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# China's Official Media Portrayal of Religion (1996-2005): Policy Change in a *Desecularizing Society*

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This content analysis of religion news coverage in the *People's Daily* during a 10-year period (1996–2005) found a more positive tone toward religion after 2001, when a significant policy change was announced by Chinese political leaders. The number of newspaper articles about religion increased steadily. Underrepresentation of Christianity suggested by previous studies was not found, but a prejudicial tone toward different religions was identified.

Since the Cultural Revolution era (1966-1976), when China closed houses of worship, it has become one of the most religious countries in the world (Yang, 2004); its Christian population, for example, is second only to that of the United States (Kindopp, 2004). By the end of 1997, China had a religious population of 100 million (China's Religious Affairs Bureau, 2005). This number is conservative, however, given that it does not include underground religious followers (Edelman & Richardson, 2005). A 2007 survey estimates that 31.4% of Mainland Chinese ages 16 and above, or about 300 million people, are religious followers; 40 million of these are Christian (Wu, 2007). While some Western nations are experiencing a secularizing trend, some believe that Mainland China is increasingly religious (Yang, 2004). The time might be right to examine China's religion policy as well as how official news media, the mouthpieces of the government, portray religion. Previous research has not expanded knowledge of the subject. This study, therefore, aims to stimulate discussion and provide a foundation for further research

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As China undergoes a political metamorphosis, we review key policy changes leading to cautious yet increasingly tolerant journalistic treatment of religion.

## Media and Chinese Government

In the classic *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956/1984), Wilbur Schramm argued that, under Soviet communism, mass media were government's "instruments for unity" (p. 123) and the state's "agitator," "propagandist," and "organizer" (p. 124). During the early Cold War era, this approach dominated "the socialist world" (Altschull, 1984, p. 100), including China.

Chinese citizens viewed media as the ruling apparatus of the Communist Party (Lin, 2004; Yao, 2007), and in Mao's era, political messages were ubiquitous (Kalathil, 2003). Despite many changes, the government maintains propaganda and party-sanctioned journalism as a tool of ideological preservation (Pan & Chan, 2003). For example, *People's Daily* is "the official organ of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee" (Tan, 1990, p. 151); it is used by 89% of government officials seeking policies and guidelines (Lee, 1990). Not only is it "the Chinese government newspaper" (Scollon, 2000, p. 761), but it also covers other topics as well (Tan, 1990). It has an online version containing advertising. Although young adults define journalism more broadly, *People's Daily* continues to be, as one of its senior editors puts it, "big and all-inclusive," with a readership of "decision-makers, government officials, executives, experts, and scholars" (Polumbaum, 2008, p. 45). A content analysis, then, should tell us more about media depictions of religion in a time of cultural change.

## Justification of the Study: China's Evolving Religious Freedom Policy

Religion is a topic of growing interest due to a cautious loosening of religious restrictions (Yao, 2007). The shift has been gradual, however. Between 1949 and 1979, atheism dominated the culture; denominations were discredited. By the 1980s, however, both positive and negative treatments of religion surfaced in the press. Chinese researchers were studying religion in greater depth by the 1990s. These events coincide with significant governmental policy change.

Despite the fact that Mao Zedong enacted a religious freedom policy, denominations were restricted and punished for interfering with socialist ideals (Leung, 2005). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adopted a hard line of militant atheism; folk religious practices were frequently banned. Considered tools of Western imperialism, foreign missionaries were often expelled or compelled to adhere to government directives. According to Li Weihai, head of the CCP's Department of Union Front, the goal of Mao Zedong's policy was to undermine religious freedom rather than expand it (Leung, 2005).

Assuming CCP leadership, Deng Xiaoping oversaw a transition from intolerance to conditional religious rights. *Document No. 19* permits religious practice as long as citizens remain loyal, support CCP, and obey the law (Yang, 2004). Nevertheless, the document implies that religion is an atavism, not a significant player in society. Ye Xiaowen, chief of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, insisted that the government would "gradually weaken the influence of religion" (Yang, 2004, p. 115).

The situation relaxed under Deng's economic reforms, however. Officials thought accommodation might quell anti-government sentiment after the Tiananmen Square incident. In 1993, General Secretary of the CCP Jiang Zemin recognized religious groups but admonished them to "accommodate" socialism. On December 10, 2001, Jiang gave an important speech commenting positively on religion. The popularity of Falun Gong kept religion on the political agenda (Chan, 2004) as officials became wary of the controversial sect. When clergy expressed skepticism about the group, credibility of major denominations grew. At a national meeting of policymakers, it was concluded that religion could be a stabilizing force (Leung, 2005) and an important component of society (Chan, 2004). In 2004, Chief of the State Administration for Religious Affairs Ye Xiaowen argued that religions might help improve communication between China and the outside. However, Ye qualified his support by insisting on compatibility between theology and socialism (Leung, 2005). Whether the increased latitude afforded religious groups extends to expanding religion news coverage is a logical next step of research.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study of religion coverage in *People's Daily* focuses on three sets of questions; they have to do with (1) tone of news coverage, (2) desecularization, and (3) proportional portrayal of religious groups.

### Tone of News Coverage

Given that Chinese policy has softened toward denominations, is it safe to assume that the official newspaper is more accommodating? It is reasonable to ponder possible relationships between policy change and religious information available, especially from official sources. Depiction of religion in *People's Daily* has implications in terms of what can be learned about comparative religion; it is also a key factor in terms of whether particular groups survive and flourish.

The first group of hypotheses predicts that the CCP's policy change after Jiang's speech on December 10, 2001, is reflected in the *People's Daily's* coverage of religion:

- H1a: The tone of religion coverage in *People's Daily* after Jiang's speech is more positive than before the speech.
- H1b: Articles after Jiang's speech contain more positive key words than articles before.
- H1c: Articles after Jiang's speech contain fewer negative key words than articles before.

### Desecularization in China

The possibility of broader coverage in *People's Daily* is consistent with a desecularizing trend in China. Unlike secularization theory, where media, art, and entertainment are said to gradually undermine religious commitment (Maguire & Weatherby, 1998; Berger, 1967), desecularization implies that media can empower religion, especially with support of government and other institutions. Universities are also addressing religion in Mainland China. In the 1980s, religious

research institutes were established, several journals on the subject were launched, and research was published. In 2000, Mainland China had more than 60 research institutes and more than 60 journals dedicated to the study of religion. In the last five years of the 20th century, more than 1,000 books on religion were published (Yang, 2004).

Desecularization is supported by considerable growth of religious activity. Overmyer (2003) summarizes this shift:

In the last 20 years religious traditions in many parts of China have revived their activities and organizations and rebuilt their temples, mosques and churches, despite decades of strict regulation and repression by the government. This revival is an aspect of the greater social freedom that has accompanied the economic development and diversification of that period. The government is trying to maintain political control, and legal restrictions remain, but wherever local traditions permit, religious activities come bubbling to the surface, festivals for the gods are held, traditional funerals and burial rituals are restored, destroyed images and shrines are replaced, priests reappear to perform rituals, and congregations meet to worship. (p. 1)

According to a *Pew Center* poll, 56% of Chinese citizens consider religion to be “very” or “somewhat” important in daily life, and state-run media report that 300 million are religious (“Religion in China on the Eve of the Beijing Olympics,” 2008). Gunde (2002) notes cross-denominational worship as well: “One of the enduring features of religion in China has been that a great many people are perfectly comfortable in following more than one faith” (p. 44).

Given that *People’s Daily* is the flagship CCP party organ, and based on growing religious belief, the second set of hypotheses predict increases in the amount of religious coverage in the newspaper between 1996 and 2005:

H2a: *People’s Daily’s* coverage of religion increased during the study period.

H2b: Religion is mentioned more frequently in *People’s Daily* during the study period.

### Uneven Portrayal of Groups

The next series of hypotheses draws on the *proportional portrayal assumption*, or idea that the amount of coverage given a group should correlate with that group’s proportion in society. In other words, “total minority representation should approximate the minority’s proportion in the population” (Taylor & Stern, 1997, p. 49). Researchers argue, for example, that political candidates’ coverage should be proportional to their electoral support (Jenkins, 1999). This assumption is the foundation for studies examining underrepresentation of minorities in media (Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002; Li-Vollmer, 2002) and overrepresentation of the male gender (Len-Rios, Rodgers, Thorson, & Yoon, 2005). Some use the proportion portrayal assumption in pointing out that small religious groups are overrepresented in news coverage given their size relative to the population (Kerr, 2003; Cohen, 2005; Driel & Richardson, 1988). A corollary of this assumption is that when the population of a group changes, the proportion of media coverage should change accordingly.

Calculating this proportion is next to impossible, however, given no procedure for verifying the number of Buddhists and Taoists (News Office of the State Council, 1997). Therefore, the number of clergy is used in the third set of hypotheses. While not an exact parallel, the ratio

of clergy to its members is relatively constant (Chang & Bompadre, 1999; Chen & Huang, 2004). According to the News Office of the State Council (1997), there were about 0.3 million clerics nationwide; Buddhism had about 0.2 million, Taoism 0.025 million, Islam 0.04 million, Catholicism 0.004 million, and Protestantism 0.018 million. The proportion of Christian clergy among all Chinese clerics is 0.077  $((0.004 + 0.018)/0.287)$ .

Hence the third group of hypotheses:

H3a: The proportion of news devoted to Christianity is smaller than the proportion of Christian clergy among all clerics.

H3b: The proportion of times Christianity is mentioned in articles is lower than the proportion of Christian clergy among all clerics.

## METHODOLOGY

### Data

News articles were accessed from the *People's Daily* Web site database. Using the key word "religion" in Chinese, from January 1, 1996, to December 31, 2005, a total of 4,749 articles were identified. A 10-year period provides an ample time segment for tracking change in news coverage of religion. Using a random starting number, a systematic sample of 361 articles was drawn for the analysis. Key word searching is a common method in content analysis. For example, Kerr and Moy (2002) sampled Lexis-Nexis to examine the portrayal of Christian fundamentalists by elite U.S. print media; they searched for the words "fundamentalist" or "fundamentalism" in combination with "Christian" to obtain data. Kerr (2003) searched the Vanderbilt Television News Archive with the same key words. Using the key word "NRMs," Driel and Richardson (1988) obtained their sample in analyzing how print media covered the New Religion Movement.

One Chinese researcher developed the coding scheme, and another created the codes. Before the coding, an intercoder reliability test was performed on 40 articles generated randomly from the sample. The result was a Scott's Pi of 0.895 for the most subjective four variables. Respectively, the topic variable Pi was 0.837, frame 0.718, tone 0.838, positive key words 0.883, and the negative key words 0.883. The intercoder reliability is in the acceptable range.

### Measures

*Tone.* Tone, a common variable in content analysis, usually ranges from three categories to six. Three categories often include positive, negative, and neutral (Cohen, 2005), favorable, neutral, or unfavorable (Hill, Hickman, & McIendon, 2001), or positive, negative, and unidentified or unclear (Skill, Robinson, & Lyons, 1994). In addition to favorable, unfavorable, and neutral, Buddenbaum (1987) adds another category, "mixed," which includes articles containing both "favorable" and "unfavorable" factors. A five-value scale might be: positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat, and extremely (Driel & Richardson, 1988). Scholars also use a six-point scale with 1 meaning very negatively, 5 very positively, and 6 meaning not portrayed (Kerr, 2003).

This study uses the six-point scale to assess tone of media coverage in which 1 = highly positive, 5 = highly negative, and 6 = NA. For more reliable results, the scale was reduced to four categories: positive (= 1), neutral (= 0), negative (= -1), and NA (not included in most of the analysis).

*Key words.* Key words reveal something about the phenomenon under study. For example, descriptive words are used to determine whether religious groups are treated objectively in media reports (Hill et al., 2001; Kerr, 2003), and whether wedding ceremonies are depicted traditionally in reality TV programs (Engstrom & Semic, 2003). This study identifies positive words such as “stabilizing,” or “harmonizing” and negative terms such as “infiltration,” “intervention,” “anti-forces,” “outside forces,” and “separation.” We considered the frequency of key words in determining the tone of the sampled articles.

*Amount of coverage.* Amount of coverage is usually measured by counting the stories mentioning a subject (Lee, 1990) or by counting the space and broadcast time devoted to a subject (Driel & Richardson, 1988). To avoid bias, some scholars adopt both approaches (Gramham, 2004; Lichter et al., 2000; Marton & Stephens, 2001). Here, we calculate the number of news pieces dealing with religion as well as the number of times religion is mentioned. In the discussion section, we used word length as an auxiliary measurement of coverage.

## FINDINGS

H1a asks whether the tone of *People's Daily* articles has changed toward religion after Jiang's speech in December 2001. An independent samples *t* test indicates that the tone of the newspaper toward religion is more positive after this date (one-tailed  $p = .031^3$ ; see Table 1). With the three-point scale (i.e., negative = -1, neutral = 0, positive = 1, and NA is excluded in the analysis), the tone of the *People's Daily* toward religion has a mean of .13 ( $SD = .10$ ) from January 1, 1999 to December 10, 2001, and a mean of .39 ( $SD = .10$ ) from December 10, 2001 to December 31, 2005. *Therefore, H1a is supported.*

Tone also varies according to the location of a denomination ( $F(5, 162) = 7.21, p < .001$ ). A post-hoc Scheffe test indicates that articles portraying religions in Mainland China are more

TABLE 1  
Comparisons of Tone and Proportions of Positive and Negative Key Words Before and After the Religion Conference

Hypothesis	Variable	Before	After	One-tailed <i>p</i>
		Dec 10, 2001 (1)	Dec 10, 2001 (2)	
H1a	Mean of tone	0.13 (.10)	0.39 (.10)	(1 < 2) 0.031*
H1b	Proportion of positive key words	0.02	0.03	(1 < 2) 0.417
H1c	Proportion of negative key words	0.12	0.08	(1 > 2) 0.100

\*refers to significance at .05 level.

positive in tone than those depicting denominations in the other countries (mean difference = 0.93,  $p < .001$ ) or the world as a whole (mean difference = 1.00,  $p = .026$ ).

A 1-tailed hypothesis test of proportion was conducted to examine H1b<sup>4</sup>. Based on the data, the point estimation of the proportion of articles appearing after December 10, 2001, with positive key words is 0.03 ( $n = 148$ ,  $x = 4$ ), and the point estimation of those appearing before this date is 0.02 ( $n = 213$ ,  $x = 5$ ). The calculated  $z$  is 0.21, which by checking the standard normal distribution table, yields a 1-tailed  $p$ -value of .417. This probability suggests no significant difference between the proportions before December 10, 2001, and after. *Thus H1b is not supported.*

H1c predicts that after December 10, 2001, the proportion of articles with negative key words will be lower than before that date. The point estimation of that proportion before is .12 ( $n = 213$ ,  $x = 26$ ), and .08 ( $n = 148$ ,  $x = 12$ ) after that time. The calculated  $z$  is 1.29, and the one-tailed  $p$  is .099. At the commonly used 95% confidence level, *H1c is not supported.*

The second group of hypotheses addresses the unsecularizing trend in China. To test H2a, we divided the sample articles into periods ranging from the earliest to the most recent. Using the order number of the period as independent variable and the number of articles published in that period as dependent variable, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted ( $R^2 = .11$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ; see Table 2). After deleting the 13th and 21st periods (e.g., found to be outliers and influential cases by testing standardized residual, studentized residual, studentized deleted residual, leverage value, DFBETA and DFFITS) the regression model is better ( $R^2 = .21$ ,  $p = .004$ ). The coefficient of the independent variable period is 0.73 ( $SD = 0.24$ ,  $p = .004$ ), which means that from 1996 to 2005, when time passed by one more period, the *People's Daily* will publish 0.73 more articles about religion. *This conclusion supports H2a predicting the increase of articles about religion as time goes by.*

Examination of H2b, which examines the unsecularizing trend from the perspective of number of mentions did not yield a significant finding. After deleting the outliers and influential cases, the regression model has a  $p$ -value of .575 (see Table 2), which means time contributed little to increasing mentions of religion in articles published in the *People's Daily*. *H2b, therefore, is not supported.*

TABLE 2  
Regression of Number of Articles and Mentions Through Time

Hypotheses	DV	IV	Coefficient	$t$	$p$	$R^2$
H2a	Original case model-number of articles	Period	0.64	2.15	0.038*	0.11
		Constant	7.72	11.09	<0.001**	
	Outliers-deleted model-number of articles	Period	0.73	3.06	0.004**	0.21
		Constant	7.23	12.77	<0.001**	
H2b	Original case model-time of mentions	Period	0.01	0.57	0.575	0.01
		Constant	0.98	2.65	0.012*	
Post-hoc analysis	Original model-weighted word length	Period	-25.05	-0.37	0.71	0.004
		Constant	14504.5	9.28	<0.001**	

*Note.* Weighted word length is obtained by multiplying average word length per period by the number of articles appearing in that period.

\*refers to significance at .05 level. \*\*refers to significance at .001 level.



TABLE 3  
Comparison of Proportion of Christian Clerics with the Proportion of Articles and  
Number of Mentions of Christianity

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Testing Method</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>Proportion of Religious Clerics (1)</i>	<i>Proportion of Articles or Number of Mentions (2)</i>	<i>One-Tailed p-value for 2 &lt; 1</i>
H3a	Small sample proportion test	Christianity	0.077	0.15	0.955
H3b	Proportion test		0.077	0.18	0.999
Post-hoc analysis	Proportion test	Buddhism	0.70	0.56	<0.0002**

*Note.* The proportion of clerics refers to the proportion of Christian or Buddhism clerics among all Chinese clerics. The proportion of articles and number of mentions of religion is also confined to the same area.

\*\*refers to significance at .001 level.

The third group of hypotheses examines whether the *People's Daily* is biased toward different religions with respect to amount of coverage. The sample proportion of articles covering Christianity in Mainland China ( $n = 4$ ) among those covering five religions ( $n = 26$ ) is .15. When comparing two sample proportions, those with less than 30 are better suited for a binomial test instead of a general proportion hypothesis test (Rao, 1998). Using Rao's (1998) formula, and H3a as the research hypothesis, a  $p$ -value of .955 was calculated (see Table 3) suggesting that the proportion of articles is not likely to be lower than the proportion of clerics. *H3a is not supported.*

H3b addresses the same question in terms of how many times major religions are mentioned. One sample proportion hypothesis test is used given that the sample is quite large. The results show that the proportion of times mentioning Christianity against the total times mentioning all five religious groups ( $(18 + 28)/274 = .17$ ) is significantly larger than the proportion of Christian clerics among all clergy (.08.  $p < .001$ ). *Therefore, H3b is not supported.*

## DISCUSSION

The tone of the *People's Daily* toward religion since December 10, 2001, is slightly more positive. Although the mentioning of specific religions and average word length did not show obvious increases over time, the data reveal that from 1996 through 2005, the *People's Daily* published more articles about religion over time. This is a sign that religion has increasingly more weight in China's political agenda.

### Slow Change

Such change, however, appears to be slow. This is consistent with Jiang's insistence that Party solidarity be a necessary condition for the expansion of religious freedom (Jiang, 1991). Nevertheless, if religion-government compatibility is seen as plausible, news coverage may

TABLE 4  
Sources in the *People's Daily* Commenting on Religion

Party and government officials at provincial level or above	83.3%
Officials at below provincial level	3.1%
Religion leaders	7.3%
Scholars	6.3%

Note.  $\chi^2(3, N = 96) = 174.58, p < .001$ .

trend even more positively in the future. Members of the Central Committee no longer consider religion inherently incompatible with government's social and economic goals (Central Committee of the CCP, 1982). Whether or not *People's Daily* reflects a desecularizing trend cannot be determined solely from these data, however; additional research is needed. When considering number of articles, however, religion appears to be gaining a more salient position in the *People's Daily*. The positive trend, nevertheless, is gradual and slow-moving.

### Religion Remains a Sensitive Topic

One reason positive coverage has not increased more rapidly could be that religion remains a sensitive subject. High-ranking government officials are the dominant sources of news about religion. Officials at the provincial level or higher account for 83.3% of total sources (see Table 4). Officials below this level comprise 3.1%, religion leaders 7.3%, and scholars 6.3% ( $\chi^2(3, N = 96) = 174.58, p < .001$ ). This may explain why Christianity was overrepresented in the *People's Daily* according to the number of articles<sup>1</sup> (see Table 3). Perhaps Party officials were courting the support of the Christian community.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

From this foundational research, we gain a deeper understanding of religion news in China. Researchers can build on these data, but should recognize the study's limitations. By using a single key word search (i.e., "religion"), some articles may have been missed. Furthermore, intercoder reliability was tested with a subset of only 40 articles, and one researcher completed all other coding. Using the paragraph as the primary unit of analysis may provide richer data in future studies. Such improvements could lead to more thorough descriptions of religion news. Finally, the scope of content analysis itself is restricted; it reveals little if anything about readers. Researchers are beginning to study Chinese audiences (Yao, 2007), and we hope more will be learned about how religion news is actually used.

This study has implications for both religious and governmental sectors. Giving religious groups a voice could pay dividends in terms of Party support. Such coverage, however, will likely be restricted to that which complements state ideology. Since politicians have the power, they determine the parameters of what is allowed. The latitude with which such limits are set

<sup>1</sup>It isn't clear how the exclusion of the underground religious population from official statistics explains this finding.

is immensely important to religious communities because it affects what citizens ultimately learn about denominations. Therefore, theological issues threatening the status quo such as free agency, utilitarian morality, and natural law are not likely to be treated in depth. It is up to future researchers to assess the range and type of religious information permitted by official outlets in the future.

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