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## Paths to Enlightenment: Constructing Buddhist Identities in Mainland China and the United States

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### Recommended Citation

Di, D. (2018). Paths to Enlightenment: Constructing Buddhist Identities in Mainland China and the United States. *Sociology of Religion*, 79(4), 449–471. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sry003>

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Sociology of Religion* following peer review. The version of record Di, D. (2018). Paths to Enlightenment: Constructing Buddhist Identities in Mainland China and the United States. *Sociology of Religion*, 79(4), 449–471. is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/sry003>

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**Paths to Enlightenment: Constructing Buddhist Identities in Mainland China and the United States**

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Word Count: 10111

Re-submitted to *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review*

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**TITLE**

Paths to Enlightenment: Constructing Buddhist Identities in Mainland China and the United States

**ABSTRACT**

How do national contexts influence the construction of religious identity in faith communities? In this paper, I examine the construction of Buddhist identities in two similar ethnic Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples but in distinct national contexts, one in mainland China and the other in the United States. While both are Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples, they have distinctive temple-level cultures: a strict culture in China and a permissive culture in the United States. Individual-level cultural frameworks also differ. In mainland China, the Buddhists learn their religion dutifully while their US counterparts critically explore religion inside and outside their temples. Relying on theories in cultural sociology, I argue that national contexts influence both individual-level cultural frameworks and temple-level group styles to produce different religious identities. This paper has implications for future studies that examine how community-based religious identities vary according to national context.

Word Count: 141 Words

## INTRODUCTION

How does national context influence people's construction of religious identity within faith communities? Previous studies, discussing the influence of national context on the construction of religious identity outside the congregational setting (Bellah et al. 1985; Pál 2007; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Roof 1999; Wuthnow 1998), suggest that dominant national cultures, such as American individualism, shape people's understanding, interpretation, and embodiment of their religiosity (Bellah et al. 1985). However, by relying on non-congregational-based samples they ignore the influence of faith communities on the construction of religious identity.

Another body of literature finds that the cultures of faith communities, what Penny Edgell (1999) calls "congregational models," construct different types of religious identity even within the same denomination (Ammerman et al. 1997; Edgell Becker 1999; Ecklund 2006). However, this literature usually situates religious congregations in a default social context (Edgell Becker 1999; Cadge 2004; Ecklund 2006; Winchester 2008) and is unable to say whether and how national context plays a role in the construction of congregational-based identities. All told, the studies are decontextualized, either at a congregational or national level.

In this paper, I rely on a comparative study of two ethnic Chinese Mahayana Buddhist temples belonging to the same international Buddhist headquarters but situated in two distinctive national contexts: mainland China and the United States. I argue that national context influences the construction of religious identity through two mechanisms, by influencing the cultural frameworks that individuals use to embrace their religion and by contributing to the construction of community-level group cultures. Hence, national context serves as a little recognized influence on the interaction of temple and practitioner—a key process that constructs people's religious identities (Cadge 2004; Ecklund 2006; Edgell Becker 1999; Winchester 2008).

## **NATIONAL CULTURES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES**

National context, filtered through the expression of publicly accessible highly-valued cultural values, is key to the construction of some religious identities (Bellah et al. 1985; O'Brien 2015; Madsen 2009; Roof and McKinney 1987). For example, the culture of individualism is the national culture of the United States (Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier 2002; Singelis et al. 1995; Triandis 1988). It translates to a “personal culture” (Lizardo 2017, 88), in which individuals have interpretive frameworks for understanding how to situate religion in their lives (Edgell 2006). Personal cultures are embedded in collective cultures (Alexander and Smith 1993; Lizardo 2017), so that, for example, some religious baby boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, are not fully submissive to the authorities of the faith communities in which they were born and raised (Roof and McKinney 1987). Instead, they often use the cultural framework of individualism, seek outside resources, challenge external religious authorities, and construct an individualistic religiosity and spirituality (Martí 2015; Roof 1999; Roof and McKinney 1987).

Regarding how national cultures influence individuals' construction of religious identities, scholars have sparked two debates: first, whether the culture influences the actual performance of religious identity or only the articulation of the identity construction (Bellah et al. 1985; O'Brien 2015); and second, whether the influence of national culture on the construction of religious identity is equally accessible to and internalized by everyone (Bellah et al. 1985; Madsen 2009). Nevertheless, they recognize that, in Western contexts, and perhaps most dominant in the United States, a culture of individualism influences, to varying degrees, the construction of religious identity (Bellah et al. 1985; Marti and Ganiel 2014).

Because existing studies show that national context in the United States influences people's frameworks for religious identity construction, it is reasonable to assume that such

influences occur elsewhere. Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient empirical examination for this relationship in countries that value collectivism and a legacy of Confucianism, as many East Asian cultures have (O'Dwyer 2003; Sun 2013). In mainland China, Confucianism acts as a foundation for Chinese and, more broadly, Asian values (Ralston et al. 1997; Sun 2013). Confucianism calls for the maintenance of harmonious societies based on deference to authority and a constant reinforcement of social hierarchies (O'Dwyer 2003). This is shown by a son's deference to his father, a subordinate's respect for a leader, and a student's esteem for a teacher (Ho and Ho 2008). Confucian cultural values also encourage people to be dependent, seek harmony, maintain order, and respect authority (O'Dwyer 2003; Sun 2013; Zhang and Schwartz 1997), the precise opposite of a culture of individualization (Alexander and Smith 1993).

While Confucianism is the dominant culture in the East (Zhang and Schwartz 1997), few scholars have studied whether it influences the construction of religious identities there. An initial study in Taiwan shows that Confucianism is integrated in Taiwanese Buddhists' understanding of the gendered and religious self (Schak 2008). However, for mainland China, most studies treat religion as a variable, which illustrates and explains the distribution of religious people and the change of religious landscapes in certain areas (Leamaster and Hu 2014; Wang 2010; Wu and Zhang 2010; Yang and Hu 2012), but does not provide an understanding of the construction of religious identity. We still do not know whether there is a relationship between national culture and religious identity in mainland China or, if so, exactly how it influences religious identity. This information, however, is necessary for our understanding of the current and future religious revivals in mainland China (Yang 2011).

## **CONGREGATIONAL CULTURES AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES**

No doubt congregational culture does influence the construction of religious identity for those who are settled in religious congregations (Ammerman et al. 1997; Becker 1999). Faith communities—temples, synagogues, mosques, and churches—provide practitioners with a structure of plausibility (Berger 1967) that constructs and reinforces their religious identity through sermons, hymns, rituals, and religious classes (Cadge 2004; Chen 2008; Ecklund 2006). Many scholars say that, in each faith community, there is a meaningful, salient, and shared communal culture—a group-level interactional style—that shapes people’s understanding, expression, and embodiment of religiosity (Becker 1999; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

What is more, congregational culture can be independent of theology; that is to say, even religious congregations affiliated with the same denomination and sharing the same theology can embody different congregational cultures (Edgell Becker 1999). As Penny Edgell (1999) documents in her study, a mainline Christian church having a family-type congregational culture is different from its community-type counterpart. Such congregational cultures influence the way in which congregants interact with each other and with their religious leaders (Edgell Becker 1999). Like other group-level cultures (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003), congregational cultures are established on a clear understanding of the congregation’s boundaries and on their relationship to society, an understanding which is contingent on the national and local religious context (Ammerman et al. 1997; Guest 2003; F. Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Congregational cultures are further sustained through the congregants’ understanding of group bonds and their use of congregation- specific languages (Becker 1999; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003).

The majority/minority status of religion, real or imagined, shapes the congregations’ understanding of its boundaries (Yang and Ebaugh 2001) and subsequently shapes the temple-level cultures (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). In mainland China, Buddhism is officially

recognized by the government and situated in what Fenggang Yang (2006) calls the “red market.” It is also a majority religion there, having followers who represent 18.21% of the general population—this in a country where more than half the population is non-religious and only 5.1% are Christians (Pew Research Center 2012). However, the majority status of Buddhism is fragile given that, in China, Buddhism is often mixed with Daoism and folk religions (Leamaster and Hu 2014). Hence, the Buddhist temples that want to be orthodox may need to construct a salient symbolic boundary to differentiate themselves from the more popular Buddhist “other.”

In contrast, Buddhism in the United States is a minority religion, with only 1.2% of the population being adherents (Pew Research Center 2012). While many white and middle-class people in the United States appreciate Buddhism, they usually would not affiliate with Buddhism or practice Buddhism in a temple setting (Prebish 1999; Seager 2012). For ethnic Chinese Buddhist temples, given their religious and ethnic minority status, their boundaries with society are assumed and imposed rather than lines that need to be highlighted and carefully crafted (Cadge 2004; Chen 2002; Yang and Ebaugh 2001).

The existing literature encourages the assumption that, even for two Buddhist temples following the same theology, the “temple culture” (the culture on a communal level) would differ given different national contexts. However, due to a lack of transnational comparative studies of similar Buddhist temples, we do not know *how* temple cultures in two distinctive national contexts would differ or how such differences (if they even exist at all) might influence the construction of Buddhist identities. My study of the two temples is an early attempt to establish an analytic link among national culture, congregational culture, and the construction of religious identity. This study, therefore, answers how national culture influences the construction



of identity within a religious community—for which there is a pressing need given the growing number of international religious headquarters (Levitt 2007).

## **DATA AND SETTINGS**

The data from this paper comes from 15 months of fieldwork, from September 2015 to December 2016. I conducted participant observation and interviews in two Buddhist temples, one located in a mid-sized city in mainland China and the other in a large metropolitan city in the United States. Both temples belong to the same international headquarters overseeing hundreds of Buddhist temples worldwide. The international headquarters advocates for humanistic Buddhism, which develops from traditional Mahayana Buddhism. Instead of focusing on after-life metaphysics, humanistic Buddhism encourages its practitioners to practice day-to-day enlightenment through thinking positively and helping others (Long 2000).

Both temples in my study have close theological, ideological, and organizational affinities with the international headquarters. Specifically, monastics were trained at the same Buddhist school before being assigned to different temple branches. And lay members receive the same interpretation of Buddhism, primarily from the words of the founding Master. Monastic members are religious leaders, and although opinions from devoted practitioners are valued, monastic members make the final decisions. There are lay leaders at both temples who oversee small groups of volunteers, but the power dynamic between leader and group is more egalitarian than hierarchical. At both temples, monastic members—rather than lay leaders—usually assign tasks to practitioners in volunteer work, and affiliates treat monastics with respect. To protect the confidentiality of the research sites, this paper uses pseudonyms to identify the temples. Pagoda

Temple refers to the temple in China, and its sister temple in the United States is referred to as the Lotus Temple. I also changed the names of individual respondents.<sup>1</sup>

The temples vary in size. Pagoda Temple is larger than those in the Lotus Temple. There are more than 400 registered members at Pagoda and about 130 at Lotus, but not all members are regular practitioners; my observation of weekly scripture chanting services suggests that about 80 practitioners regularly attend services at Pagoda, and about 40 regularly attend at Lotus. The sizes of these two temples are typical of their respective contexts.

I obtained access to the site through my personal religious network. After gaining permission to study the temples, I began participant observation. I introduced myself as being born in a Buddhist family but also clearly stated my identity as a researcher. I was involved with both temples, but never as a complete insider. In the Pagoda Temple (China), I conducted a three-month participant observation by serving as a full-time volunteer, eating and living in the temple, assisting with serving temple guests, cleaning the guest room, attending morning chanting services, and participating in scripture chanting, as well as Buddhist seminars. At the Lotus Temple (the United States), I conducted a nine-month participant observation, attended weekly scripture chanting services, helped prepare Buddhist rituals, and volunteered in the children's camp. Although I conducted the participant observation at the Pagoda Temple for a shorter period, my involvement there was deeper, because I was a full-time volunteer at the Chinese Pagoda but only a regular participant in weekly activities at the US Lotus Temple. I spent my additional fieldwork time in other temple branches of this international headquarters to obtain smooth access to my primary research sites and to gain contextual information.

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<sup>1</sup> This study received approval through my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

In my participant observation, I paid attention to the intersections between individuals and organizations. Participant observation also helped me to recruit respondents for interviews. Considering the fact that Chinese people who visit Buddhist temples do not necessarily identify as Buddhists (Leamaster and Hu 2014; Yang and Hu 2012), I interviewed only practitioners who regularly volunteer at the temple, because such work is indicative of an affinity with the temple.

The study consists of 80 in-depth interviews with Buddhists, of which 49 were conducted at the Pagoda Temple in China and 31 at the Lotus Temple in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Sixteen respondents were males and 64 were females. The over-representation of the sample's female participants reflects the practitioner gender disparity in both temples. All interview participants self-identify as ethnic Chinese. In the Pagoda Temple, most interview participants were mainland Chinese, while one was from Taiwan. In the Lotus Temple, most interview participants were from Taiwan, five from mainland China, one from Hong Kong, and one is ethnic Chinese who originally came from Malaysia.<sup>3</sup> I asked respondents about how they came to the temple, how they adopted a Buddhist identity, and how they understand their Buddhist identities.

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<sup>2</sup> The disparity in the number of interviews is reflective of the sizes of the two temples. There is also an inequality in respondents' educational attainment. Buddhists in the US-based temple are proportionally more highly educated than their peer practitioners in the China-based temple. This disparity of educational attainment should be ideal typical for ethnic Chinese Buddhist temples given that post-1965 ethnic Chinese immigrants in the United States tend to come from middle-class backgrounds.

<sup>3</sup> Although there are three non-Chinese regular practitioners in the Lotus Temple, for the sake of comparison, in this study I only interviewed ethnic Chinese practitioners.

All but one of the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.<sup>4</sup> I conducted data analysis through a generally inductive two-cycle coding process (Saldana 2015). I identified emerging themes in the interviews and participant observation, reflected in the interview context notes and fieldwork notes. After returning from the research sites, I read the interview transcripts and fieldwork notes and identified themes that emerged from data analysis. Based on my fieldwork and first-cycle coding, I generated a coding scheme to capture the submerged story in the field. In the second-cycle coding, I categorized data into themes.

In this paper, to situate people's construction of religious identities in their national and congregational contexts, I rely and expand on theories in cultural sociology (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Strand and Lizardo 2015; Lizardo 2017). Theories in cultural sociology describe broadly defined culture influences people's discourses and actions (Martin 2011; Strand and Lizardo 2015). Considering the suggestive causal mechanisms that may emerge from this paper, a few clarifications about my methodology are necessary before outlining my findings. First, the suggestive causal mechanisms discussed in this paper rely on extensive previous theories in cultural sociology. Reliance on previous literature is an effective methodology for qualitative studies to raise tentative causal arguments (Maxwell 2004). Second, the design of my study – a comparative study of two Buddhist temples nearly identical in theology and organization – provides some leverage for me to suggest potential causal mechanisms (Maxwell 2004). In my case, examining the two Buddhist temples that are almost identical in every other way but situated in distinctive national contexts enables me to obtain information about how a

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<sup>4</sup> One respondent was uncomfortable being recorded. Following the protocol of the IRB, this interview was not recorded, but the author took extensive notes throughout, with the respondent's permission.

given national culture may influence religious people's construction of identities. Furthermore, the combination of interviews and participant observation allows me, *to some extent*, to conduct an ethnographic micro-analysis (Erickson 1992), in that I have observed people's performances of religious identities in the field and deconstructed their identity via data analysis. Lastly, even though this study is a strong first step in comparative work on religious identity construction, I recognize that cross-sectional qualitative studies are inherently limited in their ability to produce causal arguments, so the mechanisms described in this study should be taken as grounded in actual data but still suggestive.

## **PERSONAL CULTURES FOR IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

### *Embracing Buddhism in a Confucian Society: Dutifully Learning Religion*

Buddhists at Pagoda Temple may have been exposed to Buddhism by visiting other Buddhist temples, worshipping on traditional Buddhist holidays. Some of them have even taken refuge in the triple gem, a ritualistic event that symbolizes their identities as followers of the Buddha. However, they know—or assume they know—little about the correct interpretation of Buddhism, that is, “Orthodox Buddhism.”<sup>5</sup> At Pagoda Temple, they seize opportunities to learn about Buddhism through rituals, scripture chanting, meditation, reading groups, and lectures; and they develop their understanding of Buddhism in a manner similar to the Confucian way of learning; that is, they are respectful of and deferential to their teachers, follow what they say, and change their behavior accordingly (Tweed and Lehman 2002; Stalnaker 2013). In other words, their personal cultures—the individual-level interpretive framework through which they situate Buddhism in their lives—are embedded in the collective Confucian culture of mainland China.

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<sup>5</sup> Pagoda\_016, female, 78 years old, high school diploma, conducted 01/27/2016

At Pagoda Temple, most teachers are monastic members. In fact, the word “learn” frequently appears in my respondents’ descriptions of how they gradually approach Buddhism and reinforce their Buddhist identity. For example, Ding Xiang,<sup>6</sup> a 60-year-old Buddhist, said:

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

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

This attitude of dutiful learning is not only applicable to senior and less-educated practitioners like Ding Xiang; it also emerges in the narratives of young, well-educated

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<sup>6</sup> Pagoda\_043, female, 60 years old, elementary school, conducted 02/21/2016

Buddhists. Chen Hui,<sup>7</sup> a 34-year-old college-educated woman, became a full-time temple volunteer after taking a Buddhist training course there. Born after the 1980s in mainland China, a society with state-sponsored atheism (Yang 2011), Chen Hui admitted that she “did not have any religious exposure” when she was in school. She was later motivated to learn more about religion and Buddhism was the most accessible religion in her hometown. After visiting several Buddhist temples, Chen Hui, following a month-long camp at Pagoda Temple, decided to convert to humanistic Buddhism, which is taught and practiced at Pagoda. Chen Hui reflected:

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

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

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

Playing dharma instruments, chanting scriptures, understanding theologies, and serving Buddhist meals are important cultural resources through which Chen Hui develops her Buddhist identity.

They come almost exclusively from what she sees as a classroom setting, and the process to

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<sup>7</sup> Pagoda\_012, female, 34 years old, bachelor’s degree, conducted 01/26/2016

reinforce her Buddhist identity is a valuable “learning” path which enables her to “purify the heart to prevent it from being attracted by the unnecessary external beauty in the society.”

At Pagoda Temple, scripture chanting and dharma talks usually occur in the main shrine, some reading groups take place in rooms designed for copying calligraphy, but neither of these is an explicit classroom setting as described in a study by Galonnier and Rios (2016). Yet, Buddhists here see such settings as educational, dutifully learning Buddhism, attending lessons, and deferring to the monastics. One of my respondents said, “I think it is just like going to school. Although I am learning [Buddhism], I still do not have a degree certification. I think I should take refuge in the triple gem [to get the “degree certificate”].”<sup>8</sup> To Buddhists in Pagoda Temple, practicing Buddhism in the temple is a process of dutiful learning and taking refuge in the triple gem is a necessary milestone for the learning process at the temple.

*Embracing Buddhism in an Individualistic Society: Critically Exploring Religion*

Compared to Pagoda Temple, Lotus Temple *looks* like an educational setting. The dharma talk usually happens in what practitioners refer to as a “classroom,” where the monastic stands on the stage with a projector and the practitioners sit in chairs with desks and take notes. However, unlike their counterparts in China, few, if any, Buddhists at Lotus describe the development of their Buddhist identification as a process of dutiful learning. Rather, they talked about the process as a critical exploration. Before settling in at the US-based Lotus, they had access to and critically evaluated other religions, which, in most cases, meant Protestant Christianity. In fact, after practicing at Lotus, they continue to search for outside resources, seeking alternative explanations to construct their Buddhist identity. Such critical exploration is compatible with a

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<sup>8</sup> Pagoda\_042, female, 41 years old, associate diploma, conducted 02/21/2016



culture of individualism, the dominant culture in the United States; it celebrates voluntarism over obligation and individual evaluations of authoritative discourses (O'Brien 2015).

In my fieldwork at Lotus Temple, I encountered Steven Tsai,<sup>9</sup> a middle-aged Buddhist originally from Taiwan. Steven said that his exposure to religion was like that of most Chinese people because there was a “mixture of Buddhism and Daoism” in a “traditional family culture.” After coming to the United States, Steven “searched [religion] here and there” and discussed the afterlife with colleagues affiliated with Protestant Christianity or with the Eastern Orthodox Church. He eventually found that “there is something [in most religions] that cannot persuade me logically and thoughtfully,” but Buddhism has a “more persuasive logical system.” Being a devoted Buddhist and regular practitioner at Lotus Temple, Steven is not entirely satisfied with the temple’s authoritative interpretations of Buddhism, nor has he stopped his critical exploration. He reads articles written by venerable Buddhists from other Buddhist branches, has watched the video online, and has developed a deeper understanding of some ideas, such as the notion of karma, that are particularly important to his Buddhist identity.

Like Steven, Jim Zhang,<sup>10</sup> his peer practitioner, also approaches Buddhism through a process of critical exploration. Jim is a 55-year-old immigrant from mainland China. He told me that, after coming to the United States, he visited Bible study groups “for a long time.” He was “willing to learn [the Bible]” because, in his words, “when I came to the United States, I used to admire the United States and the West a lot. The Western world admires Christianity. Naturally, I was willing to try and hear [Christianity].” However, he found Christianity “hard to understand” and began to consider Buddhism. After exploring both religions, Jim believes that “heaven [in

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<sup>9</sup> Lotus\_020, male, around 50 years old, advanced degree, interviewed 06/19/2016

<sup>10</sup> Lotus\_026, male, 54 years old, master’s degree, interviewed 07/27/2016

Christianity] exists, but Buddhahood is on a higher level.” Jim became a Buddhist after an active critical evaluation of other religions.

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

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

This process of critical exploration emerged from most of my interviews with ethnic Chinese Buddhists at Lotus Temple, regardless of age, gender, country of origin, and often began before they came to the temple. For instance, a middle-aged Buddhist woman<sup>11</sup> has critically explored Christianity before settling in Lotus Temple. Reflecting on her critical exploration of

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<sup>11</sup> Lotus\_003, female, 55 years old, high school, interviewed 05/22/2016

religions, this Buddhist woman said, “I do appreciate Christianity. There is just this one particular sentence in the Bible that I cannot understand. It says those who believe in God will be saved. Does it mean that those who do not believe in God will be condemned?” She has even debated with those who tried to convert her to Christianity.

Such critical explorations continue after the practitioners become regular, active, and even devoted members at the temple. As a young Buddhist woman<sup>12</sup> reflected, “I did my research online. ... I have read a lot of books. I read the biography of the Shakyamuni Buddha. From there, I read more books. [I know how to be a Buddhist from] a little bit of both, the books and the temple.” All of my respondents at Lotus Temple are ethnic Chinese for whom Confucianism is an important part of their ethnicity (Ho and Ho 2008). Yet, Buddhists there do not receive the temple’s interpretation of Buddhism as dutiful learners. Instead, they seek both inside and outside religious resources, which they critically evaluate, and use their own judgement to decide how to construct their religiosity. In contrast to their peer practitioners at Pagoda, the way in which Lotus Buddhists understand their religion is individualistic and consistent with the cultural frameworks embodied by white middle-class people in the United States (Alexander and Smith 1993; Madsen 2009).

## **TEMPLE LEVEL GROUP CULTURES**

### *Strict Temple Culture in Pagoda, mainland China*

Not only do the practitioners have different personal cultures, Pagoda and Lotus temples have different group cultures. As Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003: 737) maintain, groups (in this case the temples) have group styles that are “recurrent patterns of interaction that arise from a group’s shared assumption about what constitutes good or adequate participation in the group setting.”

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<sup>12</sup> Lotus\_002, female, 34 years old, bachelor’s degree, interviewed 05/20/2016

Given that such styles are patterned, durable, and easily identifiable, they are group *cultures* (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). In congregational settings, the patterns of interaction in group cultures emerge from a shared understanding about where and how to situate symbolic boundaries to differentiate one religious group from another. As a newcomer to Pagoda Temple, I immediately identified it as a strict Buddhist temple.

Situated in a national context where Buddhism is, arguably, the dominant religion (Leamaster and Hu 2014; Pew Research Center 2012), Pagoda Temple has a clear symbolic boundary that not only differentiates it from the secular world but also distinguishes it from other Buddhist temples. This clear, if delicate, symbolic boundary is reflected in how people at the temple greet each other. In my case, I learned the Buddhist greeting through peer influence. After beginning my volunteer work at the temple, I was no longer a total outside researcher but partly a practitioner, and when other volunteers greeted me, they began to say “Auspicious sister” instead of “Hello.”<sup>13</sup> After several such greetings, I also began to address others as “Auspicious,” taking part in the distinctively insider language also used by Buddhist practitioners at the Pagoda Temple and some other temple branches affiliated with this International Headquarters. “Auspicious,” however, is not a widely used greeting at other Chinese Buddhist temples. By means of such speech, Pagoda Temple establishes a clear group boundary differentiating it from secular society and indeed from other Buddhist temples. In my case, peer sanction and guidance served as an important mechanism to transmit Pagoda’s speech codes to me.

Eating is another important behavioral code at Pagoda Temple. One Saturday morning, while working as a volunteer in the temple’s guest room, I heard a sound on a wooden board. An experienced volunteer said, “The wooden board hits. It is the time for lunch.” Weekend lunches

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<sup>13</sup> Pagoda participant observation, conducted 01/16/2016

in Pagoda Temple are usually formal Buddhist lunches, and being unfamiliar with the temple's dining etiquette, I was assigned an experienced volunteer who taught me how to eat like a Buddhist. On our way to the dining hall, she explained the basic rules: be quiet, chant scriptures, hold the lunch bowl properly, and line up before lunch.<sup>14</sup>

Although the other meals were not as formal, there were still rules to follow. Specifically, practitioners are required to hold their bowls when eating, to take a half bowl before and after eating, to eat all their food, and to use a napkin afterwards to clean their bowls. Avoiding unnecessary waste is a Buddhist tradition, and wiping the bowls carefully saves the volunteers from having to spend too much time cleaning them. An experienced volunteer made the rules very clear to me at my first temple breakfast.<sup>15</sup> Experienced Buddhists guided, instructed, and sanctioned my behavior, making sure that I adopted the correct behaviors and reinforced the temple's boundary with the outside world and other Buddhist temples. Even for long-term practitioners, peer sanction is salient. A devoted practitioner<sup>16</sup> reflected on the ritualistic eating and said: "There is no way to waste your food. Everyone is watching you."

Greeting and eating are two ritualistic and representative instances that reflect Pagoda's strict culture, but this strict culture is not limited to rituals; it emerges with every interaction at the temple. I have observed a Buddhist woman correcting others for pouring out water in her bottle for new tea. This Buddhist woman walked to the person who poured out water and said, "In Pagoda Temple, we are taught to cherish the merits. You could have drunk the water in your

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<sup>14</sup> Pagoda participant observation, conducted 01/16/2016

<sup>15</sup> Pagoda participant observation, conducted 01/16/2016

<sup>16</sup> Pagoda\_012, female, 34 years old, bachelor's degree, interviewed 01/26/2016

cup before pouring in new tea.”<sup>17</sup> Through this interaction, the Buddhist woman guided her fellow practitioner to strictly observe Pagoda Temple’s behavioral rule of cherishing merits.

I have also observed a Buddhist woman correcting visitors for unnecessary use of paper towels in the restroom. When the visitors refused to correct their behavior, she turned to me, as I was wearing a volunteer tag, and whispered, “They would never understand it. But you, dharma sister, you must understand why I said this to them.”<sup>18</sup> As shown in my observation, everyone who wants to be part of the temple needs to be part of its strict temple culture. Those who do not accept it are always referred to as “they.” For members, it is necessary to be clear about what Pagoda’s relation is to the broader society and perhaps even other Buddhist temples, to observe mutual responsibility for peer sanction, and to adopt the temple’s speech and behavioral codes, all of which work to construct and sustain the temple’s culture.

#### *Permissive Temple Culture in Lotus, the United States*

In contrast to Pagoda Temple, the temple-level culture at Lotus is permissive. Located in a suburban area in a large city in the United States, the temple’s traditional Chinese architectural style differentiates it from the surrounding buildings. Probably because of its religious and ethnic minority status, Lotus Temple does not highlight its symbolic boundary to further separate it from the broader world. Instead, it embodies a permissive culture, and practitioners support each other when they reject Lotus-specific and even Buddhist speech and behavioral codes.

Each Sunday morning, during the weekly scripture chanting services, Buddhists at Lotus Temple usually wear jeans, T-shirts, shorts, and even occasionally gym clothes. Although the temple’s architecture sets it apart from the mainstream society in the United States, its dress code,

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<sup>17</sup> Pagoda, participant observation, conducted 03/12/2016

<sup>18</sup> Pagoda, participant observation, conducted 01/17/2016

to some extent, re-integrates its members into the secular world. This permissive culture is further reflected in the Buddhists' interactions with each other in the temple.

Like Pagoda Temple, Lotus serves free vegetarian lunches every weekend. But instead of having formal Buddhist lunches, Lotus serves a casual buffet-style lunch. There is no formal scripture chanting or prayer before the meal, and people are not required to hold their bowls and keep quiet. However, there are a few rules for eating, one of these being, "Eat up what you get." Even so, not every practitioner obeys the rule. Even devoted practitioners occasionally do not eat all that they receive. When I was having lunch in the temple, a young devoted practitioner complained to me about having too much rice on her plate. "This (wasting food)," she said, "is really bad. I should have eaten up the rice. But it is just too much. I am not going to eat it up. I may throw it away quietly."<sup>19</sup> Her complaint about having too much rice on the plate indicates that, from her perspective, practitioners at Lotus Temple would not explicitly ask their peers to strictly observe the behavioral rules and stop such reasonable dismissal. This assumption is different from what I have experienced and observed in the China-based Pagoda Temple.

The permissive culture at Lotus Temple is also found in the practitioners' greetings. The monastic has tried to standardize greeting practices from a speech norm, which is mixed with Buddhist and secular greetings, to a sacred greeting, namely "Auspicious." Before a scripture chanting service for Medicine Buddha, a nun approached some young volunteers who were busy preparing for the service. On seeing her, they said, "Hello." The nun smiled and said lightly, "You do not even know how to greet me. When you see me, you should put your palms together and say, 'Auspicious.'"<sup>20</sup> This admonition, however, did not yield any noticeable change in the

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<sup>19</sup> Lotus participant observation, conducted 08/07/2016

<sup>20</sup> Lotus participant observation, conducted 10/15/2015

greeting. Both youth volunteers and other practitioners still said “Hello,” “Good morning,” and “Good afternoon” to greet each other, as they did to the monastics. And the monastics did not correct them. Practitioners at Lotus partly reject the Buddhist speech code by retaining a casual, secular greeting. At the same time, the Lotus Temple recommended—but did not forcefully impose—its greeting codes on practitioners, which indicates that the permissive culture there is accepted by both practitioners and monastics.

Lay and monastic members at Lotus Temple negotiate and compromise with each other, constrained by but simultaneously constructing a permissive temple culture. As a religious and ethnic minority in the United States, the temple already has an imposed symbolic boundary that differentiates it from the broader society. Within their interactions in Lotus, members do not act as peer instructors directing and/or sanctioning their peer practitioners’ speech and behavior. In some cases, such as dropping the honorific “Auspicious” in the greeting or by not referring to others as “dharma sister” or “dharma brother,” they allow a small mutiny against the temple’s speech and behavioral codes. Their mild reject of the speech and behavioral codes, to some extent, downplays the temple’s symbolic boundary with the broader society. Practitioners at Pagoda Temple also use some secular language and behavioral codes in many daily interactions and weekly scripture chanting services, but observe Buddhist codes in formal chanting services and official dharma talks. Monastics in this temple have observed and permit such integration of secular cultures in the temple. As a monastic summarized in her talk during an outreach event preparation meeting, Lotus Temple “just wants to give people a taste of what Buddhism is.”<sup>21</sup>

## **CONSTRUCTING BUDDHIST IDENTITIES**

### *A Temple-Specific Buddhist Identity in Pagoda, Mainland China*

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<sup>21</sup> Lotus participant observation, conducted 05/28/2016



National cultures—the culture of Confucianism in mainland China and individualism in the United States—influence the personal cultures of Buddhists, an interpretive framework through which Buddhists assess how to situate faith in their lives. The majority/minority status of Buddhism in China and the United States influences the temple-level group culture by facilitating a shared understanding of where and how to situate the symbolic boundaries that differentiate one temple from another (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). The Buddhist identity is further constructed through the interaction of personal-level cultural framework (Lizardo 2017) and the temple-level culture (Becker 1999; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). At Pagoda, the Confucian framework of dutifully learning Buddhism and the strict temple culture operate together, producing a type of intensive Buddhist identity that endorses subtle symbolic boundaries.

By “being a Buddhist,” practitioners in Pagoda Temple refer to a specific type of Buddhist identity that celebrates their temple affiliation. Zhang Chun Hua,<sup>22</sup> a middle-aged Buddhist woman described her performances of Buddhist identities and said:

The starting point of all my behaviors is observing the beliefs in Pagoda Temple. Whatever happens, my first thought is that I should protect the interest of Pagoda Temple. I would rather sacrifice my own interest to protect the interest of Pagoda Temple.

As reflected by her narrative, after practicing Buddhism at Pagoda Temple, her identity transitions from a secular to a Buddhist self, and, more specifically, to a “Pagoda self.” This Pagoda self is congruent with a temple-level culture that carries a clear boundary which differentiates the temple from society and from other temples.

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<sup>22</sup> Pagoda\_004, female, 45 years old, high school, interviewed 01/23/2016

Like Zhang Chun Hua, some of her peer practitioners even framed their participation at Pagoda as the most meaningful part of their Buddhist identities. Wu Tong, a middle-aged Buddhist practitioner,<sup>23</sup> comparing Pagoda to other Chinese temples, described the most important part of being a Buddhist:

Buddhists in Pagoda Temple have a different level of understanding [from those in other temples]. I have asked myself why there is a difference. I don't know.

What I know is that we understand and observe the [Buddhist] rules.

By understanding and observing the Buddhist rules, practitioners refer to their observation of the temple's speech and behavioral codes. It is this that separates the temple from secular society, but it also distinguishes it from what many respondents see as other, "superstitious" Buddhist temples.<sup>24</sup> These codes, specific to Pagoda Temple, provide the core of the Buddhist identity of the temple's practitioners, constructing their temple-specific Buddhist identities.

Narratives about the importance of being a Buddhist at Pagoda Temple and being a follower of the venerable Master in this International Buddhist Headquarters emerged in almost all conversations, either formal or informal.<sup>25</sup> Throughout their practice of Buddhism at the temple, their "secular self" almost disappears when they are in the temple. Instead, they construct a very specific type of Buddhist identity that hinges on their adherence to Buddhism within the temple. In other words, with a Confucian framework of dutiful learning Buddhism, Buddhists

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<sup>23</sup> Pagoda\_040, female, 51 years old, junior high school, interviewed 02/21/2016

<sup>24</sup> Pagoda\_016, female, 78 years old, high-school diploma, interviewed 01/27/2016

<sup>25</sup> Pagoda\_025, female, 45 years old, high-school diploma, interviewed 02/19/2016; Pagoda Participant Observation, conducted 03/27/2016.

there are deferential to the authoritative Buddhist discourses articulated by the temple and embody those discourses through the performance of their religiosity.

*An Individual-Centered Buddhist Identity in Lotus Temple, the United States*

In contrast to Pagoda Temple, practitioners at Lotus Temple value their “secular selves,” which, having been constructed in a broader and secular world, never disappear. Being a Buddhist becomes one facet to be incorporated into other facets of their identities. This individual-centered identity is illustrated in an interview with David Liao,<sup>26</sup> a 65-year-old engineer who participated at Lotus Temple. He described his “own understanding of Buddhism:”

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

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

Like David, Amanda Chung,<sup>27</sup> a devout Buddhist in her 30s, integrates her Buddhist identity with her secular self, attributing her ability to do so to the permissive culture at Lotus Temple. She said, “We will not say, ‘If you are a Buddhist, you must be vegetarian.’” As a Buddhist, Amanda said, “I still need to live my life. I still need to interact with others.” It is

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<sup>26</sup> Lotus\_023, female, 38 years old, associate diploma, interviewed 06/02/2016

<sup>27</sup> Lotus\_030, female, 34 years old, master’s degree, interviewed 08/14/2016

impossible for her to isolate herself and “read [Buddhist] scriptures deep in the mountains.” According to her, a feasible approach to integrating her Buddhist identity with other facets of her life is “to do good in my interactions with colleagues at work,” while not being a strict vegetarian. Her Buddhist identity serves how she lives her life, not the other way around.

Although being active, regular, and even devoted practitioners at Lotus Temple, their secular selves never disappear to be replaced by Buddhist selves. Instead, their Buddhist selves are incorporated into their secular selves, serving the secular in a Buddhist way. In David’s words, a Buddhist way is the “right way.” Having an individualistic framework as a personal stake, and practicing Buddhism in a permissive temple, Buddhists at Lotus are not entirely subsumed by an authoritative discourse. They have room to interpret and re-interpret Buddhism and construct a type of Buddhist identity with a permissive boundary with the secular world.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I examined the construction of Buddhist religious identity in two similar temples that practice the same type of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, are affiliated with the same international Buddhist headquarters, but are in two distinctive national contexts. Previous studies recognize that religious identities are conditioned by national context (Bellah et al. 1985; Peek 2005; Read and Bartkowski 2000; Wuthnow 1998). They have also provided information about how the construction of religious identity is an interaction between congregational cultures and individual religious practitioners (Becker 1999; Cadge 2004; Chen 2008; Galonnier and Rios 2016; Ecklund 2006; Min 2010). However, lacking comparative studies of religious construction of similar religious communities in distinctive national contexts, work done by previous researchers does not explain how national contexts influence the construction of religious identities within faith communities. I argue that national context influences both individual-level

and temple-level cultures; in other words, national context is a little recognized factor that contributes to the construction of different religious identities, and does so in the following ways:

First, personal cultures—the interpretive framework that individuals use to embed religion in their lives—are contingent upon the dominant culture of the national context in which people practice their faith. As previous scholars acknowledge, individuals’ cultural frameworks are socially constructed (Alexander and Smith 1993; Lizardo 2017). Through explicit exposure and/or habitual learning, individuals acquire culturally appropriate ways—revealed in actions or articulations—to construct religious identities (Edgell 2006; Lizardo 2017; Madsen 2009; O’Brien 2015). At Pagoda Temple, personal cultures are the way through which Buddhists dutifully learn Buddhism, and are embedded in the Confucian culture of mainland China. At Lotus Temple, on the other hand, personal cultures, influenced by the culture of individualism in the United States, encourage the critical exploration of ideas and religion. By means of these different and in some ways opposing frameworks, Buddhists manifest diverse ways of seeking, receiving, and interpreting religious discourse, both in and outside their temples.

Second, the temple-level cultures are congruent with the majority or minority status of religion in the respective countries where adherents practice their faith (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Situated in mainland China, where Buddhism has a fragile majority status (Leamaster and Hu 2014; Pew Research Center 2012), Pagoda Temple manifests a strict temple culture with a clear group boundary with other Buddhist temples. It requires its members to sanction each other, and demands the use of Buddhist (even Pagoda) specific-speech and behavioral codes. This strict temple-level culture differs with its counterpart in the United States, where Chinese Buddhists are both religious and ethnic minorities (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). The US-based Lotus Temple

has a permissive temple culture with a flexible boundary. Group members permit the non-observance of temple-specific speech and behavioral codes.

Such influence of a majority/minority status on the group culture of religious organizations is often mentioned though seldom thoroughly discussed in the literature (Chen 2002; Smith et al. 1998; Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Based on my observation, I argue that for religious communities that see themselves as part of the major religion in their national context, the strictness of the group culture enables practitioners to highlight a symbolic boundary with the perceived “others” who practice the same religion and endorse a similar theology. The perceived need to highlight the symbolic boundaries explains why a strict temple culture emerges at the Pagoda Temple, and why Buddhists there observe Pagoda-specific language and behavioral codes in greeting, eating, and other ritualistic—as well as non-ritualistic—moments. However, even within permissive group cultures, for religious communities that see themselves as a minority religion in the national context, the communities are easily distinguishable from others theologically, as well as in rituals, practices, and architectural styles. The already existing and even imposing boundaries explain why monastic and lay members at the Lotus Temple in the United States compromise each other, constructing a permissive temple-level culture that permits the refusal of certain Lotus-specific—and even Buddhist—language and behavioral codes to integrate the temple into the broader and often secular society. Distinctive temple cultures are independent of the temple’s religious affiliation and its connection to the international headquarters, but are at least partly connected to the national context in which they are situated.

Third, echoing previous studies (Becker 1999; Cadge 2004; Chen 2008; Ecklund 2006; Min 2010), I found that the religious identities of Buddhists are constructed through interactions between personal cultures and temple-level cultures. Expanding on previous studies, I assert that

such interactions are conditioned by national contexts. This interaction occurs through Buddhists' internalization and application of the dominant cultural values in their respective national contexts, as well as their construction of an appropriate temple culture that enables them to maintain a boundary with the real or imagined secular other. Buddhists in Pagoda Temple, which calls for dutiful learning, construct intensive and temple-specific Buddhist identities. Buddhists at Lotus Temple, however, critically explore religion and construct individual-centered Buddhist identities by integrating Buddhism into other facets of their secular lives. In both temples, personal cultures, temple cultures, and religious individuals' embodiment of their religiosity mutually construct and reinforce each other. My comparison therefore shows that both the individual and temple-level cultures are dependent on the national contexts where people practice their faith and where the temples are situated. The construction of religious identity is indeed an interaction between religious people and their religious communities, but the interactions are context specific.

Finally, in addition to showing the mechanism by which national contexts influence people's construction of religious identity in their faith communities, this study contributes to the discussion of religion and ethnicity. Buddhists at both temples are self-identified ethnic Chinese. Yet, the content of their ethnicity is different. At Pagoda, ethnicity largely hinges on Confucianism. After moving to the United States, however, ethnic Chinese reconstruct personal cultures, or in Swidler's (1986: 275) phrase, are in "an unsettled cultural period" and re-tool their cultural toolkit to an individualistic framework that is informed by the national culture of the United States. The embodiment of ethnicity and religiosity is different in the two temples. This study invites scholars to further analyze the intersection between ethnicity and religion of seemingly identical ethnic groups, which practice their religion in different national contexts.

The study has limitations. As Strand and Lizardo (2015) argue, making cultural arguments is to make suggestive causal statements. Yet, this study does not aim to provide an exhaustive list of all possible causal relationships among national contexts, religious communities, and people's construction of religious identities. This limitation should be noted because China and the United States are large national contexts with a broad within-context variation, and my study is constrained by cross-sectional and qualitative analysis at only two temples. Further, although I have observed the relationship between the majority/minority status of religion and temple-level cultures, I hesitate to suggest that group cultures are *only* contingent upon national context, knowing that national context itself has a rich and varied cultural meaning.

However, the paper's contributions outweigh its limitations. I show how religious identity is dependent on the national context where people practice their faith. The personal cultures—namely, the interpretive frameworks through which people understand and embrace faith—are informed by the national-level collective culture. The group culture—namely, the temple-specific interactional patterns—is informed by the practitioners' *perceptions* of the majority/minority status of religion in their specific national context. And religious identities are constructed through an interaction between personal cultures and group cultures, both of which are conditioned by the national contexts. This mechanism is useful in future analysis of the religious identity of those who follow the same theology but who practice their faith in different national contexts.

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