The Salience of Religion Under an Atheist State

The Salience of Religion Under an Atheist State: Implications for Subjective Well-Being in Contemporary China

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We examine the linkage between religious involvement and life satisfaction among adults in contemporary China, a largely nonreligious society. Using data from the China Family Panel Studies (2012, 2014, and 2016), we conduct latent class analysis by using four indicators of religious involvement, including membership of religious groups, types of religion, frequency of participation, and evaluation of importance of religion in life. We classify the sample into four latent classes: (1) the pure nonreligious, (2) the nonreligious, but with some spirituality, (3) Chinese-religion adherent, and (4) organized religion adherent. Results from our fixed-effect models show that Chinese-religion and organized-religion adherents have higher levels of life satisfaction than those with no religious beliefs. Moreover, the disadvantaged groups benefit more from religious involvement in China, as evidenced by the stronger positive effect of religious adherence found among rural residents and individuals in the lowest income quartile. We discuss the benefits of religion both in terms of its public/social and private/intrinsic aspects and situate our findings in the larger social context of China.

Introduction

Sociologists’ longstanding interests in the link between religion and well-being can be traced back to Durkheim (1951) pioneering analysis of suicide rates across religious affiliations. More than a century later, sociologists’ fascination with

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religious involvement and health outcomes remains, but this line of research has been immensely enriched and broadened over time. Moving beyond the difference between Protestants and Catholics, sociologists have since studied the effects of varying aspects of religiosity in different social and historical settings (for reviews, see Ellison and Levin 1998; Chatters 2000; Waite and Lehrer 2003; Zimmer et al. 2016). Moreover, both theorists and empirical researchers have mapped out a complex set of mechanisms through which religion influences well-being. Complementary to the Durkheimian theory of social integration, which emphasizes the role of religion in promoting social ties and social support, researchers also increasingly recognize the intrinsic/private aspects of religion, which promotes positive emotion, self-efficacy, and optimism (Chamberlain and Zika 1988; Ellison 1991; Ellison and Levin 1998; Krause 2003; Inglehart 2010).

An abundance of empirical evidence has been accumulated, with the majority of them documenting the beneficial effect of religion on physical or mental health (for reviews, see Ellison and Levin 1998; Waite and Lehrer 2003; Zimmer et al. 2016). Nonetheless, we are far from reaching a consensus on the religion-health connection in this globalizing world. Recent studies have shown that the extent to which religion matters is strongly shaped by the national context, including its culture, norms, and government regulations (Elliott and Hayward 2009; Eichhorn 2012; Stavrova et al. 2013; Hayward and Elliott 2014; Popova 2014).

In this paper, we address this classic sociological question, that is, whether religion influences individual subjective well-being, in the unique setting of China. First, contemporary Chinese society is known to be one of the least religious nations and the state is officially atheist. The establishment of the communist government in 1949 led to policies and propaganda labeling religion as antithetical to Marxist and Maoist doctrines. As a result, an overwhelming number of Chinese mainland adults consider themselves not to be religious (Lu 2014). At the same time, it is important to note that religion has deep roots in Chinese societies, with Buddhism and Taoism permeating Chinese culture for over thousands of years. These so-called traditional Chinese religions differ from religions such as Christianity and Islam in a crucial way, that is, they are much less organized, involve much more home based praying and meditation, and attend less communal activities. Religious involvement has been on the rise in recent years, including a revival of traditional Chinese religions and expansion of Christianity and Islam (Potter 2003; Yang 2011), both as a result of loosening of government control since the open-door and economic reform policies, and people turning to religion for solace in an age of dramatic socioeconomic and political upheavals.

Arguably, in no other settings of world, do we observe such a complex interplay among different forces—a low prevalence rate juxtaposed against a long history of religious involvement, a contrast between the more privately oriented Chinese traditional religions versus the organized religions of the West, and a recent expansion yet confronted with continued governmental sanctions. In this paper, we use a nationally representative panel data (CFPS, China Family Panel Studies) to investigate how individuals’ life satisfaction could be shaped by religion. First, we consider religion a multidimensional construct and aim to create a latent class membership structure of religiosity that would take
into account different types of religious affiliation, group belonging, frequency of attendance, and the salience of religion in life. Second, we test a range of hypotheses that are theoretically and empirically motivated by mechanisms that feature both the social integration and intrinsic aspects of religion. Third, we take advantage of panel data and use fixed-effect models to establish the linkage between religiosity and life satisfaction, and effectively tease out the confounding effects of unobserved individual characteristics. Finally, we test the hypothesis of whether religion has a stronger protective effect for the disadvantaged groups. Existing literature suggests that religion provides additional coping resources for groups such as women and the socioeconomically disadvantaged (Ellison 1991; Ellison and Levin 1998). In this paper, we further extend the test to the rural–urban divide—a main driver of stratification in contemporary Chinese society.

**The Benefits of Religion: Public/Social and Private/Intrinsic Aspects**

Since Durkheim (1951) seminal work on the linkage between suicide rates and religious affiliations, social scientists have embraced religion as an important factor in influencing human development and overall well-being. Researchers primarily have identified two main mechanisms of why religion matters for well-being, with one centering on the public and social aspects of religion and the other on the private, intrinsic, and spiritual aspects of religion (Krause 2008; Lim and Putnam 2010; Kortt et al. 2015; Sinnewe et al. 2015).

The emphasis on the public/social aspects of religion derives from the Durkheimian theory of social integration. Specifically, religious institutions, services, and related activities tend to bring together persons with similar values and interests, thereby promoting social interaction, communication, and friendships. These social ties could easily extend to the secular settings. There is evidence showing that religious adherents maintain not only a larger, but also a higher quality of social networks than the nonreligious (Ellison and George 1994; Bradley 1995). Therefore, compared with individuals who are less religious, people who are religious can more effectively cope with stressful life events, such as divorce, unemployment, and bereavement (Pargament 1997).

In contrast to the public/social aspects of religion, another key mechanism of why religion matters focuses on the gains from the private/intrinsic aspects of religious involvement. First, religious involvement can engender positive emotions, such as forgiveness, love, and content, likely sources of religious people’s greater subjective well-being (Ellison and Levin 1998; Lutjen et al. 2012; Chen and Williams 2016). Second, religious involvement provides a sense of belonging, meaning, and purpose in life (Peterson and Roy 1985; Chamberlain and Zika 1988; Krause 2003; Krause and Wulff 2005), which subsequently bolster individual self-esteem, optimism, personal efficacy, and consequently, subjective well-being (Chamberlain and Zika 1988; Ellison 1991; Ellison and Levin 1998; Krause 2003; Inglehart 2010).
Empirical Evidence on the Linkage Between Religion and Subjective Well-Being

The beneficial mechanisms identified above have been well-supported by empirical research on the linkage between religion and subjective well-being. A large body of studies have generally documented a positive association of religious involvement with subjective well-being (for reviews, see Witter et al. 1985; Ellison and Levin 1998; Waite and Lehrer 2003; Zimmer et al. 2016). Despite the use of a wide range of religiosity and well-being indicators, the results are generally robust. For example, religious adherents tend to have greater life satisfaction and happiness than the nonreligious individuals (Ellison 1991; Ferriss 2002; Greeley and Hout 2006; Lelkes 2006). Engaging in public or private religious practice can also bring about higher level of personal happiness, life satisfaction, affective well-being, and quality of life (Ellison et al. 1989; Levin and Chatters 1998; Greeley and Hout 2006; Lim 2016). The more salient that religion features in an individual’s life, the higher the level of subjective well-being (Levin and Chatters 1998; Zullig et al. 2006; Gundlach and Opfinger 2013).

It is noteworthy that, although most studies identify the beneficial effects of religion on subjective well-being, some studies have documented its harmful influences. For example, Krause and his colleagues found that negative interactions such as the problem of gossiping, the strict leadership style of the minister, and conflicts with fellow parishioners and official church doctrines, and religious doubt could have detrimental influences on psychological well-being for older Americans (Krause et al. 2000; Krause 2006). While in difficult times, religion sometimes may induce negative and unproductive coping responses (e.g., anger toward church and God, and feeling of divine punishment; Pargament 1997). However, these studies tend to focus on specific sociodemographic groups or aspects of religious involvement, making their findings hardly generalizable to wider populations.

The vast literature on religion and subjective well-being focuses on a single social setting, mostly the United States or other European countries. Laudably, recent literature has turned its attention to the strength of the association between religion and subject well-being across different populations and social contexts (Elliott and Hayward 2009; Eichhorn 2012; Stavrova et al. 2013; Hayward and Elliott 2014; Popova 2014). After analyzing data from sixty-five countries derived from the fourth wave of the World Values Survey, Elliott and Hayward (2009) found that the association of attendance at religious services with life satisfaction shifted from being positive to being negative across countries with different levels of government restriction on civil, political, and religious freedoms. After pooling data from eighty-eight countries derived from the five waves of the same survey, Hayward and Elliott (2014) reported that religious involvement was most strongly associated with greater happiness in countries where religion was freely and widely practiced, whereas it was negatively associated with happiness when religiousness was relatively deviant. Using data from forty-three European and Anglo-Saxon societies obtained from
the fourth and fifth of the same survey, Eichhorn (2012) reported that individual religiosity was not significantly, though positively, associated with happiness, and the association increased in size under the conditions of greater societal levels of religious belief and practice.

Despite tremendous insights gained from existing literature, we still have relatively little knowledge in non-Western societies. In the case of China, a largely nonreligious society where different types of religions are practiced under a tight government control, does religion offer the same type of benefits as they do in some other societies? We now turn our attention to contemporary Chinese Society.

**Religion in Contemporary China**

China offers a compelling context in which to study the well-being implications of religious involvement. Contemporary Chinese society is known to be largely nonreligious. Four surveys conducted respectively in 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2011 as part of the Chinese General Social Survey found that, an average of 87 percent of Chinese mainland adults considered themselves not to be religious; out of the religious adherents, Buddhists account for the largest proportion (48%), followed by folk religionist (17%), Protestantism (16%), Muslims (13%), Catholic (2%), and Taoist (2%; Lu 2014). Putting aside their differences in doctrines, Chinese religious networks are weaker and religious activities are less institutionally organized than those in western countries, not only because of the non-congregational trait of Chinese traditional religions, but also due to the smaller social network potential of western orientation religions in China (Chen and Williams 2016).

Although China is nowadays one of the world’s least religious countries, it has historically long been a cradle and host of various religious traditions. They are composed of both diffuse and institutional aspects, such as popular beliefs in gods, spirits and ghosts, ancestor worship, Taoism, and Buddhism. These religious traditions have played significant roles in shaping Chinese culture. Not until the sixteenth century did Western Protestantism and Catholicism take roots in China, but they failed to obtain many converts (Cohen 1992).

The Communist China established in 1949 have held a negative attitude towards religious development. Seen as antithetical to Marxist and Maoist thoughts, the Chinese government’s policies and propaganda have long facilitated the diffusion of the view that all religions are superstition. Thus, religious activities in China are subject to heavy regulations by the government. The Cultural Revolution taking place during the period 1966–1976 destroyed all different kinds of religions and forced them underground.

Religion and religious practice have experienced a rebound, supported by the 1982 “Document 19” which guaranteed that the government would give respect and protection of five sanctioned faiths-Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism (Potter 2003). The rebound could also be a response to social anomie and an increasingly materialistic society in recent decades. In fact, almost
all Chinese religious activities involves sitting meditation (samadhi) that are likely to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (Zeng et al. 2011). The teachings of major Chinese religions, including Buddhism and Taoism, promote the virtues such as tolerance, self-control, harmony, and wisdom, thereby offering means to spiritual wellbeing (Ai 2000). Moreover, most Chinese religions tend to lessen the value placed on the material position, which can help adherents to have an improved sense of social status relative to the nonreligious (Chen and Williams 2016). In spite of these, religion is not immune from government supervision, surveillance, and even persecution. The state has tightened its control on religious activities in recent years, as a response to growth in religious involvement in the population (Brown and Tierney 2009; Yang 2011). Overall, current socio-political-economic conditions in China may induce ambivalence towards the role that religion plays.

**Empirical Literature on Religion and Well-Being in China**

Partly in response to increasing availability of relevant data, research interests in the association between religious involvement and well-being in China has proliferated in recent years. Although these studies have consistently reported desirable effects of religious involvement on morbidity and mortality (e.g., Yeager et al. 2006; Zeng et al. 2011; Hidajat et al. 2013), considerable controversy has surrounded the relationship between religious involvement and subjective well-being. Confirming the general pattern found in many other countries, several studies have reported that religious involvement is indeed strongly and positively associated with subjective well-being in China. For example, using data collected in the western region of China, Bian et al. (2015) found that Muslims and Taoists had higher level of subjective well-being, compared with the nonbelievers. After pooling data from the 2010, 2011, and 2012 Chinese General Social Surveys, Chen and Williams (2016) reported that religious adherents have higher levels of subjective well-being than the nonreligious. In addition, using data from two counties damaged by the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2009, Wang et al. (2012) found that religious faith helped Buddhists recover from the trauma more quickly than the non-Buddhists. However, other studies have concluded that religion is not strongly associated with subjective well-being outcomes in China. Liu et al. (2012), for example, analyzing data collected among adult residents in Taiwan, found that the frequency of religious attendance was not a significant factor in predicting happiness. Using data from the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents, Lu and Gao (2017) explored the effects of being religious on happiness and found that being religious in general was not significantly associated with happiness among Chinese mainland residents. Still, some studies have found negative effects of religious involvement on subjective well-being in China. For example, Brown and Tierney (2009) reported a strong negative relationship between religious participation and subjective well-being among the older adults in China.

In sum, existing literature on religion and subjective well-being both has accumulated invaluable knowledge in the recent years. However, there still exist
some major gaps and more questions remain to be answered. First, most previous studies on the association between religious involvement and subjective well-being are limited by its reliance on cross-sectional data, making it difficult to establish a causal relationship. The observed association between religious involvement and subjective well-being may be caused by other unobserved common factors, such as genetic factors, time/taste preference, and cognitive skills (Regnerus and Smith 2005). Additionally, there is possibility of positive selection, that is, happier people may select into religion (Regnerus and Smith 2005). It is possible that people elect to be religious due to anticipated benefits associated with religious involvement, and that people who find happiness in religion are more likely to stay than those do not. This could be particularly true in China, where intergenerational transmission of religiosity tends to be weak given tight government control. Moreover, with few exceptions (Lim and Putnam 2010; Campante and Yanagizawa-Drott 2015; Kortt et al. 2015; Sinnewe et al. 2015; Chen and Williams 2016; Zotti et al. 2016), few statistical analyses explicitly deal with the endogeneity problem surrounding the association between religiosity and subjective well-being, especially when only cross-sectional data are available.

Second, without a doubt, religiosity is a complex multidimensional construct and could manifest “in various levels and forms of religious participation (such as attendance at religious services within a congregation, family observance, and individual devotion) and in terms of the salience of religion” (Waite and Lehrer 2003: 255). Yet reviews of the literature reveal that it is often measured poorly, suffering from an oversimplification in its operationalization. For example, some scholars use a single religiosity item or scale (e.g., Schieman et al. 2003; Lelkes 2006; Brown and Tierney 2009). Other researchers may consider multiple dimensions of religious involvement but treat them as separate constructs without considering potential linkages among the different domains (e.g., Ellison et al. 1989; Ellison 1991; Ferriss 2002; Sinnewe et al. 2015). As a result, inconsistent findings could be attributed to different types of measurement of religiosity.

Research Goals and Hypotheses

To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to use a panel design to study the linkage between religion and life satisfaction in China. Given the complex history and social conditions in China, it is evident that it would be insufficient to simply study the difference between the religious and nonreligious. Nor would it be conceivable just to study religious attendance. In a society where people cannot express religious belief and practice freely, it is quite possible that self-reported nonreligious are heterogeneous, with some of which attending religious services (e.g., home church) or considering religion important in their life. It is also possible for people to self-report as nonreligious but believe in spirituality, as traditional Chinese religions and culture intertwined together for thousands of years. As Chao and Yang (2018) suggested, conventional measures clearly are inadequate to capture the complexity of religiosity in China and we need to take a
multidimensional approach. Thus, in this paper, we tap into different measures of religious involvement (such as religious affiliation, attendance, religious salience, and group belonging) and endeavor to identify some underlying structure of religiosity by grouping individuals into latent classes (detailed description of latent class analysis [LCA] provided later in the paper).

Recent studies using LCA approach to capture the multidimensionality of religiosity in the United States have shown great promises and scholars have convincingly argued for the advantages of this person-centered approach (finding an underlying structure across different dimensions), in contrast to the variable-based conventional approach (i.e., using different indicators as separate variables; Pearce and Denton 2011; Pearce et al. 2013; Lee et al. 2018). As stated by Pearce et al. (2013: 57), “humans are rarely consistently low, medium, or high across dimensions of religiosity including institutional involvement, private practices, salience, or belief.” Therefore, it is essential to come up with a parsimonious structure to characterize patterns of how individuals combine different types and levels of religious involvement.

After we establish a class membership structure that informs us of religiosity patterns of the Chinese population, we test a series of research hypotheses that are informed by existing theories and literature. First, based on the well-articulated mechanisms of religion influencing social integration as well promoting positive feelings and self-efficacy, we first hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1a: Religious involvement increases life satisfaction in general.

At the same time, we are also open to alternative hypotheses, as some studies have identified potential harmful effects of religion. In particular, recent cross-national studies have shown that the beneficial effect of religion wanes if there is a lack of strong religious norm and freedom to practice (Elliott and David Hayward 2009; Eichhorn 2012; Stavrova et al. 2013; Hayward and Elliott 2014). With China being an official atheist state and an overall low level of religious participation in the society, we believe alternative hypotheses are warranted:

Hypothesis 1b: Religious involvement decreases life satisfaction in general.

Second, we hypothesize that religiosity is manifested in different ways in Chinese society and different religious affiliations could provide different types of benefits. Sociologists are traditionally more interested in social integration that religion promotes, particularly because Judeo-Christianity religious systems is organized, congregational and provides a community structure and social network that facilitates social interaction. On the other hand, organized religions in China receive more rigorous restriction from the government and have some conflicts with the Confucianism culture. In contrast, traditional Chinese religion such as Buddhism and Taoism, tend to engage in more self-reflection, mindfulness, and the pursuit of inner peace and satisfaction, and advocate principles such as “Enough is as good as a feast” (Chen and Williams 2016; Zimmer et al. 2016). Both the social and individualistic aspects of religion could hold the key to the secret of religion and could be complementary to each other. Although existing literature provides ample theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence to suggest the benefits of both organized religious systems and Chinese
religiosity to subjective wellbeing, they do not provide us with clear guidance on whether one is more beneficial than the other. Because we are interested in the relative importance of individualistic and social aspects of religion, we formulate two competing hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: Chinese religious tradition has a stronger effect on life satisfaction than organized religions;

Hypothesis 2b: Chinese religious tradition has a weaker effect on life satisfaction than organized religions.

Finally, we test for differential effects of religion by social groups. Studies have widely documented the salutary effect of religion in helping to deal with stressful events and conditions (Siegel et al. 2001; Park 2005). Existing literature suggests that religion is an effective coping mechanism for disadvantaged groups, e.g., African Americans in the United States, women, elders, and persons with lower levels of formal education (Ellison 1991; Ellison and Levin 1998). As Ellison and Levin (1998) point out, religious symbols and beliefs provide only one of many types of tools for constructing a sense of meaning and coherence, meanwhile religious networks represent only one of many sources of social support. For the socioeconomically disadvantaged, religion becomes especially important, since they possess fewer alternative symbolic and network resources. In the context of China, we expect that religion could have a stronger effect of promoting life satisfaction for the disadvantaged groups, namely, rural residents (as compared with urbanites), women (as compared with men), and low income groups (as compared with higher income groups). Just as other settings around the world, the hardship associated with low income and gender are evident in China, where social inequality is dramatically increasing and gender disparities persist in all arenas (for a review, see Wu 2019). The rural and urban divide is certainly not unique to China, but an arbitrary classification of the population into rural and urban residence by the rigid household registration system (Hukou) has created two very different socioeconomic and welfare systems, and unequivocally magnified social disparities between the two groups, with urban residents enjoying a much higher living standard, better access to health care and welfare systems (Wu 2019). In sum, we expect these vulnerable groups to benefit more from the protective effects of religion because of their relative lack of alternative resources.

Hypothesis 3: The protective effect of religion (if any) is stronger for the disadvantaged groups.

Data, Measures, and Method

Data

We use data from the CFPS, an ongoing nationally representative longitudinal survey conducted by the Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University. Through a multistage probability sampling strategy, the baseline survey in 2010 drew a sample of 14,798 households from twenty-five out of mainland China’s thirty-one provinces (excluding Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Inner
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Mongolia, Ningxia, and Hainan). The survey completed interviews with the sampled households and all individuals living in these households. Follow-up surveys were administered biennially to the original respondents in the baseline survey. At each follow-up, the survey also interviewed the core new family members coresiding with the original respondents, but stopped interviewing them if they no longer lived with any original respondent. To date, the CFPS has already conducted three follow-up surveys (2012, 2014, and 2016). The response rate in the 2010 baseline survey is 84.1 percent at the individual level (Xie and Hu 2014). Excluding deaths, the subsequent response rates for the follow-up surveys are 74.1, 72.8, and 66.59 percent, respectively (Sun and Guan 2019). In the current study, we use the three follow-up surveys for adults (aged 16 years old or above), which include a set of items on types of religious tradition, participation, and spirituality, previously unavailable in the baseline survey.

Measures

Our dependent variable is self-reported feelings of satisfaction with life and is measured by the question: “Are you satisfied with your life?” The responses range from 1 to 5, indicating very unsatisfied to very satisfied. Life satisfaction is considered to mostly reflect the cognitive domain of subjective well-being (Andrews and McKennell 1980; Davern et al. 2007). Although multiple measures of subjective well-being would have been desirable, numerous studies have shown that, the use of different measures of subjective well-being do not yield substantially different results, particularly when used in multivariate analysis (Ellison 1991; Hellwell and Putnam 2004).

We tap into four indicators representing the organization, identity, behavioral, and attitudinal dimensions of religious involvement respectively: (1) member of religious group, (2) religious traditions, (3) frequency of attendance at religious services, and (4) feeling about the importance of religion. Member of religious group was measured by a dummy variable identifying whether the respondent was a member of religious group. The CFPS questions on religious traditions differ across survey waves. The religious tradition was measured using denominational affiliation (i.e., Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, none, or others) in the 2012 and 2016 waves, whereas it was measured using the worshipped deities (i.e., Buddha or/and Bodhisattva, the Taoist supernatural, Allah, the Catholic Lord, the Christian God, ancestor, or none) in the 2014 wave. Due to changes in the response item across waves, we exclude those who reported other affiliations.1 Considering the distribution of religious traditions in China, we reclassify them into three categories: (1) traditional Chinese religions (including Buddhism, Taoism), (2) Islam and Christianity, and (3) no affiliation (designated as reference group). It is worth noting that some identified with more than one religion.2 For those believing in both traditional Chinese religion(s) and Islam/Christianity, we regard them as Islam/Christianity believers.3

Frequency of attendance at religious activities/events was originally measured on an ordinal scale from 1 (never) to 7 (several times a week) in the 2012 wave and to 8 (almost every day) in the 2014 and 2016 waves. We collapse this into three categories (0 = no more than once a year, 1 = more than once a year
Table 1. Distribution of Items Measuring the Multiple Dimensions of Religiosity in China

|                          | Wave 2012 | Wave 2014 | Wave 2016 |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Member of religious group|           |           |           |
| No                       | 98.99%    | 98.91%    | 97.39%    |
| Yes                      | 1.01      | 1.09      | 2.61      |
| Religious traditions     |           |           |           |
| None                     | 89.27     | 78.39     | 85.91     |
| Traditional Chinese religions | 7.59   | 18.00      | 10.53     |
| Islam and Christianity   | 3.14      | 3.61      | 3.56      |
| Frequency of attendance  |           |           |           |
| ≤Once a year             | 94.83     | 82.53     | 72.09     |
| >Once a year & < once a week | 3.58   | 13.81      | 23.68     |
| ≥Once a week             | 1.59      | 3.67      | 4.23      |
| Consider religion important|          |           |           |
| Not at all               | 81.48     | 77.43     | 75.06     |
| A little important       | 12.68     | 15.40     | 17.88     |
| Very important           | 5.84      | 7.17      | 7.06      |
| N                        | 31,797    | 31,494    | 33,180    |

Source: China Family Panel Studies 2012, 2014, and 2016.

but less than once a week, and 2 = at least once a week). Our choice of the cut-off points are substantively meaningful and are informed by the original distribution of the frequency of religious service attendance. Feeling about the importance of religion was assessed by a single question asking respondents “No matter whether you attend religious activities/events, do you think religion is important to you?” with three ordered responses (i.e., 2 = “very important,” 1 = “somewhat important,” and 0=“not important at all”). Table 1 provides the frequency distribution of the four categorical variables measuring religious involvement across the survey years.

To estimate the net effect under investigation, we control for basic sociodemographic/socioeconomic characteristics, health conditions, and geographical locations, all of which could potentially confound the relationship between religious involvement and life satisfaction. The covariates in our multivariate analysis include years of schooling, household income per capita, employment status, migration, age, age square, sex, ethnicity, marital status, self-rated health, household size, urbanity, and region. We group household income per capita into quartiles. Migrants refer to those living outside of its own county of household registration at the time of the survey. Age and age-squared are included simultaneously to account for the curvilinear relationship between age and life satisfaction. Self-rated health is measured by an interview question that asked respondents to rate their health on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 to 5 (excellent to poor). We reverse coded the self-rated health so that higher values indicate better health.
Our working sample consists of 31,797 individuals in 2012; 31,494 in 2014; and 33,180 in 2016. Among them, 834 individuals died by the end of 2016. Loss due to follow-up was \(\sim\) 14.22 percent from 2012 to 2014 and 15.59 percent from the 2014 to the 2016 wave. The working sample changed across wave, not only because sample attrition occurs due to mortality or loss to follow-up, but also because new respondents are added in each follow-up survey as a result of growing up or joining the household as new members. The final sample of unique individuals is 43,868. On average, an individual was observed 2.2 times in the panel. The extent of missing cases on our independent variables ranges from .01 percent to 5.12 percent. We use a multiple imputation procedure to correct for missingness (Allison 2002). We have also conducted sensitivity tests by excluding the missing cases and the results are consistent. Descriptive statistics of all the independent variables used in the analysis for all wave combined are presented in table 2.

**Analytic Strategy**

The analysis proceeds in several steps. First, we conduct LCA to examine the typological structure underlying multidimensional aspects of religious involvement. We make use of the above-mentioned four religiosity variables as our categorical indicators (or items), i.e., member of religious groups, religious affiliation, participation at religious activities, and the salience of religion in personal life. Without making any assumption about the distribution of the religiosity variables, the LCA approach allows us to capture the associations that exist among the four categorical indicators of religiosity through a set of unobserved latent classes (McCutcheon 1987; Vermunt and Magidson 2002). The basic LCA model estimates two parameters, latent class membership probabilities and item-response probabilities. Parameters are estimated by maximum likelihood using the EM logarithm. Latent class probabilities describe the distribution of classes of the latent variable, with a sum of 1 indicating that, in addition to being mutually exclusive, the classes are also exhaustive (McCutcheon 1987). LCA analysis has been validated in religiosity studies in other contexts (Pearce and Denton 2011; Pearce et al. 2013; Lee et al. 2018).

In the second step of the analysis, we examine the effect of the derived religiosity classes on life satisfaction. We take advantage of the panel structure of the data, and estimate the effect of the derived religiosity types using fixed-effects models. The fixed-effects models are significant improvement over traditional OLS models, as they control for the unobserved heterogeneity by using only the intraindividual variance (Allison 2009; Hill et al. 2020). The fixed-effects models use changes in the independent variables (here, the derived religiosity types) to predict changes in life satisfaction. The coefficients from fixed-effect models are therefore unbiased with respect to time-invariant heterogeneity. We conduct separate analyses for rural and urban residents, for males and females, as well as for respondents with household income per capita in the lowest quartile and the remaining quartiles.
Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of All Variables in the Analyses

| Variable                                      | Whole sample | Rural | Urban | Female | Male | The lowest household income quartile | The other household income quartiles |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------|-------|-------|--------|------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Life satisfaction (1–5)                       | 3.577        | 3.563 | 3.593 | 3.610  | 3.543| 3.498                                | 3.602                               |
| Mean years of schooling                       | 7.277        | 5.982 | 8.736 | 6.551  | 8.025| 5.216                                | 7.938                               |
| Household per-capita income                   |              |       |       |        |      |                                      |                                     |
| First quartile (yes = 1, else = 0)           | .243         | .329  | .146  | .248   | .238 | —                                    | —                                   |
| Second quartile                               | .268         | .309  | .221  | .273   | .263 | —                                    | —                                   |
| Third quartile                                | .257         | .233  | .285  | .257   | .258 | —                                    | —                                   |
| Fourth quartile (highest)                    | .232         | .128  | .348  | .223   | .241 | —                                    | —                                   |
| Employed (yes = 1, else = 0)                 | .698         | .756  | .633  | .625   | .774 | .689                                 | .701                                |
| Migrant (yes = 1, else = 0)                  | .056         | .029  | .085  | .055   | .056 | .023                                 | .066                                |
| Mean age                                      | 45.745       | 45.832| 45.647| 45.572 | 45.923| 47.995                               | 45.023                              |
| Male (yes = 1, else = 0)                     | .492         | .498  | .486  | —      | —    | .483                                 | .495                                |
| Ethnic (Han = 1, else = 0)                   | .918         | .891  | .948  | .917   | .918 | .863                                 | .935                                |
| Married/cohabitation (yes = 1, else = 0)     | .794         | .800  | .788  | .796   | .792 | .786                                 | .797                                |
| Healthy (1 to 5)                              | 2.946        | 2.927 | 2.967 | 2.823  | 3.073| 2.806                                | 2.991                               |
| Mean household size                           | 4.291        | 4.602 | 3.941 | 4.346  | 4.235| 4.680                                | 4.167                               |
| Urban (yes = 1, else = 0)                    | .470         | —     | —     | .476   | .464 | .282                                 | .530                                |
| Region                                        |              |       |       |        |      |                                      |                                     |
| East (yes = 1, else = 0)                     | .421         | .344  | .507  | .421   | .420 | .292                                 | .462                                |
| Central                                       | .298         | .292  | .304  | .301   | .294 | .286                                 | .301                                |
| West                                          | .282         | .364  | .190  | .278   | .286 | .422                                 | .237                                |
| N                                             | 96,471       | 51,121| 45,350| 48,978 | 47,493| 23,446                               | 73,025                              |

Source: China Family Panel Studies 2012, 2014, and 2016.
Table 3. Comparison of Goodness-of-Fit of Basic Latent Class Models

| No. of classes | Likelihood ratio G² | Degree of freedom | AIC         | BIC         |
|----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1              | 60,800.18           | 46                | 60,814.18   | 60,880.51   |
| 2              | 7,149.97            | 38                | 7,179.97    | 7,322.12    |
| 3              | 541.58              | 30                | 587.58      | 805.55      |
| 4              | 266.71              | 22                | 328.71      | 622.50      |
| 5              | 174.12              | 14                | 252.12      | 621.72      |
| 6              | 74.45               | 6                 | 168.45      | 613.86      |

Source: China Family Panel Studies 2012, 2014, and 2016.
Note: Boldface type indicates the selected model. AIC: Akaike Information Criterion. BIC: Bayesian Information Criterion

Results

Typologies of Religious Involvement

We specify models with one to six potential latent classes and summarize their goodness-of-fit statistics in table 3. We rely on a combination of statistical criteria (i.e., the likelihood-ratio G² statistics, Akaike’s Information Criterion [AIC] and Bayesian Information Criterion [BIC]), parsimony, and interpretability to select the appropriate number of latent classes (Collins and Lanza 2010). The AIC and BIC are penalized log-likelihood model information criteria, with lower AIC and BIC values suggesting a better fit of the model (Lanza et al. 2007). Table 3 shows that, the G² statistic, AIC, and BIC continue to go down as more latent classes are added. However, there is a leveling off after the four-latent-class model. Examination of the five- and six-latent-class models shows that these models have poor homogeneity and latent class separation compared to the model with four latent classes.

Table 4 displays item-response probabilities for the four-class model. On the basis of the patterns of these probabilities, we assigned the labels defined in the table 4 to describe the four latent classes: (1) the pure nonreligious, (2) the nonreligious with some spirituality, (3) Chinese-religion adherent, and (4) organized-religion adherent. The members of Class 1 the pure nonreligious are characterized by a probability of nearly 1.0 of not being a member of religious group, have the highest probability of belonging to no religion, having the lowest probability of taking part in religious services/activities, and having the lowest self-reported salience of religion in personal life. Class 2, the nonreligious with some spirituality, shares with Class 1 the characteristics of not being a member of religious group, no religious affiliation and little attendance at religious activities. However, Class 2 is different from Class 1 in terms of the salience of religion in life. Most members of Class2 feel that religion is a little important in life (an item-response probability of .644). Class 3, Chinese-religion adherents, is represented by the highest probabilities of belonging to Chinese traditional religions (.892),...
Table 4. Item-Response Probabilities for Four-Class Model

|                               | Class 1 | Class 2 | Class 3 | Class 4 |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|                               | The pure nonreligious | The nonreligious with some spirituality | Chinese-religion adherent | Organized-religion adherent |
| Member of religious group     |         |         |         |         |
| No                            | 1.000   | .998    | .969    | .627    |
| Yes                           | .000    | .002    | .031    | .373    |
| Religious traditions          |         |         |         |         |
| None                          | .981    | .839    | .078    | .020    |
| Traditional Chinese religions| .018    | .133    | .892    | .215    |
| Islam and Christianity        | .002    | .029    | .030    | .765    |
| Frequency of attendance       |         |         |         |         |
| ≤Once a year                  | .938    | .830    | .217    | .145    |
| >Once a year & <Once a week   | .059    | .160    | .719    | .212    |
| ≥Once a week                  | .004    | .010    | .064    | .643    |
| Consider religion important  |         |         |         |         |
| Not at all                    | .990    | .280    | .251    | .038    |
| A little important            | .004    | .644    | .483    | .175    |
| Very important                | .006    | .076    | .267    | .786    |

*Source: China Family Panel Studies 2012, 2014, and 2016.*

...as well as a moderate level of religious attendance (.719) and the salience of religion in life (.483), although the probability of being a member of religious group remains very low (.031). The fourth class, organized-religion adherent, has the highest probability of being a member of religious group (.373), the highest probability of being an Islamic/Christian believer (.765), the highest frequency of attending religious activities/services (.643), and the greatest salience of religion (i.e., the highest likelihood of considering religion very important in life, .786).

Other than item-response probabilities, LCA also yields class membership probabilities, thereby identifying the probability distribution of class membership in the four classes (adding up to 100%). This measure is useful in helping us to document how prevalent each religiosity class membership is among the adults in China and whether there exists any trend over time. Figure 1 displays the trend in the probability distribution of religiosity membership during the period...
Figure 1. Distribution of religiosity class membership.

*Note:* Class 1: the pure nonreligious. Class 2: the nonreligious with some spirituality. Class 3: Chinese-religion adherent. Class 4: organized-religion adherent.

*Source:* China Family Panel Studies 2012, 2014, and 2016.

2012–2016. About 81 percent of Chinese adults were identified as the pure nonreligious in 2012, and afterwards the proportion dropped by 7 percentage points. Accompanying the decline in the pure nonreligious, we see a rise in the remaining three religiosity classes. Specifically, as for the nonreligious with some spirituality, this category fluctuates over time, with a slight decrease early on and then with an increase. For those considered Chinese-religion adherents, the proportion also fluctuates over time, with a 3 percentage points increase over the whole study period. At the same time, we observe a steady (though slight) increase in the organized-religion adherent category, from 2.5 percent in 2012 to 3.4 percent in 2014 and 3.8 percent in 2016.

**Transition in Religious Involvement**

Figure 1 documents the changing trends of religious involvement at the aggregate level and does not show within-individual changes. In table 5, we present the transition probabilities in religiosity latent classes across the three waves of measurement. Overall, ~26 percent of the sample experienced transition in religiosity class membership in between survey intervals. Some of the classes are more stable than others. For example, about 81 percent of the pure nonreligious stayed in the same class from 2012 to 2014; the corresponding figure for the pure nonreligious is 85 percent from 2014 to 2016. As for organized-religion adherent, the stability is also very high, with 76 percent of the person remaining in same group from 2012 to 2014 and 72 percent staying in the same group from 2014 to 2016. The remaining two classes are more volatile. For example,
Table 5. Transition Probabilities for Religiosity Class Membership, 2012–2016

| Variables                     | Transition probabilities to latent class at time $t+1$ | Total (N) |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
|                               | Class 1 | Class 2 | Class 3 | Class 4 |             |
| Latent Class at 2012          |         |         |         |         |             |
| Class 1                       | .814    | .086    | .091    | .009    | 1.000 (19,942) |
| Class 2                       | .522    | .253    | .199    | .026    | 1.000 (2,868)  |
| Class 3                       | .268    | .115    | .515    | .103    | 1.000 (987)    |
| Class 4                       | .105    | .052    | .079    | .764    | 1.000 (649)    |
| N                             | 18,060  | 2,588   | 2,952   | 846     | 24,446       |
| Latent Class at 2014          |         |         |         |         |             |
| Class 1                       | .849    | .112    | .032    | .008    | 1.000 (18,705) |
| Class 2                       | .556    | .345    | .072    | .027    | 1.000 (2,703)  |
| Class 3                       | .428    | .207    | .315    | .050    | 1.000 (2,976)  |
| Class 4                       | .106    | .075    | .100    | .719    | 1.000 (859)    |
| N                             | 18,490  | 3,670   | 1,800   | 984     | 24,944       |

Source: China Family Panel Studies 2012, 2014, and 2016.

Note: Class 1: the pure nonreligious. Class 2: the nonreligious with some spirituality. Class 3: Chinese-religion adherent. Class 4: organized-religion adherent.

For the nonreligious with some spirituality, only 25 percent of them stayed in the same class, and the majority (52%) transitioned into the pure nonreligious from 2012 to 2014. This pattern is consistent for this category during the period 2014–2016.

The Effect of Religious Involvement on Subjective Well-being

On the basis of the derived religiosity classes, we use the three waves of panel data from CFPS and the fixed-effect models to estimate the effect of religious involvement. We begin with Model 1, which refers to the whole sample. Coefficients of the model indicate changes in life satisfaction if persons switch from the reference category (the pure nonreligious) to each derived religiosity class. Except for the nonreligious with some spirituality, entering into the other two categories of religiosity from the pure nonreligious increases levels of life satisfaction, consistent with Hypothesis 1a rather than Hypothesis 1b. Specifically, switching from the pure nonreligious to the nonreligious with some spirituality does not induce significant changes in life satisfaction; converting from the pure nonreligious to the Chinese-religion adherent increases the average level of life satisfaction by .142 scale points; changing from the nonreligious to the organized-religion adherent leads to an increase in average level of life satisfaction by .101 scale points. The magnitude of the positive role of being a Chinese-religion adherent seems greater than that of being organized-religion adherent.
adherent, although they are not significantly different from each other at the .05 level.

Furthermore, we break down the sample by residence, gender and household income, and conduct the same analysis as that in Model 1 of table 6. We summarize the results in Models 2 to 7 of table 6. We also conduct statistical tests for whether the differences in the coefficients of religiosity membership across subgroup models (i.e., rural vs. urban, female vs. male, and the lowest household income quartile vs. the other quartiles) are statistically significant (not shown). When separating the analyses by urban and rural subsamples, we find a significant difference in the effect of being an organized-religion adherent. Specifically, while switching from the pure nonreligious to organized-religion adherent does not increase the average level of life satisfaction in the urban sample, it does so in the rural sample, with the associated coefficient being .180. This indicates that the effect of being an organized-religion adherent is stronger among rural residents than that among urban residents. Similarly, comparing Model 4 with Model 5, at first glance, we observe that the coefficients of being a Chinese-religion adherent and an organized-religion adherent are stronger among females than those among males. However, a formal test of gender variations in the effects of religious involvement is not statistically significant (results not shown). When comparing Model 6 with Model 7, we find a significant difference in the effects of religious involvement across income subgroups. Relative to those in the lowest income quartile, the coefficient for being Chinese-religion adherent is as large as .224, 67 percent higher than the corresponding figure for those in the remaining income strata. Meanwhile, for respondents with household per capita incomes in the lowest quartile, the coefficient for being an organized-religion adherent is as large as .267 and statistically significant, whereas for respondents with household income in the remaining quartiles, changing religious status from the pure nonreligious to organized-religion adherent does not increase their average level of life satisfaction significantly. Overall, organized religion only seems to matter for those most disenfranchised, whereas Chinese religion seems to matter across the board. Religiosity gives the vulnerable group (rural residents and those in the lowest income quartile) stronger protection, as suggested by Hypothesis 3.

Robustness Checks

Our use of LCA to capture the multidimensionality of religious involvement is innovative and well suits the Chinese context. However, it could be argued that, by using a comprehensive measure, we could miss the nuance of which specific aspects of religious involvement are more closely linked to life satisfaction and how our results would be compared with other studies. In addition, the collapse of Christianity and Islam into one category could seem questionable where clashes between the two are commonly observed in a global context. To make sure that our measures are in line with other commonly used measures of religiosity in the literature, we conduct a series of analyses as robustness checks. We examine each of the four religiosity
Table 6. Linear Fixed-Effects Regressions of Life Satisfaction on Religiosity

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Whole sample | Rural | Urban | Female | Male | The lowest household income quartile | The other household income quartiles |
| Religiosity membership (Class 1: pure nonreligious = 0) | | | | | | | |
| Class 2: the nonreligious with some spirituality | .008 (.013) | .027 (.019) | .006 (.018) | .011 (.019) | .021 (.042) | .007 (.016) |
| Class 3: Chinese-religion adherent | .142*** (.018) | .125*** (.025) | .170*** (.026) | .161*** (.023) | .113*** (.028) | .224*** (.057) | .134*** (.021) |
| Class 4: organized religion adherent | .101** (.037) | .180** (.056) | .043 (.051) | .109* (.046) | .086 (.064) | .267* (.111) | .055 (.046) |
| Years of schooling | −.019*** (.003) | −.012* (.005) | −.012* (.005) | −.017*** (.005) | −.021*** (.005) | −.029** (.010) | −.019*** (.004) |
| Household per-capita income (first quartile = 0) | | | | | | | |
| Second quartile | .017 (.012) | .011 (.015) | .043* (.021) | .007 (.016) | .027 (.017) | — | — |
| Third quartile | .029* (.014) | .020 (.018) | .046* (.022) | .018 (.019) | .041* (.019) | — | — |
| Fourth quartile (highest) | .066*** (.016) | .053* (.024) | .090*** (.024) | .046* (.022) | .087*** (.022) | — | — |
| Employed (not employed = 0) | .004 (.013) | .013 (.019) | −.000 (.019) | −.002 (.017) | .009 (.021) | .053 (.039) | .000 (.016) |

(Continue)
| Variables                        | Model 1   | Model 2   | Model 3   | Model 4   | Model 5   | Model 6   | Model 7   |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Migrant (non-migrant = 0)       | −.012 (.035) | −.045 (.072) | −.041 (.045) | −.068 (.050) | .045 (.050) | −.044 (.209) | −.029 (.038) |
| Age                             | .000 (.006) | −.007 (.009) | .004 (.009) | −.001 (.009) | .001 (.009) | −.000 (.021) | .008 (.008) |
| Age square                      | .001*** (.000) | .001*** (.000) | .001*** (.000) | .001*** (.000) | .001*** (.000) | .001*** (.000) | .001*** (.000) |
| Married/cohabitation (else = 0) | .061* (.026) | .106** (.040) | .028 (.037) | .012 (.037) | .114** (.037) | −.055 (.087) | .090** (.031) |
| Healthy                         | .131*** (.004) | .126*** (.006) | .135*** (.007) | .125*** (.006) | .138*** (.006) | .124*** (.013) | .136*** (.005) |
| Household size                  | .002 (.004) | −.001 (.006) | −.002 (.007) | .001 (.006) | .003 (.006) | −.028* (.013) | .003 (.005) |
| Urban (rural = 0)               | −.060* (.024) | —         | —         | −.070* (.033) | −.048 (.033) | .030 (.089) | −.086** (.027) |
| Region (East = 0)               |           |           |           |           |           |           |           |
| Central                         | .099 (.065) | .064 (.218) | .093 (.122) | .117 (.099) | .088 (.086) | −.009 (.430) | .085 (.071) |
| West                            | .077 (.080) | .071 (.249) | −.218 (.147) | −.034 (.130) | .144 (.101) | −.335 (.379) | .133 (.093) |
| Intercept                       | 1.323*** (.155) | 1.321*** (.264) | 1.394*** (.224) | 1.456*** (.220) | 1.217*** (.219) | 1.607** (.606) | 1.308*** (.182) |
| N of person-wave observations   | 96,471     | 51,121     | 45,350     | 48,978     | 47,493     | 23,446     | 73,025     |
| N of unique person              | 43,868     | 24,238     | 22,346     | 22,017     | 21,851     | 16,576     | 38,544     |

Source: China Family Panel Studies 2012, 2014, and 2016.

Notes: ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. Standard errors are in parentheses.
indicators (i.e., group belonging, religious tradition, frequency of attendance, and religious salience) separately (Models 1 through 4) and simultaneously (Model 5), so that we can explore their separate and combined effects (see Supplementary Appendix table A1, see the online supplementary material). The results suggest that all four aspects of religiosity matter. The results are highly consistent with the LCA.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Does religion influence life satisfaction in contemporary China? On the one hand, with functions ranging from providing a sense of meaning and hope to life to offering strong social networks and support, religion could positively shape subjective well-being, as an abundance of existing literature suggests. On the other hand, recent cross-national comparisons also demonstrate that positive effects of religion are found to be conditioned upon religious freedom and cultural religious norm. If that is the case, then for a largely nonreligious society and an atheist state, we would not observe a strong beneficial effect of religion in China.

First and foremost, we do not simply categorize individuals into the religious versus nonreligious group. Nor do we rely on a single indicator of religiosity, whether it is participation or spirituality. Since religion is not a salient feature of the society, with an overwhelming proportion of the population claiming no religious belief at all, our measures of religious involvement aim to paint broad strokes while at the same time allowing for nuances across groups. Our LCA classifies Chinese adults into four broad types, those with no religious belief, those who are nonreligious but with some spirituality, those who are Chinese-religion adherents, and those who are organized-religion adherents. Further, our longitudinal data analysis also shows the fluidity of religious involvement in China. More than a quarter of the sample have experienced transition in class membership across a four-year period. This provides ground for a dynamic analysis of religious involvement and shifts in life satisfaction.

Compared with earlier studies that document an association between religious involvement and subjective well-being, our fixed-effect models provide a key piece of the evidence that the relationship indeed could be causal in nature in the Chinese context. First, our answer to the question of whether religion matters or not is a definite yes. A change from the pure nonreligious to Chinese-religion adherents and organized-religion adherents both increases levels of life satisfaction, net of other factors. Second, among those who are nonreligious, having a higher level of spirituality does not induce an increase in life satisfaction. This casts some skepticism on the argument that the belief in god or higher being provides some beneficial effect on mental well-being. Third, we find that the benefit of adherence to Chinese religion is comparable with that of adherence to organized religion. Most of the existing researches overwhelmingly suggest that the benefit of religion comes from its “public aspects,” that is, religious participation promotes social interaction and social support among its members.
Chinese religion (Buddhism and Taoism) tends to be non-congregational and more individualistically oriented, compared with organized religions such as Christianity and Islam. Recent literature on the general benefits of spirituality, mindfulness, and meditation lend support to our findings (Ai 2000). In addition, some research in China has documented “fatalistic voluntarism”—a combination of individual agency to change the situation and fatalistic acceptance of the way things are—as a key feature of Chinese religion, and has provided evidence that they enhance well-being (see Liu and Mencken 2010). At the same time, religious activities, particularly by organized religions, such as Christianity, are still subject to heavy government regulations and members could still be more vulnerable to persecution.

Finally, our results are consistent with the general literature that religious involvement provides a stronger buffering effect for the disadvantaged groups, as manifested in our subsample analyses of low versus high income, and urban vs. rural. The rural segment of the Chinese population has long been disadvantaged in terms of education opportunities, labor market, living standards, and health care. The stronger effect sizes we find of religious involvement in the poorer and rural subsamples also provide support for the hypothesis that it is progressively more effective in buffering the negative effect of stress in life. We also note that women in organized religion get a boost in life satisfaction while no statistically significant effect is observed for men in the same category. However, since a formal test of gender subsample difference is not significant, we refrain from drawing any definitive conclusion about any additional advantages offered by religious involvement to women.

Indeed, the healing power of religion for those who are in need of it the most could be exactly the reason why this case study of China stands out in a globalizing context. Yes, national contexts matter but not in the way that we expected originally. Recent cross-national studies underscore the importance of national contexts and suggest that the positive effect of religion manifests in countries where there is strong religious norms and religious freedom. Instead of playing a small or no role at all, it turns out that, religion indeed plays a salient role in shaping individual life satisfaction in China, the most populous but arguably the least religious country of the world. The effect sizes that we observe from our models are indeed strikingly large. Consider the net difference in life satisfaction between those who are religious adherents versus those who are not: it is almost twice as large, compared with those in the highest versus the lowest income quartiles. The statement that religion has a big impact on life satisfaction is shocking in a largely nonreligious society with very limited religious freedom, considering that economic gains/growth and materialist orientation have dominated national conversations in the past decades. Ironically, earlier communist rhetoric often uses the quote of “religion is the opium of the people” to illustrate its harmful and illusory effect, which is a flagrant misrepresentation of Marx’s dialectic perspective on religion (McKinnon 2005). We believe the findings from our paper provides a perfect illustration of (Marx 1970) full quote: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” His poignant
analyses of religious beliefs and practices in late capitalism of the nineteenth century undoubtedly still resonate in a communist/state capitalist society with few religious freedom and rights for its population. Religiousness could be in and of itself an expression of protest, while at the same time helps to relieve pain, to bring solace, and to elevate spirits in times of needs.

We would like to acknowledge a few caveats for this study. First, we acknowledge our measures of Chinese traditional religions could be imprecise. In contrast to the exclusivity in beliefs and practices in religions such as Christianity and Islam, Chinese traditional religion are often nonexclusive and strongly correlate with Chinese folk religions (e.g., ancestor worship, local deity worship, a belief in the god of wealth, and divination; for details, see Yang and Hu 2012). It is likely that our measures of religiosity are insufficient to distinguish Chinese traditional religions from Chinese folk religion. Second, although fixed-effect models are powerful tools for longitudinal analyses, it is not without limitations (Hill et al. 2020). For example, the benefits of religion may apply to those who decide to become religious only, since fixed-effect models estimate the mean effect on those experiencing religious changes. We have a small number of panels, i.e., three waves of CFPS data, possibly making the coefficients downwardly biased. Finally, this study does not address the explicit mechanisms through which religious involvement affects subjective well-being, and how these mechanisms are shaped by the wider socio–political system in China. We see our paper as a useful starting point to evaluate the benefit of religious involvement in China. More questions beg our answers, as regard to mechanisms and its connection to an ever-changing social context.

Notes

1. 91 respondents (0.3%) in 2012 and 91 respondents (0.3%) in 2016 reported other affiliations.
2. The 2012 CFPS only allowed respondents to select one religion, but respondents in the 2014 and 2016 wave could select more than one. In total, 259 respondents in 2014 and 29 respondents in 2016 identified themselves with two or more traditions.
3. 51 respondents believe in both traditional Chinese religions and Islam/Christianity. The results are robust either way we classify them.
4. Note that the person-wave observations for subgroups add up to the same, whereas the N of unique persons for subgroups does not. This is because for one person, residence and income status can change over time.

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**Supplementary Material**

Supplementary material is available at *Social Forces* online.

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