RICE UNIVERSITY

Getting Enlightened: A Comparative Study of Buddhist Temples in Mainland China and the US

by

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This dissertation examines the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and
gender in two Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples that are affiliated
with the same international Buddhist headquarters, but situated in two
distinctive national contexts: mainland China and the US. In particular,
I examine the contextualization of global Buddhism. Three research
questions guided this study: (1) What are people’s religious experiences
in the two Buddhist temples? (2) In what way are religion, gender, and
ethnicity constructed in these two faith communities? (3) In what way,
and to what extent, is a globalized religion contextualized? The
theoretical framework that guided this study is a discussion of the
relation between people’s agency and social institutions, which
illustrates the way individuals are constrained and enabled by
authoritative discourses, also referred to as institutional norms, in the
social institutions in which they are situated. This study relied on a
15-month ethnographic study in two Buddhist temples and 80 in-depth
interviews (conducted in both Mandarin and English) with ethnic
Chinese Buddhist practitioners within the temples. The findings related
to the first research question revealed that, although Buddhists in the
two temples practice the same type of Buddhism and follow a similar set of authoritative Buddhist discourses, they construct two different types of religious identities actively according to the founding master’s words. Buddhists in the temple in China construct temple-specific Buddhist identities, while their counterparts in the temple in the US construct individual-centered Buddhist identities. The findings that addressed the second research question illustrated that, while monastic leaders in the temples may express gender and ethnicity in somewhat similar ways, their construction differs in the two temples. Based on the findings related to the first two research questions, to address the third research question, I argue that religious people’s agency is the locus to understand the contextualization of global Buddhism. However, in contrast to previous scholars who have focused predominantly on the dialectical relations between individuals—Buddhist practitioners in one case and the social institution of religion in another case, I argue that, when developing their agency, monastic members and religious practitioners evaluate their positions constantly in the broader national context and navigate the religious norms with the cultural resources that are accessible to the broader and even secular national contexts. This navigation process helps practitioners construct a collective form of agency in the Chinese and an individual form in the US temple. Taken together, this dissertation reveals the localization of a seemingly globalized social institution, proposes a novel and contextualized understanding of people’s agency, and offers implications for the sociology of religion, gender, and ethnicity.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Religion, National Contexts, and Agency

In this dissertation, I studied two Buddhist temples: Pagoda Temple in mainland China and Lotus Temple in the US. Both of the two temples I visited are affiliated with an international Buddhist headquarters referred to as the Compassion Bodhi International Buddhist Headquarters in Taiwan. This means that Compassion Bodhi established both temples. Similar to other temple branches affiliated with Compassion Bodhi, both Pagoda in China and Lotus Temple in the US practice Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. They call it a humanistic Buddhism that is rooted in Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, but focuses more on integrating Buddhism in the modern world to make it attractive to all people, and encourage its practitioners to apply Buddhist dharmas in their everyday lives. However, a close look at these two very similar Buddhist temples reveals very different and contextualized stories on religion, national contexts, and agency.
1.1 Celebrating Festivals in Pagoda and Lotus Temple

1.1.1 Pagoda Temple in China: Celebrating December 8th

The holiday season in China lasts from the end of December to early February. This is also a time to celebrate the end of the year and the beginning of the new year according to the lunar calendar. It is a busy season for Pagoda Temple, a Buddhist temple in a mid-sized city in mainland China. As a relatively large temple in its surrounding area, during the holiday season it hosts a series of events to celebrate with its practitioners, Buddhists, tourist, and some local residents.

My fieldwork at Pagoda Temple started on December 8th on the lunar calendar—a day when many Chinese people eat congee—a type of rice porridge—and hope for a good harvest in the coming year. At Pagoda Temple, December 8th on the lunar calendar also commemorates the enlightenment of Prince Siddhartha, which led to his finding a path of self-cultivation and self-liberation to be the Buddha. Pagoda Temple serves free congee to all visitors on that day, a considerable increase in work load for the kitchen staff who normally serve only monastic members, lay volunteers, and some tourists registered to eat at the temple. By combining the two commemorations, the monastic nuns and lay practitioners said that the festival is an integral part of Chinese ethnicity.

The event also reflected other types of power dynamics more in keeping with Chinese culture than Buddhist religion. The morning of the event, nuns assigned volunteers, who were mostly lay women in the temple, to different groups. One group of volunteers packed the congee in boxes; another group served porridge to visitors, and another cleaned up tables. The packaging group worked in a mini assembly line—the first person poured porridge into a paper bowl; the second
person put a radish and chive on the porridge; the third person placed lids on the plastic bowls; and finally, the last person performed a final check before each bowl of porridge was ready to serve. Volunteers moved busily and asked for additional assignments if they were unsure as to where to be the most helpful.

I was also one of the volunteers for this congee service. An experienced volunteer instructed me to stand by in the guest room, serve congee to guests, and clean the tables after they left. Monastic members oversaw the process and experienced volunteers coordinated it. Sometime into the service, a pattern of gender division emerged: women served the congee and men provided the transportation, carried heavy items, and maintained security.

Tourists, visitors, residents in the surrounding area, Buddhists, non-Buddhists, and people who practice a mixture of Buddhism and folk religions, came to the temple to have a bowl of congee. Many temple Buddhists, according to a young volunteer, believe that eating congee in a Buddhist temple will bring luck and prosperity. In the midst of the service, a middle-aged woman asked if I could give her a bowl of congee for her son who was unable to come that day. Zhang Chun Hua, a Buddhist woman who is experienced volunteering at the temple, overhearing the request, said that a monastic member would decide. We called a monastic over and the nun explained that every visitor was entitled to one bowl of congee and no more. We declined the woman’s request. After this interaction, the experienced volunteer turned to me and said, “See, as I told you, such requests need to go through the monastic members. You cannot respond to this type of request, nor can I. Only the residential monastic members (Chang Zhu) are able to say whether it is okay to give people an extra bowl of congee.” I wondered what the power dynamics between the residential monastic community and the lay community looked like in the temple. Although I almost believed that lay practitioners at the temple would
be completely submissive to the authority of the community, I realized later that this was not always the case.

I would learn, however, that not every volunteer consults monastic members when responding to such requests. As the congee service drew to a close and tourists and visitors left the temple, a middle-aged man, who looked like a visitor (he had no volunteer tag) asked me for a second bowl of congee. I hesitated, saying, “But the venerable (monastic leader) said earlier that every person can have only one bowl of congee.” He replied, “It should be fine for me to have a second bowl; I have connections with your leader.” He then pointed to a man who was, I guessed, in his early 50s and sat at a table near him. This man, whose name I later learned was Zhao Jianguo, said “Just give him another bowl of congee. It should be fine.”

Jianguo was not a leader but rather a long-term devoted practitioner, so I wondered why the two long-term practitioners responded to the requests so differently. The woman practitioner asked the authority—the monastic members—for permission, but her male counterpart—Jianguo—used his own initiative to give his friend an additional bowl of congee. As a sociologist interested in how identities and social institutions intersect, I wondered if their different responses were rooted in gender constructs.

If my suspicion was correct, it seemed ironic. For monastic members who renounce themselves, Buddhism is de-gendered. Both monastic nuns and monks shave their heads and wear the same type of robe. However, in the day-to-day practices among practitioners, especially lay practitioners, I frequently saw gendered patterns. As implied in my interactions with these two long-term practitioners, some men acted authoritarian while women tended to be more submissive to the monastic members’ authority.

As manifested in the congee services, Buddhists at the temple, by
volunteering, perform their Buddhist selves and reconstruct Buddhism. For them, it is a way to “do religion.” Yet when “doing religion” Buddhists also “do gender,” performing their masculinity and femininity, and “do Chinese,” namely by constructing their understanding of being Chinese and navigating the relationship between being Buddhists and being Chinese. As this reflects, Buddhism is not an isolated entity, nor is it static. By “doing” gender as they were “re-doing” Buddhism, practitioners in Pagoda Temple exerted their agency and redefined gender and ethnicity—the two social institutions that closely intersect with Buddhism.

1.1.2 Lotus in the United States: Celebrating Mother’s Day

Lotus Temple, situated in a large metropolitan city in the US, is affiliated with the same international Buddhist headquarters as Pagoda Temple. It practices the same type of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, and the relationship between monastic and lay communities is similar. Even within Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, however, Buddhist scriptures are interpreted differently. Still, Buddhists at the two temples chant the same set of sutras, follow similar Buddhist rituals, and adopt the same interpretations of Buddhism, usually in the words of the founding Master. Yet the operation of gender, religion, and ethnicity are fundamentally different at the two research sites.

For example, Lotus Temple’s congee services on December 8th are modest. Its community event occurs in May, on Mother’s Day, which it typically observes as the celebration of Buddha’s birthday, which occurs in May, as well. This event usually runs from 9am to 3pm. The execution requires weeks of meetings with monastic leaders and volunteers who were usually devoted practitioners of the temple. In these preparatory meetings, monastic members and lay volunteers
usually discuss which guests they would like to invite, the tasks that need to be assigned to volunteers, and food preparation prior to the event.

At one of several weekly preparation meetings that occurred in the lead-up to the recent Mother's Day celebration in 2016, the monastic leader described the importance of the event: How many of you came to the temple due to this event? Perhaps you were not originally interested in Buddhism. Some of you were introduced by your friends, as they told you that there would be food and performances in this event. Such event is a good opportunity for people who would not have entered the temple to approach Buddhism.

Monastic and lay members perceive this event, as the temple's major annual opportunity to promote Buddhism and attract more people to the temple, and they invest their time and energy in it accordingly.

A middle-aged woman practitioner named Emily Liao is the point person of this event, and she led the last and most important preparation meeting. In the course of the meeting, she encouraged people to help in the kitchen, to coordinate with vendors, to arrange performances, and to serve food. While most assignments went well, a challenge to Liao's authority arose in relation to the flowers. The temple has a booth that sells arranged flowers at this event to cover some of its maintenance fee for everyday operation and construction fees for future expansion, and a woman practitioner named Angela Zhang had sold flowers in the temple on this day for several years. Yet Emily had noticed a problem when reviewing statistics from past events. Pointing to the designated place for the flower booth on the map projected on the screen, she said, “The flower was sold a price at $15 last year, but I realized that very few people bought the flower because it was too expensive. Eventually, we asked our friends and families to buy the flower. They were doing a favor for us.” She hesitated for a few seconds and said, “I propose to
reduce the price of the flower from $15 to $5 dollars. And we may have more people willing to purchase the flower.”

Angela stood up. She said,

I do not earn money by selling the arranged flowers. I do this every year partially for the temple. Partially, it is also because fewer and fewer people purchase flowers these days. I want to promote flowers and let more people know what flower arrangement is.

The implication was that $5 would not be worth the effort to arrange and sell the flowers, even though all of the money goes to the temple, and it might well increase the resulting revenue. Liao repeated, “But there were very few people purchasing flowers last year.” The two women continued to argue, but the monastic leader took control. She called for a vote by a show of hands: about two thirds of the assembly thought the temple should reduce the price for the flowers. “OK,” she said, “since most of you think that the price needs to be reduced, we will reduce the flower price this year.” She emphasized, “I need to be very clear that whatever your stance is, it is your personal stance. It does not represent the stance of Lotus Temple. Every decision should go through the process of being discussed and approved in a meeting like this. This is also how we do things in the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters. We need to be structured and organized.” She added, “Next year, if most people think we should increase the price, we will increase the price.”

I overheard Angela whispering to the woman beside her, “I will not sell flowers again next year.” The woman agreed. “How can we reduce the price?” she said sympathetically. “They do not understand the labor and cost devoted to flower arrangement.” They whispered to each other, I could hear them, even sitting two rows behind them. It seems as if they did not care if others overheard them.

On the day of the event, I did not see the woman who arranged the
flowers—so I am not sure if she still felt slighted. Nor do I know if the event a year later had flowers, although they were abundant that year. The day itself was sunny, a bright Sunday with clear blue skies. The day-long celebration started with a short Buddhist service that features people chanting an excerpt from the Buddhist scriptures and serving flowers and lanterns to the Buddha. The service was followed by a short speech by the temple’s monastic leader, who introduced Buddha’s birthday and explained how the temple serves the community. Then she asked all of the mothers in attendance to rise and be recognized in light of the holiday. Then local political leaders and religious leaders from other Buddhist traditions gave short speeches.

After the service, volunteers directed people to the outside of the temple to engage in a major part of the celebration—the bathing of the Buddha. Finally, performers and volunteers sang and danced, and attendees went to different booths to shop. In addition to flowers, volunteers sold Chinese food, such as fake meat ball and radish soup, fried Spring dumplings, fried rice, and Boba milk tea.

The meetings I attended in preparation for the event and volunteering at the event itself gave me a peek at how Buddhists in Lotus Temple “do Buddhism”—that is, how practitioners affiliated with the temple construct their Buddhist identities. As reflected in the preparation meeting, by and large, Lotus Buddhists’ construction of the self is individualistic. They expressed their individualistic opinions, engaged in arguments with each other, and even gently disagreed with the decision of their leaders. Expressing individualistic opinions in the preparation meetings and participating in the celebration event is also a performance and construction of Buddhist identities. Expressing individualistic opinions in the preparation meetings and participating in the celebration event is also a performance and construction of Buddhist identities. Buddhists, by
expressing their opinions, integrate secular and Buddhist identities. Through this active construction of their religious selves, practitioners at Lotus Temple “do Buddhism” by gradually blurring boundaries between Buddhism and the secular world. These boundaries are manifested in their celebration of Mother’s Day and Buddha’s Birthday, combining a secular festival (Mother’s Day) with a spiritual event (the Buddha’s birthday).

Although previous scholars suggest that in diaspora, religion often closely intersects with ethnicity, in this Mother’s Day event, as well as other celebrations within my fieldwork at Lotus Temple, I did not witness the Lotus Temple leaders highlighting the link between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity beyond the fact that most of the food served in the temple is ethnic Chinese food. The performances on the celebration of Mother’s Day, for example, included dances to English language songs and dances popular in the United States. Compared to their peer-practitioners in Pagoda Temple, Buddhists in Lotus Temple “do Chinese ethnicity” by “redoing” or even “undoing” the link between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity.

Likewise, although there were some initial gendered assignments of volunteers’ tasks, unlike the Buddhists of Pagoda Temple those in Lotus Temple were willing to question this approach and the ultimate arrangement of volunteers was far less reinforcing of gender differences than it had been in Pagoda Temple. I would come to see that this difference reflected a different understanding of agency.

1.2 The Puzzle: Different Forms of Agency in the Temples

Because they practice their faith in an individualistic culture, I expected that Buddhists in the US-based Lotus Temple would be more agentic than their Chinese
counterparts. I thought that they might actively respond to the prevailing social norms when constructing their Buddhist identities. Conversely, because they practice their faith in a collectivist culture, I expected that Buddhists in the China-based Pagoda Temple might passively submit to the prevailing social norms when constructing their Buddhist identities. My two experiences seemed to confirm this. Buddhists in Pagoda Temple were more submissive to the instructions provided by the monastic community. Their counterparts in Lotus Temple expressed articulating their personal and individualistic thoughts more frequently and more clearly.

Yet, my observational and conversational data indicated that this assumption did not tell the whole story. If, in the most simplified way, agency is an individual’s capacity to act upon and challenge structures and institutions, then Buddhists in both Pagoda Temple embodied agency as well. However, the specific manifestation of their agency—the specific ways in which they people redefine their religion, gender, and ethnicity—were quite different than in Lotus Temple. Buddhists in Pagoda Temple worked collectively with each other, observed the orders from the monastic community, and redefined Buddhism collectively. I label this type of agency a collective form of agency. Buddhists in Lotus Temple actively expressed their personal opinions, gently disagreed with the monastic community, and redefined Buddhism through individualistic endeavors. I label this type of agency an individualistic form of agency. I generated my conclusion and discussions from year-long observations at two Buddhist temples and in-depth interviews with Buddhists who regularly volunteer there.

The sections below will explore the differences between the two communities’ relationship to agency through the following questions: How do Buddhists in the two temples construct the different types of agency? How do the two types of
agency influence Buddhists’ understanding of themselves? Similarly, what institutional and normative implications arise when Buddhists embody these different kinds of agencies? To answer these questions, it is necessarily to conceptually clarify what religion is and how religion operates in societies, communities, and among individuals.

1.3 Conceptualizing Religion

1.3.1 Religion as a Social Institution

Anthropologist Mary Douglas conceptualized a social institution as a set of interwoven norms, rules, and values—the authoritative discourses that constrain people’s behavior, interpretation of the world, and understandings of themselves. An institution self-perpetuates through the embodiment of these norms, rules, and values by its members. Religion is one of these powerful social institutions, and this self-perpetuating cycle of social institutions is also therefore applicable to religion. For instance, part of the reason why Evangelical Christianity survives and thrives in US society is that its members believe, internalize, and embody the rules and norms of their religion.

Religion is not an isolated social institution but intersects with other social structures and helps perpetuate them. The norms and rules that religion articulates intersect with gender, sexuality, workplace, race, and ethnicity. Religiousness is not solely about following scriptures. Instead, it is also about how to be a good person, how to be an effective parent and respectful child, and how to be a good citizen. Through the intersection between religious norms and authoritative discourses in other social institutions and structures, and through the way individuals practice religion, religion also reinforces other structures and institutions.
Like other social institutions, religion can be redefined and challenged by those who practice it. Research shows that people can challenge powerful social institutions such as religion, gender, politics, education, and sciences, for example, through the construction of individual identities. These studies show that such challenges typically hinge on individuals who cross boundaries, people simultaneously situated in multiple institutions and exposed to differing social norms. For example, religious people, especially marginalized people within religious institutions, reinterpret authoritative discourses—norms, rules, values, and others—and use them to overcome their marginalization. Empirical studies on feminist Catholics, LGBT Catholics, and women in both Buddhist and Christian traditions have, under certain conditions, challenged their religious institutions.

1.3.2 Religion as an Organizational Context

Faith communities provide an organizational context for their members. A faith community can be perceived as a physical embodiment of the institutional norms articulated by its religion. It is a social space where people who share the same beliefs work together to construct and reinforce the sacred nature of their religion. It serves as a “structure of plausibility,” in Peter Berger’s words, where people interact with each other, construct the religious word as a form of reality, and reinforce their affiliation with religion. Some earlier scholars argued that people might participate in religious communities for secular and even utilitarian reasons, such as establishing social networks, looking for jobs, expanding business opportunities, or seeking assistance with housing or mortgages. Many scholars, however, critique this perspective, recognizing that for most religious people, religion usually possesses a certain degree of sacredness that pushes its relevance beyond the immediately pragmatic. This degree of sacredness differentiates
religion, as a social institution, from other powerful social institutions, such as education and family, all of which shape our understanding of ourselves.

Indeed, people’s participation in religion involves learning, internalizing, and embodying practices, and a secular and utilitarian perspective alone cannot explain this kind of participation. Religious people who settle in faith communities—like the Buddhists I interviewed at Pagoda and Lotus Temples—learn how to speak like a religious person, how to think like a religious person, and how to behave like a religious person within their communal cultures. Faith communities serve as important organizational and communal spaces that construct and reinforce practitioners’ religious identities through sermons, hymns, rituals, and classes.

Culture also occurs on individual and group levels. In addition to individual-level cultures, such as embracing, performing, and embodying religiosity, faith communities rely on a meaningful, salient, and shared communal culture, which is manifested through a group-level interactional style that shapes people’s understanding, expression, and embodiment of religiosity. Religious congregations affiliated with the same denomination and that share the same theology may embody different congregational cultures. For example, Penny Edgell found that a mainline Christian church with a family-friendly congregational culture was different from its community-focused counterparts. The ways in which congregants interact with each other, understand their mission, and perceive the relationship between other congregants and their religious leaders are different according to the specific communal cultures in their congregation. Shared and meaningful communal culture and the everyday practices of religious people reinforce each other. On the one hand, this shared culture influences religious people’s construction of religiosity. Religious people learn, observe, and internalize the interactional culture from their faith communities to shape their religious self. On the other hand, everyday cultural
practices of faithful individuals constantly sustain this communal culture.

The existence and sustenance of this communal culture establishes a symbolic boundary that differentiates the faith community from what its members consider to be secular society. Hence, like other communal cultures, the cultures in faith communities depend on a clear understanding of the congregation’s boundaries and on their relationship to society. Communal cultures in religious organizations stipulate a script, both implicitly and explicitly, that informs practitioners how interact with each other as in-group members.

My observations in Pagoda and Lotus Temple show that this group-level culture has concrete religious, gendered, and ethnic meanings. In Pagoda Temple, all practitioners seemed to observe an implicit rule that whatever they did in the temple should serve the collective interest of the temple. Practitioners in Pagoda interacted with the monastic community dutifully, and they interacted with their peer practitioners collaboratively. It was clear that they their religious identities as part of a collective. There are also gendered and ethnic connotations associated with the Buddhists’ understanding of their religious selves. For example, the communal culture, implicitly and explicitly, informed practitioners in the temple how to serve the congee during the festival and how to attach Buddhist meanings to it. This means that the well-accepted and taken-for-granted communal culture, or simply put, group-level culture, informs Buddhists how to be Buddhist, how to be Chinese, and how to navigate the relationship between being Buddhist and Chinese at the same time. Hence, the communal culture in Pagoda Temple is clearly ethnic.

The group-level culture of Lotus Temple defined practitioners in a strikingly different way. Buddhists in Lotus Temple seem to acknowledge that, although they all come to the temple to practice Buddhism, they do not give up their individual selves at any time. Buddhists in Lotus Temple openly and frequently disagreed and
debated with each other and with monastic leadership. Their communal culture permits and encourages quite different gendered practices, which blur segregated and dichotomous gendered divisions. Finally, by celebrating Mother’s Day—a Western, if not Americanized, holiday—and imbuing this celebration with Buddhist meanings, the communal culture in Lotus Temple also informed its practitioners how to navigate their identities as Buddhists with their identities as ethnic Chinese in the United States.

1.3.3 Religion as a Framework

Religion is an organizational context, but it is more than congregations, mosques, synagogues, and temples. Religion serves as a lens through which religious people understand the world. For people who are devoted and committed to religion, their understandings of wealth, poverty, gender, ethnicity, and race may all filter through the lens of religion. This creates frameworks that are more or less stable and taken-for-granted. Religious frameworks function as schemata—knowledge structures of generalizable rules—that people can apply to different areas to receive default assumptions when information is incomplete. However, faith traditions alone do not dictate religious frameworks.

While religious frameworks are relatively stable and, to different degrees, taken for granted by the practitioners, scholars also have consistently found that specific understandings and practices of religion are different, even among people who share the same faith tradition. For instance, though both are Theravada Buddhists, ethnic Thai Buddhists’ understandings and practices of Buddhism differ from their white American counterparts who converted to Buddhism. Even within the same ethnic group, people’s understandings of their religion differ, depending on the communal context where they practice their faith. For example, a study of
second-generation Korean Evangelical Christians found that those who practice their religion in an ethnic congregation understand their faith, as well as its intersection with race, ethnicity, and civic identity, differently from those who practice it in a multi-ethnic congregation.\textsuperscript{51}

Hence, in the strand of studies that conceptualize religion as a framework, two competing arguments emerge. On the one hand, scholars perceive that the religious framework is relatively stable. On the other hand, they also recognize that distinctive communal contexts condition the specific frameworks where people practice their faith. These two opinions implicitly present a dilemma: If the religious framework is relatively stable, how can it be fluid between distinctive faith communities, even though they are affiliated with the same religious tradition? Relatedly, if religion, as a framework, is fluid, how does it change and become reconstructed? To some extent, the conceptualization of religion as a “doing” process through which people construct an understanding of themselves and redefine broader social institutions resolves this dilemma.

1.3.4 Religion as Individuals’ Construction of Themselves

The conceptualization of religion as individuals’ construction of themselves directly answers the dilemma concerning the fluidity and stability of religion and religious frameworks. Viewing religion only as a framework through which people understand the world detaches religion from embodied practices. In fact, religion influences people’s construction of themselves. Their religiosity shapes the way they talk, behave, interact with others, and understand society. Some Muslim women, for instance, wear a headscarf, which involves adjusting their embodied practices to be a sacrificial and feminized Muslim.\textsuperscript{52} Likewise, in my fieldwork, I have talked with Buddhist nuns who shave their head and renounce themselves to abandon their
attachment to the secular world and become a good Buddhist.

More importantly, people’s understandings of their religious identity are rarely isolated. They intersect with other facets of their identities, such as gender. Muslim women who wear headscarves and Buddhist nuns who shave their heads both construct their religious and gendered selves, although in very different ways. The conceptualization of religion as individuals’ self-authorship connects the other conceptualizations of religion and makes them an integrated entity. On the one hand, the individual’s self-understanding depends on the faith tradition in which they believe—namely religion as a social institution—as well as in which faith community they practice their faith. On the other hand, through their articulation, understanding, and practices of religion, religious people also illustrate the potential to transform their faith tradition and the community where they practice their faith, even in very gentle and nuanced ways.

Speaking with and observing the communities in the Pagoda and Lotus temples gave me detailed understandings on how practitioners in the two temples construct their religious selves. Situating their construction of religious selves in organizational, institutional, and national contexts, I will examine these mutual relationships among religions on multiple dimensions: How does Buddhism as a social institution condition Buddhists’ understanding of themselves? How do their faith communities condition that understanding? Conversely, how do Buddhists illustrate the potential and exert the agency to transform religion at an institutional and organizational level?
1.4 Comparing Buddhism in Two National Contexts

In this work, I compare two Buddhist temples, both affiliated with the same international Buddhist headquarters, in China and the United States. I chose them after carefully considering several methodological and theoretical concerns. Although their differences interested me most, their affiliation to the same headquarters and thus their practice of the same type of Buddhism allows me to control for theology, organization, and religious practices. However, as well as differing in the nation in which they are embedded, their practitioners differ in their level of educational attainment. These differences reflect the distinctive religious landscapes of the national context in which they operate.

Previous comparative studies of faith communities have generally focused on Christian congregations belonging to the same denomination and situated in the same national context. Such comparisons are typified in Edgell’s research comparing multiple mainline Protestant congregations in the United States. A few other studies compare faith communities that belong to distinctive faith traditions but are dominated by one racial and/or ethnic group. For example, Carolyn Chen compares Christian congregations and Buddhist temples of Taiwanese people in America. My research, on the other hand, compares two faith communities belonging to the same tradition—Buddhism—but which are situated in distinctive national contexts.

This comparison should be productive because it will aid our understanding of how religious practitioners retain a contextualized sense of agency and how the secular and the sacred interact with each other. Agency here has two senses: agency to change religion as a social institution and agency to act upon the social structures in secular societies. By situating religious people in two national contexts
that have distinctive, if not opposite, dominant national cultures, this study facilitates an understanding of whether and how the sacred and the secular interact in the construction of religiosity.

As the ensuring chapters will describe, the interaction between the sacred and the secular occurs within a personal-level cultural framework and explains the emergence of the first sense of agency: the ability to change the institutionalized cultural norms of religion. Buddhists’ agency enabled and constrained by their religious norms as well as the social and cultural norms in the broader and often secular societies. This comparison, therefore, fills a gap in the literature by examining similar faith communities in different national context, as well as a general dearth of information on this subject about communities outside the United States. It also departs from the tendency in past research to decontextualize the faith communities other studies examine. It arises from an understanding that religious people, like everyone else, are exposed to the cultural norms of the broader and often secular societies in which they exist and embody some type of personal cultures—the individual-level interpretive cultural framework through which they embrace and situate religion—which leads them to understand and interpret religion. In other words, the agentic tendency to challenge religion, which arise through an interaction between sacred and secular cultures, is not salient in comparative studies of faith communities situated in similar, if not decontextualized, societies.

Furthermore, comparing two similar Buddhist temples on different continents allows me to examine the contextualized differences in religious people’s agency. Whereas racial and ethnic hierarchies are salient and persistent in the United States, they have a different status in China. The comparison between Buddhists at Pagoda Temple and at Lotus Temple thus allows me to compare how the distinctive
national contexts determine their sense of agency, enabled by religion and reflected in their responses to and actions on social structures. Hence, the comparison between two research sites offers new insights about religious people as cultural agents and how their agency responds to the social structures with which they contend as well as the strictures of their religion.

1.5 Organization of the Dissertation

Through the analysis of Pagoda Temple in mainland China and Lotus Temple in the United States, I show how a highly globalized, if not standardized, form of Buddhism, is contextualized. I identify the process within which a highly globalized Buddhism is contextualized and discuss how the contextualizing process leaves implications for our understandings of other social institutions beyond the two temples.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical framework that describes Buddhists’ agency, drawing on agency in general and on religious people’s agency in particular. By identifying cultural frameworks on two different levels—individual and communal—I propose in Chapter 2 a concept of contextualized understanding of religious people’s agency that considers their navigation between religious and secular cultures. The chapter covers the cultural logic that constructs the “agentic actor-hood” as embodied by the temples’ practitioners.

Chapter 3 describes the salient and central part of the practitioners’ experiences at their temples, namely, their construction of religious identity. It explains why, despite practicing the same type of Buddhism and being affiliated with the same international Buddhist headquarters, Buddhists at Pagoda and Lotus embody distinct types of Buddhist identity. The chapter considers how religious people formulate their first sense of agency—to challenge their religion as a social
Chapter 4 moves from an analysis of how people challenge religion as a social institution to a related analysis of how they use it to challenge gendered structures. It examines the reception and interpretation of religious gendered norms that practitioners receive in secular contexts, and specifically their volunteer work.

Chapter 5 continues the discussion of gender, moving from a general analysis of gender and religion to a specific one: the scripture chanting services. Many scholars argue that religious gendered norms become authoritative if the religious context attaches sacredness to them. In such cases, when practitioners perform gender according to their religious gender norms, they are in fact performing the sacredness of their religion. By comparing how Buddhists understand gender segregation in their scripture chanting services, the chapter engages and questions these arguments. Our understanding of the relationship between “doing gender”—engaging in a particular gendered performance and reinforcing gendered structures—and “doing sacredness”—enhancing the degree of sacredness in religion—is in fact constructed upon a comparison between religious gender norms and the dominant gender norms apparent in secular societies.

Chapter 6 considers Buddhist responses to still another social structure—ethnicity. While Buddhists at both Pagoda and Lotus are ethnic Chinese, the operation of ethnicity, the perceived relationship between religion and ethnicity, and the cultural meanings attached to ethnicity are distinctive at both temples. Buddhists at Pagoda and Lotus relate to their own Chinese ethnicity in unique ways, and the meanings attached to the roles of their ethnicity in their respective contexts explain why the manifestation of agency differs at the temples.

Chapter 7 provides a summary and concluding remarks. The comparison of religious people’s agency, broadly defined, at the two temples contributes to the
sociology of religion, a body of literature that implicitly or explicitly isolates religion from the broader and often secular societies in which people practice their faith. By showing how religious people formulate and exert their agency when responding to these structures, the study contributes to the sociology of gender and to ethnicity. Its findings, though they related primarily to religion, also illuminate agentic behavior in relation to other institutions that offer authoritative discourses to those within their orbit.
Chapter 2

Theoretical Interlude: How Agency Connects
National Context, Faith Communities, and
Religious Individuals

2.1 The Temple

From a sociological perspective, the embodied practices at the two study sites reflect an institutionalized communal culture. The community at Pagoda Temple follow rules that guide, instruct, and encourage practitioners to perform their Buddhist identities, while the community at Lotus Temple does not evidently perform this identity in the same way. Both communities follow wider Buddhist rituals and scriptures, but practices vary widely at the two temples in spite of their outward similarities. For instance, at Pagoda the degree of formality in Buddhist meals, the language that people use to greet each other, and the interactional patterns among practitioners are all distinctive to this temple. At Lotus everything is comparatively informal, from the clothing people wear to the customs they follow at even the most important rituals. Each temple’s unique communal culture exerts influence on how the members of the communities construct their religious selves.
within the temple and vice versa.

### 2.1.1 Pagoda Temple

Pagoda Temple in mainland China is situated in a tranquil, picturesque suburb of a mid-sized city, an almost ideal location for Buddhist practitioners. Like most Buddhist temples in mainland China, its monastic members, lay followers, and volunteers are chiefly ethnic Chinese and mainland citizens although a few are from Taiwan. The temple gate opens at 9 am to visitors and practitioners alike, but some volunteers with permission arrive before then. The gate closes at 5 pm after which, with a few exceptions, people can neither leave nor enter. The gate, literally and symbolically, separates the sacred from the secular.

Before starting my fieldwork, I participated in multiple Buddhist classes and scripture chanting services at different temples in China to obtain some knowledge about appropriate language and embodied practices of Buddhism. I learned how to prostrate, chant Buddhist scriptures, greet others using Buddhist language—such as Amitofo, a popular Buddhist mantra—and show respect to monastic members as a lay practitioner. However, I soon learned that this preparation would not be very useful at Pagoda.

One day before the congee serving event on December 8th, lunar calendar, I went to the guest house at Pagoda to discuss my interest in doing research at the temple. There, I met a young nun in her early 30s who told me, “The monastic member who would meet with you is probably doing Guo Tang [a formal Buddhist meal]. They [meaning the monastic members] are not allowed to talk over the phone or even whisper during lunch.” She advised me to wait in the guest house until lunch was over. I was unfamiliar with this custom of silence although I later noticed that it is not uncommon at other temples.
While sitting in the guest room, I noticed different “types” at the temple: some were temple members, others not. Non-members came in, walked around, and left. Some, who looked like practitioners, sat down, drank a cup of tea, chatted a bit with the volunteers in the guest room, and read a Buddhist magazine provided by the temple. And there were those who wore volunteer tags and vests; they helped out in the guest room, welcoming visitors.

In fact, religious identities in Chinese contexts are often vague and fluid. Many Chinese do not identify with any faith tradition but combine the practices of different traditions, particularly Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religions. This means that those who go to Buddhist temples do not necessarily self-identify as Buddhists. In my fieldwork at the temple, I came to know that there are indeed different types of Buddhists with different levels of involvement in both Buddhism and temple affiliation and are easily distinguishable. First, there are visitors who are interested in visiting and knowing about Buddhism but who may not read Buddhist scriptures or practice Buddhism regularly—or at all. There are also those who practice Buddhism but do not necessarily volunteer at the temple. And there are the volunteers who are usually temple members but not required to serve as volunteers. Volunteers, in any case, usually wear tags and recognizable vests and are easily recognizable. Buddhist practitioners and visitors interpret the temple and Buddhism quite differently. The former attend scripture chanting services and Buddhist lecturers while the latter visit the pavilion, terrace, open hall, and the pagoda, keeping the temple’s spiritual purpose at a distance. There are also differences between Buddhist practitioners and Buddhist volunteers as the later seem to know more about the everyday operation of the temple through their volunteer work.

Although I am familiar with Buddhism, I do not practice it regularly.
Assigned an experienced volunteer to familiarize me with the temple’s customs, I was just little more than a visitor at Pagoda Temple. The volunteers instructed me how to eat and comport myself. Even at supper, which is a relatively informal occasion at Pagoda, there is a dining etiquette—although for visitors it is sufficiently flexible that I could comfortably attend without making too many adjustments to my demeanor.

After my meeting at the guest house, right before supper time, a practitioner walked me to the dining hall that day and instructed me on the dining rules. Before eating, for example, practitioners stand in line, place their palms together, chant a four-line stanza, and bow to the Buddha. All visitors, including me, did the same. Everyone holds the bowl with one or both hands, rather than setting it on the table. Everyone finishes every bite in their bowl, in keeping with Pagoda’s “no waste” rule. After eating, practitioners half bow to the Buddha to show their gratitude for the food. The empty bowl is then returned to a designated place. My liaison instructed me, “We usually wash our own bowls in the kitchen instead of having volunteers wash them for us.” I would learn practitioners extend many such small courtesies to temple volunteers. She forgot to tell me to dry my bowl before putting it in its place. Another practitioner, the first person to participate in an interview for my study, corrected me when I started to put it away wet.

Generally, Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples have clear rules for every meal. In some temples, they are more extensive than in others. Compared to other Buddhist temples, Pagoda’s were quite extensive, so that while saluting the Buddha before and after meals is the norm at many Buddhist temples, cleaning your plate, as we did at Pagoda, is not compulsory elsewhere. These rules serve as a symbolic boundary not only between the temple and the secular world but also between the temple and other Buddhist sanctuaries. It took me several tries to learn all the rules,
and long-term volunteers corrected me frequently in the early weeks of my research. Language also sets Pagoda Temple apart from other Mahayana Buddhist temples in China. For instance, practitioners at Pagoda Temple rarely use Amitofo (the name of Amitabha) to greet each other. Instead, they put their fingers together, use a gesture that symbolizes the lotus flower, and say “Auspicious.” Using “Auspicious” to greet one another is, in fact, an insider language adopted by practitioners affiliated with the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters. Of the several branches I have visited, only Pagoda strictly follows this convention. As with my conduct at meals, practitioners at Pagoda watch, guide, and sanction the language and behavior of others to maintain such customs.

2.1.2 Lotus Temple

Like Pagoda, Lotus Temple is affiliated with the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters. However, in the US Lotus Temple, I observed a very different communal culture from that of Pagoda Temple in mainland China. Situated in a suburb of a large US city in the South, the temple’s architectural style is traditional Chinese Buddhist, which distinguishes it from neighboring buildings. Like its sister temple, Lotus Temple is also in a tranquil area. Within the temple, there are small areas—a garden and lobby—with the flavor of Chan Buddhism that highlight the temple’s sanctity. Most practitioners who regularly participate in scripture chanting services are first-generation ethnic Chinese immigrants who came from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. A small minority are non-Chinese.

The first time I visited Lotus Temple was on a Sunday morning in September 2015. A woman in her late 60s, seated behind the reception desk, greeted me as I stepped inside. She was clearly a volunteer—yet I was surprised that she wore no symbol to identify her as a Lotus Buddhist and that she addressed me in colloquial
Chinese. I felt overdressed. In other faith communities, such as the multiple Christian congregations I visited for an earlier project, my clothes might have seemed too informal. The woman was wearing a T-shirt and jeans. When I asked her if there would be a scripture chanting service that day, she apologized and said that it would be brief because they needed to accommodate a lecture on applying to college. I was surprised that a temple would shorten scripture chanting to accommodate a secular lecture, but it turned out to be exactly what she described: a lecture on how to attain higher test scores and become a more competitive candidate, with no apparent spiritual or religious component.

Lotus regularly held lectures on a range of subjects that had little to do with Buddhism, including talks about maintaining health, preventing cancer, establishing a pan-Asian ethnic community, applying for immigration visas, and understanding the history of Chinese immigration in the United States. I asked several practitioners why Lotus hosted these lectures and seminars, and they all said that their purpose was to attract those who might not otherwise visit a Buddhist temple. As Andrew Hsu, a long-term Buddhist who held a leadership position among lay followers, told me:

We are a foreign religion. If you want Americans to step in [to the temple,] the architectural style itself is foreign enough to remind them that we are an exotic religion. Our architecture is traditionally Chinese, right? If you see an Islamic mosque, do you have the courage to enter it? If you see a Hindu temple, do you have the courage to enter it? Cultural differences prevent many people from entering our temple.

At Lotus, then, the purpose of secular lectures is to downplay the already salient symbolic boundaries and open the temple to people who are not ethnic Chinese Buddhists. There is an intriguing tension and dynamics among Lotus Buddhists,
whose interpretation of Buddhism plays down symbolic boundaries to attract people who are unfamiliar with the religion and who they implicitly assume are non-ethnic Chinese. Yet the temple exists primarily to serve ethnic Chinese, and most of the topics center around that demographic, with a few that might interest those who are not Chinese (e.g. how to get higher SAT scores, apply for college, or prevent cancer).

Despite these mild tensions and nuanced dynamics, the boundary between the sacred and the secular at Lotus is blurred in almost every way. No one corrected my behavior or dress on my first three visits, even my wearing clothing that was more formal than most. (On my third visit, a member of the community invited me to the stage to dance in celebration of a traditional Chinese festival, and I realized that jeans and sneakers were not only more appropriate to the culture in Lotus Temple but also more appropriate to the activities there.) I saw practitioners at Lotus wearing shorts and gym clothes at times.

Meals are also casual events at Lotus Temple. The only rule I observed in the dining room, which they called Five Contemplation Hall (Wu Guan Tang), was to eat all the food in my bowl. No one holds the bowl or plate as practitioners do at Pagoda; no one gives thanks to the Buddha; and there are no meals during which talking is forbidden. Practitioners chat and exchange information about new sales at the local grocery store, the most reliable plumbers in town, and finding help with gardening. Even cleaning up is not governed by rules, as at Pagoda. Only half of the Buddhists, usually those who are devoted, wipe their plates with paper towels. Many do not clean their plates at all, and no one would ask them to do so.

Other events at Lotus are relatively casual, too. While in some important Buddhist rituals, such as the Thousand-Buddha scripture chanting (Li Qian Fo Fa Hui), the medicine Buddha scripture chanting (Yao Shi Fo Fa Hui), or the New Year lantern scripture chanting service after the spring festival (Xin Nian Shang Deng Fa
Hui) have a semi-formal atmosphere. But even the most formal Buddhist rituals at Lotus are not as formal as the most casual routines at Pagoda. I did not participate in any events at Lotus as formal as a dinner at Pagoda.

Those at Lotus Temple integrate Buddhism into broader US society through dress, symbols, atmosphere, language, behavior, and practices. The temple practices downplay the boundary between the sacred and the secular. The communal culture in Lotus Temple and Lotus practitioners’ construction of their Buddhist selves mutually influence and reinforce each other.

2.2 The People

Although practicing the same type of Buddhism and affiliating with the same international Buddhist headquarters, the two temples are quite different, as are those who practice their faith there. For my fieldwork, I encountered two representative Buddhists—Wu Wen from Pagoda and Eric Lai from Lotus—who typify two interpretations of Buddhism, their interactions with temple authorities, and their responses to religious norms articulated by their temple. Wu Wen, for example, largely observed the Buddhist rules and rituals and reinforced the temple’s authority. Eric Lai, however, is more critical towards the practices of Buddhism and the understanding of gender in his temple.

2.2.1 Wu Wen of Pagoda Temple

Wu Wen is a middle-aged woman with short brown hair who was dressed in a fashionably outfit. It was not easy to schedule an interview with her because she was often busy with volunteer work—greeting guests, explaining Buddhist art to visitors, and helping nuns and monks arrange outreach events to local residents who
are not yet Buddhists. Wu Wen’s work, patience, skill, and experience is always apparent in all of these activities, which require exceptional interpersonal skills and multi-tasking abilities. Wu Wen was among the most accomplished at Pagoda Temple in the art of handling these tasks well. She was always courteous and diplomatic, interacting with monks and nuns respectfully and welcoming guests warmly.

Although I had tried to interview Wu Wen several times, it was only one Sunday afternoon, late in the day, when she finally agreed to talk about her experience as a practitioner. We would have to be brief, she told me. We sat on a bench close to the temple lobby, where she would soon work her second several-hour shift. Although the lobby was not private, the bench is situated in the corner, and with people coming and going through the lobby, talking to each other, it would not be easy for them to hear our conversation. Like all of her peer practitioners at Pagoda, Wu Wen chose to be interviewed in Mandarin Chinese. Unlike some, she did not have a strong regional accent. Wu Wen spoke quickly with an authoritative tone and made constant eye contact. Like many of her peer practitioners at the temple, she is middle-class. Her family owns a small business and she is among the owning partners, which allows her to gain the flexibility in her work schedule that volunteering at Pagoda sometimes requires. She worked as an accountant prior to working in the family business. In China as in United States, this is a middle-class occupation that typically pays well.

Wu Wen said that she had first learned about Pagoda from her personal driver. (A personal driver is not a marker of being very rich in China, but it does suggest she is comfortably middle-class.) He told her that a temple practicing humanistic Buddhism in her hometown was recruiting volunteers. “I didn’t mean to be a volunteer,” she said. “My actual purpose was to learn Buddhism. The
Buddhism I had been instructed in was a bit superstitious. It was like a local Buddhism.” She later clarified that local Buddhism integrates local religions and is often considered superstitious. She explained, “Before coming to Pagoda Temple, I was not a follower of Buddha. I was a fan of Buddhism, not a follower.” She credited Pagoda with making her a true Buddhist.

Wu Wen’s participation at Pagoda led her to, as she put it, “systematically understand Buddhism.” The monks and nuns did not explicitly tell her to learn the faith, but instead gave her volunteer work, and because of that she “illustrate[d] [her] own values.” She took classes at Pagoda and the members of the monastic community spoke to her about Buddhism in informal conversations. She also began to read books by the founder of the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters. Two years after she first came to Pagoda, she took a ritualistic oath taken by aspiring Buddhists, which is called “taking refuge in the Triple Gem.” Wu Wen attributes every positive change in her life to an “increasingly deeper learning of Buddhism.”

Wu Wen told me that Pagoda has special characteristics not found at other Mahayana Chinese Buddhist temples. She explained, Buddhism requires practitioners to “do whatever is good, avoid whatever is bad, and purify [our] hearts.” For Wu Wen, the way that Buddhism is practiced in Pagoda Temple makes Buddhism more approachable. She compared Pagoda Temple to other Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples:

Look at our main shrine. Think about the main shrine [that you have seen] in other Buddhist temples. We do not have pillars. We have a huge lobby. We want to invite others to enter and know more about the temple.

Wu Wen’s Buddhist identity is clearly tied to the symbolic boundary between
Pagoda’s humanistic Buddhism and practice at other Buddhist temples, and the lobby signifies this boundary.

Buddhism shapes Wu Wen’s understanding of gender and Chinese ethnicity. It informs how she interacts with others. She examines gender through a Buddhist lens, asserting that so-called gender differences are “merely superficial manifestations.” Rethinking Chinese ethnicity through this lens, she sees Chinese culture as part of Buddhism, instead of the other way around. Drinking tea, for instance, is traditionally thought of as a component of Chinese culture, but in fact the tradition stems from Buddhist Zen tea, a ritual frequently observed at the temple. Wu Wen embraces, almost completely, Pagoda’s religious discourses. She effortlessly follows all of the rules of the temple’s communal culture. Yet Wu Wen’s construction of her Buddhist self is by no means a simple submission to any sort of authority. She actively and very consciously reconstructed her Buddhist identity after joining Pagoda’s community, transforming it from a “superstitious” Buddhist identity to an “Orthodox” Buddhist identity. As part of authoring her own religious identity, Wu Wen had determined that the most meaningful part of Buddhism is taking part in the collective effort to “invite more people” into Pagoda and its approach to Buddhism.

2.2.2 Eric Lai in Lotus Temple

Eric Lai is, like Wu Wen, middle-aged, and he has also taken refuge in the Triple Gem, although I did not think he had as he dresses like everyone else at Lotus Temple, rather than the black robes the leading nun in Lotus Temple always encourages more sincere Buddhists to wear. He attends weekly scripture chanting services at Lotus Temple, some times more frequently than others. Nonetheless Eric told me that as a practitioner who has taken refuge in the Triple Gem, he treasures
the three jewels in Buddhism: the Buddha, the dharma (the teaching), and the
sangha (the community). It also signals his affiliation with Buddhism and his
identity as a follower of the Buddha, although this looked very different for Eric
than anyone else I met at Pagoda Temple.

A lay practitioner introduced Eric to me while Eric and I were both helping
at a children’s summer camp at the temple. I guessed Eric was in his late 30s. He
had short hair and wore glasses. He had a soft voice, was polite and diplomatic
throughout our interactions and his demeanor suggested he was middle-class, later
confirmed when he told me that he had a management role in his company. When I
asked to interview him, Eric seemed quite willing, but our conversation was not as
smooth as I expected. When I asked him why he came to the temple, how often,
and what he did there, Eric answered briefly, almost curtly—yes, he was familiar
with the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters; yes, he comes to the temple
up to four times a week; yes, he participates in scripture chanting services and
volunteers. He did not elaborate.

Eric does not submit to the monastic leadership of Lotus. He became more
open as he articulated his critical perspective about the understandings and
expression of religion, gender, and ethnicity in his temple. He is critical of some of
the discourses and practices of Lotus Temple. Eric said:

I have been to Christian congregations and realized that there is a
distance between the expression of religion at Lotus Temple and that in
Christian congregations. If you go to a Christian congregation, you will
find that when people pray, there is probably a music band. It is much
like a concert and very fancy. Christian sermons and prayers are very
well constructed. Here is the distance (between Christian congregations
and Buddhist Temples).
I got the impression that while he believes in Buddhism, he wishes services at Lotus Temple were more like those he was describing. Eric immigrated to the United States from Taiwan in his early 30s. He told me has been exposed to Chinese folk religions as well as Buddhism and Protestantism.

When we talked about the intersection between gender and Buddhism, Eric raised his eyebrows. He said disapprovingly, “There are very notable differences [between men and women in Buddhism] and very notable inegalitarianism.” He said that he promotes gender egalitarianism at Lotus as much as he can and seeks to maintain a critical perspective concerning the intersection of gender and ethnicity. And this critical perspective helps him to promote gender egalitarianism and generates an understanding of the intersection between religion and Chinese ethnicity that is different from the authoritative discourses from the temple. He did say that people at Lotus try to practice Buddhism in a way that is more egalitarian, more lively, and more attractive to people who are not ethnic Chinese, but he thinks there is a lot of room for improvement. While the temple struck me as highly secular by comparison to Pagoda Temple, he thinks it is not enough, saying it should “play down religious activities and emphasize other events, such as outdoor retreats, concerts, and lectures.”

I was surprised that Eric, a devoted and active Buddhist practitioner, had little to say about his relationship to Buddhism. Yet he was very articulate about religious expression and the intersection of religion, gender, and ethnicity. Unlike his counterparts at Pagoda Temple, Eric is a critical explorer, reconfiguring religion, as a social institution, as well as various interpretations of Buddhism. I found this was typical of many practitioners at Lotus. Similar to Wu Wen, Eric is also actively constructing his Buddhist identity. But instead of following the authoritative discourses articulated by the temple, Eric’s construction of his Buddhist identity
integrates more individualistic and critical opinions—many of them formed in the broader and often more secular societies in the United States.

2.3 The Theory

Despite their affiliation with the same international Buddhist headquarters, the operation of religion and the manifestation of gender and Chinese ethnicity at the temples are different. Moreover, Wu Wen and Eric Lai, two representative practitioners at Pagoda and Lotus, understand their religion and navigate their relationships with their temples differently. From a theoretical perspective, I propose that religious people’s agency—namely the way they actively respond to the authoritative discourses articulated by their religion and construct themselves—is key to understanding the contextualized differences at these temples, both at the communal and individual levels.

2.3.1 “Doing Religion”

At a communal level, Pagoda Temple articulates a strict culture that requires practitioners to observe extensive rules and requirements, behaviorally and linguistically, to enhance the boundaries between the sacred and the secular. In contrast, Lotus Temple articulates a permissive culture that allows practitioners to downplay the so-called boundary between the sacred and secular. Buddhists’ construction of their religious identities is also different between the two temples. Buddhists in Pagoda Temple such as Wu Wen willfully conform to the organizational culture and submit to its authority. Their counterparts in Lotus Temple such as Eric Lai mildly critique certain discourses and gently reject some requirements in the temple. The differences between Pagoda and Lotus—at both
the communal and individual level—illustrate that Buddhism is not a static entity. The standardization of the international headquarters constrains but ultimately cannot prevent the differing communities from reconstructing Buddhism.

Avishai introduced the phrase “doing religion” to theorize the active construction of religion, such as I observed in the two temples. The word “doing,” borrowed from gender literature, suggests the agency of those who practice. “Doing” assumes that identity is a constant performance that individuals can, in part, actively change. “Doing” further assumes that individuals and communities can reconstruct the taken-for-granted structures and institutions—those of gender, class, and ethnicity. People’s agency starts from these active performances of their identities.

The most obvious way of “doing” religion is in performing and reconstructing the individual religious self. Scholars found that religious people, especially converts, change the representation of their religiosity—they wear religious symbols, cover their bodies, fast, and pray. Wu Wen’s willful submission to the authoritative discourses in Pagoda and Eric Lai’s critique of some religious, gendered, and ethnic practices at Lotus reflect this type of active construction.

Individuals’ “doing religion” reflect an attempt to redefine their religion for others as well as themselves. People who practice their faith in communities have the capacity to do and redo the communal culture through their active performances and construction of religious identity. In Edgell’s book, Mainline Christians’ observation of their communal culture, whether it is a type of culture that is labeled as the family model or a type of culture that is labeled as the community model, reinforces the organizational and enduring interactional styles in their congregations. If practitioners like Wu Wen and Eric Lai reject their own temples’ organizational culture, it may transform. Studies on feminist Catholics’
responses to their congregational culture suggest they have had this impact. The ambition of “doing religion” does not stop at the communal level. By doing religion, people embody the agency to redefine the perspectives, rules, and resource distribution of their communities on a broader level—they redefine the institutionalized schemas and the seemingly static structures. For instance, according to David Smilde, Evangelical Christians in Venezuela, most of whom are converts, for instance, embody the potential to overcome the structuralized class division prevalent in their national context. Similarly Muslim women in Indonesia have challenged the gender structure of their mosques by actively re-articulating and re-performing their gendered Muslim identities.

“Doing religion,” therefore, conceptualizes the construction of religion as an active and constant process. It may be the most evident on an individual level where people actively and perhaps intentionally preform, articulate, embody, and understand their religiosity. But it occurs on a community level as well, which can lead to changes to the organizational culture and structuralized arrangement of faith communities. In fact, religion is “done,” constantly and actively, as a framework, as an organizational context, and as an individual identity.

### 2.3.2 Agency

The “doing” process is inherently related to human agency. The concept of “doing religion” not only gives practitioners the ability to reconstruct religion, but also highlights their agency to further challenge and transform broader social structures. In other words, religious people retain a sense of agency. An overview of theories on agency will shed light on a more in-depth understanding of Buddhists’ agency in the two temples that I study. Simply put, agency describes people’s ability to challenge the imposed social arrangement. Scholars have defined agency with a focus on
different aspects. Emirbayer and Mische, for instance, define agency as:

The temporarily constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive responses to the problems posed by changing historical situations.

This definition situates human agency in a temporal dimension and highlights that three elements condition human agency: previous experiences, future goals, and current abilities. Each of these factors contributes to the specific manifestation of human agency. Emirbayer and Mische also recognize that agency could both reproduce and transform social structures. For example, I observed that Buddhist practitioners in both temples retained the sense of agency to respond to broader social structures, such as gender, but they responded to them in different ways. Emirbayer and Mische’s definition of agency suggests that Pagoda and Lotus practitioners’ distinctive habits—how they are socialized to “do gender” and “do religion,” their different imaginations, and to what extent they see themselves as having virtual and material resources to respond to the social structures—drive the differences. But the two temples exist in differing, complex, national social contexts that clearly affect the culture of each temple. Emirbayer and Mische’s definition of agency does not illuminate the influence of these social contexts. Sewell’s definition of agency addresses this gap.

Sewell’s definition of agency is built upon a conceptualization of schema, which is “generalizable or transposable procedures applied in the enactment of social life.” Agency, therefore, “entail[s] the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts.” Using Sewell’s definition of agency to explain the differences that I observed between Pagoda and Lotus Temple suggests that
Buddhists in the two temples live and practice their faith in distinctive social contexts that contain different structures and institutions. Therefore, they construct different schemas from these institutions and structures that help to further retain different senses of agency. Like Emirbayer and Mische, Sewell also recognizes that agency only describes people’s potential to challenge social structures. It does not guarantee an actual transformation of the social structures.

However, Cambell is not satisfied with the vague descriptions of what human agency actually entails that Sewell and Emirbayer and Mische provide. Campbell argues that a significant gap in the current definition of agency is the lack of differentiation between people’s “potential” and “capability” to challenge social structures and institutions. To fill in this conceptual gap, Campbell refers to the differences between what he labels as “type 1” and “type 2” agency. Type 1 agency refers to the “power possessed by individuals that enable them to engage in actions.” This is similar to the “potential” embodied by individuals that Sewell references. Type 2 agency, however, refers to “the fact that individuals may themselves, on occasions, act as agents.” Simply put, type 1 agency is the potential for people to transform the institutions and challenge the structures, while type 2 agency is the actual action in which people engage to respond to social structures. According to Campbell, individuals may sometimes possess the power of agency but may not translate it to actions.

For all its nuance, Campbell’s definition of agency does not clarify what types of action count as agentic actions. This theoretical shortcoming makes it difficult to apply the division between type 1 and type 2 agency, namely the division between power and action, to the Buddhists who participated in my study. As Wu Wen’s experience suggests, Buddhists in Pagoda Temple, indeed, reinforced and highlighted gendered and ethnic divisions through their construction of a strict,
sacred, and Orthodox Buddhism. Despite having the “power of agency” (type 1 agency), Wu Wen does not manifest her “agentic power” (type 2 agency). Eric Lai, however, and his colleagues at Lotus, blur gendered, racialized, and ethnic divisions by “doing” a permissive Buddhism that melds boundaries between the sacred and the secular, translating agency into action with “agentic power” (type 2 agency). But who possessed the power and who engages in the action?

The conceptualization of agency in gender literature, to some extent, addresses the theoretical shortcoming in Campbell’s definition. When analyzing individuals’ capability to respond to powerful and overarching gender structures, gender scholars recognize that individuals do not need to challenge the gendered structures intentionally to manifest their agency. Instead, people often retain their sense of agency through their own construction of gender. Therefore, the manifestation of agency is more intentional and explicit in the former and more implicit and embedded in the latter. While powerful and institutional gender norms may constrain them, when engaging in the construction of their own gendered selves, individuals often re-interpret these gender norms. This reinterpretation leaves room for people to retain their sense of agency. Individuals’ performances and embodiment of their gendered selves, therefore, become a way in which they exert their agency.

Existing theories of agency are each informative in distinctive ways. Embirbayer and Mische situate human agency in a temporal dimension, while Sewall situates human agency on the breadth of structures and institutions with which people are affiliated. Other scholars have recognized the ambiguity in earlier conceptualizations of agency and have attempted to clarify the difference between embedded agentic power and agentic actions. Although they recognize the diversity of agency and the different factors that may contribute to different forms of agency,
these previous theories all directly link a grand construct—social structures or social institutions—with a micro-level construct—individuals. They do not explain whether, to what extent, or how the social contexts where people live and work pattern agency. The different types of agency, conditioned by the distinctive social contexts where people live and practice their faith, however, emerges in my fieldwork. In this work, I follow the broader conceptualization and define agency as people’s capacity to act upon the institutionalized and structuralized social arrangement. Joining with previous scholars,92 I recognize that agency does not need to be an intended thought or movement, though it can be. Instead, people’s reinterpretation of the institutionalized norms with which they engage in the process of self-authorship construct and maintain agency. By comparing how Buddhists in Pagoda and Lotus Temple maintain their sense of agency through their construction of gendered, ethnic, and religious identities, I propose a theory that considers the contextualization of individuals’ agency.

2.3.3 Religion and Agency

Early social scientific studies rarely recognize the connection between religion and agency due to two common myths.93 The first is the idea that religion itself is imposed and static.94 The second is that, when examining the connection between religion and other social structures (as well as the social institutions embedded in the structures), religion is totally oppressive to people’s manifestation of agency and could not be a conduit to more freedom. Scholars’ increasingly comprehensive understandings of religion have debunked both of these myths.

In the context of the US and to a lesser degree the UK, because they are exposed to and internalize individualism, religious practitioners manifest the intention and capacity to free themselves from institutional interpretations of
religion and construct their own individual understandings of it.\textsuperscript{95} Sheila, a representative character in an early study on religious individualism, did not affiliate with any faith tradition, but neither was she purely secular. Instead, she constructed her own individualistic religion, which she labelled as Sheilasm.\textsuperscript{96} While perhaps an extreme example, multiple forms of Sheilasm have nonetheless become increasingly prevalent in the US and the UK. The emergence of alternative spirituality, for instance, illustrates that people are not constrained by imposed, inauthentic, and institutional interpretations of religion. Rather, they are capable of exerting their own agency upon their religion.

Recognition of religious agency began with research on spirituality—alternative forms of Sheilasm.\textsuperscript{97} More recently, scholars recognize that individuals also have the capacity to construct and reconstruct their own institutional form of religion. This religious agency is particularly salient among those born to practitioners of religions that marginalize and exclude them.\textsuperscript{98} Female Catholics and Catholics who are sexual minority, for instance, creatively re-interpret Catholicism to resolve the tensions between their gender, sexual, and religious identities.\textsuperscript{99} Through creative interpretation of religion and active construction of their religious selves they maintain and illustrate their religious agency. This process of individuals engaging in active dialogue with religion is essentially a process of “doing religion” as later scholars describe it. The changes from conceptualizing religion as only a social institution to recognizing individuals’ capacity to construct religion demystifies the previous perspectives that viewed religion as static.

When it comes to the intersection between religion and other social institutions and structures,\textsuperscript{100} many also perceive religion as a factor that contributes to the reinforcement of these social institutions and structures. Two of the most salient examples are how religion reinforces gender and ethnicity. In
regards to gender, researchers found that women who are members of the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS), for instance, received and internalized the traditional gender norms that portray women as the ideal wife and ideal mother and restrict their capacity to receive higher education.  

The existing literature is grounded in rigorous empirical studies. Based on these studies, we cannot argue that religion only reinforces social structures. In its simplest form, agency refers to people’s capacity to act upon structures and institutions through their active construction of the self, although it is also constrained by the social institutions and structures where the individuals are situated. In fact, an emerging field that recognizes people’s active construction of selves within religion is that of gender and religion. Indeed, more nuanced understandings of religious women’s construction of their gendered identities show that, regardless of which form of femininity they internalize and embody, they do still actively construct their gendered selves. This active construction of gendered selves is manifested in multiple forms, which include, but are not limited to, submission, resistance, compromise, and negotiation. Their active performance of gender demonstrate an agentic capacity to respond to gender—as both a structure and an institution. More recent literature that examines the intersection between religion and race also recognizes people’s active construction of racialized religious identities. Muslims in Western societies, including the US and Europe, which racialize and stigmatize their religious identities, are particularly likely to engage in such construction.

The agentic effects of religion is equally salient in relation to ethnicity. Accordingly, so-called ethnic religious communities—Korean Evangelical congregations, Taiwanese Buddhist temples and Christian congregations, mainland Chinese Christian congregations, Vietnamese temples, and Thai
Buddhist temples—preserve, celebrate, and to some degree reconstruct ethnicity through food, decorative symbols, and language in the ethnic religious communities in the diaspora. For instance, a Taiwanese Buddhist temple in the US invested effort to present and reinforce the “Chinese culture” by highlighting its traditional Chinese architectural style. Likewise, a Korean Christian congregation in the US also preserved its Korean ethnicity by celebrating traditional festivals, such as the Spring Festival in Korea, and encouraging children to treat their elders with great respect in accordance with Confucianist filial piety.

Previous studies focus on the intersection between religion and other social institutions and structures ranging from gender to race to ethnicity indicate that, within the process of “doing religion,” religious people are manifest their agency. Recognizing the fluidity of religion and the intersection between religion and other social institutions renders religious people’s agency clearer. Religious people’s capacity to respond actively to institutions and structures through their construction of self has become increasingly apparent.

However, such a theoretical background is not sufficient to resolve the lingering puzzle in my fieldwork: If, as I have observed, Buddhists in both Pagoda and Lotus Temple retain certain degrees of agency to “do religion,” “do gender,” “do ethnicity,” and even “do” other institutions, how do they formulate their agency? The previous agency theories that so quickly link the structural to the individual do not provide immediate answers to this question. The agency of the Buddhists I observed clearly looks different between the two temple contexts. This means, in addition to the individual-level differences, there are organizational or even broader social level factors that shape Buddhists’ agency within the two temples. To address this question and address this gap in the literature, I propose a contextualized theorization of agency.
2.4 A Contextualized Theorization of Agency

In line with past scholarship in feminist studies, I conceptualize agency as constructed through people’s construction of self. Individuals interpret the imposed social norms through a process that leaves space for them to formulate and exert their agency through self-authorship. However, I contend this interpretation is a black box that obscures the form agency takes. The patterning of agency depends on how people interpret social norms in order to understand how they construct their agency. In this contextualized theory of agency, I further argue that three kinds of culture determine how religious people interpret their religion’s authoritative discourses: (1) personal-level culture, the framework that religious individuals adopt to embrace religion; (2) communal culture, the enduring, powerful, and taken-for-granted patterns by which religious people interact with each other; (3) the cultures in dialogues, which take place between both the individual-level and communal-level culture with the broader and often secular societies where people practice their faith.

2.4.1 The Co-construction of a Contextualized Agency

Whereas past research might suggest that individuals act upon social structures through agency, I believe that individual and communal level cultures enter into this relationship to create a contextualized agency. The individual-level culture—the framework that people adopt to embrace their religions—explains the extent to which they are receptive to the authoritative interpretation their faith community articulates. This reception (or resistance, or some state in between) does not apply only to their attitudes towards the religious narratives their faith communities articulate, such as theology, rituals, and scriptures. It also applies to the other bundled narratives their religious communities articulate, such as a religious
interpretation of gender, race, and ethnicity. By responding to the former, people “do religion.” By responding to the latter, people “do gender” and ”do ethnicity.”

Both Wu Wen in Pagoda and Eric Lai in Lotus “do” religion. In her statements and her actions, Wu Wen appeared as a dutiful learner who is extremely receptive to the authoritative discourses Pagoda Temple articulates. The behaviors of the volunteers on the congee serving day reflects how common such submission is in Pagoda. At the same time, their behavior mimicked the authoritative discourses of Pagoda Temple, which is replete with explicit and implicit rules. These discourses prompt the Temple’s volunteers, practitioners, and monastic leaders to embody their agency in a collective manner.

The permissive context of Lotus Temple prompted Eric and others to question its few authoritative discourses. Indeed, most practitioners at Lotus have been exposed not only to folk religions and other interpretations of Buddhism but also to Protestantism. When practitioners challenge the temple’s rules and customs, Lotus compromises. For example, its practitioners continually challenge the division of labor by gender—a manifestation of the dialectical and mutual compromise that Lotus has with its practitioners. Throughout this dissertation there are many examples of this mutually accommodating relationship. Hence, the type of agency that religious practitioners in Lotus Temple manifest is more individualistic—rather than a collective entity with their temple, they sometimes challenge the authoritative interpretations from their temples.

At each of the research sites, the personal and communal cultures—what the temple asks its practitioners to do and how individuals embrace religion—were largely congruent. While individuals’ cultural framework does not always conform to the temple’s rules and approaches to Buddhism, the it does not actively clash. Specifically, Pagoda had a strict communal culture and practitioners’ personal
cultures prompted them to embrace its authoritative discourses. Lotus had a permissive communal culture and its practitioners expressed their individual opinions and questioned its leader’s decisions.

In theory, it is certainly possible that not all Buddhist temples exhibit congruence between their personal and communal cultures. However previous literature in cultural sociology shows that personal and communal cultures are usually congruent with each other in religious communities. Individual members of a community must maintain and reinforce its communal culture, and thus there is an inherent reason for them to align. Individuals whose framework is in tension with the organizational culture of their faith communities may conflict with the leadership and leave the faith community to establish a new one. Neither the strict culture in Pagoda Temple nor the permissive culture in Lotus Temple were entirely imposed; rather, they depended on the construction, reconstruction, and reinforcement of each temples’ membership. Individual and communal culture are on different levels of analysis, they nevertheless mutually reinforce each other and exist as one integral entity.

2.4.2 The Dialogues between the “Sacred” and the “Secular”

Neither personal nor communal level culture is constructed in a vacuum. They are constructed upon a careful evaluation of culture in the broader and often more secular societies. This is how the dominant cultures, both imagined or real, in the two distinctive societies play a role, shaping religious people’s agency and constructing different types of agency even among religious people who practice the same type of Buddhism.

While most congregational studies implicitly or explicitly situate religious
Christian Smith rightly points out that for a religious congregation to survive in this modern and pluralistic era, it needs to be both embattled and engaged in order to maintain significant membership. Religious congregations need to be embattled in that they construct a communal culture that is distinct from that of the secular, but they must engage with their secular culture to remain relevant. The Pagoda and Lotus Temples are situated in national contexts with distinctive religious landscapes, and highlight “embattlement” and “engagement” respectively.

The construction of communal culture in Pagoda Temple highlights its “embattlement.” The People’s Republic of China recognizes Buddhism as a major religion and situated it within what sociologist Fenggang Yang calls the “red market,” meaning that the atheist central government in China permits its existence. A plurality of the half of the population that professes any religion, 18.21% of the overall population, align with Buddhism—this in a context where more than half of the population are not affiliated with any religion.

However, Buddhism’s primacy is fragile in China, as it is often mixed with Daoism and folk religions. Hence, to differentiate itself from the secular society as well as from the so-called secular, superstitious, and popular Buddhists, Pagoda Temple relied on the strictness of its temple culture, crafted a rigid symbolic boundary, and “battled” with the perceived secular culture.

In contrast, only 1.2% of people in the United States identify as Buddhist. While, in the US, many white middle-class people integrate Buddhist ideas and practices—for example, finding inner peace and meditation—in their construction of spirituality, they usually do not affiliate with Buddhism or practice it in a temple setting. Given the minority status of both Buddhism and the ethnic Chinese who practice it at Lotus Temple, there is less need to highlight or craft the
sacred/secular boundary. Hence, Lotus Temple downplayed its distinctness from the secular society in many ways, emphasizing its compatibility with and integration into the US society.

Likewise, personal cultures, the framework with which individuals embrace religion, are constructed upon interactions with “the secular.” Personal culture is embedded in collective cultures. The dominant national culture where people live plays a particularly important role in shaping individuals’ personal cultural framework and how they respond to religious narratives.

This embedded nature of personal culture within the national culture is well-documented in US-based studies of baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964. Studies of religious baby boomers conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s show that they were not fully submissive to the authorities of the faith communities in which they were born and raised. Instead, they often use the cultural framework of individualism, seek outside resources, challenge external religious authorities, and construct an individualistic religiosity and spirituality. In other words, rather than accepting the form of the sacred their faith traditions have created and imposed on them, they accept an understanding of the sacred they create that caters to their individualistic needs. Buddhists in Lotus Temple, many of whom are immigrants, experience their new culture of individualism and act on it, even in their religious context. Eric Lai’s approach reflects a desire to craft an interpretation of Buddhism that catered to his individualistic needs. As chapter 3 will suggest Lai’s peer practitioners take a similar approach, reflecting a comprehensive picture of how the culture of individualism influences the personal culture framework of Buddhists who attend Lotus Temple.

Given that existing studies show that the national context of the US influences people’s framework for religious identity construction, it is reasonable to
assume that such influence occurs elsewhere. Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient empirical examination for this relationship in countries that value collectivism as a legacy of Confucianism, like many East Asian cultures have. ¹³⁰ In mainland China, Confucianism acts as a foundation for Chinese and, more broadly, Asian values. Confucianism calls for the maintenance of harmonious societies based on deference to authority and a constant reinforcement of social hierarchies.¹³¹ Thus it calls for sons to defer to their fathers, subordinates to respect their leaders, and student’s to esteem their teachers.¹³² Confucian cultural values also encourage people to be dependent, seek harmony, maintain order, and respect authority,¹³³ the precise opposite of a culture of individualism.¹³⁴ Confucianism is a dominant culture in China, and it influences Chinese people’s cultural frameworks in politics,¹³⁵ education,¹³⁶ and business ethics,¹³⁷ and may influence how they embrace religion. Wu Wen’s framing of her experience with Buddhism as a “learning” process and the monastic members as her spiritual teachers suggests the influence of Confucianism. In Chapter 3, I will provide a more detailed elaboration on whether and to what extent the culture of Confucianism influences how individuals accept, understand, and interpret Buddhism in Pagoda Temple.

It is worth noting that, while we cannot establish a causal relationship between dominant cultures in different national contexts and the way in which individuals embrace religion, the cultural dominance of individualism and Confucianism in the West and East make them powerful. As illustrated in my later interview-based and observational data, they play an important role in the practitioners’ imagination of what society—broader, secular, less contemplative—looks like outside the temple.
2.4.3 Contextualized Theorization of Agency

While previous theories of human agency recognize the multiple forms of agency and the factors—both temporal and transposable—that may influence human agency, their theories do not leave sufficient room to understand the patterning of human agency. This contextualized theory of agency first situates human agency in the national contexts where they live, using the connection between the dominant national culture and personal-level cultures as a mechanism. Second, it also illustrates how communities shape human agency.

Although this dissertation is particularly about Buddhists' agency in the two temples, the theories are applicable to human agency in other social institutions that, similar to the Buddhist temples, are both globalized and localized. For instance, it is reasonable to speculate that the organizations that employ scientists, or high-tech workers, or retail workers as well as the nations where they live condition their agency. Much like Buddhist temples, an employer may deviate from the “standard” culture, which has an impact on its practitioners.

This dissertation's data will ground the theoretical framework asserting that communal and national-level factors shape the nuances and complexity of agency at the two research sites. In doing so I do not deny that individual-level factors, such the experiences that preceded joining each temple, influence how individuals manifest their agency. As the data will illustrate, the influence of national and communal culture is so powerful that it generates highly visible and patterned differences in Buddhists' agency between the two temples. The next chapter focuses on how Buddhists exert their agency and “do religion.” It will provide a more comprehensive picture of the contextualization of religious agency at both Lotus and Pagoda.
3.1 Days in the Temples

3.1.1 A Day at Pagoda Temple

One Saturday morning in early spring, 2016, I began as a volunteer at Pagoda Temple. Pagoda has an organized structure for volunteer work, dividing its helpers into groups that one or two monastic members—depending on the size of the group and the expected workload—lead, guide, and direct. Lay practitioners who want to volunteer are usually told to arrive at the temple on or before 9 am, where they sign the attendance sheet, go to the main shrine, prostrate before the Buddha, and begin their work. Prostrating towards the Buddha is important at Pagoda. For newcomers like me, it feels awkward in the beginning of my fieldwork, but an experienced volunteer always reminded me to go to the main shrine and follow this simple ritual.

The nuns give volunteers, especially long-term, experienced volunteers, routine work, such as serving guests, cooking food, setting up dining areas, and taking care of temple logistics. “Whatever the monastic members need us to do, we
do,” said one volunteer. On this particular day, along with many other volunteers, I drifted away from my daily routine to help with a temporary exhibition at the temple. The work was unfamiliar to me, but a monastic told me not to worry. “Experienced volunteers and other monastic members will tell you what to do.”

The exhibition was situated in a building chiefly used to host visitors and tourists. When I arrived, Zhen Hua, a full-time volunteer and devoted practitioner in her early 30s, was sitting behind a reception desk. Zhen Hua is also one of my interview respondents, but we got to know each other during my first shift when I served congee to visitors. At that time, Zhen Hua worked together with the nuns and oversaw the temple’s logistical issues and the work division among volunteers, and I noticed that she was adept and professional at both. Later, during our interview, she told me that she has a master’s degree from an elite university in mainland China, which may have explained why she handled her tasks so well.

In our interview, Zhen Hua said she was attracted to Buddhism through the temple’s Buddhist training camp. Attracted by the peace and tranquility that Buddhism offered, she volunteered at the temple and began to re-think her life goals, deciding to stay as a full-time volunteer and work out what her next steps in life would be. Pagoda Temple has a group of full-time volunteers like Zhen Hua, many seeing their lives in a different light after practicing Buddhism. They stay at the temple as full-time volunteers, which gives them time to detach from the hustle-bustle of the secular world.

Seeing me entering the exhibition, Zhen Hua stood up and greeted me with a reserved smile, putting her palms together and saying, “Auspicious dharma sister.” I also put my palms together and replied, “Auspicious.” Zhen Hua knew that I was assigned to the exhibition as extra help since a monastic member had called her earlier. As an experienced volunteer, she introduced me to the flow of my volunteer
work, saying that it would include walking around the exhibition, answering questions from tourists and keeping them from touching the art. She added, “The monastic and myself will oversee your work. And if you have questions, you can always approach us.” Partnered with another Buddhist woman in her mid-30s, I found the work intense during peak hours. When a large number of visitors entered the exhibition hall, we were peppered with endless questions and sometimes had to remind the visitors not to touch the art. If they were interested in knowing more about Buddhism or the temple, we directed them to other exhibitions or to temple volunteers.

Visitors came in waves. In off-peak hours, the work was easy, relaxing, even dull, and at one point, when I had little to do, Zhen Hua suggested a walking meditation. “When you are walking around the exhibition hall,” she said, “you can actually do a walking meditation, paying specific attention to your steps to prevent you from being distracted by other external things.” She asked me if I had meditated before and I told her that I had participated in a meditation class and knew sitting meditation. She asked me how I felt about meditation. I answered, as if I were a student, that I had difficulty focusing only on my breathing and not thinking about my concerns in the secular world.

“This is understandable,” Zhen Hua said. “You need to give yourself time to get used to it. Walking meditation can be, to some extent, easier than sitting meditation.” She showed me how, walking around the exhibition hall and attending to each of her steps, keeping only her footsteps in mind. She then compared walking to sitting meditation, saying that paying attention to the steps in walking is similar to paying attention to breathing in sitting meditation. The only difference is that steps are more tangible and that walking meditation may be a good entry point to meditation for newcomers. She talked about her own experience with meditation:
that she can do sitting meditation for several hours without distracting herself and when
she has time in the midst of her volunteer work, she tries to do a walking meditation, taking every moment to cultivate her Buddhist heart. From that moment, our relationship changed. I was no longer a volunteer with Zhen Hua. I was her student and she my teacher, instructing me how to cultivate my Buddhist heart and perform my Buddhist identity.

Zhen Hua and I walked for a while and I learned how to correct my posture and focus on my steps. We did this until the wooden board struck three times. At Pagoda, time is signaled by strikes on a wooden board, and now it was time for lunch. Tourists and visitors can choose to join either in the free formal Buddhist lunch or pay for their own casual lunch in the tea house. Volunteers, however, must participate in the formal lunch and follow its rules and rituals. When I asked Zhen Hua if I had to go to the formal lunch, she replied that, yes, it is “required for people who volunteer in the temple.” She explained that residential monastic members require every volunteer to have lunch in the temple since it is important for volunteers to “learn Buddhism and cultivate their hearts.”

Formal Buddhist meals at Pagoda follow procedures which are specific to the occasion. They include detailed rules that require practitioners to engage in appropriate behaviors even before they step into the dining hall. I remember the uneasy feeling I had during my first formal Buddhist lunch at Pagoda: the format was new to me and the behavioral requirements demanding. It was like being a solitary guest in a roomful of strangers whose social customs were unknown to me, even though I had already spent several months doing preliminary research in different Mahayana Chinese Buddhist temples to familiarize myself with the Buddhist language and demeanors. Before entering, we lined up outside the dining hall. A Buddhist man, an experienced volunteer, stood at the entrance, overseeing
After entering the dining hall, the practitioners withdrew their chairs carefully, making little noise. Lunch started with scripture chanting and designated volunteers served the meal.

From the moment we entered the dining hall, talking was forbidden. Volunteers walked about like attentive waiters and if practitioners wanted more food, they gestured to a volunteer who served the lunch. Monastics ate with lay practitioners, but in different places within the dining hall. Monastics sate on the designated rows that are farther away from the entrance. The temple’s director usually sat on a stage in the middle of the dining hall, and it was clear that she and the monastics served as role models for practitioners.

When most practitioners had finished lunch, the director gave a short dharma talk, noting those lapses in comportment where the practitioners did not do so well. She pointed out that some people made unnecessary noise when withdrawing their chairs. On a more positive note, she connected eating with Buddhism, instructing Buddhists to cherish what they get—which Buddhists call “merits”—and purify their hearts in eating. After this, the practitioners chanted an excerpt of scripture—prayer after meals—pushed their chairs back in, lined up, and shuffled out quietly.

For most practitioners, volunteer work resumed after lunch. After returning to the exhibition hall, Zhen Hua suggested that we gather in the lobby and sing a Buddhist song by the founding master of the Compassion Bodhi Headquarters. The song’s lyrics directed Buddhists to cultivate their hearts in ten easy steps. Although several volunteers were reluctant to sing, Zhen Hua encouraged them, explaining that singing purified the heart and spread humanistic Buddhism—the specific type of Buddhism that Pagoda espouses—to visitors and tourists in the exhibition hall. She was right. When the volunteers sang, visitors and tourists stopped to listen,
smile approvingly, and take pictures.

Pagoda Temple closes at 5 pm each day, but volunteer work ends later depending on how long it takes to close the building. On that particular day, I was assigned to organize the chairs and mop the floor after the visitors left. Given how late some volunteer work can end, volunteers sometimes have dinner in the temple with permission from a residential monastic (*Chang Zhu*).

Unlike lunch, dinner is not open to the public. It is a more casual buffet-style affair. But there are still rules. Before going to the buffet, for example, practitioners lined up and waited for a monastic to start chanting a four-sentence stanza. After this, they picked up their food, sat in designated areas—segregated by gender—put their palms together, chanted the name of the Buddha, and began eating. Throughout the meal, they held their bowls, retrieved any food they dropped on the table, finished what they had, and used a napkin to wipe their bowls. They were allowed to talk to each other quietly, and after dinner, half bowed towards the Buddha before leaving. Although dinner is the most casual meal at Pagoda, there are still rules and procedures to follow.

My volunteer work varied from day to day and several sociological observations emerged from a typical day at Pagoda. When I came to the temple and started my fieldwork, I was unfamiliar with its rules and rituals. Nor did I know the temple’s language and embodied practices because they differed from those of my preliminary fieldwork at other Buddhist temples. The process of getting used to the language and postures at Pagoda was difficult. As reflected in my interaction with Zhen Hua, her interaction with other practitioners and the monastic director’s interactions with Buddhists during lunch, Buddhist identities at Pagoda are constructed through an instruction and learning process. Zhen Hua taught me how to perform my Buddhist identity with walking meditation. She also taught others
when and why to sing the Buddhist song in the midst of their volunteer work. Similarly, during the formal lunch, as the leading monastic member, the temple director instructed the practitioners on how to perform Buddhist identities when eating.

Buddhist practitioners sometimes speak temple-specific languages and adopt temple specific gestures. This means that, by and large, they perform Buddhist identities that are also temple-specific. These cultural symbols establish a symbolic boundary that differentiates their identities at Pagoda from those at other Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples. Although the songs were written by the founding Master of the international Buddhist headquarters, and are, as Zhen Hua said, about humanistic Buddhism, a typical day at Pagoda and the types of Buddhist identities that people construct there are different from those at Lotus, its sister temple in the United States.

3.1.2 A Day at Lotus Temple

Unlike Pagoda, where some practitioners come to the temple three or four times a week, most practitioners at Lotus Temple come just once a week. Sunday morning is the busiest time—not least because it is then that the scripture chanting service occurs. I usually arrived fifteen minutes before the start of the service. On my first day, two middle-aged ladies sitting behind the reception desk were chatting to each other. On seeing me, they waved and said, “Hi, Good morning.” Because greetings at Lotus are casual, I usually waved and said, “Good morning” in return. Prior to the scripture chanting services, people were milling around, some talking in the lobby or dining hall, others checking their phones in the main shrine. Some devoted practitioners read books in the temple’s small library. I usually sat in the main shrine and waited for the service to begin.
Ten minutes before the service, an usher struck a wooden board and practitioners began entering the shrine. Generally, Buddhists who have taken refuge in the triple gem are required to wear black robes, but not all do. On one occasion, the leading monastic nun pointed to a regular practitioner and said, “I have told him for multiple times that he should wear the black robes in the scripture chanting services, but again, he is not wearing it today.” In some cases, when practitioners are late, they do not have time to change. Wearing T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers, they sit in the last several rows with their counterparts who have not taken refuge in the triple gem. Although wearing black robes and “appropriate” clothes is encouraged in scripture chanting services at Lotus, it is not mandatory. Some practitioners attend services wearing gym clothes, shorts, and high-heeled sandals, and the monastics generally do not object. Like most practitioners who have not taken refuge in the triple gem, I usually wore a T-shirt and jeans and sat in the last several rows of the shrine’s auditorium.

Practitioners are not always punctual either. Some came twenty minutes late, which was discouraged though permitted. Scripture chanting services last for an hour, with monastics and devoted practitioners leading from the stage and other attendants chanting in the audience. Scripture chanting usually involves chanting one of the three major sutras: The Diamond Sutra (Jin Gang Jing), the Amitbha Sutra (A Mi Tuo Jing), or the Universal Gate Sutra (Guan Shi Yin Pu Sa Pu Men Pin). Practitioners, even devoted ones, are not always familiar with the flow of the services. Each week, designated volunteers stand at the sides of the main shrine, hold a white board, and cue them about the next step of the service.

A dharma talk follows the scripture chanting services, but the theme varies from week to week. Some weeks, a monastic member plays a video by the founding Master who talks about why practitioners need to attend scripture chanting
On other occasions, monastic members lead the services themselves and talk with practitioners about how to cherish and accumulate merits in their lives as Buddhists, how to follow the rules in the main shrine and chant scriptures as Buddhists, and how to make good wishes and realize their wishes as Buddhists. Now and then, Lotus Temple invites outside speakers to present at “dharma talks” with topics that seem unrelated to Buddhism, that deal with, say, college applications, visa applications, immigrant status, or the history of Chinese immigrants in the US.

Dharma talks are usually less well attended than the scripture chanting services and some practitioners leave the temple right after the service. Monastic nuns, however, encourage practitioners to stay for the whole Sunday morning. When a small group of volunteers and I were cleaning up the main shrine after the services, a practitioner asked us to go to the classroom and listen to the dharma talk. Otherwise, “monastic members would be unhappy.” Even so, throughout my fieldwork at Lotus Temple, there are practitioners who regularly attend the scripture chanting services but leave before the dharma talks.

Like Pagoda Temple in China, free vegetarian lunches were provided after the dharma talks at Lotus, but they were more casual. Official Buddhist lunches are not offered. Instead, practitioners line up and chant a four-sentence stanza, the same stanza their Pagoda counterparts chant. Afterwards, visitors, practitioners, and volunteers can select their food from the buffet table. Lunch is a casual social time at Lotus Temple. Buddhists coalesce into small groups and talk to each other, some in local dialects, but their conversations are seldom about Buddhism—I heard practitioners talking about weekend plans and grocery shopping. Young practitioners usually discussed their school work and their college applications. People who finish their lunches are free to leave the temple.
At Lotus, the dynamics between monastic leaders and practitioners and how they construct their Buddhist identities are different than at Pagoda. Practitioners at Lotus are less submissive to the authority of monastic members. This more egalitarian relationship between monastic members and the laity provides practitioners with room to integrate their secular with their Buddhist identities. It is understandable, then, that Buddhist identities at Lotus are more individualistic, and practitioners can decide whether, when, and how they perform them. The boundary of Buddhist identities is also different from that at Pagoda. At Lotus, people do not strictly follow a temple-specific language (such as saying “Auspicious”). Instead, they incorporate secular greetings into their interactions with each other, implicitly accepting that they can be Buddhists without following formal instructions from monastic members. Thus, some do not wear black robes, are not punctual for scripture chanting services, and do not attend the dharma talks. In other words, their Buddhist identities center on the person rather than on the temple.

3.2 Different Religious Identities

People’s identities consist of “who I am” and “what I am.” “Who I am” describes how they establish symbolic boundaries for their identities and which the in-groups and out-groups are. “What I am” describes the cultural content of people’s identities, which, in the case of the Buddhists in my study, encapsulates “what it means to be a Buddhist.” As indicated by the typical days at both temples, Buddhists answer these questions differently.

For Buddhists at Pagoda, “who I am” entails a difference not only from non-Buddhist others but also from Buddhists who do not practice at the temple. Their understanding of “what I am,” as illustrated later in this chapter, springs
almost exclusively from the authoritative religious discourses articulated by their temple. However, in many scenarios, their counterparts at Lotus play down, if not avoid, answering, “who I am”. Their understanding of “what I am” comes from sources beyond the authoritative interpretations articulated by their temple.

Part of the reason why differences in Buddhist identities are so intriguing is that the type of authoritative discourses they receive are similar; practitioners even identify with each other. For instance, before Chinese New Year, the founding Master of Compassion Bodhi wrote a “praise to the Buddha in the Chinese New Year,” in which he asked the Buddha to create peace in the world. Praises to the Buddha were widely distributed to temple branches affiliated with Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters, including Pagoda and Lotus. At Pagoda, practitioners sometimes were required to read the “praises to the Buddha” before they started their volunteer work and at Lotus, it was often a part of their scripture chanting.

Compassion Bodhi also publishes books and brochures that interpret Buddhist scriptures and the dharma in plain easy-to-understand language for lay practitioners. These books and brochures are accessible at Pagoda and Lotus temples so that by reading the same books the practitioners at both temples receive similar interpretations of Buddhism. The only difference is that Lotus Temple have some of the books and brochures translated in English. Hence, differences in their Buddhist identities should not be attributed to differences in the religious discourse they receive but to something above and beyond it.

The puzzle, therefore, is: Why do Buddhists at the temples, who receive similar interpretations of Buddhism, construct distinctive Buddhist identities and how do they construct them? In this chapter, I rely on my observations of and the practitioners’ stories about the construction of their “religious selves” to seek
answers to these questions.

3.3 Personal Cultures for Identity Construction

3.3.1 Embracing Buddhism in a Confucian Society:

Dutifully Learning Religion

Buddhists at Pagoda Temple may have an understanding of Buddhism based on visiting other Buddhist temples, worshipping on traditional Buddhist holidays, or taking refuge in the triple gem. However, many of them know little about the correct interpretation of Buddhism, or “Orthodox Buddhism.” At Pagoda Temple, they seize opportunities to learn about Buddhism through rituals, scripture chanting, meditation, reading groups, and lectures; and they develop their understanding of Buddhism in a manner similar to the Confucian way of learning. For example, they are respectful of and deferential to their teachers, obey their injunctions, and change their behavior accordingly. In other words, their personal cultures—the individual-level interpretive framework through which they situate Buddhism in their lives—are embedded in the collective Confucian culture of mainland China.

At Pagoda Temple, most teachers are monastic members. In fact, the word “learn” frequently appears in my respondents’ descriptions of how they gradually approach Buddhism and reinforce their Buddhist identity. For example, Ding Xiang, a 60-year-old Buddhist, said:

I have learned Buddhism before [coming to the temple]. Actually, I would not say I learned Buddhism before [coming to the temple]. I merely burned incense with a bunch of old women and I felt happy hanging out with others. I started to learn how to behave and be a good person according to Buddhism after I came to Pagoda Temple. What I
knew before were these secular rules in society. I did not know what the purpose of learning Buddhism is, how I should behave as a Buddhist, and how I should handle all these things in my life appropriately.

She told me that ten years ago she took refuge in the triple gem, long before coming to Pagoda Temple. However, in her practice at the temple, she always assumes that she knows little about “Orthodox Buddhism.” She attends “monastics’ dharma talks,” pays attention to how monastics teach, “how (we) should learn Buddhism and how we should behave as Buddhists.” Throughout the interview, Ding Xiang emphasized that she was always “willing to learn,” and whenever she is confused, she “asks (the) monastics for help.” In other words, she sees the Pagoda Temple chiefly as an educational institution, and she, a dutiful student, treats the monastics as teachers, deferring to and respecting their authority. After learning Buddhism at the temple, her understanding of Buddhism is derived principally from the interpretation the temple monastics provide.

This attitude of dutiful learning is not only applicable to senior and less-educated practitioners like Ding Xiang; it also emerges in the narratives of young, well-educated Buddhists. Chen Hui, a 34-year-old college-educated woman, became a full-time Pagoda temple volunteer after taking a Buddhist training course there. Born after the 1980s in mainland China, a society with state-sponsored atheism, Chen Hui admitted that she “did not have any religious exposure” when she was in school. She was later motivated to learn more about religion and Buddhism was the most accessible religion in her hometown. After visiting several Buddhist temples, Chen Hui, following a month-long camp at Pagoda Temple, decided to convert to humanistic Buddhism, which is taught and practiced at Pagoda. Chen Hui reflected:

I learned humanistic Buddhist thoughts when I was participating in the
Buddhist training camp in this temple. At first, I did not know much about it. The monastics always taught us about humanistic Buddhism. This month-long Buddhist course provides you with a concept [about what humanistic Buddhism is].

In Chen Hui’s words, the month-long Buddhist camp, a “Buddhist course,” provided her with an initial concept of humanistic Buddhism. After becoming a practitioner at Pagoda Temple, her subsequent exposure to Buddhism occurred in classroom-like settings. In her words:

As long as monastics are giving us [Buddhist] classes, we are always willing to participate. Every Monday, monastics give us classes. In these classes, we learn about how to play dharma instruments, how to chant Buddhist sutras. We also learn about how to understand Buddhist theologies. I remembered there was a time when monastics taught us how to serve meals in Buddhist ways.

Playing dharma instruments, chanting scriptures, understanding theologies, and serving Buddhist meals are important cultural resources through which Chen Hui developed her Buddhist identity. They came almost exclusively from what she saw as a classroom setting, and this process of reinforcing her Buddhist identity was a valuable “learning” path which enabled her to “purify the heart to prevent it from being attracted by the unnecessary external beauty in the society.”

Generally, practitioners at Pagoda Temple dutifully adopt this learning framework to embrace Buddhism. In our conversations, they told me, “We have learned a lot,”162 “how to understand the eight noble paths,” how to play “basic instruments in Buddhism,” “how to hold (Buddhist) activities,” “how to cook vegetarian dishes,”163 and how to integrate Buddhism into their seemingly mundane volunteer work.164 They implicitly and/or explicitly position themselves as students,
respectful and submissive to the authority of their “teachers”—the monastic members and Master of the headquarters.

The practitioners highlighted that “what we have learned here could never be learned outside.” Their narratives show that what they learn at Pagoda becomes not only an important cultural resource to help construct an image of who they are and how they should perform their religious identities, but also enhances the sacredness of their religious identity, differentiating what they “have learned (at Pagoda Temple)” from what they learned elsewhere.

At Pagoda Temple, scripture chanting and dharma talks usually occur in the main shrine, some reading groups take place in rooms designed for copying calligraphy, but neither of these is explicitly a classroom setting. Yet, Buddhists at Pagoda nonetheless see such settings as educational, and dutifully learn Buddhism, attend lessons, and defer to the monastics. As a result, they rely on the monastics’ interpretation of Buddhism to construct the cultural content of their Buddhist identities, namely, how to be a Buddhist. Hence, when talking about the images of Buddhists, my interview respondents in Pagoda Temple often used the monastics’ words or those of the Master founder of Compassion Bodhi. More importantly, they also follow the gridlines from the temple to perform their Buddhist identities. Xiu Hua informed me, “The founding Master is generating some standards that guide our lives. I will follow these standards.” After a short pause, this practitioner continued, “Of course, I am not perfectly following the standards by now. But I will try really hard to learn more.” In other words, the learning process becomes a process that enables the practitioners to continuously receive and internalize the authoritative religious discourses articulated by their temple. Some of them explicitly describe their practices of Buddhism in the temple as a learning process. As Yu Tong, a 41-year-old Buddhist woman, said, “I think it is just like going to
school. Although I am learning [Buddhism], I still do not have a degree certification. I think I should take refuge in the triple gem [to get the “degree certificate”].

To Buddhists in Pagoda Temple, practicing Buddhism in the temple is a process of dutiful learning, and taking refuge in the triple gem is a necessary milestone for the learning process at the temple.

### 3.3.2 Embracing Buddhism in an Individualistic Society: Critically Exploring Religion

As illustrated by my typical day in the Lotus Temple, compared to Pagoda Temple, Lotus Temple looks like an educational setting. For instance, the dharma talk usually happens in what practitioners refer to as a “classroom,” where the monastic stands on the stage with a projector and the practitioners sit in chairs with desks and take notes. However, unlike their counterparts in China, few, if any, Buddhists at Lotus describe the development of their Buddhist identity as a process of dutiful learning. Rather, they talked about the process as a critical exploration. Before settling on the US-based Lotus, these Buddhists had to ability to examine and evaluate other religions, which, in most cases, meant Protestant Christianity. In fact, even while practicing at Lotus, they still continue to search for outside resources, seeking alternative explanations to construct their Buddhist identity. Such critical exploration is compatible with a culture of individualism, the dominant culture in the United States; it celebrates voluntarism over obligation and individual evaluations of authoritative discourses.

In my fieldwork at Lotus Temple, I encountered Steven Tsai, a middle-aged Buddhist originally from Taiwan. Steven said that his exposure to religion was like that of most Chinese people because there was a “mixture of Buddhism and Daoism” in a “traditional family culture.” After coming to the United States,
Steven “searched [religion] here and there” and discussed the afterlife with colleagues affiliated with Protestant Christianity or with the Eastern Orthodox Church. He eventually found that “there is something [in most religions] that cannot persuade me logically and thoughtfully,” but Buddhism has a “more persuasive logical system.” Although a devoted Buddhist and regular practitioner at Lotus Temple, Steven was not entirely satisfied with the temple’s authoritative interpretations of Buddhism and investigated other worldviews. He read articles written by venerable Buddhists from other Buddhist branches and watched online lectures, and as a result, developed a deeper understanding of some ideas, such as the notion of karma, that are particularly important to Buddhist identity.

Like Steven, Jim Zhang, his peer practitioner, also approaches Buddhism through a process of critical exploration. Jim is a 55-year-old immigrant from mainland China. He told me that, after coming to the United States, he visited Bible study groups “for a long time.” He was “willing to learn [the Bible]” because, in his words, “when I came to the United States, I used to admire the United States and the West a lot. The Western world admires Christianity. Naturally, I was willing to try and hear [Christianity].” However, he found Christianity “hard to understand” and began to consider Buddhism. After exploring both religions, Jim believes that “heaven [in Christianity] exists, but Buddhahood is on a higher level.” Jim became a Buddhist after an active critical evaluation of other religions.

A regular practitioner at Lotus Temple, Jim continued this process of critical exploration. He told me that an important approach for him was “reading Buddhist scriptures by myself at home,” and “searching, what I think, are good and reliable online resources” (italics mine)—resources that are not available at his temple. He stressed that he uses his own judgment to decide which online resources were “good and reliable.” Jim explored different interpretations of Buddhism, trusting his
judgement to decide which ones were reliable to construct an individualistic Buddhist identity.

For Jim, outside materials—such as online videos about Buddhism—provided answers to many of his questions, which helped him to construct his Buddhist identity. Jim Zhang specifically mentioned an online video that helped him clear up an early confusion about reincarnation. “(I always asked myself) Why are you pretty? Why am I not? Why are you able to receive a lot of merits? Why do I not?” Through this he came across one video, which answered many such questions. “This is a very, very good video,” he said. “It is only fifty minutes long. After watching this video, you will know what Buddhism is. This video talks about the origin of life and reincarnation.” Believing in reincarnation and seeing life as a manifestation of the accumulated merits of previous lives was an important aspect of Jim’s Buddhist identity. They were as important as the temple’s explanations for the construction of his Buddhist identity.

This process of critical exploration emerged from most of my interviews with ethnic Chinese Buddhists at Lotus Temple, and transcended age, gender, country of origin, and often began before they came to the temple. For instance, Vicky Chou, a middle-aged Buddhist woman critically explored Christianity before choosing Lotus Temple as her religious home. Reflecting on her critical exploration of religion, this Buddhist woman said, “I do appreciate Christianity. There is just this one particular sentence in the Bible that I cannot understand. It says those who believe in God will be saved. Does it mean that those who do not believe in God will be condemned?” She has even debated with those who tried to convert her to Christianity.

Such critical explorations continue after the practitioners become regular, active, and even devoted temple members. As Linda Chen said, “I did my research
online. I have read a lot of books. I read the biography of the Shakyamuni Buddha. From there, I read more books and [I know how to be a Buddhist from] a little bit of both: the books and the temple.” Such different forms of exploration continually emerge in my interview data. Buddhists “search for online resources to find Buddhist scriptures in plain Chinese” or “watch YouTube videos to listen to how well-known monks explain Buddhist sutras.” The online videos that practitioners like the most and the books that practitioners read are not always produced by the international headquarters. All of my respondents at Lotus Temple are ethnic Chinese for whom Confucianism is an important part of their ethnicity. Yet, Buddhists at Lotus do not receive the temple’s interpretation of Buddhism as dutiful learners. Instead, they seek both internal and external religious resources, which they critically evaluate, and use their own judgement to decide how to construct their religiosity. In contrast to their peer practitioners at Pagoda, the way in which Lotus Buddhists understand their religion is individualistic and consistent with the cultural frameworks embodied by white middle-class people in the United States.

3.4 Temple Level Group Cultures

To embrace Buddhism, practitioners at Pagoda and Lotus temples adopt different frameworks. In the interim, their faith communities also embody different communal cultures, which are defined as “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumption about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting.” Specifically, at Pagoda, the communal culture is stricter than at Lotus. To belong to “in-groups,” practitioners at the former need to observe the linguistic and behavioral requirements of their temples. In contrast, the communal culture at Lotus is more permissive, where Buddhists and monastic leaders continually compromise.
3.4.1 Pagoda’s Strict Temple Culture

As a newcomer to Pagoda Temple, I understood at once that the temple-level culture would be strictly observed. Situated in a national context where Buddhism is the dominant religion, Pagoda has a clear symbolic boundary that not only differentiates it from the secular world but also from other Buddhist temples. This clear, if subtle, boundary is reflected in how people greet each other.

I learned the Buddhist greeting through peer influence. After beginning my volunteer work at Pagoda, I was no longer a total outsider in the eyes of practitioners, but had myself become a practitioner, and they began to greet me by saying “Auspicious dharma sister” instead of “Hello.” After several such greetings, I also began to address others as “Auspicious,” thus using the insider language of the practitioners at the Pagoda. “Auspicious,” however, is not a widely used greeting at other Chinese Buddhist temples. By using this greeting, then, Pagoda Temple established a clear group boundary differentiating it both from secular society and from other Buddhist temples. Peer sanction and guidance served as an important mechanism to transmit Pagoda’s speech codes to me.

First, the novice had to learn to say “Hello” in a Buddhist way. In my case, I did not learn through formal instruction but from peer influence: people began greeting me with “Auspicious.” This signaled that I had changed from an outside researcher to an inside practitioner and brought with it a change in my demeanor, in the way I smiled, talked, expressed myself, and interacted with others.

As illustrated through how Zhen Hua greeted me, practitioners in Pagoda Temple always used “Auspicious” to greet each other in the temple. Further conversations with them revealed that, among Buddhists at Pagoda Temple, it is a common sentiment that using “Auspicious” to greet practitioners is an important part of their identity. Ding Xiang said:
An important part of humanistic Buddhism involves rules of conduct. For instance, when we greet each other in daily lives, we may shake hands first and say hello. In Buddhism, we greet with each other and join our palms. This is what we must know. If you are in a Buddhist temple and people greet each other using “hello,” you will feel really weird, right?... Here, we greet each other using “Auspicious.” After learning this (how to greet with each other), when you are communicating with other practitioners, you will say, “Auspicious.”

Greeting each other with “Auspicious” was an important way that practitioners at Pagoda Temple performed their Buddhist identities. This greeting also served as a cultural symbol that established a symbolic boundary.

Eating is another important cultural component of Buddhists’ construction of identities. On my first day of volunteer work in Pagoda Temple, I heard a sound on a wooden board. An experienced volunteer said, “The wooden board hits. It is the time for lunch.” Weekend lunches at Pagoda Temple were usually formal Buddhist lunches, and because I was unfamiliar with the temple’s dining etiquette, I was assigned an experienced volunteer to guide me through the meal. On our way to the dining hall, she explained the basic rules: be quiet, chant scriptures, hold the lunch bowl properly, and line up before lunch. The rules and etiquette in eating were routinely and constantly imposed on new practitioners at Pagoda Temple.

While my experience of learning how to eat at Pagoda came from first-hand instruction from experienced volunteers, other newcomers learned how to eat by a more formal process. For instance, Pagoda Temple hosted monthly Buddhist lecturers where participants—Buddhists, visitors, or volunteers—were encouraged to stay for lunch. At the end of the lecture, the host—who was often a monastic member—asked the participants if any of them “do not know how to guo tang
(eating formal Buddhist lunches).” Those who had no experience of or were not familiar with formal lunches watched a tutorial that provided step-by-step guidance on how to observe the rituals in formal Buddhist lunches. Through such instruction and formal video-taped tutorials, Pagoda Temple stressed the importance of eating and ensured that “insiders” observed appropriate behaviors.

Because the rules were explained to each practitioner, the monastics at Pagoda did not hesitate to correct practitioners if they forgot to observe them. After one lunch, for instance, a monastic leader indicated what was not done well. She said that the practitioners could have pulled out their chairs more quietly. I was corrected several times because of my lack of familiarity with eating and greeting etiquette, and even long-term volunteers who occasionally forgot the rules were corrected.

One evening, some volunteers and monastic members were waiting for dinner, the temple’s most casual meal. Although casual, there were still rituals to be observed. One routine involved lining up and chanting a four-sentence stanza before picking up the food. Two volunteers forgot to observe these routines, going directly to the food table. Seeing this, a monastic stopped them and said, “Don’t you remember that we need to chant the verse before picking up the food. You are both experienced practitioners, how could you. . . ?” The two, suitably chastened, put down their food and lined up with other Buddhists. One murmured, “Oh, we really made a mistake.” And repeated it again, “This time, we really made a mistake.”

This correction process reinforces the imposition of behavioral codes that ensure practitioners observe temple-specific behavioral routines when constructing, performing, and embodying their Buddhist identities.

For many practitioners, these rules become an integral part of their Buddhist identities. As Chen Hui, a young, highly educated practitioner, reflected in her
When you have meals in the dining halls within the temple, you have to eat it up. You need to pick up as much food as you are able to eat. There is no way for you to waste your food. Every person is watching you. Also, in what university would you waste your food. The monastic would give you a notion on how to deal with food. Also, in your daily interactions with the monastics, they would also influence you through their behaviors and words in everyday lives.

She explained how the words and behaviors of the monastics and practitioners had influenced her. “I see that other people cherish their merits a lot. Regardless of whether the food has become cold, they believe that they should eat it up. It will give you a belief that you should also do so.” As her narrative illustrates, when she began at Pagoda, the temple’s strict behavioral requirements felt like a burden, an unnecessary imposition, but eventually, they became a “belief,” a natural inclination, and an embodiment of her Buddhist identity.

The strictness of Pagoda Temple is not limited to eating and greeting. It permeates every aspect of behavior, including hairstyles and how to deal with material goods. In Buddhism, hairstyles have symbolic meaning. After renunciation and becoming monastics, nuns and monks shave their hair to symbolize their departure from the secular world. For most lay practitioners, however, there is no such explicit requirement, although at Pagoda I was corrected by monastic members and other practitioners about my hair.

Initially, I had long shoulder-length hair, but after serving as a volunteer in the temple for a few days I was told by a monastic that “As a woman practitioner(\textit{Nv Zhong}), you should always maintain an appropriate dressing style. Having your hair shoulder length is inappropriate. You should either have a
ponytail or have short hair.” I apologized and told her that I would change my hair to a ponytail after breakfast. This conversation initiated another. When I returned to my seat, a volunteer who sat opposite of me repeated what the nun said and told me, “It is inappropriate to keep your hair shoulder length. Look at my hairstyle, I am always having very short hair.” Bai Jie, a younger practitioner in her mid-20s, overheard our conversation and asked the long-term practitioner, “Is my hairstyle appropriate?” The long-term practitioner nodded to Bai Jie and said, “Yours looks fine.” Then she switched to me and said, “You can also mimic my hairstyle and have a ponytail.” This incident indicates that the rules, regulations, behavioral and linguistic codes—Pagoda’s enduring and institutionalized temple-level culture—are strictly observed. The temple’s culture, though initially imposed by monastic members, is sustained and reinforced by practitioners who have internalized it.

The strict culture in Pagoda Temple was well-integrated in their daily routines and was revealed in numerous incidents throughout my fieldwork in the temple. As discussed in Chapter 2, visitors are not necessarily “in-group members.” Many are not even Buddhists. Yet, volunteers sometimes discipline the behavior of visitors, particularly if the visitor violates an important rule, such as bringing non-vegetarian food into the temple. In other cases, volunteers correct mild violations of the temple’s behavioral requirements. I observed one volunteer correcting someone for pouring out water in her bottle for new tea. She said, “In Pagoda Temple, we are taught to cherish the merits. You could have drunk the water in your cup before pouring in new tea.”

I have also observed a Buddhist woman correcting visitors for unnecessary use of paper towels in the restroom. Upon seeing a visitor use three pieces of paper towels to wipe her hands, this Buddhist woman said, “In Pagoda Temple, all the things that we use are donated by different people. You do not even need one paper
towel to wipe your hands. You could have dried your hands off.” This visitor, however, refused to correct her behavior and said, “These paper towels are here for people to wipe their hands. If you dry your hands off, there could be water on the floor. The slippery floor would make people fall!” When this visitor refused to correct her behavior, the Buddhist woman turned to me, as I was wearing a volunteer tag, and whispered, “They would never understand it. But you, dharma sister, you must understand why I said this to them.”

As shown by my observations, everyone who wanted to be part of the temple needed to be part of its strict temple culture. Those who did not accept it were always referred to as “they.” For members, it was necessary to be clear about the nature of Pagoda’s relation to the broader society and other Buddhist temples, to observe mutual responsibility for peer sanction, and to adopt the temple’s speech and behavioral codes, all of which worked to construct and sustain a strict temple culture.

3.4.2 Permissive Temple Culture in Lotus, the United States

In contrast to Pagoda Temple, the temple-level culture at Lotus is permissive. Located in a suburban area in a large city in the United States, the temple’s traditional Chinese architectural style differentiates it from the surrounding buildings. Probably because of its religious and ethnic minority status, Lotus Temple does not highlight its symbolic boundary to further separate it from the broader world. Instead, it embodies a permissive culture, and practitioners support each other when they reject Lotus-specific and Buddhist speech and behavioral codes. As manifested in my days in Lotus, each Sunday morning, during the weekly scripture chanting services, Buddhists at Lotus Temple usually wear jeans, T-shirts,
shorts, and even occasionally gym clothes. Although the temple’s architecture sets it apart from the mainstream society in the United States, its dress code keeps its members firmly in the secular world. This permissive culture is further reflected in the Buddhists’ interactions with each other in the temple.

Like Pagoda Temple, Lotus serves free vegetarian lunches every weekend. But instead of having formal Buddhist lunches, Lotus serves a casual buffet-style lunch in which the rules around “eating” are significantly more relaxed. The only ritualistic rule is lining up and chanting the four-sentence stanza before eating. And the only requirement is to “eat up what you get.”

Despite Lotus’s relaxed rules, some practitioners disobeyed even the few that exist. Practitioners do not always eat all that they receive. While lunching at the temple one day, Linda Chen complained about having too much rice on her plate. “This (wasting food),” she said, “is really bad. I should have eaten up the rice. But it is just too much. I am not going to eat it up. I may throw it away quietly.” Her complaint indicates that, from her perspective, practitioners at Lotus Temple will not explicitly ask their peers to observe every behavioral rule and were not above bending them. 190

When eating in the temple, practitioners were not required to half bow to the Buddha or chant a stanza before eating. Nor were they required to hold their bowls and keep quiet while eating. In other words, while Pagoda and Lotus Temple receive similar interpretations of Buddhism and even have similar rituals, the cultures of the two temples are different—one is strict, the other permissive. Such disparity in the culture between the temples can translate into visible differences in the embodiment of Buddhist identities. At Lotus, for instance, I saw one Buddhist practitioner who is not a regular attendant, help out in their children’s camp. When eating in the Five Contemplation Hall (the dining hall), he always took a half bow to the Buddha,
put his palms together, quietly chanted a stanza before eating. His performance of Buddhist identities in eating is visibly different from how other Buddhists at Lotus perform their Buddhist identities. Curious, I asked how he came to the temple and he told me that he is a mainland Chinese. When he was in China, he often visits Pagoda Temple. This information explains why his performances of Buddhist identity is so different from members at Lotus Temple. He internalizes Pagoda’s strict temple culture and performs his Buddhist identity in the “Pagoda way.”

The permissive culture at lotus Temple is also found in the practitioners’ greetings. Like Pagoda Temple, Lotus Temple tried to standardize the manner in which practitioners greet each other. Before a scripture chanting service for Medicine Buddha, a monastic approached some young volunteers who were busy preparing for the service. On seeing the nun, they said, “Hello, Venerable.” The Monastic smiled and said lightly, “You do not even know how to greet with me. When you see me, you should put your palms together and say ‘Auspicious Venerable.’” This conversation, however, did not yield any noticeable change in the greeting. In subsequent participant observations, both youth volunteers and other practitioners still said “Hello”, Good morning” and “Good afternoon” to greet each other as well as the monastics. And the monastics did not correct them. In this way, practitioners in Lotus Temple partially rejected the identity protocol by retaining casual and secular greetings. At the same time, Lotus Temple did not forcefully impose its greeting protocol on practitioners, either. This incident demonstrates a delicate compromise between the practitioners’ agentic orientations and Lotus Temple’s imposition of identity protocols. As the snapshot in the beginning of the chapter shows, the way that people greet each other in Lotus Temple remains casual. Even those who sit behind the reception desk—people who represent the temple to interact with visitors—do not greet visitors using
“Auspicious.” In other words, practitioners at Lotus Temple partly reject the Buddhist speech code by retaining a casual, secular greeting. At the same time, the Lotus Temple recommended—but did not forcefully impose—its greeting codes on practitioners, which indicates that the permissive culture there is accepted by both practitioners and monastics.

Indeed, as indicated by the “no waste” rule in eating and the requirement of “Auspicious” in greeting, many of the behavioral and speech codes at Lotus and Pagoda are similar. This is not surprising since the temples are affiliated with the same international headquarters. However, the differences between a strict and a permissive temple culture are not necessarily about the content, such as symbols, rules, and codes, but rather about how and to what extent the temples impose those cultures. For instance, “no waste” is still a rule when eating at Lotus, but neither monastics nor practitioners insist on imposing it at every meal. Similarly, using “Auspicious” as a greeting at Lotus is more a recommendation than a requirement.

In fact, like its counterpart in China, Lotus Temple has requirements concerning hair, but they are generally not imposed on regular practitioners. Although I kept my hair shoulder length during my first three months of fieldwork at Lotus, I encountered no explicit correction. It was only after I started as an usher that an experienced volunteer told me that practitioners who serve as ushers—those who wear robes, play instruments, or burn incense throughout the religious service—should have “appropriate” hairstyles. In other words, the rule applies to ushers. The permissive culture at Lotus permits some negotiation between practitioners and the temple authorities about behavioral and speech codes, providing room for practitioners to integrate their secular behavior with the temple space. They are allowed to wear T-shirts, jeans, and even gym clothes and to say “hello,” “good morning,” and “good afternoon.” To some extent, this space
plays down the symbolic boundaries between the temple and the secular world and influences the construction of the practitioners’ Buddhist selves.

3.5 Constructing Buddhist Identities

3.5.1 A Temple-Specific Buddhist Identity in Pagoda, Mainland China

National cultures—the culture of Confucianism in mainland China and individualism in the United States—influence the personal cultures of Buddhists. Their personal culture is an interpretive framework through which Buddhists assess how to situate faith in their lives. The majority/minority status of Buddhism in China and the United States influences the temple-level group culture by facilitating a shared understanding of where and how to situate the symbolic boundaries that differentiate one temple from another. The Buddhist identity is further constructed through the interaction of the personal-level cultural framework and the temple-level culture. At Pagoda, the Confucian framework of dutifully learning Buddhism and the strict temple culture operate together, producing a type of intensive Buddhist identity that endorses subtle symbolic boundaries.

By “being a Buddhist,” practitioners in Pagoda Temple refer to a specific type of Buddhist identity that celebrates their temple affiliation. Zhang Chun Hua, a middle-aged Buddhist woman described her performances of Buddhist identities and said:

The starting point of all my behaviors is observing the beliefs in Pagoda Temple. Whatever happens, my first thought is that I should protect the interest of Pagoda Temple. I would rather sacrifice my own interest to protect the interest of Pagoda Temple. I always position the interest of
Pagoda Temple in the first place. . . . Regardless of what happens, I would call the monastic members [to seek their input]. I do not care if I would be critiqued by others. It does not matter. But I would definitely call the monastics and report the incident to them.

As her narrative reflects, after practicing Buddhism at Pagoda Temple, her identity transitioned from secular to Buddhist, and, more specifically, to a “Pagoda self.” Moreover, this Pagoda self comes from the authoritative instructions articulated by the monastics. This means that she would seek monastics’ input and adjust her behaviors accordingly. This Pagoda-driven identity is congruent with a temple-level culture that carries a clear boundary which differentiates the temple from society and from other temples.

Wu Tong, a middle-aged Buddhist practitioner articulated the symbolic identity of boundaries between Buddhist practitioners in Pagoda Temple and their counterparts in other Buddhist temples. She compared Pagoda to other Chinese temples and described the most important part of being a Buddhist:

Buddhists in Pagoda Temple have a different level of understanding [from those in other temples]. I have asked myself why there is a difference. I don’t know. What I know is that we understand and observe the [Buddhist] rules.

By understanding and observing the Buddhist rules, practitioners refer to their observation of the temple’s speech and behavioral codes. It is this that separates the temple from secular society, but it also distinguishes it from what many respondents see as other, “superstitious” Buddhist temples. These codes, specific to Pagoda Temple, provide the core of the Buddhist identity to the temple’s practitioners, helping them construct their temple-specific Buddhist identities.
Narratives about the importance of being a Buddhist at Pagoda Temple and being a follower of the venerable Master in this International Buddhist Headquarters emerged in almost all conversations, both formal and informal. For instance, in our interview, Shen Tian, a 53-year-old Buddhist woman told me that “My parents told me that Buddhism is superstitious, and they do not encourage me to be a Buddhist.” She acknowledged that “yes, I also feel like those [Buddhism] is superstitious, but our humanistic Buddhism is egalitarian and without restriction.” Without hesitation, she said, “As long as you have an honest heart, you can come to the temple and learn Buddhism.” In doing so, she establishes the symbolic boundary between practicing Buddhism at Pagoda Temple and practicing “superstitious Buddhism” in other Buddhist temples. Through informal conversations, when devoted practitioners or long-term volunteers introduce the practice of Buddhism to newcomers in the temple, they always refer it as “this is how humanistic Buddhism practices in Pagoda Temple.”

Because practitioners at Pagoda are devoted to the type of Buddhism practiced at their temple, the content of their Buddhist identities is determined by the authoritative discourses articulated by the temple and especially by its monastic community. The boundaries of these identities are situated between the Pagoda “us” and the secular “others.” In other words, the “secular self” almost disappears when Buddhists are in the temple, where they construct a temple-specific Buddhism and to which they conscientiously adhere. This temple-specific Buddhist identity, I maintain, is constructed through an interplay between the Confucian framework of dutifully learning Buddhism and Pagoda’s strict temple culture. Within the Confucian framework, the Buddhists are deferential to the authoritative discourses articulated by the temple and embody them in the performance of their religiosity.
3.5.2 An Individual-Centered Buddhist Identity in Lotus Temple, the United States

In contrast to Pagoda Temple, practitioners at Lotus Temple value their “secular selves,” which do not disappear in the temple. Buddhism becomes just one facet of their identities. This individual-centered identity is illustrated in an interview with David Liao, a 65-year-old engineer who participated at Lotus Temple. He described his “own understanding of Buddhism:”

We should not stop chasing our dream just because Buddhism tells us that these things are illusionary. As long as you chase your dream in the right way, you should do that, right? I want to buy a Mercedes Benz vehicle. I want to have lots of money, go ahead. . . . If you want to be promoted as a high-level officer or a vice president, go ahead. As long as you can do it and you do it in the right way.

David emphasized that this is his “own understanding” of Buddhism; it is not contingent upon the temple’s interpretation. For him, Buddhism justifies, serves, and centers around a secular self that wants to “chase dreams.” Instead of substituting his “secular self” for a “Buddhist self” or even to a “Lotus self,” David reverses the process by integrating his Buddhist self with his secular self.

Like David, Amanda Chung, a devout Buddhist and an active volunteer in her 30s, integrates her Buddhist identity with her secular self, attributing her ability to do so to the permissive culture at Lotus Temple. She said, “We will not say, ‘If you are a Buddhist, you must be vegetarian.’” As a Buddhist, Amanda said, “I still need to live my life. I still need to interact with others.” It is impossible for her to isolate herself and “read [Buddhist] scriptures deep in the mountains.” According to her, a feasible approach to integrating her Buddhist identity with other facets of her
life is “to do good in my interactions with colleagues at work,” while not being a strict vegetarian. Her Buddhist identity is embodied in how she lives her life, not the reverse.

Indeed, for many practitioners at Lotus, Buddhism is no more than an additional dimension to their central identity. Some would not “think about Buddhist teachings” deliberately but would rather integrate Buddhism by “doing good” in their lives inside and outside the temple. Others would not strictly observe a vegetarian diet. “I am a vegetarian,” Anna Chen, a 67-year-old active practitioner and regular volunteer said, “when I am in the temple. Outside the temple, I am not.”

Because Buddhists at Lotus live their lives in various ways, the expression of their identity or, more precisely, of how they integrate Buddhism into their lives, differs from person to person. However, regardless of how they understand, perform, and embody their Buddhist identities, they share one similarity with Amanda Chung—identity is an integral part of the individualistic self that is constructed outside the temple.

Although being active, regular, and even devoted practitioners at Lotus Temple, their Buddhist selves never replaces their secular selves. Instead, their Buddhist selves are incorporated into their secular selves, serving the secular in a Buddhist way. In David’s words, a Buddhist way is the “right way.” Lotus practitioners’ construction of Buddhist identity is very different from that of their counterparts in Pagoda Temple. While this difference seems counter-intuitive given their close affiliation with the same international Buddhist headquarters, after de-composing their construction of religious identities into an individualistic framework and a temple culture, I assert that by possessing an individualistic framework while practicing Buddhism, Buddhists at Lotus Temple are not entirely
subsumed by an authoritative discourse. They have room to interpret and re-interpret Buddhism and construct a Buddhist identity with a permissive boundary to the secular world.

### 3.6 Summary

The comparison between the construction of Buddhist identities in Pagoda and Lotus temples yields insights into how national context influences the construction of religious identity within faith communities. Relying on interviews and observational data, I can break down the construction of Buddhist identities into personal-level and temple-level cultures. Both frameworks are conditioned by the dominant culture in the broader national contexts where people practice their faith.

First, personal cultures—the interpretative framework that individuals use to embed religion in their lives—are contingent upon the dominant culture of the national context where people practice their faith. Through explicit exposure and/or habitual learning, individuals acquire culturally appropriate ways—revealed in actions or articulations—to construct their religious identity. At Pagoda Temple, personal cultures are the way through which Buddhists dutifully learn Buddhism and embed themselves in the Confucian culture of mainland China. At Lotus Temple, on the other hand, personal cultures, influenced by the culture of individualism in the US, encourage the critical exploration of many ideas and religions. By means of these different, and in some ways opposing, frameworks, Buddhists manifest diverse ways of seeking, receiving, and interpreting religious discourses, both in and outside their temples.

Second, the temple-level cultures are congruent with the majority or minority status of religion in the respective countries where adherents practice their faith. Situated in mainland China, where Buddhism has a fragile majority
Pagoda Temple manifests a strict temple culture with a clear group boundary between it and other Buddhist temples. It requires its members to sanction each other and demands the use of Buddhist (even Pagoda) specific speech and behavioral codes. The strict temple-level culture differs with its counterparts in the United States, where Chinese Buddhists are both religious and ethnic minorities. The US-based Lotus Temple has a permissive temple culture with a flexible boundary. Group members permit indiscretions in the temple-specific speech and behavioral codes.

Such influence of a majority/minority status on the group culture of religious organization is often mentioned, through seldom thoroughly discussed, in the previous social scientific studies of religion. Based on my observation, I argue that for religious communities that see themselves as part of the major religion in their national contexts, the strictness of the group culture enables practitioners to highlight symbolic boundaries with the perceived “others” who practice the same religion and endorse a similar religious ideology. The need to highlight symbolic boundaries explains why a strict temple culture emerged at the Pagoda Temple, and why Buddhists there observe Pagoda-specific language and behavioral codes in greeting, eating, and working. However, even within many permissive group cultures, communities are easily distinguishable from others theologically, as well as in rituals, practices, and architectural styles. These boundaries explain why monastic and lay members at the Lotus Temple in the United States are relaxed with each other, constructing a permissive temple-level culture that permits the refusal of certain Lotus-specific—and even Buddhist—language and behavioral codes to integrate the temple into society. Distinctive temple cultures are independent of the temple’s religious affiliation and its connection to the international headquarters but are at least partly connected to the national context in which they are situated.
Third, I found that the religious identities of Buddhists are constructed through interactions between personal cultures and temple-level cultures. Expanding on previous studies, I assert that such interactions are conditioned by national contexts. This interaction occurs through Buddhists’ internalization and application of the dominant cultural values in their respective national contexts, as well as their construction of an appropriate temple culture that enables them to maintain a boundary with the real or imagined secular other. Buddhists in Pagoda Temple, for instance, construct intensive and temple-specific Buddhist identities. Buddhists at Lotus Temple, however, critically explore religion and construct individual-centered Buddhist identities by integrating Buddhism into other facets of their secular lives. In both temples, personal cultures, temple cultures, and religious individuals’ embodiment of their religiosity mutually construct and reinforce each other. My comparison therefore shows that both the individual and temple-level cultures are dependent on the national contexts where people practice their faith and where the temples are situated. The construction of religious identity is indeed an interaction between religious people and their religious communities, but the interactions are context specific.

In this chapter, I show how religious identity depends on the national context where people practice their faith. Their personal culture—namely, the interpretive framework through which they understand and embrace faith—is informed by the national-level collective culture. The group culture—namely, temple-specific interactional patterns—is informed by the practitioners’ perceptions of the majority/minority status of religion in their specific national context. Religious identity, then, is constructed through an interaction between personal and group cultures, both conditioned by national context.
Navigating Gender Norms: “Doing Gender” in Volunteer Work

What are the religious gender norms articulated by the two temples? How do these religious gender norms translate into Buddhists’ understandings of gender? Why do Buddhists in Pagoda and Lotus Temple “do gender” differently? This chapter takes an initial step to address these questions by examining how gender is “done” in volunteer work and the attitudes practitioners espouse. I focus on the reproduction and challenge of gender in volunteer work because an important component of gender traditionalism in conservative religions is the notion of traditional gender roles—men are supposed to be breadwinners and women are supposed to be caregivers. Volunteer work is an important sphere in Buddhist temples that may reflect or challenge the notion of traditional gender roles through work divisions.211

Gender is a social institution that, as Patricia Yancey Martin writes, contains “power relations and normative expectations” and is produced and reproduced continuously through individual practices such as how people talk about gender as well as behavior.212 Religious communities are an important locus for people to “do gender,” or reproduce or challenge gender as a social institution. 213 Thus, religion,
to some extent, intersects with gender, and produces and challenges gender as a social institution. The specific intersection between gender and religion is dependent on the gender ideologies offered by religious communities, practitioners’ response to these gender ideologies, and practitioners’ gendered practices. For the Buddhists who practice at them, Pagoda Temple in China and Lotus Temple in the US are important sites to produce, reproduce, or challenge gender. Yet, in contrast to the well-documented intersection between gender and religion, which predominant focuses on people’s performances of gender in gender-conservative faith communities, Neither Pagoda nor Lotus Temple is gender-conservative. In fact, promoting gender egalitarianism is an important agenda for the Compassion Bodhi International Buddhist Headquarters as well as the temple branches affiliated with this headquarters. This is evident in the fact that nuns lead both, which is more progressive than many gender-conservative faith communities described by previous scholars. But egalitarianism, does not mean there is no difference. In spite of it gender emerges in complex and nuanced way in the two temples.

How, then, does gender intersect with religion in these two liberal religious communities? In this chapter, I examine the intersection between gender and religion in the two temples through a description of the official gender ideologies defined by Compassion Bodhi, an analysis of gender ideologies offered by the two temples, and an examination of practitioners’ understandings and performances of their gendered selves. This chapter, like others in this dissertation, adopts a theoretical framework of “doing gender” through “doing religion.” This means that I will examine how Buddhists in the two temples articulate gender and perform their gendered selves, which potentially leads to reinforcing or transforming gendered structures. Here, I focus on how gender is “done” through volunteer work. Sun Fang from Pagoda Temple and Andrew Hsu from Lotus Temple
represent the typical understandings of gender egalitarianism in the temple.

4.1 The Background

4.1.1 Gender in Buddhism and Gender at the Headquarters

Buddhist gender norms range from comprehensive egalitarianism and the elimination of gender differences to the institutional subordination of women, and even to claims of female inferiority. Hence, some scholars say that Buddhist views of gender can be ambiguous and inconsistent, and traceable to Buddhism’s origins. However, Buddhism’s concept of equality was originally highly progressive compared to Indian society in general. Its theology recognized that men and women can reach Buddhahood, the ultimate stage of enlightenment.

Buddhism has not necessarily maintained its position as a force for progressive change. For example, the “Eight Special Rules” governing the behavior of monastic communities require nuns to salute to monks and never to criticize them, but no such rules constrain monks’ behavior. Likewise Buddhist scriptures, such as the Madhayama Agama, encourage laywomen to become ideal wives and caregivers and men ideal husbands and breadwinners. Both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist texts highlight the danger of women’s sexuality and the temptation they present to monastics, who may not achieve enlightenment if they succumb. Contrary to most interpretations, some Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist teachings claim it is almost impossible for women to reach Buddhahood.

Some scholars frame modern Buddhism’s approach to gender as a compromise between its tradition of gender egalitarianism and the gender inequality of secular societies. In Chinese societies (such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, as well as mainland China), that means that Buddhism and Confucianism interact with each
While scholars recognize the potential of re-interpreting Confucianism to achieve gender egalitarianism, it has traditionally encoded female subordination. Buddhism, however, introduced the idea of gender egalitarianism to Confucian societies and provided women with a route to liberation through monasticism.

At the same time, though, Confucianism in turn influenced Buddhism, leading to gender-traditionalist Buddhist practices. For instance, although China has made tremendous progress in promoting gender egalitarianism and an increasing number of monastic Chinese Buddhist nuns have become leaders, laywomen are still expected to be ideal wives and caregivers.

As a Chinese Buddhist Temple in the United States, Lotus Temple also interacts with US gender stratification and gender segregation, which exist in many institutions, such as religion, the workplace, health care, and the criminal justice system. However, egalitarian gender norms are relatively widespread in the United States. Research shows that religious practice and gender norms do not differ significantly in ethnic Buddhist temples like Lotus—those which are chiefly composed of immigrants—or meditation centers—those which are predominantly white. Some studies similarly show that egalitarian gender norms in the U.S. empower Taiwanese and Thai immigrants to reconstruct their gendered selves, freeing them from traditional gender norms in which women are submissive. For instance, Buddhists in an ethnic Theravada temple say that men are considered superior to women in their ethnic culture, but women are more involved in a US temple and participate in leadership practices, such as leading morning scripture chanting services.

Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters, of which Pagoda and Lotus are affiliates, explicitly names gender equality as a value. The founding Master contends that female nuns should have the same status as male monks, and female
nuns work as directors, religious leaders, and spiritual teachers in lots of Buddhist branches connected to Compassion Bodhi. Female nuns lead both Pagoda and Lotus temples. The founding Master also encourages female nuns to teach Buddhist monks in Buddhist schools, whereas there are some other Buddhist temples where monks teach nuns but nuns do not teach monks. The founding Master also advocates for gender egalitarianism among lay Buddhists with respect to housework, child rearing, and paid work. He thinks that women should make contributions to the society, carry social responsibilities, and engage in community services to achieve gender egalitarianism. He also has a progressive perspective on abortion compared to most Buddhist leadership. While noting that Buddhist theology understands fetuses as a living being and abortion as a form of murder, he acknowledges that abortion is a complicated issue and opposes laws that ban it. Rather he says that women should be able to decide about abortion for themselves.

Compassion Bodhi thus represents a liberal community according to the overall approach in scholarship of making such differentiations.\textsuperscript{236} It, and both Lotus and Pagoda Temples, clearly differs from conservative religious communities that generally advocate for traditional gender ideologies that reject women’s religious leaderships, advocate women’s compliance to men, praise women’s femininity as a natural characteristic, support abortion rights.\textsuperscript{237} They have far more in common with liberal religious communities, in the sense of having progressive gendered stances in terms of women’s religious leadership,\textsuperscript{238} rhetoric about gender roles,\textsuperscript{239} and attitudes towards abortion.\textsuperscript{240} Nonetheless, situating any religious community on the spectrum of conservatism and liberalism simplifies their complex nature, and, as I found, neither Pagoda nor Lotus aligns completely with the rhetoric of their parent organization.

The nuns who lead Pagoda and Lotus Temple do not face official, gendered
limitations in their roles as leaders. As well as leader they are spiritual teachers who give dharma talks, host Buddhist rituals, and provide Buddhist classes to practitioners. Likewise, most women in Pagoda and Lotus Temple have careers. Yet, I found that neither temple always promotes gender egalitarianism.

4.2 “Doing Gender” in the Temples

4.2.1 Doing Gender and Doing Differences in Pagoda Temple in China

At Pagoda, men and women read the same scripture, sit in the same main shrine, and hear the same dharma talk. When eating, men and women sit in the same dining hall and have the same food. There are some resources only accessible to women; for instance, the internal morning scripture chanting services is usually only open to women, although lay men of high status are sometimes permitted to participate. For example, Pagoda sometimes invites professors from elite Chinese universities to lecture at the temple and allows some to participate in the temple’s internal scripture chanting service.

I once asked Min Qiang why the internal scripture chanting service is open only to women. He explained that all residential monastic members are nuns, and by “residential monastic members” he meant monastic members who stay at the temple for a long time. The internal scripture chanting service occurred in a shrine within the monastic members’ residential halls. Considering the norm of gender segregation in sacred places, men, as a rule, are not allowed to enter the residential hall and, therefore, prohibited from participating in the morning scripture chanting service. While gender segregation in sacred places is the norm, many Pagoda Buddhists do not believe a gender difference exists. For instance, Xin Hua, a
38-year-old Buddhist woman, said, “I do not feel lots of differences between men and women.”

Yet the division in volunteer work is clearly gendered. Women typically usher in the guest house and serve food in the dining hall and tea house, both tasks considered feminine work. Men, in contrast, do “the masculine work,” such as driving cargos and standing guard at the entrance to the main shrine. When I asked about these kinds of divisions, interviewees described it as natural. Xiu Hua, the practitioner who said there were no differences between men and women at Pagoda said that men do “more physically demanding work” and that theirs is that work “that we dharma sisters are not able to do.” Indeed, in their practices, it was typically men who lifted heavy objects, there were tasks men and not women performed that do not require physical prowess. The claim of “no difference” seemed to contradict the clear expectation of gender distinction in volunteer work, and I sought to investigate why this was the case.

### 4.2.2 Doing Gender and Doing Sameness in Lotus Temple in the US

For most of my time in Lotus Temple, I worked together with a group of young practitioners, most of whom were in their 20s. This group did work in the temple ranging from serving as ushers in the scripture chanting services to preparing food for the outreach event to playing games with kids in the children’s camp. In general, I also observed gender neutrality in work throughout the temple. Men serve as ushers and cook dishes in the kitchen. Women are just as likely as men to do seemingly physically demanding work, such as climbing high to clean the glass on the top of the gate during new-year cleaning sessions. Gender difference was not salient in labor division. Likewise, men and women have equal access to resources at
Lotus. They chant the same scripture, read the same books, hear the same dharma talk, have the same food, and share the main shrine and dining hall. There was gender division in the main shrine, but it was not enforced as rigidly as at Pagoda, and there were practitioners who opposed it outright.

Interestingly, while many practitioners at Lotus Temple claim that they do not think there is any difference between men and women, most of them do not attribute their understandings of gender egalitarianism to the religious gender norms articulated by their temple or Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters. Rather they attribute their understandings of gender egalitarianism to their experiences in the US. One Buddhist woman at Lotus told me that her experiences in the temple had not changed her understanding of gender because “the spirit in the US is more egalitarian.” However, she thought that Buddhists who practice their religion in Asia might have a different experience.

The differences between gender practices in Lotus Temple and Pagoda Temple supports the notion that the context plays a strong role, given the temples’ other similarities. I will look at their differences with respect to gender through two case studies based on members I spoke with at each.

4.3 Understandings of Gender among the People

4.3.1 Sun Fang in Pagoda Temple in China: “Gender Is Equal Here”

Sun Fang is one of many practitioners at Pagoda who said that gender is equal in Pagoda Temple. A woman in her mid-20s, Sun Fang decided to stay in Pagoda Temple and serve as a full-time volunteer for some time before going back to the secular society after participating in a month-long educational camp held in Pagoda
Temple. When I spoke to her, she had been there for three months. Her volunteer work in Pagoda Temple involved serving both formal and informal meals. She is of average height and has thick, short hair and red cheeks. She reminded me of the “tomboys” at my middle school—girls who did not embody a stereotypical image of femininity. At the beginning of our conversation, Sun Fang seemed to be a little bit nervous. She kept touching the cup of tea on the table and had emptied it within the first five minutes of our interview. But she also seemed eager to share her thoughts about Buddhism with me.

After starting with a few questions about how she had come to Pagoda Temple and her understandings of Buddhism, I asked her, “how are gender differences known at Pagoda Temple?” Without hesitation she replied, “I think gender is equal here. We do not have the so-called male privilege and female subordination thing at all. Thinking about the monastics in our temple, they are all female nuns, but can really behave in a masculine way. In every aspect of their behaviors and interactions, they are as capable as men.” She emphasized, “In our Pagoda Temple, there is no gender discrimination. It is entirely gender equal I would say.”

Sun Fang had long been interested in Buddhism but had never practiced it before going to Pagoda’s camp. She had visited other Buddhist temples in mainland China that were not affiliated with the Compassion Bodhi, and she spoke from the point of view of comparing Pagoda to these other temples. She said, “In other Buddhist temples, indeed, there is this phenomenon. I mean there are salient power dynamics between male monks and female nuns. Sometimes, female nuns [are required to] prostrate towards male monks.” Sun Fang found this uncomfortable, and she had been attracted to Pagoda in part because it has female leadership. She believed that the notion of gender egalitarianism in Pagoda Temple fit her ideals.
about gender relations. She credited this gender egalitarianism with enhancing her own confidence and that of other women affiliated with the temple.

I was surprised, then, when Sun Fang said, in response to my question as to whether men and women learn Buddhism in different ways, “Of course there are differences between male and female practitioners. Indeed, there are more female practitioners in the temples, but they are having more ‘bad habits.’” When I asked what she meant, she explained, “For example, they speak loudly. They gossip. Also, they have these inappropriate behaviors.” She paused. “And, most importantly, they are calculated. They are easier to feel jealous than male practitioners. Males are franker and more open. They won’t be calculated.” In focusing her volunteer work on food service, Sun Fang also conforms to Pagoda Temple’s gendered norms with respect to labor. Thus, Sun Fang betrayed some belief in traditionalist gendered narratives.

I found it was common for Buddhists in Pagoda Temple to assert that “gender is equal here” and to celebrate the gender egalitarianism offered by their temple, but yet to evince opinions clearly aligned with gender traditionalism.

4.3.2 Andrew Hsu in Lotus Temple in the US: “I Don’t Notice It”

Buddhists in Lotus Temple were usually very talkative when they discussed their journey to Buddhism as well as their participation in Lotus Temple. Yet, when the conversation veered towards gender, a lot of them seemed to be confused. When I asked them how gender manifests itself in their temple, most people simply answered, “I don’t know.” Some of them asked me what I meant by my question. Andrew Hsu’s first response to my question about gender and Buddhism was, “I haven’t thought about this question.” But as our conversation
continued, I found that Andrew has deep and meaningful thoughts on gender and Buddhism.

Andrew Hsu is a forty-year-old first-generation Taiwanese immigrant who came to the US fifteen years ago. He is of average height, with cropped hair, and wears glasses. He is soft-spoken and I was surprised to learn that he is a lay leader at Lotus Temple. Hsu also has a master’s degree and holds a full-time job outside the temple. In his spare time, he volunteers at the temple, helping the monastics to arrange different kinds of outreach events, serving as an usher in important Buddhist rituals, and occasionally playing instruments in scripture chanting services. When I invited Andrew Hsu to participate in an interview, he immediately agreed, and he began the interview eagerly even though he had been volunteering all day at a children’s camp training event and must have been exhausted. He helped me find a quiet space inside the temple where we could talk without being interrupted. Most of his answers were long and detailed. He said he was giving me “long version stories.” These interesting “long version stories” described his journey of participation at Lotus after he relocated from the East Coast to the metropolitan city in the South.

So, I was surprised that Andrew said he hadn’t thought about how gender comes through in Buddhism and how it manifests in Lotus Temple. He seemed to be thinking out loud as he said, “Some Buddhist books say, ‘[Women] need to become men. If you are a woman in this life, you should be a vegetarian so that you can become a man in your next life.” He mused, “Does it mean that being a woman is a bad thing? This explains why women pray to become men in their next lives.” He speculated that menstruation might explain the logic of this tradition: “My understanding is that, probably it is because women need to have their periods every month, which is annoying. That’s why they want to become men [in their
next lives].” But he didn’t feel totally confident. “Buddha has not said that there are any differences in gender,” he said, again seeming to think aloud. Ultimately, he concluded that based on his own readings of Buddhist books and scriptures the manifestation of gender in Buddhism is “very very conflicting.”

On the other hand, Andrew believed that the manifestation of gender in Compassion Light International Headquarters as well as Lotus Temple was almost entirely egalitarian. He explained, “I don’t think gender matters [in any temple affiliated with Compassion Bodhi]. [Humanistic Buddhism such as Lotus practices is humanitarian and egalitarian].” He also referenced women’s leadership at Lotus: “Key female nuns in Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters are all exceptional. They are all leading female scholars [of their day] and they all chose to follow the founding Master of Compassion Bodhi.” Indeed, his work that day in training to work at the children’s camp reflected the fact that both men and women work with children at Lotus. In Andrew Hsu’s description, there was a “gap” between how gender was described in some Buddhist literature and how gender manifested itself in Compassion Light International Buddhist Headquarters as well as in Lotus Temple. When I asked if the gender egalitarianism that he observed in the temple had, in any way, influenced his gendered perspectives, he said he doesn’t notice gender egalitarianism at Lotus. “Thinking about my own family, my mom is a teacher. I mean she is having a job. And, in lots of aspects, including driving skills, my mom is more capable than my dad. So, to me, I have always been exposed to gender egalitarianism.” Thus, Andrew Hsu felt that he had already had gender egalitarian views, so the practices of Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters and Lotus Temple could not influence him.

On the other hand, Andrew Hsu allowed that “maybe” gender egalitarian practices at Lotus had influenced others. “Gender has always been egalitarian to
me. . . . But there may be some people who are living in a social context with the atmosphere of [gender traditionalism]. She may have believed that women are [subordinated]. And then, suddenly, she broadens her spectrum and started to realize that women can also take charge on their own. This is also a vivid manifestation of humanistic Buddhism, right?” It might, he concluded, “change their thoughts” about gender.

However, most of my interviewees at Lotus Temple reported similar experiences and feelings and Andrew Hsu. They appreciate gender egalitarianism at the temple but do not think it has influenced them.

4.4 Sme Buddhism, Different Understandings of Gender

The comments of study participants show that Buddhists at Pagoda construct gender perspectives that are perceived as being egalitarian. But they believe that gender egalitarianism means men and women being equal but different. By contrast the practitioners in their US sister temple believe that gender egalitarianism means men and women being equal and the same. There, Buddhists challenge patriarchy in their routine practices without being vocal about their agentic power. Through a comparison of how gender is “done” in Pagoda and Lotus Temple, I illustrate that the dialectical relationship between practitioners and religious gender ideologies are context specific.
4.5 Gender Norms in the Temples

4.5.1 Explicit Norm of Gender Egalitarianism

Both Pagoda and Lotus temples claim gender egalitarianism. Inspired by Buddhist philosophies, the temples not only support gender equality but also question the social meanings attached to the dichotomy of gender. My interview with Li Xiang, a twenty-five-year-old practitioner in Pagoda Temple, illustrates the temple’s gender egalitarianism. Li Xiang quoted an anecdote from the founding master of the international Buddhist headquarters: One day, a person asked the founding master, “Venerable Master, why are there so many female monastics in your temples?” The founding Master said, “I do not see any female monastics. I do not see any male monastics either. I just see a lot of people in this temple.”

Li Xiang interpreted the anecdote:

He [the founding master] just saw a lot of monastics working in this temple! According to him, there are no differences between men and women. This was how the founding Master would answer this question. . . . Gender does not play any role in our paths to enlightenment and Buddhahood. . . . The superficial physical gendered representations of she being a woman and he being a man are not real.

Li Xiang’s comments illustrate why, according to the temple’s gender egalitarianism, Buddhists should not observe people through a gender lens because “there are no differences between men and women.” According to Li Xiang and others I spoke with, the Pagoda Buddhist gender ideology is egalitarian and progressive.

Jin Hui, a regular volunteer at the main shrine who typically sits behind a reception desk on the right corner of the main shrine, explained that she welcomes every opportunity to introduce Buddhist gendered ideologies to visitors. She says:
Sometimes I receive questions from the visitors. They ask me why the monastics here are all women. Why aren’t any male monastics in this temple? I always tell them that we should not differentiate one thing from another. We enter the temple and become Buddhists to purify our hearts. No matter whether you are a monastic or a lay Buddhist, the gender differences do not exist.

Like Li Xiang, Jin Hui values an egalitarian gender ideology that questions the social meaning of gender and downplays gender differences. She acts as a temple ambassador, dispensing Buddhist gender egalitarianism literature to people unfamiliar with Buddhism through her volunteer work.

Governed by the same international Buddhist headquarters as Pagoda Temple, Lotus Temple also explicitly claims a Buddhist understanding of gender egalitarianism. In one of the Buddhist lectures I attended there, a nun was invited to speak to a class about equality in Buddhism. She talked about the history of Buddhism, Shakyamuni Buddha’s intention to achieve equality among casts and classes in ancient India, and about broadening the Buddhist conceptualization of equality from castes and classes to men and women. In her words:

The founding Master of Compassion Bodhi advocates for the equality between men and women and the equality between monastics and laities. You may observe the so-called differences between men and women in your daily lives. And yes, we do see the differences between men and women. But these differences are merely superficial manifestations. They do not really exist. Both men and women have the same Buddhist nature to achieve enlightenment.²⁵⁴

This egalitarian gender norms at lotus Temple stem from the Buddhist philosophy of laksana,²⁵⁵ which describes observed characteristics, including differences between
genders and between monastic and members of the laity, as superficial and illusory. This philosophy encourages practitioners at lotus Temple to question the perceptions of gender differences.

Compassion Bodhi’s official stance on gender egalitarianism is well reflected in the two temples’ discourses of gender. By questioning the legitimacy of dichotomous gendered divisions in the first place, the two temples go beyond claiming that men and women have equal status. Such gender norms, while progressive and egalitarian, have only emerged in situations when monastic and lay practitioners explicitly talked about gender; that is, when they talked about understanding gender (and its Chinese translation Xing Bie) under a Buddhist framework in seminars, lecturers, official discourses, and in one-on-one interviews with me. In addition, they leave the details of these norms are left ambiguous, similar to the form of soteriological inclusiveness that eliminates the gendered differences as summarized by Alan Sponberg. Specifically, neither temple discusses the patriarchal gendered structures outside the temples. Nor do they tell practitioners how to discourage socially enforced gender differences or deal with gender in their temple services or their lives outside. Although the temples explicitly claim to be egalitarian, the claim is, to some extent, superficial. The way the temple authorities understand, perform, and construct gender is more nuanced and complex than this explicit discourse of gender egalitarianism.

4.5.2 Implicit Norms of Gender Traditionalism

In addition to explicit gender egalitarianism, the temples provide practitioners with implicit norms that address how gender should play out in practice. Surprisingly, instead of guiding practitioners to disparage gender differences, these implicit gender norms encourage practitioners to highlight gender differences. These norms
are implicit because they do not emerge in conversations that are explicitly about gender; rather, they emerge in conversations about practicing Buddhism in daily life. While not explicitly mentioned, gender as a theme was very salient in these conversations.

For instance, attendees at Pagoda’s monthly Buddhist lectures, which are held in a classroom-like setting, sit with men on the right and women on the left. At one of these lectures, three practitioners spoke about how Buddhism had changed their lives. One panel speaker, a middle-aged man, told the audience that, since he began to practice Buddhism, he has rarely argued with his wife. “It is really important to think about family issues from my wife’s perspective,” he explained, “since men and women think differently. Men are more goal-oriented, while women focus on their own experiences.” This was clearly a gender traditional view. He then gave a solution. “Praising is very effective. We should praise every positive characteristic of our husbands and wives. Every morning, when I wake up, I tell my wife how beautiful she looks today. Women can be easily satisfied. Praising them about how beautiful they are will make them happy.”

After his speech, a nun went on stage and said, “From the speech, you must have learned that wives should also say some good words to their husbands. If you, as wives, say ‘I love you’ to your husbands every day, what will your husband do? They will buy fancy shoes and new handbags for you, right?” She framed this summary as a joke, and the audience laughed. On the one hand the speech undermined the inegalitarian idea that only women are easily satisfied by kind words; on the other it was clearly traditional in its ideas about what women and men want and prioritize.

Understanding gender within a Buddhist framework was not the lecture’s main subject, which was how to integrate Buddhism in everyday life. Still, gender
emerged as a salient theme when the middle-aged woman and the nun talked about how Buddhism deepens the husband-wife relationship. The comments at this lecture clearly contrasted with the temple’s official gendered stance and explicit gender norms that downplay the differences between men and women. Directing men and women to sit in separate places reinforced those differences through segregation. Thus, gender was “done” in the interactions of monastics, speakers, and audiences. Assigned seats, the recognition of gender differences, and the notion of traditional gender roles in marriage all taught practitioners gender traditionalism. Describing masculine characteristics, such as being “goal-oriented,” as an inherent feature of men, and “feminine” characteristics, such as “focusing on their experience at this moment,” as features common to women, links gender practices to biological characteristics.

Traditional gender norms also emerged in a dharma talk after a Sunday morning scripture chanting service at Lotus Temple. The talk was about making and accomplishing “good wishes” as the Buddha did. A nun stood on the stage and said that the Buddha made great wishes to “save all living beings from suffering.” She added, “To accomplish these good wishes, you may encounter a lot of difficulties. In this case, you need to stay positive, be persistent, and think about how to overcome them.” She gave an example of how to achieve these good wishes. “For example, one day, you made a wish to cook a dish for your husband. You followed the recipe and expected this dish to be delicious. When you served this dish to your husband, unfortunately, your husband told you that this dish tastes nasty. What will you do? Some of you may be angry. You may tell yourselves that you would never cook meals for your husband anymore.” The audience laughed, and she continued: “This is not the right attitude. You should always stay positive. You should tell yourself that next time you will serve a delicious dish to your
husband.” The nun connected the idea of being a good Buddhist wife with cooking. She also emphasized persistence, implying that wives should not abandon their feminine responsibilities even after being criticized by their husbands. Although the Buddhist dharma of making good wishes and persistently pursuing them is not inherently about gender, the monastic’s application of the theology to the division of labor within a family supports a traditionalist gender structure.

In fact, a rather powerful narrative of gender traditionalism emerged at Lotus Temple. Another dharma talk following a scripture chanting services for medicine Buddha with another monastic nun in the temple evinced gendered understandings about its subject, the merits of participating in scripture chanting services for lay practitioners. She said, “There are some this-worldly merits of participating in scripture chanting services. Men practitioners will find themselves being more successful in career and women practitioners will find themselves being more good looking.” Thus she situated men and women in a dichotomy, suggesting that women have little interest in career success—which was curious, since most women at Lotus have jobs—and men have little interest in their own physical appearance.

The emergence of gender norms in discussions about applying Buddhism in daily life illustrates the two temple’s mixed message about gender. It also provides information to understand whether there are more concrete and practical guidelines provided by the temple on how to “do gender” considering how ambivalent their explicit norm of gender egalitarianism is. I was surprised to find traditional and essentialist implicit gender norms at both temples, given the stance of the founder at Compassion Bodhi and the fact that none of my interviewees advanced such traditionalist gender norms in relation to the Buddhist framework specifically.
4.6 Responding to the Gender Norms

4.6.1 “Doing Gender” in China-Based Pagoda Temple: Promoting Equality, Preserving Differences

Pagoda Temple seems to promote conflicting gender norms. By complying with a set of apparently conflicting gender norms, Pagoda Buddhists retain a sense of agency much like the compliance agency of women’s active construction of their gendered selves through their observation of religious gender norms. Conforming to the official gendered narratives of their temple, Pagoda Buddhists adopted a narrative of explicit gender egalitarianism when framing their own understandings of gender. For instance, when responding to my question about the manifestation of gender in her temple, Wu Wen, a 41-year-old Buddhist at Pagoda, said:

I don’t think gender exists. Everyone is equal. . . . There seems to be a difference [between men and women]. Men are men. Women are women. You have your name. I have my name. We all have the same heart. [Our hearts] are the same. They are equal. We can [all] reach Buddhahood.

Yet, when talking about how they performed gender, Pagoda Buddhists referred to the implicit narrative of gender traditionalism. Wu Wen serves as a volunteer usher. Another respondent, Li Chen, described the work requirements as “attention to details, services, and smiles,” believing that such embodied practices are feminized and, therefore, not a “man’s job.”

When I asked Wu Wen how she understands gender egalitarianism, she replied that it means different but equal:

[Gender egalitarianism] does not mean that men and women are equally capable of doing everything. This is not the case. For instance, I am a
woman. I am not good at doing physically demanding work. I can use
my wisdom to ask my husband to do this work for me. I can use other
ways to complete this physically demanding work ... I mean, men cannot
cook. Could it be said that men should also know how to cook?

Thus, gender egalitarianism conforms to some very traditional ideas. From a
Western and secular perspective, such opinions are clear articulations of gender
inequality.\textsuperscript{264}

I later realized that according to their own account Pagoda Buddhists were
selecting gender norms that were far more egalitarian than those they saw in secular
Chinese society. For instance, Lin Hua,\textsuperscript{265} a 66-year-old practitioner, said:

Women always tend to devalue themselves because of the historical
tradition of male dominance in the past. In Pagoda Temple, we do not
[devalue ourselves] anymore. We are the masters of Pagoda Temple.
This is because the monastics have given us confidence. I think we are as
capable as men. Sometimes we are even better and stronger than men.

Lin Hua embraces the temple’s ideology of gender egalitarianism, compares women’s
status outside the temple with their roles as “masters of Pagoda Temple,” and
concludes that her empowered gendered self is coupled with her pious Buddhist self.
She is committed to promoting egalitarianism inside and outside the temple, saying
that if she encountered gender-discriminatory remarks, she would “tell them a lot of
stories about capable and strong women.”

Like Wu Wen, Lin Hua has a perceived feminized job in Pagoda, serving
food. I asked her about her understanding of gender egalitarianism. “Men do more
physically demanding jobs,” she said. “We do more light and detailed work. We
just have different labor divisions.” Lin Hua also believes that gender egalitarianism
means “different but equal.” She translates this into how she “does gender” by
advocating for the equal status of men and women. Nevertheless, she volunteers in one of the most feminized duties at the temple.

Pagoda Buddhists adhere to both the temple’s explicit and implicit norms through their comparison of the gender norms at Pagoda—both the explicit norm of gender egalitarianism and the implicit norm of gender traditionalism—with what they perceive as Chinese society’s prevailing gender norms. I talked to a Buddhist woman at Pagoda who said that she used to believe that “women should be moral, obedient, modest, quiet, and serve their husbands,” but that she had changed her understanding after observing how Pagoda’s gender norms “give women more opportunities” without “entirely abandon(ing) their feminized attractiveness.” Like the others, she understands gender egalitarianism through the different but equal model, and predicates her understanding on the contrast with Chinese secular society. Another Buddhist at Pagoda told me that she had once believed that “only male monks are able to make an important contribution to Buddhism” and still thought that “women are not as good as men in logical and overarching thinking,” but had come to understand that women can contribute to Buddhism because of other strengths.

Both men and women Buddhists in the temple told me that the egalitarian Buddhist gender ideology they learned at Pagoda offers the cultural resources to generate agentic power to respond to male dominance both within and outside Buddhism. They observed, for example, that Pagoda Temple makes a great contribution to Buddhism in their area and that its female leadership is no barrier. They described women’s leadership and gender egalitarianism in Pagoda Temple as carrying “landmark significance” in challenging traditional thinking by both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. Outside Buddhism, gender egalitarianism in Pagoda Temple enables practitioners to react to patriarchy in an agentic way. Their
agency outside Buddhism is illustrated in the change of their own gendered perspectives.

Their agency is also reflected in how they interact with others. Jin Hua, a 55-year-old Buddhist woman, said that women “can do whatever [men] are able to do. We can also do the things that you are not capable to do.” She added that if she meets people who discriminate against women outside the temple, she would “go ahead and tell them a lot of stories about strong and capable women.” Admittedly, what people say does not necessarily reflect what they do, but the changes of their gendered perspectives both in and outside Buddhism demonstrate Pagoda practitioners’ gender agency, which is defined as women’s active construction of their gendered selves.

In contrast to previous studies that show that men and women affiliated with the same faith tradition “do gender” differently, at Pagoda Temple men spoke about gender norms much the same way women did. Articulating gender is an important component of the “doing gender” process. Like women at Pagoda, Buddhist men at Pagoda promote gender egalitarianism and favorably compare their temple’s gender norms to those outside. For instance, Deng Chaoyang said that he actively promotes the egalitarian gender norms in the temple to non-Buddhists outside the temple but thinks that people don’t always understand what he is doing. Thus, the temple’s gender norms are a way to construct a symbolic boundary to differentiate the “sacred us” from the “secular other.”

Buddhist men at Pagoda also support the dichotomous labor division. They describe driving cargo and other tasks reserved for men as work that “women are not able to do.” Deng Chao Yang emphasized, “there is no way for men to serve as ushers.”

At Pagoda, gender is “done” through “doing equality” and “doing
differences,” and the “equal status” of men and women was salient. During my fieldwork there, I saw no women being denied access to any space or resource because of gender and was never denied myself. Men and women shared the same rooms, attended the same Buddhist lectures, chanted the same scriptures, ate the same food, and heard the same dharma talks. But they addressed each other as “dharma sisters” and “dharma brothers” in both group settings (e.g., saying “hello dharma sisters and dharma brothers” at the beginning of the lecture) and person-to-person settings (e.g., saying “Auspicious dharma sister” to greet women and “Auspicious dharma brother” to greet men).

Leadership at Pagoda enforced gender norms in assigning my volunteer work, as well. I routinely organized brochures in the guest room, welcomed tourists, served tea, cleaned tables, washed tea cups, and cleaned rest rooms inside the guest room. Men did not perform any of these tasks. Sometimes, monastics met important guests in a small and private conference room within the guest room, and I would serve tea. An experienced practitioner instructed me to “walk gently and quietly into the conference room and be very attentive to the guests’ needs. [To] always put the cup on their right hand and switch the handle of the tea cup towards the guests so that they can easily pick up the cup and drink teas.” She exhorted me, “Remember to keep your smiles when serving tea to the guests.” Thus I was to perform my femininity in these tasks.

Although not every Buddhist at Pagoda was reflective about gender, the majority were, envisioning the temple and themselves as egalitarian, in spite of the many performances of gender that a Western secular perspective suggests are not egalitarian. Comparing Pagoda’s norms to those they believed held in Chinese secular society determined this perspective.

In fact, the gender agency that Buddhists at Pagoda manifest in their active
construction of their gendered selves is through their compliance to both explicit and implicit gender norms articulated by their temple. As Avishai describes in a paper based on a study involving orthodox Jewish Israeli women, compliance agency for these Buddhists stems from an intention to differentiate the sacred us from the secular other through an observation of gender traditionalism. Embracing egalitarianism at Pagoda also represented compliance with religious gender norms because this set of norms aligns with their envisioning of egalitarian gendered selves. Their perception of being gender egalitarian and not traditional became a way to construct the sacredness of their gender identities, distinct from the secular Chinese society. Lotus Buddhists interpret gender norms quite differently as a result of differing context.

4.6.2 “Doing Gender” in the U.S.-Based Lotus Temple: Promoting Equality, Enacting Sameness

Buddhists at Lotus Temple receive the same explicit gender norms as their peer practitioners at Pagoda Temple. They want to be gender egalitarians and they actively promote gender egalitarianism. They therefore appreciated the explicit and egalitarian gender norms articulated by their temple. Practitioners in Lotus Temple frequently told me that “all living things [are] equal” and that “every person can become Buddha.” This understanding of equality includes, but is not limited to, gender equality.

Like their peers at Pagoda, Lotus Buddhists compare the gender norms articulated by their temple with those outside the temple, but they believe that secular US society is more egalitarian than their religious gender norms. As a consequence, Buddhists at Lotus construct their understanding of gender egalitarianism through their exposure to the gender norms in the secular societies in
the US. They therefore almost manifest a sense of what Burke would call critical agency to critique some of the gender norms articulated by their temple.²⁸¹,

Practitioners at Lotus do not think their understandings of gender egalitarianism are primarily constructed within the temple. Rather, they see it as constructed through their exposure to egalitarian gender norms of secular US society. Meredith Kou²⁸² is a 64-year-old first-generation Taiwanese immigrant who moved to the United States when she was a teenager. She spoke approvingly of the temple’s articulation of gender egalitarianism of not “differentiating between men and women” but attributed her understanding of gender egalitarianism as a step down from the gendered differences in the US. She explained, “Probably, it was because I have been abroad [in the United States] for a long time that I do not have any attachment to the so-called gender differences.” Rather than describing the temple’s explicit norm of gender egalitarianism as a source of empowerment, as many of her peer practitioners at Pagoda Temple do, Meredith Kuo sees the temple’s explicit norm of gender egalitarianism as being aligned with her perspectives of gender egalitarianism that are constructed through her stay and exposure to the gender norms in the secular society in the US. Christina Li,²⁸³ a woman practitioner who is five years younger than Meredith Kuo also attributed her understanding of gender to her long residence in the United States. She said, “in the US, women are empowered. They are not subordinated but empowered.” This attribution of gendered norms to exposure to US society cut across genders. A 40-year-old man told me that he had “long believed in gender egalitarianism”²⁸⁴ due to his exposure to gender ideologies in the US. Eric Lai, a 36-year-old man, said “the spirit of the US culture is gender egalitarianism.”²⁸⁵ Based on ten years of experience in the United States he explained:

Here, both men and women lift heavy things. In Asia, lifting heavy
things is men’s responsibility. Women do not need to do it . . . I will give you another example, in Taiwan, it is interesting that when people are dating, a man will carry his girlfriend’s purse. In the U.S., you will not see this kind of thing.

Unlike at Pagoda, where people situated their gendered selves within their religious selves, at Lotus, they only did so loosely. Instead of fully complying with the temple’s gender norms, Eric drew on resources from secular US society to project his gendered self. He therefore criticizes some implicit and traditionalist gender norms articulated in the temple, saying, “Even in Buddhist precepts, monks and nuns are constrained by different sets of precepts. This is not gender egalitarian. What we could do is try our best to achieve gender egalitarianism.” By saying that he would “try his best to achieve gender egalitarianism,” Eric manifests his agency to challenge, if not subvert, gender traditionalism within Lotus Temple. The transition between social contexts endemic to the immigration enables Buddhists in Lotus Temple to construct an implicit boundary to differentiate their own gendered perspectives from the gendered perspective of those in their homeland.

Many, if not all, practitioners in Lotus Temple recognized the explicit norm of downplaying gender differences and promoting gender egalitarianism from their temple. Yet, unlike their peer practitioners at Pagoda Temple, they generally recognized when the temple articulated gender norms, even only implicit gender norms, that were not aligned with their understandings of gender egalitarianism. For instance, Amy Chow, a Buddhist woman in her mid 60s, indicated confusion about why Buddhist sutras always used “he” instead of “she.” Similarly I heard whispers of disagreement among the audience at a lecture when the monastic members in the temple claimed that men and women should not go out together by themselves. A Buddhist man criticized the use of the terms “dharma sisters” and
“dharma brothers,” saying that if Buddhists disdain gender differences, they should also disdain gender differences in greetings.\textsuperscript{289}

In fact, many Lotus practitioners did not conform to the temple’s nominal requirement that the practitioners call each other dharma sisters and brothers. It was more common to use each other’s names, which is unusual at Pagoda. In addition, the gender dichotomy of the temple’s division of labor was blurred. A 27-year-old woman said that women did some “electrical stuff,”\textsuperscript{290} and a 58-year-old woman said women physical work when the men were “scared” to do it.\textsuperscript{291} Men also helped in the kitchen and serve as ushers.\textsuperscript{292} However, while they were critical of what they saw as signals of traditionalist gender norms in interviews, they rarely said anything in the course of temple business. Ignoring the norms was their form of protest.

On a few occasions, this critical agency led to mild tensions between practitioners and temple authorities. At a meeting to prepare for an outreach event, a nun met with practitioners who were willing to serve as volunteers. Trying to recruit volunteers to help in the kitchen, she asked, “Where are these mothers and wives? You must know how to handle things in the kitchen. You should really help out in the kitchen.” Several “mothers and wives” raised their hands, and then a young man, apparently in his early 30s, raised his hand too. The monastic looked at him doubtfully and said, “Are you sure that you are really able to help out in the kitchen? I mean, cutting vegetables?” The young man hesitated, nodded, and said, “Yes, I think I am quite good at that.”\textsuperscript{293} The nun accepted this explanation and eventually let him help out in the kitchen, but the nun’s traditional gender outlook created some awkwardness.

The explicit gender norms of Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters call on practitioners to embody and promote gender egalitarianism, and those at
both temples complied. But the ways in which they “do gender” differ. Unlike Pagoda practitioners, who highlight the gender differences in the performance and embodiment of gender, Buddhists at Lotus challenge the gendered differences in language, perception, behavior, and labor, even when this means critiquing the temple’s authoritative gendered discourses. While their specific responses to gender norms range from critiquing and questioning, to politely refusing to observe, their ways of “doing gender” align with their perspectives on gender egalitarianism, which they attribute to their exposure to gender norms in the secular US.

It is important to qualify that, although Lotus Buddhists reject the implicit norm of gender traditionalism espoused by their temple, it is by no means an explicit protest or argument. Rather, these are mild whispered rejections and mild disagreements in day-to-day practices. Not every practitioner explicitly challenges the dichotomous gender division in every micro-interaction either. During my fieldwork at the temple, I experienced one incident in which a woman practitioner implicitly reinforced rather than challenged the dichotomous labor division. Seeing me carrying a bucket of water, she stopped me and said, “Why are you carrying such a heavy bucket of water. Let me call a man practitioner to help you out.” This perception reinforces rather than challenges the dichotomous labor division, but it was the only such incident I encountered at Lotus Temple, which means that, although there was a general pattern of promoting gender egalitarianism by advocating for the sameness between men and women, there might be nuanced complexities in the gender agency practiced at the temple.

### 4.7 Summary

This chapter examines how religious practitioners in two similar, nominally gender-progressive religious communities form their gender agencies and “do
gender.” It answers the questions: Do faith communities that endorse progressive gendered discourses in principle promote gender progress in practice? Is religious gender agency conditioned by the context in which the practitioners live and practice their faith? I found that the way in which gender operates in both Pagoda and Lotus is more nuanced than the simple gender egalitarianism that Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters articulates. Indeed, when the temples explicitly talk about gender, especially under a Buddhist framework, they call for the elimination of gendered differences. However, when it comes to topics the authorities did not specifically tie to gender egalitarianism, such as integrating Buddhism in daily life, or insisting on appropriate Buddhist behavior for volunteers at the temple, gendered narratives emerged. In fact, the authorities reinforced a traditionalist gendered narrative, highlighting rather than downplaying the dichotomous gendered differences between men and women. This set of complex gendered narratives answered my first question: nominally gender progressive religious communities do not necessarily promote gender egalitarianism. Indeed, the multi-layered gender norms, especially the traditionalist gendered discourses that emerge in conversations not explicitly about gender may, in some cases, make a nominally progressive faith community the locus for reproducing gender. The role that such communities play in the broader society is partly dependent on the religious practitioners’ interpretation of and responses to their religious gender norms.

I also examined how practitioners in the temples respond to gender norms, form their gendered selves, and manifest their gender agency. Results uncovered two types of gender agency. At Pagoda, Buddhists adhere to the gendered discourses provided by their religion—both explicit and implicit—and manifest a sense of what prior scholars have called “compliance agency.” In contrast, Lotus Buddhists resist and critique the implicit norm of gender traditionalism supported by their temple
and manifest a sense of “critical agency” or “autonomy.” While the respective gender agencies appear to be very different, a close analysis reveals that the Buddhists experience a similar set of processes when forming their gender agency. Deconstructed into three components, they are envisioning, comparing/selecting, and “doing gender.”

First, at both temples Buddhists decide which nominal gender norms to embrace. Buddhist practitioners internalize, perform, and advocate for gender egalitarianism. But they may have different understandings regarding what gender egalitarianism entails between the temples. Second, they compare the temple’s religious gender norms with those outside and select those that best fit their vision of gender egalitarianism. At Pagoda, many see the secular norms outside the temple as historically subordinating and constraining women. In the US, Lotus Buddhists also compare their religious gender norms with those outside, but, unlike Pagoda Buddhists, see some secular gender norms as more egalitarian than the implicit disclosure of gender traditionalism in their religion. Buddhists at Lotus maintain a vision of gender egalitarianism, using the norm of secular equity to critique the temple’s implicit articulation of gender traditionalism. Third, after comparing and selecting the gender norms to fit their vision of gender egalitarianism, Buddhists at both temples manifest their gender agency by “doing gender,” namely by performing their gendered agency through the active formation of gendered selves and responses to a “highly rigid regulatory frame.” While receiving a similar set of gender norms, Pagoda and Lotus Buddhists compare them to those of the society outside, constructing different types of gender agency. Pagoda Buddhists practice their gender agency by adhering to equality and preserving the differences between men and women. This performance, from their perspective, promotes gender egalitarianism. Lotus Buddhists, however, manifest a sense of gender agency by
insisting on equality and reducing differences based on gender. From their perspective, this performance of gender agency is also a performance of gender egalitarianism.

Gender agency theorists note that the formation of gendered subjects and gendered agencies are socially situated. Many studies, focusing on one faith community in one national context, have implicitly or explicitly assumed that the vision of ideal gender relationship, which can be egalitarian or progressive, is what they want to pursue. as the gendered relationship that practitioners want to pursue. Yet, by examining the formation of gender agency in two faith communities that endorse very similar gender norms, I found that Buddhists can have identical visions of ideal gendered relationships but manifest different forms of gender agency.

The three elements I construct provide a more contextualized understanding of gender agency. Comparison and selection is key to contextualizing and situating gender agency. Future scholars might examine how gender is contextualized in other global religions, and perhaps in institutions beyond religion, such as science and technology.

In this chapter, I discuss how gender is “done” through volunteer work. Volunteer work is an important sphere for study participants to “do gender” in religious settings given that traditional gender roles, as reflected by division of labor, are salient in Buddhists’ participation in volunteer work. As a result, gender is “done” through the reproduction or challenge of dichotomous labor division in both temples. Yet, doing gender in volunteer work only tells part of the story about the intersection between gender and Buddhism in both temples. It is reasonable to ask, how does gender intersect with religion in more sacred spheres within the temple? In other words, how is gender manifested in sacred activities, such as
scripture chanting and Buddhist rituals? The next chapter will discuss the manifestation of gender in sacred spheres and analyze the contextual specific relationship between “doing gender” and “doing religion” in the two temples.
Chapter 5

Intersecting Gender and the Sacred: Segregating Gender, “Doing” Sacredness

5.1 Gender Segregation in Temples

5.1.1 Gender Segregation in Pagoda Temple

In addition to volunteer work, the sacred places and sacred moments, such as the scripture chanting services in the main shrine, are also important places within which practitioners “do gender.” This chapter examines how gender is segregated by practice in the two temples and how practitioners respond to it. Following previous scholars, I see religious people’s responses to gender segregation as a manifestation of their agency. Yet, unlike Buddhists who retain a sense of gender agency in their volunteer work, as discussed in Chapter 4, I argue that their responses to gender segregation are related not only to their navigation of the sets of gender norms in and outside their religious communities but also to their navigation of the relationship between the sacred and the secular. In other words, the way in which Buddhists perform gender segregation is related to the issue of whether they perceive this segregated gender arrangement as a component that constructs the
sacredness of their religious identities.

On an early Saturday morning in mid-March 2016, I arrived at Pagoda Temple to attend a monthly Buddhist lecture. The ten-minute walk from the entrance of the temple to the classroom is very pleasant in early spring. After the long winter, although there was still a chill in the air, I warmed to the sunshine and the early buds of flowers.

There were many others walking with me. Monthly Buddhist lecturers are a popular event at Pagoda Temple, and many practitioners and volunteers attend. These lectures are open to the public, although they require pre-registration. Instead of interpreting Buddhist scriptures from a scholarly perspective, these lectures offer a range of topics that are related to Buddhism, such as Zen and cognitive understanding as well as how to live a happy life. Men and women chatted with each other as we walked and as we entered the temple the atmosphere was relaxed. We could have been going to a picnic instead of a serious class.

Dozens of people were gathered at the front of the entrance to show their ticket. Zhao Jianguo, a devoted and long-term volunteer in the temple well-known to me, was standing beside the entrance door, checking each practitioners’ ticket, and allowing them to enter the classroom. This process was a bit messier than I would have expected. But the greeter’s authority was clear.

The classroom was pretty spacious. There is a stage at the front, and the seats are divided down the middle by a narrow aisle, but with far more seats set up on the left side than the right side. Volunteers and monastics were directing the participants to their seats—men to the right and women to the left, and the participant demographics conformed to the overrepresentation of women affiliated with Pagoda Temple.

The speakers maintained the relaxed atmosphere as class began, sometimes
telling mild jokes that inspired gentle laughter. People in the audience spoke to each other in whispers at time. But the gender segregation as well as a slightly more solemn atmosphere than had prevailed on the walk into the temple established a symbolic boundary around the lecture. Crossing this boundary around noon when the lecture ended, reestablished friendly conversation between men and women. The physical space of the classroom set up a symbolic boundary that differentiates the gendered arrangement in the temple, but it did not carry over as we took an hour break before most of us would attend a scripture changing service.

The scripture chanting service took place in the main shrine, and it too was divided into two sides by a narrow aisle in the middle. This time, the two sides are equally divided. Monastics and volunteers again directed us where to sit, although some attendees already knew where to go, and they picked prayer mats and went to their appropriate places without waiting to be directed. Men practitioners were directed to the first several rows of the left side and female practitioners were directed to the remaining spaces.

The way in which men and women are segregated in the classroom and the main shrine is intriguing. At the Buddhist classroom lecture, women sat on the left and men on the right, perhaps because there were more women than men in the temple and more seats on the left side of the classroom. In the main shrine, however, men and women are segregated with women on the right, perhaps because space there is equally divided. Given that there were substantially more men than women attending the scripture-chanting services after men had filled the first several rows on the left side, the volunteers and monastic members directed those women who were unable to find a seat on the right side to the remaining seats on the left. This “re-directed” segregation suggests that the symbolic meaning of gender segregation may be more important than actual segregation.
I had experienced two transitions of gendered arrangement in this half-day experience at Pagoda Temple. Gender was integrated outside, but in the sacred spheres of the Buddhist classroom and the main shrine, gender was, at least, symbolically segregated. This gender segregation was executed through a combination of imposition and internalization. On the one hand, monastics and volunteers imposed gender segregation on Buddhists, directing them to the appropriate places to sit. On the other hand, the temple’s long-term practitioners had internalized this segregated arrangement.

Similar transitions had taken place in February in the course of my interactions with Min Qiang, a 25-year-old male practitioner, whose interview had been my first with a Pagoda practitioner. It was a chilly evening when I went to the dining hall after a long day of volunteer work and interviews. Like the dinner I described in Chapter 1, it was casual, and I had grown used to holding my bowl when eating, using a napkin to wipe my bowl, eating every morsel, and chanting a four-sentence praise before dinner.

I had not spoken in any depth with Min Qiang since my interview with him a few weeks before, but he was very willing to talk to me when we happened to meet on our way to the dining hall. He asked me about the progress of my research. A recent college graduate, he was curious about my research topic. He asked me why I had chosen to conduct my research and whether other scholars had done research project that analyzes humanistic Buddhism. I was happy to answer his questions and to explain why I thought the stories about Buddhists’ religious lives should be heard. He seemed to like this, and he patted my shoulder gently, saying, “Best luck with your interviews.” And then, he smiled and joked, “But remember, you should write about the accurate understandings of Buddhism.” This was another indication that Min Qiang, like his peer practitioners in Pagoda Temple, established symbolic
boundaries to differentiate the “Pagoda us” (those who practice “Orthodox” Buddhism) from the “non-Pagoda other.”

Our conversation stopped as soon as we stepped in the dining hall. After chanting the four-sentence praise, Min Qiang quickly picked up his food, went to the back rows in the dining hall, and sat with the other men practitioners for dinner. As with the classroom and the main shrine, easy cross-gender interaction stopped once we entered another space. I had not been told that interaction with Buddhist men was forbidden within the dining hall.

When I became more involved in Pagoda Temple, I realized that cross-gender interaction was permitted during meals, but gender segregation was the norm. Men would sit furthest from the door and women would sit closer to the door. Gender segregation in the dining hall was a well-accepted norm in Pagoda Temple that had been internalized even though it could be violated. During lunch one day, a man practitioner asked to sit at a table where I was sitting with several other women, in the several rows that are closer to the door of the dining hall. Another woman responded that he could, but only because she could see that the men’s tables were full: “Oh, there is no space for men over there. Okay, then, I guess you can sit with us.” At that point I realized that gender segregation in the dining hall was not fixed, though it was rigid. This was quite different from volunteers and monastics enforcing segregation in the classroom and main shrine, yet it seemed to flow from that rather than a lack of knowledge or friendliness, as men and women spoke freely in some other spaces.

Cross-gender interactions were free in the guest room, the tea house, the garden, and even the kitchen, but uncommon in the main shrine, the classroom, and the dining hall. It seems like, these three places carry a particular set of symbolic meanings that shift the gendered arrangement in the temple. This raises the
following questions: What are the symbolic meanings embodied by these places? Why do practitioners change their gendered arrangement in these places? And more importantly, how does the gender arrangement inform us about the intersection about religion and gender at Pagoda Temple?

5.1.2 Gender Segregation in Lotus Temple

Lotus Temple also has a particular set of gendered dynamics, but I did not notice them at my first visit, which was on a warm and sunny Sunday morning in late September in 2015. I arrived at the temple around twenty minutes prior to the scripture chanting service. Seeing I was a new face in Lotus Temple, Meredith Kuo, a 60-year-old volunteer who later became my interviewee, approached me and asked, “Is this your first visit in Lotus Temple? I will take you to have a short tour around the temple.” As we toured, men and women practitioners, were talking with each other in the lobby, the hallway, the library, and the dining hall. The tour concluded at the lobby and Meredith pointed to the main shrine, where the scripture chanting service would begin soon.

Entering the main shrine, I noticed that it was divided equally into left and right by a central aisle. There were several Buddhists waiting for the scripture-chanting service to begin. Some were checking phones and waiting on prayer mats, which I rarely saw in the main shrine at Pagoda. Others were sitting on the bench, talking to each other in low voices. When I attended other Buddhist temples prior to beginning my fieldwork at the two research sites, I was told that it was Buddhist custom to prostrate three times towards the Buddha on entering the main shrine. I noticed later that not all Lotus Buddhists did so. While devoted practitioners always prostrated, many others simply picked up a prayer mat and sat down. I followed the practice of the devotees, prostrating towards the Buddha three
times before picking up a prayer mat and sitting down to await the service. Several practitioners who were sitting on the bench turned to look at me, but it seemed possible this was only because I was a stranger at the temple. No one told me if I was in the wrong place, as they certainly would have at Pagoda if I had sat in the men’s section. But as most of the practitioners entered, I realized that was exactly what I had done, and I quickly and quietly moved to the right side to sit with women practitioners for the service.

Later in my fieldwork, my training as a volunteer revealed that the designation of men’s and women’s sides is more than tacit. In the ensuing months I started to regularly participate in the scripture chanting services and volunteer at Lotus, and I received training as a volunteer usher. My trainer instructed me, “When you walk from the Western side, I mean the women’s side, to the Eastern side, namely the men’s side, you need to take a half bow to the Buddha in the hallway.” At this time I received no direct indication that as an usher I should enforce the gender segregation, but at a subsequent training for volunteer ushers that I attended I was told ushers should enforce the gender segregation, except that we could direct some women to the men’s side if the women’s side became overcrowded. The second trainer also termed the Western side the women’s side and the Eastern side the men’s side. In another violation of gender segregation that would not occur at Pagoda, I found that at memorial services ushers usually directed family members of dead we were honoring to sit together regardless of their gender. In my fieldwork at Lotus Temple, however, I found no particular meaning attached to “East” versus “West.” Segregating men and women seems to be more important symbolically than actually segregating them.

Thus, the general rule that women sat on the Western side of the room and men on the Eastern side was honored but not enforced. On my first visit, the
experience of not being told where to sit was typical of how ushers dealt with those who breached the guidelines. When I served as a temple usher, like other ushers I did not enforce gender segregation. If practitioners and, in many cases, newcomers, sat in the “wrong side” prior to the beginning of the service, an usher would direct the person to the “correct side,” but for late arrivals coming in the middle of the service, an usher would rarely re-direct them. I observed at Lotus women moving from their side to the men’s side even when space was available on the women’s side.

In addition to the main shrine, a second space where I observed gender segregation was in the meditation room but only during meditation sessions. During these sessions, attendants were told to sit in designated gender areas, with men on one side of the room and women on the other side. It is worth noting that the meditation room was sometimes used for purposes other than meditation, such as youth training sessions or Buddhist classes. In such cases, gender segregation was not required and cross-gender interactions were permitted. Overall, gender segregation exists in Lotus Temple—yet only in the most sacred places and during sacred moments, such as scripture chanting in the main shrine and meditation sessions in the meditation room. However, even then, particularly during scripture chanting, gender segregation is not strictly imposed.

### 5.2 Similar Gender Segregation, Different Responses

Gender segregation in religious spaces, particularly sacred spaces, is not uncommon. Pamela Prickett, for instance, analyzes how Muslim women in the US resist gender segregation in places of worship and conceptualizes their responses as a manifestation of gender agency. Although the gender-religion intersection,
particularly in terms of gender segregation in faith communities, is not, compared to other religious communities,\textsuperscript{307} as salient in Buddhist temples, it did exist in the two temples I studied. Overall, the dynamic of gender at the two study sites is very similar. While gender is integrated in most spaces in the temples, men and women are segregated in certain places, although segregation occurs in the dining room and the Buddhist classrooms in Pagoda Temple as well as in the main shrine, the only place of segregation in Lotus Temple. This is because Lotus Temple has no sacred spaces other than the main shrine and the meditation room—meaning that people’s temple experiences are directly related to the construction of their spirituality, to the cultivation of their heart, as Buddhists say.

This chapter examines how gender is segregated by practice in the two temples and how practitioners respond to it. Following previous scholars,\textsuperscript{308} I see religious people’s responses to gender segregation as a manifestation of their agency. Yet, unlike Buddhists who retain a sense of gender agency in their volunteer work, as discussed in Chapter 4, I argue that their responses to gender segregation are related not only to their navigation of the sets of gender norms in and outside their religious communities but also to their navigation of the relationship between the sacred and the secular. In other words, the way in which Buddhists perform gender segregation is related to the issue of whether they perceive this segregated gender arrangement as a component that constructs the sacredness of their religious identities.

Using a more theoretical lens, this chapter provides information about the connection between “doing gender” and “doing religion,” namely how Buddhists in both temples relate their gendered practices to the sacredness of their religiosity. A close analysis of their understanding of gender segregation shows that practitioners at Pagoda and Lotus understand and perform gender segregation in distinctive
ways. As we will later see, Buddhists at Pagoda believe that gender segregation is directly related to the sacredness of their Buddhist identity and the construction of their religious lives. In contrast, Buddhists at Lotus adopt a more secular understanding of gender segregation, seeing it as a custom that should be observed but which is not related to the sacredness of their Buddhist identities.

Previous sociologists of religion argue that gendered arrangement is an important component of the construction of religiosity in many religions, including Judaism, Islam, and Evangelical Christianity. In other words, “doing gender” or performing and reproducing gender as a social institution is part of the process of “doing religion.” For example, some religious women affiliated with Catholicism, Evangelical Christianity, Islam, and Judaism construct the sacredness of their religiosity and differentiate themselves from others who do not share their faith by internalizing gender norms associated with their religious traditions. Building on this framework of “doing gender” and “doing religion,” this chapter illustrates how the different social contexts of the two temples drive the intersection between doing gender and doing religion. I refer here to two levels of meaning, albeit in different social contexts. On the one hand, Buddhist responses to gender segregation is a way for Buddhists to exert their gender agency. Hence, the perceived dominant gender norms in China and the US are still pertinent to the discussion. However, I contend that the majority or minority status of Buddhism is pertinent to the practitioners’ understanding of gender segregation given that it is related to how and where they establish the symbolic boundaries for constructing their religious identities.

### 5.3 Gender Segregation in the Temples

The Compassion Bodhi, which guides practice at both Pagoda and Lotus, lays out its construction of gender on its website, where the message from the founding
Master describes gender segregation as a change the international headquarters has made to promote gender equality, in keeping with his stance in favor of women becoming monastic leaders and spiritual teachers. He mentions that at the headquarters women and men are separated by the central aisle instead of, as in traditional Buddhism, so that men are in the front and women in the back. He describes this transformed gender segregation in Compassion Bodhi as an indication that men and women may be different, but they are equal.

Religious organizations such as Compassion Bodhi act as intermediaries between theology—the dharma in the case of Buddhist temples—and practitioners. My in-depth conversations with practitioners about gender segregation revealed how they understand gender segregation at each their temples. The sections below summarize my findings.

5.3.1 Segregating Gender and Doing Religion in Pagoda Temple

While gender segregation occurs in multiple places in the temple, most of my respondents talked about the main shrine. They described it as an indication of the sacredness of the space. My interview respondents told me that gender segregation made the shrine look "tidy" and "solemn." For example, Chen Hui, a 25-year-old practitioner, told me that "segregating men and women looks neat. Having women practitioners sitting at a certain place and their men practitioners sitting at another place looks neat." Huang Mei Li, 26-year-old Buddhist woman who serves as a full-time volunteer in the kitchen, agreed. When I brought up gender segregation, she looked a little bit surprised. It seemed she had not thought about gender segregation; she saw it as an arrangement endemic to Buddhism. I asked her if she noticed gender segregation in scripture chanting services and the dining room.
Huang Mei Li said, “Yes.” She further explained why men and women should be separated in the main shrine and said:

[Gender segregation] looks neat. It does not look messy at all. I have also been to other Buddhist temples. Men and women sit together with each other. I mean, they do not separate men and women by Eastern side and Western side, but they segregate men and women by front and back. Men practitioners are sitting on the front rows of the main shrine and female practitioners are sitting on the back rows of the main shrine. So it is the same [as Pagoda].

Huang Mei Li’s description of segregating men and women as a way to make the main shrine look tidy suggests it’s a policy that creates a sacred and ritualistic outlook in the main shrine. Her reference to practice at other Buddhist temples emphasizes that segregating men and women is a traditional practice in Buddhism. Gender segregation is also a way in which practitioners like Huang Mei Li connect their own beliefs in Buddhism with a broader Buddhist tradition and reinforce the sacredness as well as legitimacy of their Buddhist identities.

It was common for interviewees to connect gender segregation in Pagoda Temple with a broader tradition in Buddhism and to imply that the observation of gender segregation is an important part of their Buddhist identities. Later in this interview, Huang Mei Li said that she had participated in “Buddhist rituals in a traditional Buddhist temple [where] all women practitioners were sitting on the back of the main shrine and male practitioners were sitting on the front of the male shrine.” She described this as similar to Pagoda’s arrangement. Thus, Huang Mei Li saw gender segregation at Pagoda Temple as participating in the historical tradition of Buddhism of segregating men and women in certain places, particularly in the main shrine.
As these statements suggest, while the founding Master perceives the transition of “front-back segregation” to “Eastern-Western segregation” as a symbol of gender equality in Compassion Bodhi, Buddhist practitioners in Pagoda Temple did not think of it in the same way. They emphasized the similarities to traditional Buddhist temples, although they recognized that the arrangement was slightly different than the traditional front-back division. The fact that gender segregation existed was more important than the specific arrangement, and it helped to create a ritualistic outlook and to demonstrate the legitimacy of their Buddhist practices.

Of course, gender segregation is not the only component that enhances the sacredness of the religious spheres and religious identities at Pagoda. In the main shrine, this segregated gendered arrangement operates with a dress code to create a ritualistic environment. In addition to segregating by gender, during my fieldwork, I observed another form of segregation, particularly in the main shrine: segregation between those who wear black robes and those who do not. Wearing a black robe usually indicates that the wearer has taken three refuges in the triple gem, the wish that they will be affiliated with the Buddha (Fo), the dharma (Fa), and the monks (Sen). In my conversation with Chen Fen Fen, a middle-aged woman practitioner, I learned that “segregation makes ritual look good.” While she acknowledged gender segregation in scripture chanting services, she believes that the sartorial differences between the robe and non-robe wearers are really about aesthetics: “Practitioners who wear robes sit in the front and practitioners who do not wear robes sit in the back. Everything looks so neat.”

Chen Fen Fen added that she likes gender segregated settings, but it does not make her “feel the particular distinguishes [meaning distinctions] between men and women.” Nor did she mention that the segregated arrangement reminded her of any particular understandings of masculinity or femininity. According to Chen Fen Fen,
separating men and women carries similar functions as separating people who wear black robes from those who don’t. Both types of segregation are part of the components that construct ritualistic atmospheres in the sacred space of the main shrine.

On a superficial level, practitioners in Pagoda Temple described segregating gender as a component that created a ritualistic outlook in the main shrine and connected their identification with Buddhism with the broader historical tradition. On a deeper and more spiritual level, Buddhists in Pagoda Temple further informed me that gender segregation was important to create purity in their own hearts since gender segregation prevented them from being engaged in heterosexual attractions. As Gao Lian, a devoted young woman practitioner, said:

I think the reason why we segregate men and women…. Could it be said that it looks good to mix men and women? It does not look good. This is the first point. But, this is not the most important reason. The important thing, to me, is that—I will give you an example. We are all lay Buddhists. If there is a very very handsome man sitting beside you, will you be attracted by him? Probably you will, right? Probably, when you chant the scripture, you are still amazed by how handsome he looks, right? This is because sexual attraction is more likely to happen between men and women…. But if there is a woman sitting beside you, there will not be [sexual attraction]…. Even if there is an old woman standing beside you, you will not pay too much attention to her. But this is not the case if you are mixed with men. You will probably see a man walking in the main shrine and started to think, “Why didn’t he stand beside me?”

Gao Lian contends that gender segregation is helpful to construct a purified
Buddhist heart. And this purified Buddhist heart is constructed through the avoidance of any potential sexual attraction.

My conversation with another practitioner, Wu Wen, further disclosed how this practice of gender segregation is executed and even somewhat perpetuated in the temple. She explained:

Mixing men and women together, does it look ritualistic at all? Also, according to Buddhist precepts... when men and women are sitting together, they will have this kind of [sexual attraction]. For example, if a beautiful woman is sitting beside a man, will he purify his heart? He will not. The purpose of [gender segregation] is to purify your heart.... Also, since we are in this temple, we need to observe the arrangement of residential nuns, right? It can also reduce your sexual attachment to others and help you to have a calmed heart in your path of self-cultivation. Isn’t it good?

Wu Wen’s comments indicate that gender segregation in Pagoda Temple is sustained by both temple-level imposition and individual-level internalization. On one hand, as Wu Wen described, gender segregation in scripture chanting services and in the dining, room is a precept in Pagoda. Men and women Buddhists in Pagoda Temple are separated from each other because they observe “the arrangement of residential nuns.” In other words, Wu Wen implied that she follows this segregated arrangement to observe the requirements from the monastic members in the temple, who she referred to the “residential monastic members” in the interview. On the other hand, Wu Wen’s descriptions typify how practitioners in Pagoda Temple internalize, reinforce, and justify this segregated gender arrangement. Later in the interview, Wu Wen returned to the topic of why gender segregation is necessary.

At Pagoda Temple, I self-identified and consciously performed as a visitor.
This meant that I was not an insider, but rather someone with a professional and personal interest in Buddhism. Therefore, I did not, nor would I be allowed to, wear the uniform of Buddhist practitioners. In any case, because I volunteered at the temple, which often required considerable walking, I chose to wear jeans and sneakers in the temple. Returning to the topic of why gender segregation is necessary, Wu Wen pointed to my jeans and sneakers and said:

The clothes that you are wearing today is okay. . . . But, if a woman is wearing sexy clothes today, what will men think about her? If a woman is wearing a skirt today, what will men think about her? Will they still focus on the chanting service at all?

Given that men can easily be attracted by women, especially by these women who wear “sexy clothes,” Wu Wen thought, in sacred spaces where practitioners intend to purify their hearts, it is essential to segregate men and women. Wu Wen’s understanding of gender segregation in the temple was very similar to that of Gao Lian. While in agreement with the explanation provided by Gao Lian, Wu Wen additionally highlighted the supposed danger of women’s sexuality, implicitly blaming women for being sexually seductive.

To bolster their claim that gender segregation is crucial for the construction of a Buddhist identity, practitioners in Pagoda Temple use multiple resources to understand this segregated gender arrangement. The description from Li Xiang, a twenty-five-year-old devoted practitioner who explained the Buddhist notion of gender egalitarianism to use in the previous chapter, illustrates how multiple cultural resources operate together to construct practitioners’ explanation to the gendered arrangement in certain spaces within the temple. She explained:

We of course need to be segregated. If, for example, a very handsome guy is standing right in front of you, are you still in the mood of
cultivating your heart? . . . Previously, a monastic told me that, the reason why we separate [men and women] is because mixing them together makes people feel uncomfortable. It is like using the restroom. Men use a standing posture to urinate and women use a squatting posture to urinate. If men and women use the same restroom, will you be comfortable about it?... I think it is like using the restroom. Gender segregation [in the restroom] is something that we have been accepted since we were very young. It exists for a reason. . . . Also, in Buddhism, when Buddha was still with us, a lot of new male monks cannot abandon the secular seduction after seeing beautiful women. They therefore secularize themselves after renunciation. To Buddha, this is not a good thing because it shows that these male monks cannot control their hearts really appropriately. So, why does Buddhism require men and women to be separated from each other? This is to help practitioners to control their hearts relatively easily.

In her description, Li Xiang relied on several resources to interpret gender segregation in the temple. She first quoted a word from a monastic, indicating that gender segregation is not a bottom-up segregation that started from Buddhist practitioners. Instead, it is a top-down segregation that is imposed on Pagoda Temple. She then used an example of men and women using different restrooms, implicitly relating gender segregation with perceived biological differences between men and women, and thus assuming that gender segregation solves an unchangeable problem. Li Xiang also emphasized that gender segregation in restrooms is something that “we have accepted since we were very young.” Thus she suggests it cannot be changed. Moreover, and most importantly, Li Xiang connected gender segregation with the purification of the heart, informing me that gender segregation
is helpful to practitioners to cultivate their hearts. Furthermore, she told me that
gender segregation is a historical tradition that was started since Shakyamuni
Buddha was still alive. Buddhist histories, gender essentialism, requirements from
the temple, and habitual behaviors all become important components that construct
Li Xiang’s understandings of gender segregation in the temple.

“Purifying heart,” in fact, is important to Buddhist practitioners in Pagoda.
My first interviewee, Min Qiang, summarized the importance of purification of
heart. He said that Buddhist practitioners “would rather stir water in thousands of
lakes and rivers [than] stir the purified hearts of Buddhists (Ning Jiao Qian Jiang
Shui, Bu Rao Dao Ren Xin).”

By segregating gender, most Buddhists at Pagoda believe that they are
constructing the sacredness of their Buddhist identities, either through ritualistic
moments or through their purified hearts. As Orit Avishai says, they are “doing
religion,” but rarely consciously “doing gender.” Even so, there are exceptions.
Several Buddhist practitioners at Pagoda think that segregating gender is a process
of “doing” both gender and religion. A fifty-year-old Buddhist woman, Zhong Min
Qing, said that segregation “may be a way for us [the women] to indicate our
respect to male practitioners.” She then quoted a story about Shakyamuni Buddha,
saying that when Shakyamuni Buddha was turning his dharma wheels, he told his
disciples how to differentiate male bones from female bones. Male bones, he said,
are usually whiter and heavier and female bones darker and less heavy. Zhong Min
Qing explained that, at the time when Buddha was alive, men had many
opportunities to go to Buddhist temples and hear the dharma, but women did not.
Thus, she tied the sense of “respect” to segregation.

Compared with other Buddhists with whom I talked at Pagoda, Zhong Min
Qing’s perspectives of gender and segregation were manifestly clear. On several
occasions, she emphasized that these were her own thoughts and opinions. This emphasis on the personal ownership of her ideas indicates that she may not have received official instruction about gender segregation at the temple. Her explanations, nevertheless, reinforce the temple’s gender differences and patriarchy by suggesting that men and women are essentially different and that these differences are indicative of men’s superiority over women.

Situating my findings in the framework of “doing gender” and “doing religion,” Buddhists in Pagoda Temple exerted their power of agency, namely their autonomous behaviors, to “do religion.” While they observed a salient gendered arrangement, they did not consciously “do gender.” It was clear that they had never thought to question gender segregation. This lack of conscious reflection probably explains why they were not aware of the change from “front-back segregation” in traditional Buddhist temples to “left-right segregation” in temple branches of Compassion Bodhi. To them, segregation itself is far more important than how gender is segregated. As a researcher, I am interested in knowing more about how volunteers and monastic members deal with gender segregation when someone whose gender identity is non-binary or ambiguous. Where, for example, should transsexuals sit in sacred places? This issue, however, during my fieldwork at Pagoda, did not arise.

5.3.2 Challenging Segregation and Challenging Gender in Lotus Temple

As the vignette at the beginning of this chapter shows, gender segregation in Lotus Temple is not as rigid as that in Pagoda Temple in China. Like Pagoda Temple, Lotus Temple segregates by gender in the main shrine. I would also learn that men and women are segregated in the meditation room. However, Lotus has no other
places with gender segregation, and practitioners in Lotus Temple routinely challenge the segregated gender arrangement. In addition, even the temple ushers will lead people to gender-mixed seating at memorials. In my interviews with practitioners at Lotus Temple, I sought to understand how they understand the gendered arrangement in the main shrine and how this differed from those I had uncovered at Pagoda Temple. When I asked practitioners in Lotus Temple about their perspectives on gender segregation, most of them perceived it as a secularized arrangement. For example, Eva Yuh, a 58-year-old Taiwanese immigrant who regularly volunteers in the temple, said:

[Gender segregation] is merely a custom in Buddhism. It was like... If you are invited to someone’s house, and you saw that people take off their shoes before entering the host family’s house, you will then take off your shoes and enter, right? You will first see whether other people take off their shoes before entering the house. So [gender segregation] is merely a custom in [Lotus] temple. Since you want to enter this temple, it was like enter someone’s house, you should respective their custom. There are no particular [meanings attached to it].

In sharp contrast to her peers at Pagoda Temple, Eva Yuh implied that, from her perspective, there were neither gender nor religious meanings attached to the separation of men and women in the main shrine.

The detachment of religious meanings from gender segregation provides practitioners in Lotus Temple with more space to question this segregated gender arrangement. And different from their peer practitioners in Pagoda Temple, no one at Lotus was surprised by me asking about gender segregation. Few, if any, practitioner at Lotus was surprised by me asking about it. For example, a 27-year old regular practitioner, Melissa Wang, told me that she really didn’t know why
Lotus practiced gender segregation. She said:

I mean, I just feel like it’s not necessary, like, you are not, it’s not like you are— everybody is fully clothed, everybody is, I mean you are at a temple, it’s not accurate [to suggest that it’s a sexualized situation], so, I don’t know. It’s not like the gym locker room, okay it’s necessary to separate men and women [there]. You know, that kind of thing? So I never understood why, but I never care to ask. It’s just the way it is.

Comparing the temple space with gym locker room, Melissa Wang questioned the legitimacy and necessity for Lotus Temple to separate men and women. While Melissa’s confusion about gender segregation in the main shrine prevented her from observing the segregated gender arrangement, she did not really challenge it either.

Meredith Kuo,329 the woman who offered me a tour in my first visit to the temple, referenced that women at Lotus will go to the men’s side when the women’s side starts to fill up:

Sometimes we just follow the custom, right? Actually, it is not meaningful at all. It does not have particular meanings. You should know that, when women’s side is full, we also move to the men’s side. We are not insisting this segregated gender arrangement. . . . It is pretty flexible. . . . While generally, we are segregated between the Eastern side and the Western side, probably it was because when people are lined up. . . . It was a custom, to me, it was just a custom.

Meredith Kuo thus described violating gender segregation as a mild challenge to it. by emphasizing it was “just a custom” she declares that it has no religious content. Others also referenced moving to the men’s side to worship as a mild challenge to gender segregation, although no one referenced challenging it more actively.
The Buddhist men whom I talked with at Lotus Temple, however, seem to have a different understanding of gender segregation when compared to their women counterparts. Gender segregation was in fact among the elements of Lotus practice that Eric Lai criticized in his interview with me. While he is deeply committed to Lotus Temple, Eric said he wanted to “break” the gender segregation in Lotus Temple. Like Meredith Kuo and Melissa Wang, he described it as “merely a custom.” When I asked him why he wants to break it, Eric explained:

You come here, and this arrangement is like how we separated men and women in different classes when we were in middle school. [The intention] was not to [avoid] evil thoughts that prevents people from cultivating their hearts. But, basically, people in Buddhist temples have purified heart. So there should not be the so-called differences between male practitioners and female practitioners. I can hardly imagine a male Buddhist practitioner conduct[ing] sexual harassment. I think this is nearly impossible. . . . Also, [gender segregation] does not look good at all. There are lots of people in one side (the women’s side) and very few people in the other side (the men’s side). It will be better if men and women could mix together.

Eric Lai acknowledged the question of purity of heart, but he detached gender segregation from sanctity. His comments are also in direct conflict with the wide agreement among practitioners at Pagoda Temple that gender segregation looks better than gender mixing. While Lotus’ practitioners are also majority female, the imbalance is not quite as extreme.

Notwithstanding Eric’s strong feelings against gender segregation, he remained on the men’s side of the aisle during the scripture-chanting service. Perhaps because other men who object to gender segregation at Lotus agree with
Eric that the imbalance is one of the problems—they want the men’s side to have more practitioners, not fewer, I have rarely, if ever, observed any men violating gender segregation by going to the women’s side.

Although having many practitioners secularizing and even criticizing gender segregation in Lotus Temple, this does not mean that every temple member rejects gender segregation. I interviewed Jason Chang,331 a young Buddhist man in his mid-20s who transitioned from a Hindu to a Buddhist tradition. When I asked him whether he had noticed gender segregation in the scripture chanting services and how he felt about it, he said that “men and women should be separated in the practice.” I probed and he explained: “The main reason is to focus on the Buddha. It’s just less distraction.” His perspective is similar to the perspectives of Pagoda Buddhists who think that gender segregation helps to purify their hearts. Yet it is worth noting that, among the 31 Buddhists who I interviewed at Lotus Temple, most held to a secular interpretation of gender segregation and delinked it from the sacredness of their Buddhist identities.

5.4 Summary

In this chapter, I demonstrated that in both Pagoda Temple in China and Lotus Temple in the United States, there is a similar transition of gendered arrangement according to physical spaces, but the specific gendered arrangements are different in the two temples. In Pagoda Temple, gender is segregated in a number of places, including the main shrine, the Buddhist classroom, and the dining hall even during unofficial meals that are only open to Buddhist volunteers. At Lotus, gender is segregated largely in the main shrine during scripture chanting services and occasionally in the meditation room during meditation classes. Gender segregation at Lotus is dependent on both the sacredness of the place and the moment. When
Buddhists attend lectures in the main shrine or have small-group discussions in the meditation room, men and women mingled with each other. In both temples, then, men and women are separated during sacred moments that carry significant religious meanings, and any differences reflect different understandings of what counts as the most sacred places within the temple.

A close analysis of the interpretations of gender segregation by Buddhists further reveals that practitioners at Pagoda Temple and Lotus Temple have separate understandings of segregation. Buddhists in Pagoda Temple focused more on the religious components attached to gender segregation in the temple. They informed me that gender segregation enhanced both the sacredness of the physical spaces and the purity of their hearts. In contrast, their counterparts in Lotus Temple put greater emphasis on the gendered components associated with segregation. Differing from their peer practitioners in mainland China, practitioners in Lotus Temple adopted a secular interpretation of gender segregation. They did not attach sacred meanings to this gendered arrangement and did not connect it with their Buddhist identities. Yet the secularized understanding of gender segregation at Lotus does not mean that gender segregation is almost eliminated. If it were, the practitioners would not have looked at me disapprovingly when I sat on the wrong side in my first fieldwork at the temple. Instead, it means that Buddhists there do not necessarily link gender segregation with the sacredness of their religious identities.

Practitioners’ unique interpretations of gender segregation at Pagoda Temple and Lotus Temple led to their distinctive responses to it. At Pagoda Temple, practitioners largely observed, if not reinforced, this segregated arrangement, whereas practitioners at Lotus, Buddhists sometimes utilized their agentic power to challenge it. Although my research method and sample cannot provide conclusive arguments about how the agency in Lotus Temple interacts with gender, my initial
analysis shows differences between how men and women Buddhists in Lotus Temple respond to gender segregation. Men practitioners may challenge gender segregation verbally, but not in practice. Buddhist women may not challenge gender segregation vocally, even in the one-on-one interview setting, but may not follow gender segregation in practices.

My data offers a few possibilities about this difference in agency between men and women. One possibility is that, due to the overrepresentation of women in Lotus Temple, it is more natural to have women moving to the men’s side instead of the other way around. Another possibility is that the social construction of masculinity is usually perceived as being superior to femininity. As a consequence, women moving to the men’s side may implicitly be perceived as upward mobility while men moving to women would potentially lower their social standing. In any case, agency is constructed by the broader gendered culture and structure.

This analysis of how gender is arranged and segregated in sacred spaces in the temples concerns not only my prior observations on different types of gender agency but also echoes my previous discussions on the different types of Buddhist identities between the temples. Indeed, Buddhists at Pagoda and Lotus embody different types of gender agency. The former manifest a more compliant agency even in their navigation of the relationship between gender and religion while the latter manifest a more critical sense of agency, challenging the connection between gender and Buddhism. What is equally important is the difference in their Buddhist identities. Buddhists at Pagoda perform a Temple-specific Buddhist identity that highlights the intra-religious boundary between the “Pagoda us” and the “non-Pagoda other.” Their counterparts at Lotus, however, perform a more individual-centered Buddhist identity that restrains the inter-religious symbolic boundary that differentiates the “Buddhist us” from the “non-Buddhist other.”
By focusing on how people “do gender” in the most sacred places, this chapter adds to the scholarship in gender and religion. Switching from an imposition of Western feminist perspectives to an understanding of religious practitioners’ own perspectives, recent studies indicate that how religious people “do gender” cannot be separated from how they “do religion.” Specifically, although some practices in conservative religious traditions might seem to embody gender traditionalism to people outside the religion, from the perspectives of those on the inside, these practices are essential to the construction of their religious identities, the enhancement of the sacredness of their religiosity, and their own difference from more secular people. For instance, some Jewish women locate their femininity in a concept of the ideal wife and mother, to decrease their anxiety about not having a settled value system in the modern world and to differentiate themselves from the “secular other.”

The framework of “doing gender” to “doing religion” is more applicable to Buddhist practitioners at Pagoda than to Lotus. Although the gendered connotation is particularly salient at Pagoda, many practitioners do not see it as being related to gender. This means that they do not necessarily believe that gender segregation informs them about how to be Buddhist women and Buddhist men. Rather, they believe that gender segregation just helps them to be Buddhists.

Even when they do not read this segregation as a gendered practice, this does not mean that gender is not “done” through segregation. The way practitioners are segregated in sacred places highlights their dichotomous gendered differences, and the practitioners’ participation in gender segregation is itself a way of “doing gender.”

In Lotus Temple, however, practitioners detached gendered practices from religious meanings. They applied their agentic power to challenge this segregated
arrangement and “re-do” gender. Their challenge of gender segregation was even, to some extent, approved by the temple, which removes gender segregation at memorial services. At the same time, challenges were limited to women quietly moving to the men’s side, rather than a direct reject of the practice.

My data, together with my prior descriptions of the religious and gender contexts in the two temples, offer several explanations for why gender and agency differ at the two temples. First, as indicated in Chapter 1, Pagoda practitioners perceive Buddhism as a majority religion in China, but most of the so-called Chinese Mahayana Buddhists outside the temple misunderstand Chinese Buddhism. Gender segregation and the connotation of segregating gender and avoiding sexual attraction, therefore, become the cultural resources with which Pagoda Buddhists highlight the symbolic boundaries between the “Pagoda us” and the “non-Pagoda other.” Lotus practitioners, however, recognize that Buddhism, especially Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, is a minority religion in the US and, therefore, construct an individualistic Buddhist identity that plays down the inter-religious symbolic boundaries. Their challenge to gender segregation could be one of the dimensions with which they test symbolic boundaries.

Second, their different understandings and responses to gender segregation in the temple could be related to how they were socialized about gender. The previous chapter about how Buddhists in the two distinctive temples “do gender” shows that Buddhist practitioners in Pagoda and Lotus Temple understand gender egalitarianism differently, and hence respond to the gendered structure in distinctive ways. Their different gender schemas and agency are probably related to the different gender climates in mainland China and the United States. Similarly, in this scenario of their interpretations of gender segregation, I speculate that practitioners’ different understandings about gender segregation is also related to
the gender relations, and, more precisely, how they have been socialized about
gender in the two contexts. As shown in Chapter 4, many Buddhists at Lotus
Temple know that, as immigrants, they have been exposed to what they see as the
more egalitarian gender norms in US society. Their different exposures to gender
ideologies in secular societies explain why, in Pagoda Temple in China, practitioners
“read religion” from gender segregation. Yet, in Lotus Temple in the United States,
practitioners “read gender” from gender segregation.

In either case, the way in which practitioners in the two temples understand
gender illustrates that, although Buddhists in the two temples adopt very similar
gendered practices—segregating men and women in certain sacred spaces within the
temple—the intersection between gender and religion is different in the two temples.
Gender segregation in religious communities, particularly in the sacred places, is a
close intersection between gender and religion. Buddhists can read gender, religion,
or both when trying to understand such intersection. The way they read it, is
dependent on (1) the personal cultural framework through which they embrace
Buddhism; (2) the communal cultures embodied by the temples where they practice
Buddhism, and (3) the dialogues between religious and sacred cultures on both
personal and communal levels. Together with my description about how gender is
performed and reproduced in volunteer work, this chapter about gender segregation
further illustrates that the social contexts where practitioners are situated condition
the intersection between gender and religion.
According to a 2010 survey by Pew Research, 488 million people are Buddhists (seven percent of the world’s population). Of these, 50% live in China. There is also a growing presence of Buddhists and Buddhist temples in the US, the result of Asian immigrants but also because of increasing numbers of white middle-class Americans who converted to Buddhism and/or adopted Buddhist ideas and practices in the construction of their spirituality without affiliating with Buddhism or practicing it in faith communities. While 33% of US Buddhists are Asian and 44% are white, Buddhism is still seen as a foreign religion inherent in Asian ethnicities. Even so, scholars find that members of minority religious communities can often successfully navigate between religion and ethnicity and that this intersection is not uniquely applicable to US faith communities. As my fieldwork shows, it occurs at both Pagoda and Lotus temples, in China and the US, respectively.
6.1 Intersection Between Buddhism and Chinese Ethnicity

6.1.1 Preserving and Reconstructing Chinese Ethnicity in Pagoda Temple

Much like most fast-developing cities in China, the metropolitan area where Pagoda Temple is located features simple, arguably Westernized architectural styles. As with most Buddhist temples in China, Pagoda stands out for its classical Chinese architecture, with white walls and black curved eaves and ridges. It has a broad rooftop, white walls, alleys, platforms, and shrines typical of a traditional Chinese Buddhist Temple, although the buildings themselves are all newly constructed. Several practitioners said that the architecture is part of the local government’s effort to preserve Chinese culture in the surrounding area. These new buildings in traditional Chinese architectural styles, therefore, are an integral part of the area in which they stand.

Many of the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples I visited before beginning my fieldwork at Pagoda Temple have a traditional Chinese architectural style, regardless of whether they are ancient temples or new buildings that mimic Chinese architecture. I fully expected Pagoda’s invocation of traditional China in its architecture before my first visit. Considering the long history of Buddhism being integrated into Chinese society,343 I was not surprised to learn that respondents see Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity as inextricably linked. What I did not expect was that practitioners would be interpreting and expressing Chinese ethnicity and its interplay with Buddhism in fascinating ways. In fact, they see Buddhism not only as an integral part of Chinese ethnicity but also as a way to reconstruct a so-called authentic Chinese ethnicity.
My first clue that members of the temple are deeply engaged with the intersection between religion in ethnicity came from Bai Jie. I met Bai Jie on the first day of my fieldwork. She is in her early 20s, with short hair and a sweet voice. I learned from her that Pagoda Temple not only celebrates the Chinese New Year, which I expected, but that it begins its celebration with the Laba Festival, which is three weeks before the New Year itself. I have described some of my observations from the exhausting, exciting, deeply meaningful work of serving porridge at the Laba Festival in chapter 1; here I will address how that event typifies Pagoda’s relationship to Chinese ethnicity.

Celebrating Laba Festival is not uncommon in China, where, regardless of religious affiliation, people eat Laba Porridge, a dish made of oats, peanuts, dates and red beans, but I had not expected a Buddhist temple to observe a holiday that I thought was secular. Bai Jie told me that she was excited because her mother was planning to visit the temple for the Spring Festival, which would begin the following week with the Laba Festival and continue until the New Year three weeks later. I was surprised by her emphasis on an event that is deeply Chinese but that I considered to be not particularly Buddhist. A monastic woman whom I met on the first day of my fieldwork congratulated me on my luck in timing my fieldwork to begin in time to help to serve the porridge for the Laba Festival. When I later met Bai Jie’s mother I heard another practitioner congratulate her on being at the temple for Chinese New Year festivities as well: “Spring Festival is the best time at Pagoda Temple. Outside lacks a flavor of Spring Festival (mei you nian wei), but the festival always has a strong spirit at Pagoda.” I was struck by this description: in preserving a “strong spirit” of Spring Festival, Pagoda would be giving to encompass visitors like Bai Jie’s mother a deep connection to Chinese ethnicity, which is central to the event. In both of my formal and informal conversations with
Buddhists, I frequently heard similar remarks during the Spring Festival: “The flavor of celebrating Chinese New Year is lost outside the temple (mei you nian wei) but preserved inside, here at Pagoda.” Over time I learned that such events at Pagoda not only preserve Chinese cultures and celebrate Chinese ethnicity; they also reconstruct it, giving it Buddhist meaning.

On the morning of the Laba Festival itself, I woke at 5:30 am, attended a short internal scripture chanting service, and headed to the dining hall with other volunteers for breakfast, which consisted of a bowl of Laba Porridge. I had been told that volunteers have porridge for both breakfast and lunch at Pagoda because the temple lacks the staff to prepare other dishes on this day.

The primacy of the porridge was familiar, but Pagoda’s recipe is quite different from many others in that it is savory instead of sweet. I ultimately asked Bai Jie why, and she said,

Many people ask the same question: Why does Laba Porridge taste savory in the temple? I was also initially confused. Later, I was told that the founder is extremely compassionate. He realizes that people with diabetes cannot eat sweet Laba Porridge. So, all temple branches of Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters offer savory Laba Porridge, which shows the wisdom and compassion of our Venerable Master.344

Laba Porridge is an important cultural symbol of Chinese ethnicity. In using the recipe, the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters has created, Pagoda reconstructs this symbol. By interpreting the flavor as a representation of the founding master’s foresight and compassion, practitioners at Pagoda attached a Buddhist meaning to the cereal. As I learned more about the temple and its celebrations of Chinese festivals, I realized that Pagoda continually reconstructs
symbols associated with Chinese ethnicity in just such nuanced ways.

Shortly after breakfast, volunteers and monastics prepared for the whole-day porridge-serving event, which started at 9 am when the temple opened its doors to tourists. Outside, it was raining and cold and little gusts blew the leaves in the alleyways. There were, however, many practitioners, visitors, and tourists milling around, and flyers announced that free porridge would be served in the guest room.

A volunteer standing next to the entrance used a microphone to relate the Buddhist history of the festival. “Laba was the day the Buddha was enlightened,” she said. “Before that, he was doing extreme abstinence with the hope of understanding the ultimate truth. He was so hungry he could barely think. At that moment, a shepherdess gave him a bowl of porridge, which he ate, and his energy returned. After thinking under the Bodhi tree for forty-nine days, Buddha got enlightened.”

This was the first time I had heard of the Laba Festival having a Buddhist meaning. I had known the holiday as a secular festival, one of many such annual festivals in China, but the festival at Pagoda is intimately tied to Buddhist history, and practitioners reinterpret its meaning, believing it to be an annual celebration of the day Prince Siddhartha ate the porridge, revitalized after his long abstinence, and became the enlightened Buddha.

The reconstruction of Chinese ethnicity manifests itself not only in the flavor of the porridge but also in its various cultural symbols. In the lantern exhibition, for example, right after the Laba festival, lanterns represent Buddhist stories. Similarly, before the Chinese New Year, Pagoda Temple distributes red couplets—papers that the Chinese traditionally place on their doors to express good wishes. Instead of familiar words such as those found in secular societies—for instance, good luck and good fortune—the couplets use dharma words articulated by the founding Master.
Inside the temple, I found Chinese New Year celebrated more intensely than any Spring Festival I had attended elsewhere. In the large cities near Pagoda Temple, the festival is celebrated with a large New Year’s Eve dinner, a family reunion, and then fades into memory after only three to five days. At Pagoda Temple, the celebration lasted for almost three weeks.

The Spring Festival celebrations concluded with a several-weeks-long Chinese Lantern Exhibition in the garden, and much as the Laba Festival had it incorporated Buddhist themes. While including images of monkeys corresponding to the secular Year of Monkey (it was 2016), it also included images of the Bodhisattva, something I had never seen at any other Chinese Lantern Exhibition. Thus, it blended Chinese ethnicity with Buddhist meaning yet again. Pagoda practitioners believe that authentic Chinese culture is threatened, especially after the Cultural Revolution, a ten-year sociopolitical movement that destroyed many Chinese cultures in the 1960s. Now facing China’s unprecedented modernization, the practitioners believe they are preserving what they can of Chinese culture.

6.1.2 Detaching Chinese Ethnicity from Buddhism in Lotus Temple

While I did not expect ethnicity and religion to intersect at Pagoda, I expected the preservation of Chinese ethnic cultures to be salient at the US Lotus Temple. Previous studies on immigrant faith communities show that they are an important social space for immigrants to stay connected with their native countries and so preserve their ethnic cultures.\textsuperscript{345} I assumed that this would apply to Lotus, an ethnic Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temple that is predominantly composed of immigrants to the United States, most of them first-generation Chinese immigrants.

Although Ebaugh and Yang\textsuperscript{346} find minority faith communities may attract
many non-ethnic practitioners, this is not the case at Lotus. I met few regular practitioners who were not ethnic Chinese. Members of the temple have a curious term for these practitioners: “English speaking people.” The term was deceptive in that most members speak proficient English and a small number of practitioners who are second or third generation Chinese immigrants have limited capacity to speak Mandarin, although they have sufficient comprehension not to require English language translation. Yet they are not considered “English speaking people”; only those without Chinese heritage are. Yet language was the main practical distinction, and more senior practitioners often turned to their younger counterparts, who spoke fluent English, saying things like, “There are foreigners in the temple. Please translate for them if necessary. The word “foreigner” is a literal translation of *Wai Guo Ren* and, in this context, refers to English-speaking people. As this perception reflects, Lotus establishes a diasporic culture—the dominant culture in the temple is ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese is perceived as “foreign.” Thus, Lotus presents its identity as a Chinese Buddhist temple.

Sometimes local middle-schools visit the Lotus Temple. I volunteered to help the guide for a group of students from a local Catholic school. Bradley Anderson, a white volunteer, was the tour guide. We had a short chat before the tour, and Bradley told me that he works for a tech company. Free Mandarin classes at other temple branches affiliated with the international headquarters had been his portal into Buddhism. After moving to the city several years ago, he sought a temple branch affiliated with Compassion Bodhi and became a regular practitioner at Lotus. As an undergraduate philosophy major, he saw many connections and differences between Buddhism and Western philosophy. He told me that he would provide the students with a brief but authentic understanding of Buddhism.

Bradley asked me to open both left and right entrance doors: “Boys go
through the right door and girls go through the left door.” The Catholic school teachers followed Bradley and instructed, “Boys this door. Girls that door.” She repeated this several times until all students had entered the main shrine. This segregation became a mutual sanction for student visitors. When one boy tried to enter through the “girls’ door,” a school friend, another teenager, stopped him and said, “Hey, you are not a girl!” This surprised me since Lotus does not, as a rule, segregate entry through its doors, just as gender separation at the main shrine is less rigid than at Pagoda. I could not tell if this was due to Bradley or the nun, but the nuns evidently approved as they and Bradley had discussed the tour flow before other volunteers and the students came to the temple. It seemed to be a way of introducing the visitors to the Buddhist custom of gender segregation even though Lotus does not itself keep this custom. The emphasis on Chinese ethnicity continued as the students entered the main shrine and sat on the prayer mats. Bradley offered a brief history of the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters and the connection between it and the temple. Throughout his talk he particularly highlighted that Lotus Temple is a Chinese Buddhist temple.\footnote{It seems like, monastic leaders from the temple want to highlight its affiliation with Chinese ethnicity.}

Chinese New Year was also a period when Lotus Temple emphasizes its Chinese ethnicity. Visiting the temple at this time, I noticed a red lantern and couplet, the calligraphy written on red papers to celebrate the Chinese New Year, in the lobby, both traditional symbols of the Chinese New Year with no particular Buddhist connection. There would be scripture chanting services on the eve of the New Year as well as for the first two days of the year. When I served as a volunteer usher for one of these services, I received a brief training session on the particulars of the New Years’ Service, and the construction of Chinese ethnicity was clear.
throughout.

The training session started at 7 pm on the evening of the Chinese New Year with a vegetarian dinner, which consisted of both vegetarian pizza and two Chinese styles of soup—a savory soup with fake meat balls and a sweet soup containing red bean rice and dumplings. I heard a monastic who was eating both vegetarian pizza and a bowl of bean rice dumpling soup remark on the contrast: “It is quite funny that we are having a traditional Chinese rice dumpling soup with American pizza.” It was a clear acknowledgement of the complexity of Chinese ethnicity at Pagoda, situated as it is in the tension of preserving Chinese ethnicity within mainstream US culture.

After dinner, the volunteers received instructions from the monastics on the flow of services. The flow itself would not be dramatically different from that of other scripture chanting services, but practitioners were to place the votive flowers and lanterns on the stage of the main shrine to symbolize their devotion to the Buddha. Volunteers need no extra training in regular services on Monday morning, but this New Year’s Eve service has a different flow. This was why volunteers, particularly ushers who would guide the flow, received the service the night before.

Based on the evening as a whole, the celebration of Chinese ethnicity seemed less salient at Lotus than it had been at Pagoda. This surprised me because I imagined that religious practitioners in diasporic communities would celebrate their ethnic cultures. Instead, some Lotus practitioners endorsed a racialized understanding of Chinese ethnicity in US society. This approach was ultimately in line with Lotus’s adoption of a broad concept of dharma and Buddhism, which is manifest in its lectures, seminars, and activities that superficially seem unconnected with Buddhism. Leadership seemed to seek to make the temple accessible and helpful to its members.
They also sought to define Chinese ethnicity within US society. For example, one Sunday in early summer after scripture chanting services, instead of having the traditional dharma talk, monastic members invited members of a Chinese dancing group to talk about and give a short demonstration of their new dance, a piece about the struggles of early Chinese immigrants to the United States. The nontraditional dharma talk opened with a short introductory video from the director, who was abroad at the time and unable to attend. He said that he wanted to show “the immigration history of Chinese Americans, from doing construction work in inter-continental railways to opening laundry shops and restaurants” through dance. He also described the founding of Chinese schools because most US public schools had once barred Chinese children. The company had conducted extensive research, interviewing older Chinese immigrants about their experiences and those of their families. Their stories included numerous examples of resistance to racial discrimination. The video concluded with the director attributing the success of Chinese immigrants to the “unique moral and cultural values held by Chinese,” saying that he hoped the dance would invite new Chinese immigrants to remember and appreciate the values of the early immigrants. This dharma talk by the dancers and managers of the company continued in this vein. Dancers used body language to dramatize the construction of the intercontinental railway, suggesting the experience of immigrants who contributed to this enormous achievement and frequently paid a brutal price for it. A number of lecture attendees purchased tickets for the performance after the presentation.\textsuperscript{349}

This presentation, like several others held at Lotus during my fieldwork focus on the racialized experience of Chinese immigrants to the United States in history and celebrate the success of immigrants to hard work, trading on the stereotype of the model minority. This is quite unlike Pagoda’s incorporation of cultural and
ethnic symbols, such as food and festivals. I realized through this and other events at Lotus that its members lack the power and agency to navigate the cultural symbols of Chinese ethnicity and recreate it in a Buddhist image that is evident at Pagoda. Buddhists at Lotus have a racialized understanding of Chinese ethnicity because of their position within US society.

Another event, a lecture by an ethnic Chinese professor, described the position of early Chinese immigrants in relation to African Americans as well as the dominant culture. Monastic leaders had invited the lecturer. She said that Chinese immigrants had to “compete for jobs with African Americans” due to racist hiring practices but were not “as physically strong” as African Americans. This was a broad generalization, a phenotypical comparison between Chinese Americans and African Americans. She attributed the Chinese immigrants’ current success to the “intelligence, diligence, and morality” of a people who overcame harsh circumstances and achieved upward social mobility. Like the dance company’s presentation, the lecture implied an adjustment to a racialized understanding of what it means to be Chinese in the United States. The use of the model minority stereotype had the ironic effect of reifying the belief that the Chinese are unassimilable but admirable. This understanding illustrates the struggle between being an insider, as many Chinese are naturalized American citizens or born in the US, or an outsider, as racial and ethnic minorities. While Buddhists at the temple usually focus primarily on religious matters, this struggle was apparent from time to time.

Another time when I saw the insider/outsider struggle manifest at Lotus was at a preparation meeting for an outreach event at the temple. Monastic leaders had decided the event would include several non-Chinese Buddhist practitioners, some of whom were well-known in the area. At the meeting one of the monastic members collected thoughts from the Buddhist volunteers regarding whether they should play
the US national anthem and have ushers carry the national flag as they entered the shrine at the beginning of an event.

Several attendees shook their heads or said “no” audibly. The monastic explained: “This [referring to Lotus Temple] is a Buddhist temple in the US. We are thinking if we should play the anthem of the US to show our courtesy.”

Jim Zhang, one of my interviewees, responded, “But we are Chinese.” Most practitioners agreed with him, although their native societies—Hong Kong, Malaysia, mainland China, and Taiwan—have dramatically differing relationships to the United States. A middle-aged practitioner, a first-generation immigrant, whispered, “Why should we play the national anthem of the US? We are not Americans. We are Chinese! This is a temple! Why do we need to play a national anthem in a temple?” Indeed, no one had proposed singing the Chinese national anthem or that of any other sending country. Another practitioner, sitting in the front row, agreed. “We do not need to sing their national anthem. We are not Americans.” The monastic nodded and said, “Okay, I sort of understand your stance on this issue.” This interaction suggested not only the struggles of the insider/outsider identity but also an intention to detach religion from that struggle. By saying “This is a temple,” the speakers indicated that they wanted no part of the insider/outsider identity to pervade their religious space, even though some temple events do bring it in at times.351

6.2 Constructing Ethnicity in Distinctive Contexts

Pagoda and Lotus temples in many ways provide their practitioners with similar cultural resources to construct their Chinese ethnicity and navigate between it and
Buddhism. For example, the festivals celebrated, the food eaten in the temple, and decorations used are similar, and they display, reinforce, and express the Chinese ethnic identity of each temple. However, their approach to Chinese ethnicity diverges from there. At Pagoda, lay Buddhists work alongside their monastic leaders to use and re-interpret cultural symbols, and reconstruct the meaning of Chinese ethnicity. At Lotus, lay Buddhists sometimes actually disagree with their leaders over how to integrate Chinese ethnicity in the temple or how to navigate their status as a racial and religious minority in the United States. Lotus practitioners try to detach identity struggles from religion. This section will rely on observational and interview data to explore why Pagoda and Lotus practitioners navigate religion and ethnicity differently.

6.2.1 Buddhism As Part of Chinese Ethnicity for Pagoda Practitioners

When I asked Huang Mei Li, a 26-year-old Buddhist woman at Pagoda whether she thinks Buddhism is related to Chinese ethnicity, she said “yes” emphatically. She went on:

The language we use in daily life, some is Buddhist. And also, our customs, such as funerals, are also related to Buddhism. When I was still in school, I was told that Buddhism has been transplanted to China for a long time, and it is integrated into local Chinese culture. Chinese culture also absorbs some Buddhist cultures. So, the two are not separate.

Huang Mei Li believes that Buddhism is the source of many Chinese ethnic symbols, including language and rituals such as funerals. Thus, in her mind Chinese
culture is rooted in religion. Her sense of this entanglement was common among people at Pagoda.

Huang Mei Li provided only vague descriptions of how Chinese ethnic symbols originated from Buddhism, but her peer Buddhist, Li Xiang, gave a more detailed description. For example, she said that many Chinese words such as occupation (Hang Ye) and unit (Dan Wei) have Buddhist origins. Huang Mei Li had also pointed out that Ye refers to karma in Buddhism and that Dan refers to Buddhist robes. As an active Buddhist practitioner, Li Xiang said that many famous poets in Chinese history were “fans of” famous Buddhist disciplines and, therefore, styled themselves on Buddhist names. For example, some poets give themselves pseudonyms names as Ju Shi, which literally means lay Buddhist practitioner. According to Li Xiang, Buddhism “has been deeply involved in Chinese culture.”

In fact, “Buddhism is part of Chinese ethnicity” was the most common comment I heard in response to my questions on their thoughts of the intersection between religion and ethnicity at Pagoda Temple. And most Buddhists at the temple told me that Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity are inseparable. Huang Mei Li and Li Xiang’s claim that part of Chinese ethnicity stems from Buddhism seems to be correct as Buddhism has already become an integral part of Chinese cultures. Buddhism’s long integration with Chinese society has led Buddhists to express their religious affiliation through Chinese ethnicity symbols, particularly language, as well. Practitioners put Buddhism on par with Confucian and Daoist thought in terms of its influence on Chinese ethnicity and point out that Buddhist scriptures are written in traditional and ancient Chinese languages. Indeed, one middle-aged woman practitioner pointed out that for many people in China Buddhist scriptures are the only texts that was originally translated in
traditional and ancient Chinese languages. Monks, nuns, and many devoted lay practitioners at Pagoda embody Chinese ethnicity at mealtimes. For example, according to my respondents, holding the bowl while eating is part of Chinese ethnicity. A Chinese saying, “dragons hold pearls” (Long Han Zhu), teaches that the bowl should be held like a dragon holds a pearl, while another, “the Phoenix nods its head” (Feng Dian Tou), means that the mouth should approach the bowl, not the reverse. My respondents also said that contemporary monk robes follow the traditional Chinese style.

These connections were relatively superficial, but many study participants at Pagoda described a deeper connection. They see Buddhism as intermingled with Chinese moral values. Sun Fang explained that the “notion of avoiding all evil behaviors and doing all good deeds,” which she found in Buddhism, is consistent with Confucian notions as well as Daoist ideology. She suggested, therefore, that spreading Buddhism enhances morality in China.

Members of Pagoda frequently emphasized the connection between Buddhism and filial piety. Filial piety is a distinctive moral value in China since it integrates notions of love, compassion, and respect for authority. Zhang Chun Hua, the middle-aged woman practitioner who volunteers at the temple and constructs her religious identity as Pagoda-centric, pointed to filial piety when reflecting on the connection between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity.

Buddhism says the notion of filial piety, right? Filial piety! Chinese ethnic culture also says filial piety. We should respect senior people and love our kids. [Filial piety] is present in both Buddhism and Chinese ethnic culture.

While Buddhism is expressed through Chinese ethnic symbols, and Buddhist values overlap with Chinese morality, their integration partly explains why Buddhists at
Pagoda can navigate the cultural resources of both Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity to reconstruct their Chinese ethnicity.

### 6.2.2 Buddhism’s Role in Preserving Ethnic Cultures at Pagoda Temple

In keeping with remarks about the “strong” flavor of the Chinese New Year at Pagoda, respondents described Pagoda as playing a vital role in preserving the vanishing Chinese ethnicity, in terms of both ethnic symbols and moral values. For example, Chen Hui said, “Chinese ethnic culture has always existed in Buddhist temples.”\(^{359}\) Because of this, she said, people can “hardly understand” Chinese ethnicity if they do not enter Buddhist temples. I probed, asking her which ethnic cultures are better preserved in Buddhist temples. She replied:

> Buddhist temples are always preserving Chinese traditional cultures. It is just the case that, if you do not engage with them, you can hardly understand them.... For instance, scripture chanting and Buddhist instruments are the particular ethnic cultures in Buddhism. They (these Chinese ethnic cultures) has been preserved in terms of how [to chant scriptures and play Buddhist instruments]. For instance, here [at Pagoda Temple], we are having Buddhist services on the first and fifteenth day of the Lunar Calendar every month. Also, Buddhist services [preserve Chinese ethnicity], the procedures of Buddhist services, and the procedures of morning and evening chanting on the first and fifteenth of Lunar Calendar. These are the specific ethnic cultures that have always been preserved [in Buddhist temples through practices].

According to Chen Hui, then, Buddhist services celebrate Chinese ethnicity because the rituals are connected with Chinese ethnic symbols. Indeed, Pagoda Buddhists
see their temple as a sacred place for preserving Chinese ethnicity. This “sacredness” is constructed according to a comparison between preserving Chinese ethnicity at the temple and its decline in mainland China.

Indeed, many of the Buddhists I spoke with at Pagoda see ethnic Chinese cultures declining and, in some cases, vanishing in China. They trace this decline to 1966-1976, when the government imposed the Great Cultural Revolution, shutting down educational, cultural, and religious institutions throughout mainland China. As a result, they see a “cultural disconnection” with a past such that, in the words of a 23-year-old woman practitioner, Xiu Hua, “a lot of Chinese culture is not recognizable and not properly preserved.” Gao Lian, a 26-year-old Buddhist woman, told me that Buddhism is related to Chinese ethnic culture and that many Chinese languages originated from Buddhism:

Probably in our generation, as well as the previous generation, people are disconnected from Buddhism due to the Great Cultural Revolution.

But before that, considering the proportion of Buddhists in China, Buddhism is very related to our lives.

Many Buddhists at Pagoda felt that the Great Cultural Revolution had led to a decline in morality. Some said that the ritualistic practices in Buddhist temples shielded the temples from politics, and particularly from the Great Cultural Revolution, and that this was key to their role in preserving Chinese ethnicity.

For Min Qiang, a young, devoted, college-educated practitioner, the crux of the issue was a disappearance of standards of respect. He wrote:

Buddhist cultures are well-integrated into the blood of the Chinese people. If you want to find the Chinese ethnic cultures now, you can see that most Chinese ethnic cultures are... the result of China’s ten-year-long turmoil. So, you will see that students dare to hit their
teachers, sons dare to hit their fathers, right? We do not respect the ancient people anymore. We do not respect senior people anymore. Now, in this era, we want to get [traditional Chinese morality] back. We want to get back the things we lost. We want to reconstruct it. But these things are—how should I phrase it? —incomplete. So, if you really want to find Chinese ethnic cultures, you need to come to the temples to find them.

According to Min Qiang, Buddhist temples have become the last bastion of Chinese ethnicity. If China is to reestablish moral values of respects for elders and authority figures, Buddhist temples must be the source.

Although Chen Hui and Min Qiang understand Chinese ethnicity differently—the former focusing on ethnic cultural symbols and the latter on ethnic moral values—they both agree that ritual is a key way Buddhist temples preserve Chinese ethnicity. Others referenced the Compassion Bodhi, which is located in Taiwan, as a key reason Pagoda preserves Chinese ethnicity. For example, Gao Lian highlighted the fact that the founding Master of Compassion Bodhi had established an international Buddhist headquarters as well as temple branches outside mainland China, even before opening branches in China. She said this effort was “saving Buddhism out of turmoil” and “bringing Buddhism to more peaceful places,” which eventually allowed Buddhism to “grow up in this peaceful place.” By “a peaceful place,” she meant Taiwan; i.e., a Chinese society, broadly defined, which is immune from the Great Cultural Revolution. She also said that branches of Compassion Bodhi would be able to preserve Chinese ethnicity, in the form of historical relics and traditional languages, outside of the reach of the central government in mainland China.

Liu Chen, a woman practitioner, at Pagoda agreed with Gao Lian about
Pagoda’s special role in preserving Chinese ethnicity compared to other Chinese Buddhist temples. She had long been interested in traditional Chinese ethnic cultures and she said Taiwan had actually preserved these cultures more effectively. She had joined Pagoda Temple because she felt that it preserves Chinese ethnic cultures better than most Buddhist temples on the mainland because the headquarters is located in Taiwan.

### 6.2.3 Practicing Buddhism, Reconstructing Chinese Ethnicity at Pagoda

Interview data bore out my observations that Buddhists at Pagoda reconstruct their own understanding of Chinese ethnicity by infusing Buddhist elements into it, such as attributing Buddhist values to the use of savory porridge at Laba Festival. By interpreting, expressing, and performing their Chinese ethnicity, Pagoda Buddhists retain a sense of agency to reconstruct their ethnicity.

Some of my interviews at Pagoda were conducted during the Spring Festival season, and when Buddhists at the temple talked about the religion-ethnicity intersection, many pointed to the lantern exhibition, telling me that the symbols represent Chinese ethnicity. Huang Mei Li regularly volunteers in the kitchen. She pointed out that the lantern exhibition made reference to a classical Chinese novel, Pilgrimage to the West. Pilgrimage to the West, a well-known story, tells of how a monastic monk went to the West—ancient India (Tian Zhuo)—to collect Buddhist scriptures. Here, the West does not refer to Western societies, but to heaven in Mahayana Chinese Buddhism (Xi Fang Ji Le Shi Jie). She also referenced the temple’s architectural style and the formal Buddhist meals (Guo Tang). She explained:

> The procedures and rituals of our services are all [part of Chinese
When we were kids, we were told to keep quiet when eating, right? We were told to hold our bowls, and there is a name for this eating manner—Oh, we hold the bowls just like a dragon holding a pearl (a person holds the bowl when eating). And we quietly use chopsticks to get food just like a phoenix nodding its head. But now, only Buddhist temples instruct people to eat in this manner.

Huang Mei Li thus attributed the preservation of Chinese ethnicity both to visible cultural symbols and embodied practices. In her understanding and performance of Chinese ethnicity, this Buddhist practitioner reconstructs Chinese ethnicity by interpreting the Buddhist eating manner as part of an authentic Chinese ethnicity.

Xiu Hua, a middle-aged Buddhist, highlighted Chinese morality. As she explained, her experience at Pagoda reminds her of the important ethical values in Chinese ethnicity:

A lot of our activities [at Pagoda Temple], such as children’s camp, also transmit our ethnic culture. I mean, in our children’s camp, we start to cultivate their moral values to chase truth, kindness, and beauty. Children are taught gratitude in these camps... I think [teaching children to be grateful] is very important. Now, here, in our society, I mean mainland China, kids who were born and raised in mainland China, including myself, have a huge distance from young people in Taiwan. I noticed this difference after coming to the temple last year. Young people in Taiwan, whatever they do, retain their good manners. It is always very natural. It is always a very natural disclosure of their good manners. Also, they are very energetic and creative. Young people from mainland China also have good manners. But that type of good manners is—is unnatural... Youth in mainland China, including us and
children around us, have always taken things for granted since they were kids. It is important for us to learn how to be grateful. You will learn how to cherish things, and how to deal with the people around you with compassion only after learning how to feel gratitude.

Xiu Hua believes that Pagoda Temple transmits essential manners and morality to the next generation. These social manners and moral values are important components of their “ethnic culture,” and exposure to them is essential. She acknowledges that she herself needs to reconstruct an ethnic identity, which is differentiated from identities embodied by mainland Chinese outside the temple. Like Liu Chen, she felt that Taiwan had retained this identity more effectively than people in the mainland.

Past research on the preservation of Chinese ethnicity has generally focused on women as the principal means of transmitting ethnicity to the next generation. At Pagoda Temple, however, I did not see a gendered difference in the participants’ narratives of religion and ethnicity. For instance, Zhao Jianguo, a 49-year-old Buddhist, believes that Buddhism and Chinese culture are inseparable. For him, the integration of Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity is more about the commonalities of moral values. He said:

Buddhism focuses on cultivating your heart. It asks you to change your heart before changing your behavior. You cannot change your behavior without changing your heart. Chinese ethnic culture also requires “change.” It asks you to embody courtesy, righteousness, integrity, and sense of shame. It asks you to have loyalty and filial piety and so on. . . . So in fact, if you embody all these characteristics, the effects are the same [with practicing Buddhism].

Later in the interview, he implied that the so-called authentic Chinese identity is
differentiated from the ethnic identities embodied by most people in mainland China:

We encourage children to participate in the summer camp and even scripture chanting services. This is because we want our children to respect and think. Why? You probably know that our kids—kids in mainland China—come from single child families. As the only child in their family, the kid is self-centered. Self-centered! Pagoda Temple has lots of activities... the purpose of these is to involve kids in a collective effort. [These activities] teach them to think from other people’s perspectives and to respect other people. [The content] is the same with Chinese ethnic cultures, right?

According to Zhao Jianguo, Pagoda Temple plays a pivotal part in preserving Chinese ethnicity, particularly in terms of Chinese morality. He sees the temple as a sacred place that constructs Chinese ethnicity, given that the moral code embodied by most young people in mainland China is often “self-centered,” which he attributes to the one-child policy that existed for decades.

From my observation and Buddhists’ narratives at Pagoda, I realized that “preservation” may not be the best word to describe the intersection between religion and Buddhism. Preservation implies that Buddhists at Pagoda follow some existing model and transplant their understanding of Chinese ethnicity to the temple. In fact, their narratives suggested a process of reconstruction. Occurring only gradually and successively, this reconstruction contains three components: establishing integration, constructing sacredness, and recreating Chinese ethnicity.

At Pagoda, Buddhists first establish Buddhism as an integral part of Chinese ethnicity, believing that Chinese ethnicity (or at least a part of it) is rooted in Buddhism. They then construct a place of sacredness, which protects Chinese
ethnicity from declining as it has in the broader, often secular mainland Chinese society. Finally, they recreate Chinese ethnicity using visible cultural symbols, embodied practices, and understanding of morality in Buddhism. In contrast to the restricted religious practices other scholarly work on religion in China has described, Buddhists at Pagoda have a relatively high degree of agency to construct Chinese ethnicity. This high degree of agency may be related to their being an ethnic and arguably religious majority in the mainland Chinese context. It may also be related to their practicing Buddhism in a temple affiliated with a Taiwanese headquarters.

6.2.4 The Expression of Buddhism through Chinese Ethnic Symbols at Lotus Temple

The expression of Chinese ethnicity and its connection with Buddhism is not as intense at Lotus as it was at Pagoda. Linda Chen, for example, could only say “I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t know,” when I asked her about Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity. After some reflection, she said she moved to the US from mainland China when she was a teenager and is still adamant that she is Chinese. She thinks that the temple provides her with a space to reinforce her Chinese ethnicity and where she can speak Cantonese and Mandarin with the older, first-generation immigrants. She added, “Basically, the temple is Chinese, the language is Chinese, and I think kids [at Lotus] learn the language too.” A young and active practitioner at Lotus, she had agreed instantly to participate in an interview and had been far more articulate and verbose in answering other interview questions, such as why she came to the temple, what she usually does in the temple, and even the questions on the intersection between gender and Buddhism. This topic did not generate the same enthusiasm.
Linda repeated herself and paused frequently in referencing the Chinese New Year as a point of connection between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity:

I mean, they celebrate Chinese New Year, you know, they have like a, I think they do, to some extent, they do. You know, they celebrate the New Year, they celebrate, what else they celebrate, it’s like, yeah, I think it is celebrating Chinese holidays.

As well as an eager and talkative interviewee, Linda was an active practitioner and long-term volunteer at the temple. Lotus’s Chinese New Year celebration had made minimal impact on her. This perhaps reflected the fact that the Chinese New Year celebrations are not all that different from other days at the temple, with scripture chanting and dharma talks. And, indeed, Lotus celebrates Laba festival in a minor way and most practitioners do not attend. Their celebration of Spring Festival is less intensive than at Pagoda.

A number of Buddhists at Lotus referenced the “red couplets” and “red lanterns” I had seen during the Spring Festival. Several Buddhists referenced the use of Mandarin Chinese in the Buddhist scriptures and the dharma talks, but they did not see Lotus as a central protector of Chinese ethnic cultures.

“I don’t know” was the most common response to my questions about this. Sherry Tsai, a 34-year-old first-generation Taiwanese immigrant who moved to the US ten years ago, added, “I know [Buddhism] originated in India. And people may think that it comes from Asia [meaning the main Asian continent, not the Indian subcontinent]. It is probably because we [practitioners of Buddhism] speak Chinese.” In other words, it is mostly people who are ignorant of Buddhism’s Indian roots that would consider a Chinese Buddhist Temple to be a major source of Chinese ethnic culture. Sherry said that Buddhism is “merely a religion.” I found it was common for Buddhists at Lotus detach the ethnic connotation of Buddhism
from their religion.

6.2.5 Lotus Members’ Delinking of Buddhism from Chinese Ethnicity

The Lotus Buddhists I spoke with do not see Buddhism as an ethnic religion. In answer to my question about Buddhism and ethnicity, Melissa Wang said there is “not really” a link between them. After all, she knew “Asians who are Catholics. Asians can practice the so-called Western religions, such as Catholicism, and non-Asians can practice Buddhism.” She described the temple as a place for everyone, emphasizing her point by repeating it: Lotus Temple “is just, it is just a place where everybody if you want to go, you just go.” Although I asked whether she sees any connection between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity, she interpreted this as an inquiry about whether there is an inherent connection between Buddhism and Asians as a racialized group. In her response, she delinked the connection between Buddhism and Asian, and vice versa.

Many practitioners at the temple shared Melissa’s perspective. many said things like “I don’t think Buddhism belongs to a certain nation” and “Buddhism transcends national boundaries. Everyone can believe in Buddhism. Everyone can choose not to believe in Buddhism. It doesn’t matter. It transcends national boundaries.” As shown in their responses, Lotus practitioners interpreted the question of the connection between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity differently from Pagoda practitioners. Some understood it as a question about whether only Chinese citizens can or should practice Buddhism. Others, such as Melissa, understood it as a question about whether Buddhism is an inherently Asian religion. Emily Hwang, a practitioner at Lotus said specifically that Buddhism transcends racial boundaries: “I think everyone in the world can learn Buddhism,” she said. “In fact, regardless of
their racial identities, a lot of people are learning Buddhism.”

While Buddhists at Lotus interpret religion and Chinese ethnicity differently, understanding the question as an intersection between religion and country, race, or ethnicity, their common reaction is that they do not think Buddhism is inherently related to identity. Several practitioners at Lotus did tell me that bundling Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity “narrows” Buddhism. Rose Chao, a Lotus Buddhist, said that she does not connect Buddhism with Chinese ethnicity:

If we include Buddhism into Chinese ethnic cultures or say that Buddhism is transmitting Chinese ethnic culture, I think this is somewhat narrow. . . . I don’t think Buddhism is preserving Chinese ethnic culture. . . . It is possibly a medium [a venue for other people to know more about Chinese ethnic cultures since most Buddhists are ethnic Chinese. . . . But Buddha’s notions are broader. He does not limit [Buddhism] to Chinese ethnicity. No! He does not. He focuses more on people’s heart. Everyone can become Buddha. Not just Chinese. Not just Asians. Everyone can become Buddha. Everyone who is willing to accept the teachings of Buddhism.

Rose noted that, while some people may mentally link Buddhism with Chinese ethnicity or a broadly defined Asian culture, she, as a practicing Buddhist, does not see this link as valid or fruitful.

Although Buddhists in Lotus Temple identify with being ethnic Chinese, speak Chinese, and celebrate, to some extent, Chinese ethnic festivals, they do not link their Buddhist identities with being ethnic Chinese in their narratives. This intention to delink Buddhist and ethnic identities, however, does not imply that Buddhists at Lotus resist the monastic members’ connection of Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity. Rather, their responses are a form of mild avoidance, a subtle
refusal to establish a link between Buddhism and ethnicity. As my research continued, I came to understand that part of the reason they tended to avoid connecting Buddhism to Chinese ethnicity was a reluctance to connect their religion with their insider/outsider status in the United States.

6.2.6 Practicing Buddhism, Focusing on Enlightenment at Lotus Temple

One strategy that Buddhists use to separate their religion from ethnicity is to focus on the purely spiritual, such as enlightenment, in their pursuit of Buddhism. Eva Yuh, a first-generation immigrant from Taiwan, uses this strategy. Eva comes to the temple three or four times a week, where she participates in chanting services and volunteering. However, she does not relate her involvement at Lotus with her understanding of what it means to be an ethnic Chinese. In response to my question about a connection between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity, Eva said, “I don’t come to the temple to seek ethnicity.” She then reiterated: “[My involvement in the temple] is not related to ethnic culture... I focus more on the peace that Buddhism brings to me.” To some extent, then, she focuses on the spiritual aspect of her religion when practicing Buddhism.

While Eva emphasizes the peacefulness of Buddhism, Amy Chow, who immigrated to the US from Hong Kong, said that she is attracted to Buddhism’s “tolerance and compassion.” She was perplexed by my question about a relationship between her Chinese ethnicity and Buddhism, noting, “I have always spoken Chinese since my childhood” and that Buddhism was not “by any means” related to her ethnicity and did not have “any particular influence” on her ethnic identity.

It became clear to me that practitioners at Lotus wanted the temple to shield them from any struggles regarding their insider/outsider identity which they
associated with being ethnic Chinese and therefore a minority in the United States. In our conversation, Meredith Kuo\textsuperscript{377} said:

Who am I? I have spent more than 20 years in Taiwan. Am I a Taiwanese? But I have lived in the US for a long time. I moved here in 1975. It has been 40 years. Does my mom come from mainland China? Am I a mainland Chinese? So, I think, well, our venerable Master once said, we are all residents in the Earth. Then, we are Earth people, right? . . . In Buddhism, it would not ask you to make any differentiation in time and space. The time and space, the past, the current, and the future are continuous. How can you make a difference?

Meredith later said, “It is not necessary [to differentiate] according to where people come from.”

Meredith had asked herself, “What is identity?” and answered, “We are who we are.” Many practitioners at Lotus expressed that they do not have a stable ethnic/cultural identity. As immigrants who practice a minority religion with other ethnic Chinese, they may struggle to provide a definitive answer to explain their ethnic and national identities. Meredith and her peer practitioners want their religion to provide them with a safe space within which they do not need to engage in insider/outsider discussions, and to do this, they focus on enlightenment. Jenny Sun\textsuperscript{378} answered to my question about Buddhism and ethnicity and said, “[Ethnicity] is never in my mind, never in my mind because I focus on how to be enlightened.”

6.3 Summary

Pagoda and Lotus temples belong to the same Chinese Mahayana Buddhist International Headquarters and arguably represent the same Chinese ethnicity.
However, Buddhists at each temple navigate the intersection between religion and ethnicity differently. At Pagoda, practitioners believe their religion is closely related to Chinese ethnicity, and they recreate that ethnicity within their religious space by maintaining that their religion is closely integrated with Chinese culture and that the temple is a sacred space for preserving, if not creating, an authentic Chinese ethnicity through their practices of Buddhism. To them, the type of Chinese ethnicity they craft under a religious framework serves as a symbolic boundary which differentiates them—as people who embody what they perceive as “authentic ethnicity”—from the non-Buddhists others.

Practitioners at Lotus, however, do not manifest a salient sense of agency to recreate Chinese ethnicity. While they acknowledge that Buddhism may be expressed through Chinese cultural symbols, particularly the Chinese language, they do not decouple Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity. Instead, they frame Buddhism as “for everyone” and focus on enlightenment, hoping that Buddhism, as a faith for everyone, serves as a bridge to connect and integrate the practitioners with what they perceive as mainstream US society.

I had expected Buddhists at Lotus to embody a stronger sense of agency because they are, to some extent, the dominant culture of individualism in the US enables it. After all, agency is arguably connected to individualism. And, indeed, as discussed in previous chapters, individualism seems to empower Lotus members to question some aspects of temple practices endorsed by their monastic leaders, while their counterparts at Pagoda are more submissive. Thus, I was surprised to find that practitioners at Pagoda retained a more salient form of agency with respect to recreating ethnicity than those at Lotus. Unlike previous studies, I found that although the temple highlights certain Chinese ethnic cultures, perceived as a symbolic ethnicity by Herbert Gans, Lotus practitioners minimalize it.
Certainly, Chinese ethnicity can be perceived as a form of social institution.\textsuperscript{383} There are norms that depict Chinese ethnicity and those who are affiliated with it, namely those who identify as ethnic Chinese, as in my case, take these norms for granted.\textsuperscript{384} This study’s data indicates that the institutionalized understanding of Chinese ethnicity constrains the construction of ethnicity within a religious framework and that the majority/minority status of the context in which they live and practice their faith empowers it. In mainland China, people feel that the Cultural Revolution dismantled institutionalized consensus about what it means to be Chinese. But they feel that Chinese ethnicity has become salient because the country has a religious legacy deeply rooted in Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism and a government that is officially atheist.\textsuperscript{385} At the same time, Buddhists at Pagoda belong to an ethnic majority and, arguably, to a religious majority.\textsuperscript{386} The lack of consensus on the understanding of Chinese ethnicity makes them feel comfortable manifesting their agency and recreating Chinese ethnicity. Their ethnic and religious majority status yields a perceived power to retain their agency when reconstructing Chinese ethnicity. Buddhists in China, therefore, actively integrate Buddhist elements in Chinese ethnicity and construct an authentic understanding of it.

In the US, however, there is an institutionalized, if not structuralized, understanding of Chinese ethnicity. Here, ethnic Chinese are racialized as part of Asian Americans, the so-called “model minority.”\textsuperscript{387} In the United States, Buddhist Chinese are also a religious minority. This dual minority status makes them feel less able to reconstruct Chinese ethnicity than their counterparts in China. Instead, they manifest agency through small, barely perceptible compromises and occasionally the active detachment of ethnicity from their religion. They mildly but actively avoid explicit discussion of their insider/outsider status within the temple space.
While previous studies on the intersection of religion and ethnicity, particularly in the US, describe the immigrant faith community as a locus for religious people to preserve ethnic cultures, my examination of religion and ethnicity in the two Buddhist temples show that the intersection between them is an active constructing-reconstructing process. This means that practitioners at both temples practice their agency to reconstruct Chinese ethnicity within their religious spaces—although their specific manifestations of agency differ.

The reconstructing process echoes other dynamics and dialogues between Buddhist practitioners and their temples. At Pagoda, Buddhist practitioners affirm and reinforce the temple’s interpretation, expression, and reconstruction of Chinese ethnicity. At Lotus, however, they occasionally challenge the authority’s expression of Chinese ethnicity, especially when it relates to discussions concerning their insider/outsider identities.

Nevertheless, unique dynamics emerge that are pertinent to the practitioners’ agency to reconstruct Chinese ethnicity. Specifically, I argue that religious people’s agency for creating and recreating ethnicity within their religious space depends on two factors: the degree of institutionalization of the current interpretation of ethnicity and the practitioners’ perceived power to reconstruct, if not recreate, ethnicity. The latter process, in particular, depends on the person’s evaluation of their majority/minority status within the broader context where they practice their faith.

Sociological theories on agency (broadly) and religious people’s agency (particularly) emphasize the dialectical relationship between individuals and the social institutions to which they respond, such as ethnicity and gender. While informative, these theories isolated religious people from the broader context in which they practice their faith by focusing on the dialogue between individuals and
social institutions. Yang and Ebaugh\textsuperscript{391} correctly point out the role that the
majority/minority status plays in constructing people’s experiences within their
faith communities. Yet, I contend that, in terms of both religion and ethnicity, this
status relates to how religious immigrants engage in dialogues with their societies,
and the perceived power that religious people have when engaging in such dialogues
partly explains how they retain their agency to reconstruct ethnicity in their faith
communities. Such understanding of Buddhists’ agency in their navigation of
Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity is an integral piece of a contextualized
understanding of religious people’s agency. In the following chapter, I will draw
conclusions as to why Buddhists in each temple embody distinctive types of agency,
given the many similarities between them, and how understanding this embodiment
contributes to our conceptualizations of religious people’s agency.
Although I was born and raised in a Buddhist family, I never received specific instructions for prostration, although it is an important ritual for Buddhists. I was always eager to do it correctly, and I imitated the adults at the temple as best I could. But before I started my fieldwork, I sought instruction, and a monk in a Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Temple in Houston taught me to bend my knees, lying on a prayer mat, face down, placing my palms in the correct positions, and to repeat the bend three times.

My fieldwork started with participant observations at Lotus Temple, and my initial goal was to learn about the temple’s culture, practices, and routines, as well as to make some connections. Buddhist temples in China prior to starting my fieldwork at Lotus Temple, then, I prostrated towards the Buddha as I had been taught. It seemed to me, at least, that I was blending in. But at Pagoda Temple Zhang Sihong, who gave me a tour of the temple, questioned the way that I prostrated during the tour. We were standing in the main shrine at Pagoda, before a statue of Bodhisattva. Sihong suggested that we prostrate towards the Buddha. I did as I usually do, bending my knees, face and palms down, before standing. Sihong said, “Oh, this is not how we prostrate towards the Buddha. You need to
face your palms down to the mat, and then face them up to the mat, and finally face them down to the mat again.” I was surprised since no one had corrected me at Lotus. I had expected that the method would be the same at both temples.

Sihong, who knew I had spent time at Lotus Temple in the United States, noticed my surprise. “Have you prostrated towards the Buddha at Lotus Temple?” she asked. When I said I had, she seemed unconcerned: “Well, we prostrate towards the Buddha in different ways, right?” I nodded, and Sihong added, “Sometimes different temple branches in different places have different ways to prostrate towards the Buddha.”

So, I learned there is no standardized way to prostrate to Buddha, even in temple branches that are affiliated with the same international Buddhist headquarters. There are, instead, contextualized differences in this embodied and ritualistic practice. As this dissertation has described, I would learn that such differences affected many such practices and also extended to the practitioners’ understanding of their Buddhist self and in their interpretation and reconstruction of gender and ethnicity under a Buddhist framework. This seemingly globalized Buddhism is, in fact, itself contextualized.

7.1 The Contextualization of Global Buddhism

Although the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters has hundreds of affiliated temple branches that practice the same type of Buddhism and follow the same interpretation of Buddhist dharma, usually in the words of the founding master, around the world, they practice Buddhism differently. In fact, I found that contextualization is as salient as standardization is in the lived experiences at the two temples I had selected for the study. How do practitioners contextualize Buddhism at the temples and how do they practice Buddhism? Answers to these
questions explain the globalization and contextualization of Buddhism, as well as of other social institutions. They are the questions I raise and try to answer in this dissertation.

Contextualization occurs in different ways, including—but not limited to—the construction of the religious self. In its most salient form, Buddhists come to their temple to construct their religious selves. Practitioners at Pagoda, for example, construct an intensive Temple-specific Buddhist identity, which not only enables them to establish a boundary differentiating “Buddhist us” from “non-Buddhist others,” but also enables them to establish a boundary differentiating “Pagoda us” from “non-Pagoda others.” Their counterparts at Lotus, however, establish individual-centered Buddhist identities within which Buddhism serves as one facet of their religious identity among many.

The practitioners’ understanding of gender within a Buddhist framework is related to their understanding of their religious selves and differs at the temples. When volunteering, Buddhists at both Pagoda and Lotus temples believe they manifest a gender agency and promote gender egalitarianism. Their understanding of gender egalitarianism, however, differ. Practitioners at Pagoda believe that gender egalitarianism means that men and women should have equal status and similar access to material and spiritual resources. Yet, it also means they are different. For volunteer work, their labor is assigned according to traditional assumptions—but not equally. Practitioners also believe that men and women should be segregated in sacred places, which is predicated on little more than gender stereotypes.

Lotus practitioners similarly believe in gender egalitarianism, but to them, equality means to reduce (although not eliminate) the dichotomous gender division. They believe that men and women have the capacity to do similar work and, while
there are exceptions, many challenge, albeit mildly, the segregated gender arrangement endorsed by Compassion Bodhi. This distinctive understanding of gender egalitarianism, as I explained in the last chapter, can be attributed to how Buddhists navigate gender norms inside and outside their temples.

Much like their approach to gender segregation, the approach to Chinese ethnicity in each temple reflected national context, something I specifically sought to isolate by selecting two ethnic Chinese Buddhist temples with a significant amount in common on two different continents. For the interviews, I selected only those practitioners who self-identify as ethnic Chinese, but—as manifested in my data—Buddhists at Pagoda and Lotus have distinctive understandings of the relationship between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity. Practitioners at Pagoda believe that Buddhism is part of Chinese ethnicity, which the temple helps to preserve. They see themselves as constructing an authentic form of Chinese ethnicity. At Lotus, however, the practitioners detach Chinese ethnicity from Buddhism. Although they believe that Buddhism is expressed through Chinese ethnic symbols, and particularly Chinese culture, they delink Buddhism from Chinese ethnicity by focusing on enlightenment.

So, how do the contextualized differences occur and how do they inform us of the globalization and localization of Buddhist temples? Do they say anything about the dynamics of globalization and localization in other social institutions? How should we understand the similarities and differences between the two temples?

Based on the data that I collected, I believe that contextualized differences occur on two distinctive levels: individual and communal. In some cases, these differences emerge in relation to both, operate together, and construct their contextualized differences, as they did at the two temples I studied. For instance, although each articulates the same interpretations of Buddhism, the communal
culture at Pagoda is strict while at Lotus it is permissive. Buddhists at both temples, however, adopt a distinctive individual-level cultural framework to embrace and understand Buddhism. While both try to establish some connections between Buddhism and Chinese ethnicity, Pagoda focuses on integrating religious symbols into their display of Chinese ethnicity to reconstruct it, while Lotus compromises with a racialized understanding of Chinese ethnicity and reinforces the perception of Chinese immigrants as a “model minority” in the United States. 393

Nevertheless, contextualized differences are more salient at the individual level, so that although the two temples embody similar communal cultures—in, for example, their interpretation of religion and Buddhism—Buddhists at each temple respond to their communal cultures in different ways. Differences in individual cultural frameworks also contribute to the contextualized differences in the intersection between religion and gender. These differences are partly due to the relationship between individuals and social institutions, as previous theories have shown. Specifically, earlier studies on human agency (broadly) 394 and religious people’s agency (particularly) 395 highlight the dialectical relationship between individuals and communities, and identify the location of “agency”—individuals’ ability to challenge and transform the institutionalized culture. This argument is informative, as it illustrates whether and to what extent religious practitioners have the agentic capacity to challenge the authoritative discourses articulated by the temple. But it also, to some extent, isolates faith communities from the broader national context in which they are situated. It does not address the agentic capacity that individuals have when responding to the institutions and structures in the broader society. However, why would this dialectical relationship be different for people who are affiliated with the same social institution?
7.2 Doing Religion, Gender, and Ethnicity

I interpret the contextualized differences that I observed at the temples as a “doing” process. Although the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters intends to, by and large, standardize the practice of religion and the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and religion in my research sites, gender, ethnicity, and religion have a localizing process. Religion—in this case, Buddhism specifically—is not a static institution but subject to the “doing” process and occurs at both communal and individual levels. While the two temples offer similarly authoritative interpretations of religion at the communal level, asking practitioners to read the same scriptures, follow the same rituals, and practice the same type of Buddhism, how they impose their behavioral and linguistic requirements on practitioners differs. In China, Pagoda Temple reconstructs the standardized form of Buddhism by offering a strict culture while Lotus offers a permissive culture in the United States. This “doing process” also occurs at an individual level, with Pagoda practitioners dutifully learning Buddhism and obeying the temple’s behavioral and linguistic requirements, which reinforces temple culture and constructs Pagoda-specific Buddhist identities, while Lotus practitioners actively explore other cultural resources to critically examine the behavioral and linguistic requirements of their temples. The individual-level framework and permissive temple culture at Lotus support each other by constructing individual-centered Buddhist identities. In other words, while the authoritative interpretations of Buddhism are similar at the temples, the practice and understanding of being a Buddhist differs, making Buddhism—a religious institution—subject to a constant “doing” process at both the communal and individual levels.

Generally, in faith communities, the process by which gender is “done” occurs chiefly (though not entirely) at an individual level. While the strictness and
permissiveness of the temple cultures still exist, Pagoda and Lotus temples offer largely similar interpretations of gender and Buddhism. Explicitly, they propose an egalitarian, if vague, interpretation of gender and downplay dichotomous gendered differences between men and women. However, practitioners do not talk about how to understand gender within a Buddhist framework, which implicitly highlights gender differences. These inconsistent interpretations of gender provide Buddhists at the temples with sufficient room to do gender, mainly by comparing what they perceive as the dominant understanding of gender egalitarianism with the gender norms each faith community offers.

Situated in two vastly different contexts with distinctive dominant gender norms, Buddhists at Pagoda, on the one hand, believe that their religious gender norms are more egalitarian than those in secular mainland China, which reinforces male dominance. They observe both explicit and implicit gender norms, and construct an understanding of gender egalitarianism as men and women being equal but different. Their counterparts at Lotus, on the other hand, perceive that gender norms in the broader US society highlight sameness between men and women and are, therefore, more egalitarian than the implicit traditional norms offered by Buddhist temples. The practitioners formulate an understanding of gender egalitarianism as men and women being equal and the same. The different ways in which Buddhists understand and perform gender are reflected in their navigation of the relationship between gender segregation and sacredness at the two temples.

Although religious practitioners at Lotus challenge dichotomous gendered differences while their Pagoda counterparts reinforce them, this does not necessarily mean that Lotus Buddhists are more agentic. We can only conclude that Buddhists at the US temple have access to different resources, retain a different sense of agency, and manifest gender agency in different ways from their peer practitioners.
at Pagoda.

How Buddhists at the two temples “do ethnicity” is further complicated by their different understanding of Chinese ethnicity. Both temples celebrate Chinese ethnicity to some extent within the temple settings. Both celebrate Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) with special services and both display different types of ethnic symbols, such as the red couplet and red lantern. In addition, both offer special food, such as Laba Porridge and dumplings, during traditional festivals. But the extent to which the temples reconstruct Chinese ethnicity by navigating the relationship between religion and ethnicity is clearly different.

At Pagoda, there is little consensus about what it means to be ethnic Chinese, a confusion many practitioners and volunteers trace to the Cultural Revolution. In fact, Chinese Buddhists have a dual-majority status in mainland China, as both a religious plurality and an ethnic majority. They retain a stronger sense of agency to reconstruct Chinese ethnicity, by integrating Buddhist cultural elements in Chinese ethnicity, and claiming it as authentic.

Their peer practitioners at Lotus, however, are both a religious and ethnic minority. While integrating Buddhist elements into Chinese ethnicity—for instance, holding scripture chanting services during Spring Festivals—the temple reveals nuanced compromises of the institutionalized understanding of Chinese ethnicity by reinforcing the myth that Chinese immigrants are a model minority or by highlighting religious components and downplaying ethnic components in services during Spring Festival. Buddhists at Lotus are not always submissive to the interpretation of Chinese ethnicity articulated by their temple. Instead, they manifest their agency by challenging the articulation of Chinese ethnicity in their temple, rejecting and avoiding any discussions related to their insider/outsider identities—although they accept some mild display of Chinese ethnic symbols inside
the temple.

Compared to their peer practitioners at Pagoda, Buddhists at Lotus indeed show a greater agentic capacity to challenge the authoritative interpretations of Chinese ethnicity articulated by their temple in avoiding discussions of insider/outsider identities. Meanwhile, they also implicitly reinforce a stereotypical understanding of Chinese Buddhists as the permanent “other” in US society. This complex manifestation of the Buddhist’s agency in “doing ethnicity” is similar to the manifestation of agency in “doing gender,” which, together, create a more complex and theoretical puzzle about what agency means in the temples. The complex ways in which Buddhists manifest their agency to do religion, gender, and ethnicity can be understood with a refined understanding of religious people’s agency, which I label “a contextualized understanding.”

7.3 A Contextualized Understanding of Religious People’s Agency

In this dissertation, following other scholars, I acknowledge two levels of culture, the individual and communal levels, that work together when constructing people’s experiences in faith communities. The former refers to an enduring pattern that influences how practitioners, both monastics and lay members, interact with each other. The latter refers to the frameworks within which individuals embrace Buddhism and to other cultural meanings associated with Buddhism, such as gender and ethnicity. Yet, expanding on previous theories, I argue that what explains the contextualized differences is a “culture in dialogue”—which, in this case, refers to that dialogue between cultures, both individual and communal, inside the temple and the broader, often secular society where the temples exist and its
members practice their faith.

The communal culture—the enduring and taken-for-granted pattern that shapes religious people’s interactions with others—is partly constructed by a majority/minority status in the broader national context and in the evaluations of whether and how to construct the symbolic boundaries between faith communities and the secular “other.” Hence, we see that, despite apparent similarities between the temples, the communal cultures at Pagoda and Lotus are quite different: the former being strict and the latter permissive. This difference in culture is also congruent with the distinctive intersections between religion, gender, and ethnicity in the two temples.

The individual-level culture—the framework in which people embrace Buddhism—is also partly constructed by the dominant culture in the national context where the practitioners practice their faith. Hence, we find a dutiful learning framework at Pagoda in China, where the dominant culture is (arguably) Confucian, and a critical exploring framework at Lotus, where the dominant culture celebrates individualism. 397

On both levels, the cultures are congruent with each other. Specifically, practitioners at Pagoda dutifully learn Buddhism, which reinforces the temple’s strict communal culture; likewise, the permissive culture at Lotus provides the practitioners with sufficient room to explore other religions, other interpretations of Buddhism, and an understanding of gender and ethnicity outside the temple. In other words, the temple’s permissive culture and the critical exploring framework mutually support each other.

As alluded to earlier, previous theories on human agency in general and religious people’s agency in particular both identify this dialectical relationship as the key through which religious practitioners construct religion, as a social
institution. However, without a cross-national comparison, the studies did not indicate that the dialogues between the cultures on the communal and individual level are constructed based on the broader social context where people live and practice their faith.

By comparing two similar faith communities, I propose a contextualized understanding of religious people’s agency. While acknowledging the cultures at both the communal and individual levels, I specifically identify “cultures in dialogue,” arguing that both the communal and individual cultures are constructed on dialogue, both deliberate and unconscious, within the broader social context where the practitioners live. Faith communities, for instance, may carefully craft which types of culture they want to embody, to what extent they want to highlight the intersection between Buddhism and other social institutions, and where they want to establish symbolic boundaries. Such decisions are, either implicitly or explicitly, constructed based on an understanding of the majority/minority status of Chinese Buddhism in the respective contexts. The cultural frameworks that practitioners adopt when they embrace their religion and situate it in other facets of their lives are constructed by the dominant culture where they live. They further navigate the cultural resources of the outside world as well as those inside their faith communities.

7.4 Power and Agency in Faith Communities

The different manifestations of agency at the two temples sheds light on the broader question of religious people’s agency. If we focus only on the dialogue between religious people and their faith communities, Buddhists at Lotus Temple seem to be more empowered and agentic than their counterparts at Pagoda. While the former lack the cultural resources and agentic capacity to challenge the seemingly
authoritative interpretations of their faith communities, peer practitioners at Pagoda are submissive to and even reinforce the authoritative interpretations of religion from their faith communities.

However, if we situate religious people’s agency in a broader context, we see that Buddhists at the China-based Pagoda Temple retain a strong sense of agency to challenge the dominant interpretations of religion, gender, and ethnicity in mainland China. Although constrained, their ethnic and religious majority status, by and large, provides them with the power to retain a sense of agency, challenging and reconstructing social institutions in the broader secular society. In other words, they are constrained and enabled by the norms articulated by their faith community to reconstruct the social norms in the broader and often secular contexts.

Their peer practitioners at the US-based Lotus Temple, are, however, somewhat submissive to and compromised by the social meanings bundled with Buddhism and the interpretation of race and ethnicity in the broader US context. While their critical framework offers them more agentic capacity to challenge authoritative interpretations of religion in their faith communities, their ethnic and religious minority status, to some extent, limits their capacity to do religion, do gender, and do ethnicity in the broader social context. They are enabled and constrained by the social norms in the broader US society to challenge and reconstruct the religious, gendered, and ethnic discourses articulated by their faith community.

Although scholars often associate people’s agency with a culture of individualism, this understanding is incomplete in the following ways. First, even in national contexts where the dominant culture is collectivist, people may manifest collective agency. While it differs from individualistic agency, it involves working towards a goal and collaborating with each other and may challenge social
institutions and even social structures with collective force. Buddhists at Pagoda Temple in China manifest just this sense of collective agency. However, with an individualistic form of agency, members of a social institution do not always work together with the institutional authority. Instead, in many scenarios, they may explicitly or mildly challenge the authority of their institutions, being less bounded by the institutional authority but perhaps more constrained by the institutionalized interpretations in the broader context beyond their institutions. Buddhists at Lotus, for instance, retain a sense of individualistic agency.

To summarize, then, there are different types of agency with which people challenge institutionalized interpretations using distinctive forms and in different realms. It is hard to say which group of Buddhists retains a stronger sense of agency. The different types are contextualized and conditioned by each temple’s broader context.

7.5 Generalizing to a Contextualized Agency Outside Buddhist Temples

Although the two cases document religious people’s agency in faith communities, this contextualized understanding of agency can be generalized to other social institutions outside religion. Many social institutions, such as science, technology, and health care, are increasingly globalized in the sense of articulating a similar set of institutionalized norms. For instance, the practice of science draws on several well-articulated and authoritative institutional norms, include secularity, objectivity, and ethics. Although previous studies have examined the contextualization of academic science, there is still room to explore whether its contextualization fits into the overarching theoretical framework on contextualized human agency.
Technology is just as globalized as academic science, and is likely to be increasingly globalized through multinational high-tech companies. High-tech companies associated with the same global headquarters but situated in different countries may have a similar set of core values and even development practices. People who work for the same company but in different locations will communicate often to develop and deliver products. While having a seemingly standardized and globalized overarching structure, company and location contextualization occurs at the communal and individual levels, or at both. It seems possible that different outposts of the same company will differ and resemble one another in similar ways to Pagoda and Lotus, and that the contextualization of human agency will be apparent in similar ways.

My research at Lotus and Pagoda provides a theoretical lens through which we can examine the globalization and localization of institutions and obtain a contextualized understanding of people’s agency. Such an understanding focuses on (1) the communal culture (namely the cultural patterns that guide interactions within academic scientific communities, tech companies, and health care organizations), (2) the individual culture (namely how people embrace these highly globalized social institutions and situate them in their daily lives) and (3) cultures in dialogue (namely how religious practitioners navigate between their religious cultural norms and the perceived cultural norms in the broader and national contexts).
I began the project with the motivation to know whether, and in what way, a global religion is contextualized. Therefore, I selected Buddhism—a religion that is becoming globalized increasingly—and two temples that are similar in most dimensions (e.g., the type of Buddhism practiced, the interpretation of Buddhism that practitioners in the temple receive, and the rituals they follow), but are situated in two different national contexts—mainland China and the US. Before beginning the fieldwork in these two research sites, I visited other Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples to familiarize myself with their languages, practices, and norms.

I obtained access to my major research sites through my personal religious network. Thus, when conducting the fieldwork, I was very aware of the navigation between the insider and outsider identities, and I ensured that monastic and lay members understood my identity as a researcher.Kusow (2003); Milligan (2016) Particularly in the in-depth interviews with Buddhist practitioners, I stated that I am not as familiar with Buddhism, particularly the type of Buddhism they practice, compared to members affiliated with the temple.

Data were collected using two qualitative research methodologies: participant observation and interviews. My fieldwork began with participant observations,
which enabled me to recruit interview respondents more easily and establish rapport with the two temples’ members. Thereafter, I conducted in-depth interviews with Buddhists who volunteer actively in the temple. Thus, this dissertation draws on data collected during 15 months of participant observation and 80 in-depth interviews. A revised grounded theory approach was adopted in the data analysis, Strauss and Corbin (1998) such that, when coding the interviews and fieldwork notes, I found that themes previous scholars have identified emerged naturally. I also adopted an inductive rationale and paid attention to the new themes that emerged in the data. This semi-grounded theoretical approach allowed me to highlight the exploratory nature of qualitative methodologies, Saldana (2015). The combination of participant observation and interviews also allowed me to evaluate the validity of different data sources and reduce potential biases.

8.1 Participant Observation

I spent 15 months conducting fieldwork in the two temples as well as other temple branches affiliated with Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters. The participant observations in my research sites began in September 2015 when I began to visit Lotus Temple—the temple in the US—on a weekly basis. From September 2015 to December 2016, I familiarized myself with the type of Buddhism people practice in the temple and the insider language members of the Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters adopt. My connections with monastic and lay members in this temple also allowed me to obtain easy access to the research site in Mainland China. The purpose of the three months of participant observation was to use Lotus Temple as a locus to obtain a sense of the nature of Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters as well as its “sister temple”—Pagoda Temple. Therefore, I did not conduct any interviews during this visit, although I told the
monastic leaders, as well as other Buddhist practitioners, that I would conduct interviews there, and they expressed openness to the possibility of having me interview Buddhists in the temple.

From January to March 2016, I conducted my fieldwork at Pagoda Temple in China. Although I attempted to establish connections with monastic leaders through my personal religious network prior to my fieldwork, in the beginning, monastic leaders in Pagoda Temple were hesitant to allow me to conduct interviews there. While it is difficult to specify why they demonstrated such resistance, I offer two speculations. First, Pagoda Temple is situated in mainland China, a country with state-sponsored atheism; thus, monastic members in this temple may be more careful when a researcher is affiliated with a university in the US. However, they allowed me to begin volunteer work in the temple while the residential monastic members decided whether to approve the interviews. Therefore, I spent the first week of my fieldwork serving as a full-time volunteer in the guest room from 9am to 5pm (sometimes even later) daily without conducting any interviews. However, this volunteer work gave me a sense of the temple dynamics. I also had the opportunity to experience the strict temple culture. Later, after receiving the monastic members’ approval and beginning to conduct the interviews, I continued my volunteer work, in which I served largely as an usher in the guest room.

From May to December 2016, I resumed my fieldwork in Lotus Temple in the US. Unlike my first round of fieldwork, I focused more this time on recruiting interview respondents and conducting interviews. At the same time, I remained an active volunteer in their scripture chanting services, children’s camp, regional events, and dharma talk. I spent the remaining several months of my fieldwork in other temple branches affiliated with Compassion Bodhi International Headquarters to obtain easy access to my major research sites.
I took notes immediately after my participant observations. In some scenarios, particularly during my fieldwork in Pagoda Temple, because of the tight schedule, I did not have sufficient time to write field notes, and recorded them immediately instead. After I returned from the field sites, I worked with undergraduate research fellows and transcribed the recorded notes.

8.2 Interviews

While my participant observations began in Lotus Temple, after receiving verbal approval from the temple’s monastic members, I began the interviews at Pagoda Temple with people who volunteer there actively. I did so because, considering the vagueness of Chinese people’s religious identities, I perceived that practitioners’ active volunteer work indicated their close connection with the temple.

To protect my respondents’ confidentiality, I assigned them pseudonyms unrelated to their real names. However, the pseudonyms followed the way they address themselves in the temples. Therefore, for Buddhists in Pagoda Temple, I used their Mandarin names with Romanized spelling (Pin Yin). As immigrants in the US, Buddhists in Lotus Temple usually go by their English first name and Chinese last name. Therefore, usually I assigned them pseudonyms with an English first name and Chinese last name.

Most of the interview respondents were recruited through monastic members’ referrals. Realizing that such a sample may be biased towards people who have a particular type of attachment to the temple, I used participant observation and casual conversation with regular volunteers as an opportunity to understand the perceptions of those whom monastic members did not refer, and compare the validity of the data collected from both sources. As alluded to in the previous chapters, most of the practitioners in the two temples are women. Given that my
interview samples approximate the demographics in the two temples, more women also participated in my interviews. None of the Buddhists with whom I interacted in the two temples self-identified as non-binary in terms of their gender. To avoid the implicit and inaccurate assumption that gender is constructed biologically, I addressed them deliberately as Buddhist women and men.

I conducted 49 interviews with Buddhists at Pagoda Temple who range from 24 to 70 years old. As stated, most members interviewed were women. The educational attainment of the participants ranges from primary school to a master’s degree, and most have at least a high school diploma. Although interview respondents in the temple in China are not educated as highly as are their counterparts in Lotus Temple, largely, they identified themselves explicitly or implicitly as middle class.

I conducted 31 in-depth interviews with Buddhist practitioners at Lotus Temple who range from 18 to 73 years old. Again, similar to the demographic makeup at Pagoda temple, most of the Buddhists who participated in these interviews are women whose educational attainment ranges from primary school to PhD degree. Most of my interview participants have at least a bachelor’s degree if not other advanced degrees (e.g., master’s degree and JD). Overall, they are educated more highly than their peer practitioners in Pagoda. I speculate that their high educational attainment can be attributed to the self-selection process for ethnic Chinese immigrants who moved to the US after 1965—most of them were from middle-class backgrounds in their countries of origin and came to the US specifically to pursue a higher education. Interview respondents’ demographic information is included in Table 1.

All except one interview was transcribed fully, and I adopted a two-round coding approach to analyze them. In the first round, I coded the interview
inductively largely, and identified the themes that emerged from the data. I then constructed a coding scheme. In the second round, I reviewed the interview transcripts again and categorized respondents’ narratives with the coding scheme. Throughout the process, I analyzed the interview data with two undergraduate research fellows to ensure that a certain degree of inter-coder reliability was achieved. 408

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics</th>
<th>Pagoda Temple% (n=41)</th>
<th>Lotus Temple% (n=31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>18-30 years old</td>
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<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>51-70 years old</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.1: Demographics of Interview Respondents

8.3 Methodological Clarifications

Although the study design is a transnational comparative study of two Buddhist temples in different national contexts, I have avoided making causal inferences between those national contexts and the differences I observed. This is because the methodologies that I utilize—cross-sectional and qualitative data—does not enable me to establish causal links between national contexts and Buddhists’ identities. Nor do I intend to. In other words, both mainland China and the US are large
countries with great variation in cultures and norms across geographical locations. I cannot generalize from the different practices of Buddhism between the two temples to all Buddhists in both countries or attribute the observed differences to differences in national context. The most important locus in this contextualized understanding of religious people’s agency is their navigation of the religious and secular cultural norms, which is constructed on people’s perceptions. This methodological caveat does not limit the generalizability of the theory. The theory itself, therefore, can be generalized to people who practice similar religions in different national contexts. It may also be applicable to our analysis beyond the religious contexts, such as those who are affiliated with a non-religious global social institution but live in different social contexts.
Appendix 2: Interview Schedule for Lay Practitioners

9.1 Script

Let me start by introducing myself. I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Rice University. I am currently conducting a research study about Buddhist temples in the PRC and the US. In this study, I am particularly interested in how religion, ethnicity, and gender are manifested in your temple.

Thank you so much for participating. Before we get started I need to go over a few things with you that Rice University wants to make sure you know in order to protect people who participate in studies like this. First, I will record during the interview. Yet, after transcribing, all identifiable information gathered in this interview will be deleted. Second, your participation is voluntary. Please feel free to withdraw from this interview anytime you want. You can skip questions or ask me to stop recording anytime during the interview. Are there any questions about this study I can answer now? Could you take a minute to sign the consent form?
9.2 Background Information

1. Tell me a little bit about how you get involved in the temple?

2. *Probe (If not mentioned by the respondent):* Where do you live? Is it far away from the temple?

3. *Probe (If not mentioned by the respondent):* How often do you come to this temple?

4. What kind of activities do you usually participate in the temple?

5. *For Respondents in the US Only* How long have you been living in the US?

6. *Probe:* When did you come to Houston? What work do you do now?

9.3 Religion

*Note: This section answers to my research question about religious transition. Specifically, how did they approach to Buddhism? What is their religious trajectory?*

1. When did you start to come to this temple? Why did you choose this temple?

2. I want to know more about your religious history. In what ways was religion important to your life when you were a child?

3. *Probe (if not mentioned by the respondent):* What about Buddhism? To what extent was Buddhism important in your childhood?

4. Have you experienced any religious shifts in the arc of your life?

5. Among so many religions, why did you choose Buddhism?
9.4 Current Religious Belief, Practice, and Identification

Note: This section answers my central research question about the construction of religious identity on an individual level of analysis. Specifically, How do practitioners in these two temples construct their Buddhist identity? How do they frame and understand the meaning of being a Buddhist?

1. How would you describe the importance of Buddhism in your life now?

2. How do you usually practice Buddhism outside the temple?

3. Probe (if not mentioned by the respondents): For example, do you do mediation at home? Do you read Buddhist scriptures at home? Do you pray? If you do, under what condition and how often are you involved in these activities? Do you have a shrine or Buddha statue at home?

4. Some people tell me that Buddhism is especially attractive to old and less educated people. How would you respond to such statement?

9.5 Lived Religion and Civic Engagement

Note: This section provides more in-depth answers about identity negotiation. To what extent do Buddhist perceive the needs to negotiation between their Buddhist identity and other types of identities (e.g. professional identity)?

1. To what extent and in what ways do you think Buddhism influences your work?

2. What about your interactions with colleagues? Has Buddhism ever come up in your interactions with colleagues?
3. **Probe if not mentioned by the respondent:** To what extent do you think your participation in religious activities in this temple influences your work outside the religious setting if at all?

4. Do you have any volunteering activities in this temple? How often do you participate in these volunteering activities? In your opinion, what is the significance of these volunteering activities?

### 9.6 Understandings of Buddhism

*Note: This section also answers my research question about the construction of religious identity on an individual level of analysis.*

1. Would you please summarize in a few sentences to describe what Buddhism is about?

2. As you know, this Buddhist temple is advocating for a humanitarian Buddhism. In your opinion, to what extent is a humanitarian Buddhism different from other types of Buddhism?

3. **Probe if not mentioned by the respondent:** What is the most meaningful part of this humanitarian Buddhism?

4. To what extent do you think Buddhism is growing in China/the US? In your opinion, what is the largest obstacle for the further development of Buddhism in China/the US?
9.7 Gender

Note: This section answers my research question about the intersection between gender and religion on an individual level of analysis. Specifically, how do gender norms in each temple impact the construction of gender identity for individual practitioners?

1. How is gender manifested in your temple?

2. Are men and women involved in this temple in different ways?

3. If yes To what extent do men and women practice Buddhism differently in this temple?

4. Can you tell me a little bit why it is helpful for men and women to sit in different places?

5. How does Buddhism influence your role as a wife/mother/father/husband?

6. Have you ever experienced any forms of discrimination because of your gender?

7. If yes: Are there any ways in which Buddhism is related to your gender discrimination?

8. If mentioned by the respondent: Are there any ways in which Buddhism is related to your gender discrimination?

9.8 Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

Note: This section answers my central research question about the intersection between religion and ethnicity. How do the intersection between religion and ethnicity impacts the understanding of what it means to be a Chinese Buddhist on an individual level?
1. *For US respondents only:* If people ask who you are, what will you say? To what extent do you think your self is an American? To what extent do you think yourself as a Taiwanese/Chinese?

2. *Probe if not mentioned by the respondent:* Will the answer be different if an American asks you this question?

3. *Probe if not mentioned by the respondent:* Will the answer be different if I—a person who comes from Mainland China—ask you this question?

4. *For respondents in China only:* Equality is becoming an increasingly salient topic in China. In your opinion, to what extent do you think China is becoming an equal country?

5. To what extent do you think Buddhism is related to Chinese culture?

6. How often do you hold activities to celebrate Chinese culture in this temple? What are these activities?

7. I have heard that provincial differences are really salient to Chinese people. To what extent do you think provincial differences are manifested in this temple?

8. *Probe if not mentioned by the respondent:* For example, do you have any fellowship groups that are exclusive to people who come from the same province in China?

9. Are most of your closest friends also Buddhists? Do you usually get to know most of your friends in this temple?
9.9 Transnationalism

Note: This section answers my central research question about religion and transnationalism. I am interested in understanding how different branches in this international headquarter communicate with each other.

1. How often do you interact with Buddhists in other temples under this international headquarter?

2. textitProbe: How often do you visit the “sister temples” in China/the US? How often do you visit the international headquarter in Taiwan? In what ways do you interact with people from other branches?

3. In your opinion, what are the benefits of having this large international headquarter that has hundred of temples in different places in the world?

4. How often do you go back to China (or Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia)? Are your families in China/Taiwan? Are they also Buddhists?

5. If respondents’ families are also Buddhist: Do they practice Buddhism in temples of this international headquarter?

6. If you are visiting a foreign place (or if you are going back to China), will you visit the international branch there? Why or why not?

7. Probe if the respondent answered yes to question #37: What will you do when you visit another international branch? Will you also do volunteering work?

9.10 Transmission to the Next Generation

Note: I am expecting to obtain information about religious socialization (and possibly the intersection between religious and ethnic socialization) in this section.
1. Do you have children? Do you want your children to be Buddhists? How often are they (respondent’s children) come to the temple? How often do they participate in activities in this temple? What kind of activities do they participate?

2. Tell me a little bit the relationship between Buddhism and parenting.

3. Add your name, thesis title, degree, and date

4. What is the most meaningful part of being a Buddhists in the US/China?

### 9.11 Demographic Information

1. What is your age?

2. What is your marital status?

3. What is your educational attainment?

4. Do you have children? If so, how many?

1. Add special packages you might require

2. Specify name of bibliography: References, Citations, etc.

3. Add your name, thesis title, degree, and date

4. Define committee members and affiliations (up to five). Spacing for the title page will be automatically determined for best formatting.
Notes

1 Long (2000)
2 I deliberately chose not to disclose the name of the city to protect the confidentiality of my research site.
3 Pagoda, Participant observation, observed January 16, 2016.
4 Avishai (2008)
5 West and Zimmerman (1987)
6 None of the Buddhists I encountered self-identify as non-binary in terms of their gender.
7 I chose not to disclose the name of the city where Lotus Temple is situated to protect its members' privacy.
8 Juewei (2014); Zito (2011)
9 Avishai (2008)
10 Cadge (2004); Chen (2005); Min (2010)
11 Triandis (1988)
12 Triandis (1988)
13 Campbell (2009); Emirbayer and Mische (1998)
14 I use the term a collective form of agency and the individualistic form of agency to differentiate it from the concept “collective agency” that usually occurs in the literature of political sociology and studies on social movement.
15 Douglas (1986)
16 Douglas (1986)
17 Smith et al. (1998)
18 Czarnecki (2015); Woodhead (2007)
19 Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000); Wilcox (2009)
20 Day (2005); Lindsay and Smith (2010)
21 Bartkowski et al. (2012); Emerson and Smith (2001)
22 Min (2010)
23 Winchester (2008)
24 Wilcox (2002b)
25 Ecklund (2006a); Edgell et al. (2016)
26 Hays (1994)
27 Lindgren and Wahlin (2001)
29 Dillon (1999)
30 Chen (2005)
31 Chen (2008)
32 Berger ([1967] 2011)
33 Bankston and Zhou (2000); Cadge and Ecklund (2007)
34 Chen (2008); Di (2014)
35 Ammerman et al. (1997); Becker (1999)
36 Galonnier and de los Rios (2016)
37 Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003); Lizardo (2017)
38 Becker (1999); Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003)
39 Becker (1999); Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003)
40 Becker (1999)
41 Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003)
42 Edgell (2006)
43 Lindsay and Smith (2010)
44 Sullivan (2006)
45 Avishai (2008)
46 Ecklund (2006a)
I acknowledge that earlier, in the theories of gender, there was a debate regarding whether the concept of “accountability” in West and Zimmerman’s (1984) initial article presented a barrier to challenging the gendered structure; Martin, “‘Said and Done’ Versus ‘Saying and Doing’ Gendering Practices, Practicing Gender at Work.” In their more recent work, “Accounting for Doing Gender,” West and Zimmerman (2009) also propose that possibility that gender can be “re-done” even when people are accountable to gender scripts.
I recognize the conceptual differences between institution and structure. For instance, race and gender is more or less perceived as social structures, but ethnicity and religion are often seen as social institutions. However, I also acknowledge an emerging but visible strand of research that critiques the conceptual divisions between institutions and structures, as both have the capacity to constrain and enable individuals. One of the examples is the recognition of gender is recognized as both a structure Risman (2004) and an institution Martin (2004). Both scholars acknowledge that there are more similarities than differences in their conceptualizations. Both articles came out in roughly the same time and coincidentally raise similar arguments although distinctive word choices.

See Chan (2015) and Sumerau (2012) for examples of individual-level framework being different from communal level cultures. Chan, “Complementarianism as Doctrine and Governance”; Sumerau, “That’s what men are supposed to do.”
Pagoda, participant observation, observed March 12, 2016
Lotus, Participant observation, observed July 24, 2016
Lotus, Participant observation, observed September 13, 2015
Lotus, Participant observation, observed September 20, 2015
Lotus, Participant observation, observed November 1, 2015
Lotus, Participant observation, observed May 15, 2016
Lotus, Participant observation, observed December 11, 2016
Lotus, Participant observation, observed September 6, 2015
Lotus, Participant observation, observed October 4, 2015
Lotus, Participant observation, observed August 7, 2016
Pagoda and Molnár (2002)
Nagel (1994)
Pagoda, Participant observation, observed March 12, 2016
Lotus, Participant observation, observed January 29, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 78 years old, high school diploma, interviewed January 27, 2016
Tweed and Lehman (2002)
Pagoda, female, 60 years old, elementary school, interviewed February 21, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 34 years old, bachelor’s degree, interviewed January 26, 2016
Yang (2011)
Pagoda, woman, 25 years old, associate diploma, interviewed January 26, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 25 years old, associate diploma, interviewed January 26, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 48 years old, high school diploma, interviewed February 19, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 48 years old, high school diploma, interviewed February 19, 2016
The setting where Pagoda practitioners receive the authoritative interpretations from their temple is very different from the classroom like settings in Galonniéir and Rios, “Teaching and Learning to Be Religious.”
Pagoda, woman, 38 years old, associate diploma, interviewed February 18, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 66 years old, high school diploma, interviewed January 27, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 38 years old, associate diploma, interviewed February 18, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 41 years old, associate diploma, interviewed February 21, 2016
O’Brien (2015)
Lotus, man, around 50 years old, advanced degree, interviewed June 19, 2016
Lotus, man, 54 years old, master’s degree, interviewed July 27, 2016
Lotus, woman, 55 years old, high school, interviewed May 22, 2016
Lotus, woman, 46 years old, junior high school, interviewed May 29, 2016
Lotus, woman, 59 years old, master’s degree, interviewed June 3, 1998
Leung (1998)
Alexander and Smith (1993); Madsen (2009)
Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003)
Leamaster and Hu (2014); Center (2012)
Pagoda participant observation, observed January 16, 2016
Pagoda, female, 78 years old, high school diploma, interviewed January 26, 2016
Pagoda participant observation, observed January 16, 2016
Pagoda, Participant Observation, observed February 19, 2016
Pagoda, woman, 34 years old, bachelor’s degree, conducted 1/26/2016
Pagoda Participant Observation, observed January 27, 2016

See also West and Zimmerman, “Doing Gender.” for detailed and theoretical descriptions of the framework of “doing gender.”

Avishai et al. (2015)
Avishai (2016); Woodhead (2007)
Baer (1993); Chan (2015); Ecklund (2006b)
Avishai (2008)
West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009)
Collett (2006); Sponberg (1992)
Collett (2006); Gross (1992)
Byrne (2013); Yang (2004)
Zhang (2009)
Xie (2013); Di et al. (2016)
Davis and Greenstein (2009)
Norris and Inglehart (2011)
Cadge (2004); Morreale (1998); Seager (2012)
Cadge (2004); Chen (2008); Röder and Mühlau (2014)
Cadge (2004)
The perception of what counts as masculine and feminine work may differ from faith community to faith community. The work that I describe here is perceived as masculine and feminine. Some of my interview participants said at both Temples said, “I have not thought about gender” or “I do not know how gender is reflected in Buddhist temples,” but this was not common at either temple.

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Chaves (1997); Emerson (1996); Manning (1999); Sumerau and Cragun (2015)

Adams (2007); Chan (2015)

Gallagher and Smith (1999); Manning (1999); Leamaster and Subramaniam (2016)

Emerson (1996); Wilcox (1992)

Pagoda, Participant observation, observed 01/15/2019

Pagoda, 001, man, 26 years old, bachelor’s degree 01/20/2016

Pagoda, Participant observation, observed March 12, 2016

Lotus, 009, man, 36 years old, master’s degree

Lotus, 013, female, 25 years old, associate diploma, conducted 01/26/2016

Lotus, 002, woman, 33 years old, bachelor’s degree, conducted 05/21/2016

Lotus, 022, woman, 70 years old, master’s degree, conducted 06/23/2016

Lotus, 008, man, 40 years old, master’s degree, conducted

Pagoda, 015, woman, 25-year-old, High School Diploma, conducted 01/26/2016

Pagoda, 029, female, 28-year-old, High School Diploma, conducted 01/29/2016

Lotus Participant observation, conducted 06/13/2016

Crane (2007)

Sponberg (1992)

Lotus participant observation, observed December 11, 2016

Lotus participant observation, observed October 15, 2015

Burke (2012)

Pagoda, 049, 41-year-old woman, high school diploma, interviewed March 27, 2016.

Pagoda, 006, 27-year-old woman, associate diploma, interviewed January 24, 2016

Leahey (2006)

Pagoda, 018, 66-year-old, woman, high school diploma, interviewed January 27, 2016

Pagoda, 031, 32-year-old woman, bachelor’s degree, interviewed February 21, 2016

Pagoda, 020, 38-year-old woman, bachelor’s degree, interviewed February 18, 2016.

Campbell (2009)

Pagoda, 020, Female, 38-year-old, Bachelor’s Degree, conducted 02/18/2016; Pagoda, 001, Male, 26-year-old, Bachelor’s Degree, conducted 01/20/2016

Pagoda, 020, Female, 38-year-old, Bachelor’s Degree, conducted 02/18/2016; Pagoda, 001, Male, 26-year-old, Bachelor’s Degree, conducted 01/20/2016

Pagoda, 017, Woman, 55-year-old, High School Diploma, conducted 01/27/2016

Irby (2014)

Pagoda, 039, 45-year-old man, high school diploma, interviewed February 21, 2016.

Pagoda, 039, 45-year-old, man, high school diploma, interviewed February 21, 2016.

Pagoda Participant observation, conducted 03/13/2016

Some of my interview participants said at both Temples said, “I have not thought about gender” or “I do not know how gender is reflected in Buddhist temples,” but this was not common at either temple.

Avishai (2008)

Lotus, 023, Man, 64-year-old, Master’s Degree, conducted 06/02/2016

Lotus, 031, Woman 34-year-old, PhD in Progress, conducted 08/28/2016

Lotus, 031, Woman, 34-year-old, PhD in Progress, conducted 08/28/2016

Leahey (2006)

Lotus, 001, 64-year-old, Woman, Master’s Degree, interviewed May 4, 2016
Lotus, Woman, 59-year-old, Master’s Degree, conducted 06/03/2016
Lotus, Man, 40-year-old, Master’s Degree, interviewed June 4, 2016
Lotus, Man, 36-year-old, Master’s Degree, interviewed 06/05/2016
See Lotus, 64-year-old man, Master’s degree, interviewed June 2, 2016; Lotus, 34-year-old woman, PhD in progress, interviewed August 28, 2016 as explicit examples emerged in interviews.
Lotus, Man, 40-year-old, Master’s Degree, interviewed June 4, 2016
Lotus, Man, 36-year-old, Master’s Degree, interviewed June 5, 2016
Lotus participant observation, observed June 20, 2016
Lotus, Man, 53-year-old, PhD, interviewed July 16, 2016.
Lotus, Woman, Juris Doctor, interviewed May 29, 2016
Lotus, Woman, associate degree, interviewed June 16, 2016.
Lotus participant observation, observed June 12, 2016
Lotus participant observation, observed May 1, 2016
Risman (2004)
Lotus, participant observation, observed May 6, 2016.
Burke (2012)
Butler (1999, 25)
Bucar (2010)
Irby (2014); Rao (2015)
Pagoda, Participant Observation, observed February 20, 2016.
Pagoda, Participant Observation, observed February 20, 2016.
Pagoda, Participant Observation, observed January 27, 2016.
Lotus, Participant Observation, observed September 6, 2015.
Lotus, Participant observation, observed October 17, 2015.
Emmett (2007); Prickett (2015)
Prickett (2015)
Cadge (2004)
Emmett (2007); Prickett (2015)
Avishai (2008); Irby (2014); Rao (2015)
Martin (2004)
Avishai (2008); Mahmood (2005)
Avishai (2008); Brasher (1998); Davidman (1991); Rao (2015)
Edgell (2006)
Pagoda, Woman, 26 years old, high school diploma, interviewed January 24, 2016.
Pagoda, Woman, 26 years old, high school diploma, interviewed January 24, 2016.
Pagoda, Woman, 26 years old, high school diploma, interviewed January 24, 2016.
Pagoda, Woman, 41 years old, associate diploma, interviewed February 22, 2016.
Pagoda, Woman, 26 years old, associate diploma, interviewed January 20, 2016.
Pagoda, Woman, 41 years old, associate diploma, interviewed March 27, 2016.
Pagoda, Woman, 25 years old, high school, interviewed January 26, 2016.
Pagoda, Man, 26 years old, bachelor’s degree, interviewed January 20, 2016.
Avishai (2008)
Pagoda, Female, 51 years old, high school diploma, interviewed January 27, 2016.
Avishai (2008); Mahmood (2005)
Campbell (2009)
Lotus, Woman, 58 years old, associate diploma, interviewed June 16, 2016.
Lotus, Woman, 27 years old, juris doctor, interviewed May 29, 2016.
Lotus, Woman, 64 years old, master’s degree, interviewed May 04, 2016.
Lotus, Man, 36 years old, master’s degree, interviewed June 5, 2016.
Lotus, Man, 26 years old, bachelors’ degree, interviewed June 11, 2016.
Avishai (2016)
Avishai (2008); Irby (2014); Mahmood (2005)
Not manifesting a salient sense of agency to reconstruct Chinese ethnicity does not mean that Lotus practitioners do not have agency. In the following chapter, I will provide a refined and contextualized understanding of religious people’s agency.

Ratner (2000)
Cadge and Ecklund (2007)
Gans (1979)
Douglas (1986)
I deliberately chose not to say “national contexts” here. This is because both mainland China and the US are large countries with huge variations across geographical contexts. While practitioners in the Buddhist temples perceive some norms as being the dominant national norms, it does not necessarily entail that these social norms are on such a macro context.

For example, in my interview with Pagod002, she said, “Most of the volunteers in the temple have successful careers and live a pretty good life outside the temple.” Such narratives also occur in the monthly Buddhist lecture in the temple.

One participant in Pagoda Temple in China was not comfortable being recorded. Thus, according to the requirements from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Rice University, I did not record this interview. Instead, with the respondent’s permission from the respondent, I took extensive notes throughout this interview instead.


Archer, Louise. 2001. “‘Muslim Brothers, Black Lads, Traditional Asians’: British Muslim Young Men’s Constructions of Race, Religion and Masculinity, ‘Muslim Brothers, Black Lads, Traditional Asians’: British Muslim Young Men’s Constructions of Race, Religion and Masculinity.” *Feminism & Psychology* 11:79–105.


