

Study: Despite highest rates of religious disaffiliation, East Asia remains spiritually vibrant

by [Chloë-Arizona Fodor](#)

June 20, 2024



Worshippers pray as they burn their joss sticks at a temple to welcome in the Lunar New Year of the Dragon in Hong Kong on February 9. (AP Photo/Louise Delmotte)

In East Asia, people are leaving their religion at rates that are among the highest in the world, according to a survey released June 17 by Pew Research Center. But while many East Asians do not identify as members of an organized religion, they continue to hold spiritual beliefs associated with the region's faiths.

Pew studied more than 10,000 adult participants over four months in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and neighboring Vietnam and found that significant

numbers of adults across the region say they have “no religion,” ranging from 27 percent in Taiwan to 61 percent in Hong Kong.

Among these religiously unaffiliated people, however, at least 4 in 10 believe in God or unseen beings, with a quarter or more saying that mountains, rivers, or trees have spirits, and half or more leave offerings for deceased ancestors.

“When we measure religion in these societies by what people believe and do, rather than whether they say they have a religion, the region is more religiously vibrant than it might initially seem,” the report said.

IMG-REPLACE-TOKEN-27731

The survey also pointed to a remarkable level of mobility in East Asians’ religious identification.

Many people say they have switched from the religious identity they were raised in, either to another religion or to no religion. In Hong Kong and South Korea, 53 percent of adults have changed their religious identity since childhood.

The dominant trend is disaffiliation, rather than switching faiths. The percentages of adults in Hong Kong (37 percent) and South Korea (35 percent) who say they were raised in a religion but no longer identify with one are the highest in the world, overshadowing several Western European countries such as Norway (30 percent), the Netherlands (29 percent), and Belgium (28 percent).

“There’s been a lot of study and talk about how Western Europe is secularized,” said Jonathan Evans, senior researcher at Pew and lead author of the report, “but it doesn’t seem that there’s been as much discussion about religious change in people’s lifetimes coming from East Asia.”

He added, “It’s been really fascinating to see how East Asia and religious identity fit into a more global understanding.”

While the levels of disaffiliation are high, public attitudes toward proselytizing vary widely. Most adults in Japan (83 percent) and South Korea (77 percent) say it is unacceptable for a person to try to persuade others to join his or her religion. People in Taiwan and Vietnam are more divided regarding conversion efforts, while the majority of respondents in Hong Kong (67 percent) say it is acceptable to proselytize.

In Hong Kong, 30 percent of adults report being raised without a religion, while 61 percent currently report being religiously unaffiliated, a gain of 31 percentage points. On the flip side, 29 percent of Buddhists in South Korea say they were raised Buddhist, but 14 percent currently identify as Buddhist—a 15-point decline.

The Pew team faced cultural and linguistic challenges in collecting data in East Asia. The concept of religion is relatively new in the region, having been imported by scholars only about a century ago. According to the report, frequently used translations of “religion” are typically understood as referring to “organized, hierarchical forms of religion, such as Christianity or new religious movements,” producing results “based on a Judeo-Christian, Eurocentric mindset,” Evans said.

For the new survey, Pew designed questions that would measure beliefs and practices common in Asian societies, which revealed highly active spiritual lives among East Asians.

In Taiwan, only 11 percent of adults say religion is very important to them, while 87 percent believe in karma, 34 percent say they ever practice meditation, and 36 percent say they have been visited by the spirit of an ancestor.

In another striking example: 92 percent of religiously unaffiliated Vietnamese adults say they have made an offering to ancestors in the past year. Most adults surveyed in all five countries say they believe in God or unseen beings, such as deities or spirits.

Evans explained that while people may identify with a specific religious tradition such as Christianity or Buddhism, the boundaries of ritual and practice are often blurred.

“Someone might classify this as a Buddhist practice, but do we see Christians doing it? Do we see religiously unaffiliated people doing it?” he asked, adding, “While people might place a label on themselves, that does not necessarily reflect what beliefs and practices they have.” —Religion News Service