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MULTIPLE-PERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS ON THE GEOLOGICAL DISTRIBUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN CHINA

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Abstract

This article uses GIS technology to obtain the geographical distribution of Christians in China based on the data on religions in each Chinese province collected by CFPS in 2012. After processing the data, we get the geographical distribution of proportion of Christian population in all religious people in each Chinese province. Furthermore, this article tries to explore reasons that can explain such distribution from multiple dimensions, including history, religious ecology, and religious studies. First of all, we find out that the number of Christians has made Christianity the second largest religion in China, while the first one is Buddhism; however, Christianity is developing much faster than Buddhism. In addition, this article finds out an astonishing phenomenon: the population of Christians is almost the same as that of Buddhism in Henan, the birthplace of Shaolin (a branch of Buddhism).

Keywords

Christianity, Geological Distribution, Multiple Dimensions (People's Republic of China)

1. Introduction

Although the majority of Chinese populace is atheist, with the vigorous development of religions in the country, religions have become one of the significant factors that affect the daily life of Chinese people. However, the studies on the national, geological distribution of mainstream religions by scholars are still relatively rare, and the analysis on the factors behind the differences of geographical distribution among mainstream religions is relatively fragmented now. Thus, this article proceeds from the sampling data of religions in different Chinese provinces, and makes use of the geographic information systems (GIS) to produce a scale drawing of the distribution of different mainstream religions in various provinces for further analysis.

Christianity is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament and sacred tradition. Nestorianism, one of the early branches of Christianity, was first introduced into China in the 7th century during the Tang dynasty. In the following one thousand and three hundred years, different branches of Christianity have developed, flourished, and vanished in China. And such process keeps repeating itself. In the current age, Protestantism has been the dominant branch of Christianity in China. There has been a brief description of the earliest introduction and current situation of Christianity in the paper by Wang Zuoan, the current administer of The People's Republic of China State Bureau of Religious Affairs. [1] In addition, according to *The Ecological Balance of Religions and The Development of Chinese Christianity* by Duan Qi, the rapid development of Protestantism can be explained by the imbalance of the religious ecosystem (Wang Zuoan, 2010) Also, there are other dimensions to analyze such phenomenon, such as the indigenization of Protestantism by Wang Xiaozhao, 2009.

This article extends on the document (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity>) and further illustrates the development of different branches of Christianity in different dynasties in China. In addition, this article combines religious ecology ideologies and the constant localization of Christianity in China to analyze the condition of Christianity in China.

2. Methods

2.1 Data Sources

CFPS (Chinese Family Panel Studies 1998) implemented by ISSS (China Social Science Research Center of Peking University), is a major social science project, which reflects the vicissitude of Chinese society, economy, population, education, and health and provides data for

academic research and policy decision making. The project tracks three levels of data from individuals, families, and communities; the website is <http://www.iss.edu.cn/cfps/sj/>.

Chinese Family Panel Studies has conducted three surveys from 2010 to 2012. Respondents are family members of sample households from 25 Chinese provinces, cities or autonomous regions. Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, and Hainan are excluded, because the population of the previous 25 provinces accounts for about 95% of the overall national population and CFPS can be seen as a nationally representative sample.

In 2012, the project team started a set of modules related to religion in the survey, which includes the following three questions:

I. May I ask what religion you belong to?

A. Buddhism B. Taoism C. Islam D. Christianity (Protestantism)

E. Catholicism F. Atheism G. Other [Please specify] _____

II. Whether or not you participate in religious activities / matters? Is your religion important to you?

A. Very important B. Somewhat important C. Not Important

III. How often will you participate in religious activities / matters?

A. Never B. Several times a year C. once a month

D. two/three times a week E. once a week F. Other [Please specify] _____

2.2 A Brief Introduction of GIS

A “geographic information system” (GIS) is a computer-based tool that allows you to create, manipulate, analyze, store and display information based on its location. GIS makes it possible to integrate different kinds of geographic information, such as digital maps, aerial photographs, satellite images, and global positioning system data (GPS), along with associated tabular database information (e.g., ‘attributes’ or characteristics about geographic features).

Using GIS, you can incorporate all of this information into a single system and execute common database operations. For example, GIS allows you to perform statistical analysis or spatial queries, to explore ‘what-if’ scenarios, and to create predictive models.

<http://aqua.wisc.edu/CPR/IntroductiontoGeographicInformationSystemsGIS/tabid/78/Default.aspx>

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2.3 Data Analysis of GIS

2.3.1 Export Personal Information and Religious Data

Software, such as Stata, can be used to open CFPS2012 data file, which is a two-dimensional table. Each set of data of people who finished the questionnaire occupies one line. In that table, *provid* represents the province of respondents; *birth-year-max* represents the age of respondents; and *qm601* represents the religions that respondents belong to (Atheism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, Islam, etc.). Selecting the columns and exporting them to a text or EXCEL file, then using MySQL and other database tools, can produce

Table 1: *Population Proportion of Three Main Religions*

Province	Christianity	Buddhism	Total	Province	Christianity	Buddhism	Total
Fujian	3.97%	40.40%	60.71%	Liaoning	1.99%	5.31%	8.24%
Zhejiang	3.89%	23.99%	29.73%	Guangdong	0.68%	5.18%	6.29%
Jiangsu	2.67%	14.17%	17.38%	Shanxi	1.66%	3.65%	5.95%
Yunnan	0.68%	13.06%	16.37%	Beijing	0.00%	2.48%	4.95%
Shanghai	1.88%	10.30%	13.07%	Shandong	1.54%	2.90%	4.95%
Anhui	4.32%	7.83%	12.28%	Hebei	1.13%	1.59%	4.10%
Henan	4.95%	5.52%	12.08%	Hubei	1.71%	2.09%	3.99%
Guangxi	0.15%	10.23%	11.55%	Guizhou	0.49%	1.86%	3.32%
Jilin	3.26%	8.25%	11.51%	Hunan	0.49%	2.44%	3.23%
Gansu	0.28%	6.85%	10.86%	Sichuan	0.30%	2.06%	2.67%
Jiangxi	0.66%	7.96%	9.55%	Chongqing	0.28%	0.85%	1.41%
Shanxi	1.55%	6.35%	8.60%	Tianjin	0.43%	0.00%	0.43%
Heilongji-ang	3.63%	4.39%	8.49%				

2.3.2 Data of Maps

Data of maps is downloaded from the National Geomatics Center's website (<http://www.issn.edu.cn/cfps/>, China Family Panel Studies (CFPS)) which contains free GIS data of Chinese provincial division. After downloading, the file named *chinaprovinceborderdata_tar_gz.zip*, which is a compressed package, is received. After fully unpacking, three files are received: *bou2_4p.dbf*, *bou2_4p.shp* and *bou2_4p.shx*.

2.3.3 Map Generator Tool

R language <http://nfgis.nsd.gov.cn>, Website of National Geomatics Center has map tools package which can read the map downloaded from the National Geomatics Center's website. A map can be generated by calling the function `read.shape()`. Figure 1 shows the population data of every province: the more people, the darker the color of the place.

3. Provincial Geological Distribution of Christianity

Christianity in China can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty; however, because of Tangwuzong Li Yan's antipathy to religions, it had almost completely faded at that time. Since then, the spread of Christianity can be divided into two periods in the time line: from the 13th century to the 18th century, Roman Catholicism was dominant; from the 19th century to present, Protestantism has been dominant.

In the 13th century, Roman Catholicism was first introduced into China and it had about 60 thousand followers under Kublai Khan's relatively loose policies. However, with the overthrow of the Yuan Dynasty, Catholicism almost vanished. Catholicism was not spread in China until the 16th century when the wave of Western colonialism flourished. When it came to the 18th century, rites controversy was caused by Matteo Ricci's unique preaching style. This led to conflicts between the Vatican and Qing imperial court and ended up with the loss of Catholics' legal rights to preach in China and persecutions or deportations of foreign missionaries. From that time, Roman Catholicism faded from China's religious stage just like Nestorian did 600 hundred years ago. In the century between the 18th and 19th century, Eastern Orthodoxy flourished, but since the number of followers can be neglected compared to the other two branches and that number contains many refugees from Russia, this research will not go into this detail.

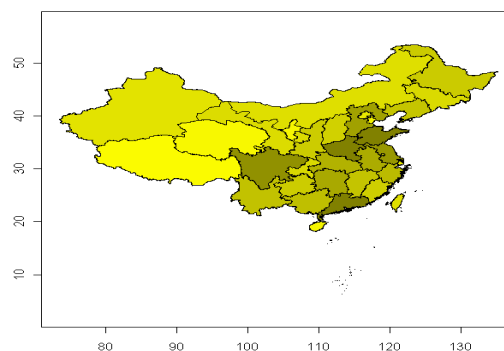


Figure 1: Rates of Christians in Chinese Provinces

In the 19th century, Protestantism was brought to China by Robert Morrison, a missionary from London Missionary Society. Though it was the latest main branch of Christianity introduced in China, it has developed well up to the present. The earliest Protestant missionaries arrived were stopped at Guangdong Shi San Hang by Qing imperial court's prohibition; therefore, they had few followers. After the Second Opium War, with the protection of unequal treaties signed by Qing imperial court, a large number of Western missionaries came to China to spread Protestantism. Twists and turns were unavoidable, but the group was generally strengthening. Nowadays, the number of Protestants is over thirty million conservatively and is still increasing. From the brief history of Christianity above, it is not difficult to find out that except the early branches, like Nestorian, entering China through the inland, most main branches, like Catholicism and Protestantism, were brought to China across oceans. This fact explains the phenomenon in Figure 1 that Christianity is mainly clustered in East and South China, which is contiguous to oceans directly, while the number of followers is generally very low in North and West China, which is inland bound. However, to further analyze other patterns and characters of the distribution of Christianity in China, this article will start from other perspectives.

4. Analysis by Religious Ecology Ideologies

From Figure 2 below, an interesting phenomenon is found: as a foreign religion, Christianity is so prosperous in Henan, the Birthplace of Shaolin, that the rate of Christian followers is almost the same as that of Buddhism. To explain this phenomenon, this section will use the ideology of religious ecology and the horizontal comparison between Christianity and Chinese local religions to find out the reasons.

Religious ecology is the living condition of all kinds of religions in a society, which has similarities to the ecology of nature. Normally, different religions should reach a balanced condition, where they can promote, rely on, and restrict each other; each religion has its target population and can satisfy the needs of a particular group of people. But in some cases, several religions flourish fast, while others fade. In China, the Cultural Revolution broke the original balance of religious ecology and created a period for full-scale reconstruction. Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism lost their former absolute advantage: they were depressed severely by the regime in power and finally lost their activity in China. As a result, the development statuses of the above

three religions were at the same stage as that of Christianity. At this point, the differences between Christianity and the three traditional religions reflected as advantages for Christianity. One of the biggest advantages was the difference between their missionary methods. Christianity has missionaries to popularize its doctrines and ideologies from door to door particularly. Those missionaries are usually so diligent that they are willing to conquer all kinds of difficulties to convert more people. On the other hand, the three traditional religions do not have missionaries and they spread through people's daily hearing and talking.

In addition, if people want to be followers, they have to go to temples by themselves, since no one will send messages for them. Because Henan is a relatively poor province; the transportation system there is undeveloped; and the communication among villages is poor, Christianity can spread there more efficiently. Another great advantage of Christianity is that the three traditional religions have been considered as feudal superstition since the Cultural Revolution. As a result of such stereotype, most people have antipathy toward those traditional religions. In contrast, people often have such a stereotype that foreign things are better than domestic ones.

Since Christianity is a foreign religion, it will unavoidably be labeled as "advanced" or "developed" in people's mind. Thus, the worship of Christianity would soon be prevailing. At the same time, in most poor areas in Henan, natural calamities and man-made misfortunes are inevitable; thus, spiritual pillars are in great need, while the ideology of "atonement" in Christianity meets their need. As a result of all the factors above, Christianity has become the ideal religion for people in Henan.

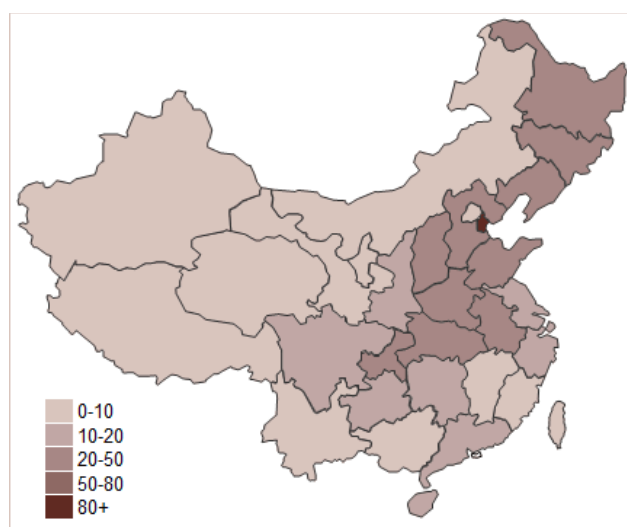


Figure 2: Rates of Christians in Chinese Provinces

5. Localization of Christianity in China

At last, this section believes that localization is also one of the main factors that promote the growth of Christianity in China. Counting from the reign of Emperor Tai Zong of the Tang Dynasty to the present, Christianity has a history of more than one thousand and three hundred years. In this period, there have been many examples of missionaries who actively spread localized Christian ideologies by combining Western and Chinese perspectives and those missionaries achieved unexpectedly high effectiveness. The most famous missionary among them is Matteo Ricci, who respected Confucianism very much. He simplified Christian doctrines to fit “benevolence,” the essential concept in Confucianism. In addition, he removed the idea that “Men are born equal” to fit the hierarchical system of society at that time. Another representative figure is Young John Allen, who combined Chinese and Western education perfectly. After he came to Shanghai, Allen first founded Anglo-Chinese College with comprehensive subjects and later he founded a girls’ college with Christianity as a required subject. This promoted the spread of Christianity in another efficient way. Definitely there are also counter-examples in the one thousand three hundred years. Rites Controversy during the Kangxi period demonstrates that it is undesirable to import Christianity directly into China without changes, because such behavior will not only diminish citizens’ interest in Christianity, but also cause the antipathy of the regime in power and finally end up in failure. Now, let’s look at the current situation of Christianity. Localization is still in process and it mainly reflects in the similarities with other religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, etc.), the combination with other religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, etc.), and the participation in regional activities (charity, festivals, etc.). First of all, the idea of “universal love” from Christianity works in the same as “benevolence” from Confucianism and “kindness” from Buddhism do. They all ask people to be charitable and only sincere men will be respected. In addition, Christianity has become more inclusive, especially to Chinese traditional customs. For example, unlike orthodox Christians, people here can worship their ancestral tablets, can kowtow and bow, can burn incense to pray, and can worship their ancestors as gods. Strictly speaking, Christianity in China is no longer monotheism. At last, the participation of Christians in regional activities, especially charity events, attracts a number of followers. For example, churches will usually give financial help to the poor and promote medical care, education, and social benefits in rural areas. To sum up, this section

believes that localization is one of the main factors that boost the development of Christianity in China, while it may also be the potential for future boom.

6. Conclusion

This article is divided into six parts. In the introduction part, the reasons to write this article and how this article is different from previous findings by other researchers are explained. Then, in the methods part, geologically distributional maps based on data from CFPS are drawn and two astonishing facts are found: Christianity has been the second largest religion in China and it has the highest rate of followers in Henan, the birthplace of Shaolin. In addition, these two facts and the current distribution of Christianity from three dimensions – history, religious ecology, and localization process – are explained.

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