
2016 CFPS	9.0 (±2.2)
2012 WVS	9.2 (±2.7)
2018 WVS	8.8 (±2.3)
2012 CLDS	8.3* (±1.9)
2014 CLDS	6.8* (±1.9)
<i>‘Folk religion’ is an option (CGSS)</i>	
2010	5.5 (±1.3)
2012	5.8 (±1.4)
2013	5.2 (±1.3)
2015	4.7 (±1.3)
2017	4.5 (±1.2)
2018	3.8 (±1.1)

Note: The China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS) estimates are among adults ages 18 to 64. Margins of error are included in parenthesis.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS); CLDS; China Family Panel Studies (CFPS); and World Values Survey (WVS).  
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## Listing ‘no zongjiao’ as the first response option seems to have little impact on Christian or Buddhist estimates

Which <i>zongjiao</i> do you believe in?	‘I don’t believe in any’ listed as the ninth option (2012)	‘I don’t believe in any’ listed as the first option (2018)
Christianity	3.3% ( $\pm 1.3$ )	2.5% ( $\pm 1.0$ )
Buddhism	9.2 ( $\pm 2.7$ )	8.8 ( $\pm 2.3$ )

Note: Based on adults in China. The question wording: “Which religion (*zongjiao*) do you believe in (*xinyang*)?” is the same between the two waves. The differences in the estimates of Christianity and Buddhism between two surveys are not statistically significant. The estimates of other religions are omitted because the survey does not adjust for ethnic composition, which affects the Muslim percentage and therefore that of the religiously unaffiliated. Margins of error are included in parenthesis.

Source: World Values Survey, 2012 and 2018.

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## Surveys that ask about religion (*zongjiao*) produce similar Christian estimates, despite wording differences

Question wording	Christianity	Buddhism	Source
To which religion ( <i>zongjiao</i> ) do you belong? 请问您属于什么宗教?	2.6% ( $\pm 0.5$ )	9.0% ( $\pm 2.2$ )	2016 CFPS
Which religion ( <i>zongjiao</i> ) do you believe in ( <i>xinyang</i> )? 您信仰那个宗教?	2.5 ( $\pm 1.0$ )	8.8 ( $\pm 2.3$ )	2018 WVS
What religion do you believe in ( <i>xin</i> )? 您信的是什么教?	2.2* ( $\pm 0.7$ )	6.8* ( $\pm 1.9$ )	2014 CLDS
What is your religious belief ( <i>zongjiao xinyang</i> )? 您的宗教信仰是什么?	1.8 ( $\pm 0.5$ )	–	2018 CGSS

Note: Based on adults in China. The China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS) estimates are among adults ages 18 to 64 only. Margins of error are included in parenthesis. The Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS) Buddhist estimate is omitted because it may not be comparable to other survey results as the CGSS includes a “folk religion” category in the response option.

Source: China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), 2016; World Values Survey (WVS), 2018; CLDS, 2014; and CGSS, 2018.

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### Identifying with more than one religion

In addition, surveys that allow respondents to choose more than one response option to the zongjiao question produce statistically insignificant differences compared with those that allow only one answer. This is because most Chinese people who identify with a religion identify with only one, even though many mix beliefs and practices from multiple faiths. Fewer than 0.5% of adults chose more than one religion across all four waves of the CGSS (2012-17), which allow respondents to choose more than one answer to the question “What is your religious belief (zongjiao xinyang)?”<sup>110</sup>

The most common combination of faiths is Buddhism and folk religions (74 out of the total 46,747 respondents), followed by Buddhism and Taoism (19), and Taoism and folk religions (15), according to pooled data from four waves of the CGSS. Mixing traditional Chinese religions with non-traditional religions is rare. Fewer than 20 respondents identified with both (a) traditional Chinese religion(s) such as Buddhism, Taoism or folk religions, and (a) nontraditional religion(s) such as Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism or Islam at the same time.

Identifying with more than two religions is also uncommon: Only 11 respondents across four waves chose more than two religions.

When estimating religious composition in China, we collapsed respondents with more than one religion into a single religion to avoid double-counting. We categorized respondents based on considerations of scarcity and stigmatization. When respondents identified with more than one

Multiple faiths	Salient religion
Buddhism and folk religions	Folk religions
Buddhism and Taoism	Taoism
Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions	Taoism
Buddhism and Christianity	Christianity
Taoism and Christianity	Christianity

### Excluding respondents with multiple faiths produces similar results as those presented in this report

*% of adults in China who identify as \_\_\_\_, according to each approach*

	Our approach	Alternative approach
Religiously unaffiliated	90.1%	90.1%
Buddhists	4.5	4.5
Folk religions	2.0	1.9
Christians	1.6	1.6
Muslims	1.5	1.5
Other religions	0.3	0.4

Note: In this report, respondents with more than one faith are assigned their “salient religion” (i.e. the one that is more stigmatized or less common). The other approach puts all such respondents into the “Other religions” category.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey, 2017  
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<sup>110</sup> The Chinese wording of this question is “您的宗教信仰是什么?” In the 2017 CGSS – the most recent wave with information on multiple faiths, only 33 respondents (less than 0.3%) of the total sample (12,582) identified with more than one religion. The 2010 and 2018 waves also allowed respondents to choose more than one religion, but unlike other waves, the datasets provide a single religion variable, forcing each respondent to fall into only one religion category.

religion, we classified them based on the identity that is more stigmatized in Chinese society and/or the less common religion. For example, between Buddhism and Taoism, Taoism is rarer, and between Christianity and Taoism, Christianity is more stigmatized in China.

There are other plausible approaches to handling cases with multiple faiths, such as assigning anyone who identifies with more than one religion to the “Other religions” category. But because adults with multiple faiths make up only a tiny fraction of the population, any recoding strategy has little impact on the share of each religious group. Alternative recoding approaches produce similar results as those presented in this report. In the 2017 CGSS for example, Buddhists account for 4.5% of the total adult population, according to the above approach. The estimate remains the same when excluding respondents who identified with Buddhism and (an)other religion(s) at the same time. A similar pattern exists for Christianity, Islam and folk religions.

## Why the *zongjiao* measures of affiliation discussed in this report differ from previous Pew Research Center estimates of China's religious composition

In this report, we describe the challenges of estimating the sizes of religious groups in China and explain how estimates vary depending on whether the underlying survey data measures formal *zongjiao* affiliation, or (non-*zongjiao*) beliefs and practices. We also describe cultural and political pressures that could constrain what respondents say in surveys.

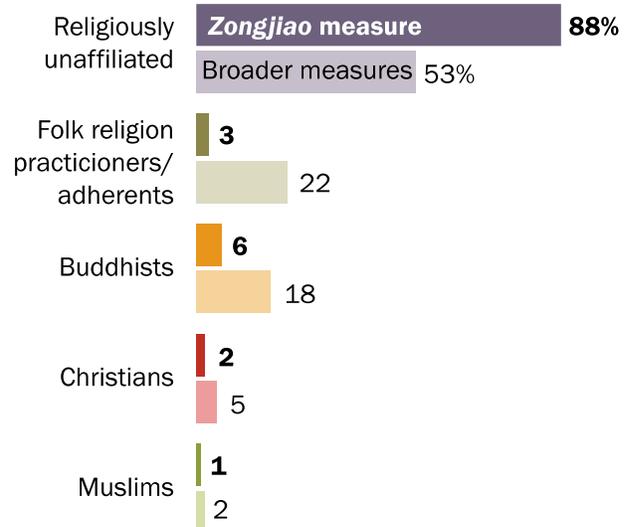
This report is Pew Research Center's most in-depth analysis of the challenges of measuring religion in China, but it is not the first time we have wrestled with this topic. For example, our 2011 report on Global Christianity included a [lengthy Appendix](#) about the difficulty of measuring Christianity in China. In the Methodology for our 2012 report, "The Global Religious Landscape," we explained how we used a [unique mix of methods](#) to address challenges of estimating the size of China's religious groups.

The 2011 and 2012 reports relied on the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (SLSCR), which included many religion questions.<sup>111</sup> The SLSCR has not been repeated and many of its survey questions have not been asked by other survey organizations.

Nonetheless, even when we wrote our earlier reports, it was clear that according to *zongjiao* measures of formal affiliation, nearly nine-in-ten Chinese could be classified as religiously unaffiliated.

### How survey-based estimates of *zongjiao* religious affiliation in China vary from our earlier, broader approach

% of adults in China who were \_\_\_ in 2010



Note: Earlier Pew Research Center estimates for China used a mix of survey measures on belief, practice and affiliation to estimate the size of religious groups, and Christian estimates were adjusted to account for a potential undercount. The *zongjiao* measure rows show what our 2010 estimate would have been if we had limited ourselves to survey measures on formal *zongjiao* affiliation, which typically refers to formally identifying with organized religion and does not generally capture traditional Chinese religions. While the Center's previous estimates included adults ages 20 and older, the *zongjiao* measure in this table includes adults ages 18 and older. Source: Earlier estimates from "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050." New estimates are based on the Chinese General Social Survey, 2010. "Measuring Religion in China"

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<sup>111</sup> Data from the 2010 wave of the Chinese General Social Survey was not available when we wrote the above reports.

In 2011 and 2012, we took non-zongjiao measures into account when making estimates, which means our estimates were larger than zongjiao measures alone would indicate. For example, our estimate of the size of the Buddhist population was informed by a measure of believing in (*xin*) Buddha, a more inclusive measure than zongjiao identity.

The 2007 SLSCR survey did not offer a zongjiao measure of folk religions, so we classified people in the folk religion category by considering their beliefs and practices.<sup>112</sup> We also adjusted our estimate of the Christian population in light of evidence of underreporting among Chinese Christians.<sup>113</sup>

### **Can Chinese survey data be trusted?**

The Chinese government monitors and restricts many aspects of life, including which websites are available to Chinese residents, as well as what [kinds of content](#) can be discussed on popular messaging and blogging sites, such as WeChat and Weibo. Authorities also regulate academic research and social surveys in China.

As a result, readers may wonder how much trust to place in surveys conducted by Chinese academic organizations, such as the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and the China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS).

On the one hand, these surveys are conducted by researchers at state-supervised, publicly funded universities, and the surveys themselves are often indirectly financed by the Chinese government.<sup>114</sup> Scholars at Chinese universities may need the government's tacit or explicit approval to continue their research and advance in their careers. Also, when survey interviewers introduce themselves to respondents, they may present [letters of recommendation from local authorities to help demonstrate their legitimacy](#). Interviewers sometimes seek additional help from local officials to gain cooperation from interviewees, and in some cases an official may even be present during the interview, although this appears to be rare. For example, a local official was

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<sup>112</sup> Respondents from the 2007 SLSCR were classified as a folk religionist if they did not identify with one of the other religious groups and reported worshipping gods or spirits at conventional religious sites, at home or in the workplace; attending formal temple services or praying or burning incense in temples; or believing in the existence of gods or spirits, evil forces or demons, heaven, hell, the afterlife or reincarnation.

<sup>113</sup> Refer to Stark, Rodney, Byron Johnson and Carson Mencken. 2011. ["Counting China's Christians: There are as many Christians in China as there are members of the Communist Party."](#) Stark and his colleagues reported a higher refusal rate among Christians worshipping in unregistered churches compared with the general adult population (62% vs. 38%). Moreover, they posited that about one-in-ten of presumed Christians who agreed to be interviewed did not admit to being Christian when asked. Data from this study has not been made public.

<sup>114</sup> Large-scale surveys are expensive, and it is common for surveys around the world to be financed, directly or indirectly, by governments. For example, in the United States, the General Social Survey is supported by grants from the National Science Foundation, a government organization. However, Pew Research Center surveys do not receive government funding.

recorded as being present during 0.4% of interviews for the 2018 CFPS.<sup>115</sup>

On the other hand, the scholars at Renmin University, Peking University and Sun Yat-sen University who conduct the CGSS, CFPS and CLDS are highly credentialed experts in their fields. Each of these survey teams has an [international advisory committee](#) that includes experts in survey methodology. For example, the CFPS team [collaborated](#) with researchers from the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center to design and carry out their survey project. Finally, the consistency of survey results over many years, and the comparability of results across survey projects, suggests that the findings do not fluctuate substantially in response to changing government regulations of religion. And, in addition to the government-supported academic surveys analyzed in this report, data collected by Horizon Research Consultancy Group, a private organization that conducts surveys in China, shows broadly similar patterns in measures of religion.

This report discusses both the strengths and the limitations of information on religion from China. Pew Research Center's demographers have identified and clearly called out some data points that should be viewed with caution, such as official statistics on numbers of worship sites.

Overall, however, the survey findings discussed in this report can be considered the *best available* source of national-level information in a country where Pew Research Center and other independent, international researchers are not currently able to freely conduct their own surveys. While it is possible that Chinese respondents do not reveal the full extent of their religious affiliations, beliefs and practices to interviewers, multiple surveys conducted by different organizations over the past two decades consistently show Chinese respondents telling interviewers they have low levels of identification with organized religion (zongjiao), yet they affirm specific beliefs and practices that may be considered spiritual or religious.

Aside from surveys, there are limited methods for measuring China's religious landscape. Qualitative studies of communities provide rich, nuanced information about religious life in those settings. However, it is impossible to know the extent to which studies in one geographic area of China are representative of other areas. The government collects some statistics through official government religious associations, but the methodology and reliability of these statistics is not clear. Some religious groups collect their own statistics, but no organization collects membership

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<sup>115</sup> Seeking formal or informal permission from local authorities, such as tribal leaders, is a fairly common practice among survey researchers not just in China, but also in some other countries. For example, some firms working under contract with Pew Research Center to conduct face-to-face interviews internationally have informed local officials about survey activity happening in their areas, to help ensure the safety of interviewers. But the Center's interviewers try to avoid the presence during interviews of any third parties, including family members, neighbors and friends, as well as local officials.

statistics on Buddhists, Taoists or people who observe folk religions. In other words, while it is important to keep in mind the limitations of surveys, they are the best tool available – and in some respects the only tool – for measuring national trends in religion in China.

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional hurdles for survey research. For example, as discussed earlier, the 2021 Chinese General Social Survey was conducted in only 19 of mainland China’s 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. China enforced strict “zero-COVID” lockdowns during the pandemic, and when the survey was fielded from roughly June to September 2021, the [delta variant of the coronavirus](#) made face-to-face surveys difficult in regions where it would otherwise have been conducted.

## Appendix A: Glossary

Chinese pinyin	Chinese characters	English definition
<b>bu wanquan tongji</b>	不完全统计	Incomplete statistics, commonly used in official reports to suggest the statistics have serious limitations.
<b>caishen</b>	财神	The god of wealth, who can bless people with luck and prosperity. One popular caishen is <b>Guan Gong</b> .
<b>Cangu Nainai</b>	蚕姑奶奶	Silkworm Mother, a folk deity popular in Hebei province.
<b>citang/zongci</b>	祠堂/宗祠	An ancestral temple or hall.
<b>cunweihui</b>	村委会	Villagers' committee, the smallest administrative unit in rural areas. (Also refer to <b>juweihui</b> )
<b>Daodejing</b>	道德经	"The Book of the Way and the Virtue," a foundational text of Taoism, written by Chinese philosopher Laozi.
<b>dao guan</b>	道观	A Taoist temple with resident Taoist monks or nuns.
<b>Daojiao</b>	道教	Religious Taoism.
<b>dengji/zhuce</b>	登记/注册	To register or put on record.
<b>dixia jiaohui</b>	地下教会	"Underground church" that is Catholic (i.e., a Catholic church not affiliated with the state-controlled Catholic association). (Also refer to <b>jiating jiaohui</b> )
<b>Falun Gong</b>	法轮功	Literally "law wheel practice," a spiritual movement with Qigong elements and Buddhist and Taoist concepts. It was founded in 1992 and banned in China in 1999. (Also refer to <b>Qigong</b> )
<b>fengshui</b>	风水	Literally "wind-water," the practice of arranging objects and physical space to achieve balance and harmony to ensure good luck.
<b>fo</b>	佛	Buddha.
<b>Fojiao</b>	佛教	Buddhism.
<b>fomen dizi</b>	佛门弟子	A disciple of Buddha.
<b>gong/guan</b>	宫/观	A Taoist temple with a monastery in the context of this report. (Also refer to <b>si/siyuan</b> )
<b>Guan Gong</b>	关公	Lord Guan, the deified figure of military general Guan Yu. Historically worshipped as the god of wealth and war. (Also refer to <b>caishen</b> )
<b>Guanyin</b>	观音	The goddess of mercy, a popular folk deity rooted in the Buddhist bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who is often depicted as genderless or male.
<b>Gui</b>	鬼	In the context of this report, ghost or the spirit of a dead person.
<b>Gui Jie</b>	鬼节	(Hungry) Ghost Festival, which falls on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month. (Also refer to <b>Zhongyuan Jie</b> and <b>Yulanpen Jie</b> )
<b>guiyi</b>	皈依	"Taking refuge," a formal ritual of converting to Buddhism.

<b>hukou</b>	户口	Household registration, which the Chinese government uses to classify citizens into urban and rural residence categories.
<b>huoju daoshi</b>	火居道士	A Taoist priest who lives at home (as opposed to a monastery).
<b>jiaotang</b>	教堂	A church building.
<b>jiating jiaohui</b>	家庭教会	“House church,” typically refers to an unregistered Protestant church or a Protestant church whose leader refuses to affiliate with the state-run Christian agency. (Also refer to <b>lianghui</b> and <b>dixia jiaohui</b> )
<b>Jidujiao</b>	基督教	Christianity, but is often used to refer to Protestantism specifically. (Also refer to <b>Jidu xinjiao</b> )
<b>Jidu xinjiao</b>	基督新教	Protestantism.
<b>jili</b>	祭礼	In this report, refers to ancestral rites or the ceremony or ritual of venerating ancestors. (Also refer to <b>jisi zuxian/jizu</b> )
<b>jisi zuxian/jizu</b>	祭祀祖先/祭祖	Ancestor veneration, a traditional Chinese custom that often involves burning “spirit money” and making food or drink offerings to deceased family members.
<b>juhuidian</b>	聚会点	Meeting point, a Protestant religious venue that functions like a church but is typically smaller and not housed in a church building.
<b>juweihui</b>	居委会	Residents’ committee, the smallest administrative unit in cities. (Also refer to <b>cunweihui</b> )
<b>kongmiao/wenmiao</b>	孔庙/文庙	Confucian temple, traditionally a ceremonial site for the worship of Confucius.
<b>lianghui</b>	两会	Literally “Two Committees.” Refers to, in the context of this report, the China Christian Council (CCC) and the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Committee, the two agencies responsible for supervising Protestant Christianity in China.
<b>ling/lingyan</b>	灵/灵验	Efficacy or efficacious, used in this context to refer to prayers to gods or deities being answered.
<b>longwang</b>	龙王	Dragon king, a category of folk deities believed to control wind and rain.
<b>Lunyu</b>	论语	“The Analects,” a collection of Confucius’ aphorisms compiled by his disciples.
<b>Mazu</b>	妈祖	Goddess of the sea, the deified figure of Li Mo, a woman shaman who lived in coastal Fujian and has evolved into a popular Buddhist and Taoist figure.
<b>miao</b>	庙	Traditional religious temples that typically do not have a monastery for monks or nuns.
<b>ming</b>	命	Fate or destiny.
<b>minjian xinyang</b>	民间信仰	Folk religion(s).
<b>mixin</b>	迷信	Superstition.
<b>neidan</b>	内丹	Internal alchemy, the Taoist practice of maneuvering the energy of the body to achieve immortality.
<b>pusa</b>	菩萨	Bodhisattva, in Buddhism a person who is on the path to achieve enlightenment.

<b>Qigong</b>	气功	A form of body-mind practice to cultivate and harness Qi, the energy or the life force that empowers all living creatures in Chinese religious tradition.
<b>qiancheng de</b>	虔诚的	Devout or deep, as in religious commitment.
<b>Qingming Jie</b>	清明节	Tomb Sweeping Day, which usually falls on April 4 or 5, when Chinese people traditionally tidy the gravesite(s) of deceased family members and perform ancestor rituals.
<b>Quanzhen</b>	全真	Pure Perfection, a Taoist sect.
<b>ren</b>	仁	Benevolence or “loving others,” one of Confucianism’s central teachings.
<b>Rujiao/Rujia sixiang</b>	儒教/儒家思想	Confucianism.
<b>shaoxiangbaifo</b>	烧香拜佛	Literally “burn incense to worship Buddha,” typically refers to worshipping various deities of traditional Chinese religions.
<b>shenkan</b>	神龛	Shrine or altar dedicated to local deities and, in some cases, also ancestors.
<b>shenxian</b>	神仙	“Immortal,” a colloquial term for Taoist deity.
<b>shuyu</b>	属于	Belong to, e.g., an organized religion or political organization.
<b>si/siyuan</b>	寺/寺院	Buddhist temple with a monastery. (Also refer to <b>gong/guan</b> )
<b>simiao</b>	寺庙	Places of worship with some Buddhist connection, either having a Buddhist monastery or housing Buddhist deities.
<b>Sishuwujing</b>	四书五经	Four Books and Five Classics, a collection of foundational Confucian texts.
<b>teyi gongneng</b>	特异功能	Spiritual or supernatural power.
<b>tian</b>	天	Heaven, an important concept in Confucianism that typically refers to a pervasive, invisible entity with divine powers and authority.
<b>Tianzhu</b>	天主	Word used by Chinese Catholics for God.
<b>Tianzhujiao</b>	天主教	Catholicism.
<b>tudi ci</b>	土地祠	A place of worship dedicated to an earth god. (Also refer to <b>tudigong</b> )
<b>tudigong</b>	土地公	Earth god or earth lord, a patron deity who typically oversees affairs in a small jurisdiction, such as a village or forest.
<b>wan</b>	万	10,000.
<b>wu/wushu</b>	巫/巫术	Shaman/shamanism.
<b>wuchang</b>	五常	The five constant virtues of Confucianism (i.e., benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and trustworthiness).
<b>wu shen lun zhe</b>	无神论者	Atheist.
<b>xiangxin</b>	相信	Believe in, trust or have confidence in. When used in a religious context, it commonly does not imply formal commitment. (Also refer to <b>xin</b> and <b>xinyang</b> )
<b>xiao</b>	孝	Filial piety, a key concept in Confucianism that emphasizes respect for parents and elders.
<b>Xiaojing</b>	孝经	“The Classic of Filial Piety,” one of Confucianism’s foundational books. (Also refer to <b>Sishuwujing</b> )

<b>xie</b>	邪	Evil or unorthodox.
<b>xiejiao</b>	邪教	Evil cult or heterodox teaching, refers to religious groups whose teachings the Chinese government deems harmful or disruptive.
<b>xin</b>	信	Believe in, trust or have no doubts in. This a verb implies a stronger commitment than <b>xiangxin</b> as it connotes worship or veneration. (Also refer to <b>xiangxin</b> and <b>xinyang</b> )
<b>Xinjing</b>	心经	“Heart Sutra,” a popular Buddhist scripture.
<b>Xinde She</b>	信德社	Faith Press, a Catholic-run news agency.
<b>xinyang</b>	信仰	Firm belief in or commitment to a theory, thought or philosophy. Commonly implies a formal commitment to or serious conviction in a value system. (Also refer to <b>xin</b> and <b>xiangxin</b> )
<b>xisu</b>	习俗	Traditional custom. Some customs, such as the (Hungry) Ghost Festival, are steeped in folk religion.
<b>xuefo</b>	学佛	To study Buddha.
<b>xuyuan</b>	许愿	To make a wish.
<b>yitangdaidian</b>	以堂带点	A program the “Two Committees” launched to “connect unauthorized meeting points with an official [nearby, registered] church.” (Also refer to <b>lianghui</b> )
<b>Yulanpen Jie</b>	盂兰盆节	The Buddhist version of the (Hungry) Ghost Festival, also known as Ullambana festival.
<b>yun</b>	运	Fortune or luck. In Chinese religious tradition, humans can bring about good fortune or keep misfortune at bay by praying to deities or engaging in practices such as <b>fengshui</b> .
<b>Zhengyi</b>	正一	Orthodox Unity, a Taoist sect. (Also refer to <b>Quanzhen</b> )
<b>zhong</b>	忠	Loyalty (to the king), one of Confucianism’s central teachings.
<b>Zhongyuan Jie</b>	中元节	The Taoist version of the (Hungry) Ghost festival, also known as the Zhongyuan festival.
<b>zixuanzisheng</b>	自选自圣	“Self-election and self-ordination,” a government-sanctioned policy of appointing Catholic bishops without input from the Vatican.
<b>ziyou</b>	自由	Freedom.
<b>zongjiao</b>	宗教	Religion. Typically refers to organized religions with professional clergy and institutional or governmental oversight.
<b>zongjiao xinyang</b>	宗教信仰	Religious belief. Typically refers to a formal commitment to a value system. (Also refer to <b>zongjiao</b> and <b>xinyang</b> )
<b>zuo libai</b>	做礼拜	Worship attendance (for Christians) or prayer (for Muslims). This term does not apply to the types of worship common among Buddhists, Taoists or other traditional Chinese religious groups.

## Appendix B: Survey questions used in this report

### 2010 Chinese General Social Survey

Chinese	English translation
<p>A5. 您的宗教信仰:</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教 → 跳问A7a</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰 (拜妈祖、关公等)</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他 (请注明: ___)</p>	<p>A5. What is your religious belief?</p> <p>01. I don't believe in a religion → Skip to Question A7a</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>
<p>A6. 您参加宗教活动的频繁程度是:</p> <p>1. 从来没有参加过</p> <p>2. 一年不到1次</p> <p>3. 一年大概1到2次</p> <p>4. 一年几次</p> <p>5. 大概一月一次</p> <p>6. 一月2到3次</p> <p>7. 差不多每周都有</p> <p>8. 每周都有</p> <p>9. 一周几次</p>	<p>A6. How often do you participate in religious activities?</p> <p>1. Never</p> <p>2. Less than once a year</p> <p>3. About once or twice a year</p> <p>4. A few times a year</p> <p>5. About once a month</p> <p>6. Two or three times a month</p> <p>7. Almost every week</p> <p>8. Every week</p> <p>9. A few times a week</p>

## 2012 Chinese General Social Survey

Chinese	English translation
<p>A5. 您的宗教信仰 (多选):</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰 (拜妈祖、关公等)</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他 (请注明: ___)</p>	<p>A5. What is your religious belief? (Multiple answers)</p> <p>01. I don't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>
<p>A6. 您参加宗教活动的频繁程度是:</p> <p>1. 从来没有参加过</p> <p>2. 一年不到1次</p> <p>3. 一年大概1到2次</p> <p>4. 一年几次</p> <p>5. 大概一月1次</p> <p>6. 一月2到3次</p> <p>7. 差不多每周都有</p> <p>8. 每周都有</p> <p>9. 一周几次</p>	<p>A6. How often do you participate in religious activities?</p> <p>1. Never</p> <p>2. Less than once a year</p> <p>3. About once or twice a year</p> <p>4. A few times a year</p> <p>5. About once a month</p> <p>6. Two or three times a month</p> <p>7. Almost every week</p> <p>8. Every week</p> <p>9. A few times a week</p>

## 2013 Chinese General Social Survey

Chinese	English translation
<p>A5. 您的宗教信仰 (多选):</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰 (拜妈祖、关公等)</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他 (请注明: ___)</p>	<p>A5. What is your religious belief? (Multiple answers)</p> <p>01. I don't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>
<p>A6. 您参加宗教活动的频繁程度是:</p> <p>1. 从来没有参加过</p> <p>2. 一年不到1次</p> <p>3. 一年大概1到2次</p> <p>4. 一年几次</p> <p>5. 大概一月1次</p> <p>6. 一月2到3次</p> <p>7. 差不多每周都有</p> <p>8. 每周都有</p> <p>9. 一周几次</p>	<p>A6. How often do you participate in religious activities?</p> <p>1. Never</p> <p>2. Less than once a year</p> <p>3. About once or twice a year</p> <p>4. A few times a year</p> <p>5. About once a month</p> <p>6. Two or three times a month</p> <p>7. Almost every week</p> <p>8. Every week</p> <p>9. A few times a week</p>

## 2015 Chinese General Social Survey

Chinese	English translation
<p>A5. 您的宗教信仰是 (多选):</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰 (拜妈祖、关公等)</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他 (请注明: _____)</p>	<p>A5. What is your religious belief? (Multiple answers)</p> <p>01. I don't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ____)</p>
<p>A6. 您参加宗教活动的频繁程度是:</p> <p>1. 从来没有参加过</p> <p>2. 一年不到1次</p> <p>3. 一年大概1到2次</p> <p>4. 一年几次</p> <p>5. 大概一月1次</p> <p>6. 一月2到3次</p> <p>7. 差不多每周都有</p> <p>8. 每周都有</p> <p>9. 一周几次</p>	<p>A6. How often do you participate in religious activities?</p> <p>1. Never</p> <p>2. Less than once a year</p> <p>3. About once or twice a year</p> <p>4. A few times a year</p> <p>5. About once a month</p> <p>6. Two or three times a month</p> <p>7. Almost every week</p> <p>8. Every week</p> <p>9. A few times a week</p>

<p>B20. 有人认为中国目前的道德状况不太理想，如果要进行道德重建，您认为传统儒家文化应该发挥什么样的作用？</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. 道德重建必须依靠传统儒家文化</li><li>2. 道德重建需要部分依靠传统儒家文化</li><li>3. 传统儒家文化在道德重建中基本上没用</li><li>4. 传统儒家文化对于带的重建有消极影响</li></ol>	<p>B20. Some people think that the state of moral values in China is not ideal. If we were to restore moral values, what role do you think Confucian values should play?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Moral restoration must rely on Confucian traditions</li><li>2. Moral restoration needs to rely partly on Confucian traditions</li><li>3. Confucian traditions have basically no use in moral restoration</li><li>4. Confucian traditions have a negative impact on moral restoration</li></ol>
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## 2017 Chinese General Social Survey

Chinese	English translation
<p>A5. 您的宗教信仰 (多选):</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰 (拜妈祖、关公等)</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他 (请注明: ___)</p>	<p>A5. What is your religious belief? (Multiple answers)</p> <p>01. I don't believe in to a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>
<p>A6. 您参加宗教活动的频繁程度是:</p> <p>1. 从来没有参加过</p> <p>2. 一年不到1次</p> <p>3. 一年大概1到2次</p> <p>4. 一年几次</p> <p>5. 大概一月1次</p> <p>6. 一月2到3次</p> <p>7. 差不多每周都有</p> <p>8. 每周都有</p> <p>9. 一周几次</p>	<p>A6. How often do you participate in religious activities?</p> <p>1. Never</p> <p>2. Less than once a year</p> <p>3. About once or twice a year</p> <p>4. A few times a year</p> <p>5. About once a month</p> <p>6. Two or three times a month</p> <p>7. Almost every week</p> <p>8. Every week</p> <p>9. A few times a week</p>

<p>D19. 以下关于孝道观念的说法，您是否同意？</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 非常同意</li> <li>2. 相当同意</li> <li>3. 有些同意</li> <li>4. 无所谓同意不同意</li> <li>5. 有些不同意</li> <li>6. 相当不同意</li> <li>7. 非常不同意</li> <li>98. 不知道</li> <li>99. 拒绝回答</li> </ol> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 无论如何，在家中父亲的权威都应该受到尊重</li> <li>2. 子女应该做些让父母有光彩的事</li> <li>3. 为了传宗接代，至少要生一个儿子</li> <li>4. 对父母的养育之恩心存感激</li> <li>5. 无论父母对您如何不好，仍然善待他们</li> <li>6. 放弃个人的志向，达成父母的心愿</li> <li>7. 赡养父母使他们生活更为舒适</li> </ol>	<p>D19. Do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about filial piety?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strongly agree</li> <li>2. Fairly agree</li> <li>3. Somewhat agree</li> <li>4. Neither agree nor disagree</li> <li>5. Somewhat disagree</li> <li>6. Fairly disagree</li> <li>7. Strongly disagree</li> <li>98. Don't know</li> <li>99. Refuse to answer</li> </ol> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The authority of father in a family should be respected under any circumstances</li> <li>2. Children must make efforts to do something that would bring honor to their parents</li> <li>3. To continue the family line, one must have at least one son</li> <li>4. Be grateful to your parents for raising you</li> <li>5. Be nice and kind to your parents regardless how they have treated you</li> <li>6. Give up your aspirations to meet your parents' expectations</li> <li>7. Support your parents' livelihood to make their lives more comfortable</li> </ol>
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## 2018 Chinese General Social Survey

Chinese	English translation
<p>A5. 您的宗教信仰是什么？</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰（拜妈祖、关公等）</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他（请注明：___）</p>	<p>A5. What is your religious belief?</p> <p>01. I don't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>
<p>A6. 您参加宗教活动的频繁程度是：</p> <p>1. 从来没有参加过</p> <p>2. 一年不到1次</p> <p>3. 一年大概1到2次</p> <p>4. 一年几次</p> <p>5. 大概一月1次</p> <p>6. 一月2到3次</p> <p>7. 差不多每周都有</p> <p>8. 每周都有</p> <p>9. 一周几次</p>	<p>A6. How often do you participate in religious activities?</p> <p>1. Never</p> <p>2. Less than once a year</p> <p>3. About once or twice a year</p> <p>4. A few times a year</p> <p>5. About once a month</p> <p>6. Two or three times a month</p> <p>7. Almost every week</p> <p>8. Every week</p> <p>9. A few times a week</p>

<p>A72a. 您配偶或同居伴侣的宗教信仰是什么？</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰（拜妈祖、关公等）</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他（请注明：___）</p> <p>98. 不知道</p> <p>99. 拒绝回答</p>	<p>A72a. What is the religious belief of your spouse or partner?</p> <p>01. He/She doesn't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p> <p>98. Don't know</p> <p>99. Refuse to answer</p>
<p>A89i. 您14岁时，您父亲的宗教信仰是什么？</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰（拜妈祖、关公等）</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他（请注明：___）</p>	<p>A89i. What was your father's religious belief when you were 14 years old?</p> <p>01. He didn't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>

<p>A90i. 您14岁时，您母亲的宗教信仰是什么？</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰（拜妈祖、关公等）</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他（请注明：___）</p>	<p>A90i. What was your mother's religious belief when you were 14 years old?</p> <p>01. She didn't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>
<p>B2. 请问在特殊的情况如结婚，搬迁或丧礼时，您会不会在意吉日或凶日？</p> <p>1. 非常在意</p> <p>2. 有点在意</p> <p>3. 不太在意</p> <p>4. 毫不在意</p> <p>99. 拒绝回答</p>	<p>B2. On special occasions like weddings, moving days and funerals, do you care if it is an auspicious or inauspicious day?</p> <p>1. I care very much</p> <p>2. I care somewhat</p> <p>3. I don't care very much</p> <p>4. I don't care at all</p> <p>99. Refused to answer</p>

<p>B3. 在过去的一年中，您去过多少次已故家庭成员的墓地？</p> <p>1. 没有 2. 一次 3. 两次 4. 三次 5. 四次 6. 五次或以上 98. 不知道 99. 拒绝回答</p>	<p>B3. In the past year, how many times have you been to the gravesites of deceased family members?</p> <p>1. None 2. Once 3. Twice 4. Three times 5. Four times 6. Five or more times 98. Don't know 99. Refused to answer</p>
<p>B4. 在过去的一年中，您有多少次去过一个地方祈求好运（学术和商业成功，健康等）？</p> <p>1. 没有 2. 一次 3. 两次 4. 三次 5. 四次 6. 五次或以上 98. 不知道 99. 拒绝回答</p>	<p>B4. In the past year, how many times have you been somewhere to pray for good luck (for success in school or business, for good health, etc.)?</p> <p>1. None 2. Once 3. Twice 4. Three times 5. Four times 6. Five or more times 98. Don't know 99. Refused to answer</p>
<p>B5. 您是否随身戴着祝好运的符咒和/或护身符？</p> <p>1. 有 2. 没有 99. 拒绝回答</p>	<p>B5. Do you carry any lucky charms or amulets on you?</p> <p>1. Yes 2. No 99. Refused to answer</p>

## 2021 Chinese General Social Survey

Chinese	English translation
<p>A5. 您的宗教信仰是什么？</p> <p>01. 不信仰宗教</p> <p>信仰宗教</p> <p>11. 佛教</p> <p>12. 道教</p> <p>13. 民间信仰（拜妈祖、关公等）</p> <p>14. 回教/伊斯兰教</p> <p>15. 天主教</p> <p>16. 基督教</p> <p>17. 东正教</p> <p>18. 其他基督教</p> <p>19. 犹太教</p> <p>20. 印度教</p> <p>21. 其他（请注明：___）</p>	<p>A5. What is your religious belief?</p> <p>01. I don't believe in a religion</p> <p>Believe in a religion</p> <p>11. Buddhism</p> <p>12. Taoism</p> <p>13. Folk religion (Veneration of Mazu, Guan Gong, etc.)</p> <p>14. Hui religion/Islam</p> <p>15. Catholicism</p> <p>16. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>17. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>18. Other Christianity</p> <p>19. Judaism</p> <p>20. Hinduism</p> <p>21. Other (Please indicate: ___)</p>
<p>A6. 您参加宗教活动的频繁程度是：</p> <p>1. 从来没有参加过</p> <p>2. 一年不到1次</p> <p>3. 一年大概1到2次</p> <p>4. 一年几次</p> <p>5. 大概一月1次</p> <p>6. 一月2到3次</p> <p>7. 差不多每周都有</p> <p>8. 每周都有</p> <p>9. 一周几次</p>	<p>A6. How often do you participate in religious activities?</p> <p>1. Never</p> <p>2. Less than once a year</p> <p>3. About once or twice a year</p> <p>4. A few times a year</p> <p>5. About once a month</p> <p>6. Two or three times a month</p> <p>7. Almost every week</p> <p>8. Every week</p> <p>9. A few times a week</p>

**2012 China Family Panel Studies**

Chinese	English translation
<p>M601. 请问您属于什么宗教?</p> <p>1. 佛教</p> <p>2. 道教</p> <p>3. 伊斯兰教 (回教)</p> <p>4. 基督教 (新教)</p> <p>5. 天主教</p> <p>6. 无宗教</p> <p>77. 其他 (请注明) ____</p>	<p>M601. To what religion do you belong?</p> <p>1. Buddhism</p> <p>2. Taoism</p> <p>3. Islam (Hui religion)</p> <p>4. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>5. Catholicism</p> <p>6. No religion</p> <p>77. Other (Please specify: ____)</p>

**2014 China Family Panel Studies**

Chinese	English translation
<p>M601A. 您信什么? (可多选)</p> <p>1. 佛、菩萨</p> <p>2. 道教的神仙</p> <p>3. 安拉</p> <p>4. 天主教的天主</p> <p>5. 基督教的上帝</p> <p>6. 祖先</p> <p>78. 以上都不信</p>	<p>M601A. What do you believe in? (May choose multiple answers)</p> <p>1. Buddha/bodhisattvas</p> <p>2. Daoist immortals</p> <p>3. Allah</p> <p>4. God of Catholicism</p> <p>5. God of Christianity (Protestant)</p> <p>6. Ancestors</p> <p>78. None of the above</p>

## 2016 China Family Panel Studies

Chinese	English translation
<p>M601. 请问您属于什么宗教?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 佛教</li> <li>2. 道教</li> <li>3. 伊斯兰教 (回教)</li> <li>4. 基督教 (新教)</li> <li>5. 天主教</li> <li>6. 无宗教信仰</li> <li>7. 其他 (请注明) ____</li> </ol>	<p>M601. To what religion do you belong?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Buddhism</li> <li>2. Taoism</li> <li>3. Islam (Hui religion)</li> <li>4. (Protestant) Christianity</li> <li>5. Catholicism</li> <li>6. No religious belief</li> <li>7. Other (Please specify: ____)</li> </ol>
<p>M602A. 您烧香/拜佛的频率有多高?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 从不</li> <li>2. 一年一次</li> <li>3. 一年几次</li> <li>4. 一月一次</li> <li>5. 一月两三次</li> <li>6. 一周一次</li> <li>7. 一周几次</li> <li>8. 几乎每天</li> </ol>	<p>M602A. How often do you burn incense to worship Buddha (and other deities)?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Never</li> <li>2. Once a year</li> <li>3. A few times a year</li> <li>4. Once a month</li> <li>5. Two or three times a month</li> <li>6. Once a week</li> <li>7. A few times a week</li> <li>8. Almost every day</li> </ol>
<p>M602B. 您做礼拜的频率有多高?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 从不</li> <li>2. 一年一次</li> <li>3. 一年几次</li> <li>4. 一月一次</li> <li>5. 一月两三次</li> <li>6. 一周一次</li> <li>7. 一周几次</li> <li>8. 几乎每天</li> </ol>	<p>M602B. How often do you attend worship services?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Never</li> <li>2. Once a year</li> <li>3. A few times a year</li> <li>4. Once a month</li> <li>5. Two or three times a month</li> <li>6. Once a week</li> <li>7. A few times a week</li> <li>8. Almost every day</li> </ol>

<p>M603. 不管您是否参加宗教活动/事宜，宗教对您来说重要，是：</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. 很重要</li><li>2. 有点重要</li><li>3. 不重要</li></ol>	<p>M603. Regardless of whether you participate in religious activities/affairs, how important would you say religion is to you?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Very important</li><li>2. Somewhat important</li><li>3. Not important</li></ol>
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## 2018 China Family Panel Studies

Chinese	English translation
M6010. 您是否相信佛或菩萨?  1. 是 2. 否	M6010. Do you believe in Buddha/bodhisattvas?  1. Yes 2. No
M6011. 您是否相信神仙?  1. 是 2. 否	M6011. Do you believe in immortals?  1. Yes 2. No
M6012. 您是否相信真主安拉?  1. 是 2. 否	M6012. Do you believe in Allah?  1. Yes 2. No
M6013. 您是否相信天主?  1. 是 2. 否	M6013. Do you believe in the Catholic God?  1. Yes 2. No
M6014. 您是否相信耶稣基督?  1. 是 2. 否	M6014. Do you believe in Jesus Christ?  1. Yes 2. No
M6016. 您是否相信鬼?  1. 是 2. 否	M6016. Do you believe in ghosts?  1. Yes 2. No
M6017. 您是否相信风水?  1. 是 2. 否	M6017. Do you believe in fengshui?  1. Yes 2. No

**2012 China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (individuals)**

Chinese	English translation
<p>17.1. 您信的是什么教?</p> <p>1. 天主教</p> <p>2. 基督教</p> <p>3. 佛教</p> <p>4. 藏传佛教</p> <p>5. 道教</p> <p>6. 伊斯兰教</p> <p>7. 东正教</p> <p>8. 其他宗教</p> <p>9. 无宗教信仰</p>	<p>17.1. What religion do you believe in?</p> <p>1. Catholicism</p> <p>2. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>3. Buddhism</p> <p>4. Tibetan Buddhism</p> <p>5. Taoism</p> <p>6. Islam</p> <p>7. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>8. Other religion</p> <p>9. No religious belief</p>

**2014 China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (individuals)**

Chinese	English translation
<p>17.1. 您信的是什么教?</p> <p>1. 天主教</p> <p>2. 基督教</p> <p>3. 佛教</p> <p>4. 藏传佛教</p> <p>5. 道教</p> <p>6. 伊斯兰教</p> <p>7. 东正教</p> <p>8. 其他宗教</p> <p>9. 无宗教信仰</p>	<p>17.1. What religion do you believe in?</p> <p>1. Catholicism</p> <p>2. (Protestant) Christianity</p> <p>3. Buddhism</p> <p>4. Tibetan Buddhism</p> <p>5. Taoism</p> <p>6. Islam</p> <p>7. Orthodox Christianity</p> <p>8. Other religion</p> <p>9. No religious belief</p>

**2014 China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (neighborhood committees)**

Chinese	English translation
R67. 行政区划范围内有宗祠、祠堂吗?  1. 没有 2. 有	R67. Are there any ancestral shrines or halls in your jurisdiction?  1. No 2. Yes
R68. 行政区划范围内有教堂吗?  1. 没有 2. 有	R68. Are there any church buildings in your jurisdiction?  1. No 2. Yes
R69. 行政区划范围内有寺庙吗?  1. 没有 2. 有	R69. Are there any (Buddhist) temples in your jurisdiction?  1. No 2. Yes
R70. 行政区划范围内有清真寺吗?  1. 没有 2. 有	R70. Are there any mosques in your jurisdiction?  1. No 2. Yes
R71. 行政区划范围内有道观吗?  1. 没有 2. 有	R71. Are there any Taoist temples in your jurisdiction?  1. No 2. Yes
R72. 行政区划范围内有土地祠/神龛吗?  1. 没有 2. 有	R72. Are there any temples for the god of land or other deities' shrines in your jurisdiction?  1. No 2. Yes

## 2007 World Values Survey (China)

Chinese	English translation
<p>V185a. 您属于哪一个宗教团体?</p> <p>1. 罗马天主教 2. 基督教 3. 东正教 4. 犹太教 5. 伊斯兰教 6. 印度教 7. 佛教 8. 道教 77. 其他 (请具体说明: ____) 99. 没回答</p>	<p>V185a. To which religious group do you belong?</p> <p>1. Roman Catholicism 2. (Protestant) Christianity 3. Orthodox Christianity 4. Judaism 5. Islam 6. Hinduism 7. Buddhism 8. Taoism 77. Other (Please specify: ____) 99. No answer</p>
<p>V4-V9. 请说明下列各项在您生活中的重要程度。首先您觉得家庭在您的生活中是很重要、重要、不太重要、还是很不重要?</p> <p>1. 很重要 2. 重要 3. 不太重要 4. 很不重要 8. 不知道</p> <p>V4. 家庭 V5. 朋友 V6. 休闲时间 V7. 政治 V8. 工作 V9. 宗教</p>	<p>V4-V9. Please indicate the level of importance of each of the following items in your life. Do you think in your life family is very important, important, not very important, or not important at all?</p> <p>1. Very important 2. Rather important 3. Not very important 4. Not important at all 8. Don't know</p> <p>V4. Family V5. Friends V6. Leisure time V7. Politics V8. Work V9. Religion</p>

## 2012 World Values Survey (China)

Chinese	English translation
<p>V144. 您信仰哪种宗教？</p> <p>1. 罗马天主教 2. 基督教 3. 东正教 4. 犹太教 5. 伊斯兰教 6. 印度教 7. 佛教 8. 道教 0. 什么都不信 77. 其他（请具体说明：___） 99. 不回答</p>	<p>V144. What religion do you believe in?</p> <p>1. Roman Catholicism 2. (Protestant) Christianity 3. Orthodox Christianity 4. Judaism 5. Islam 6. Hinduism 7. Buddhism 8. Taoism 0. I don't believe in any 77. Other (Please specify: ___ ) 99. Did not answer</p>
<p>V4-V9. 请说明下列各项在您生活中的重要程度。首先您觉得家庭在您的生活中是很重要、重要、不太重要、还是很不重要？</p> <p>1. 很重要 2. 重要 3. 不太重要 4. 很不重要 8. 不知道</p> <p>V4. 家庭 V5. 朋友 V6. 休闲时间 V7. 政治 V8. 工作 V9. 宗教</p>	<p>V4-V9. Please indicate the level of importance of each of the following items in your life. Do you think in your life family is very important, important, not very important, or not important at all?</p> <p>1. Very important 2. Rather important 3. Not very important 4. Not important at all 8. Don't know</p> <p>V4. Family V5. Friends V6. Leisure time V7. Politics V8. Work V9. Religion</p>

## 2018 World Values Survey (China)

Chinese	English translation
<p>Q289. 您信仰哪个宗教?</p> <p>0. 什么都不信 1. 罗马天主教 2. 基督教 3. 东正教 4. 犹太教 5. 伊斯兰教 6. 印度教 7. 佛教 8. 道教</p>	<p>Q289. What religion do you believe in?</p> <p>0. I don't believe in any 1. Roman Catholicism 2. (Protestant) Christianity 3. Orthodox Christianity 4. Judaism 5. Islam 6. Hinduism 7. Buddhism 8. Taoism</p>
<p>Q1-Q6. 请说明下列各项在您生活中的重要程度。首先您觉得家庭在您的生活中是很重要、重要、不太重要、还是很不重要?</p> <p>1. 很重要 2. 重要 3. 不太重要 4. 很不重要</p> <p>Q1. 家庭 Q2. 朋友 Q3. 休闲时间 Q4. 政治 Q5. 工作 Q6. 宗教</p>	<p>Q1-Q6. Please indicate the level of importance of each of the following items in your life. Do you think in your life, family is very important, important, not very important, or not important at all?</p> <p>1. Very important 2. Rather important 3. Not very important 4. Not important at all</p> <p>Q1. Family Q2. Friends Q3. Leisure time Q4. Politics Q5. Work Q6. Religion</p>

<p>Q7-Q17. 您认为在家应着重培养孩子的哪些品质？（选五项）</p> <p>7. 有礼貌 8. 独立性 9. 勤奋 10. 责任感 11. 有想象力 12. 对别人宽容与尊重 13. 节俭 14. 坚韧 15. 虔诚的宗教信仰 16. 不自私 17. 服从</p>	<p>Q7-Q17. What qualities do you think children should be taught at home? (Pick five answers.)</p> <p>7. Good manners 8. Independence 9. Hard work 10. Responsibility 11. Imagination 12. Tolerance 13. Thrift 14. Perseverance 15. Devout religious belief 16. Selflessness 17. Obedience</p>
<p>Q166. 您是否相信死后有来生？</p> <p>1. 是 2. 否</p>	<p>Q166. Do you believe in life after death?</p> <p>1. Yes 2. No</p>
<p>Q167. 您是否认为有地狱？</p> <p>1. 是 2. 否</p>	<p>Q167. Do you think hell exists?</p> <p>1. Yes 2. No</p>
<p>Q168. 您是否认为有天堂？</p> <p>1. 是 2. 否</p>	<p>Q168. Do you think heaven exists?</p> <p>1. Yes 2. No</p>
<p>Q173. 不管您是否参加宗教仪式，您觉得自己是有宗教信仰的人么？</p> <p>1. 有宗教信仰的人 2. 没有宗教信仰的人 3. 无神论者</p>	<p>Q173. Regardless of whether you attend religious rituals, do you consider yourself a person of religious belief?</p> <p>1. A person with religious belief 2. A person without religious belief 3. Atheist</p>

## 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents

Chinese	English translation
<p>A9a. 无论您去没去过教堂、寺庙等宗教场所，对于卡片上列出的这些，您信还是不信？首先，您目前相信 <b>佛教或信佛</b> 吗？（多选）</p> <p>01. 佛教或信佛  02. 道教  03. 儒教  04. 基督教  05. 天主教  06. 伊斯兰教  其它宗教（请注明）      97. 我什么都不信 (不读出)      98. 拒绝 (不读出)      99. 说不清 (不读出)</p>	<p>A9a. Regardless of whether you've been to a religious site such as church building or (Buddhist) temple, do you believe in any item listed on this card? First, do you currently believe in <b>Buddhism or Buddha</b>? (May choose multiple answers.)</p> <p>01. Buddhism or believe in Buddha  02. Taoism  03. Confucianism  04. (Protestant) Christianity  05. Catholicism  06. Islam  Other religion (Please specify)      97. I don't believe in any (Don't read)      98. Refused (Don't read)      99. Response unclear (Don't read)</p>

## Appendix C: Summary of survey sample details

Source	Year	Number of provincial units in sampled areas	% of China's adult population in sampled areas	Omitted provincial units*	Sample size (ages 18+)
CGSS	2010	31	100	None	11,774
CGSS	2012	29	99	Hainan, Tibet	11,761
CGSS	2013	28	97	Hainan, Tibet, Xinjiang	11,436
CGSS	2015	28	97	Hainan, Tibet, Xinjiang	10,968
CGSS	2017	28	97	Hainan, Tibet, Xinjiang	12,582
CGSS	2018	28	97	Hainan, Tibet, Xinjiang	12,787
CGSS	2021	19	70	Guangdong, Guizhou, Hainan, Heilongjiang, Jilin, Qinghai, Shanghai, Sichuan, Tianjin, Tibet, Xinjiang, Yunnan	8,148
CFPS	2012	25	95	Hainan, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tibet, Xinjiang	34,602
CFPS	2014	25	95	Hainan, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tibet, Xinjiang	36,209
CFPS	2016	25	95	Hainan, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tibet, Xinjiang	35,975
CFPS	2018	25	95	Hainan, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tibet, Xinjiang	33,973
CLDS	2012	29	99	Hainan, Tibet	15,035
CLDS	2014	29	99	Hainan, Tibet	21,423
WVS	2007	23	85	Chongqing, Gansu, Inner Mongolia, Jilin, Qinghai, Sichuan, Tianjin, Tibet	1,991
WVS	2012	24	92	Hainan, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tianjin, Tibet, Xinjiang, Yunnan	2,300
WVS	2018	29	98	Tibet, Xinjiang	3,036
SLSCR	2007	24	94	Hainan, Jilin, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tianjin, Tibet, Xinjiang	6,861

\* Provincial units in mainland China include provinces, direct-administrated municipalities and autonomous regions.

Source: Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), China Labor-force Dynamics Survey (CLDS), World Values Survey (WVS), and Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (SLSCR).

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## Appendix D: Muslim-majority ethnic populations by province

### Most of China's predominantly Muslim ethnic groups reside in Xinjiang

*% of individuals in each place, by ethnicity*

	Total population	Han	Uyghur	Hui	Other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups
Beijing	1.6%	1.6%	0.1%	2.4%	0.2%
Tianjin	1.0	1.0	0.1	1.5	0.1
Hebei	5.3	5.6	<0.05	5.0	0.1
Shanxi	2.5	2.7	<0.05	0.5	<0.05
Inner Mongolia	1.7	1.5	<0.05	1.9	0.1
Liaoning	3.0	2.8	0.1	1.9	0.1
Jilin	1.7	1.7	<0.05	0.9	0.1
Heilongjiang	2.3	2.4	<0.05	0.7	0.1
Shanghai	1.8	1.9	0.1	0.7	0.2
Jiangsu	6.0	6.5	0.1	1.2	0.2
Zhejiang	4.6	4.9	0.1	0.7	0.2
Anhui	4.3	4.7	<0.05	2.6	0.1
Fujian	2.9	3.1	<0.05	1.1	0.2
Jiangxi	3.2	3.5	<0.05	0.1	0.1
Shandong	7.2	7.8	0.1	4.9	0.2
Henan	7.0	7.6	<0.05	8.3	0.1
Hubei	4.1	4.3	0.1	0.7	0.1
Hunan	4.7	4.7	0.1	0.7	0.1
Guangdong	8.9	9.4	0.1	0.8	0.3
Guangxi	3.6	2.4	<0.05	0.3	<0.05
Hainan	0.7	0.7	<0.05	0.2	<0.05
Chongqing	2.3	2.3	<0.05	0.1	<0.05
Sichuan	5.9	6.1	0.1	1.0	0.1
Guizhou	2.7	1.9	<0.05	1.8	0.1
Yunnan	3.3	2.5	<0.05	6.5	<0.05
Tibet	0.3	<0.05	<0.05	0.2	0.2
Shaanxi	2.8	3.1	<0.05	1.2	0.1
Gansu	1.8	1.7	<0.05	11.8	24.8
Qinghai	0.4	0.2	<0.05	8.3	5.2
Ningxia	0.5	0.4	<0.05	22.2	0.1
Xinjiang	1.8	0.9	98.7	9.7	67.3

Source: Census of China, 2020  
"Measuring Religion in China"

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