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## Boundary Formation and Cultural Construction: How do Chinese and Indian Immigrant Converts Understand Religious Identity?

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## **Boundary Formation and Cultural Construction**

### **Religion and Ethnicity for Chinese and Indian Immigrant Converts in the U.S.**

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#### **Abstract**

Most scholars study immigrants' religious lives in a vacuum, paying little attention to the religious lives of people who switch from one religious tradition to another. This article relies on interviews with Chinese and Indian immigrant converts in the U.S. to provide a unique comparative perspective on the religious lives of Asian immigrant converts, with a specific focus on their identity construction processes. Findings indicate that Chinese and Indian immigrants establish different types of boundaries, but form similar cultural content within their identities. I debunk the assumption in existing theories that religious conversion is an either/or transition.

Keywords: religious conversion, immigration, Chinese, Indian, identity construction

#### **Introduction**

In the midst of a growing body of literature on religion and immigration, scholars analyze how new immigrants – the group of people who moved to the U.S. after the implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act (Alba and Nee) – utilize religion to preserve ethnicity as they adapt to U.S. society (e.g. Chen; Ebaugh and Chafetz; Ecklund 2006; George; Kurien; Min; Ng; F. Yang 1998; F. Yang 1999; See Cadge and Ecklund for a review). Inheriting the legacy of early scholars (e.g. Durkheim; Greeley), scholars assume that immigrants' religions almost entirely overlaps with their ethnicity. To be Indian is to be Hindu, for example. Prior scholars analyzed immigrants' religious lives primarily in a vacuum, describing how immigrants

establish ethnic connections, celebrate ethnic cultures, and construct ethnic identities through their participation in ethnic religious congregations (e.g. Chen; Ecklund 2006; George; Kurien; Min; Ng; F. Yang 1998; F. Yang 1999). What is less clear in the existing literature is the construction of religious identities and the compromise between religious and ethnic identities among immigrant religious converts. What will happen to an immigrant's ethnic identity if the immigrant switches from one religious tradition to the other? How will immigrants maintain their ethnic identity if they change their religion? How do these immigrants adjust their association with both their previous and their current religious communities? Do they perceive the need to navigate both their religious and ethnic affiliations?

This paper addresses these questions through the investigation of religious converts in two Asian immigrant groups – Chinese and Indian – who orient and re-orient themselves with their religious and ethnic communities after religious conversion. Given that individual-level identity accounts may reflect people's affiliation with certain social groups (Cerulo; Ecklund 2005), I regard converts' identity discourse as a locus for understanding how immigrants who transformed from one religious tradition to another negotiate their connections with both religious and ethnic communities. In this article, I first examine the construction of religious identities among Chinese and Indian immigrant converts, asking the extent to which these immigrant religious converts disassociate from their previous religious community and associate with the new one. I also analyze how these Chinese and Indian immigrants negotiate their relationship with their ethnic community after conversion.

Findings regarding their construction of religious identities demonstrate that Chinese and Indian immigrants establish relationships with previous religious communities in different ways. Chinese immigrants in my sample perceive their religious conversion as an either/or transition, asserting that they have entirely left their previous religious community and are fully affiliated with the new one. Indian immigrants, in contrast, construct what I label as an "implicit inclusionary boundary," finding commonalities between Indian Hindus and themselves. After constructing their religious identity, both Chinese and Indians perceive the need to negotiate between their religious beliefs in Protestant Christianity and their ethnicity. The integration of ethnicity in Protestantism is explicitly reflected not in boundary construction, but in the formation of cultural content within that identity. Utilizing similar strategies, they secularize their ethnic cultures by detaching any sacred elements that are associated with the cultures and integrating their ethnic culture with Protestantism. These findings make direct contributions to theories about both religious conversion and identity construction.

## Review of the Literature

### *Religious Conversion*

Part of the backdrop of Chinese and Indian immigrants' conversion stories rests on a larger scholarly literature about the conversion process. Most theories about religious conversions hold the assumption that religious conversion is a rational choice. They presume that individual converts have certain religious demands and – through the religious conversion – they search for the most desirable religious product that best meets these demands (e.g. Lofland and Stark; Stark and Finke). Under this framework, the conversion process is

determined by factors on two different sides: people's wants on the demand side and available religions on the supply side (e.g. Loftland and Stark).

Positioning this rational choice in social contexts, scholars further note that people's rationality is constructed by the social institutions they are affiliated with. People who are affiliated with the same social institution, such as having the same gender and holding the same occupation, tend to have socially and culturally patterned religious demands (see Davidman; Gooren; Jindra; Stark and Finke). Highly educated people living in metropolitan cities, for instance, may have different religious demands than their less educated counterparts who live in rural areas, and these two groups of people are very likely to be attracted to different religious traditions. The socially and culturally patterned religious needs on the demand side also exert significant influence on the supply side. Religious organizations with different targeted populations provide distinctive sacred and secular products, highlight their unique marginal differentials, and carve out niches in the religious market (e.g. Ramet; Hall).

On a societal level of analysis, when scholars are painting a broad picture about conversion rate, they also adopt the assumption that religious conversion is a negotiation between the supply and the demand side. On the supply side, in contexts where the religious market is free, the overall religious conversion rate is positively related to religious pluralism (Barro, Hwang, and Cleary). On the demand side, research in China, for example, indicates that after the economic transformation, the old framework of meanings is not applicable to most Chinese people any more (F. Yang 2005). The loss of meanings and the increase of spiritual demands in China facilitate the mass conversion to Christianity (F. Yang 2005).

On all levels of analysis, existing literature about religious conversion consistently assumes that the motivation for people to leave their old religion and be affiliated with a new religion is due to their socially and culturally constructed rationality. This rational choice assumption is the biggest contribution but also an important limitation in extant studies. A predominant focus on people's motivation for religious conversion implicitly presumes that the significance of conversion ends after converts make their decisions. They assume that religious converts will entirely disassociate from their previous religious community and start to fully participate in the new religious community. In reality, individuals' agency in religious conversion, as indicated by Frankenthaler, is more nuanced than what is described in the existing literature. And religious conversion is, in most cases, especially for immigrants, more complicated than the simple assumption of either/or transition. To obtain a more comprehensive picture about religious conversion, we should look beyond the motivation of people's religious change to the ways in which they construct their identities as converts.

### *Immigration and Religion*

The connection between religion and ethnicity can be traced to early scholars of religion and society, such as Durkheim, who argues that one of the important functions of religion is reinforcing the solidarity of society. According to Durkheim, the religious community almost completely overlaps with the ethnic community. These two communities serve as structures of plausibility in Berger's notion, which not only make religion real to people within this community, but also uphold the continuing existence of ethnic norms. With a specific focus on immigrants in the U.S., subsequent scholars assert that the connection with religion and ethnicity is more salient to immigrants who may abandon most, if not all, secular ethnic

cultures while preserving religion as a way to maintain their ethnic identification (Herberg; Smith).

With a more nuanced perspective on immigration and religion, especially after the influx of post-1965 immigrants in the U.S., scholars indicate that the relationship between religion and ethnicity differs across distinctive ethnic groups (Hammond; Hammond and Warner). The religious community and ethnic community are entirely overlapping for some ethnic groups, such as Jews, while only partially overlapping for others, such as the Irish (Hammond; Hammond and Warner).

While theories regarding immigrants' religion and ethnicity have made tremendous development after Durkheim, empirical studies still largely examine immigrants' religious lives in a void. In their ethnographic research in immigrant religious congregations, scholars found that immigrants in the U.S. establish ethnic connections, celebrate ethnic festivals, preserve ethnic cultures, overcome racial and ethnic discrimination, and eventually adapt to the U.S. society within religious organizations (Ecklund 2006; Min; Morgan; Ng; Kurien; F. Yang 1999). In other words, immigrants are enhancing their ethnicity through their participation in religious organizations. What is not answered in most studies about religion and immigration is what happens to both their religiosity and ethnicity if immigrants transit to another religious community.

#### *Immigrants' Conversion*

Studies about immigrants' religious conversion may shed some light on these unresolved questions in immigration and religion. Building on the existing theories of individuals' religious conversion in general, scholars believe that immigrants' religious conversion stems from their rational choice. Immigrants' religious conversion might be less costly than the conversion of non-immigrants due to the fact that they are less constrained by the religion-based social bonds compared with their non-immigrant counterparts (Chao). Besides the relatively low cost of religious conversion, as a vulnerable population, immigrants are able to obtain more benefits through religious participation, such as social services, job networks, and business opportunities (Cadge and Ecklund; Hagan and Ebaugh). After weighing the cost and gain of their religious participation, immigrants shift to another religion when their previous religion cannot satisfy their utilitarian demands (Akcapar). Consequently, there emerges what Smith-Hefner has called "rice-bowl Christians," who attend Christian services solely to seek sponsorship from Christian churches.

In addition to pragmatic needs, spiritual desires also motivate immigrants to convert to different religions. Chinese immigrants from Mainland China are unable to rely on Confucianism – the traditional orthodox spiritual framework in China – due to the interruption of Chinese traditions because of war and political unrest. After coming to the U.S., many Chinese immigrants believe that U.S. Evangelical Protestantism may satisfy their demands and they convert to Christianity (F. Yang 1998). However, although most immigrants from Mainland China have similar spiritual demands, not all of them convert to Evangelical Christianity due to variations in local religious markets (Wang and Yang). The lack of Chinese Christian communities in some local religious contexts may motivate Chinese immigrants to convert to other religions, such as Catholicism, or other American Protestant denominations, including Jehovah's Witnesses (Wang and Yang). Similar to the assumption in the broad

literature about religious conversion, studies of immigrants' religious conversion also predominantly concentrate on immigrants' motivation for religious conversion while ignoring convert's understanding of their relationship with both the religious and ethnic community.

#### *Immigrant Converts' Identity Construction*

In this article, I use immigrant religious converts' identity construction process as an important locus to debunk the assumption of either/or transition in existing conversion theories. Immigrant religious converts' identity accounts – “the kinds of patterned discourse that individuals in certain social locations use to describe who they are in relation to the institution in which they participate” (Ecklund 2005: 137) – provide us with insightful information about how they adjust their associations with their religious and ethnic community within this conversion process. Identity accounts involve two parts – how individuals establish boundaries to differentiate one social network from another (Ecklund 2006; Lamont 1992; 2000) and how individuals form the cultural content of their identities (Barth; Nagel). Individuals answer the question of who they are through the formation of boundaries (by saying who they are not), and the question of what they are through the construction of cultural content (Nagel). Expanding on the literature about identity construction, my findings indicate that boundary work and cultural construction provide us with different information about identity construction. Boundary work may tell us about the salience of each facet in a hybrid identity, while culture construction may illustrate what a hybrid identity is.

#### *Religious Lives of Chinese and Indian Immigrants*

Chinese and Indian immigrants in the U.S. have similar structural positions; most of them are professionals with high socioeconomic status (Pew Research Center 2012a). Yet, their religious lives, especially conversion patterns, are somewhat different. Around 43 percent of Chinese immigrants left the religious tradition that they were raised in, while only 16 percent of Indian immigrants claim that they have experienced a religious conversion (Pew Research Center 2012b). I contend that part of the difference regarding conversion patterns among Chinese and Indian immigrants should be attributed to the different kinds of religious socialization that they received in their countries of origin.

In China, traditional Chinese religions are well integrated in the Chinese culture with Chinese historiography and philosophy interpreted through theological frameworks (C. Yang). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the formation of religious institutions and the practice of religion were restricted, given the atheist stance of the Chinese government (Van der Veer; F. Yang 2012). Despite the constraints on religion at the societal level, on an institutional and individual level, religions such as Buddhism, Daoism, and folk religions have already become integrated parts of Chinese people's ethnic identification (Yang and Ebaugh). In addition, in recent years religion has revived in China, with an increase in religious organizations and individual believers (F. Yang 2012).

Different from the religious context of the PRC, religion was always valued in India. Yet, the importance of religion also generates tensions within the Indian society. When Hinduism was constructed as the representation of an Indian national identity, strife emerged between Hindus and Non-Hindus, especially Muslims, in India (Pandey). More importantly, the intertwining of the caste system and religion marginalizes untouchables, leading to a mass

conversion of people from lower castes to Christianity, especially in South India (Pau; Van der Veer).

When Chinese and Indian immigrants navigate among multiple communities, and construct their identity discourse in China and India, they may use tools, “symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews,” to resolve problems and form strategies for action (Swidler: 173). An important cultural tool comes from their religious socialization. As a result, I find that Chinese and Indian immigrants have different identity discourses when they are reflecting on the navigation of their religious and ethnic identities during the religious conversion process.

### **Data and Methods**

The data for this article comes from 29 semi-structured interviews with Chinese and Indian immigrant religious converts. Interviews were conducted in nine ethnic churches from March 2013 to May 2014. One is a Chinese church and the remaining eight are Indian churches. Religious conversion is common among Chinese immigrants, while rare among Indian immigrants. The huge difference in the number of churches in the Chinese and Indian cases reflects the disparity of the number of converted Chinese and Indian immigrants. I recruited Indian immigrants from multiple churches to make sure that I had enough interviews to make a valid case about religious conversion among Indian immigrants. Having Indian respondents from different congregations makes it difficult for me to adjust the organizational influence from different religious congregations on Indian immigrants’ narrative. Participant observation I conducted in these Indian congregations, however, reveals that the worship styles and churchgoers’ interactions in these congregations are very similar to one other, showing a common institutional location. Also, in my conversations with Indian immigrants, I heard similar stories from Indian participants who go to different congregations. Recruiting almost all self-identified religious converts from each Indian congregation in my sample, this study provides valid and valuable cases about identity construction of Indian religious converts.

Data collection started from participant observations in Sunday morning worship and Bible studies. Substantively, participant observation indicates the extent to which religious organizations influence Chinese and Indian immigrants’ identity accounts on the individual level. Strategically, the observations also enabled me to establish connections with pastors and identify potential participants. Participants in this study were self-identified first-generation Chinese and Indian immigrants who converted to Protestant Christianity at some point in their lives. All participants who identify themselves as first-generation immigrants were at least thirteen when they came to the U.S. Some still have foreign citizenship, while others adopted U.S. citizenship through naturalization. Respondents’ self-identification as religious converts differs, with a majority (26 participants) regarding the transition from other religious backgrounds to Protestantism as conversion. One Indian respondent perceived his change from Catholicism to Protestantism as a conversion and the remaining two Indian participants regard their conversion from “nominal Christians” to “real Christians” as a religious conversion.

Given the fact that individual-level identity is meaningful only after being internalized by individuals, and identity construction is a subjective process that stems from the interaction between individuals and their perceived social location (Owen, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin),

I identify religious converts according to their self-identification. Every individual who self-identifies as a religious convert has experienced a conversion process in their own terms, and they made certain adjustments to construct and reconstruct their identity.

After each participant observation, I asked pastors to make an announcement in the worship services and introduce me to churchgoers, who identified themselves as religious converts. I started with several different snowball chains in order to increase variation. Then I scheduled interviews with the religious converts who were willing to participate in my study. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to two and half hours, with an average length of one hour. Fifteen respondents are Chinese immigrants and fourteen are from India. As a bilingual Chinese speaker, I conducted all interviews. Many Chinese participants spoke English, but were more comfortable talking about their religion in Chinese. Therefore, all interviews with Chinese participants were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and all interviews with Indian immigrants were conducted in English. A majority of the interviews (25 interviews) were conducted in person and four interviews were conducted by phone. In-person and phone interviews were recorded, with the exception of one interview.

Using a sequential interviewing sampling strategy, I stopped conducting interviews when I started to hear very similar stories from different respondents (Small). After conducting interviews, I wrote extensive context notes that include portraits of participants, descriptions of the interview process, important themes generated within the interview, and potential contributions of the interview to my research. All interviews are fully transcribed. When analyzing data, I adopt both a deductive and an inductive approach to code the interviews (Strauss and Corbin). Using a deductive approach, I specifically paid attention to how my respondents differentiated themselves from out-groups and affiliated themselves with in-groups. Utilizing an inductive approach, I also did open coding, focusing on themes that had not been discussed in the previous literature. I translated quotes from Chinese immigrants from Mandarin Chinese to English. To protect the confidentiality of my participants, I assigned each participant a pseudonym. This study was fully approved by my university's review board.

## Findings

Findings indicate that Chinese immigrants and Indian converts establish different types of boundaries to construct their religious identities. Chinese immigrants construct an exclusionary boundary and differentiate themselves from their co-ethnics who they see as mainly Buddhist, or as practicing Daoism and other Chinese folk religions. Indian immigrant converts, in contrast, establish an implicit inclusionary boundary to affiliate with Hindu Indians. When constructing the cultural contents of newly achieved identities, both Chinese and Indian immigrants secularize ethnic cultures and integrate the secularized ethnic culture with their Protestant belief.

### *Exclusionary Boundary and the Construction of Religious Identity among Chinese Converts*

When I was visiting the Chinese church, I was surprised by the large number of Chinese people who converted to Christianity. Conversion is extremely prevalent in this mid-sized Chinese church that is located in a large city in the U.S. South. When I was asking one of my



contacts to introduce me to potential participants who converted from other religious backgrounds to Protestant Christianity, he said, “Almost all of us are religious converts.”

Helping the churchgoers to reaffirm their religious conversion, this church occasionally invites guest speakers who themselves are religious converts. On a Sunday morning (participant observation, conducted 06/23/2013), a guest speaker who originally came from Mainland China was delivering a sermon in Mandarin Chinese about his religious conversion experience. Connecting Chinese people with James the Just in the Bible, he said, “James the Just was an ordinary person. He did not respect God. He only cared about whether he had sufficient food supplies and whether he could go home safely. He was like us Chinese. We especially care about food, dress, and family. He did not put God as part of his lifelong plan, just like we Chinese.” The guest speaker then asked the audience, saying, “How many of you arrived in the U.S. to seek God? How many of you arrived in the U.S. just because you were not able to find Jesus back in China?” Most of the audience shakes their heads, indicating a “No.” The guest speaker then added, “But now, all of us are Christians. This was not because we respected God before coming to the U.S. This was because God had us in mind. He wants to give us a richer life.” The guest speaker then summarized how his commitment to Christianity made him a different person, distancing himself from what he called “the culture of petite bourgeois (*Xiao Shi Min Wen Hua*) in China.” According to this guest speaker, “the culture of petite bourgeois in China” only encourages people to care about the materialistic aspects of life, such as “food, dress, and family.” After believing in Christianity, this guest speaker suggested that Chinese converts are not supposed to be constrained by the “culture of petite bourgeois in China” anymore. To some extent, this sermon serves as a template that informs Chinese immigrant religious converts how to complete their religious conversion – they need to detach the “culture of petite bourgeoisie” that is common in China and accept a new spiritual life that is offered by God. My conversations with the Chinese immigrants in my sample confirm this observation.

Jenifer Li (interview conducted 03/20/2013) is among the participants who are entirely drifting away from their previous religious community to construct their religious identity within this conversion process. After coming to America, Jenifer Li converted to Evangelical Christianity. Although she claimed that she did not have religious beliefs before conversion, she occasionally went to temples and practiced Chinese folk religion. Her introduction of the role that religion plays in her childhood illustrates that she was participating in the religious community of folk religious believers, even when this religious community was not important to her. Now, according to her, she has completely transitioned away from her previous religious community. Commenting on Chinese folk religion believers, she said:

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 religion.

Making an analogy of the religious practice of Chinese traditional religions as “treating their gods as a vending machine,” Jenifer Li radically criticized the practice of believers in Chinese traditional religions to first frame this exclusionary boundary to differentiate herself from non-Christian Chinese. She further compares the religious practice of Chinese Christians with that of other Chinese religious people to strengthen this boundary. She said:

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 talking about prayer in Protestantism, Jenifer Li focused more on the spiritual side by using the words “peaceful,” “confidence,” and “hope.” She further distances Christian practice from materialistic and utilitarian needs, explaining, “The most important thing is feeling peaceful rather than caring about the final result.” Regarding the practice of Chinese traditional religious believers as utilitarian in contrast to the practice of Christianity as spiritual, Jenifer Li draws a clear distinction between believers in Chinese traditional religions and Chinese Christians to frame her achieved religious identity.

Jenifer Li was not the only Chinese immigrant convert who establishes an exclusionary boundary and regards non-Christian Chinese as out-groups. Another Chinese participant, Kevin Tang (interview conducted 05/20/2013), also differentiates himself, as a converted Protestant, from Chinese Buddhists and more broadly Chinese people who retain their traditional beliefs. He contended:

To me, their (Chinese Buddhists’) beliefs are very ridiculous. They said that as long as you read “*Amitabha*” you could be saved. But why did this thing homogenize other sects in Buddhism? This was because of the personality of our Chinese. We Chinese like doing things that are easy to do. Holding this personality, (most Chinese people might think that) if reading that incantation can bring me some good things, why don’t I do this?

After a short pause, he further added:

Then I think a really severe condition of Chinese traditional religious believers is that they do not know what they believe in. It is really, really, really chaotic. They were just like believers in low-level religions. They believe anything. They want to believe in anything. For example, Chinese folk religion advocates that as long as you are smart and righteous, you will be able to reincarnate after death.

Kevin Tang repeated the sentence “you will be able to reincarnate after death” to stress on how ridiculous this notion is. He said:

As long as you are smart and righteous, you will be able to reincarnate after death! But first, what we found is that all these smart and righteous people are dead. In addition, we also found that they are not really smarter and more righteous than us. They have their shortcomings. Believing in it just does not make any sense.

While Kevin Tang perceives the beliefs of Chinese people who retain traditional religions – both Buddhism and Chinese folk religions – as “chaotic,” and in his terms they “do not make any sense,” he thinks that Chinese Christians are different. He believes that Chinese Christians are different from their counterparts who believe in traditional Chinese religions. Chinese

Christians are “reading the Bible, and perceive it as a profound book” and they “share peace and joy together.” From his perspective, once he has reaffirmed his conversion to Christianity, he left the religious community of believers in Chinese traditional religions behind. He is now fully participating in the community of Chinese Christians, drawing a clear boundary to differentiate believers in Chinese traditional religions and believers in Christianity.

In Chinese societies, the boundaries among Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism are sometimes blurred (Clart; Yang and Hu). People might speculate that given the unclear boundaries among different Chinese religions, religions in China may not be as community-oriented as Western religions. My conversations with the Chinese religious converts, however, demonstrate that they realize the existence of a loosely organized religious community for Chinese people who believe in traditional religions. People in this community may have some shared values, which, according to my respondents, seem to be “practical” (interview conducted 03/12/2013) and “self-interest oriented” (interview conducted 05/20/2013). The Chinese participants in my sample all claimed that they come from a non-religious background, but they also informed me that they have had an exposure to Chinese traditional religions before conversion. In that sense, they were marginal members of this loosely organized religious community that is composed of believers of Chinese traditional religions. After conversion, they completely left their previous community and have been participating in the new religious community. This either/or transition is reflected in the construction of an exclusionary boundary that differentiates believers in Chinese traditional religions and themselves.

#### *Inclusionary Boundary and the Construction of Religious Identity among Indian Converts*

In contrast to what occurs in the Chinese church, religious conversion was very rare in Indian churches, let alone the conversion from another religious background to Protestant Christianity.<sup>1</sup> My contact in one of the Indian churches told me, “There might be some religious conversion that happens under the umbrella of Christianity. But converts who are transformed from another religious background to Christianity are rare in our church.” Similar to the Chinese church, most Indian churches in the southern city where I did interviews also invite guest speakers to give sermons during Sunday morning services. Different from guest speakers in the Chinese church, during my yearlong fieldwork in Indian churches, I never met a guest speaker who is also a religious convert. These guest speakers are usually born and raised in Christian families, even when they were in India. Their sermons normally covered specifically spiritual topics, such as “how to praise the Lord.”

When I was attending a Sunday morning service (participant observation, conducted 11/09/2013) in a mid-sized Indian church that is located in the suburban area of this southern U.S. city, the guest speaker was a middle-aged Indian man, who was talking about how God healed his son. His son had a severe disability that affected the corpus callosum in the brain. After twenty-two surgeries, his son survived. This middle-aged Indian man said, “After twenty-two surgeries, if there is something impossible in the world, these things are possible with God.” He then reiterated the phrase “with God” in a very loud voice. The audience

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<sup>1</sup> The disparity of conversion patterns among Chinese and Indian immigrants is also illustrated in the report from Pew Research Center (2012b).

clapped their hands, and said, “Yes!” Different from sermons in the Chinese church, sermons in Indian churches rarely provide religious converts with templates to complete their transition between religious communities. The lack of religious converts in Indian churches may mean that Indian religious converts need to rely more on their own individual agency to adjust between their previous and current religious communities in their own ways.

My interviews with Indian immigrant converts show that, different from their Chinese counterparts, most Indian immigrants are forming an “implicit inclusionary boundary”; they find commonalities between themselves and other Hindus by constructing a large but very loosely organized religious community that they could also be part of, even after religious conversion. The formation of this inclusionary boundary is evident in Charles’ narrative. Charles (interview conducted 03/20/2013), a 28-year-old Indian immigrant, identifies himself as a religious convert from Hinduism to Protestant Christianity. His description displays how Indian immigrants form an inclusionary boundary when constructing their religious identity after conversion. Charles said:

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

Charles regards different religions as diverse paths to reach the common goal: the ultimate God. Therefore, Charles believes that his conversion to Protestant Christianity does not differentiate himself from other Indians. When transitioning from Hinduism to Christianity, Charles is constructing a broad religious community that includes all religious people who are searching for God. Although his religious belief has changed, he perceived that his conversion occurs within this broad religious community.

Another participant, Johnson (interview conducted 05/30/2013), a fifty-year-old Indian immigrant who converted to Protestant Christianity while still in India, also regards other Indians as part of the in-group. Searching for the commonalities between Hinduism and Christianity, Johnson said that it was Hinduism that led him to convert to Christianity. He explained:

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 are truth. So, if somebody is searching for truth, they are searching for God.

According to Johnson, both Hinduism and Christianity have the philosophy of searching for truth. Johnson believes that Hindus and Christians are not entirely different from each other, because they are following the same philosophy. In Johnson’s notion, the boundary that seems to differentiate Hindu Indians from Christian Indians is not rigid. Similar to Charles, Johnson is also forming a broad religious community, and every person who is “searching for truth” is part of that community. To him, religious transition is not an “either/or” question. For him, transition may occur, but he does not perceive himself as drifting away from his previous religious community and fully participating in another. Instead, he is transitioning within this large religious community.

Most of my Indian participants do not understand their religious conversion as a radical transition from one religious community to another. Instead, the narratives such as “I don’t think anything has changed” (interview conducted 08/22/2013) consistently appeared in my interviews. I argue that Indian religious converts are constructing an “implicit inclusionary boundary,” forming a broad and loose religious community that embraces both Indian Protestants and believers in other Indian religions. This implicit inclusionary boundary does not mean that the Indian Christian participants in my sample are still actually practicing Hinduism. Yet, when they subjectively situate themselves in their religious community, they do not situate themselves in a way that they are either a Hindu or a Protestant. Rather, they are constructing a larger religious community in which all people who are searching for God can be part. They further position themselves as in-groups of this large community.

*Integrating Ethnic Identity in Religious Identity: The Construction of Cultural Contents*

Boundary construction is an important but not the only component of identity construction. After answering the question of who they are, Chinese and Indian immigrants in my sample also perceive the needs to answer the question of what they are (Barth; Nagel). For them, one of the tensions that they are confronted with is how to ethnically identify themselves, if the new religious practice is not a natural expression of their ethnicity. When framing their adhesive identities,<sup>2</sup> Chinese and Indian religious converts utilize very similar approaches to shaping the cultural content of their identity – secularizing ethnic culture and integrating ethnic culture with Protestant Christianity.

Compared with their Chinese counterparts, Indian converts are confronted with more challenges when they negotiate between Protestantism and their ethnic culture because Indian culture is closely tied with Hinduism (Sen). To form this adhesive identity, the Indian immigrants I spoke with secularize Hindu culture and integrate it with Protestant religious rituals. For instance, Raj (interview conducted 09/29/2013), a forty-year-old Indian immigrant who transitioned from Hinduism to Protestant Christianity after he came to the U.S., emphasized:

Even though Hinduism is called a culture, it is not a religion-based culture . . . Even Christian principles also can be linked to the same culture . . . Culture is basically, you know, the way we speak, the way we behave, the way we celebrate our festivals, all those things, right? . . . The way we (Christians) dress is also like other Hindus; the same dress; the way we speak is almost the same.

Realizing that the ethnic culture in India is intertwined with Hinduism, Raj secularized the Indian ethnic culture, arguing, “It is not a religion-based culture.” He conceptualizes culture as a dress code, behavior, language, and festival. All these things are “not religion-based,” and thus can be kept in the secular sphere. Detaching sacred meanings from his ethnic culture, Raj resolves the perceived tensions between the Hindu culture and Christianity, and shapes the cultural contents in his adhesive identity as an Indian Christian.

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase “adhesive identity” is borrowed from F. Yang’s (1999) work about Chinese Christians in the U.S.

Like Raj, Nina (interview conducted 07/05/2013), a 30-year old Indian immigrant who shifted from Hinduism to Protestant Christianity, also secularizes ethnic culture to frame the cultural content of her identity as an Indian Christian. Nina said:

We still live according to the Hindu culture, you know. We have the same values 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 she detaches all sacred meanings from Indian culture. Without any sacred meaning attached to the ethnic culture, symbols such as language become “only the culture.” In doing so, Nina is able to resolve any perceived conflicts between Indian culture and Protestant Christianity, and further construct the cultural content of her adhesive identity – an identity that allows immigrants to preserve ethnicity when they are simultaneously adapting to the U.S. society (F. Yang 1999).

Different from Indian culture, Chinese culture is not consumed by one dominant religion. The ethnic culture in China is still tied with religious meaning (Bell; C. Yang). In that case, Chinese religious converts also perceive the need to establish a boundary between the secular world and the sacred world and keep ethnic cultures in the secular world. This approach is represented in Chinese immigrants’ description of ancestor worship, which is a legacy of Chinese folk religions. When talking about the conflicts between being Chinese and being Christian, a middle-aged Chinese immigrant convert (interview conducted 07/12/2013) articulated:

Something like ancestor 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 cultures that cause the conflicts are not really meaningful.

Using ancestor worship as an example, this Chinese convert secularizes the Chinese ethnic culture and stresses the essence of this ritual – respecting senior people. According to him, cultural elements that have been abandoned in this reconstruction process are “not really meaningful.”

Both Chinese and Indian immigrant converts construct the cultural contents of their adhesive identity, and secularize ethnic cultures to integrate their ethnic culture with Christianity. After secularizing their ethnic culture, Chinese immigrants intend to integrate the Chinese culture with Christianity, asserting, “(When doing ancestor worship), there is no concept of ‘deities’ that comes to my mind. We are just respecting the deceased people” (interview conducted 11/13/2013). Similarly, their Indian counterparts contend, “There is no meaning behind it (the Hindu cultural norms)” (interview conducted 09/29/2013), but they still “follow the (Indian) tradition” (interview conducted 09/29/2013) as Protestants.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In my analysis of how Chinese and Indian immigrants construct identities within the religious conversion process, I found that Chinese and Indian immigrants establish different types of boundaries to construct religious identity. Specifically, Chinese immigrants frame an exclusionary boundary, differentiating them from non-Christian Chinese to confirm their newly achieved religious identity. With that said, Chinese immigrant converts perceive that they have entirely left the community of Chinese who believe in traditional Chinese religions and are fully affiliated with the Chinese Protestant community in the U.S. Their Indian counterparts, in contrast, establish an inclusionary boundary, constructing a broad religious identity of which all people who are searching for God and looking for truth are a part. In doing so, these Indian religious converts situate themselves within this broad community, claiming that their religious transition occurred within that community.

Chinese converts' exclusion of non-Christian co-ethnics does not mean that they abandon their Chinese ethnic identity. Indian immigrants' affiliation with Hindu Indians does not mean that Indian converts fully ally themselves with Hindu Indians. When framing their adhesive identities (F. Yang 1999) as Chinese Christians or as Indian Christians, Chinese and Indian immigrants both modify their ethnic cultures to resolve the perceived conflicts between their ethnic cultures and American Christianity. They further integrate their secularized ethnic cultures with Christianity. Based on my interview data, I found that although participants in this study are different in terms of their age, gender, place of religious conversion, and degree of religious conversion, their religious conversion narratives do not differ in terms of demographic characteristics other than countries of origin. Confirming and contributing to the previous literature in immigrants' identity construction in religious contexts, this finding implies that immigrants' identity construction is a transnational process, and the influence from the cultural contexts of their countries of origin may outweigh that of other demographic characteristics.

Analyzing the narratives does not lead to an all-encompassing argument about what happens to large representative groups of Chinese and Indian immigrants in the U.S. Limited by the qualitative research method (Strauss and Corbin), this study is not able (nor does it intend) to present what is happening to all Chinese and Indian immigrants in the U.S. who converted to Protestant Christianity. By relying on the narratives of 29 Chinese and Indian immigrants who self-identified as religious converts in the sample, the study clarifies what probably happens among Chinese and Indian converts, although I cannot exclude the possibility that the conclusions may not be applicable to Chinese and Indian immigrants who are affiliated with other Christian congregations. Even so, the study yields new information about, and plausible explanations for, what happens when Chinese and Indian immigrants construct their identity within the religious conversion process, and lays a foundation upon which future quantitative research can test the generalizability and representativeness of my arguments.

This article contributes to the existing theories of religious conversion; primarily addressing why people transform to another community, existing theories of religious conversion describe what happens within the conversion process. If scholars use people's religious participation as an indicator of their conversion, this religious conversion is an

either/or transition for both Chinese and Indian immigrants in my sample. None of the participants in my sample is still practicing a religion other than Protestant Christianity.

However, according to converts' own narratives, subjectively, only my Chinese participants perceive their faith transition as an either/or change. My Indian respondents, however, construct a large religious community that is composed of all people who are searching for God. They vaguely associate themselves with this religious community, claiming that their religious change does not differentiate them from non-Christian Indians in significant ways.

Based on these findings, we can begin to conclude that theories of religious conversion, especially the conversion processes among immigrants, need a clearer definition of community. The community for religious practice should be differentiated from the community for ethnic identity construction. For Chinese immigrants in my sample who participate in Protestant Christianity and construct an exclusionary boundary with non-Christian co-ethnics, these two communities may overlap with one another. Yet, for Indian immigrants with whom I spoke, the religious community for practice and the religious community for identity construction are two different religious communities. If theories about religious conversion largely rely on people's subjective conversion narratives, and if identity construction is what scholars of immigrant religion care about, the community for practice and the community for identification should be carefully distinguished.

This article also contributes to the study of religion and immigration more broadly. Previous empirical studies sometimes analyze immigrants' religious lives in a vacuum, largely, if not solely, focusing on how immigrants preserve their ethnic identity through their participation in congregations (e.g. Ecklund 2006; Min; Ng; F. Yang 1999). They assume that immigrants' religious and ethnic communities overlap. Such assertions do not provide a robust understanding of what happens to immigrants' ethnic identification when immigrants switch from one religious community to another. My analysis of Chinese and Indian converts demonstrates that these immigrant converts utilize specific strategies to preserve their ethnicity when changing from one religious tradition to another. Both immigrant groups secularize ethnic cultures before integrating ethnic cultures with their religious beliefs. The reason why they are adopting this specific strategy is because they are changing from religions that seem to have a taken-for-granted-approach in expressing their ethnicity to what they sometimes even perceive as an "exotic" religion that does not seem to be part of their ethnic culture.

The data from immigrants' conversion narratives do not allow me to make conclusive arguments about why Chinese and Indian immigrants use different strategies to construct their religious identity while adopting similar approaches to construct the cultural contents of their adhesive identities. One of the possible explanations, as pointed out by my participant observations, might be the different organizational culture in Chinese and Indian congregations. Having a large number of religious converts and inviting converted Chinese Christians to give sermons on Sunday mornings means that people in the Chinese Christian church may have a template that instructs them to perceive their religious change as an either/or transition.

Given that there are fewer available converts among Indians in the U.S., the Indian churches seem to give Indian converts more degree of freedom to have agency in constructing



their own religious identities in their own ways. Due to the fact that Hinduism encompasses diverse worldviews (Hefner), Indian participants' exposure to Hinduism may provide them the framework to search for the commonalities between Hinduism and Protestant Christianity when they construct their achieved religious identity as Protestants. If this is the case, then the construction of the inclusionary boundary may be a distinguishing characteristic of Indian converts' identity construction process and cannot be generalized to other immigrant groups. Future studies are needed to provide a more robust understanding of how the cultural and social contexts in immigrants' countries of origin influence their identity construction process within religious conversion.

Relying on narratives from Chinese and Indian religious converts, this study opens up new directions for analyzing immigrants' religious conversion. Normally, scholars assume that Judeo-Christianity "play(s) the dual role of facilitating assimilation of its members and preserving ethnicity" (Yang and Ebaugh: 270). Looking at how immigrant converts construct identity, my findings begin to open the black box of immigrant religious conversion more, displaying how Chinese and Indian immigrants erect boundaries and form cultural content to establish their multiple identities within religious contexts.

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