

Article

Does Religious Community Participation Matter for Shaking off Poverty?

Yugang He 

Department of Chinese Trade and Commerce, College of Liberal Arts, Sejong University,
Seoul 05006, Republic of Korea; 1293647581@jbnu.ac.kr

Abstract: Religion, which is more of an informal system than anything else, permeates every aspect of our lives. As a result of this context, this article uses China as a case study to investigate the effect of religious community participation on income (a proxy for shaking off poverty). Using the 2018 Chinese General Social Survey and the ordinary least squares approach to conduct an empirical study, our results indicate that participation in religious communities has a favorable effect on income and is a means by which individuals may escape poverty. Additionally, we conducted the robustness test using the two-stage least squares approach and the findings indicate that the conclusions in this study are trustworthy and effective. In the meantime, the examination of heterogeneity revealed that religious community participation has a larger effect on rural residents' alleviation of poverty than on urban residents. In conclusion, the results presented in this study may serve as new evidence for the Chinese government to further religious freedom.

Keywords: religious community participation; poverty; Chinese general social survey; ordinary least squares approach; two-stage least squares approach



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1. Introduction

A religious community consists of individuals who follow the same faith. This word refers to religious adherents who live within a community, are not isolated from others, and are not completely devoted to their faith. People gather for worship at a place of worship such as a temple, synagogue, church, or mosque. In several faiths, a group that worships together is known as a congregation. In a narrower sense, a religious community is a group of individuals of the same faith who live together for religious reasons, sometimes under formal obligations such as religious vows, as in a convent or a monastery. The majority of religious communities are a component of how religions are structured and the majority of faiths include some type of religious order. In fact, there are many different religions practiced in China. Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Catholics, and Christians make up the majority of China's adherents to various religious traditions. Currently, China has nearly 200 million religious citizens, more than 380,000 religious staff, approximately 5500 religious organizations, including 7 national religious organizations, 144,000 legally registered religious community venues, and 92 religious schools, as reported by the State Administration of Religious Affairs in 2018. As a result of the continued expansion of religious liberty in China, the interchange of religious activities has become more common, and China's religious communities have also grown fast. Increasingly, religious communities play a vital role in society.

Moreover, religious freedom has been an issue of increasing significance in China in recent years as its impact on the evolution of Chinese society has expanded. Specifically, firstly, the Chinese government's tolerance and respect for religion have been further consolidated compared to the past. Secondly, the freedom of religious activities in China has also increased. Thirdly, the freedom of practice and affairs of religious beliefs in China has been expanded. Fourthly, the construction of religious organizations and religious

buildings in China has become increasingly free. Fifthly, the free participation of Chinese religious people in public activities has been further guaranteed. Sixthly, the development of religious education in China is also supported by the Chinese government, such as through the establishment of general schools and increased expenditure on religious education. Seventhly, the freedom of religious belief of individuals in China is protected by Chinese law. Consequentially, religion in China has become more institutionalized and its influence on the country's social development has become increasingly evident. Wang and Lin (2014), and Grim (2015) discovered that religious freedom contributed to China's income growth. Neufeld (2017), Lelkes (2006), and De Vanssay and Spindler (1994) observed a strong influence of religious freedom on wealth and income, as well as a significant association between wealth level and political system; moreover, Brown and Tierney (2009), and Awaworyi Churchill et al. (2019) noticed that a gain in religious freedom led to a rise in wealth income, especially in China's poorest regions, where the impact was more pronounced.

China has the largest population in the world. China's economy has risen swiftly since the reform and opening up, becoming the second-largest economy in the world. However, owing to the substantial wealth disparity, a considerable portion of China still lives in poverty. According to data from the China National Bureau of Statistics, the rural poverty rate at the end of 1978 was around 97.5%. Based on the total rural population with registered habitation, there were 770 million rural poor individuals. At the end of 2017, the rural poverty rate was 3.1%, and the number of impoverished people was 30.46 million. From 1978 to 2017, the number of rural Chinese living in poverty decreased by 740 million, or roughly 19 million on average every year. With an average yearly decline of 2.4 percentage points, the incidence of rural poverty decreased by 94.4 percentage points. The government of China has enacted a number of new policies in an effort to end poverty. These policies include expanding the building of rural infrastructure, enhancing the quality of medical care, and giving financial assistance to those living in poverty.

In light of what has been discussed so far, the purpose of this paper is to acquire more knowledge on the significance of participation in religious communities in the fight against poverty. Participation in religious communities has been shown to have a positive effect on income and is a means by which individuals may escape poverty, according to the findings of an empirical study that was carried out with the help of the Chinese General Social Survey from 2018 and the approach known as ordinary least squares. In addition, we carried out the robustness test by using the two-stage least squares methodology and the results show that the conclusions reached in this work may be relied upon and used effectively. In the meantime, the investigation of heterogeneity indicated that participation in religious communities had a greater impact on rural peoples' ability to alleviate poverty than it did on urban residents' ability to do so.

In contrast to the studies that came before it, this article contributes to the already-existing body of information in three significant ways. First, this article provides additional evidence that individuals are capable of lifting themselves out of poverty by examining the correlation between participation in one's religious community and financial well-being. Specifically, the article looks at how participating in one's religious community can lead to increased income. Second, in spite of the fact that it is an unofficial institution, it has once again shown how significant a role religion plays in social life. Third, according to the results of this study, the influence that participation in religious communities has on an individual's income situation is dramatically different in rural and urban areas of China. This is recent information that has been uncovered.

In conclusion, the remaining portions of this article are structured as follows: In Section 2, a review of the relevant literature is presented; in Section 3, a sample explanation, a description of variables, and a specification of the model are provided; in Section 4, results and comments are presented; and in Section 5, a conclusion is drawn.

2. Literature Review

Multiple studies have investigated the correlation between religious affiliation and financial standing. [Lipford and Tollison \(2003\)](#) went further in their investigation by proposing that participants' incomes were lower due to the influence that religious participation had on participants' choices and capacity for net profits. Using household-level data from the European and World Values Survey that have been aggregated for twenty-five Western countries, [L. Bettendorf and Dijkgraaf \(2010\)](#) examined if the households' behavior in various countries with regard to the effect of religion on income was homogeneous. They discovered that the estimated findings were dissimilar for high- and low-income countries: church membership had a favorable influence on income in high-income countries but a detrimental impact in low-income ones. Subsequently, [L. Bettendorf and Dijkgraaf \(2011\)](#) examined the association between religion and income in the Netherlands using a micro-dataset. They defined religion as the act of participating in a religious community and for their empirical studies they employed a joint regression and single-equation regression. Using the technique based on a single equation, they discovered that both religious measurements had a large negative impact on one's income and that one's income had a negative impact on religion. When the equations were estimated simultaneously, nevertheless, the cross-effects were rendered meaningless and no longer significant. Additionally, [De La O and Rodden \(2008a\)](#), [Elgin et al. \(2013\)](#), [Lam and Hung \(2005\)](#), and [Clydesdale \(1997\)](#) agreed with these findings even though they used different samples for the empirical investigations.

There has been a lot of discussion in the previous literature on the connection between religion and income; however, the majority of research is focused on microdata. The topic has been examined from a microeconomic perspective, which has mainly neglected the possibility of heterogeneity across countries. Employing data collected on church participation rates for a panel of nations from 1925 to 1990, [Sequeira et al. \(2017\)](#) employed heterogeneous panel data estimators and discovered that the influence of participation in religious activities on per capita income is often insignificant. When the chain of events leading up to the relationship between religion and income was taken into consideration, this finding was consistent with some of the most current studies ([Beck and Gundersen 2016](#); [Navarro and Skirbekk 2018](#); and [Kimhi et al. 2021](#)) that cast doubt on the effect of religion on income. Using data from the States in the United States, [Dincer and Hotard \(2011\)](#) explored whether or not there was a correlation between various indicators of racial and religious diversity and various metrics of income inequality. To carry out the empirical research, they relied on the generalized technique of moments and ordinary least squares. They came to the conclusion that religious diversity was both a direct and indirect contributor to the problem of income inequality. Moreover, [Gruber \(2005\)](#), [Ana and Rodden \(2008\)](#), and [Schwadel et al. \(2009\)](#) approved these results.

On the basis of the literature review that was just presented, the disparities between this work and the aforementioned literature have advanced in three different respects, as shown in Section 1.

3. Sample Explanation, Variable Description, and Model Specification

3.1. Sample Explanation

The Chinese General Social Survey, launched in 2003, is China's first countrywide, comprehensive, and ongoing academic survey project. It collects data at multiple levels of society, community, family, and the individual, summarizes social change trends, discusses topics of great scientific and practical importance, encourages the opening and sharing of China's scientific research, provides data for international comparative research, and serves as a multi-disciplinary economic and social data collection platform. Chinese General Social Survey data is now the primary source of information for the study of Chinese society, and it is widely used in scientific research, education, and government decision-making. As a result, this paper examines the influence of religious community participation on individual poverty reduction using data from the 2018 Survey. This survey has a total

of 12,582 samples and 783 variables. In addition to certain disqualified samples, such as respondents' refusal to reply, those beyond the age of 65, and those under the age of 18, this paper has 6512 legitimate samples.

3.2. Variable Description

Dependent variable: This article uses practices by Klasen (2008) and Notten (2016) in order to better evaluate individual economic poverty. Their practices are that if a person's income rises swiftly, he or she will be able to escape poverty soon. As a result, the dependent variable is the individual's income level, which is a proxy for the individual's poverty level.

Independent variable: Following He et al. (2021a), He and Tian (2022), and He et al. (2021b), religious community participation is used as a proxy for religion. In the 2018 Survey, the following question was asked: "How often do you participate in religious community activities?" There were nine possible solutions: (a) I have never participated in religious community activities; (b) I have participated in religious community activities less than once a year; (c) I have participated in religious community activities approximately once or twice a year; (d) I have participated in religious community activities several times a year; (e) I have participated in religious community activities approximately once a month; (f) I have participated in religious community activities two or three times a month; (g) I have participated in religious community activities almost every month; (h) I have participated in community activities every week; (i) I have participated in religious community activities several times a week. In this paper, religious community participation is used as a dummy variable. If a respondent replies that he or she participates in religious community activities, the value is set to one. Otherwise, the value is set to zero. There were 1245 respondents who participated in religious activities among the 6518 legitimate samples, while there were 5267 respondents who never participated in religious community activities. The percentage of those who have participated in religious community activities compared to those who have never participated reached 19.199%. This outcome is essentially consistent with the reality of religious community participation in China.

Control variables: Some key variables have been included in this article based on previous studies. Following Hinze (2000), Heath and Niethe (2001), and Barringer and Kassebaum (1989), gender is introduced in this article. Following Untaru and Han (2021) and Ozhamaratli et al. (2022), age is introduced in this article. Following Tchamyu et al. (2019) and Van Vu (2020), education level is introduced in this article. Following Taheri et al. (2019a), economic status is introduced in this article. Following Bueno (2011) and Mellor and Milyo (2002), health status is introduced in this article. Following Madalozzo (2008) and Dunga (2017), marital status is introduced in this article.

To this end, Table 1 shows the forms, definitions, and sources of these variables used in this paper to help readers better understand them.

Table 1. Variable Description.

Variable	Form	Definition
Dependent variable		
Income	in	Individual's income level (unit: yuan) in log
Independent variable		
Religious community participation	re	Dummy variable (religious community participating = one; otherwise, zero)
Control variables		
Gender	ge	Dummy variable (female = one; otherwise, zero)
Age	ag	Age in log
Education level	ed	Dummy variable (master's degree or above = one; otherwise, zero)
Health status	he	Very unhealthy = 1; Unhealthy = 2; Average = 3; Healthy = 4; Very healthy = 5
Economic status	ec	Lower = 1; Low = 2; Average = 3; High = 4; Higher = 5
Marital status	ma	Dummy variable (married = one; otherwise, zero)

Note: Data used in this paper is sourced from Chinese General Social Survey in 2018.

3.3. Model Specification

To examine the effect of religious community participation on income (a proxy for shaking off poverty), a baseline regression model was built.

$$\text{in} = a_0 + a_1\text{re} + a_2\text{ge} + a_3\text{ag} + a_4\text{ed} + a_5\text{he} + a_6\text{ec} + a_7\text{ma} + u, \quad (1)$$

where a_0 denotes the constant; $[a_1, a_7]$ denote the coefficients to be estimated; u denotes the white noise. In Equation (1), we will concentrate on the coefficient, a_1 . Specifically, if the sign of a_1 is positive and statistically significant, this suggests that religious community participation is conducive to poverty alleviation. Equally, if the sign of a_1 is negative and statistically significant, this suggests that religious community participation exacerbates poverty. Meanwhile, if the sign of a_1 is zero or not statistically significant, this suggests that religious community participation has no effect on poverty alleviation.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Fundamental Properties of the Investigated Variables

This subsection discusses the fundamental properties of the variables considered in this work. These fundamental properties contain the values of mean, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation. The results of the fundamental properties of the investigated variables are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of fundamental properties of investigated variables.

Variable/Statistics	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard Deviation
in	2.127	0.254	5.712	0.193
re	0.186	0	1	0.366
ge	0.449	0	1	0.178
ag	1.762	1.255	1.813	0.154
ed	0.084	0	1	0.125
he	3.905	1	5	0.087
ec	2.116	1	5	0.069
ma	0.393	0	1	0.418

As seen in Table 2, income has a mean of 2.127 and a standard deviation of 0.193. This indicates that the majority of respondents are on a path to improving their income. In other words, they are rising out of poverty. Religious community participation has a mean of 0.186 and a standard deviation of 0.266. This result reveals that, on average, 18.6% of the respondents in this sample participate in religious community activities. Moreover, the standard deviation also demonstrates that respondents' inclination to participate in religious community activities fluctuates substantially. In reality, this outcome is consistent with China's actual status on this issue. Gender has a mean of 0.449 and a standard deviation of 0.178. Age has a mean of 1.762 and a standard deviation of 0.154. The education level has a mean of 0.084 and a standard deviation of 0.125. Healthy status has a mean of 3.905 and a standard deviation of 0.087. Economic status has a mean of 2.116 and a standard deviation of 0.069. Marital status has a mean of 0.393 and a standard deviation of 0.418.

4.2. Effect of Religious Community Participation on Shaking off Poverty

This subsection investigates the impact of religious community participation on shaking off poverty. Additionally, this paper uses the change in respondents' income to measure their poverty. Specifically, if the respondents' income falls, they will fall into poverty. On the contrary, an increase in respondents' income implies that they are emerging from poverty. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of descriptive statistics.

Variable/Model	Model (1): in	Model (2): in
re	0.085 *** (6.646)	0.062 *** (6.708)
ge		−0.281 *** (−4.933)
ag		0.061 (1.133)
ed		0.136 ** (2.123)
he		0.497 * (1.847)
ec		0.995 *** (3.549)
ma		0.613 ** (2.318)
c	5.923 *** (4.498)	6.814 *** (4.653)
R ²	0.272	0.209
Observation	6512	6512

Note: t-statistics shown in parentheses; * a 10% significant level; ** a 5% significant level; *** a 1% significant level; c, constant.

The findings of Models (1) and (2) for the influence of religious community participation on income are shown in Table 3. The outcome of Model (1), without control variables, suggests that religious community participation has a positive effect on income. This implies that a 1% increase in religious community participation leads to a 0.085% increase in income. Equally, the findings of Model (2), with control variables, show that religious community participation has a positive influence on income. This means that a 1% increase in religious community participation brings about a 0.062% increase in income. When the religious community participation in Models (1) and (2) are compared, it is observed that although the coefficient of religious community participation in Model (2) is slightly smaller than that in Model (1), both of these two coefficients are significant at the 1% level. Therefore, it might be concluded that religious community participation has a positive effect on income. In other words, this finding suggests that religious community participation can assist individuals in escaping poverty. This outcome might be explained in a variety of ways. The first possibility is that religion, as an informal social institution, promotes individuals to be thrifty and conscientious. This may assist them in avoiding poverty. The second probable explanation is that religion might help people develop a positive work attitude, which can help them increase their income and get rid of poverty. The third probable explanation is that religion not only helps people move out of poverty monetarily but also on a spiritual level, by purifying their hearts and enriching their souls. Fourth, religious community engagement helps to build and maintain social networks that may help people access income-generating activities. Of course, this outcome is consistent with [De La O and Rodden \(2008a\)](#) and [L. J. Bettendorf and Dijkgraaf \(2005\)](#).

Moreover, the impacts of the control variables on income are considered in Table 3. Gender negatively affects income. This indicates that women are more likely than men to fall into poverty. This outcome is consistent with [Barber et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Smith et al. \(2007\)](#). Age positively affects income. Unfortunately, this finding does not pass the significance test. Education level has a positive effect on income. This outcome suggests that people with a higher level of education are more likely to escape poverty than those with a lower level of education. This finding is consistent with [Larsen et al. \(2020\)](#) and [FitzRoy and Nolan \(2020\)](#). Health status positively affects income. This outcome denotes that the healthier an individual is, the less likely he or she is to become impoverished. This finding is consistent with [Benzeval et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Fanning and O'Neill \(2019\)](#). Economic status positively affects income. This outcome suggests that people with higher economic status are less

likely to fall into poverty. This finding is consistent with [Gadhawe and Nagarkar \(2015\)](#) and [Taheri et al. \(2019a\)](#). Marital status positively affects income. This outcome suggests married people are less likely to fall into poverty than unmarried people. This finding is consistent with [Eaker et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Cramm et al. \(2012\)](#).

4.3. Robustness Test

Individual socioeconomic characteristics may be endogenous to income. At the same time, there are a lot of unobservable factors that influence people's participation in religious communities and these factors may also influence their income. That is, the endogenous problem may contradict the results in Table 3. Therefore, to tackle the endogenous problem, the two-stage least squares method is used in this paper. According to religious market theory, religious community participation has relative stability and an inter-generational locking effect ([Stark and Finke 2004](#)). As a result, the number of sites of religious community activity may be appropriate as an instrumental variable of individuals' religious participation. In this paper, the number of temples in each province is the instrumental variable. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of robustness test.

Variable/Model	Model (3): re	Model (4): in
re		0.047 *** (3.516)
te	0.275 ** (2.233)	
cv	Yes	Yes
c	5.126 *** (3.426)	3.172 *** (4.273)
Cragg–Donald Wald test		217.145 ***
Observation	6512	6512

Note: *** 1% significance level; ** 5% significance level; te, the number of temples (instrumental variable); cv, control variable; t-statistics shown in parentheses.

According to the results shown in Table 4, the coefficient of t is positive and significant at the 1% level. This implies that an individual is more likely to participate in religious community activities in an area with a higher concentration of temples. Additionally, it demonstrates that instrumental variables have significant explanatory power in comparison to endogenous variables. According to the result of the Cragg–Donald Wald test, the instrumental variable that was chosen for this work should be considered valid. Moreover, the outcome of Model (4) suggests that religious community participation favorably influences income. This result accords with the findings shown in Table 3. In other words, the results presented in this article are reliable and robust.

4.4. Heterogeneous Effect

People in China are seeing their incomes rise as a direct result of the fast expansion of the country's economy. Meanwhile, with the backing of relevant policies of the Chinese government, China's urbanization has quickly deepened, which has led to major growth in the gap in the standard of living that exists between China's rural and urban regions. This, of course, encompasses the many religious beliefs held by individuals. As a result, to investigate the disparities in the levels of income and participation in religious communities that exist between rural and urban regions, we carried out a heterogeneity study. The findings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of heterogeneity study.

Variable/Model	Model (5): Rural Area	Model (6): Urban Area
re	0.051 *** (6.932)	0.024 *** (5.148)
cv	yes	yes
R ²	0.194	0.178
Observation	4127	2385

Note: *** a 1% significant level; cv, control variable; t-statistics shown in parentheses.

Participation in religious communities has been proven to have a favorable influence on income in both rural and urban settings, as shown by the findings reported in Table 5. Specifically, a 1% rise in religious community participation results in a 0.051% rise in rural income and a 0.024% rise in urban income. This implies that a heterogeneous effect exists between rural and urban areas in terms of the effect of religious community participation on income. One plausible reason is that religion, as an informal system, has an effect on individuals' economic behavior. Rural dwellers are subject to more religious restrictions on their economic conduct, such as reduced entertainment expenditures; hence, their disposable income will grow proportionally (Iannaccone 1998; Platteau 2008). Moreover, religious teachings inspire individuals to be frugal and to actively participate in economic activities in order to earn extra income (Mael and Ashforth 2001). This kind of participation in religious community activities may aid in the eradication of poverty among rural inhabitants. Another likely explanation is that the standard of living enjoyed by those living in urban areas of China is much higher than that of those living in rural areas. Those who live in urban areas have diverse daily activities, which inevitably exclude urban residents who want to take part in religious community activities. Because of this reason, the influence of citizens' participation in their religious communities will be less significant in urban areas than it would be in rural areas.

5. Conclusions

This article aims to investigate the effect of religious community participation on income (a proxy for shaking off poverty). Our findings, which were derived from an empirical study that was carried out with the help of the Chinese General Social Survey from 2018 and the method of ordinary least squares, indicate that participation in religious communities has a positive effect on income and is a means by which individuals may escape poverty. In addition, we carried out the robustness test by using the two-stage least squares methodology and the results show that the conclusions reached in this work can be relied upon and used effectively. In the meantime, the investigation of heterogeneity found that participation in religious communities had a greater impact on the alleviation of poverty among rural inhabitants than it does among urban residents.

In light of the research results shown above, we propose the following policy recommendations: (1) Since participation in the activities of religious communities may assist individuals in increasing their income and escaping poverty, the government needs to further liberalize religious practice and make more space available for religious gatherings. This has the potential to enhance not just the material lives of people but also their spiritual lives; (2) the government, in its capacity as an informal social structure, should enact measures such as religion-related education and build additional locations to allow religion to fully fulfill the social function to which it is suited; (3) there is wide variation in the extent to which religious communities in both rural and urban settings work to alleviate poverty. The government should thus take steps to equalize the impact of religious communities in both rural and urban settings.

In addition, this article adds to the existing body of knowledge in three fundamental ways. First, through an examination of the correlation between participation in one's religious community and income, this article presents further proof that individuals may lift themselves out of poverty. Second, the significance that religion plays in society has

been shown once again, despite the fact that it is an informal institution. Third, according to the findings of this research, the impact of participation in religious communities on one's income standing varies significantly between China's rural and urban regions. This is a fresh piece of information.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that this work has a few limitations. On the basis of these limitations, corresponding directions for the future are supplied. First, this study does not take into account a number of other factors, such as private assets and race, which could have an impact on the findings presented in this article. In order to revisit this subject and come up with additional fascinating findings, it is feasible that future researchers may make an effort to include as many potentially relevant factors as they can. Second, in this study, China is the sole instance that is considered. In the future, researchers may investigate this issue using other countries, such as Japan and Korea. It is possible that they may discover new outcomes. Third, to investigate this subject, this article exclusively makes use of the method of ordinary least squares. In the future, researchers may look at this subject using other approaches, such as a difference-in-differences assessment or propensity score matching, which could come upon new information.

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