

# Appendix C: Methodology for China

## Overview of Findings and Methods

Published estimates of the Christian share of the Chinese population range from about 1% in some relatively small-sample public opinion surveys to about 8% in reviews of membership reports from churches and church leaders (including unregistered churches) within China. Given the size of China's population, a difference of a single percentage point represents more than 10 million people. In light of such a wide range of estimates, this study carefully considered multiple sources of data – including public opinion surveys, church membership reports and Chinese government statistics – in an attempt to provide a reasonable estimate of the number of Christians in China.

This methodology builds on the 2008 Pew Forum analysis of religion in China.<sup>26</sup> Since its publication in May 2008, that analysis has been well received by scholars at numerous scientific and professional meetings in the U.S. and China.<sup>27</sup> At these meetings, the Pew Forum received feedback on the initial analysis as well as helpful input on its current estimate.

There is general consensus among scholars of mainland China that its Christian population numbers somewhere in the tens of millions. Several efforts have been made to come up with more precise figures on the number of Christians in both state-approved associations and unregistered churches. Based on a review

### Christians in China

	ESTIMATED POPULATION	PERCENTAGE OF 2010 POPULATION OF CHINA
Protestant	58,040,000	4.3%
Independent	35,040,000	2.6
Other Protestant	23,000,000	1.7
Anglican	< 1,000	< 0.1
Orthodox	20,000	< 0.1
Catholic	9,000,000	0.7
Other Christian	< 10,000	< 0.1
<b>Total Christian</b>	<b>67,070,000</b>	<b>5.0</b>

Population estimates are rounded to the ten thousands. Percentages are calculated from unrounded numbers. Figures may not add exactly due to rounding. See methodology for details on the range of estimates available for China.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life  
*Global Christianity*, December 2011

<sup>26</sup> See *Religion in China on the Eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics*, analysis by Brian J. Grim, Pew Forum senior researcher and director of cross-national data. Grim produced this updated analysis with help from Pew Forum Research Assistant Noble Kuriakose and Pew Forum Research Associate Anne Shi.

<sup>27</sup> Venues include: "Religion and the Future of China Symposium," Council on Foreign Relations, New York, N.Y. (June 11, 2008); "Symposium on Religion and Spirituality in China Today," Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University (April 30, 2009); "Best Quantitative Estimate of Religion in China Today," Renmin University of China Beijing, immediately following and involving key researchers from the Seventh Symposium of the Social Scientific Study of Religion in China (July 28, 2010); "Religion in China Today," panel briefing provided to Assistant Secretary of State and U.S. Special Representative to the Organization of Islamic Conference, Washington, D.C. (April 2011); "Religion in the Social Transition of Contemporary China," Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, Washington, D.C. (Oct. 13, 2011); and "Religious Change and Conversion in China," Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Milwaukee, Wis. (Oct. 29, 2011).

of these estimates, the Pew Forum's demographers think that the 2010 Christian share of China's population is likely in the neighborhood of 5% (or 67 million people of all ages), as shown in the table on this page. This figure includes non-adult children of Chinese believers and un-baptized persons who attend Christian worship services. It can be broken down as follows:

- Catholics total roughly 9 million, or 0.7% of China's overall population. They include 5.7 million people affiliated with the state-approved Catholic Patriotic Association, as reported by the 2010 *Blue Book on Religions*, which is produced by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).<sup>28</sup> This study conservatively estimates that an additional 3.3 million people are affiliated solely with unregistered Catholic congregations.
- Protestants total about 58 million, or 4.3% of China's overall population. They include members of churches aligned with the state-approved Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee (TSPM), which has roughly 23 million adherents (1.7% of China's population), according to the China Christian Council (the TSPM's sister organization that oversees such matters as theological education, external relations and Bible printing). In addition, this study estimates that China has some 35 million independent Christians (2.6% of the population), who are also classified in this study as Protestants. Many people in the independent Christian category meet without state approval in homes, rented facilities and public spaces. As a result, they are sometimes called "house church" Christians.<sup>29</sup> Independent Christians also include un-baptized persons, often referred to as "seekers," attending either registered or unregistered churches.
- Orthodox Christians number about 20,000. Other Christians number fewer than 1,000. Among the members of these groups are some expatriates living in China.

---

28 The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the highest academic research organization in the fields of philosophy and social sciences, is directly under the State Council of the People's Republic of China – the highest executive organ of State power as well as the highest organ of State administration.

29 The term "house church" is perhaps a misnomer, as is noted by Pace University Professor Joseph Tse-Hei Lee: "The definitions of 'open churches' (dishang jiaohui), 'underground [Catholic] churches' (dixia jiaohui), and '[Protestant] house churches' (jiating jiaohui) prove ... problematic. Such terms do not accurately describe the reality of Chinese Catholicism and Protestantism. The contemporary Chinese government requires places of worship to register, whether they are churches, temples, monasteries or mosques. The 'underground church' is not underground in a literal sense. Neither does the 'house church' mean a religious meeting in a single household. Officially, the terms 'underground church' and 'house church' mean an unregistered religious body ..." ("Christianity in Contemporary China: An Update," by Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, *Journal of Church and State*, (2007) 49(2), pages 277-304.)

The Pew Forum's estimate of roughly 67 million Christians falls in the middle range of previous estimates, which vary from less than 30 million to more than 100 million.<sup>30</sup>

## Background on the Chinese Context

Because there are no truly nationally representative surveys of the religious affiliation of the Chinese public, only a rough estimate of the country's Christian population is possible. Also, because the number of religious adherents in China is a politically sensitive issue, the national census does not ask questions about personal religious affiliation.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, there may be underreporting by the registered churches and the State Religious Affairs Bureau (SARA). Part of the sensitivity is that followers of some of China's five officially recognized religious traditions – Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam and Daoism – very likely

### Range of Existing Christian\* Population Estimates for Mainland China

Source	MINIMUM PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION THAT IS CHRISTIAN	MAXIMUM PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION THAT IS CHRISTIAN	BEST EST. PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POPULATION THAT IS CHRISTIAN	BEST ESTIMATE OF 2010 CHRISTIAN POPULATION
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' <i>Blue Book on Religion</i> , 2010	2.1%	>2.1%	>2.1%	29,000,000
Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents, 2007	3.2	5.9	5.0**	67,000,000
Meta Analysis by Global China Center's Carol Lee Hamrin, 2005	NA	NA	5.0	67,000,000
China Christian Council (2011) estimate of Protestants <b>plus</b> Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association estimate in <i>Blue Book</i> <b>plus</b> House Church estimate by Liu Peng, 2009	2.1	5.8	NA	79,000,000 <sup>^</sup>
Asia Harvest, 2010	6.1	9.2	7.7	104,000,000
World Christian Database, 2010	NA	NA	8.0	108,000,000

\*Chinese authorities sometimes use the term Christian to mean Protestant. Here Christian includes all Christian traditions.

\*\*Best estimate takes into account nonresponse follow-up survey reported by Stark, Johnson and Mencken (2011).

<sup>^</sup>Adds the estimates of Protestants and Catholics (28.7 million) to Liu Peng's estimate of unregistered house church members (50 million).

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • *Global Christianity*, December 2011

30 An estimate of between 39-41 million Protestants was put forth in 2008 by Werner Burklin, founder of China Partner, an international Christian organization. Burklin's survey team interviewed 7,409 individuals in every province and municipality in China. His estimate, however, was based on a non-probability convenience sample survey of Chinese citizens aged 15 and over. The survey team was asked to randomly ask people what religion, if any, they adhere to. The team interviewed them mainly on the streets and parks but also on trains, planes, subways, taxis and buses, and in hotels, open air markets, department stores and mom and pop stores. See: <http://www.gospelherald.net/article/opinion/44825/facts-about-numbers-of-christians-in-china.htm>

31 For an understanding of Chinese restrictions on religion in a global context, see "Rising Restrictions on Religion:" <http://pew-forum.org/Government/Rising-Restrictions-on-Religion.aspx>. For a discussion of the historical and modern contexts of restrictions on religion in China, see pages 120-140 in *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the 21st Century*, by Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

outnumber members of the Chinese Communist Party. For instance, about 6% of Chinese are Party members, compared with more than 20% who are thought to be affiliated with the five recognized religions, combined.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the data limitations, a great deal of scholarship has been devoted to the study of China's religious populations and their growth since the late 1970s, when the nationwide prohibition of religion was lifted following the end of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>33</sup> This growing body of empirical research comes from a number of different sources, including reports sponsored by the Chinese government, reviews of membership reports from churches and church leaders within China, ethnographic case studies,<sup>34</sup> and surveys of the Chinese public.<sup>35</sup> Taken together, these studies have produced valuable insights into the nature of religion in China today.

Among scholars of China, there is a general consensus that religion and its influence have grown substantially during the past three decades. This includes growth in institutional forms of religion as well as more "diffused" forms of religious belief and practice expressed in family and community contexts, including house churches, rather than within an organized or institutional religious framework.<sup>36</sup> However, a consensus has not developed on the current size of the various religious communities in China. In addition to the lack of an authoritative census or survey, the absence of a consensus on numbers also stems from differences in defining who should be counted as a member of the various religious communities.

---

32 According to the Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents, a 2007 survey by the Chinese polling firm Horizon. (For more information on the survey, see footnote 40.) Interestingly, despite the requirement that Party members be atheist (see <http://www.cfr.org/china/religion-china/p16272#p3>), the survey found that more than 13% of Communist Party members expressed some religious affiliation, though none surveyed identified as Christian.

33 For an overview, see *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, by Yang Fenggang, Oxford University Press, 2011.

34 For an example, see "Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-east China," by Kenneth Dean, *The China Quarterly*, Volume 174 (2003), pages 338-358.

35 For an overview, see *Social Scientific Studies of Religion in China: Methodology, Theories, and Findings*, by Yang Fenggang and Graeme Lang, eds. Brill Academic Publishers (2011).

36 In *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (University of California Press, 1961), sociologist C. K. Yang first introduced the term "diffused religion" to describe Chinese religious beliefs and practices expressed in family and community contexts rather than within an organized or institutional religion framework.

Although there are challenges with measuring other religious groups in China,<sup>37</sup> researchers face a particularly daunting measurement challenge regarding Christianity. Here, the central issue is not so much the diffuse nature of Christian identity and practice in China, though that is also an issue,<sup>38</sup> but also the large number of Christians who do not affiliate with either of the two state-approved denominations. Christians who decline to put themselves under the theological and administrative oversight of these two denominations operate in what Prof. Yang Fenggang of Purdue University refers to as grey and black religious marketplaces.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, unregistered churches operate on the edges of the law – in the realm of administrative policies – because there are few laws that establish the limits of the government or the freedom of religious groups in society.<sup>40</sup> And because of the ambiguous, sometimes adversarial relationship between the government and Christian groups that are not willing to join state-approved denominations, attempts to measure these groups often are met with suspicion by all sides – the government, the state-approved churches and the unregistered groups.

---

37 Among government scholars of Buddhism in China, for example, there is some disagreement on whether to define as adherents only those who have undergone official conversion ceremonies or to use the broader definition of anyone self-identifying as a Buddhist. (Less than one-in-ten self-identified Buddhists in China underwent a conversion ceremony compared with more than one-in-three Christians, according to an analysis of the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents.) From the government perspective, counting the broader category involves the willingness to acknowledge that adherents of Buddhism can include those with no formal membership in a Buddhist organization or no definite conversion to the faith. For instance, Zheng Xiaoyun, the leading researcher on Buddhism at the Institute on World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), noted at a recent academic conference (“Religion in the Social Transition of Contemporary China,” Oct. 13, 2011, Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, Washington, D.C.) that CASS is debating whether to count only those Buddhists who have undergone a formal conversion ceremony. Prior to the 20th century, various Chinese dynastic policies counted as Buddhists only those who had undergone conversion ceremonies to become monks or nuns, in part because these people no longer were required to pay taxes to the government. A further complication in measuring Buddhism is that there exist a plethora of localized Chinese religious beliefs and practices expressed in family and community contexts rather than within an organized or institutional religion framework. Some of these incorporate elements of Buddhism, while others are closer to Taoism, and yet others blend animism. Most of these incorporate some form of ancestor veneration or worship. This diffused religious category is sometimes referred to as Chinese folk religion. And finally, an added complication is that a number of Chinese, when given the option in the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents identified as both Buddhist and Christian. For a fuller discussion of Chinese folk religion, see Wong, Wai Yip (2007) “Defining Chinese Folk Religion: A Methodological Interpretation,” *Asian Philosophy* Vol. 21. Li, Y. Y. (1998) *Zong Jiao Yu Shen Hua Lun Ji [A Treatise on Religion and Myth]* Taipei: New Century Publishing. Feng, Z. Z. & Li, F. H. (1994) *History of Chinese Folk Religion*. Taipei: Wenchin; and Jonathan Chamberlain (2011) *Chinese Gods: An Introduction to Chinese Folk Religion*; Hong Kong: Blacksmith Books.

38 There are some localized forms of Christianity throughout China that sometimes blend local and Christian beliefs. For examples of these groups, see *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Changing the Global Balance of Power*, by David Aikman, Regnery Publishing, 2003. The intensely Chinese nature of Christianity existed prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. For instance, Prof. Lian Xi demonstrates that indigenous Christianity in China was often localized, uniquely Chinese, millenarian and frequently anti-foreign (*Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, Yale University Press, 2010).

39 In an attempt to analyze the religious situation in contemporary China, a country with religious traditions and regulations drastically different from Europe and the Americas, Prof. Yang describes a triple-market model: a red market (officially permitted religions), a black market (officially banned religions), and a gray market (religions with an ambiguous legal/illegal status). The gray market concept underscores the extent of non-institutionalized religiosity in China. (See “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, pages 93–122, 2006.)

40 For a discussion of religion and law in China, see “Religion in post-Hu China: What Changes are Probable?” by Liu Peng at the “Religion in the Social Transition of Contemporary China,” Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, Washington, DC. (October 13, 2011). Only since 2010 has there been a program to study religion and the rule of law at Peking University Law School. This is likely the only program on this topic being offered in China. See: “Second Summer Conference on Religion and the Rule of Law – Beijing, July 2011” [http://iclrs.org/index.php?blurb\\_id=1335](http://iclrs.org/index.php?blurb_id=1335).

Indeed, government and academic researchers have found evidence that Christians in general, and members of unregistered Christian groups in particular, are less likely than Chinese as a whole to participate in public opinion surveys. For instance, a follow-up study<sup>41</sup> to the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents<sup>42</sup> found that independent Christians were less than half as likely to agree to participate than the average of all those surveyed in the main study. Separately, one of the authors of the 2010 *Blue Book of Religions* discussed reasons that public opinion surveys may yield somewhat lower estimates of Christians than actually exist in the population:

1. It is a sensitive subject for local officials, and they do not want to facilitate the poll or have large numbers reported. [a potential sampling bias]
2. It is a sensitive subject for some Christians, and for churches that do not want to report their true numbers. [a reliability issue]
3. Some ‘Christians’ who have not yet been baptized do not want to say that they are Christian because, according to the churches, they are not.<sup>43</sup> [a classification issue]

In addition to these issues, researchers also face the challenge of adequately representing regional variances in religious affiliation. Evidence suggests that religious groups are geographically concentrated; therefore, a reliable design for a survey to measure religious affiliation would need to include strategies for sampling across China’s 33 provinces, regions and municipalities – many of which individually surpass the population of entire countries.

One rough indication of the geographic concentration of religion is a 2004 Chinese government economic census that reports the number and location of economic institutions, including religious organizations officially registered with the government. A preliminary summary of the results is shown in the map below. In the analysis by Purdue University’s Center on Religion and Chinese Society, directed by Prof. Yang Fenggang,<sup>44</sup> each Chinese county is color-coded to show the religion that has the largest number of registered places of worship or religious institutions. According to this mapping, Protestant institutions are dominant in the

---

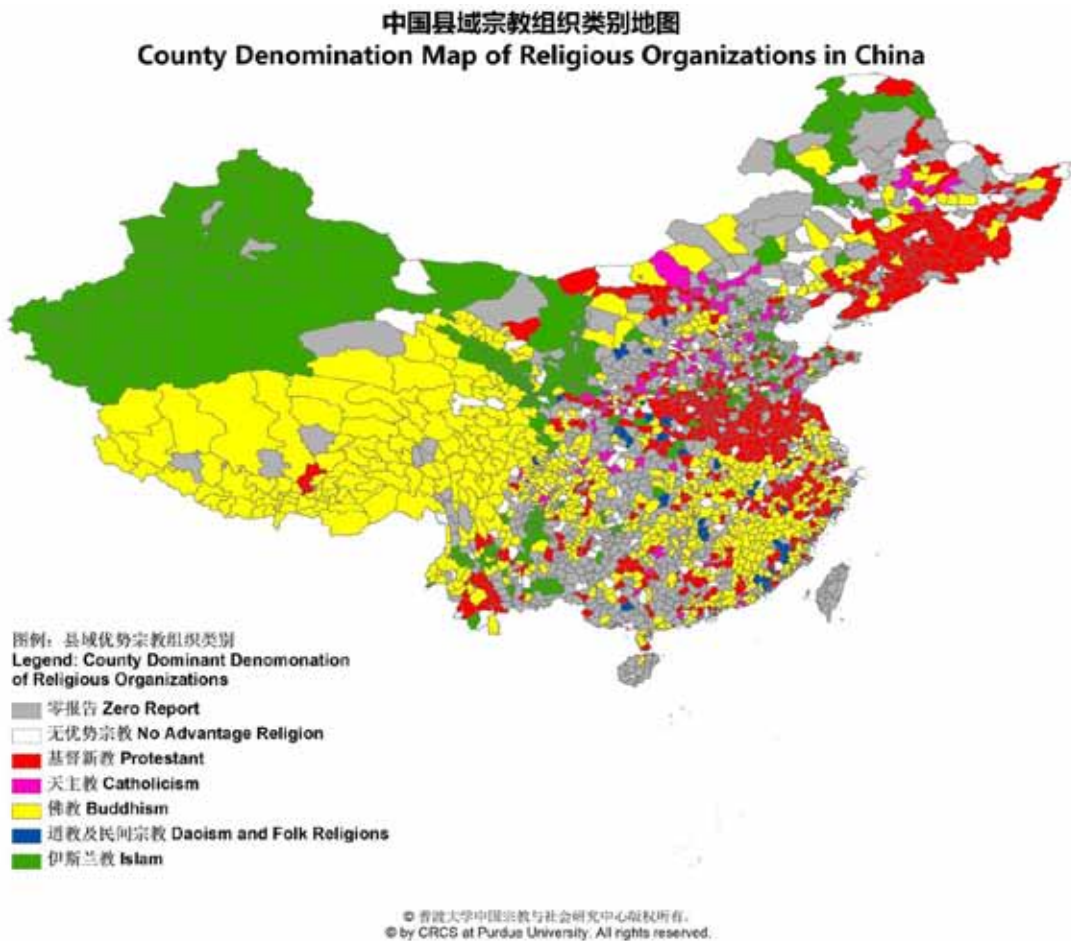
41 As reported in “Counting China’s Christians: There are as many Christians in China as there are members of the Communist Party,” *First Things*, by Rodney Stark, Byron Johnson and Carson Mencken, May 2011. <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/05/counting-chinarsquos-christians>

42 See footnote 65 for details on the study.

43 As reported by Janice Wickeri, “Chinese Protestant Christians: Who, What, Where, Why – Findings of A Questionnaire Survey of Chinese Protestant Christian Households by the Institute of World Religions Research Group,” in *Amity News Service* 28 (2010) 10-12, p. 8.

44 Map is used with permission of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society.





East, Muslim institutions in the West,<sup>45</sup> Catholic institutions in North and Central regions of the country, and Buddhist institutions in the South.

The 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents survey<sup>46</sup> attempted to address this potential bias by interviewing in most Chinese provinces, but fewer than 150 people were interviewed in many provinces, and some provinces were not included at all. While this sampling strategy is not unusual for national surveys, it has the potential to miss religious groups that are geographically concentrated within provinces.

45 While an officially recognized institutional presence is only a rough indicator of religious concentrations, the most obvious result of this is the clear undercount of Muslims in numerous public opinion surveys, most of which report a 1% or lower share of Muslims. (See *Religion in China on the Eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics* for a summary of recent survey findings.) Recognizing this bias, the Pew Forum's 2010 estimate of Chinese Muslims was based on a projection from the 2000 Chinese Census, which does have a category for Muslim ethnic groups. Based on that information, that study concluded that approximately 1.8% of the population is Muslim (approximately 23.3 million Muslims). It is clear that the lower public opinion survey estimates for Muslims results from Western regions being largely excluded from the sampling frame of most such surveys.

46 The 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents; for more details see footnote 65.

These are some of the reasons that any estimate of Chinese Christian numbers must draw on multiple sources of information rather than rely only on existing surveys of the public.

### Chinese Government Estimates

Chinese government estimates can be considered a minimum figure for the number of Christians because they are based primarily on reports from the state-approved Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of the Protestant Churches of China (for Protestants) and from the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (for Catholics). These estimates typically include only members of these two officially recognized associations. They generally do not include un-baptized persons attending Christian groups, non-adult children of Christian believers or other persons under age 18. And, most importantly, they generally do not take into account unregistered Christian groups.

Despite these limitations, government reports do provide some useful data as well as some indication of recent trends. Most notably, they show dramatic growth among officially recognized Protestants and Catholics, as is seen by comparing the numbers reported in the government's 1997 White Paper<sup>47</sup> on religion with an updated 2006 Background Brief provided to the Pew Forum by the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C. The officially reported number of Christians increased from 14 million to 21 million, or 50%, in approximately 10 years. During this time, government figures indicate that the number of Protestants rose from 10 million to 16 million – a 60% increase – while the number of Catholics went from 4 million to 5 million – a 25% increase. The 2006 Background Brief goes so far as to say that Protestantism, in particular, has increased “by more than 20 times” since it “was first brought to China in the early 19th century.”

More recently, the 2010 *Blue Book of Religions* estimates Christians in China to number about 28.7 million (2.1% of the population), 37% more than were reported in the 2006 Background Brief. This includes 23 million Protestants, or 1.8% of the 2007 total population of 1.31 billion, based on a survey on Protestantism carried out by the government's Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2008-2009, which claimed to be a full population survey and not just a survey of Protestants in registered churches. The *Blue Book of Religions* separately estimates that China has 5.7 million Catholics, but it also acknowledges that this figure may be an undercount, possibly because it includes only Catholics who attend churches affiliated with the state-approved Catholic Patriotic Association.

---

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.china.org.cn/e-white/Freedom/index.htm>.



There is some evidence that the growth in Protestant numbers, in particular, has occurred mainly through conversion rather than as a result of better reporting or the registration of previously unregistered groups, though both of those factors also may account for some of the increase.<sup>48</sup> Despite its limitations, the 2008-2009 CASS study of Protestantism shows that a substantial portion of Protestants in mainland China are recent converts.<sup>49</sup> Of the Protestants interviewed in the study, 44.4% said they had converted to Christianity between the ages of 35 and 54. Though that figure seems high,<sup>50</sup> it suggests that a substantial amount of conversion is occurring. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the results of the CASS survey are not possible to evaluate because there is no access to the individual survey data. Moreover, there are other unanswered questions about the survey. For instance, the *Blue Book* claims that of the 63,680 surveys distributed, all were completed, resulting in a 100% response rate. It is highly unlikely that out of such a large number of questionnaires, all would have been returned and completed. It is also difficult to understand why such a large survey would have been used to estimate only the number of Protestants and not the number of Catholics as well.

The China Christian Council reports that there are more than 23 million Protestants in China.<sup>51</sup> This number is similar to the number of Protestants reported in the 2010 *Blue Book*. How many more is difficult to determine, especially when un-baptized believers and members of unregistered groups are considered. One indirect indicator is the demand for Bibles, especially in a country where not every Christian has a Bible<sup>52</sup> and where, since most still live at a subsistence level, owning multiple copies of the Bible is a luxury.<sup>53</sup> Since its founding in 1988, the Amity Printing Company, the official printing arm of the China Christian Council, has printed nearly 90 million Bibles, reportedly including about 56 million for distribution

---

48 Natural population growth is not a likely reason for Christian growth given that there is no evidence that Chinese Christians have more children on average than the general population, which is below replacement level.

49 As mentioned by the Amity News Service editor at the very end of her piece (<http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=2007&pointer=>), the survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences might be the most comprehensive survey of Protestants in China to date.

50 There are unanswered questions about the survey. First, the raw data are not available for independent review. And, second, some of the claims made seem implausible. For instance, the Amity News Service account of the survey states that "63,680 questionnaires were issued, with a 100% return rate." It is highly unlikely that out of such a large number of questionnaires that all would have been returned.

51 <http://www.bibleinchina.org/news/jiaohuishigong/2011/6/116231343566054.html>

52 For instance, see "The 1-Million Catholic Bibles and NT Distribution" for a story of Catholics recently receiving their first Bible: <http://www.ubscp.org/1-million-catholic-bibles/>.

53 Certainly some Christians have multiple copies and replace worn-out copies; therefore, the quantity of Bibles produced is only a rough indicator of demand rather than the actual numbers of Christians. See "Sold a Buffalo to Pay for Bible School" for an example of the economic situation of a Bible student and her congregation in China: <http://www.ubscp.org/sold-a-buffalo/>

in China and more than 33 million for overseas markets.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the Amity presses now are printing more than 10 million additional Bibles per year,<sup>55</sup> with the capacity to “print more than 18 million Bibles a year.”<sup>56</sup> Of course, Bibles may be read by more than just church members in China and not all will be distributed within China. At a minimum, however, this level of demand is an indication of the number of people with some interest in Christianity.

The 2006 Background Brief provided by the Chinese Embassy states that “There are no [government] data available on the number of ‘house meetings’ that exist.” But even though the government has not released an official estimate of the number of Christians associated with unregistered groups, in December 2009, the *China Daily*, China’s national English-language newspaper, published an interview with Chinese Academy of Social Sciences religion scholar Liu Peng, perhaps the government’s leading expert on unregistered churches,<sup>57</sup> in which Prof. Liu claimed that “‘house churches’ – praying facilities that do not register or report to the State Administration for Religious Affairs – have at least 50 million followers nationwide.”<sup>58</sup> The basis for this ballpark estimate has not been made public. But the fact that an important state-run news organization would publish such a statement indicates that house-church believers may outnumber those affiliated with the official churches.

### Membership-based Estimates

As previously noted, attempts to count the number of unregistered (or “independent” or “house church”) Christians can be met with suspicion by the government, the officially approved churches and the independent groups themselves. Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that a range of estimates exist. The World Christian Database estimates that China has more than 100 million Christians, including more than 300 house church networks (among the Han majority alone) claiming to represent approximately 70 million people.<sup>59</sup> However, a separate review of estimates of Christians in China by Senior Researcher Carol Lee Hamrin at the Global China Center, an academic and research institution based in the U.S. and devoted to the study of China and religion, suggests a smaller overall number. She estimated that “[a]s of

---

54 <http://www.ubscp.org/about/>

55 <http://www.ubscp.org/80-millionth-bible/>

56 <http://www.ubscp.org/about/>

57 Prior to that, in the 1980s, Prof. Liu Peng worked in the Communist Party of China Central Committee’s united-front work department, where he helped draft numerous policy papers and became intimately familiar with China’s administrative system on religious affairs.

58 “Rule of law best help to freedom of faith,” by Ku Ma (China Daily, 2009-12-03)  
[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2009-12/03/content\\_9106147.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2009-12/03/content_9106147.htm)

59 <http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org>

2005, Christians were approaching 5 percent of the population, four-fifths of them Protestants,” and that “[u]nregistered Christians may be the largest autonomous social group in China.”<sup>60</sup>

An ambitious assessment of the number of Chinese affiliated with all forms of Christianity in every county of China was carried out recently by Asia Harvest, an inter-denominational Christian ministry working in Asia.<sup>61</sup> The study’s numbers are based on secondary analysis of more than 2,000 published sources as well as interviews with leaders of unregistered churches who granted the research team access to statistics on their membership. The study estimates that there are 104 million Christians of all ages in mainland China (7.7% of the country’s total population), including children as well as un-baptized adult believers. This includes an estimated 83.5 million Protestants (6.1%), of whom 29.5 million belong to the state-approved church and 54 million are independents, some of whom may be considered heterodox.<sup>62</sup> Importantly, however, the study points out that “owing to the difficulties of conducting such a [study] in China today – not the least of which is the sheer size of the country – there is [in the study’s rough estimation] a margin of error of 20 percent.” So, the study estimates that the number of Christians is between 83.4 million (6.1%) and 125.2 million (9.2%).

Asia Harvest’s estimate of the number of Chinese Catholics is much higher than from other sources. Its study finds that China has about 20 million Catholics, or 1.5% of the population. This includes nearly 7.5 million people affiliated with the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and 13.4 million Catholics worshipping outside of officially recognized churches. In comparison, the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong,<sup>63</sup> which monitors the number of Chinese Catholic priests, congregations and members, estimates that there are 12 million Catholics in

---

60 “China’s Protestants: A Mustard Seed for Moral Renewal?” by Carol Lee Hamrin, AEI Online, May 14, 2008, <http://www.aei.org/paper/27992>. In the same article, Hamrin also observes that “[i]t still is rare to observe public manifestations of Christianity in China other than crosses on church buildings symbolizing the presence of a registered congregation. Most Christian groups -- like the majority of all nonprofit organizations in China -- are not members of the government-sanctioned associations and thus are not registered with the relevant authorities. Nevertheless, most Christian groups no longer operate in strict secrecy. They meet in rural farmyards, urban apartments, factories, restaurants, or rented space in commercial or even state facilities. Church summer camps and weekend retreats are popular, too. A key result of this quasi religious freedom is that Christianity has begun to reach into different sectors and levels of society. The church has become a significant part of China’s unofficial ‘second society,’ a concept introduced by sociologist Elemér Hankiss in the context of Communist Hungary to describe the social and economic activities thriving beyond the immediate control of the state and its official organs. Indeed, the church’s influence extends far beyond the visible religious activities and memberships within the officially sanctioned churches.”

61 See “How Many Christians are There in China?” by Paul Hattaway, Asia Harvest, 2010: <http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/Christians%20in%20China/How%20Many%20Christians%20are%20There%20in%20China.pdf>. The study includes figures that are provided by a documented source or where Christian leaders can make an “intelligent estimate” of their numbers. The study noted that while some house church networks do not keep statistics on their congregations, other large networks do keep detailed records about numbers of fellowships and believers. Hattaway’s estimates are summarized in a series of national and province tables, many of which include links to sources used to make the estimates. For instance, see sources for the estimates of Christians in Hunan at the bottom of the web page: <http://www.asiaharvest.org/pages/Christians%20in%20China/Provinces/Henan.htm>

62 See Yang (2006 and 2011) for a discussion of heterodox groups

63 [http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/china/en\\_cinfo\\_china\\_stat09.html](http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/china/en_cinfo_china_stat09.html)

both branches of the Catholic church – 6.3 million more than acknowledged by the government but far fewer than estimated by the Asia Harvest study. Asia Harvest’s higher estimate could be due in part to double counting in some Catholic dioceses where churches and bishops are affiliated with both the official and unofficial churches.<sup>64</sup>

## Independent Survey Estimates

While it did not cover the entire country, and thus is not a truly nationally-representative survey, the 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents<sup>65</sup> provides some valuable data on various levels of Christian identification in China.<sup>66</sup> The Spiritual Life Study was sponsored and independently carried out by the Horizon Research Consultancy Group, a Chinese public opinion polling firm, and the data are available through the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA). Among the experts who consulted on the study were leading social science researchers both inside and outside China.<sup>67</sup> The survey covered three major municipalities and six provincial capitals and their surrounding areas, as well as some other regional cities and small towns. In all, about two-thirds of all Chinese provinces were sampled to some extent.

The Spiritual Life Study permitted respondents to indicate belief in more than one faith. In all, 3.2% – or the equivalent of about 44 million people if applied to China’s 2010 population – self-identified as Christian (2.94% Protestant and 0.34% Catholic).<sup>68</sup>

But there are other indicators of possible Christian identity and/or contact with Christianity in

64 For instance, Beijing Archbishop Joseph Li Shan, installed in September 2007, is openly recognized by both the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Church and the Vatican.

65 The 2007 Spiritual Life Study of Chinese Residents (data archived at the Association of Religion Data Archives: <http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/SPRTCHNA.asp>) was a multi-stage random survey of mainland China administered in three municipalities (Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing), six provincial capitals (Guangzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan, Hefei, Xi’an and Chengdu), 11 regional cities, 16 small towns and 20 administrative villages. No major cities in the west, the far northeast or on the south-central coast were surveyed. The study was conducted with face-to-face interviews of 7,021 Chinese adults aged 16 and older and had an American Association of Public Opinion Researchers response rate of 28.1%.

66 Another recent survey by researchers at Shanghai’s East China Normal University reported in the state-approved China Daily found that “31.4% of Chinese aged 16 and above, or about 300 million, are religious.” The survey also estimated that some 40 million Chinese adults are Christians. See: “Religious believers thrive the estimate” by Wu Jiao (China Daily), Updated: Feb-07-2007, last accessed Nov-4-2011. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-02/07/content\\_802994.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-02/07/content_802994.htm). The dataset for this survey has not been made publically available.

67 The principal investigators were Fenggang Yang (Purdue University), Victor Yuan (CEO-Horizon Key Research, Beijing), Anna Sun (Kenyon College/Princeton University), Lu Yengfang (Peking University); Rodney Stark (Baylor University), Byron Johnson (Baylor University), Eric Liu (Baylor University), Carson Mencken (Baylor University) and Chiu Heu-Yuan (Taiwan National University).

68 The data presented here are proportionately weighted based on population size: respondents from cities are proportionately weighted to reflect the distribution of cities in the analysis; respondents from the towns are proportionately weighted to reflect the distribution of towns in the analysis; respondents from rural villages are proportionately weighted to reflect the distribution of villages in the analysis. All respondents are assigned weights based on urban, town, or rural status in order to reflect the national distribution trends, based on the 5th Basic Statistics on National Population Census of China.

the survey as well. For example, when belief in the existence of Jesus is considered, the portion of Chinese who indicate some connection to Christianity rises to as high as 5.9%. This is similar to the results of a slightly different question from a predominantly urban survey carried out by Horizon in 2005, which found that 6% of the Chinese respondents express belief in the existence of “God/Jesus” (in Chinese *Shangdi/Yesu*, a rough equivalent of the “Christian God”) – more than 50% higher than the number of people who self-identified as a Christian in that earlier poll.<sup>69</sup> These figures, while not a direct indication of Christian identity, are important to note, given the problems associated with the ability of surveys to accurately and reliably measure Christian identity in a Communist country where atheism is the ideological norm.

In addition to the 5.9% of Chinese who either identified as Christian or expressed belief in the existence of Jesus in the Spiritual Life Study, an additional 1.4% reported having at least one Christian parent.<sup>70</sup> All things considered, the results of the Spiritual Life Study seem to suggest that a reasonable estimate for the share of Christians probably lies somewhere between the 3.2% who claimed Christianity as their religious identity and the 7.3% who expressed some loose connection to Christianity.<sup>71</sup>

Given the dual problems already discussed of higher refusal rates among Chinese Christians to participate in public opinion surveys (survey nonresponse) and/or reluctance to self-identify as a Christian when asked in the survey (item nonresponse), some of the primary investigators from the Spiritual Life Study, in collaboration with researchers at Peking University in Beijing, launched a follow-up study of nonresponse rates. Based on contacts in the Chinese Christian community, they acquired a listing of Chinese house church members from some of the same areas sampled in the Spiritual Life Study. Interviewers *unfamiliar* with the objectives of the follow-up study sought interviews with the house church members. The overall refusal rate in the Spiritual Life Study was 38%, but among the new sample of known house church members, 62% refused to be interviewed. When the investigators adjusted for this difference in survey response rates, they estimated that China has a total of 58.9 million Christians ages 16 and older.

To correct for the second problem, item nonresponse, the follow-up study also took into account the portion of Christians who agreed to be interviewed but did *not* identify as Christian (9%) when asked about their religion in the survey. The investigators concluded: “Correcting

---

69 For more details on the 2005 survey, see *Religion in China on the Eve of the 2008 Beijing Olympics*, a Pew Forum analysis by Brian J. Grim, senior researcher and director of cross-national data.

70 Though not normally considered an indicator of belief in the case of grown children, it is an interesting indication of additional people who have some connection to churches. This also may have measurement implications, since these people may be active in eventually bringing into the church their younger grandchildren – a demographic group not accounted for in the survey.

71 The 7.3% includes those who expressed either Christian affiliation, belief in the existence of Jesus or having a Christian parent. Note that some self-identified Christians did not express belief in Jesus and many did not report having a Christian parent.

for that suppressor brings the number of Christian Chinese sixteen and older to 64.3 million. Of course, this total is for 2007. Obviously the total is higher now. It seems entirely credible to estimate that there are about 70 million Chinese Christians in 2011.”<sup>72</sup> This figure is similar to other efforts that attempted to account for the number of Christians in both the state-approved denominations and unregistered churches summarized at the start of this Methodology.

It is important to note that the researchers have not made the data or a detailed methodology from the follow-up study available. Therefore, as with the 2008-2009 CASS survey, it is not possible to verify these findings. For instance, it is not possible to replicate the adjustment procedures used by the investigators because the overall impact of nonresponse not only depends on differences between the response rates of the original people sampled and house church Christians, but also on the actual number of house church members in the population, which is unknown.

---

72 Rodney Stark, Byron Johnson and Carson Mencken, “Counting China’s Christians: There are as many Christians in China as there are members of the Communist Party,” *FIRST THINGS*, May 2011, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/05/counting-chinas-quos-christians>.