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Construction and Tensions Resolution: A Comparative Study of Religious Conversion to Protestantism among Chinese and Indian Immigrants in the United States

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ABSTRACT

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Despite the recent scholarly focus on immigration and religion, little is known about the shift of immigrants’ religious beliefs. Among the small set of studies that analyze immigrants’ religious conversion experience, most adopt a functional approach to understand the religious conversion process of Chinese immigrants. However, few scholars have analyzed the religious conversion process of Indian immigrants in the United States, let alone compared it with that of Chinese immigrants. Focusing on Chinese and Indian immigrants, this study adopts a comparative perspective to understand the relative influence from immigrants’ countries of origin and their immigrant status on the religious conversion process. Relying on twenty-nine semi-structured interviews, descriptively, this project examines Chinese and Indian immigrants’ interpretations of their religious conversion experience as well as their strategies for constructing identities. Using a cultural approach, sociologically, this paper analyzes how Chinese and Indian immigrant religious converts form new cultural norms during the conversion process. The findings reveal that Chinese and Indian immigrants have different approaches to interpret religious conversion process and construct religious identities. However, they utilize similar strategies to negotiate between their religious and ethnic identities. Drawing on these results, this article includes another ethnic group into
the scholarly discussion to provide a more robust theory regarding immigrants’ religious conversion. This paper also has implications for the meaning of being an immigrant Christian in the United States.
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Construction and Tensions Resolution: A Comparative Study of Religious Conversion to Protestantism among Chinese and Indian Immigrants in the United States

Religious conversion has always drawn scholarly attention because it involves “a conscious shift in one’s sense of grounding” (Heirich 1977: 674). After religious conversion, individuals change the way that they view themselves and the world around them. Immigrants’ religious conversion deserves particular scholarly focus because it not only transforms how they understand reality but also influences how they assimilate into the host society (e.g. Chen 2005; 2006; Ng 2002; Yang 1998; Yang 1999a; Yang and Ebaugh 2001b).

For the United States, scholars have long been interested in the religious experience of post-1965 immigrants, most of whom moved to America from Latin America, the Caribbean, East and South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (Alba and Nee 2003; Warner 2000). Unlike earlier waves of European immigrants, some groups of post-1965 immigrants are not only racially different from white Americans but also have
religion, and religious conversion is consequential to both immigrants themselves and the religious institution in the host society. Without studying immigrant religious converts, we do not know, however, how immigrants complete the process of religious conversion and how their conversion has an impact on the host society. This paper discusses the narratives Chinese and Indian immigrants in the United States give for their religious conversion process to Protestantism. Specifically, how do Chinese and Indian immigrants construct their religious and ethnic identities during the process of religious conversion? In addition, to what extent does the national culture in their countries of origin and immigrant status in the United States play distinct roles in their religious conversion process, if at all? These research questions are important in that immigrants’ religious conversion provides us with a window through which we can understand how the host society exerts an influence on immigrants’ religious lives and conversely how immigrants’ religious lives leave an impact on the host society.

Immigrant religious converts’ identity construction process deserves scholarly focus because the construction of identity is one major challenge that immigrant converts encounter. Immigrants’ self-identification is based on the interface of race, ethnicity, and religion (Jeung et al. 2012). After conversion, religion is not merely an extension of immigrants’ ethnic culture (Chen 2006). Instead, religion exerts its independent influence
on immigrants’ self-identification and it sometimes even challenges immigrants’ ethnic
cultures (Chen 2006). Thus, immigrant religious converts need to negotiate among race,
etnicity, and their new religious beliefs. Understanding immigrants’ strategies to
construct identities within the religious conversion process is essential because it
provides us with an opportunity to explore whether an individual’s identities as an
immigrant, as a religious person, and as an America overlap or at odds with each other.
Hearing the narratives from immigrant religious converts, we are able to understand how
immigrants deconstruct and reconstruct identities and how they eventually resolve the
tensions among their multiple identities and find a social location in the United States.

Scholars have generated theories that specifically aim to explain post-1965 Asian
immigrants’ religious conversion because their religious experience in the United States
is different from earlier Europeans who also immigrated to the United States (e.g. Chen
2005; 2006; Ng 2002; Yang 1998). Traditional sociological theories assume that earlier
European immigrants would assimilate into American society by gradually abandoning
their nationality, language, and secular culture (Herberg 1955). Their religious identities
would remain unchanged and become the primary source of self-identification in
America (Herberg 1955). Yet most earlier European immigrants were white and they
held Judeo-Christian religious beliefs before moving to the United States (Ecklund 2006;
Herberg 1955). Different from their earlier counterparts, most post-1965 Asian
immigrants’ previous religious beliefs are not under the umbrella of Judeo-Christianity
(Yang 1998). After moving to the United States, some Asian immigrants chose to
abandon their previous religious beliefs and convert to Protestantism (Yang 1998).
Most theories regarding religious conversion of post-1965 immigrants are generated based on empirical findings of Chinese immigrants (Abel 2006; Hall 2006; Ng 2002; Yang 1998; Zhang 2006). According to extant theories, after Asian immigrants’ conversion to Protestantism, a disjunction occurs between their Christian religious beliefs and other components of their ethnic cultures. This is because Christianity is relatively new to most Asian countries whereas Asian immigrants’ ethnic cultures are intertwined with traditional Asian religions (Bell 1989; Yang 1999a; Yang 2012). Some Chinese immigrant converts attempt to resolve this disjunction by settling in ethnic Protestant churches to be ethnically identified with other immigrants (Ng 2002). Religious conversion, therefore, becomes a bridge that connects immigrants’ ethnic cultures in their countries of origin with the religious cultures in the host society (Ng 2002). With the analogy of religious conversion as a bridge, researchers noted that both immigrants’ experience in their countries of origin and their immigrant status in the United States facilitate immigrants’ conversion (Chen 2005; 2006; Ng 2002; Yang 1998). While these previous theories contributing to the broad picture of Asian immigrants’ religious conversion process, by comparing the religious conversion process of Chinese and Indian immigrants, we will find the relative influence from the national culture of immigrants’ countries of origin and their immigrant status in the host society on their conversion experience.

Relying on twenty-nine interviews with Chinese and Indian immigrant religious converts and participant observation in Chinese and Indian immigrant churches, this paper demonstrates that Chinese and Indian immigrants adopt similar approaches to maintain their ethnic identities. Both immigrant groups integrate secular ethnic symbols
in religious rituals. Despite the similarities regarding the preservation of ethnic cultures, Chinese and Indian immigrants utilize different strategies to abandon their previous religious beliefs and construct Christian identities. Chinese immigrants radically transit from their previous religious identities to Christians whereas Indian immigrants attempt to conduct a smooth transition and construct their new religious identities.

By showing this, I argue that governmental attitudes towards religion in immigrants’ countries of origin and their immigrant status in the United States operate together and shape immigrants’ religious conversion. Immigrants’ religious conversion, thus, is more than an individualistic rational choice. Rather, the macro-level social contexts in immigrants’ home countries and their immigrant status have an impact on individual immigrants’ actions during religious conversion.

1.1. Review of the Literature

1.1.1. Religious Conversion

Religious conversion is a “radical personal change” (Snow and Machalek 1984: 169) in that it transforms how religious converts construct their reality and understand their world (Snow and Phillips 1980; Straus 1979). Social scientists have attempted to explain why individuals abandon their previous religious beliefs and accept another religion. The traditional psychological “brainwashing model” emphasizes on how religious organizations “exercise mind control over new converts” (Long and Hadden 1983:1). Sociologists, in contrast, are more interested in the role social relationships play in the religious conversion process (Long and Hadden 1983). The classical sociological
model was produced by Loftland and Stark (1965), who identified several associated factors with individuals’ religious conversion. These factors include but are not limited to tensions in religious converts’ experience, the problem-solving perspective adopted by religious converts, and their identification as seekers (Loftland and Stark 1965).

According to Loftland and Stark’s (1965) model, people who face unresolvable tensions in their previous lives, such as frustrated marital relationships, guilt, and fear, would seek another religious framework to explain their tensions. Specifically focusing on the seekership, Straus (1979) investigates how religious converts draw resources from public media and their interactions with other believers to search for a new religious system that can interpret the tensions in their lives. Realizing the commonalities between the traditional psychological explanations and sociological models, Long and Hadden (1983:1) combine the psychological “brainwashing” model and the sociological “social drift” model, demonstrating that the religious conversion process involves two perspectives: how religious organizations attempt to attract new converts and how new converts explore the meaning of their new religious beliefs. Adopting these classical social scientific explanations as theoretical frameworks, more recently, Jindra (2011) compares the religious conversion across different religious groups. She contends that a person’s previous experience, such as their problematic relationships with parents in the childhood, decides which religious contents are attractive to them (Jindra 2011). This relationship is reflected on converts’ narratives about religious conversion (Jindra 2011).

The main contribution of these studies is that they inform us why individuals convert to another religion. Yet, these classical social scientific theories do not elaborate on what happens during the religious conversion process. Motivation for religious
conversion only tells us part of the story. Only by understanding what happens during the
religious conversion process can we obtain a complete picture about this “radical
personal change” (Snow and Machalek 1984:169). Furthermore, with an emphasis on the
impact of religious conversion on new converts, previous literature does not focus on
how religious converts transform the religious institution. Yet, more recent work on
religion and immigration shows that immigrants do have agency to change the religious
institution in the host society (Cadge and Ecklund 2006; 2007; Finke and Stark 2005;
Jeung et al. 2012; Yang and Ebaugh 2001b). Given this fact, these classical theories on
conversion cannot adequately explain the religious conversion of immigrants in the
United States. Thus, a study exploring the relationship between immigrants’ agency and
the process of conversion is necessary to fully understand particular features regarding
immigrants’ religious conversion.

1.1.2. Immigration and Religion

After moving to the United States, immigrants bring their own traditional
religions to America and establish ethnic religious organizations (Yang and Ebuagh
2001b). The emergence of immigrant religious organizations formed a free religious
market, brings competitions among religious organizations, and contributes to the
religiosity in the United States (Finke and Stark 2005; Yang and Ebaugh 2001b).
Moreover, the presence of Asian protestants and Latino Catholics de-Europeanized
churches in America (Cadge and Ecklund 2006; Jeung et al. 2012).

For immigrants, religion acts as a knot binding immigrants’ ethnic culture and
their lives in the host society (Bakston and Zhou 1996; Yang 1999b; Yang and Ebaugh
As a knot, the ethnic cultures in immigrants’ countries of origin and their immigrant status in the United States intersect in immigrant religious organizations (Bakston and Zhou 1996; Yang 1999b; Yang and Ebaugh 2001b). To maintain their ethnic cultures, immigrant religious believers celebrate ethnic festivals, adopt ethnic symbols, and form ethnic communal circles in religious organizations (George 1998; Min 2006; Ng 2002). For instance, Chinese and Korean Christians celebrate the Lunar New Year in immigrant churches (Min 2006; Ng 2002). Similarly, Indian Christians fuse their ethnic cultures into religious organizations by physically separating men and women to mirror the gender relations back in India (George 1998). And Korean Americans utilize churches as civic organizations (Ecklund 2006).

In addition to the preservation of ethnic culture, immigrant religious organizations also adapt to the dominant American society. To assimilate into dominant American society, immigrant religious organizations start to adopt congregational models (Yang and Ebaugh 2001b). For example, Buddhist temples in most Asian countries do not have lay leaders (Yang and Ebaugh 2001b). After transplanting Buddhist Temples to the United States, immigrants congregationalized their temples by introducing lay leaders in their organizational structure (Yang and Ebaugh 2001b).

All these empirical findings indicate that immigrants have agency to transform the religious institution in the host country by either integrating their ethnic culture into religious organization or transforming the traditional structure of their organization to adapt to American society. Yet, most of the existing studies adopt a functional perspective (e.g. Cao 2005; Kim and Kim 2012; Yang 1999b). With a functional perspective, previous literature on immigrants’ religious experience only examines how
immigrant religious organizations provide immigrants with social services, job networks, and business opportunities (Cadge and Ecklund 2006; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000). Scholars claim that immigrant religious organizations mainly carry non-religious functions, which is facilitating immigrants’ economic and cultural adaptation. Constrained by the functional perspective, previous studies assume that immigrants’ actions within their religious organizations are motivated by non-religious purposes (e.g. Ecklund 2006; Kwon 1997; Ng 2002). Yet, immigrants’ religious behaviors are different from other secular behaviors in that immigrants attach sacred meanings with their religious behaviors. Thus, to have a better understanding of immigrants’ religious lives in the United States, we need interpretive research to understand immigrants’ religious experience.

1.1.3. Immigrants’ Religious Conversion

Scholars regard Asian immigrant religious converts as an ideal population to develop the classical theoretical traditions about religious conversion and apply these theories to immigrants. One particular feature about immigrant religious converts is that they have experienced two transition processes: the transition from their countries of origin to the United States and the transition from their previous religious beliefs to Christianity (Yang 1998). These transitions are radical for Asian immigrants because Christianity is relatively new to Asians and the ethnic cultures of Asian countries are not embedded with Judeo-Christian traditions (Yang and Ebaugh 2001a).

Regarding the conversion experience of Asian immigrants in the United States, Yang (1998) conducted an ethnographic study in a Chinese Evangelical church in
Washington, D.C. His argument is established on Lofland and Stark’s (1965) classical religious conversion model. Lofland and Stark (1965) contend that personal experience of tragedy motivates individuals’ religious conversion. Applying this classical theoretical model on Chinese immigrants, Yang (1998) argues that Chinese immigrants’ previous tragic experiences, such as suffering from the Anti-Japanese War and being refugees in Vietnam, motivate Chinese immigrants’ conversion to Evangelical Christianity. The major contribution of Yang’s (1998) study is that he moves the analytical level from individual personal crises to national collective memories. In so doing, Yang (1998) connects individuals’ motivations for religious conversion to the cultural and social contexts in their countries of origin. However, following the traditional theoretical model about religious conversion, Yang’s (1998) research still focuses on the motivation for immigrants’ religious conversion without paying sufficient attention to what happens during the conversion process. However, it is worth expanding the research scope and analyzing what conflicts immigrants have encountered in their conversion experience, how immigrants overcome these tensions within the conversion process, and why they adopt certain strategies to complete their conversion process.

Expanding on Yang’s (1998) research scope, Ng (2002) began to look at why Chinese immigrants convert to Christianity and the actual process of their conversion. In his study, Ng (2002) found that Chinese immigrant converts mold a tutelary god to complete their transition from previous religious beliefs to Evangelical Christianity. They did this because the notion of a tutelary god is consistent with notions in Chinese folk religions (Ng 2002). Ng (2002) also found that Chinese immigrant converts utilize their church as a social space to preserve ethnic cultures by celebrating Chinese festivals. At
the same time, their church facilitates immigrants’ assimilation into American society by providing English classes and American cultural training sessions (Ng 2002). Shifting the scholarly focus to the consequence of immigrants’ religious conversion, Chen (2006) analyzes how Christianity leaves an impact on Taiwanese immigrant families. Her findings indicate that Evangelical Christianity slightly transforms Taiwanese families by interpreting filial obligation through Christian languages and softening the hierarchical relationship between parents and children through Christian ideologies (Chen 2006). Based on her empirical findings, Chen (2006) argues that religion is more than an extension of ethnicity. Religion is independent from other components of ethnic cultures (Chen 2006). In certain situations, religion even challenges ethnic cultures (Chen 2006). Without empirical data, however, Chen (2006) is not able to conclude whether her arguments about religion and ethnic cultures can be generalized and applied to other ethnic groups. Thus, it is worth analyzing the religious conversion experience of immigrant groups other than Chinese and asking individual immigrant converts’ narratives about their negotiation between religious and ethnic identities. Building on and developing existing theories about immigrants’ religious conversion, I believe a cultural rather than functional perspective is helpful to look beyond the non-religious purpose of individuals’ actions and concentrate on immigrant converts’ experiences and meanings developed within the religious transition process.

1.1.4. A Cultural Perspective

This paper adopts Swidler’s (1986) definition of culture, specifically her conceptualization of cultural toolkit. Swidler (1986: 273) conceptualizes culture as a
toolkit that contains “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views.” People use cultural
tools in this toolkit to guide their actions (Swidler 1986). Individuals’ utilization of the
cultural toolkit becomes more salient in unsettled lives when their previous cultural
values cannot reinforce their current structural circumstances (Swidler 1986). Unsettled
lives refer to the social transformation or people’s transition from one social context to
another (Swidler 1986). Within the unsettled period, people can no longer organize their
lives and solve social problems with existing and taken for granted traditions (Swidler
1986). In that case, ideology, “a highly articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual
system,” is formed to guide people’s social actions in unsettled lives (Swidler 1986: 279).

Applying Swidler’s (1986) theoretical arguments about how culture guides
actions, Lamont (1992; 2000) studies how individuals arrange their actions according to
their cultural repertories. When Lamont adopted a cultural perspective to analyze the
identity construction process of French people and Americans, she was referring to the
national culture of France and the United States (Lamont 1992; 2000). She shows that
different national historical cultures in France and the United States lead to French people
and the Americans’ different approaches to constructing their class identities.

Swidler (1986) and Lamont (1992; 2000) demonstrate that unsettled lives
facilitate the formation of new cultural norms and cultures guide individuals’ actions in
the identity construction process. Swidler (1986) also implies that when forming new
cultural norms, people inevitably draw resources from existing cultures to construct new
cultures and maintain their cultural capacities. Yet, Swidler (1986) and Lamont (1992;
2000) did not elaborate on what strategies individuals adopt to form new cultural norms,
why individuals want to form new cultures, and how cultures guide individuals’ actions
when they are constructing identities. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze individuals’ identity construction process under Swidler’s (1986) and Lamont’s (1992; 2002) theoretical framework and pay more attention to what happens in the identity construction process.

1.1.5. Chinese and Indian Immigrants in the United States

The religious conversion process of Chinese and Indian immigrants is an ideal comparison case for this study because their similar immigrant status in the United States and different religious contexts in their countries of origin. Scholars found that immigrants’ previous experience in their motherlands influences their religious conversion process (Yang 1998; Ng 2002). Therefore, it is necessary to briefly understand Chinese and Indian immigrants’ living conditions in the United States as well as the social contexts in China and India before examining their religious conversion process.

Chinese and Indian immigrants are two large Asian immigrant groups in the United States (Batalova 2011). Among all Asian immigrants in America, 15.4 percent of Asian immigrants come from China, including Hong Kong and another 15.6 percent of Asian immigrants come from India (Batalova 2011). The increase in the number of Chinese and Indian immigrants enables them to become two important ethnic groups in the United States, especially in California, New York, and Texas (Batalova 2011). These two large immigrant groups, however, are different from immigrant refugees coming from Laos and Cambodia (Allard 2001). Most Chinese and Indian immigrants are highly
educated and they come to the United States to seek more educational attainment and financial opportunities (Kao and Thompson 2003).

In addition to the similar living conditions of Chinese and Indian immigrants in the United States, the social and cultural contexts in China and India also share similarities that are key to our understandings of their religious contexts. First, historically, China and India are two neighboring societies with profound traditional cultures that are influential to societies around them (Van der Veer 2014). Second, both China and India are religiously diverse countries (Van der Veer 2014). Multiple traditional Asian religions, such as Hinduism and Sikhism in India and Buddhism and Daoism in China, have played important roles in these two social contexts (Robinson 2004; Hardgrave 1993; Yang 2012; Yang and Ebaugh 2001b). Third, regarding their development stages, after the Second World War, both China and India began to pursue economic advancement and political independence (Van der Veer 2014).

With the intention to promote the development of their countries, both the Chinese and Indian government advocated for “progress, rationality, equality, and anti-imperialism” (Van der Veer 2014:8). However, these two governments differ in terms of their attitudes towards religion (Hardgrave 1993; Kurien 2001; Mitra 1991; Van der Veer 2014; Yang 2012). The Chinese government regards religion as an obstacle to pursue the development of the country, and, thus, banned religious venues and practices (Van der Veer 2014; Yang 2012). Though, now, the Chinese government mildly tolerates five official religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism, it still claims an atheist government (Yang 2012). During the Great Cultural Revolution, a ten-year-long political campaign, the Chinese government even closed all venues to
traditional religions and banned all religious practices (Yang 2012). In the process of social development, the Chinese government sacralizes Communism as a pseudo-religion while holding restrictive attitudes towards religious venues and religious practices of conventional religions (Van der Veer 2014; Yang 2012).

Different from China, the value of religion is acknowledged in India (Van der Veer 2014). Though the Indian government excluded religion from public spheres under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru after independence, the Indian government has not removed religious venues from the society (Mitra 1991). In fact, India is a country that is segmented by sects, castes, and, most importantly, religious traditions (Hardgrave 1993). For Indian immigrants, religion satisfies their spiritual demands, represents their cultures, and reinforces their ethnic identifications (Mitra 1991). In recent years, the Indian government is integrating religion in the political sphere where some politic parties advocate for the interest of a particular religion, such as Hinduism (Kurien 2001; Pandian 2012).

The different governmental attitudes towards religion in China and India create potential differences in Chinese and Indian immigrants’ attitudes towards religion and religious conversion in the United States. Before immigrating to the United States, Chinese immigrants were exposed to religion mostly in private or even underground venues while their Indian counterparts inherited religious beliefs from families and practiced religions publicly (Desai 1963 [2004]; Yang 2012). Therefore, it deserves scholarly focus to analyze whether Chinese and Indian immigrants in the United States adopt different strategies to construct identities in the religious conversion process.
1.1.6. Filling the Gaps

Few studies investigate religious conversion of Indian immigrants in the United States, let alone compare Indian immigrants’ religious conversion process with that of Chinese immigrants. Most studies about immigrants’ religious conversion confine the scope of their analyses within Chinese immigrants’ conversion process. Previous scholars imply that the cultural, social, and religious contexts back in China and Chinese immigrants’ status in the United States together leave an impact on Chinese immigrants’ religious conversion. Given this statement, to fully understand the relative influence from cultural contexts in immigrants’ mother countries and their immigrant status in the United States, a comparative study with an ethnic group other than Chinese is needed. Moreover, with a predominant focus on Chinese immigrants’ conversion process, previous scholars assume that the religious conversion experience of Chinese immigrants can be generalized to other ethnic groups. To provide a more robust theory about immigrants’ religious conversion, we need to expand our research scope to other post-1965 immigrant groups. Finally, among the small set of studies that discuss immigrants’ religious conversion experience, most of them adopt a functional perspective with an emphasis on the non-religious purpose of immigrants’ actions. More interpretive work is needed to hear immigrants’ narratives about their religious lives in the United States and how their narratives have implications for their actions in religious organizations (Thomas and Thomas 1928).

This paper compares the religious conversion process of Chinese and Indian immigrants because they share their immigrant status yet the religious contexts in their
countries of origin are different. Given the fact that Chinese and Indian immigrants are two large ethnic groups among Asian immigrants, studying their religious lives holds important implications for how American society influences Asian immigrants’ religious lives and, more importantly, what it means to be an immigrant Christian in the United States.

1.2. Methods

1.2.1. Data Collection Activities

This comparative study of religious conversion relies on twenty-nine interviews with Chinese and Indian immigrant religious converts in nine Protestant churches in Texas. Interviews were conducted from March 2013 to May 2014. The pastor and churchgoers in one of my research sites regard their church as predominantly Chinese. The remaining eight sites consider their church predominantly Indian. I explain below why I use eight Indian churches. Participants were self-identified first-generation Chinese or Indian immigrants who converted to Christianity at certain stages in their lives. All participants who identified themselves as first-generation immigrants were born or raised in their countries of origin for at least thirteen years. Some of them still have foreign citizenships while others adopted the US citizenship through naturalization. Their self-identification is consistent with the scholarly definition of first-generation immigrants (e.g. Algan et al. 2010). Yet, participants’ self-identification of religious converts differs. Some of them regard their transformation from other religious background or the non-religious background as a conversion. One participant considered his transformation from
the Catholicism to the Protestantism as a conversion. Two participants self-identified as religious converts because they transformed from nominal Christians to hard-core Christians. Religious converts who shifted from other religions background or non-religious background to Protestantism have experienced tremendous transformation. Lacking Christian background, these religious converts perceive the needs to learn how to understand the world and organize their lives according to the Christian ideologies. Compared with the religious conversion from other-religious or non-religious background to Christianity, the shift from nominal Christians to hard-core Christians is relatively minor. According to Rambo (1993), all these transformations can be regarded as religious conversion. In the data collection process, I adopted participants’ self-identifications as religious converts to Christianity. When analyzing the data, I mainly rely on the narratives provided by participants who converted from other religious backgrounds or non-religious background. It is because the transformation from non-religious background or other religious background to Christianity provides a window to understand how immigrants adopt strategies to negotiate the conflicts and tensions between their ethnic and religious identities. Compared with immigrants who converted under the umbrella of Christianity, immigrants who converted from other religious backgrounds or the non-religious background may have experienced more struggles within their conversion process.

Data for this study include interviews and participant observation. Before interviewing converted immigrants, I conducted participant observation in Chinese and Indian churches during Sunday morning worship services and Bible studies. During participant observation, I disclosed my identity as a researcher. Substantively, participant
observation sheds light on how Chinese and Indian immigrants negotiate their religious and ethnic identities in the organizations. Strategically, conducting participant observation enables me to establish connections with pastors and locate potential participants through participant observation. The primary research sites include one Chinese church and one Indian church. The fieldwork activities last for more than a year from March 2013 to May 2014. Most churchgoers in the Chinese church are religious converts. In the Indian church, however, most churchgoers were born in Protestant families. Therefore, they do not meet my requirements as converted immigrants. To solve this problem, I deliberately asked pastors and other churchgoers to recommend to me other Indian immigrant churches. The disparities between the number of converted Chinese and Indian immigrants explain the huge differences in number of churches in the Chinese and Indian cases. All the nine churches are situated in suburban areas with high average socioeconomic status.

In the two primary research sites, a Chinese and Indian church, I asked pastors to introduce me to religious converts in their churches. Each pastor helped me to identify at least one religious convert in his church. In the Chinese church, given the large number of converted immigrants, each participant was able to name one to two converted Chinese immigrants in their church. Thus, I successfully adopted the snowball sampling strategy and recruited sufficient immigrant converts to participate in the interviews in the Chinese church. In the Indian church, however, some participants either did not know any other converted Indian immigrants or were reluctant to recommend me to other converted Indians. In that case, I asked the pastor to inform me of other Indian immigrant churches and recruited participants in new research sites.
Within one-year fieldwork, I have conducted twenty-nine semi-structure interviews. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted with Chinese immigrants in Mandarin Chinese and another fourteen interviews were conducted with Indian immigrants in English. The interviews lasted from forty-five minutes to two hours and a half in length. In these interviews, I asked them about their motivation for religious conversion, their religious conversion experience and, most importantly, whether they have experienced any conflicts during the religious conversion process (A complete interview guide is provided as an appendix). Additionally, I conducted participant observation in each of my research sites. I observed Bible study, Gospel camps, and Sunday morning worship services provided by the Chinese and Indian churches. After conducting interviews, I listened to the audiotapes carefully and fully transcribed eight interviews. In addition, I transcribed portions of the other interviews that are most relevant to my research question. I also wrote extensive context notes after each interview. The context notes include portraits of interviewed participants, the process of interview conducting, important themes generated within the interview, and potential contribution from this interview to my research. When analyzing the data, I coded the interviews for themes related to immigrants’ identity construction strategies. Quotes from the Chinese immigrants were translated from Mandarin Chinese to English. To protect the confidentiality of my participants, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Also, I do not disclose the names of Chinese and Indian churches.
1.2.2. Insider and Outsider Status

In the data collection process, I have a nuanced insider and outsider status as a researcher. For Chinese immigrant who converted to Christianity, I was an ethnic insider while a religious outsider. For Indian immigrants who converted to Christianity, I was a “double-outsider” because I was neither an Indian nor a Christian. Being an East Asian looking person who did not wear traditional Indian sari, my outsider status was perceivable in Indian churches. As a Chinese, my outsider status was less perceivable in Chinese churches. Yet, the more time I spent with the Chinese participants, the more I felt like an outsider. Though I shared the same ethnic identity and spoke the same language with my Chinese participants, I have not fully involved in their circles and I could clearly feel my status as an outsider of Chinese Christians. This nuanced research status intrigues me to investigate why some Asian immigrants’ religious identities are more salient than their ethnic identities. I attempt to find the answers to this question in their identity construction process.

1.2.3. A Modified Grounded Theory Methdology

A modified grounded theory methodology enables me to conceptualize theories based on the collected data. In a grounded theory methodology, theories are generalized based on the collected data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). A grounded theory approach enables scholars to revise theories during the ongoing data collection process (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This methodology is applicable for studying social phenomenon that has not been studied. Specific to immigrants’ religious conversion, though there is a small set of studies that investigate immigrants’ religious conversion, this social phenomenon is
largely understudied. Thus, a modified grounded theory approach is helpful to generate a robust theory regarding immigrants’ religious conversion.

1.3. Findings

1.3.1. Seeking Truth and Individualistic Choices

After immigrating to the United States, both Chinese and Indians are exposed to the religious contexts in America, a context extremely different from those in China and India. Even though Chinese and Indian immigrants have similar immigrant status in America, the cultural contexts in their countries of origin provide them with different frameworks to interpret their religious conversion process. The theme of seeking truth consistently appeared Chinese immigrants narratives about conversion. Despite the fact that some Indian immigrants also mentioned the process of searching for truth, they stressed more their freedom to make individualistic choices and pursue their religious beliefs in this conversion process. However, this narrative as an individualistic choice rarely emerged in interviews with Chinese immigrant converts.

Robert Lin\textsuperscript{5} participated in this study when he was attending a Gospel Camp of organized by the Chinese church. He is a 35-year-old active churchgoer who immigrated to the United States from Mainland China eleven years ago. Ten years after arriving in the US, Robert Lin converted to Evangelical Christianity in a Gospel Camp in the United States. Reflecting on his religious conversion experience, Robert Lin naturally brought up how the Chinese government portrayed religion, he said:
When we were having politics classes, we were educated that politics is spiritual opium. Then, later in my life, I found that actually it is—Oh, no, no, I mean religion, religion is spiritual opium. Then, later in my life, I found that actually it is opium and a placebo.

Being raised in Mainland China for about twenty-four years before coming to the United States, Robert Lin believed that religion does not contain any truth. After arriving in the United States and being exposed to the freedom of practicing religion, Robert Lin gradually found that “this religion (Christianity) is truth.” He converted to Protestantism because he believed that Christianity is more than a placebo. He described his religious conversion as searching for the truth, he said:

Put it differently, even until now, I am still examining my religious belief. I want all non-Christians to ask some questions and challenge my religious beliefs. It is because I hope—There is a Chinese saying that “Listen to both sides and you will be enlightened; heed only one side and you will be benighted.” I hope that one day, one of their questions will destroy the root of my religious belief. The religious belief will eventually collapse. If that happens, I will be very happy. Why? This is because I do not want to establish my faith on a fake religious belief. But, it has been ten years, ten years, all the questions, just like what the Bible says, “There is no new thing under the sun. That which has been, is that which is to be, and that which has been done, is that which will be done.” People keep asking similar questions. The more they ask me, the more I found that this religion is truth. This religion is true, other religions are-[fake]. Moreover,
what we believe is more than a religion. We are believing in a living God.

It is logically convincing.

Robert Lin interpreted his religious conversion as a result of constantly seeking truth. In his narratives, he implied that Christianity is different from other traditional Chinese religious beliefs in that Christianity is not a placebo but truth. The political propaganda in Mainland China formed Robert Lin’s perceptions of religion. After immigrating to America, the religious freedom in American society provides Robert Lin with a chance to reexamine religion. To justify his Christianity religious belief, Robert adopted a strategy of differentiating Christianity from other traditional Chinese religious beliefs and interpreting his religious conversion as seeking “truth.”

A similar narrative occurred in the interview with David Zhang. David Zhang is a 37 year-old Chinese immigrant. He converted to Protestantism about ten years ago after moving to the United States. Like Robert Lin, when talking about the reason for converting to Christianity, David Zhang said, “It (Converting to Christianity) was not a feeling. When you really start to know it (Christianity), you will know that it is the truth.” David Zhang also said that he did not purposely adopt any strategies to resolve the conflicts during religious conversion. He said, “To me, there is nothing to overcome. If it is really the truth, I don’t need to overcome.”

Similar to what Yang (1998) found in his ethnographic research about Chinese Evangelicals, my finding indicates that Chinese immigrants’ spiritual demands cannot be satisfied in China because of the restriction of religious practice and beliefs. Deepening Yang’s (1998) arguments, I contend that the structural-level political climate in China becomes part of Chinese immigrants’ national cultural repertoire. This national cultural
repertoire provides Chinese immigrants with the framework to interpret their religious conversion as the process of seeking truth. Their narratives are different from Indian immigrants who interpreted their religious conversion process as a chance to make their individualistic choices.

Many narratives from Indian Christians reflect their conversion as individualistic choice. For example, this is seen in the interview with Catherine. Catherine is a 20-year-old Indian immigrant. She arrived in the United States as a teenager and converted to Christianity from Hinduism seven years ago with her mother, Marie. She described the importance of religion in India as “Religion consumes your life.” She then gave an example, “Like over in India, it was like Ok, if I am a Christian, I am only allowed to marry a Christian. You cannot go outside Christianity to marry.” After immigrating to America, she realized that “Over here, religion is not a barrier for you to do anything at all.” Catherine and her mother, Marie, interpreted their conversion as “No body is going to question us why you go to the church. We have full freedom here.” Due to the fact that religion is a significant part of the Indian society, Indian immigrants are constrained by the religious beliefs of their families. Their social circles are established not only on sects and castes, but also on religious beliefs (Hardgrave 1993). Religious freedom in the United States makes them realize that they have the full freedom to choose their own religious belief. According to my interpretation, that may be a reason to explain why Indian immigrants are inclined to interpret their religious conversion as an individualistic choice.

Another Indian immigrant convert, Raj, described how religion consumes people’s lives in India in a more extreme way. Raj is a 44-year-old Indian immigrant. He
converted to Christianity from a Hindu background—after arriving in America—nine years ago. He narrated the difficulties of converting to Christianity back in India, he said:

Even today, it is not. I won’t say it is as widely as accepted as Hindus. At least it is much better now. Lot of Hindus are being converted. But the mass conversion or anything still do not happen because so many restrictions and some violence or everything.

Raj realized that the barrier of converting to Christianity in India is not about explicit restrictions. Instead, it is because religion is so deep-rooted in the India society. He further added:

Um, I mean, as I mention, it is not a restriction per se. It is mostly by the society. Therefore, for example, if you convert, if you give up your Hindu and become Christian, therefore, in the society, they have feeling, that Ok, they alienate you. They alienate you.

After coming to the United States and being exposed to the religious freedom, Raj started to be open to Christianity, gradually understand Christian ideologies, accept Christianity, and finally tell others about his conversion. This process took him more than three years. He realized that his status as an immigrant in the United States brought him the freedom to pursue his religious belief, he explicitly said, “Because we are here. In India, probably different, yea.”

From the narratives of Chinese and Indian immigrants, we understand that Chinese and Indian immigrants adopt different interpretive frameworks to understand their religious conversion. Chinese immigrants narrated their religious conversion as a process of searching for truth contained in the religion whereas Indian immigrants
described their religious conversion as an individualistic choice after being exposed to religious freedom. Though there is a pattern that interviewed Chinese immigrants focused more on the process of searching for truth and interviewed Indian immigrants emphasized the process of making individualistic choices, there are complexities regarding their narratives. In other words, these two interpretive frameworks are not mutually exclusive.

Previous scholars regard that people in Mainland China do not have sufficient religious freedom (Yang 2012) whereas Indian people do have the freedom to practice religion (Hargrave 1993; Van der Veer 2014). Yet, for Indian immigrants, having the freedom to practice religion does not mean that they have the freedom to choose their own religious beliefs. Rather, according to the narratives from Indian converted immigrants, they inherited religious belief from families of origin and the inherited religious belief consumes their lives, constricting their freedom to pursue other religions.

Chinese and Indian immigrants’ explanations of their religious conversion process show that both Chinese and Indian immigrants’ religious freedom is constrained, but in different ways. The governmental constraints of religious freedom in China lead Chinese immigrants to describe their religious conversion as seeking truth. The social constraints of religious freedom in India result in Indian immigrants’ interpretation of their religious conversion as an individualistic choice. Such national-level constraints are connected with individual-level actions by providing Chinese and Indian immigrants with different interpretive frameworks.
1.3.2. The Construction of Religious Identity: Vending Machine and Common Goals

After converting to Christianity, the first step to construct religious identities is switching from their previous religious beliefs to Christianity. To make such transition, Chinese immigrants criticized previous traditional religions, distanced Protestant Christianity from traditional religions, and confirmed their identities as Christians. This strategy is reflected on Jenifer Li’s discussion about believers of Chinese traditional religions. Jenifer Li is a 30-year-old Chinese immigrant who moved to the United States to pursue her doctoral degree in biology. After coming to America, she converted to Evangelical Christianity five years ago. Though she claimed that she did not have religious beliefs before converting to Christianity, she occasionally went to temples and practices Chinese folk religions. Commenting on believers of Chinese traditional religions, she proclaimed:

The so-called Chinese religious believers treat their gods as a vending machine. They put coins in it and their gods will give them some practical goods…Because of this, they lost opportunities to learn about their religions.

By analogizing the religious practice of Chinese traditional religious believers as “treating their gods as a vending machine,” Jenifer Li radically criticized the religious practice of Chinese traditional religious believers. She then compared Christian religious practice with the religious practice of Chinese traditional religious believers by saying:
For most of the time, I think prayer is a way to make myself peaceful. The most important thing is feeling peaceful rather than caring about the final result… I will tell God what I want. Probably I will not obtain the good result even though I prayed to God. But after telling God, I will have more confidence and hope.

When describing Christian religious practice, Jenifer focused more on the spiritual side by using the word “peaceful,” “confidence,” and “hope.” She also distanced Christian religious practice from materialistic and utilitarian needs by stressing, “the most important thing is feeling peaceful rather than caring about the final result.” Locating the Chinese religious practice on the utilitarian spectrum and Christian religious practice on the spiritual spectrum, Jenifer Li claimed that Christianity is a religion that satisfies her spiritual demands whereas Chinese traditional religion is utilitarian and believers do not even understand the ideologies of traditional Chinese religions.

Other Chinese immigrant converts, such as Yvonne Wang¹¹, also situated traditional Chinese religious beliefs in the utilitarian spectrum. Yvonne Wang is a 22-year-old Chinese immigrant who converted to Evangelical Christianity four years ago when she was an undergraduate student in an American university. When talking about Chinese Buddhists, she said, “They go to the temple, but they do not necessarily believe in Buddhism. They go there because others go there. They have practical needs and they think it is goodwill.” To further state her opinion regarding traditional religions, Yvonne Wang added:

So they go to the temple, but they don’t really believe in Buddhism… You can see the differences between real Buddhists and fake Buddhists. Oh, I
don’t mean they are fake Buddhists, but they don’t believe in Buddhism seriously.

Though Yvonne Wang qualified her statement by saying “I don’t mean they are fake Buddhists,” in her narratives, she thought that believers of traditional religious “have practical needs” and “they don’t believe in Buddhism seriously.” Similar to Jenifer Li, Yvonne Wang located traditional religious practice on the utilitarian spectrum and contrasted such religious practice with Christian practice to construct her new religious identity.

Criticisms of Chinese traditional religions consistently appeared in my interviews with Chinese immigrants. Robert Lin, the 35-year-old Chinese immigrant who narrated his conversion to Christianity as the result of seeking truth, regarded going to temple and praying to Buddha as typical Chinese religious practices. Similar to Jenifer, in order to construct his religious identities, Robert Lin criticized Buddhist practice and demonstrated that Christianity is different from Buddhism. He commented:

They (Chinese religious believers) swindled and do nothing good in daily lives. When they attend religious activities, they dress decently, burn joss sticks, and pray to the Buddha. [Religious practice] is not supposed to be in this way. Our Christian belief is the same outside and inside. It is because God said, “You should love others as the way you love me.”

During the interview, Robert Lin further compared Christian religious practice with the religious practice of Chinese traditional religious believers. When he described prayer in Christianity, he said:
Sometimes, I sigh. I may even complain. Sometimes, I may even get angry. But you know, our God will bless us. In other words, I talk to God as the way I talk with you. I talk to God as the way I talk to other people.

This is integrity. We are the same outside and inside.

In their narratives, Chinese converted immigrants differentiated Chinese traditional religions from Christianity by radically criticizing religious practice of Chinese traditional religions. What they attempted to do is to distance Christianity from the religion portrayed by the Chinese governmental propaganda. Influenced by the national cultural repertoire in China, Chinese immigrants interpreted their religious conversion as the result of seeking truth. This interpretation is consistent to their actions in constructing religious identities. Specifically, Chinese immigrants criticize Chinese traditional religions by replacing the contents of their previous religious identities with Christian ideologies.

In contrast to their Chinese counterparts, Indian converted immigrants did not criticize their previous religious beliefs. Rather, they managed to find commonalities between their previous religious beliefs, mainly Hinduism, and Protestantism. They utilized the strategy of finding commonalities because religion is deeply rooted in every corner of Indian society, including their families, previous social circles, and their own identities. By finding commonalities, Indian converted immigrants attempt to maintain ties with their Hindu families and friends back in India as well as construct their identities as Christians in the United States.
Charles is a 28-year-old Indian immigrant who converted to Christianity from Hinduism two years ago after he moved to America. When he was describing the construction of his religious identity as a Christian, Charles said:

I believe in God, the ultimate God. I believe in only one God. I believe that Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Muslims, every religion is a different way to reach God. Now, I choose Christianity because I like the sacrifice Jesus Christ made for us.

Charles regarded different religions as diverse paths to reach the common goal: the ultimate God. Thus, Charles believed that his transition from being a Hindu to being a Christian is merely a switch to a different path. He is still pursuing the same goal: approaching the ultimate God.

The narratives as “finding commonalities” repeatedly appeared in the interviews with Indian immigrants who converted to Christianity. Johnson is a 55-year-old Indian immigrant who converted to Christianity from Hinduism 20 years ago when he was still in India. Similar to Charles, Johnson even said that it was Hinduism that led him to convert to Christianity. He said:

In Hinduism, there is a philosophy that if you look for truth, you will find the truth. That is not a Christian philosophy. That is a Hindu philosophy. What is truth? The truth is any fact that led you to God. Facts about God is truth. So, if somebody searching for truth, they are searching for God.

Johnson believed that he converted to Christianity on the path of following the Hindu philosophy and searching for the truth. Johnson gradually replaced the Hindu ideologies with Christian ideologies without criticizing Hinduism. In so doing, Indian immigrants
such as Charles and Johnson attempted to make a smooth transition from being Hindus to being Christians.

Previous scholars usually assume that religious freedom is suppressed in China (Yang 2012) whereas religion is highly valued in India (Van der Veer 2014). Yet, if we interpret religious freedom as the freedom to pursue one’s own religious belief, in this regard, Indian immigrants have even less freedom than their Chinese counterparts. The constraints of religious freedom from the Chinese government are only limited within the geographical scope of Mainland China. After moving to the United States, Chinese immigrants have sufficient freedom to search for the truth contained in religion and pursue their own religious beliefs. Thus, in America, Chinese immigrants radically criticized traditional religions to confirm their religious beliefs, contrast Chinese governmental narratives that religion is opium for the masses, and eventually construct their religious identities (Yang 2004). For Indian immigrants, the constraints from inherited religious identities are transnational. Even in the United States, immigrant religious converts carefully and strategically shield away from their previous religious beliefs to maintain their social and cultural connections back in India. This finding, by and large, challenges the current scholarly focus regarding the national-level religious freedom in China and India.

1.3.3. Negotiating between Religious Identities and Ethnic Identities:

Secularization and Integration

After converting to Protestantism, religion is no longer an extension of Chinese and Indian immigrants’ ethnic cultures. Rather, religion becomes a component that is
different from other ethnic norms and traditions. In this regard, Chinese and Indian immigrant converts face the similar challenge and they confront such challenge with similar strategies. To confront this challenge, both Chinese and Indian immigrant converts utilize religious organizations as a space to secularize their ethnic symbols and integrate their ethnic symbols in religious rituals. Interviews with Chinese and Indian immigrant converts and the participant observation in Chinese and Indian churches reveal this strategy.

Indian ethnic cultures are closely tied with Hinduism (Sen 2005). Thus, compared with Chinese immigrant converts, Indian immigrant converts face more challenges in negotiating between their religious identities and ethnic identities. When I asked them how to handle their identities as both an Indian and a Christians, these converted Indian immigrants described how they secularized their ethnic cultures by detaching the sacred meanings attached with their ethnic symbols. Nina\textsuperscript{15} was a 30-year-old Indian immigrant and she converted to Christianity from Hinduism seven years ago in the United States. She told me how she detached the religious meanings from the ethnic cultures and located her Indian ethnic cultures in secular spheres. She said:

> Actually, I do like the Indian culture. You know, they have some good things in the culture. You know, things like seeking to get the balance and- They do have values…We still live according to the Hindu culture, you know. We have the same value as the home. But only the culture, not the other things. Only the culture. Things like how to say hello, you know all the things. The culture.
In this conversation, Nina reiterated the phrase “the culture” several times to indicate that after detaching the religious meanings from the ethnic symbols, these symbols are constrained in the secular sphere and attached only to the ethnic culture. Thus, Indian ethnic symbols, such as “how to say hello,” represent “only the culture.” These secularized ethnic symbols are further integrated in religious rituals in immigrant religious organizations.

The similar theme occurred in my conversation with Wendy. She is a 37-year-old Indian immigrant who converted to Christianity seven years ago after immigrating to the United States. Wendy said, “When you say the culture, it is the food, your social behavior, and language. They all come from social practices, right? But religious rituals-They are different.” By “food, your social behavior, and language” Wendy referred to symbols in Indian ethnic cultures. Wendy specifically stated that she differentiated “religious rituals” from these ethnic symbols to secularize her ethnic culture. After secularizing ethnic cultures and detaching sacred meanings attached with ethnic cultures, converted Indian immigrants managed to integrate ethnic symbols into religious practice to preserve their ethnic identities.

Similar to their Indian counterparts, Chinese immigrant participants also adopted this strategy to negotiate between their ethnic and religious identities. Different from the ethnic culture in India, the Chinese ethnic culture is not consumed by one dominant religion. However, the Chinese ethnic culture is still tied with religious meanings (Bell 1989). In that case, Chinese immigrants also perceive the needs to detach religious meanings from ethnic symbols before integrating these symbols in religious rituals. Peter Qin is a Chinese immigrant in his thirties. He converted to Christianity from a non-
religious background five years ago in a Chinese immigrant church in the United States. In the interview, Peter Qin described how he secularized ethnic cultures in China. He used the example of how he detached sacred meanings from ancestral worships to demonstrate his strategy of secularizing Chinese ethnic cultures. Specifically, he said:

Something like ancestral worship, I mean—According to the Bible, all things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. So, there are a lot of good things as well as a lot of bad things in our Chinese traditional culture. We respect senior people. I do not think anyone will prevent us from doing this. I mean, on the superficial level, there are conflicts between being a Christian and being a Chinese. But these traditional Chinese cultures that cause the conflicts are not really meaningful.

Peter Qin secularized the ancestral worship by merely keeping the value of respecting senior people. He detached Chinese folk religious elements from the ancestral worship and situated the ethnic cultures in the secular area.

Another Chinese converted immigrant, Sophia Chen, used similar strategies as Peter Qin to secularize ethnic Chinese cultures. When I asked her whether she felt any tensions between the Chinese ethnic cultures and Christian religious practice, she said, “I don’t feel any conflicts…If by ethnic cultures, you mean traditional festivals, they are well preserved in our church.” After a three-second pause, she added:

In our religious congregation, we also have Mid-Autumn Festival and Dragon Boat Festival. In Mid-Autumn Festival, we eat moon cakes, share our religious experiences, and sing sacred songs. It is not different [from
how other Chinese people celebrate Mid-Autumn Festival.] But if a traditional Chinese festival is related to ghosts and deities, we will not celebrate it.

In her narrative, Sophia stresses that she located Chinese ethnic cultures in the secular area by avoiding the celebration of Chinese festivals that “are related to ghosts and deities.” She also implied that Chinese immigrant churches integrate secularized Chinese ethnic symbols into religious rituals by eating moon cakes when churchgoers were singing sacred songs. After infusing Chinese ethnic symbols into Christian religious rituals, Chinese immigrants have created their unique Chinese Christian rituals in the United States. Sophia’s descriptions not only shows how she secularized ethnic cultures on the individual level, but also displays how Chinese immigrant churches integrate the secularized ethnic cultures in religious rituals on the organizational level. Immigrant churches provide Chinese and Indian immigrants with an important social space to negotiate between their ethnic and religious identities.

For instance, in Indian churches, every Sunday morning, men and women sit in different places to worship God. Women usually wear the traditional Indian sari. Most Indian churches that I visited conduct part of the worship service in traditional Indian languages, usually Malayalam. Churchgoers sing sacred songs in Indian languages. Some sacred songs even have Indian tunes. Sitting places, dresses, languages, tunes are all ethnic symbols that are integrated in religious rituals. When describing those ethnic symbols, one of the Indian immigrant converts¹⁹ ascertained that they distinguish ethnic symbols from religious elements by situating their ethnic symbols in secular spheres and religious rituals in sacred places. He commented:
That might be differences in the personal way, what we do. You know, we worship, you know, you know, kind of, you know, praying to God, going to church or temple. That might be differences. But culturally, even after coming over here, we are not following the Westernized culture because we are following Christianity. We are following the same Indian culture.

What are the dresses and behaviors, what are the—Everything is the same.

By stating “we are following the same Indian culture,” this Indian convert emphasized that Indian Christians want to preserve their ethnic identities. Yet, ethnic cultures cannot enter the sacred sphere. Once it is related to sacred elements, “That might be differences.”

The same strategy is also utilized by Chinese immigrant churches. Chinese Christians sang sacred songs with Chinese lyrics every Sunday morning. Pastors conducted worship service in Cantonese or Mandarin Chinese. After worship services the Chinese church provided traditional Chinese lunch boxes to churchgoers. Similar to what happens in Indian immigrant churches, in Chinese immigrant churches, Chinese lyrics, language, and food are secular ethnic symbols that are integrated in religious rituals. Durkheim ([1921] 2001) states the dualism of sacred and profane in his argumentation about elementary religious forms. According to Durkheim ([1921] 2001), the sacred world and the profane world are two distinguished worlds that do not intersect with each other. To negotiate between their religious and ethnic identities, Chinese and Indian immigrant converts adopt a Durkheimian strategy. Even though their religious organizations integrate ethnic symbols in religious rituals, these immigrant Christians
draw a clear boundary between ethnic symbols in the secular world and religious rituals in the sacred world.

1.4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examines the religious conversion process of Chinese and Indian immigrants with a specific focus on their identity construction process. From the semi-structured interviews with self-identified first-generation Chinese and Indian immigrants in the United States who converted to Protestantism, findings illustrate that Chinese and Indian converts have different interpretive frameworks to explain their religious conversion. These interpretive frameworks further lead to their different strategies to construct new religious identities within this conversion process. Chinese immigrants described their religious conversion as a pursuit for truth contained in religion; Indian immigrants narrated their conversion as an individualistic choice. Regarding the identity construction process, Chinese immigrants abandon their previous religious identities by radically criticizing traditional Chinese religions. However, Indian immigrants attempt to find commonalities between their previous religious beliefs and Protestantism. Despite these differences, Chinese and Indian immigrants utilize similar approaches to negotiate between their religious and ethnic identities. Both Chinese and Indian immigrant converts secularize their ethnic cultures, and their religious organizations integrate these secularized ethnic symbols in religious rituals.

With a scholarly focus on the motivation for people’s religious conversion, previous scholars claim that individual personal experience, such as frustrated
relationships, guilt, and fear, facilitates conversion to another religion (Loftland and Startk 1965). For immigrant groups, the cultural and social contexts in their countries of origin, such as Chinese immigrants’ collective memories about the anti-Japanese war, influence their motivations for religious conversion (Yang 1998). My findings indicate that the cultural contexts in immigrants’ countries of origin, such as the governmental attitudes towards religion, not only have an impact on immigrants’ motivations for religious conversion as demonstrated by previous scholars but also influence immigrants’ actions when they construct identities within this conversion process. Specifically, the cultural contexts in immigrants’ countries of origin provide them with interpretive frameworks to understand religious conversion. Immigrants, further, organize their actions in the religious identity construction process according to such interpretive framework. By providing individuals with cultural interpretive frameworks, the structural-level cultural and social contexts are connected with the individual-level actions in the identity construction process (Ecklund 2006).

When analyzing immigration in the United States, most scholars adopt a functional perspective, demonstrating that immigrants construct collective identities for utilitarian and non-religious purposes, such as to achieve political mobilization or to assimilate into the dominant society (Cerulo 1997; Ecklund 2006; Nagel 1994; Ng 2002). Yet, adopting a cultural rather than a functional perspective, my research highlights that immigrant religious converts construct collective identities not only for utilitarian purposes. Instead, their nuanced social locations as immigrant Christians force them to establish collective identities and construct boundaries that differentiate them from both American Christians and non-Christian co-ethnic immigrants. Therefore, on the one
hand, several immigrants stated, “Almost all of my friends are Christians,”20 “I don’t have a lot of Hindu Indian friends in my social circle.”21 On the other hand, several of them described their experience of switching from American Protestant churches to ethnic churches22. This research, thus, has implications for the meaning of immigrant Christians in the United States. I argue that their identities as being an immigrant Christian alienate them from both their ethnic groups and American Christians. Given this nuanced social location, immigrant Christians have to create a unique social space to state their identifications in the United States. Immigrants craft this unique social space by detaching the sacred meanings from their ethnic cultures and integrating secular ethnic symbols in Christian rituals.

In addition to its empirical contributions, theoretically, this study deepens Swidler’s (1986) and Lamont’s (1992; 2000) theoretical argumentations. Swidler (1986) theorizes that individuals form articulated new cultural notions in unsettled lives. Lamont (1992; 2000) argues that national culture influences the way in which individuals maintain boundaries to construct their identities. This study opens the black box by displaying how immigrant religious converts draw elements from existing cultures to form a new culture in their construction site—immigrant religious organizations. This project also shows how immigrants construct collective identities by consistently performing rituals that represent their collective identities in the construction site. As Berger ([1967] 1990) states, people forget things. Rituals remind individuals about the meaning of their collective society and construct individuals’ collective identities (Berger [1967] 1990). The way that immigrant converts utilize rituals illustrates how individuals form new cultural notions in unsettled lives, how such new cultural notions guide their
actions in the identity construction process, and how they utilize rituals to reinforce their collective identities. Moreover, challenging other studies that concentrate on how culture constrains individuals’ actions (e.g. Bourdieu 1984), this project demonstrate that individuals do have a certain degree of agency to actively utilize culture and eventually form new cultural notions.

Additional studies would need to take into account the following limitations of this study. First, the average age of participants in this study is relatively young. Most are under 40 years old with the exception of two Indian participants who were over 65 years old. The limitation of age groups fails to inform us whether and to what extent there are dynamics across generations regarding the identity construction process. Moreover, the comparison of the religious conversion processes is still limited within two ethnic groups. With the existing data, I cannot conclude whether findings in this study can be generalized to other ethnic groups. More empirical research is needed to examine the religious conversion process of other Asian immigrants, such as those from Laos and Cambodia.

Relying on narratives from Chinese and Indian immigrant religious converts, this study opens up new directions to study immigrants’ identities, especially the relationship between their ethnic identities and religious identities. Normally, scholars assume Judeo-Christian religions “play the dual role of facilitating assimilation of its members and preserving ethnicity” (Yang and Ebaugh 2001b: 270). My findings, however, show that abandoning their previous religious identities and adopting a Christian religious identity situate immigrants in a social location that alienates them from both their ethnic
community and their religious community. Being an immigrant Christian, to some extent, limits immigrants’ social space in the host society.

Noting how immigrants use culture to create a social space that is unique for them, this project further demonstrates that social space consists of cultural elements. People rely on culture to define a social space and form a group. Even though the social space for certain kinds of groups, such as racial groups, are determined by biological characteristics. There are cultural meanings hidden behind these biological characteristics (Balibar, Etienne, and Wallestein 1997).

Thus, my research has implications for future research by inviting more studies to analyze the identity construction process from a cultural rather than functional perspective. In this project, I mainly confine my analytical dimension to the individual level by predominantly relying on individuals’ narratives regarding their own religious conversion process. Future studies should analyze immigrants’ identity construction process on an organizational level to investigate the role ethnic and religious community plays in immigrants’ identity construction process.
Notes

1 By United States, I refer to continental US.
2 All Chinese immigrants who participated in this study converted to Evangelical Protestantism. Twelve of the fourteen Indian participants converted to Pentecostal Protestantism. One Indian participant converted to non-denominational Christianity. Another Indian participant converted to Lutheran Protestantism.
3 By Chinese Immigrants, I refer to immigrants who come from Mainland China excluding these immigrants from Taiwan and Hong Kong.
4 When giving pseudonyms to participants, I assigned each Chinese participant a random last name while did not assign any last names to my Indian participants. This is because last names usually do not represent any meanings in the Chinese cultures. In the Indian culture, however, last name usually represent the caste of that person. Given this knowledge, in this paper, I did not give any Indian participants last names.

5 CH_006, conducted 5/25/2013
6 CH_009, conducted 05/26/2013
7 IN_011, conducted 09/29/2013
8 IN_012, conducted 09/29/2013
9 IN_007, conducted 07/05/2013
10 CH_002, conducted 03/20/2013
11 CH_001, conducted 03/12/2013
12 CH_006, conducted 05/20/2013
13 IN_002, conducted 03/20/2013
14 IN_005, conducted 05/30/2013
15 IN_008, conducted 07/09/2013
16 IN_006, conducted 06/13/2013
17 CH_012, conducted 07/12/2013
18 CH_013, conducted 01/11/2013
19 IN_007, conducted 07/05/2013
20 CH_013, conducted 01/11/2013
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Appendix A

*Interview Guide*
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 immigrant who converts to Christianity. 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. For one, all identifiable information gathered during the interview will be confidential. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You can withdraw from the 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?

*Basic Questions*

1. I would like to start by asking you some questions about your work. What do you do for living?

   *For students:* What is your major?

2. Could you tell me a little bit about some of the reasons you chose to come to the U.S.?

3. From what you remember, could you tell me the town or city where you were born and raised?

   Probe: How do you interact with families and friends in your hometown?

*Original Religious Background*  
*Societal Level*

4. To what extent does religion play an important role in your mother country?

5. What is the significance of religion for the lives of people in your mother country? How do people typically practice religion in your mother country?

6. Could you compare the significance of religion in your mother country and in the U.S.?
Social Origin

7. What is the significance of religion in your life before coming to the U.S.?
   Probe: If the respondent had religious belief---What religion did you believe?

8. [If the respondent had religious identity before coming to the U.S.] How did you become a religious believer before conversion?

   [If the respondent did not have religious identity before coming to the U.S.] Do you have any other firm non-religious beliefs? If so, what are they?

   [If the respondent does not understand the question, explain this question a little bit by asking, “Did you believe in science? Did you believe in what you are experiencing? Do you have any other firm non-religious beliefs”?

9. What is the significance of religion for your parents?
   Probe: What religion do they believe? How do they practice their religion?

10. What about your relatives?

11. How do you view the relationship between religion and science?

12. From what you remember, can you tell me any of your exposures to religion in your childhood?

13. How important is religion for your family members?

14. Do you believe in ghosts now? How important are ghosts in your life now? How important is the concept of destiny in your life?

   [If the person has not mentioned ghosts in traditional Chinese or Indian culture, ask him/her “Are there any ghosts in traditional Chinese/ Indian religions? To what extent are they important in your life now?”]

15. What is the most important thing in your previous religious belief?
[Skip this question if the respondent does not have religious beliefs before conversion.]

[If the respondent does not understand this question. Explain it a little bit by asking “Are there any particular scriptures, concepts, or rituals that are most important in your previous religious belief?”]

Conversion Experience

16. When did you convert to Christianity?

17. Tell me the story of how you became a Christian.

18. Why did you become a Christian?

19. Among different religions, why did you choose to convert to Christianity?

20. Some people say that conversion is a sudden decision; others say that it is a gradual transformation. What do you think about both of these perspectives? Which one was more like your experience?

21. Have you experienced any tension with your ethnic culture since you converted to Christianity? If so, what kind of tensions?

   Probe: I am specifically interested in any tensions between you and your family members.

Current Religious Background

21. What kind of church are you currently attending? Is it a multi-racial/ethnical church or a Chinese/Indian church?

22. How do you interact with other people in your church?

23. Do you participate in religious activities? How often do you go to the church or participate in other religious activities?
Probe: *If yes*---What kinds of activities do you participate in regularly?

Probe: *If no*---Why don’t you participate in religious activities?

24. How important is prayer to your understanding of Christianity?

25. What do you talk to God about while praying?

26. Some people say that being a Christian means being less Chinese/Indian. How do you think about that kind of statement?

*[If the respondent doesn’t understand it, explain a little bit about ‘being a Christian means being less Chinese/Indian’.]*

27. Are there any conflicts between being a Christian and being an Indian? Under what condition will the importance of one of these two identities outweigh the other?

28. *[Skip this question if the respondent does not think there are any tensions between being a Christian and being a Chinese/Indian]*

Tell me a little bit about the tension you are feeling about your identity.

*After Conversion*

29. What role does Christianity play in your life now?

30. Tell me a little about how you felt after converting to Christianity?

31. How do you and people in your church talk about religious beliefs in China/India?

32. From your perception, what is the relationship between religious organizations and public policies in the U.S.? What do you think about the relationship between religious organizations and public policies in Indian/China? Is it different from here and how different?

*Demographics*

Would you please to provide some demographic information about your self just for the
sake of bookkeeping?
33. Age

34. Marital Status

35. Do you have children?

[If the respondent says yes] How many? Are you going to raise them as Christians?

36. Race/Ethnicity

37. Education

    Major

38. Parents’ occupation

39. What are your parents’ religious identities?

40. Denomination of church you currently attend