Impact of Religion on the Attitudes toward Abortion and Contraception Use in the Contemporary Taiwan

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Studies have shown that religion is strongly associated with opposition of abortion in the U.S. However, little is known about the effects of religion in non-Western societies, where non-Judeo Christian religious traditions have been dominant. Using a nationally representative sample of married women in Taiwan, we investigate how religion affects attitudes toward abortion and contraception use in a Chinese cultural context. Our analysis indicates that conservative religious groups, Taiwan Protestants and the New Religious Movement (Yi-Guan-Dao), are more likely to disapprove of abortion, particularly when household financial constraints or out-of-wedlock pregnancy is the reason, compared to Chinese traditional religionists (i.e. Buddhists and Taoists). However, Chinese traditional religionists tend to disapprove of birth control, except for sterilization after reaching the desired number of children. The nonreligious tend to favor abortion and birth control more under all circumstances. Despite these attitudinal differences, we find no significant effect of religion in predicting the likelihood of having abortion.

INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that religion is strongly associated with opposition of abortion in the United States. In particular, Catholicism and Conservative Protestantism have influenced practice and attitudes toward abortion, and put contraceptive use under debate. However, scholars know little about how religious beliefs affect abortion attitudes in non-Western societies, particularly where non-Judeo Christian traditions are dominant.

Taiwan is an ideal case for testing the association and consistency of the relationship between religious traditions and abortion behaviors and attitudes. Being one of the fast developing regions in East Asia, Taiwan has transited from a primarily agricultural society to a high industrialized society during the last half century. With its economic development, Taiwan's fertility rate has decreased dramatically to be below the replacement level. In 2004, the total fertility rate was merely 1.2. At the same time, abortion has become popular. According to one of the official reports from the Taiwan Institute of Family Planning, the number of abortion was estimated to be 320,000 per year. Among non-governmental medical statistics, the estimated number is above 500,000 annually. Not only did these numbers make Taiwan the society with the highest abortion rate in East Asia, but such abortion rates were also substantially higher than those in Western countries (e.g., six times higher than the abortion rate of France). Taiwan is also a society of considerable religious diversity (Tamney and Chiang 2002). As shown in many non-western countries, modernization process did not make Taiwan more secular. The majority of the Taiwanese population is religious: approximately 75 percent of the population reported practicing various Chinese traditional religions (i.e., Buddhists, Taoists, and many folk religions); about 5 percent Christian (Protestant and Catholic); about 3-5 percent rising New Religious

Movement groups (i.e. Yi-Guan-Dao); and only about 15 percent not currently affiliated with any religion (Chao 2004, Chiu 1997).

Thus, our study focus on the following questions: does religion play a significant role in predicting women's attitudes and behaviors toward abortion in a society where abortion seems to be a relatively common practice? Are Christians in Taiwan (Protestants and Catholics) similar to those in the United States in the sense that they may be more inclined to oppose abortion? Or, are these groups more similar to Chinese traditional religionists, to whom religious concerns regarding abortion are more likely to be compromised under the pressure of wanting more children (particularly sons)? Moreover, how do religious beliefs such as ancestor worship and life after death affect individuals' attitudes toward abortion and fertility behaviors in such context?

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Conservative religious groups, such as Catholics and conservative Protestants are one of the major forces apposing abortion in the U.S., as in other places in the world (Granberg 1991 Tamney et al 1992). These groups tend to particularly disprove of abortion due to "soft" reasons, such as perceiving abortion as a personal choice, rather than due to "hard" reasons such as physical harm to the mother or fetus and pregnancy due to rape. However, studies show that there is significant convergence between Catholics and Protestants on their attitudes toward abortion during the past two decades (Sullins 1999, Evans 2002). Catholics have become much softer regarding their views of abortion, while Conservative and Evangelical Protestants have become much stricter toward pro-life orientations. Scholars also point out that the impact of religion on abortion is mediated by personal religious involvement and commitment. The higher personal religiosity and the more frequent attendance in a religious congregation the more likely

respondents will report strong opposition against abortion, set aside the influence of religious affiliation.

However, we know little about whether religion has the same impact on people's decision and attitudes toward abortion in other non-western societies, where the dominant religious culture is different, such as Confucian Taiwan. Although Christianity came to Taiwan less than 200 years ago, it has experienced a golden time in Taiwan contemporary history. Conservative or Evangelical Protestant churches and new religious movement groups are currently among the fastest growing religious bodies in Taiwan (Chao 2006). Even though many Taiwanese still consider Christianity as a "foreign" or "western" religion, and the total number of Christians remains about 5 percent of the population, Taiwanese Protestant and Catholic churches display distinct characteristics in areas of family, sexuality, political participation, and other ethnic relations (Chiu 1986). Because of these distinctive characteristics, we expect Christianity to affect women's attitudes toward abortion as following:

H1: Catholics and Protestants in Taiwan are more likely to disapprove of abortion, and less likely to have abortion.

Further, the dramatic modernization process influences not only Taiwanese religions but also the family. However, the patriarchal nature of family relations remains intact, and the influence of Chinese traditional family cultures are still very strong (Gallin 1982, Xu 2002). Even though modernization has dramatically increased women's participation in the labor force and enrolment in mandatory education, there is still significant inequality between men and women in earnings, educational attainment, and other areas of family lives (Baraka 1999). Many families still prefer sons and use sex-selective abortion to abort unwanted female fetuses. As a result, Taiwan has had a strong imbalance in the sex ratio for many decades, especially for high

order births (i.e. according to Taiwan Census data 2004, the sex ratio for third child in 2004 is 136:100, and in certain regions for the forth child, it reaches to 147:100). Since the legalization of abortion in 1985, the official abortion rates start to rise dramatically. Under the current law, the only condition required for obtaining an abortion is the spousal consent for a married woman.

In addition, there may also be strong religious differences in willingness to use abortion to select the sex of children. Even though in some schools of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhists, abortion is occasionally addressed, it has not been strongly condemned as "killing" (Moskowitz 2001) as in some Conservative Catholic or Protestant groups is. In fact, some folk religions, Taoists, and Buddhist temples will provide religious services, which were adopted from Japanese folk religion, to bless aborted fetuses and wish for the wellbeing of their birth parents. These services tend to help relieve people's guilt toward abortion by performing rituals to bless the aborted fetuses (Moskowitz 2001). Moreover, because of a family's pressure for reproduction and the desire for male offspring, women may even receive support to have sex-selective abortion. Thus we expect to find that Chinese traditional religionists will be more likely to approve abortion and more likely to abort fetuses (particularly female fetuses), compared with Christians and secular population. Thus we present the following hypotheses:

H2a: Because there is no strict religious resistance on abortion, Chinese traditional religionists are more likely to approve abortion.

H2b: Due to the pressure of reproduction, Chinese traditional religionists are more likely to disapprove of using birth control, especially if a family has not reached desired number of children yet (particularly number of sons).

Also, scholars start to give ample attention to the rising new religious movement groups in Taiwan, such as Yi-Guan-Dao (YGD). YGD is currently among one of the fastest growing

religious groups in Taiwan (Fu 1999). This religious sect emphasizes on returning to the traditional "Confucian" moral teachings as a way to fight against the decaying secular culture. They tend to provide intensive religious classes, having tight networks among members, and encourage believers to enchant on scriptures (Fu 1999, Qin 2000). We expect to see that YGD will display distinct effects on abortion and contraception.

H3: YGD practioners are more likely to discourage abortion in general, particularly related to moral reasons of abortion, such as pregnancy out of marriage.

Last, we predict that the secular group in Taiwan will be similar to the secular groups in the U.S., that they are more likely to favor abortion and birth control than the conservative groups and the traditional religionists.

H4: people who have no religion are more likely to favor abortion compared with other religious groups.

DATA

During the past two decades, Taiwan has been the site of high quality survey data collection, including measures of religion and gender issues that are analogous to those in major U.S. surveys, but adapted to the Chinese context. This allows us to examine the religion-gender-family connection in a non-Western context. Our analysis draws on data from the 8th wave the *Knowledge of, Attitudes toward, and the Practice of Contraception Survey* (KAP) in Taiwan, conducted in 1998 by the Taiwan Institute of Family Planning, a governmental institution under the Department of Health. Analogous to the *National Survey of Family Growth* in the U.S., the KAP collected data from a nationally representative sample of ever-married women aged 20-60 in Taiwan every 3-5 years since 1965. The KAP includes rich information on women's marital and fertility histories, family planning methods and contraception use, actual and desired number

and sex of children, gender role attitudes, working histories, religious beliefs and practices, and family background. The comprehensive measures of the KAP provide incredible measures on women's abortion histories and their reasons, as well as their preference for their children's gender composition. Being the most comprehensive data source on fertility and marriage in Taiwan, the KAP data enable us to examine how religion affects attitudes toward abortion and contraception use in a Chinese cultural context. The data also allow us to investigate the effects of other prevalent religious practices, such as ancestor worship, on abortion and birth control attitudes.

Our analysis uses the wave conducted in 1998 because it is the most recent one. While the 1998 wave also added a subsample of single women, we select only respondents who had ever been married for the analysis. The reason for this selection is that a relatively small proportion of single women reported to have ever had any sexual experience or abortion. After eliminating missing values, our working sample contains 2,793 cases.

MEASURES

Dependent variables

Attitudes toward abortion. The first set of our dependent variables is the level of disapproval toward abortion, given a certain condition. Respondents were asked to report their levels of (dis)approval toward abortion under the following five circumstances: (a) "when a wife who wants to space childbirths more widely becomes pregnant;" (b) "when a couple does not want to have children any more, but they did not use contraception either;" (c) "when a wife used birth control, but the birth control failed and she became pregnant;" (d) "when a family has no financial ability to afford having more children;" (e) "when an unmarried woman accidentally became pregnant with her boyfriend." We coded the responses from 1 to 5, with higher scores

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indicating more accepting views of abortion ("strongly disapprove"=1 and "strongly approve" =5). However, because ordered logistic regression models treated lower scores as higher orders, our statistical analysis was to predict the likelihood of reporting a disapproving attitude.

In order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of how religion influences contraception use and birth control, we also examine respondent's *attitudes toward sterilization and birth control.* Respondents were asked to report their levels of (dis)approval of the following scenarios: a) "a woman who has already had her desired number of children chooses to had a doctor to perform a sterilization surgery on her;" b) "a married couple uses contraception before they have any children, so that they will not have children too soon;" and c) "after giving birth to the first child, a married couple begins to use contraception to avoid having children too frequently." Answers to these questions were coded from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating the more accepting view of sterilization or contraception use (1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree). Similar to the analysis of abortion attitudes, our ordered logistic regression analysis predicts respondents' likelihood of reporting a higher level of disapproval rather than a higher level of approval.

Religion Measures

Religious affiliation. In KAP, respondents were asked to identify their current religious background from the following categories: (1) Chinese traditional religions (Buddhism or Taoism), (2) Catholic, (3) Protestant, (4) Yi-Guan-Dao, and (5) no religion. *Chinese traditional religions.* Measuring religion is a complicated issue in the Chinese/Taiwanese context. Religion is often manifested in congregations or other institutional structures in the U.S. In the Chinese context, the distinctions between different Chinese religious traditions are vague. Even though in general surveys in Taiwan, people are self-identified as Taoists, Buddhists, and Folk religionists,

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in reality, there are no clear boundaries between these three especially for lay people. The deities of these three religions are not exclusive from each other. The pragmatic orientation of Chinese traditional religions makes lay believers worship multiple gods or deities at the same time, which is not considered as an offensive thing. Lay believers do not tend to be very familiar with the doctrinal differences between specific deities, which will be worshipped as long as they are efficient in bringing blessings and protection. Thus, scholars tend to treat them under the broad rubric of "Chinese traditional religion." Even though in the actual sample, *Catholics and Protestants* contain comparatively very small cases (Catholics xx and P xx), according to the literature in the U.S., considering they might have present distinct characteristics regarding abortion and birth control in general, we still measure them as separate groups. *Yi-Guan-Dao* is a New Religious Movement group in Taiwan. It has one of the fastest growing rates among all the religious groups in contemporary Taiwan(xx). It is considered as religious cults in the mainland China, but like many rising religious sects, they characterize as having intensive net work among members, and promote traditional morality among the members (xx). Thus we created a series of dummy variables for each of these religious affiliations.

Importance and behavior of ancestor worship. In KAP respondents are asked the following question: "How important do you believe worshiping your ancestors is for the wellbeing and the development of your current family?" Responses are coded as the higher score indicating higher beliefs of the importance of ancestor worship (1=not important at all to 5=very important). Other the attitude question, we also whether respondents build family altar or presenting ancestor's tablets at home (1=having tablets, 0=otherwise).

Other background measures

As numerous studies also shown the impact of socio-demographic factors affect attitudes of abortion and contraception use, we also include the relevant factors in our models, such as respondent's age (measured in years), self-rated household income level, place of residence (1=rural, 0=otherwise), education (1=elementary or lower, 2=middle school, 3=high school, 4=junior college or technical schools, 5=university level or higher), number of children, and ethnicity (Fukien=reference group, Hakka, Mainlanders, and Aboriginal).

ANALETIC STRATEGY

Our analysis involves two steps: in Table 1 we provide information on the comparison of means on the attitudes toward abortion and birth control by all religious groups. In Table 2, we estimated ordered logistic regression models, predicting the net effects of religious affiliations and beliefs and covariates on five indicators of attitudes toward abortion, controlling other socio-demographic variables. In Table 3, we estimate ordered logistic regression models, examining the net effects of religion on the attitudes of sterilization and birth control, taking other social demographic factors into account. After listwise deletion of missing cases, our final sample includes 2,793 respondents.

PRILIMINARY RESTULS

Our Study did not find significant effect of religion on the likelihood of having had an abortion of married women in Taiwan. However our analysis demonstrates significant impact of religion on the attitudes toward abortion and birth control in general.

After controlling socio-demographic factors, Taiwan Protestants and the YGD practioners display significantly more conservative views disapproving abortion, compared with the Chinese traditional religionists. As Chao (2006) points out in his study on Taiwan Protestantism, Taiwan has no real "liberal" Protestant churches. Majority of Taiwan Protestant churches are

Conservative or Pentecostal churches; even among those growing mainline churches, most of them tend to hold evangelical views. On the same time, our results confirm that the new religious movement sect YGD tend to show more conservative views on abortion and birth control, as qualitative studies show that they tend to hold strong conservative views on family morality. In responding to the secularization process and the "falling of morality" in the contemporary society, conservative religious groups are more likely to emphasize on family morality, anti-abortion, etc as way to defend traditional family values, to strength group identity, and increase group boundaries with the outside world. Conservative Protestants and the rising New Religious Movement (YGD) in Taiwan share common characters such as emphasizing on returning to family morality, having strong religious ties and network, church/religious institution emphasizing on traditional family ideologies, fighting against abortion and homosexuality. Surprisingly, Taiwan Catholics did not shown significantly more conservative views on abortion than the traditional groups.

Because of the reproduction pressure (and maybe the need to having more children particular sons to inherit family linage), traditional religionists present a more pragmatic orientation toward abortion and family planning attitudes than other groups. They are less likely to disapprove abortion, and more likely to favor sterilization after reaching the desired number of children. However, they are more likely to discourage use of birth control, particularly when the spouse has not have any children yet, or only have one child. In other words, reasons that against using abortion, are not the consideration of life-start-at-contraception issue nor it is likely to be considered as a signaling decaying morality as the conservative groups do, but more likely to be concerns regarding financial situation or reproduction pressure.

As shown in all these tables, H3 is confirmed that the non-religious group is the ones most likely to approve abortion, and most likely to agree with using contraceptive methods, compared with other groups. Such results persist even after controlling other factors.

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Table 1: Comparison of means of attitudes toward abortion and birth Control by religious affiliations

	AQ1	AQ2	AQ3	AQ4	AQ5	S	BC1	BC2
Catholic	2.33	2.48	2.44	3.15	3	3.56	2.81	3.71
	(.22)	(.20)	(.19)	(.23)	(.21)	(.19)	(.23)	(.21)
Protestant	2.33	2.51	2.51	3.08*	2.96*	3.51*	2.99	3.68
	(.11)	(.12)	(.12)	(.12)	(.12)	(.11)	(.12)	(.10)
YGD[a]	1.85**	2.27*	2.05**	2.70**	2.68**	3.50+	3.02	3.6
	(.12)	(.18)	(.15)	(.20)	(.17)	(.17)	(.18)	(.11)
No religion	2.46+	2.73*	2.67	3.45*	3.26*	3.64*	3.11**	3.70**
	(.05)	(.05)	(.04)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.05)	(.02)
Chinese traditional	2.38	2.61	2.67+	3.36	3.18	3.76**	2.81**	3.54**
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Total	2.38	2.62	2.65	3.35	3.17	3.72	2.87	3.58
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	0.02	(.02)	(.02)

Note: All attitude variables were coded from 1 to 5, with a higher score indicates a higher level of approval. AQ1 = "abortion for the reason of childbirth spacing." AQ2 = "abortion if pregnant without contraception use." AQ3 = "abortion if pregnant because contraception failure." AQ4 = "abortion for the reason of family financial constraints." AQ4 = "abortion if the pregnancy is out-of-wedlock." S = "a woman's sterilization upon reaching the desired number of children." BC1 = "a couple's using birth control before any childbirth." BC2 = "a couple's using birth control after first childbirth." $+ p < .10 * p < .05 ** p < .01$
[a]YGD = *Yi-Guan-Dao* (the New Religious Movement group)

Table 2: Ordered logistic regression models predicting disapproval of abortion by the reason for abortion

	Childbirth spacing			Undesired pregnancy due to no contraception use			Undesired pregnancy due to contraception failure			Family financial constraints			Out-of-wedlock pregnancy		
Religion															
Catholics	0.886	0.653	0.605	0.841	0.661	0.619	0.733	0.589	0.575	0.727	0.587	0.617	0.752	0.598	0.708
Protestants	0.886	.656*	0.632*	0.845	.649*	.647*	0.756	.599*	.591*	.647*	.496**	.528**	.717+	.544**	.632*
YGD[a]	.406**	.424**	.401**	.534*	.562+	.541*	.329**	.339**	.331**	.357**	.372**	.351**	.463**	.483*	.443**
No religion	1.091	0.981	0.911	1.201*	1.106	1.027	1.014	0.941	0.896	1.178+	1.083	0.992	1.127	1.032	0.934
Chinese traditional religion	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Other religion variables															
Ancestor worship important		.868**	.902*		.832**	.867**		.852**	.872**		.847**	.927+		.856**	0.934
Ancestor tablet at home		.777**	.859+		.873+	0.967		0.887	0.936		.838*	0.992		.816**	0.989
Socio-demographic variables															
Age			1.001			1.005			1.007			0.997			1.009+
Ethnicity															
Hakka			1.119			1.081			1.193+			.805*			0.971
Mainlander			1.183			1.116			1.008			0.856			1.049
Aboriginal			1.424			1.268			1.252			1.147			0.772
Fukien			--			--			--			--			--
Rural residence			0.945			0.965			1.116			.819*			.734**
Number of children			0.976			0.971			0.978			0.967			0.948
Years of education			1.115**			1.156**			1.122**			1.218**			1.207**
Income			1.021			1.013			1.094*			1.078+			1.127**
Δ of -2 log likelihood			66.48			74.12			64.93			126.13			138.76
Δ of R-Squared			0.006			0.0071			0.0051			0.014			0.014

Note: $N = 2{,}793$ in all models. $+ p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed t-test)

[a]YGD = *Yi-Guan-Dao* (the New Religious Movement group)

Table 3: Ordered logistic regression models predicting disapproval of sterilization and birth control

	Sterilization			birth control without children			birth control after first child		
Religion									
Catholics	0.673	0.708	0.795	0.783	0.677	0.748	1.413	1.086	1.067
Protestants	.641*	.682+	.637*	1.291	0.782	0.979	1.251	0.764	0.907
YGD[a]	0.641	0.643	0.695	1.429	1.579	1.226	1.009	1.112	0.864
No religion	.829*	.853+	0.915	1.559**	1.305**	0.972	1.283**	1.085	.803*
Chinese traditional religion	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--
Other religion variables									
Ancestor worship important		.885**	.859**		.792**	0.889**		.756**	.857**
Ancestor tablet at home		1.327**	1.215*		.631**	0.815**		.693**	0.927
Socio-demographic variables									
Age			1.005			.942**			0.954
Ethnicity									
Hakka			.782*			0.862			0.944
Mainlander			.768+			1.397*			1.476**
Aboriginal			1.086			.576*			0.697
Fukien			--			--			--
Rural			1.107			.766**			.709**
Number of children			0.876			0.974			0.976
Years of education			.934+			1.274**			1.315**
Income			1.018			1.021			1.077+
Δ of -2 log likelihood									
Δ of R-Squared									

Note: *N* = 2,793 in all models. + *p* < .10 * *p* < .05 ** *p* < .01 (two-tailed *t*-test)
[a]YGD = *Yi-Guan-Dao* (the New Religious Movement group)