Religion and subjective well-being among the elderly in China

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Evidence from developed and developing countries alike demonstrates a strongly positive relationship between religiosity and happiness, particularly for women and particularly among the elderly. Using survey data from the oldest old in China, we find a strong negative relationship between religious participation and subjective well-being in a rich multivariate logistic framework that controls for demographics, health and disabilities, living arrangements, wealth and income, lifestyle and social networks, and location. In contrast to other studies, we also find that religion has a larger effect on subjective well-being on men than women.

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1. Introduction

Since Easterlin's (1974) pioneering analysis of the interplay between aggregate economic growth and the average subjective well-being of a country's citizens, economists have embraced subjective well-being as an important economic outcome and proxy for individual utility. One prominent line of research has shown that aggregate data on happiness may be used to inform macroeconomic policy. For example, Di Tella et al. (2001) use data from a dozen European countries to infer each country's subjective preferences for the trade-off between unemployment and inflation. Helliwell (2006) estimates the social valuation of good and transparent governance, economic stability, and the rule of law. Alesina et al. (2005) and Gruber and Mullainathan (2002) assess the effect of labor market regulation and cigarette taxes, respectively, on collective well-being.

At the disaggregated level, economists have long held that revealed preference more accurately represents true well-being than subjective states of mind, yet deducing changes in happiness from observed behavior is often difficult in practice. Although care must be taken in the use and interpretation of subjective data,\textsuperscript{1} Lelkes (2006) and Frey and Stutzer (2002a) note that measures of subjective well-being are reliable measures of "experienced utility," and the use of subjective data on well-being has recently been embraced by economists. A popular line of empirical inquiry in the recent research on individual-level well-being has been identifying the determinants of happiness among various population groups. Large-scale surveys conducted in the United States,\textsuperscript{2} the European Union,\textsuperscript{3} and 81 countries from across the socioeconomic spectrum\textsuperscript{4} demonstrate a considerable degree of consensus: regardless of survey location, robust indicators of subjective well-being include relative income, health status, the strength of social networks, the happiness of friends and relatives, and recent changes in income, marital status, or social networks (Frey and Stutzer, 2002b). Notably, men and women are equally likely to report high-levels of happiness or life satisfaction according to surveys of 170,000 adults in 16 countries (Inglehart, 1990) as well as to a meta-analysis of 146 studies (Haring et al., 1984).

Because faith communities provide social support for their members and encourage hope in the face of vulnerability (Ellison

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\textsuperscript{1} See Di Tella and McCulloch (2006) and Kahneman and Krueger (2006) for recent reviews.
\textsuperscript{2} General Social Surveys (Davis et al., 2001).
\textsuperscript{3} Eurobarometer Surveys (Hartung, 2005).
\textsuperscript{4} World Values Surveys (Inglehart et al., 2004).
et al., 1989), because religiously-active individuals tend to rebound from divorce, unemployment, illness, and bereavement more quickly and more fully (Ellison, 1991), and because religion may foster higher expected utility in the afterlife (Azzi and Ehrenberg, 1975), participation in religious activities may also influence subjective well-being. The preponderance of evidence is overwhelming. For example, Myers (2000) uses a survey of 35,000 American adults to show a monotonic positive relationship between the frequency of attendance at religious services and subjective well-being. Gruber (2005) finds that the effect on self-reported well-being of moving from never attending religious services to attending weekly is comparable to the effect of moving from the bottom income quartile to the top quartile. Swinyard et al. (2001) find that religious participation is among the most determin-

While the majority of studies report positive relationships, at least two examples of religiosity negatively influencing subjective well-being have nevertheless been described. First, Gee and Veevers (1990) use data for 6500 Canadians to demonstrate a positive correlation between religious involvement and satisfaction with life. Within the subpopulation of adult men in British Columbia, however, 48.7% of religiously “unaffiliated” survey respondents report being “very satisfied” with life, whereas only 38.3% of “actively affiliated” survey respondents report such high levels of satisfaction. Second, Willis and Crider (1988) find that religiosity is positively associated with overall life satisfaction among middle-aged Pennsylvanians. Among men, however, the frequency of church attendance negatively impacts marital satisfaction. Unfortunately, neither study controls for health, demographics, lifestyle, and other correlates of well-being that may bias the estimates. Finally, as we describe below, religious participation and subjective well-being may be negatively related in the presence of widespread religious persecution.

This paper analyzes the influence of religiosity on subjective well-being among Chinese octogenarians, nonagenarians, and cen-tenarians using a robust multivariate framework that controls for demographics, health and disabilities, living arrangements, wealth and income, lifestyle and social networks, and location. Given the evidence from previous studies, including evidence from countries that share religious traditions with China, we expected to find a positive relationship between religious participation and satisfaction with life; however, we find a robustly negative relationship. Moreover, we find that religious participation has a stronger influence on men’s well-being than on women’s well-being. To our knowledge, this is the first study to uncover such relationships for a large sample while controlling for such a large number of correlates of religiosity. We interpret this finding to be indirect evidence of vulnerability associated with religious persecution, although we cannot test for persecution directly.

Section 2 provides an overview of religion and religious partici-

2. Review of religion and religious participation in China

seen as being antithetical to Marxist, Leninist, and Mao Zedong thought, religion in the People’s Republic of China has been sub-

See Inglehart (1990), Soydemir et al. (2004), and Lelkes (2006) for evidence of strong positive links between religious participation and subjective well-being in other settings.

While registration bestows legitimacy on the organization from the govern-

ment’s perspective, it also entails government control of finances, personnel, publications, and evangelical activity. Registration has also led to the censorship of some religious practices (Human Rights Watch, 1998).
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