

Article

Does Religious Belief Affect Volunteering and Donating Behavior of Chinese College Students?

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Abstract: Limited research has been conducted in mainland China to explore the relationship between religious belief and prosocial behaviors such as volunteering and charitable donation. This study aims to investigate whether and how religious belief affects Chinese college students' charitable giving and volunteering. Based on a survey of 1992 college students from five universities in Shanghai, the authors found that religious belief has a positive influence on charitable giving. Moral norms and family income level are also significant influencing factors in college students' donation behavior. Religious belief does not affect volunteering frequency. Instead, volunteering intensity is affected by political status, social norms exerted by friends and families and volunteering motivations.

Keywords: religion; volunteering; charitable giving; college students; China

1. Introduction

Major religions around the world have a central tenet that advocates loving and caring for the less fortunate and have powerful calls to serve others. As a result, religious belief has long been naturally associated with prosocial activities such as volunteering and charitable giving. Abundant research in western countries has also explored the relationship between religious belief and prosocial behaviors theoretically, empirically and experimentally (Oviedo 2016).

In China, although the constitution guarantees citizens freedom of religious belief, religion is strictly regulated and de facto repressed (Grim and Finke 2007; Potter 2003; Yang 2011). The Communist Party of China has established China as an atheist country since it took power (Yang 2004). Since the reform in 1978, the restrictions on religion have decreased and religion has grown, yet protection of religious practices is still limited to "normal religious activities" and religious groups have to register under the government (Davie 2018; Potter 2003; Yang 2011). Based on a survey conducted by WIN-Gallup in 2012, in China, religious people approximately account for 14 percent of the population (WIN-Gallup International 2012). According to another poll, led by Institute of Social Science Survey at Peking University, the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) in 2012, 10 percent of the total population in China are religious (Institute of Social Science Survey 2012). Although the ratio of religious people in China is much lower than the world average, the large population base of China still results in about more than 140 million people with religious belief. However, studies on the relationship between religious belief and prosocial behaviors in China are limited.

There have been a few studies on the relationship between religiosity and charitable giving in China, yet most of them are limited to the donation behavior of executives. Several studies have demonstrated that individual executives at private enterprises who have religious belief are likely to donate more than those who do not (Zeng et al. 2016) and on behalf of the enterprises (Du and Feng 2014; Wang et al. 2015; Zhou and Hu 2014). Only one study, based on the data from Chinese General Social Survey in 2012, demonstrated that people with religious belief were more likely

to give and give more to charities, than those who are not religious (Liu and Ruan 2018). These studies provide some support for the positive relationship between religious belief and donation. However, they fail to provide insight into how religious belief affects young people, such as college students who usually have less disposable income.

In addition, little is known about the relationship between religiosity and volunteerism in China. Moreover, we are particularly interested in how religiosity affects Chinese college students since previous research has shown that donating experiences in youth is likely to translate into charitable giving in adulthood (Hart et al. 2007; Metz et al. 2003). Similar impact has been observed in volunteering as well (Clerkin et al. 2009). Plus, college students are a major source of volunteers in China. College students in China are encouraged and sometimes even required to participate in volunteering activities. However, there are many problems in volunteering among Chinese college students, such as lack of professional training and commitment (Yan et al. 2018). Moreover, college students tend to donate impulsively and irregularly (Zhu et al. 2017). For the third sector in China to thrive in the future, stable charitable giving and volunteers are necessary. Therefore, it is of great importance that we investigate and understand the prosocial behaviors of young people. This study aims to fill in the gap and explore the influence of religious belief on volunteering and donation behavior of Chinese college students.

2. Literature Review

In western countries, many studies have demonstrated a moderate positive relationship between religious belief and prosocial behaviours such as volunteering and charitable giving. For example, Fényes and Pusztai (2012) used logistic regression and found that religious belief has a positive impact on volunteering among college students in three central European countries. Based on a survey of American college students, religious belief was found to be a predictor of whether male students are volunteers (Ozorak 2003). In a more recent study among American students, participation in religious services had a positive impact on both volunteering and charitable giving (Clerkin et al. 2009). Lyons and Nivison-Smith (2006) found that people in Australia who attended religious services frequently were more likely to donate to charities and donate more on average. Despite this attention to the role of religiosity in prosocial activities within college students in other countries, there is a lack of attention to the role of religiosity in China. Only one study in China has shown that religious belief can predict whether students are volunteers (Luo et al. 2012).

Many scholars have also emphasized the importance of taking several dimensions of religiosity into consideration since each dimension may have a different mechanism to influence prosocial behaviors (Lam 2002; Regnerus 2003; Son and Wilson 2012). For example, Son and Wilson (2012) took into account the private (e.g., saying prayers at home, practicing spiritual) and public (e.g., attending collective rituals and activities organized by the congregation) aspects of religion and found that only private religiosity has a positive influence on obligation to help others. Lam (2002) investigated participatory, devotional, affiliative and theological dimensions of religion and found that all these four dimensions have significant yet different influence on secular voluntary association participation. However, we could not include these detailed questions about religion or religious practices in our questionnaires since we distributed and collected them with the help of several college administration offices and they were rather sensitive about asking about religiosity in China. Therefore, despite the limitations of a singular dimension of religiosity, this study measured religious belief only by asking the participants a simple dichotomous question to assess whether participants have religious belief. We think this limitation is offset by the added value of additional data on religiosity in China, especially among younger generations such as this college-based sample.

Based on findings of extant studies, we derive two expectations regarding the ways religious belief will relate to charitable giving and volunteering in Chinese college students, specifically the two hypotheses are listed below.

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): *Students with religious belief are likely to donate more money.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): *Students with religious belief are likely to volunteer more frequently.*

In addition to religious belief, existing literature has identified other influencing factors on volunteering and charitable giving, including gender, political status, social norms, family income, moral norms and volunteering motivations. To limit the potential for confounding impacts on one's volunteering and donation behavior, we include measures of these constructs as control variables in our study, excluding variables that are unlikely to affect college students, such as education level, marital status and number of children.

Past research has found that female students are more likely to volunteer than male students (Astin and Sax 1998; Einolf 2011; Li and Liang 2019). As to the effect of gender on charitable giving, there are mixed results. Many experimental studies and empirical studies indicate that women are more likely to donate and donate more than men (Kamas et al. 2008; Mesch et al. 2011; Testa and D'Amato 2018). However, there are a few studies that have found no gender difference in charitable giving (Einolf 2011). Taking all the studies into consideration, we postulated the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): *Female students are likely to donate more money.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): *Female students are likely to volunteer more frequently than males.*

In China, leaving aside the other parties, most college students fall into one of the following five categories: common people (people who are neither youth league members nor party members), youth league members, applicants for party membership, probationary party members and party members. Studies on Chinese college students have demonstrated that the closer one is to the Party, the more likely he/she is willing to donate and volunteer (Huang 2020; Luo et al. 2012; Zhu et al. 2017). Therefore, H3a and H3b are proposed.

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): *Students with higher levels of political status are likely to donate more money.*

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): *Students with higher levels of political status are likely to volunteer more frequently.*

The studies on the effect of social norms on prosocial behaviors yielded contradictory results. A field experiment carried out in a Swedish university demonstrated that descriptive social norms increased charitable giving of college students and the effect of local social norms of one's immediate environment is more powerful than that of global social norms (Agerström et al. 2016). Another experimental study carried out in the United States also confirmed the effect of social norms on donation (Herzog et al. 2019). Research on Chinese college students investigated and substantiated the effect of social norms on volunteering (Huang 2020; Luo et al. 2012). However, in an empirical study with a sample of Australian citizens, social norms did not predict donation intention or behavior (Smith and McSweeney 2007). Another study in China found that only social norms exerted by friends had a positive impact on volunteering, while social norms exerted by parents did not (Li 2010). To explore the effect of social norms, we listed two hypotheses below.

Hypothesis 4a (H4a): *Students with greater exposure to social norms are likely to donate more money.*

Hypothesis 4b (H4b): *Students with greater exposure to social norms are likely to volunteer more frequently.*

Previous research has also identified income level as a factor in charitable giving (Burgoyne et al. 2005). For example, income level had an impact on charitable decision-making among Australians, such that those with higher levels of income were more likely to donate (Smith and McSweeney 2007). Additionally, for college students, those with family income greater than \$100,000 were more likely to donate (Clerkin et al. 2009). Thus, H5 is proposed.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): *Students with higher family income levels are likely to donate more money.*

Moral norms are often included in studies on charitable giving to reflect the moral component in donation. A focus group study among UK adults on charitable decision-making showed that personal obligation was one of the reasons to donate to charities (Burgoyne et al. 2005). Plus, in many studies that apply theory of planned behavior to predict the intention and behavior of charitable giving, moral norms were included to measure personal feelings of responsibility and proven to be an influencing factor (Knowles et al. 2012; Smith and McSweeney 2007). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 6 (H6): *Students with moral norms are likely to donate more money.*

Volunteering motivations can also influence whether and how frequently people participate in volunteering. In a study with a sample of American college students, Ozorak (2003) divided volunteering motivations into intrinsic motivations (such as enjoyment, values and seeing a need) or extrinsic motivations (such as requirement, resume building and social pressure) and found that students with intrinsic motivations were more likely to participate in voluntary activities. A comparative study among 12 countries showed that students with resume-building motivations had lower intensity of volunteering (Handy et al. 2010). A Chinese study demonstrated that students with altruistic and self-enhancement motivations volunteered more frequently (Li and Liang 2019). These studies indicate that volunteering motivations have an impact on volunteering frequency. However, all these studies divided motivations to volunteer in different ways, and therefore, we decided to adopt a more recognized and comprehensive method of classification. The volunteering function inventory (VFI) developed by Clary et al. (1998) is a well-established scale that has been used in a large number of studies. It measures six volunteering motivations, Protective (to protect oneself from negative feelings), values (to express altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others), career (to prepare for a new career or to practice career-related skills), social (to be with one's friends or to participate in activities that are recognized by important others), understanding (to gain new learning experiences and to practice knowledge, skills and abilities) and enhancement (to develop one's ego in a positive way) (Clary et al. 1998). Based on previous research, we proposed the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): *Students with values Function are likely to volunteer more frequently.*

3. Materials and Methods

The data analyzed in this article is a part of a larger project. From September to November in 2019, questionnaires were distributed to college students in five universities in Shanghai, namely, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Tong Ji University, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics and East China University of Political Science and Law. We applied both random sampling and snowball sampling to collect and analyze 1992 responses using SPSS and AMOS software packages.

The questionnaire consists of five parts, demographic information, volunteer function inventory, helping attitude scale, helping power motivation and questions about donation and volunteering, in which we selected relevant items to measure the variables in this study. Two dependent variables are present in the current study. To measure the participants' volunteering and donation behavior, we asked the participants how many times on average they volunteer each year and how much money they donate to charities on average each year. Religious belief is the main independent variable of this study, which is measured by asking the participants whether they have religious belief (0: no; 1: yes). The limitations of this singular measure of the multi-faceted dimensions of religiosity was employed in order to ease the concerns of university administrators regarding the inclusion of religious content on the questionnaire.

The control variables include gender, family income level, political status, social norms, moral norms and volunteering motivations. For gender, we assigned 0 to male and 1 to female. Family income level and political status are both ordinal variables. Family income level is measured by a 6 Likert scale, in which 1 denotes extremely poor and 6 denotes extremely wealthy. Political status is divided into five categories that represent different levels of political identity with the Communist Party (1 = common people, 2 = youth league member, 3 = applicants for party membership, 4 = probationary party member, 5 = party member). social norms and moral norms of donation are numerical variables. social norms are measured by the donation or volunteering rate of the participants' families and friends while moral norms of donation are measured by a subscale used in the study conducted by [Smith and McSweeney \(2007\)](#), which includes four items with an 8-point Likert agree–disagree scale with several statements, namely, “I am the kind of person who donates money to charities or community service organizations;” “I would feel guilty if I didn’t donate money to charities or community service organizations;” “I believe I have a moral obligation to donate money to charities or community service organizations;” and “Not donating money to charities or community service organizations goes against my principles.” The score is calculated by the mean of these four items, and a higher score denotes a stronger sense of moral obligation. As to volunteering motivations, we chose VFI which consists of 30 items that measure six motivations with five items each. All these items are measured with an 8-point Likert agree–disagree scale in our questionnaire, and the score of each dimension is calculated by its mean.

4. Results

There were 1992 valid responses collected. Descriptive statistics of demographic variables, as well as the average charitable giving and volunteering frequency per year, are summarized in [Table 1](#). Notably, 49.8 percent of the participants are male and 63.6 percent are youth league members. More than half (55.3 percent) of the students believed they have a normal family income and 12.3 percent are religious, which is higher than the statistics of CFPS and lower than that of Gallup. College students donate 154.39 RMB on average to charities each year, with 100 RMB being the mode and 899.989 being the standard deviation. Our participants volunteer 2.91 times on average each year, with 1 being the mode and 4.060 being the standard deviation, which is notably low.

In addition, the average donation rates of families and friends are 51.5 percent and 39.5 percent respectively, which implies that college students may volunteer more often than their relatives. The average volunteering rates of families and friends are 35.3 percent and 53.8 percent respectively, which is approximately the opposite of the case in charitable giving. These results are consistent with the notion that college students have more free time to volunteer but less money to donate while their close families, usually parents, may have more money but less free time.

Next, we conducted regression analyses of charitable giving and volunteering separately and we first discuss the results for charitable giving and then proceed to the results for volunteering in the following subsections.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis.

Variables	N	Percentage	Charitable Giving	Volunteering Frequency
Gender				
Male	992	49.8	154.46	2.63
Female	1000	50.2	154.33	3.19
Political status				
Common people	119	6.0	286.60	1.68
Youth league member	1267	63.6	139.96	2.78
Applicants for party membership	304	15.3	149.28	3.43
probationary party member	126	6.3	121.20	3.38
Party member	176	8.8	201.20	3.43
Family income level				
Extremely poor	27	1.4	67.48	3.11
Relatively poor	73	3.7	112.89	2.82
Adequate	137	6.9	93.77	3.00
Normal	1102	55.3	112.79	2.91
Relatively wealthy	617	31.0	228.68	2.95
Extremely wealthy	36	1.8	535.00	1.94
Religious belief				
No	1746	87.7	123.60	2.84
Yes	246	12.3	372.96	3.45
Total	1992	100	154.39	2.91

4.1. Charitable Giving

We investigated the effect of religious belief on charitable giving by first conducting a regression analysis on religious belief in Model 1 and adding control variables into the regression in Model 2.

As shown in Table 2, the positive effect of religious belief on charitable giving among Chinese college students still holds after the control variables are entered. Therefore, H1a is accepted. Apart from religious belief, we confirmed the positive impact of family income level and moral norms on charitable giving in Model 2. H5 and H6 are accepted. However, gender, political status and social norms do not appear to have a significant influence on donation, thus rejecting H2a, H3a and H4a.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results for the average amount donated each year (N = 1992).

Predictor Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Religious belief (0: no; 1: yes)	0.091 *** (4.085)	0.092 *** (4.069)
Gender (0: male; 1: female)		−0.017 (−0.752)
Political status (1: common people; 6: party member)		−0.003 (−0.146)
Family income level (1: extremely poor; 6: extremely wealthy)		0.073 ** (3.261)
Donation rate of friends		0.027 (1.207)
Donation rate of families		0.031 (1.336)
Moral norms of donation		0.049 * (2.104)
R ²	0.008	0.019
Adjusted R ²	0.008	0.015
F change	16.684 ***	3.439 **

t statistics in the parentheses; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

4.2. Volunteering

This subsection discusses the results for the analysis of volunteering. The reliability of each dimension in VFI is verified by Cronbach's alpha, shown in Table 3. To test the validity of VFI, confirmatory factor analysis is conducted via AMOS. The model fits are not perfect yet are acceptable (GFI = 0.829, NFI = 0.858, CFI = 0.865 and RMSEA = 0.079) and therefore, the validity of VFI is confirmed. The descriptive analysis of VFI and its correlations with volunteering frequency are demonstrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations (N = 1992).

Variables	Mean	Std.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Protective function	5.454	1.394	(0.823)						
2. Values function	5.939	1.242	0.716 **	(0.828)					
3. Career function	5.478	1.317	0.767 **	0.660 **	(0.799)				
4. Social function	5.098	1.361	0.688 **	0.645 **	0.691 **	(0.826)			
5. Understanding function	6.031	1.310	0.727 **	0.769 **	0.755 **	0.590 **	(0.867)		
6. Enhancement function	6.034	1.317	0.744 **	0.748 **	0.723 **	0.585 **	0.863 **	(0.857)	
7. Volunteering Frequency	2.91	4.060	0.140 **	0.120 **	0.133 **	0.197 **	0.099 **	0.103 **	†

** $p < 0.01$; reliability given in the parentheses along the main diagonal; † single item—no Cronbach's alpha.

As shown in Table 3, volunteering motivations with a mean above 6 are enhancement function and understanding function while social function has the lowest mean 5.098. Additionally, volunteering frequency is positively correlated with all the variables. Next we use hierarchical regression to further examine whether and how these volunteering motivations and religious belief influence volunteering frequency.

The results of hierarchical regression are shown in Table 4. In Model 1, religious belief had a significant influence on volunteering frequency. However, in Model 2, the effect of religious belief became insignificant after the other independent variables, i.e., volunteering motivations, were added into the regression, indicating that religious belief does not have a significant influence on volunteering frequency. H1b is rejected. Additionally, only social function had a positive influence on volunteering frequency. In the final model, the four significant predictor variables are political status, social function, volunteering rate of friends and families. H3b and H4b are accepted; H2b and H7 are rejected. The fact that the only volunteering function that positively predicts volunteering is the social function is of particular interest since social function has the lowest mean in the descriptive analysis.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression results for volunteering frequency (N = 1992).

Predictor Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Religious belief (0: no; 1: yes)	0.050 * (2.212)	0.033 (1.473)	0.015 (0.696)
Protective function		0.034 (0.844)	0.036 (0.893)
Values function		0.003 (0.068)	0.006 (0.145)
Career function		0.006 (0.152)	0.014 (0.351)
Social function		0.193 *** (5.742)	0.113 ** (3.237)

Table 4. Cont.

Predictor Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Understanding function		−0.038 (−0.764)	−0.030 (−0.605)
Enhancement function		−0.010 (−0.206)	−0.010 (−0.206)
Gender (0: male; 1: female)			0.029 (2.084)
Political status (1: common people; 5: party member)			0.058 ** (2.645)
Volunteering rate of families			0.054 * (2.135)
Volunteering rate of friends			0.126 *** (5.028)
R ²	0.002	0.041	0.068
Adjusted R ²	0.002	0.037	0.063
F change	4.891 *	13.186 ***	14.532 ***

t statistics in the parentheses; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Based on a sample of Chinese college students, our findings indicate that, in line with most studies on this topic in other countries, religious belief has a positive influence on charitable giving among college students in mainland China. However, contrary to many studies in western countries, religiosity does not appear to affect volunteering. This result may stem from several possibilities. First, as mentioned in the introduction, volunteering in college is incentivized and even sometimes compulsory in a few Chinese universities. For example, students in Shanghai Jiao Tong University are required to earn certain credits through volunteering. Therefore, students may have to participate in ‘mandatory’ volunteering activities each year regardless of their religious belief. Second, religion-related activities are de facto restricted in China and college students may be preoccupied by schoolwork, which precludes the opportunities for religious students to volunteer in such events. Third, compared to volunteering, donating to charities may be an easier way for religious people to express their concern for others and social issues, especially when giving via online platform, such as WeChat and Alipay, has become extremely popular in China (Zhu et al. 2017).

In addition, our findings confirm the effect of social norms on volunteering frequency, which is consistent with the fact that social function is the only volunteering motivation that positively influences volunteering intensity with significance. Additionally, volunteering rate of friends has more influence on college students than that of families, which is in line with a study carried out in China (Li 2010). Political status is another influencing factor. This is potentially due to the fact that a large number of volunteering activities are managed and promoted by the Youth League and that youth league members and especially party members are taught and required to take more responsibilities in caring for others.

As for charitable giving, family income level is associated with donation behavior as expected. However, social norms do not affect donation as we hypothesized. There are several reasons that may account for this result. First, our sample is made up of college students, most of whom are unable to earn money on their own yet, which may negatively influence their decision in charitable giving. Second, donation may be viewed as a private act and donors may tend to remain anonymous. Therefore, it is possible that students are not exposed to the accurate number of donors around them and the concomitant normative effects. Finally, many college students may have the misconception that only the wealthy are qualified to donate money and that donating a small amount of money cannot make a difference. Thus, some students may rarely engage in charitable giving.

Notably, our research is not without limitations. First, the data we acquired was self-reported, and previous research has shown that self-reported data of charitable giving is likely to be distorted,

usually exaggerated, by memories (Burt and Popple 1998). Similar to charitable giving, self-reported volunteering frequency may also be biased to some degree because the participants might be tempted to present themselves in a more favorable way. More importantly, by asking students whether they have religious belief, we employed a simplistic measure of religiosity. As demonstrated in extant studies, multiple dimensions of religiosity can relate to prosocial behaviors through a variety mechanisms, but we could not include a more sophisticated approach to studying the many dimensions of religiosity due to potential delirious effects on the ability to collect data with university college students and the qualms that university administrators had with the inclusion of religious content on the survey. For this reason, we could not further explore whether and how different religious affiliations and participation in different religious practices would elicit a change in students' behavior. We also could not differentiate between secular giving and religious giving. Although in this study we have reached a preliminary conclusion that religious belief has a positive influence on charitable giving but not on volunteering, whether our results will hold robust after other religion-related variables are considered requires further research. Future research can take these into account and explore in depth how religious belief affects people's prosocial behavior.

Despite these limitations, our research contributes to the extant literature in that we explored the relationship between religious belief and prosocial behaviors of young people in China. In particular, we have found that in China, where religion is strictly regulated, religious belief has a positive influence on charitable giving among college students but volunteering frequency is not affected by religious belief. These results both support and challenge existing findings on the role of religiosity in prosocial actions within other countries and highlight the need to study China and other under-studied, non-Western locales.

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