

# Religious Believers Thrice the Estimate

By Wu Jiao (China Daily)

The number of people who describe themselves as religious is a startling three times more than the official estimate, according to the country's first major survey on religious beliefs. The poll of about 4,500 people, conducted by professors Tong Shijun and Liu Zhongyu of Shanghai-based East China Normal University from 2005 till recently found that 31.4 percent of Chinese aged 16 and above or about 300 million are religious. This is in sharp contrast to the official figure of 100 million, which has remained largely unchanged for years.

According to the survey, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Christianity and Islam are the five major religions, accounting for 67.4 percent of believers. A striking feature is the re-vitalization of traditional Chinese religions. About 200 million people are Buddhists, Taoists or worshippers of legendary figures such as the Dragon King and God of Fortune, accounting for 66.1 per cent of all believers.

Also significant is the big rise in followers of Christianity. According to official figures, their number rose from less than 10 million in the late 1990s to 16 million in 2005; but the survey finds 12 percent of all believers, or 40 million, are Christians. The survey also sheds light on reasons behind the religious revival. Of the 1,361 people surveyed, 24.1 percent said religion "shows the true path of life"; and 28 percent said it "helps cure illness, avoid disasters and ensure that life is smooth". "This kind of feeling is especially common in rural areas," Liu was quoted as saying in the latest issue of Chinese-language Oriental Outlook magazine, which published the survey.

However, Liu disagreed that religious passion is fanned by poverty. For example, many new believers in recent years are from the economically-developed coastal areas. Liu attributed the rising influence of religions to the religious freedom enjoyed in the country and social problems confronting the Chinese in a time of fast change.

The survey also finds that more young people have joined the ranks of the religious since 2000. "This is markedly different from the previous decade, when most religious believers were in their 40s or older," said Liu. Specifically, 62 percent of the 1,435 religious believers surveyed are in the 16-39 age group, while only 9.6 percent are 55 years old or older. Also, the number of middle-aged believers saw a big surge in the late 1990s, according to Liu. "They were atheist in the 1950s, but they have turned to religion when they turned older." About 72 percent of the religious said they are happier now than when they were not believers.

At the first world Buddhism forum in East China's Zhejiang Province last year, the Chinese government acknowledged the active role religion plays in building a harmonious society. "For example, religious beliefs have helped cut down crime to a large extent," said Liu.

Updated: 02/07/07