

Statistics on Religions and Churches in the People's Republic of China – Update for the Year 2018 Part 2: Religions and Religiosity in General

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Our annual compilation of figures and data regarding the life of the religions in the People's Republic of China in its second part,¹ which is on religions and religiosity in general, brings first of all new official figures on China's religions. It then presents the attempt of the *Atlas of Religion in China*, published in 2018, to map the spatial distribution of the religious sites of the five major religions in the 31 provinces of China.

1. New Official Figures on the Religions in China in the White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief

In 2018, for the first time in 21 years, the State Council of the People's Republic of China published a White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief, which also contains new official figures of China's religions. A comparison with the figures of the first White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief from 1997 is interesting here (see Table 1).

As Table 1 shows, in the 2018 White Paper all figures for religions are higher than the 1997 figures – in some categories actually significantly higher.

The first salient fact is that the Chinese State estimated the number of Chinese citizens believing in a religion as twice as many in 2018 as in 1997. On this Chen Zongrong, former deputy head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs and now secretary general of the United Front Department of the Central Committee of the CP of China, made the following statement at a press conference on April 3, 2018:

The figure of 100 million people in the 1997 white paper was actually from the estimates by the late Premier Zhou Enlai when he met with Pakistani and Indonesian Islamic delegations in the 1950s. He said at the time that there were several tens of millions of religious followers in China, and if they added those who held

This article was first published under the title "Statistik zu Religionen und Kirchen in der Volksrepublik China. Ein Update für das Jahr 2018. Teil 2: Religionen und Religiosität allgemein" in *China heute* 2018, No. 2, pp. 93-101. In addition to the two chapters translated here, the German version further presents the results of two surveys dealing with political aspects of the religiosity of Chinese university students, and one survey conducted in the rural areas of Qufu on religious belief as social capital of the aged.

1 "Part 1: Catholic Church" has already appeared in *RCTC* 2019, No. 2, pp. 21-30.

beliefs in their hearts instead of going to temples, all of them could make up almost 100 million people. From that time until the publication of the white paper in 1997, we all cited the saying of Premier Zhou. I want to explain two points on this issue:

First, the statement itself is an estimated statistic. It is an approximate figure. At that time, China's total population was more than 600 million. From the 1950s to the present, the total population of China has more than doubled. With more than 1.3 billion people, the population has grown substantially. For various reasons, after so many years of development, coupled with population growth, it is natural for the number of religious believers to grow.

Second, especially after reform and opening up was implemented, China has restored its policy of freedom of religion. As the breadth and depth of opening up to the outside world have been enlarging, all religions have had some growth respectively. It is very natural. Therefore, to still use the saying from the 1950s is not in line with the development in reality. Now the number of nearly 200 million people in the white paper is the number offered by the five major religions in China, which conducted statistics on their own, while we had data from the academic research institutions, statistical agencies, and sample surveys. The number was agreed on and recognized by various parties after we compared data from the two main sources (religions' own math and civil survey data). The nearly 200 million people are the number of religious followers who basically often go to religious sites and participate in religious activities.²

The old figure of 100 million adherents of a religion is, therefore, an estimate made in the 1950s and the new figure of 200 million is primarily attributed to the doubling of the total population since the 1950s. Thus, according to official State estimates, the percentage of adherents of a religion in the population has not increased since the 1950s.

With regard to the individual religions, the steep increase in the number of adherents of Protestantism is particularly striking: from 10 million in the 1997 White Paper to 38 million in the 2018 White Paper. Here the official State view has at least partly adapted to the fact that the number of Protestant Christians in China has risen very sharply in recent decades. This increase of the official figure for adherents of Protestantism in China came gradually: For a long time, based on the results of a household survey published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2010, the figure of 23 million Protestant Christians had been mentioned in official texts.

Regarding the figures for religious personnel, sites for religious activities and institutes for religious education, the 2018 White Paper stresses several times that these refer to personnel, sites or institutes registered with the State. Thus, the fact that figures in the White Paper of 2018 are higher than those of 1997, may, in addition to the actual increase, also mean that a higher percentage of officials or sites are now registered.

2 "SCIO briefing on China's protection of the freedom of religious belief White Paper," http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/2018-04/06/content_50826643.htm and www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/xwfbh/wqfbh/37601/38162/wz38164/Document/1626482/1626482.htm.

Table 1: Figures on Religions in China According to the White Papers on the Freedom of Religious Belief Published by the State Council of the People's Republic of China in 2018 and 1997 – A Comparative List

		2018 White Paper	1997 White Paper
Religions in total	Religious believers	nearly 200 million	over 100 million
	Religious personnel	380,000	300,000
	Sites for religious activities	144,000	85,000
	Institutes for religious education	91	74
	Religious organizations	5,500 (including seven on the national level)	3,000
Buddhism	Believers	numerous, but it is difficult to accurately estimate their numbers	[not given]
	Religious personnel	222,000	200,000 (including 120,000 monks and nuns and more than 1,700 Living Buddhas of Tibetan Buddhism; 10,000 Theravada-Buddhism)
	Sites for religious activities	33,500 (including 28,000 Han Buddhism, 3,800 Tibetan Buddhism, 1,700 Theravada Buddhism)	13,000 (including 3,000 Tibetan Buddhism, 1,600 Theravada Buddhism)
	Institutes for religious education	41	[not given]
Daoism	Believers	numerous, but it is difficult to accurately estimate their numbers	[not given]
	Religious personnel	40,000	25,000
	Sites for religious activities	9,000	1,500
	Institutes for religious education	10	[not given]
Islam	Believers = population of the 10 minority ethnic groups with a Muslim majority	more than 20 million	18 million
	Religious personnel	57,000	40,000
	Sites for religious activities	35,000	30,000
	Institutes for religious education	10	[not given]
Catholicism	Believers	6 million	4 million
	Religious personnel	8,000	4,000
	Sites for religious activities	6,000 in 98 dioceses	4,600
	Institutes for religious education	9	[not given]
Protestantism	Believers	38 million	10 Mio.
	Religious personnel	57,000	18,000
	Sites for religious activities	60,000	12,000 churches and 25,000 meeting places
	Institutes for religious education	21	[not given]
Folk belief	Adherents	China has many folk beliefs which are closely linked to local cultures, traditions and customs, in which a large number of people participate	[not mentioned]

Figures and remarks taken from State Council 2018 and State Council 1997, own compilation.

The term “religious organizations” (*zongjiao tuanti* 宗教团体) refers to the state-imposed umbrella organizations (mass organizations) of the five religions at the national and local levels. Their number has almost doubled in the last 21 years. This reflects the declared will of the authorities to strengthen the “self-construction” of the patriotic structures of the five religions.

An innovation in the White Paper of 2018 is that, in addition to the five recognised religions, the existence of “many folk beliefs” in China is mentioned. Whereas in earlier years folk belief in the People’s Republic of China was forbidden as “feudalistic superstition” (albeit partly tolerated), some of its forms are now more appreciated by the authorities – as an indigenous tradition and counterweight to the spread of Protestantism – and there are local attempts to give it legal status.

2. Spatial Distribution of Registered Religious Sites in the *Atlas of Religion in China*

The data presented below are also based on official figures from 2004, which were further processed by a research team in the USA.

Sociologist Yang Fenggang, Director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society (CRCS) at Purdue University in Lafayette, Indiana, has set himself the task of quantifying China’s religious landscape and has been publishing on the subject for many years.³ In 2018, he published with Brill in Leiden an *Atlas of Religion in China. Social and Geographical Contexts* (in the following cited as Yang 2018).⁴

This atlas – as its author states in the “Introduction” – “maps the officially registered venues of five major religions – Buddhism, Christianity (Protestant and Catholic), Daoism, and Islam – at the national, provincial, and county levels,” it also contains information on the “grey” (semi-legal) and “black” (from the government’s point of view illegal) religious market in China.⁵

Yang describes the origins of the data processed in the atlas: In 2009, Dr. Bao Shuming of the China Data Center at the University of Michigan offered him a data set of 72,887 religious sites in all 31 provinces or province-level regions and municipalities of China, which was “extracted from a 2004 Chinese Economic Census.”⁶ From the outset, Yang

3 See for example the results of the Chinese Spiritual Life Survey (CSLS) presented by Yang Fenggang in 2010, which were also discussed in Wenzel-Teuber 2012, pp. 30-36. In 2014 Yang made the controversial prognosis that “China is destined to become the largest Christian country in the world very soon,” with a figure of 160 million Christians in 2025 and 247 million in 2030. On Yang’s reasons for his estimate and the contradiction to it from the official Chinese side see Wenzel-Teuber 2015, pp. 32-33.

4 In the meantime, the Center on Religion and Chinese Society (CRCS) at Purdue University has launched an “On-line Spiritual Atlas of China” (OSAC) in order to complement the printed *Atlas of Religion in China*. According to an introduction at www.globaleast.org, the data in the OSAC will be updated periodically. Users are welcome to contribute information. See www.globaleast.org/map/index.html for direct access to the online atlas.

5 Yang 2018, pp. 1-2.

6 Yang 2018 does not provide any details on this census. It probably refers to the National Economic Census (全国经济普查), which was conducted for the first time in 2004; see website of the National Bureau of Statistics: www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/jjpcgb/ – The introduction to the online version of the atlas at www.globaleast.org explains: “China’s 2004 Economic Census, unlike subsequent years, considered religious sites as economic units, providing a name, location, leaders’ name, relative size, and reported annual income for over 72,000 religious sites.” This

said, it had been clear to him and his team that this list would not provide a comprehensive overview of all religious sites in China, partly because the 2004 Economic Census only considered sites registered with the authorities, and also because it disregarded many sites whose annual income was too small to record. Nevertheless, they decided to process these data because they “did enable us to study the spatial distribution of religions in ways not previously possible.” Between 2010 and 2017, Yang and his team carried out a cleaning of the data, which was necessary because geographical data, addresses, etc. provided in the census were often ambiguous. The adjusted data set was then used to create the atlas.⁷ Yang describes this as a “first attempt,” which may lead to more and better scholarly studies of religion in contemporary China.⁸

In “Part 2” the atlas contains a map for each province showing the distribution of the religious sites of the five religions, as well as a two-part diagram of the “Distribution of religious sites by prefecture.” For each province, these two-part diagrams show the number of religious sites at the prefectural level by county or city district in a bar chart and



Map of the People’s Republic of China: Provinces, Direct-Controlled Municipalities and Autonomous Regions. Map: d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=27749&lang=de

would also explain why Yang and his team used data from 2004 and not from more recent years for their atlas project.

7 Yang 2018, p. 5. For three regions - Beijing, Tianjin and Hainan Province – “the underreporting of religious sites in the 2004 census” was “most conspicuous”; therefore, the team supplemented the 2004 Economic Census data with additional information they had collected themselves. The maps for Beijing, Tianjin and Hainan are based on these supplemented data sets, but for financial reasons the procedure could not be applied to other provinces. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

8 Yang 2018, p. 7.

Table 2: Percentage of Registered Sites for Religious Activities According to Province and Religion, Based on Data of the 2004 Chinese Economic Census Processed for the *Atlas of Religion in China*

Province / Metropolis / Autonomous Region	Percentage of the five religions in proportion to the registered sites for religious activities per province / metropolis / autonomous region				
	Buddhist	Daoist	Muslim	Protestant	Catholic
Beijing*	21.1%	10.5%	37.6%	16.5%	14.3%
Tianjin*	10.2%		50.8%	23.7%	15.3%
Hebei	12.3%	4.1%	33.2%	7.6%	42.8%
Shanxi	37.7%	3.7%	4.2%	29.3%	25.1%
Inner Mongolia	20.0%	0.4%	23.9%	38.5%	17.2%
Liaoning	24.1%	3.9%	7.4%	58.7%	5.8%
Jilin	7.8%	0.9%	6.5%	80.9%	3.8%
Heilongjiang	15.1%	1.4%	10.3%	65.1%	8.1%
Shanghai	28.4%	9.1%	3.0%	33.2%	26.3%
Jiangsu	26.3%	4.3%	2.4%	64.8%	2.1%
Zhejiang	38.9%	24.8%	0.1%	32.8%	3.4%
Anhui	23.0%	1.4%	3.3%	69.7%	2.5%
Fujian	49.5%	19.1%	0.1%	26.5%	4.7%
Jiangxi	55.3%	14.3%	0.2%	27.5%	2.6%
Shandong	2.3%	1.8%	31.0%	56.2%	8.7%
Henan	6.1%	4.7%	17.1%	70.7%	1.4%
Hubei	65.5%	17.8%	2.7%	11.5%	2.5%
Hunan	68.9%	16.2%	3.3%	10.9%	0.6%
Guangdong	55.8%	7.7%	0.3%	27.5%	8.7%
Guangxi	38.3%		9.9%	39.7%	12.1%
Hainan*	33.3%	6.1%	3.0%	54.5%	3.0%
Chongqing	59.6%	6.6%	1.8%	19.3%	12.7%
Sichuan	79.9%	7.1%	6.7%	3.7%	2.6%
Guizhou	43.2%	3.8%	20.1%	27.6%	5.3%
Yunnan	34.4%	5.3%	26.8%	32.6%	0.9%
Tibet Auton. Region	99.8%		0.2%		0.1%
Shaanxi	22.1%	16.0%	8.6%	31.6%	21.7%
Gansu	10.2%	8.8%	77.3%	3.2%	0.5%
Qinghai	31.9%	2.4%	65.1%	0.5%	0.1%
Ningxia	5.5%	1.8%	92.1%	0.4%	0.2%
Xinjiang	0.2%	0.0%	99.4%	0.4%	0.1%

Table compiled by KWT according to data from Yang 2018: p. 77, Figure 9 (Beijing); p. 82, Figure 10 (Tianjin); p. 86, Figure 11 (Hebei); p. 92, Figure 12 (Shanxi); p. 96, Figure 13 (Inner Mongolia); p. 101, Figure 14 (Liaoning); p. 106, Figure 15 (Jilin); p. 110, Figure 16 (Heilongjiang); p. 116, Figure 17 (Shanghai); p. 120, Figure 18 (Jiangsu); p. 125, Figure 19 (Zhejiang); p. 132, Figure 20 (Anhui); p. 136, Figure 21 (Fujian); p. 141, Figure 22 (Jiangxi); p. 145, Figure 23 (Shandong); p. 151, Figure 24 (Henan); p. 156, Figure 25 (Hubei); p. 160, Figure 26 (Hunan); p. 165, Figure 27 (Guangdong); p. 168, Figure 28 (Guangxi); p. 172, Figure 29 (Hainan); p.178, Figure 30 (Chongqing); p. 182, Figure 31 (Sichuan); p. 187, Figure 32 (Guizhou); p. 192, Figure 33 (Yunnan); p. 196, Figure 34 (Tibet Autonomous Region); p. 202, Figure 35 (Shaanxi); p. 206, Figure 36 (Gansu); p. 211, Figure 37 (Qinghai); p. 215, Figure 38 (Ningxia); p. 220, Figure 39 (Xinjiang).

* Data of the 2004 Chinese Economic Census supplemented with additional information by Yang Fenggang's team.

the [resulting] percentage of the [sites of] individual religions [in proportion to the total number of recorded religious sites] in each province in a pie chart.⁹

Although, as also Yang admits, the informative value of the data set has its limitations, a look at the results is interesting. For the purposes of the present statistics, the percentages from the pie charts printed in the atlas for each province, which indicate the proportion of religious sites by religion, have been compiled into a table (see Table 2).

A look at Table 2 shows very large differences in the percentage of the five religions in the various provinces of China. In some cases, this is in line with expectations – such as the dominance of Buddhism in the Tibet Autonomous Region and neighbouring provinces with Tibetan autonomous prefectures; the dominance of Islamic sites in Xinjiang, Ningxia or Gansu; and the strong presence of the Catholic Church in Hebei. More surprising is the relatively high percentage of Islamic sites in Tianjin, Beijing, Shandong and Hebei or the dominance of Protestant sites in the three north-eastern provinces of China. The proportion of Daoist sites exceeds 10% in only seven provinces.

Official, nationwide data for the local distribution of officially registered sites for religious activities have so far only been publicly available for Buddhism and Daoism in the online database of the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA). As far as a first comparative look shows, concerning the relative distribution of registered Buddhist and Daoist sites the data from the NRAA's online database seem to support the plausibility of the results of Yang's atlas.¹⁰

Table 2 illustrates some regional features of China's religious map. However, like the online database of the NRAA, it may reflect not only differences in the reality of the religions in 2004, but also in the registration practice of the respective local authorities.

List of Sources and Abbreviations

NRAA: National Religious Affairs Administration (Guojia zongjiao shiwuju 国家宗教事务局)

NRAA database 2018: *Zongjiao jichu xinxi chaxun* 宗教基础信息查询 (Information on Basic Data of the Religions, www.sara.gov.cn/zjcx/cx/index.htm), with sub-databases *Zongjiao yuanxiao jiben xinxi* 宗教院校基本信息 (Basic Data on Institutes for Religious Education, www.sara.gov.cn/old/zjxy/cs/index.htm) and *Zongjiao*

9 Cf. Yang 2018, p. 6. Unfortunately, the captions of the individual maps and graphics in the atlas lack references regarding the respective data source; the information has to be taken from the above-mentioned "Introduction" of the atlas.

10 The results of a query of the data from the NRAA's online database conducted in 2016 which takes into consideration the distribution according to province can be found in Wenzel-Teuber 2016, p. 27, Table 1; this table also shows very large regional differences in the numerical ratio of Buddhist to Daoist sites. For experimental purposes, for four regions the author compared the numerical ratio of Buddhist and Daoist sites as given in the figures of the NRAA's 2016 online database (hereafter: O) with the figures shown in the bar charts in Yang's atlas (hereafter: A). The numerical ratio of the Buddhist to the Daoist sites was similar in each case. In Fujian it was 3.7:1 (O) resp. 2.8:1 (A), in Shaanxi 1.4:1 (O and A), in Shanghai 3.4:1 (O) resp. 3.1:1 (A), and in Sichuan 9.8:1 (O) resp. 12:1 (A). The absolute figures of the online database retrieval of 2016 are significantly (sometimes several times) higher than those of the atlas, but this could also be explained by the fact that the atlas uses older data from 2004. The number of registered religious sites has increased significantly in recent decades, as the comparison of the 1997 and 2018 White Papers shows.

huodong changsuo jiben xinxi 宗教活动场所基本信息 (Basic Data on Sites for Religious Activities, www.sara.gov.cn/old/csjbxx/index.htm), last data retrieval on Feb. 27, 2018. At the time when this article was prepared (about July 1-12, 2019), the website of the NRAA with the database was not accessible.

State Council 1997: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, White Paper "Freedom of Religious Belief in China," English version at www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/zjxy/t36492.htm.

State Council 2018: Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, White Paper "China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief," English version at www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_8004087.htm.

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Yang Fenggang 2018, with assistance from J.E.E. Pettit, *Atlas of Religion in China. Social and Geographical Contexts*, Leiden – Boston: Brill. Related online project ("Online Spiritual Atlas of China") at www.globaleast.org.