

RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN CHINA

ZHAO Litao & TAN Soon Heng

EAI Background Brief No. 368

Date of Publication: 1 February 2008

Executive Summary

1. A revival of religion is taking place in both rural and urban China. A recent nationwide survey found 31% of the Chinese population above 16 years of age or 300-400 million people are religious, almost tripling the official estimate.
2. The official estimate, however, did not take into account those in unregistered “underground churches” and whose faith is outside the five major religions approved by the government, namely Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. An accurate estimate of the actual number of religious believers is extremely difficult.
3. Other sources also suggest a rapid and broad-based revival of religious beliefs and rituals, particularly those practiced by families, local temples and communities for centuries before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) banned them between the 1950s and late 1970s.
4. At varying paces, the five major faiths have revived their activities and organizations, rebuilt their temples, mosques and churches, and claimed growing numbers of believers. In the case of Catholicism, the estimated membership increased from about 3 million in 1949 to 10-12 million in 2001; Protestantism has expanded even more rapidly, from less than one million to 25-30 million.
5. In practice, however, none of them can match the revival of local communal religions, combinations of beliefs and practices from Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism and in the form of ancestor and protective deity worships, geomancy, exorcism, and prognostication. These are tolerated but not approved by the state.
6. Their revival is most evident in South-east China, where annual festivals for local and regional gods often mobilize the entire village population for elaborate rites and rituals. The deep and rich ritual traditions share close similarities with

those of Taiwan and overseas Chinese and financial help from these connections make coastal Fujian a frontrunner in reviving local communal religion.

7. To a large extent, the strong revival is because these traditional rites, rituals and practices had been part of family life and communal identity for centuries. They are easily accessible to the ordinary people who turn to them for healing, good fortune and divination.
8. It is not surprising that religions experiencing the strongest revival are beliefs and rituals that have a strong utilitarian focus. People turn to them due to the prohibitive cost of health care, the high price of failure in businesses, and the acute sense of insecurity in the absence of an effective social safety net.
9. As long as feelings of anomie and existential insecurity are widespread, there exists the potential for other religious or quasi-religious groups like FLG to fill the gap, and even becoming a source of instability and challenge to the authority. To prevent social instability, China has to expand its social safety net and reduce the strains induced by drastic socioeconomic changes.
10. The rise of the well-educated urban middle class will create a stronger social substratum for a more rationalized faith to take hold, but this is a long ongoing process. For now, tolerance remains the best policy towards the strong revival of local communal religions.