THE ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES
OF YOUNG ASIAN AMERICANS

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by

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Abstract

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The following dissertation is an examination of the social construction and maintenance of traditional ethnic and religious identities among the rising generation of Asian Americans in the 21st century. Using an interviewed sample of 99 Asian American college student leaders at four public universities and a surveyed sample of 325 Asian American college students, I asked a set of parallel questions with regard to how the respondents understand their ethnic and religious backgrounds. The evidence based on these samples suggests that traditional identities are a constructive effort or a form of personal agency. These constructions however are derived from the available discourse in American public narratives, particularly that of race and religion. I show that not only do these public narratives produce different interpretations of ethnicity or religion when considered separately, but they also interact and inform one another in complex ways. This suggests that identities like these are both fluid and fixed relative to the social relationships embedded within family, friendships, schools, and local organizations who provide the grammar and syntax for the explanations individuals give for these identities.
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The question of identity has been a long and pervasive question in my life especially when as an adolescent and a young adult. Social scientists have pointed out that this pattern is indeed normal (much to my relief). More particularly, I felt that identity was so important precisely because the communities of which I participated continually impressed upon me the importance of being either Korean or Catholic, and much later, Protestant (or “Christian” as my church friends would say). In college it became more clear that these two identities pointed to a much larger story, the American story as I think of it, a story containing these two central themes in how we understand or imagine what we are as a nation (see Anderson 1991). And depending on the interest group one seemed to subsume the other (e.g. “Whether we’re Christian or Catholic or Buddhist, we’re all still Korean” as can be heard in a Korean student group. “Whether we’re black or white, Korean or Chinese, we’re all Christian” as can be heard in an evangelical Protestant student group.). And in still other situations hybrid versions of this talk appeared (e.g. “As Korean Christians we have a special role to play in our secular society”). It was in trying to make sense of this dynamic that led me to studying this phenomenon.

Throughout the process I learned a great deal not only about how to understand the nature of identity from a sociological view but also to better grasp the complexity of how we understand social life and what we do with that knowledge. I have come to
understand that objectivity is a slippery concept and that the social sciences work very hard to maintain as much of it as possible. Indeed there is much to be said for empirical testing and verification and all aspects that attempt to resemble the natural sciences. But I am also convinced that our values cannot be suspended entirely from the process of intellectual inquiry especially when asking questions for which we have a vested interest. What I am saying here is not new of course, but I simply want to express this view to the reader from the very beginning in order to continue that line of work which honestly presents itself with the objective standards of a given field but with an open understanding that such standards are informed by the personal values of the scholar at a given moment in his or her life. I hope that what is presented here will be insightful in what sociology can offer, and I hope also that I present as fairly as I can the different perspectives that inform the interpretation of the findings. This might be especially important in how advocacy and interest groups, ethnic or religious, might read this sort of material. So I leave up to the reader as much as possible the judgments as to what one ought to do with these findings. That said, may this study prove rewarding in its reading as it has been in its making.
As the racial and ethnic as well as religious composition of the United States grows increasingly diverse, the age-old question of identity, whether individually or corporately, presses upon us as a nation at the beginning of a new millennium. Identity is important, not so much because of the demographic evidence provided by scholars (of which there is much), but by the changes felt in the everyday reality of Americans across the nation. Examples in the media for instance, be they from film or television, all point to an increasing cultural awareness of ethnic and racial diversity. Following the tragic events of September 11th, religious diversity has taken on renewed popular attention, both in the growing presence of non-Christian religions as well as the distinct and disparate Christian voices in the public square (compare the responses by Pat Robertson, Pope John Paul II, and Franklin Graham). This diversity then raises new questions about the character of American identity—what shape will it take in light of increased pluralism and what dynamics will help mold and fashion its contours and boundaries?

The mention of ethnic, racial and religious diversity is by no means a minor or incidental illustration of American pluralism; these facets of American history have profoundly marked the culture, social structure, and every day lives of its residents (see Smith 1978). To understand the American people is to understand the continued tension
of *e pluribus unum* both in ethnic and racial terms and in religious terms. The fact of pluralism is evident in the way it has been codified in the central documents that sustain the political structure. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees the free exercise of religion regardless of belief, and that no favoritism be shown to any group by the federal government. The 13th through 15th Amendments abolished slavery, created equal protection under the law, and protected civil rights thereby shifting the way in which Americans viewed the essentiality of being human beyond that of skin color. The legal recognition of these particular freedoms based on religious and racial lines further illustrates the reality that social distinctions were present and remain present based along these categories. And these social distinctions are varied enough and wide enough to warrant the protection of a multiplicity of minorities against the potential tyranny of the majority whether religious or racial or ethnic.

The historical accounts of these social distinctions have long been a staple of research and indeed one could spend an entire lifetime poring over the vast number of stories detailing the events of particular communities identified along the lines of ethnicity, race or religion. In earlier generations, the emphasis in these histories appears to have been on the immigrant groups and the struggle for integration into the American mainstream, namely those groups typically originating from western Europe. During that time sociologists proposed explanations for the dynamics at work in these groups as well as in the nation with the aim of discovering universal patterns of behavior. These approaches at least with respect to ethnicity and religion have often suggested a linear decline, such that they were in time to be “artifacts of an outmoded past,” as Timothy Smith stated (1978). These theories of decline came to be described as assimilation, the
decline of traditional ethnicity, and secularization, the decline or traditional religion. The starting point of this decline is not clear but what is clear is that the decline of ethnicity and religion have both been attributed in part to the process of modernization (e.g. Nielsen 1985, Berger 1967).

1.1 Theoretical Reconsiderations: The Integration of the New Immigrants

Much has changed since these historical accounts and sociological propositions were first suggested. In the early 20th century we have seen the influx of new immigrants arriving from the nations of Eastern Europe thus provoking still further historical studies of these groups as well as renewed tests of sociological theories. Would we again see evidence of assimilation and secularization? One response was offered early on by H. Richard Niebuhr who at the end of the roaring 20s argued that the diversity of Christian denominations in the United States over the course of nearly 200 years is a result of class and racial divisions (1929). This in a sense suggested if economic assimilation refers to the achieving of the desired class status (i.e. middle class), then new immigrants would evidence their acceptance into the American mainstream by virtue of his church/denominational affiliation. Thus the new immigrants continue to fit into at least part of the pattern predicted earlier on. At the same time, Niebuhr continued, race continued to be an unsurpassable boundary such that this aforementioned pattern did not apply to the case of African Americans. While his argument was not meant to be a treatise on either secularization or assimilation, we do see inklings in this work of some of the problems associated with these linear decline theories; race for whatever reason was somehow exempt from these predictions.
Years later another partial answer to the question of assimilation and secularization was suggested by Will Herberg in his seminal essay, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1960). He described that the mode of incorporation for newly arrived immigrants was not through one vast cultural melting pot, but through three religious melting pots marked by the three monotheistic religions mentioned in his title. This argument placed in the forefront and privileged religion as the distinctive characteristic of the typical American; ethnicity as assimilation would predict would pass away.

A mere decade later a series of seismic cultural shifts occurred simultaneously, one catching the attention of the American public far more than the other. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s again brought race into the center of discussion. While the right to vote and receive fair and equal treatment regardless of color were protected, black Americans were often denied these in their everyday lives. Leading the way in this cause were the religious leaders of various African American churches, most notably Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Taken from the theoretical predictions of a previous generation, such a movement should not have occurred if assimilation and secularization were indeed the rule and not the exception. Race continued to be a significant marker for many and the role of religion was very much in the limelight, and further calling into question the veracity of these earlier models.  

The second and less noticed shift that was taking place was in the very ethnic and racial demography of the United States. The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 changed the parameters for entry into the United States by removing sending-nation quotas that were set in previous decades. This produced the newest and largest wave of immigration since the nation’s inception and as is well known, the new wave of immigrants increasingly
arrived from non-European shores, most notably from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean Basin (Parrillo 2003). In addition to this unexpected pattern lay the surprising story behind the religions of the new immigrants. Many of them, we have recently learned are in fact Christian, both Protestant and Catholic (Jasso et al. 2003, Jenkins 2002), and yet many are not. Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims for instance now belong to the religious scene in greater numbers than has ever been seen before, leading Harvard anthropologist, Diane Eck to call a “new religious America” (2001).

With these two shifts, non-European ethnic diversity and both Christian and non-Christian religious diversity, the question regarding secularization and assimilation as theoretical paradigms to explain the current state of America was again raised. Secularization in particular was drawn in connection with the growing religious diversity as suggested in Peter Berger’s work, The Sacred Canopy (1967) published just two years after the passing of the Hart-Cellar act. There he argued that as religious belief loses its authority in the mind of an individual (i.e. secularization), competing “reality-defining agencies” set in (127); hence religious pluralism is a correlate to secularization. The new environment engendered by the new immigration with its increasing numbers of non-Christians would spell the onset of the proposed decline of religious plausibility. If ever there was a search for a sign, this should have been it.

But in fact this was not the case, neither with respect to religion nor with ethnicity. As research accumulated over the past decades, it has become apparent that assimilation is resisted or at least slowed considerably among the new immigrants (e.g. Portes 1984, Waters 1999). Furthermore, the religiously pluralized condition of the American religious landscape did nothing to neither impede nor refute the presence,
practice and plausibility of any religious tradition. In fact what we witnessed was not only a trend toward increased sensitivity to ethnic difference among the new immigrants, but also a resurgent interest in the 1970s in European ethnicity as well. Furthermore, religious adherence and practice has never been more vibrant than now, both for new immigrants as well as long term citizens. What then did this suggest for the role of these theoretical paradigms that are so deeply interwoven with our understanding of American history in terms of its ethnic, racial, and religious diversity?

1.2 Social Integration and Identity

In addition (and perhaps not coincidentally) to the notable exceptions to these theoretical paradigms, discussion over the nature of identity has also garnered much attention in recent decades. Defining who one is has gained a niche not only among students and scholars of existential philosophy, but also for community leaders and families alike. Identifying with a new religious movement, appropriating new gender norms, have been some of the more popular examples of this new focus on identity and its many variations. These changes have thus received renewed attention in social research (e.g. Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Callero 2003, Gleason 1985, Somers 1994). This research has typically concluded that the term “identity” has grown increasingly complex in that its applied meanings in political contexts have overlapped with its theoretical meanings in scholarly contexts. Secondly the research presents contested views between those who argue that contemporary identities are highly fluid, and those who see these identities as more stable (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Callero 2003). Both agree that identities are highly situational, and constructed by the individual or
community in response to their perceptions of the larger culture but differ in how durable or flexible these identities are.

Explanations for this new understanding and construal of identity have been ascribed to multiple sources depending on the level of analysis considered: intensified forms of individualism (Bellah et al. 1996), social outgrowths of the philosophical changes brought about by modernity (Giddens 1991), a therapeutic culture (Hunter 2000), or the after-effects of the cultural revolution of the 1960s to name a few. Thus have concepts such as “reflexive identities,” “protean identity,” a “saturated self,” and “fragmented self” helped us to better understand the changes in how the self is portrayed.

Are the questions raised with respect to identity in any way connected to the questions raised with respect to understanding the nature of ethnic, racial and religious diversity? Have these changes in the construal of the self affected the ethnic and religious identities appropriated by new immigrants? If so, what consequences might this have in our understanding of the dynamics in cultural integration within the new ethnic, racial and religious America? If identity is understood now as a fluid, situational, and reflexive what does this say then about ethnic and religious identity in such a context?

1.3 Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Identity: the Case of the Rising Generation of Asian Americans

I argue that these coinciding changes in how we view both the trajectory of these social categories and the nature of identity do in fact interplay on each other. But interestingly enough, little attention is paid to how these facets intersect. Much work has been produced over the intersection of racial, class, and gender identities (Frable 1997)
but we know less about the ways in which religion factors among these. If we focus only on the worlds of the new immigrants for instance, we know from ethnographic studies that the communities from which these identities are housed are complex and sometimes produce contradictory portrayals of how these cultural markers impact, inform, and transform each other. For instance Karen Chai’s work (1998) on second-generation Korean Americans in a Boston-area congregation found that the members’ Christian identity became the “all-consuming identity” (311), whereas Kelly Chong (1998) found in her study of a second-generation Korean church in Chicago that these members’ ethnic identity was reinforced through religion. Both studies are rich in texture describing the vitality of these living communities but to a certain extent they like others, interact less with the discussion over how identity itself is undergoing change. We do not yet know for instance what is meaning attributed to traditional identities whether for new immigrants or third generation European Americans as identity itself increasingly appears to be a complex and fluid experience.

This is particularly important to the rising generation of Americans, whether they are children of immigrants or are themselves recent arrivals to these shores. This generation, born to parents who belong to the baby boomer generation has been immersed in a time of increased cultural politics, often positing one identity or another as a signifier for representation of an entire subculture deserving of rights and protection within the American legal system. We know little about the complex microcosm that these young men and women live in and how these various identities and the social milieu that helps shape and produce them work together. The question of identity, its meaning and construction, becomes all the more pronounced.
In this dissertation, I ask first, how the rising generation of Asian Americans in the 21st century understands, appropriates, constructs, and maintains ethnic, racial and religious identities. Second, I ask how, or in what ways, do these ethnic, racial and religious identities among Asian Americans interact on one another? In examining these interrelationships we can understand better what structural and cultural mechanisms affect these identities and their interaction, not only for Asian Americans but also for other minority groups and perhaps even within the white Christian majority.

I explore these questions through the words of college-age Asian American student leaders on four public college campuses in the US. During the fall of 2000 I visited these campuses and spoke with 99 Asian Americans spanning multiple ethnic backgrounds and multiple religious backgrounds to gain a sense of the comparability among the groups within this racial category. In addition I conducted a web-based survey in the spring of 2001 where I asked similar questions of some of the students within these organizations to gain a preliminary sense of how other Asian Americans might view these traditional backgrounds (N = 325).

I argue that young Asian Americans participate in the complex phenomenon of interlacing public narratives of ethnicity, race, and religion. To the extent that identity definitions are drawn selectively (and often unintentionally) from these narratives provides some evidence as to that identities are simultaneously both fluid and durable. But apart from the personal agency with which one appropriates these narratives, the narratives themselves place constraints on how personal ethnic and religious identities are defined and understood. When considered together identities and the narratives that
inform them gives some sense of internal coherence in the personal lives of young Asian Americans.

1.4 Plan of the Dissertation

The following chapters explore in further detail the responses made by these students both in the interviews and the surveys. Chapter 2 sets out to provide a basic framework with an explanation of the various terms that are used in this study as well as the notion of public narratives. Towards the conclusion of the chapter we will also gain an initial glance at some of the basic features of the respondents with respect to identity. Chapter 3 looks at the meaning, context, and significance that Asian Americans ascribe to ethnic identities. I consider not only the similarities between these responses with those in other studies, but also the ways in which these responses do not align with the expectations suggested by previous work. In chapter 4 I follow this same pattern and apply it to the responses on religious identity. Chapter 5 looks at the significance of choosing between ethnic and religious identities, the rationales used to explain such choices, and its significance to identity construction in the early part of the twenty-first century. The final chapter includes some concluding remarks summarizing the basic findings of the study and how they might connect to the wider discussion over public narratives and American culture. Included at the end is a methodological appendix which details the rationale behind the sampling approach as well as examples of the research tools used.
Endnotes

1 This is not to suggest that statistical evidence is somehow unimportant. In many ways it provides verification and corroboration to the felt experience of lived reality. Findings based on the recent Census 2000 shows a new racial portrait where white-non-Hispanics constitute a smaller proportion of the population but remain the numerical majority (cite numbers) while black and white Hispanics now take on the role of the largest racial minority population (about 13 percent) followed by African Americans (11 percent I think) and Asian Americans (including Pacific Islanders and those who are originally from the Indian subcontinent). Furthermore, academic surveys, ethnographic fieldwork suggests that religious pluralism has accompanied this new racial and ethnic mosaic (see Jasso et al pilot study, the New Immigrant Survey (2003), the National Survey of Religious Identification (2001), the Hispanic Churches survey (2000); Warner and Wittner (1998), Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000).

2 Here too we should consider the increasing presence of religious and spiritual discussion in popular media (e.g. television: 7th Heaven, Joan of Arcadia; film: Contact, Keeping the Faith, Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ; literature: the Left Behind series). An insightful sociological perspective of the growth of popular religious expression is Robert Wuthnow’s observations on the recent fascination with “angels” (1998: 114-141).

3 I realize that some readers may already take issue with the interchanging use of the terms “ethnic” and “racial.” I do so intentionally for the purpose of emphasizing the difficulty that these common terms have on how we understand identity which will be addressed later.

4 We might include here too that the 1960s heralded the first instance of a Catholic into the office of President. For some this clearly suggested that assimilation had indeed taken place for the many non-Protestant Christians who had arrived on the shores of the United States two or three generations earlier. And here too can be found evidence in support of Herberg’s “triple melting pot” thesis.
CHAPTER 2
THEORIZING AND SITUATING
YOUNG ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

2.1 Introduction

This study draws on the intersection of three expansive areas of sociological research: identity, race and ethnicity, and religion. In this chapter I will situate the study within the literature concerning the sociology of identity and narrative theory. The reason for this is simply that a great deal of ink has been spilt over the concepts of ethnic and religious identity, but it appears that there is very little in the way of a unifying theme that draws them to our sociological understanding of identity per se. What appears to be lacking in much of the sociological literature on the specific meanings and consequences of ethnic and religious identities is any interaction with social psychological and symbolic interactionist research. While our understanding of how racial and religious dynamics are changing, studies that have drawn these conclusions typically describe them under the rubric of “identity” which I and other scholars have found confusing. Thus my interest here is not to present an exhaustive overview of the sociological study of identity, but rather to draw out the main insights and arguments from this literature that inform this study. Upon doing so, we may then draw some application toward understanding how ethnicity and religion act as identities, and extend the discussion further in
understanding the dynamics of race and religion in the contemporary American scene.

Second I will introduce the concept of public narratives and its implications for identity. Finally I will make a case for the utility in studying Asian Americans for the purposes of understanding racial, ethnic and religious identity.

2.2 Clarifying the Terms: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

The main problem that should be addressed first is defining the terms. What do I refer to when I speak of race, ethnicity, and religion? Each of these terms could include an entire treatise just for each on the topic of definition alone, and to some extent the central question of this study is precisely to address this issue of definition and meaning as it is understood at the ground level. For the purposes of this study I will refer to the fairly standard uses of these terms. The history and etymology of these terms is not the central focus here and instead I refer the reader to those works whose purpose is more directed toward this endeavor (e.g. Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2002, Parrillo 2003, Zelinsky 2001).

What seems clear when looking at the definitions of these words and how they are appropriated in textbooks and other research, is that race and ethnicity are sometimes coupled together and at other instances ethnicity and religion are coupled together, but religion and race are never brought together. In light of this pattern I will provide these definitions beginning first with race, followed by ethnicity and finally religion to show how and why these terms are connected in this manner.

Race according as most scholars think of it is a socially constructed category which divides individuals into groups based on visible biological similarities such as skin
color or facial features and the like (e.g. Parrillo 2003). When speaking of this term as a “social construct” I am not ignoring the reality of these visible distinctives; instead I am referring to the social import and meaning attached to these characteristics. For instance race refers to different physical distinctions based on the culture and time period in which those categories are created and used. The history of the United States census for instance is a classic example of the socially constructed nature of race as seen in the following table:

**TABLE 2.1**

**CENSUS CATEGORIES FOR RACE**

**IN SELECT YEARS**

1790, 1890, 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>1790</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial Categories</td>
<td>Free Whites</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slaves</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Black or Negro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All other Free Persons, except Indians not taxed</td>
<td>Mulatto</td>
<td>Indian (American)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Eskimo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>Aleut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Quadroon</td>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Octoroon</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>Hawaiian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Samoan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guamanian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other API</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Adopted from the US Bureau of the Census (see Gibson and Jung 2002).
In 1790, when designating racial groups, the Census categories included three categories: free whites, slaves, and “all other Free Persons, except Indians.” One hundred years later the categories shifted to include eight possible racial groups, and a century afterward six main categories were available with an additional nine subcategories for those who were of Asian or Pacific Islander descent. Race as seen here is significant as a means of classifying the American people along perceived physical features which have some social significance at that given period of time. Observing this phenomenon has led to what is now described as racial formation theory as formulated by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994). They argue that every generation participates in a racial project which they describe as “an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (1994: 56). The theory of racial formation then refers to this process repeated over and over across time. It is this sense of race that I will be using when discussing issues of identity.

Ethnicity is often conflated with race for a variety of reasons. It is also perhaps the most difficult of the three identity terms to articulate as Wilbur Zelinsky (2001) shows in his well-titled treatise, *The Enigma of Ethnicity*.¹ At various times “ethnicity” is associated with ancestry, region, language, religion and as seen in the previous example, race. And much like race it is a categorical term and socially constructed as well within a particular time and place. Zelinsky reviews for instance the research demonstrating the emergence of ethnic group labels such as “German American” and “Irish American” as uniquely recent in many ways (2001: 30-35). That is, the context of world wars and other time-specific socio-political events helped develop new ways of conceptualizing oneself within a categorical concept called an “ethnic group” which would have been considered
absurd under other conditions and environments. To this end, Zelinsky’s definition of an ethnic group is helpful: “The ethnic group is any substantial aggregation of persons who are perceived by themselves and/or others to share a unique set of cultural and historical commonalities” (2001: 43). Because ethnicity is so contingent on contextual factors it refers to an “imagined” sense of belonging (Anderson 1991). One takes part in the history and culture of a community that originated long ago and lives on to this day in oneself. The quality of ethnicity then as Zelinsky continues is generic; that is the qualities of being ethnic are nearly interchangeable regardless of whatever ethnicity one claims. As Zelinsky humorously puts it, ethnicity “means remaining our own special cultural selves but also being just like everyone else (2001: 48). Both ethnicity and race then appear to be both fluid and yet fixed; that is, the meaning of these terms varies from context to context but unless those contexts change in some significant manner, its meaning appears fixed for that period and place.

How then does religion fit with ethnicity and race in terms of definition? Again we are presented with a problem of definition. How one defines religion varies also by time and location, an approach variously described as “situational,” “action theory,” and “symbolic realism” (Christiano et al. 2002: 7). Nevertheless some core exists at least with respect to some working sociological definition which I will use for this study. As Christiano et al. cite, religion is “the individual and social experience of the sacred that is manifested in mythologies, rituals, and ethos, and integrated into a collective such as a community or an organization” (2002: 19). Again we see that there is certain degree of subjectivity involved in understanding religion where the experience of the sacred can
well vary from person to person. And where a group of individuals band together based
on some agreed experience of the sacred, a religion is “born” so to speak.²

We can see here that race, ethnicity, and religion share in common a contingent
nature to their meaning. The context within which these terms are used invariably affects
their definition. Race differs from ethnicity and religion in that it typically has its
grounding in observable physical characteristics. But the fluidity of ethnicity is such that
it can, and sometimes does, incorporate biological distinctions as part of its imagined
community boundaries. Religion for the most part differs from race in that its grounding
has very little grounding with observable biological markers (e.g. a medical scan of
chromosomes cannot determine whether one is Catholic or Buddhist). Ethnicity,
however can at various times incorporate experiences of the sacred as part of the defining
characteristics of a group. Hence ethnicity in this way is a flexible term potentially
incorporating either race or religion or both.

2.3 Clarifying the Terms Part II: Personal and Social Identity

Having established some working grounds on how our substantive terms will be
used we can then move to the central term used in this study: identity,³ a concept that is at
once both simple and straightforward and extraordinarily complex. We know it in a
taken-for-granted sense and yet if asked to define it we often find ourselves at a loss for
words or in many cases invoking a very circular logic: “What is my identity? My identity
is me, it’s who I am.” Indeed this problem of definition has been the source of much
debate and deliberation for centuries on end. Sociology while a relatively recent player
in the history of knowledge, has brought to light some new theoretical tools and concepts
that have deepened our understanding of this term and as Timothy Owens points out, “identity” is a relatively new concept even within the study of social psychology (though the term has been in use since as early as the 14th century (2003:207)). He offers our starting definition for identity thusly: “categories people use to specify who they are and to locate themselves relative to other people…[I]dentity implies both a distinctiveness (I am not like them or a “not-me”) and a sameness as others (I am like them or a “me-too”)(Owens, 2003:207).

As Owens and others have noted, the concept of identity has taken an unfortunate turn in social research where imprecise and inappropriate uses of the word have led to a plethora of studies which have produced a wide (and often confusing) variety of findings and interpretations. A number of important corrections have appeared in the recent literature in sociology that have attempted to delineate the difference among the various uses of this term (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Callero 2003, Cerulo 1997, Gleason 1983, Vryan, Adler, and Adler 2003). Particularly important is the recognition that the term “identity” has transformed in meaning and importance even within intellectual circles, and that this transformation has been relatively recent (since the 1960s) and often closely tied to (and sometimes conflated with) identitarian politics (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Our focus here again is not to present the complex history and debate over this term, but rather to make clear which definition will be used for the purposes of this study.

Given the earlier definition above, we are still left with a fairly wide range of interpretive meanings associated with this term which may not be germane to understanding our notions of ethnic and religious identities. Following Owens’ summary
of the vast literature on identity, three categories for the term “identity” are of relevance for social scientific approaches to the concept: personal identities, social identities, and collective identities (2003). The study of ethnic and religious identities can be described within each of these three types of identity and all of them would qualify as sociological. With respect to personal identity, Sheldon Stryker incorporates the impact of social structure, where identity is tied to one’s social network. One is typically faced with a variety of choices of identity at any given moment and in any given situation; in light of this every individual creates an identity salience hierarchy where one’s location in a given social structure affects the probability that one identity will be more prominent than another (Owens 2003: 214-218). Thus ethnic and religious identities in this sense might be emblematic of the nature of one’s social networks. One’s personal view of him or herself is based on the localized experience of relationships in which one is embedded.

Taken at another level, ethnic and religious identities might be markers of social identities which refers to an identity derived from socially recognized belonging to specific groups, statuses and categories (Owens. 2003: 224). This is the level at which we are probably most used to the sociological meaning of identity, and where ethnic and religious identities seem to fit best. Much like personal identity, the theoretical drive is an interrelationship between the individual as an actor and the groups to which one associates. As Henri Tajfel explains, “[H]owever rich and complex may be the individuals’ view of themselves in relation to their surrounding world…some aspects of that view are contributed by the membership of certain social groups or categories. Some of these memberships are more salient than others; and some may vary in salience in time as a function of a variety of social situations” (1981:255). Thus an individual may have
personal motivations for taking on a particular social identity but in the process it is also the case that some of the characteristics of that group will shape that social identity. What is also valuable here is the idea that in-group, out-group boundaries develop through social identification. In other words one’s affiliation with a group is at least partly defined by some other group to which one is in direct contrast based on actual or perceived conflict. Studies of ethnic and religious group identities often describe this dynamic though rarely with reference to this framework. Alejandro Portes (1984) for example looked at the resilient Cuban identity among workers in Miami and discovered that an ingroup-outgroup dynamic was occurring between themselves and their white employer. The experience of discrimination helped solidify their Cuban identity as the social identity which acted as a boundary marker between themselves and their prejudiced employer. Christian Smith and his colleagues (1998) interviewed a variety of evangelical Protestants and discovered that their social identity was religious in nature and this also created an outgroup orientation. In this case their outgroup was defined as any relevant American progressive sociopolitical groups whose values they perceive to be at odds with theirs.

Finally, ethnic and religious identities can be thought of at the collective identity level. This is as Owens (2003) observes a new employment of ideas presented in the earlier days of sociology. The ideas of “class consciousness” derived from the works of Karl Marx and the “conscience collective” concept by Emile Durkheim come most readily to mind. Collective identity refers to notions of how a “set of individuals interact to create a shared identity and action system” (Owens 2003:226; see also Melucci 1989). This is useful when looking at how entire groups express patterned behavior, as opposed
to looking strictly at a few individuals within that group which is more the purview of social identity. Studies of ethnic and religious movements fall under this rubric and where ethnicity and religion act as identifiers for a given group. The group itself develops a sense of who they are and how they should behave.

To summarize: Identity is both a social product and a social force as suggested early in the 20th century by sociologist Charles Cooley: “One has no identity apart from society; one has no individuality apart from identity” (1902:21). Social structures both at the “local” level (i.e. the actual relationships in which one is embedded) and the “imagined community” level impact how one understands ethnic, racial, and religious identification. And at the same time, the individual takes action within these structures to transform these ascribed understandings of identity to affect the structures in which he or she is embedded. This interplay between individual agency and social structure is arguably a more sound approach to understanding the concept of identity such that it avoids the excesses of either psychological or social-ecological determinisms (Sewell 1992). In addition, for the purposes of this study, I will focus more on the personal and social identity levels of analysis, mainly for the simple reason that the data used here are not compatible for a study of how a local group develops its collective identity. Thus when I speak of identities I will be describing them in the “social identity” sense, or what the identities as grouping categories are perceived to mean, and in the “personal identity” sense, or what the categorical term means to the individual. However, one important aspect of the collective identity approach summarized by Karen Cerulo (1997) will be very useful in addressing certain central issues, namely the socially constructed nature of collective identity.
2.4 Excursus: In Search of a Framework and the Problem of Interpreting Meaning

Apart from developing some of the basic terms for this project, one of the largest problems I encountered in completing this research was the problem of interpretation. Because the evidence presented here is mainly based on the words of the interviewees I was struck with the epistemological question: how do I interpret what they are saying to me? It is one thing to determine through observation and precise survey instrumentation whether one does in fact live in an “all white neighborhood” for instance. It is quite another thing to be told this by the interviewee. A great deal of trust is necessary that the respondent is indeed giving at least some accurate portrayal of his or her surroundings. But I was unsatisfied with this conclusion perhaps due to my own particular biases about how we can know anything accurate in the empirical sense from individual report.

It is here that I turned to Karen Cerulo’s (1997) summary work on the research concerning identity construction. Since the 1960s and perhaps earlier, some sociologists have stressed the concept of social construction. That is, our sense of social reality is “built” by us to a certain extent—the world in which we live must have some kind of significance, and it is perhaps part of our essential nature to do so. Thus, because of this need for meaning, we build vast edifices of interpretation that add up to what Peter Berger (1967) described as “worldviews.”

It is this idea of social construction that helped provide a way out of my research quandary. While one cannot make “hard and fast” empirical conclusions about an individual’s world based on his or her reported response, one can know at least how an individual perceives of his or her world. And based on these perceptions we can at the
very least conclude whether this perception is unique from others, shared by others, and how it affects other perceptions about life. Identity then is an enterprise of social construction on the part of the individual. It is a way of looking at how an individual develops and structures his or her world. And because my focus here is on ethnic, racial and religious identities, I could conceptualize them as perception-informing carriers of value systems and explanations of how the world works and how to make sense of experiences in sacred or cultural terms or both.

But we know that this is only part of the story. As suggested earlier, individual agency has a counterpart in social structure. It is not enough to know how an individual makes sense of his or her world; these tools are embedded and are part of the culture and structure in which one lives. And sociologists typically argue that the origins for personal agency can be found in the social environment in which one is embedded. Here was the second problem I encountered: how can we know based on interview responses what is at work in the social environments in which these people exist? I again concluded that empirically-verifiable social structures such as family dynamics or neighborhood composition cannot be assessed based on interview responses. One can only gauge a sense of how the individual *interprets* the social structures in which he or she resides. We can gauge how one interprets the ways in which her sense of identity came about as a result of social environment and influence, and look at the differences between various individuals categorized according to ethnic, racial or religious identities.

Reliance on individual interpretation for both the agentic and structural dimensions of identity was worrisome. Not only was the study’s framework based on the perceptions of the individual, but even deriving the social correlates requires a reliance on
the report of the individual. In a sense both cause and effect could only be assessed as *perceptions* of cause and effect. Reaching this conclusion was humbling if not disconcerting as to what exactly one can learn sociologically from these interviews.\(^5\) It was in this quandary that I happened across the debates over postmodern philosophy and social science research.

### 2.5 Narrative and Identity Research

Identity research as mentioned earlier has undergone a number of disputes in a variety of venues. Imprecise distinguishing between “self” and “identity” was one; clarifying the activist’s use of “identity” and the social scientist’s use was another. And it was within this literature that the problem became clearer. According to Brubaker and Cooper (2000) a split has occurred between the traditional uses of the term identity by symbolic interactionists and social psychologists and the more recent uses offered by postmodern theorists. In short the split can be summarized as this: traditional views of identity describe identity as enduring, fixed, and stable; postmodernists view identity as just the opposite: identity is temporal, fluid, and unstable. The reasons for this recent change are many and complex, and one should consult a social history of ideas to understand the many dynamics that have taken place. But the significant aspect here was the postmodern explanations that account for why identity as a concept is “unstable” and what course of action can we take as researchers as a result.

While identities have this capacity to describe and explain, postmodernists argue, they are also in constant flux. That is, identities are under constant evaluation as the individual negotiates the selves produced by the identities. As different selves interact
with one another they shape and transform each other which in turn affect the content and meaning of these identities to the individual. One’s self in a given moment of the life course might be reflected as a “middle-aged” identity. At the same time one’s self as a racial minority, a black identity for example, might interact with the middle-aged identity. An individual with these two identities might then interpret his or her life experiences through the interaction of these two identities and the meaning systems that come with them. More so, these identities also affect one another such that the meanings with which one employs to explain a given situation is often an admixture of multiple identities that have influenced one another.

Identities then are in constant flux as a result of shifts that occur temporally, spatially, and internally for the individual within the political economy and culture, and within his or her social networks. As one ages, the meaning and salience of various identities changes significantly. Identifying oneself as racially black at the age of 20 could reflect a growing awareness and ownership of the painful history associated with African Americans, while at the age of 60 it may reflect an emphasis on sustaining and strengthening the social bonds within the local African American community.

Identity construction is also conditioned by the shifts that take place in the political economy and culture in which one lives as one ages. To be black may reflect a certain degree of prominence within the cultural mainstream in the early 21\textsuperscript{st} century, especially if one is between the ages of 20 and 30 years (consider the impact of African American culture within the entertainment and sports industries). But to be black may also refer to disenfranchisement within the political economy of the United States in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century as represented in lower quality educational institutions in predominantly
black neighborhoods, greater levels of police harassment, and feelings of suspicion in the workplace.

Aside from these macro-level factors that affect identity construction, it is also the case that the relational networks within which one exists help shape and transform various identities to which one ascribes. These networks also vary across one’s progress through the life course and through changes taking place within the political economy and culture in which one resides. A 21st century 20-year-old African American’s racial identity may be affected by her parents who remind her of their personal history and of the history of African Americans over the past three centuries. Her identity is also and perhaps more strongly influenced by what her peers impart to her. Her friends may identify racially as African and Latina Americans who may emphasize the more present concerns of being a racial minority especially within their local context, such as college or work environment (e.g. who one can date and marry, affirmative action enrollment and achievement). A 60-year-old African American’s interpersonal networks may consist of peers living within the local neighborhood and fellow church members as well as her children and grandchildren. These relationships can then alter her sense of being African American as other concerns are more salient to her (e.g. who to vote for in the mayoral election, imparting cultural wisdom to the next generation). These factors of aging, political economy and culture, and interpersonal networks all play some role in structuring identities and place particular limits on how identity is shaped by the individual.

These explanations which inform the postmodern argument are strikingly similar to that of the symbolic interactionist views of identity. Both demonstrate the interrelated
nature of agency and structure. Both point to different emphases of social structure whether it be the local relational network, location, or point in time. What they do not share in common is their interpretation of the outcomes. Symbolic interactionists argue for the veracity of identities as a result of social structures that constrain their malleability; postmodern theorists argue that these social structures are precisely the means that subvert any sense of stable identity. While these theoretical disputes persist, it occurred to me that stability and fluidity of identity are not in diametric opposition to each other with respect to identity at the level of perception. The social conditions in which one is embedded both in temporal and spatial dimensions can affect the perception that that identity is at times “unchangeable” and at other times “fluid.” And we can see this demonstrated in the narratives imparted in personal talk.

According to postmodern theoretical approaches, we can know the ways in which an individual narrates his or her identities. That is, the grammar and syntax, and stories that one uses in describing or explaining one’s identities reveals both personal agency as well as the effects of social structure insofar as they are orient their verbal expression. Margaret Somers (1994) mentions four characteristics to narrative theory that allow it to be useful as a tool for social science research: relationality of parts, causal emplotment, selective appropriation, and temporality, sequence and place. As she summarizes:

Together these dimensions suggest narratives are constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by casual emplotment. Unlike the attempt to produce meaning by placing an event in a specified category, narrativity precludes sense-making of a singular isolated phenomenon. Narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events. Indeed, the chief characteristic of narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network of relationships (however incoherent or unrealizable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices. (Somers 1994: 616)
When looking at how one describes one’s ethnic and religious identities, our attention is focused on the way an individual appropriates his or her significant relationships (both concrete and abstract) and how these bear on identity. As Somers states, “Narrative then makes sense when it has a history and relationality associated with it” (1994: 617).

Employing this frame allows us to see textual data as a way to understand the dynamics of social structure and personal agency. Each narrative has specific parameters or a plot so to speak that arguably reveal the social structure, while the creativity in constructing the narrative, especially with respect to how the individual interprets herself (or acts) within it points to personal agency (1994:617). This then opens the doors to thinking of different types of narrative which one can analyze and interpret.

Somers further elaborates on this concept by offering four dimensions of narrative: ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarrativers (617). For our purposes, we will mainly concentrate on all of these with the exception of the conceptual. As she states,

[O]ntological narratives are the stories that social actors use to make sense of…their lives. [They] are used to define who we are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to do…People act…in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives—however fragmented, contradictory or partial. (1994: 618).

Fairly similar to the idea of personal identity, this element of narrativity emphasizes the individual’s unique story describing him or herself. The individual’s ontological narrative may be embedded within larger narratives but nonetheless, it provides one with a feeling of internal coherence—that one makes sense to him or herself.
Public narratives on the other hand “are those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand, micro or macro-stories…” (Somers 1994:619). As suggested earlier, ontological narratives can and often are embedded in other larger stories, stories attached to people groups, nations, world religions etc. Each of these public narratives then places our ontological stories in relationship to stories that cover groups of individuals into a definable community, located in a specific point in time and place, and perhaps extending itself across these two dimensions. These public narratives, like all narratives are not limitless, but rather constrained by plot and what Somers calls “selective criteria” (619).

Metanarratives are a subset of public narratives. These are “masternarratives” in which we are embedded as contemporary actors in history and as social scientists” (Somers 1994: 619). That is, scholars participate in the development of public narratives. As mentioned in the previous chapter, theories of declining salience in ethnicity and religion codified as assimilation and secularization are plots. And these plots are embedded still further in the larger plot we have described as Modernity. They are then transmitted through the locations in which we develop our sense of who we are based on our relationships with teachers, parents, ministers and friends: educational institutions, family, religious institutions, peer networks. Metanarratives inform other public narratives that inform smaller units in society. So for instance, one might gain the an idea of the Christian public narrative through one’s church, but embedded within the sermon of the minister, one also is exposed to the metanarrative of secularization and possibly modernization as well.
One can imagine then the interaction between ontological and public narratives as a textual way of describing the interaction of personal agency and social structure. Personal stories allow the individual to act, but because they draw from public narratives they are also constrained by the limits of words, grammar and syntax that each public story offers. A great deal of negotiation can occur in the individual when faced with conflicting stories by which she understands who she is, where she fits in, and how she should act. It is in this framework that this study is based.

2.6 Racial and Religious Public Narratives and the Rising Generation of Asian Americans

I argue that two personal identities are particularly salient for most Asian Americans, especially those either born or raised in the United States. These identities or ontological narratives are explicitly defined as ethnic and religious. Asian American ethnic and religious ontological narratives are social identities that draw from multiple public narratives. These public narratives include specific stories associated with particular ethnicities and religions, as well as American metanarratives, particularly racial and religious. What these personal identity narratives look like and how they are related to public narratives is the subject of the remaining chapters. As identities and narratives are not created sui generis, we will pay particular attention to the web of relationships (real or abstract) that house these identity narratives.

Why would racial and religious public narratives be of significance and why are Asian Americans a particularly useful group to study in light of this? The answer to the first can be deduced from the previous chapter. Considering the history of the United
States, race and religion arise as two grand themes or meta/masternarratives that have set the parameters for our structural and cultural edifices which in turn have affected millions of lives over the years. More specifically, within the American metanarrative of race exists two subthemes: the ethnic immigration narrative and the racial inequality narrative. It is here for instance, that intellectual knowledge has contributed to the formation, maintenance and transformation of racial public narratives through the popularization of assimilation and the various theories surrounding the question of race. This is not to say that these theoretical contributions have literally been transferred to one’s ontological narrative, but rather intellectual knowledge by means of higher education and publishing made available to the public can and often does play a significant role in how those narratives are read and understood.

So for instance the concept and the logic of assimilation is now so well assumed that one can expect to see evidence for it in the way individuals describe their ethnic identity. For nearly 300 years, so the story goes, new peoples have arrived in the United States as immigrants and their adjustment to American life is one we call assimilation. The racial inequality narrative on the other hand describes the history of racism and discrimination based on the use of racial categories. Omi and Winant’s theory of racial formation might be one recent articulation of this narrative. The actual examples of racial inequality that historians and social scientists have brought to light is less important than the overall understanding of the argument underlying the examples, the plot so to speak. It is this plot that again is evident in how one talks about race whether or not one has been literally exposed to theories on race and discrimination.
The same holds true for religion. The American public narratives of religion refer to a wide variety of stories of different people groups expressing their religious views and practices. These stories in total fall under one of the two metanarratives of American religion. The first might be described as religious pluralism, the history of multiple unique religious groups and movements co-existing in the same new nation that sanctions the freedom of religious assembly. The second is that of the American Protestant sacred canopy and its subsequent decline, what pastors and religion researchers have sometimes defined as secularization. Again I emphasize that it is not the intellectually-rooted versions of these concepts and theories that is literally made public, but it is their basic plots that exist in American public narratives and find themselves embedded in the discourse of ontological narratives or personal identities.

2.6.1 Ethnic and Religious Diversity Within Asian America

To answer the second question, why Asian Americans for a study on ethnic and religious identities and narratives, I first sought out a sample that might share certain characteristics associated with public narratives while allowing for enough variation to make useful comparisons. Asian Americans in this respect are classified under one Census category and yet comprise a wide array of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Based on conservative estimates, the most recent US Census counted about 10 million Americans of Asian descent as seen in the following table:
TABLE 2.2

ASIAN AMERICAN POPULATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent Asian American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2,314,537</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>1,678,765</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>1,850,314</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>1,122,528</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>1,076,872</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>796,700</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,839,716</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total US Asian population</td>
<td>10,019,405</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: US Census 2000

NOTE: These figures are based on the conservative estimate of respondents who selected only one group. Multiple ethnic backgrounds constituted an additional 1.65 million.

Of the ten million Americans who described themselves as having some Asian background, the six largest groups which constitute 88 percent of the Asian population include (in order of population size): Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese. These six ethnic subgroups alone provide a variety of backgrounds and along with these a diversity of ethnic public as well as ontological narratives from which to draw.

Furthermore, while the US Census Bureau is not authorized to inquire into the religious backgrounds of the population, I relied on the work of scholars who have explored the religious landscape to gain an exploratory sense of the religious diversity among Asian Americans. Barry Kosmin, Egon Mayer and Ariela Keysar in 2001 reported that of their sample of Asian Americans about 28 percent were Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and other non-western religions, while Protestantism and Catholicism predominated at about 43 percent (2001:9). Similarly, Guillermina Jasso and her colleagues in their 1996 pilot study surveying a random sample of the recent immigrant
population finds that nearly 16 percent of recent adult immigrants were of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and other religious backgrounds. Strikingly, nearly 65 percent of their sample claimed to have some Christian religious preference (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), Catholics having the largest share (42 percent) (2003).³⁸

Since much of this sample of new immigrants was predominantly Latin American in origin, this large percentage might mask the actual distribution found in the Asian American subset. If we select only those respondents from Asian countries (i.e. from China, India, Korea, Pakistan, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam N= 265 or 27.7 percent of the full sample of 957),⁹ we find that 47 percent of the Asian subsample professes either Catholic or Protestant faith traditions, a mere 4 percentage points more than was reported by Kosmin et al. (2001). Catholicism again predominates among this subsample of recent immigrants (34 percent). Another 28 percent claim Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other faiths (nearly identical to Kosmin et al’s findings) and a full quarter claim no religion. The following table illustrates this diversity more fully:
TABLE 2.3

ASIAN IMMIGRANT RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE DISTRIBUTION

BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH

1996

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>26.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: New Immigrant Survey-Pilot (N=265)

NOTE: Figures represent percent of total sample.

1 In a recent correspondence with the primary investigator of the NIS-P an additional 322 respondents who were included in the “Other” category for country of birth (not shown). Among these respondents 57 claimed some Asian country as their birthplace, and these include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kampuchea, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Syria, Thailand, Turkey (correspondence with Guillermina Jasso, spring 2003).

2 Excluded in the listings are Jewish and Eastern Orthodox responses. Presumably these numbers will be quite small especially in light of the clustering within the “Other Asian” category. Secondly, none of the respondents in the ethnic backgrounds shown listed either of these two as religious preferences. Hence, the “Other” religion category does not refer to Jewish or Eastern Orthodox.

Secondly, the religious diversity of Asian American adherents within each ethnic group is substantive. If we look at the Chinese immigrant subsample, nearly 18 percent of the respondents were of either Protestant or Catholic backgrounds, while a full 63 percent claimed no religious affiliation. Among the Korean respondents a little over half of the sample claimed some Protestant religious preference, followed by another 37 percent who are Catholic and nearly ten percent who claim no religious affiliation.
These findings suggest two issues that are critical for the use of studying Asian Americans with regard to ethnic and religious identities: 1) Asian religions are indeed an increasing numerical presence in the US as Diane Eck has argued recently (2001) but their members constitute a small fraction of the religious preferences even among the populations for whom these faith traditions originate, namely those who are of Asian descent; 2) despite the uneven distribution of religious traditions among Asian American immigrants, there is more variation within this racially-defined group than for any other ethnic or racial group in the US.\textsuperscript{10} Thus given the diversity both within and across ethnic and religious backgrounds, Asian Americans should be a useful population to study the interplay of these two identities.

These results however reflect what we know of the overall population of Asian America as well as the recent immigrants particularly in 1995. While they are no less an important group in which to study identity formation and narrative, my interest centered on the rising generation of the Asian American population, particularly those in college. In selecting this target group several aspects of narrative theory can be brought into sharper relief. By the rising generation of Asian Americans I refer to those individuals who either arrived in the United States at an early age (sometimes defined as the 1.5 generation, a term coined by Ruben Rumbaut (1988))\textsuperscript{11} or who were born in the United States, the so-called second generation. This particular group stands at a very peculiar position in which the questions of identity, particularly social identity are most salient. The rising generation does not have immigrant status in the sense that their parents do. At the same time, it is not clear whether individuals qualify as “American” either to themselves or to the culture in which they live. As Min Zhou states: “Americans of
Asian ancestry still have to constantly prove that they are loyal Americans” (2004: 36), as is evident even in responses given by third, fourth, and fifth generation Asian Americans (Tuan 1999). Thus questions of identity and narrativity are all the more pertinent for this group of individuals who exist in a liminal position in society.

In addition, the setting of the American college acts as a site in which questions of public narrative arise given that one of the main purposes of public higher education is the development of character through the liberal expression and exchange of ideas. We know also that today’s universities have often been founded with some institutional religious identity and while many of these schools have since moved away from those earlier foundations (Marsden 1996; Ruben 1996), religion remains a significant issue at many of these campuses (e.g. Bramadat 2000; Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001). In addition, the university setting has been the site for some of the most heated debates over ethnic and racial identity as seen in the call for transforming curricula toward multicultural inclusion (Yamane 2001) to the debates over affirmative action (especially in relation to the overrepresented numbers of Asian students –see Takagi 1992) With the potential access to varieties of discourse in such an experimental environment, young Asian Americans and others face the question of how to negotiate their sense of who they are amid a vast marketplace of ideas. While an artificial environment in many ways, the university setting is precisely ideal for a study on public narratives because of its emphasis on engaged diversity.
2.7 Rising Asian Americans in College: An Initial Portrait of the Sample

Having discussed the theoretical framework for this study we can briefly look at some of the basic features of the sample of college attending Asian Americans whose narratives and identities we will explore in the following chapters. As mentioned earlier, these respondents came from four public universities in four separate cities in one of four states that contain the highest percentage of Asian Americans according to the 2000 Census. The interview sample consisted of 99 student leaders who participated in a variety of student organizations on their respective campuses. With their help, about 320 of their friends and fellow club members were reached for participation in the follow-up internet survey I conducted. With each sample I asked respondents to describe the ethnic and religious labels that they prefer to use. With the interview sample, the three dominant ethnic labels were Chinese, Indian and Korean (63 percent of the sample), followed by Filipino and Vietnamese (19 percent) and a variety of other backgrounds to complete the distribution. With respect to religious labels, nearly half of the sample claimed either Protestant or Catholic identities (50 percent), followed by a little less than a third who identified with some of the major Eastern religious traditions (including Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, and Sikh). In addition, just under a fifth of the sample claimed no affiliation or described themselves as agnostic, or atheist as seen in the following table:
### TABLE 2.4

#### ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DISTRIBUTION

#### INTERVIEW SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Religious Identity</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, Jain</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Other but non-traditional</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>None, Agnostic, Atheist</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** N=99

The survey sample also exhibited a fair amount of diversity along ethnic and religious lines. Given the variety of ways one might describe oneself in ethnic terms especially with respect to the location that many Asian Americans find themselves in society, I presented two sets of questions to each respondent. In the first, I asked each respondent to select as many labels as they felt applied to them. Included in the list of labels were three broad categorical labels: “Asian” “Asian American” and “American.” I next asked each respondent to select only one label that they felt best fit them. In the following table we can see the results of these two questions.
# TABLE 2.5

**ETHNIC IDENTITY LABELS:**
**MULTIPLE AND SINGLE CHOICE**

**SURVEY SAMPLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity: multiple choices</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Ethnicity: one choice</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only American selected</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Asian selected</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Asian American selected</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>21.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese inclusive</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>26.90</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>16.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino inclusive</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>18.67</td>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>15.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian inclusive</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>13.29</td>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese inclusive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean inclusive</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>11.08</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese inclusive</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.28</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asian inclusive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Asian ethnic backgrounds</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10.44</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Total                       | 316 | 100.00  |                       | 316 | 100.00  |

**NOTE:** “Inclusive” refers to selecting a given ethnic label as well as any of the following: “American” “Asian” and “Asian American” N=316

Looking first at the multiple choice responses, the variety of combinations of answer choices was bewildering to say the least. So to keep in alignment with the interview responses, I organized these responses into mutually exclusive groups. Given that the broader labels were available, each ethnic label included any respondents who selected that specific ethnicity as well as any combination of the broader terms. So for instance, almost 27 percent of the survey sample selected either “Chinese” exclusively or “Chinese” and any of the following: “Asian” “American” and “Asian American.”

Following this pattern about 19 percent of the sample selected Filipino, followed by Indian (13 percent), Korean (11 percent), Vietnamese (7 percent), and Japanese (2 percent). A full ten percent of this sample reported multiple Asian backgrounds. That is
these individuals selected any combination of Asian ethnic labels such as “Filipino” and “Chinese.” And additionally, another six percent selected only one of the broader terms without selecting any other specific ethnic label.

If we look next at the forced-choice answers we find some striking shifts. A full 21 percent opted for the label “Asian American” when forced to choose among the labels. An additional nine percent selected either “American” or “Asian” all of which served to reduce the numbers of those who exclusively identified with a specific ethnic label. These striking differences suggest a certain degree of malleability of identity as being highly dependent on the choices made available. Given these disparities, the rest of the study’s results with respect to the survey categories of identity, will refer to the multiple choice results as seen above, given that most individuals typically are not forced to choose among these labels. In this sense, these results are probably a fairer reflection of how ethnic identity choices are distributed.

With respect to religion, the results were fairly similar to what we saw in the interview sample. Nearly 30 percent claimed some Protestant Christian affiliation, another 26 percent claimed to be Catholic, and another 22 percent were Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim, with about 5 percent reporting some other religious background and nearly 17 percent claiming no religious affiliation. Given this distribution it appears that religious affiliation is a salient experience for most, but not for a significant minority. The following table lists these percentages:
TABLE 2.6

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

SURVEY SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>26.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian, non-Catholic</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>29.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One associated feature that bears some consideration is the distribution of those who claimed that these identities were important to them. It is these responses that proved to be a significant marker distinguishing various responses to identity interpretation and narration. In the interview sample, about 88 percent of the respondents stated that their ethnic background was important to them, while about 74 percent said the same with respect to their religion. As we will see, the meanings behind these responses proved more revealing than can be ascertained by these raw figures.

TABLE 2.7

IDENTITY IMPORTANCE

INTERVIEW SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>87.88</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>73.74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: N = 99
The survey sample also demonstrated this pattern. I asked the respondents to rate the importance of their ethnic and religious backgrounds while they were attending college using the same four-point scale for both questions. Nearly 80 percent of the survey respondents reported that their ethnicity was “somewhat” or “extremely” important and another seventy percent stated similarly with respect to religion as seen in the following table.

TABLE 2.8
IDENTITY IMPORTANCE
SURVEY SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of ethnic/racial background in college</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Importance of religious faith in college</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely important</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>33.74</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>45.45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>46.01</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>24.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>13.50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>14.42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important at all</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>15.99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>326</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given these distributions, it is clear that ethnic and religious identities are significant features for at least this sample of college-age Asian Americans. But what do these identities mean to them and what can they tell us about the nature of public narratives at the beginning of the 21st century? We turn next to the responses on ethnic identity to further explore this question.
Endnotes

1 Readers may find amusing that in searching for texts concerning ethnicity I encountered two with nearly the same title, the aforementioned Zelinsky text and an edited volume by Peter Kivisto titled The Ethnic Enigma published almost 12 years prior.

2 This is not to say that religion is somehow false. As a professed Christian, I readily claim that the sacred is real and I have no intention of dismissing any faith tradition’s interpretation of it. My point here is to stress the sociological dimensions of religion where a certain degree of constructedness can be seen. That is, irrespective of one’s interpretation of the sacred, patterned visible behaviors and avowed convictions exist for the believer which are empirically observable over a period of time. The community of believers are embedded within particular times and particular places which invariably affect them as much as they affect their environment. To the extent that the community then is in relationship with its surroundings a certain degree of “social construction” occurs. In a sense to be “in the world but not of it” requires effort on the part of the community to remain aware of and be engaged in its given context.

3 A pointed debate appears in the literature regarding understanding competing definitions of the “self” and “identity” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Callero 2003, Owens 2003), where some argue that two competing schools of thought exist, one in symbolic interactionism and the other in postmodern criticism. The main issue of this debate rests on the unresolvable question of how fluid or concrete the self is and its concomitant understandings of identity. Exploring the many nuances between these schools of thought is well expressed in Callero’s review of the recent extant literature (2003) and needs no repeating in these pages. For our purposes, we will present part of this debate as it pertains to ethnic and religious identities. While being bipartisan may be a dangerous ground in which to tread, I will try and draw from the best of both perspectives and bring them to bear on the specific questions at hand.

4 For a helpful analysis of the historical shifts involved in the concept of identity, see Philip Gleason’s essay (1984).

5 This is not to say that giving voice to various groups and individuals is not a significant endeavor. My concern here is that as sociologists, we have learned nothing more but the voices that have been recorded through this project.

6 The explicit use of narrative theory in the sociological study of religion has also been recently argued by David Yamane (2000) completely independent of Somer’s initial proposition.

7 This is a noticeable shift from their findings in their 1990 study on religious identification. As reported by Kosmin and Lachman (1993:147-149), in 1990 63 percent of Asian Americans claimed to be Christian, whether Protestant or Catholic, while another 15 percent claimed to be from Eastern religious traditions.
An additional 15 percent claimed to no religious preference which nearly matches the recent analysis of the general US population by Hout and Fischer (2002).

An additional subset of the sample was listed as Other constituting a full third of the respondents. In a personal correspondence with the lead author, it was determined that of this subset, 57 respondents originated from 19 other Asian countries. Given the small sample sizes from any one of these countries, these respondents are not included for analysis nor will their absence make a large difference in terms of the claims made here.

Some caution should be taken even with these findings however. The sampling approaches for the two studies varied considerably. Kosmin and Lachman for instance garnered a massive sample size of which its representativeness to the general population might err to a certain extent. This raises the question as to whether the Asian American subsample consists of more 2nd generation or 1st generation individuals. Erring on either side may also lead to dubious generalizations. Jasso et al.’s study is more precise in its targeting the immigrant population, but it is precisely because their findings are based on the target of new immigrants, the distribution of religious preference for immigrant cohorts who arrived a decade or more ago cannot be determined. It is possible then that the religious backgrounds of the longer residing Asian Americans might be more Christian perhaps than the currently arriving Asians. These issues noted, both studies provide perhaps the closest approximation of the Asian American population available in a nationally-representative study.

The 1.5 generation has in various studies been defined as anyone who arrived in the United States prior to age 13 but were not born here (see Zhou 1999).

See the appendix for the exact wording of this question.

Some measurement error is present here. Two students reported a Jain background, one Sikh, one Buddhist, and one non-denominational (presumably Protestant). These differences are minor however, and should not change the overall impressions given by the results.
CHAPTER 3

CONSTRUCTING ETHNIC ASSETS:
MAPPING AND INTERPRETING ASIAN AMERICAN ETHNIC IDENTITIES

3.1 Introduction

Does being a Vietnamese-American have a lot of meaning for you, is it a
very important part of your life?

It does. It changes a lot of my way of life. It really affects my way of life. There is a lot of culture shock because [of] the ways my parents tried to raise me and the way that I would like to be raised. A lot of people have conflicting views, and that is always a problem when your parents migrate to another country and [their] children are raised in a more American fashion where it is a more [of a] “leave it to beaver” type of upbringing. …For me it means a lot; it gives [me] a source of identity. I don’t want to say that I am not a true Vietnamese, but I don’t want to say that I am a true Vietnamese. You have to be able to adapt, and you have to be able to take in your surroundings, and where you are living, and work with that. Otherwise you can’t survive. You can’t be pigeonholed. That is basically who I am; I try to be as much as I can and with what I have. Tuan, Vietnamese male, Houston

For Tuan, being Vietnamese American carries with it an intersection of multiple perspectives which he uses to construct his ethnic identity. The salience of his ethnic identity entails a variety of concepts which link his story to the larger narratives of migration, assimilation and authenticity. These and several other plotlines help provide a basis of bridging oneself with a local familial community and the wider world through public narratives. Tuan’s statement is not entirely unique either; instead it’s a reflection
of the storied identities among the rising generation of Asian Americans, those either born in the US or raised here.

When thinking about Asian American ethnic identities, in light of what has already been discussed, we might well ask: what is specifically meant by ethnic identity among these individuals? How is it conceptualized? What are its mechanisms? In this chapter, we will explore some of the ways in which public narratives surrounding the concepts of race and ethnicity operate in the personal identities of young Asian Americans. The research to date on Asian American ethnic identities centers essentially on two fairly distinct arguments: 1) Asian Americans follow along the same trajectory as previous European groups in a process of assimilation, and 2) Asian Americans participate in the ongoing and ever-transforming racial politics of the United States. These two frameworks house most of the work thus far on Asian Americans, but more so, their distilled versions resonate in the language and discourse of the ontological narratives of young people in this racial classification.¹

3.2 Asian American Ethnic and Racial Identities: Two Frameworks

Before introducing the findings, we should first consider what we do know about Asian American ethnic identities within these two frameworks. With respect to the older framework, much of the research on ethnic identity has typically looked at the changes that occur across generations particularly among European immigrant groups who have made up the vast majority of new arrivals to the United States from the 18th to 20th centuries. As suggested earlier, metanarratives such as assimilation are based on an accumulation of scholarly work from late 19th and early 20th century immigrant
communities such as the Dutch, German, Italian and Polish. Sociologist Milton Gordon’s classic work *Assimilation in American Life* (1964) articulated perhaps the best popularly known and most comprehensive understanding of the process of assimilation which included multiple forms and stages of assimilation from acculturation to intermarriage to structural incorporation into the American mainstream. In it, ethnic identity change is described as a gradual and complex transition from an attachment to an ethnic immigrant subculture to absorption into the American mainstream. This can take the form of increased civic participation to intermarriage to structural inclusion.²

Assimilation as a theory has been present at least since the early 1900s and has continued on while also undergoing significant nuances and reconsiderations based on the new immigration since 1965. Two particular substrands can be found both of which bear some significance for the second generation of Asian Americans. The first substrand is a further articulation of the consequences derived from assimilation as it relates to ethnic identification. Herbert Gans (1979) notably introduced the idea of “symbolic ethnicity;” that is, ethnicity and identification with a particular ethnic group can continue on for several generations in that it is significant as a symbolic marker of differentiation and esteem. Mary Waters’ study of white Catholics (1990) showed further that symbolic ethnicity might be thought of as an optional identity. That is, the significance and symbolic importance of an ethnic identity, at least among some whites, may be as a result of the fact that she can choose to draw from whatever traditions are associated with any ethnicities she calls her own. Richard Alba (1990) argued similarly in his study of white ethnics in New York, stating that symbolic ethnicity among white Americans is symptomatic of the emergence of a pan-European identity (1990).
The question from this research substrand then asks whether this pattern of symbolic ethnic identity will also hold true for the post-1965 immigrants and their progeny? Mary Waters’ (1999) other study on two generations of West Indian immigrants in New York suggests that the answer is both yes and no. The effects of the racially sensitive environment of the United States imputes greater credence to the ethnic and racial identities of West Indians both in the first and second generation. In a sense then ethnic identity is symbolically significant precisely because racism is so prevalent which in turn requires West Indians to develop strategies that employ their ethnic identity as a symbolic marker of either distinction from or solidarity with native-born blacks (with whom they are most associated by the mainstream). To date however, it is not clear what this strand of research portends for Asian Americans, especially the second generation.

The second sub strand with assimilation research has focused on the notion of “segmented assimilation.” This refers to the idea that different subgroups among the second generation of the new immigrants face a variety of assimilation outcomes, as opposed to one single upwardly mobile trajectory. That is, depending on one’s socioeconomic conditions upon arrival (e.g. wealth or poverty of one’s neighborhood) and access to resources (e.g. well-funded or poorly-funded schools), one may perhaps be able to improve his or her class standing, while another may not and perhaps remain so (Portes and Zhou 1993; see also Brubaker 2001; Neckerman, Carter and Lee 1999; Portes 1996, Rumbaut 1994, Waters 1994). While this sub strand is derived specifically from the research on the post-1965 immigrants and their children, nearly all of it (with the exception of Mary Waters’ work) is derived from one data source, the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study 1992-1995, whose sample consists mainly of second-
generation young people from age 12 to 17 in two cities, San Diego and Miami (e.g. Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut and Portes 2001). Furthermore, with respect to applications of this research to Asian Americans, such findings are relegated only to those respondents in San Diego. The question then of segmented assimilation with respect to the Asian American case then requires still further consideration.

This is not to say that assimilation theory is never used to study Asian Americans. On the contrary, studies of Asian American ethnic identities have often used this framework in describing the ways in which various immigrant communities adapt and change in the United States. They typically assume that Asian American ethnic identities are predetermined constructs; that is they typically assume or take for granted the concept of ethnicity and allow it to take on some primordial or ontological quality involving a history, culture, to form as Benedict Anderson put it, an “imagined community” (1991). One is Korean for instance, because one’s parents and grandparents are and so on to some distant unnamable point in the past. The details of such communities then are an important component in detailing the nature of ethnic identity especially when it comes into contact with American culture.

In light of the recent population increase among the Asian American communities, an understanding of the details of everyday life for these people groups has been warranted since little work has appeared up until now. Additionally, little work until very recently has focused on the ways in which ethnic identities are defined and understood among the individuals within these communities, especially for the Asian immigrants in the post-1965 waves. Since the 1990s however, this research niche has exploded with scores of book and article-length treatments of how ethnic identity is
constructed and sustained. Within this burgeoning area of study, much of what we have learned has typically been an examination of how traditional ethnicity continues to affect the lives of diverse communities and yet adapts to modern American modes of life. These studies accomplish several important tasks. First they help raise awareness and give voice to a fairly understudied group, often a group for which the author claims affiliation or close association. Second, they emphasize the everyday significance of symbolic markers of ethnic distinctiveness within these communities which often leads to the third task of demonstrating that classic “straight-line declension” assimilation theory is insufficient in explaining the complicated nature of ethnic transformation in the modern American environment.

In order to demonstrate evidence for these arguments, most research in this area typically focuses on: 1) the strength of ties (or lack thereof) between the immigrant generation and their children; 2) the dynamic interplay between the mainstream culture and immigrant attitudes and practices. Given the ethnographic nature of most of these studies, they also typically center on a particular community in a given gateway city where today’s immigrants largely arrive. In many respects the stories of ethnic resistance to assimilation are stories of the urban ethnic community in a pluralistic environment. These environments tend to affect the ties of kinship and ethnic solidarity in complex ways. Intergenerational ties often buckle under the counter-influences of a cultural mainstream that emphasizes individuality and independence, two themes that are often at odds with traditional East Asian views of emphasizing family and community above the individual. However, the loss of influence by the previous generation on the younger generation is replaced not by sheer personal autonomy but by the influence of
participating in peer subcultures. In several studies of the rising generation of a given Asian American ethnic group, co-ethnic peer networks often provide a cultural space in which hybrid ethnic identities emerge that employ both mainstream cultural values and traditional ethnic values (e.g. Khandelwal 2002, Zhou and Bankston 1994). Thus the transformation of ethnic identities in the younger second generation suggests a dual passport that allows one to participate in both the communities of their immigrant parents and in American popular life. These studies suggest a resilience of traditional identity and agency on the part of these young adults to empower themselves.

But the second and more recent framework turns our attention from an agency centered perspective toward a more macro-structural emphasis on ethnic group adaptation, particularly by focusing on racial politics. If the first framework might be described as somewhat functionalist in approach to understanding ethnic identity, this latter approach might be described as a more critical view of ethnic identity. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) offer a challenging summary of the assimilation framework which they describe as the “ethnicity paradigm.” They point out that the studies on ethnicity typically stem from assimilation theory assumptions which are grounded in the comparisons with the European immigrant experience. This approach is highly problematic in that it implies that socioeconomic outcomes are a byproduct of some vaguely defined cultural difference among different ethnic groups. The framework’s assumption of a primordial quality of ethnic cultures only serves to maintain status inequalities and social stratification among ethnic groups. This is evident in cultural arguments that explain Asian American educational achievement on an assumed ethno-cultural emphasis on education. Omi and Winant argue further that this paradigm
subordinates the notion of race within the discussion of ethnicity; that is, race is simply a term to describe a byproduct of ethnic differences and ethnicity is predetermined and unchangeable.

With respect to Asian American ethnic identity, their racial formation perspective focuses more on the structural influences and meanings derived from ethnic identities such that they reflect the particular participation in the current racial politics of the United States at the beginning of the new millennium. This paradigm shift includes an emphasis placed on the complexity and subjectivity of identity. It maintains that agency occurs in developing ethnic identity but also deconstructs that agency by pointing to the situated context in which that identity is developed. Not only are ethnic identities contingent on the broader racial politics of the United States, it is also affected by the particular political and structural components of the local environment, and the power dynamics among the various individual and community actors that hold a vested interest in them.

Given the recency of this approach, fewer studies appear within Asian American ethnic-specific research that employ it (e.g. Mendoza 2002, San Juan Jr. 1998 [Filipino]; Mukhi 2000 [Indian]; Takahashi 1997 [Japanese]). Instead, because of this framework’s emphasis on race as a socially-constructed scheme, research has developed around the “Asian American” identity, a pan-ethnic label representing a wide array of individuals whose heritage can be traced to at least one people group in present-day Asia. Here, sociologists argue that individuals identified within this category share certain common characteristics due to racially-informed structural conditions. For example, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese individuals as “Asian American” are seen collectively as a “model minority,” a stereotype that claims that this racially-defined group has assimilated
remarkably well socio-economically, thereby justifying the traditional American
dividualist image that socioeconomic achievement is solely a matter of individual hard
effort. Hence, any rationale that explains inequality due to racial group differences
exemplifies the premise of this framework: race is a categorizing scheme that sustains
social inequality. A good example of this approach within the study of Asian American
identity can be found in Dana Takagi’s study (1992) of the affirmative action debates in
American universities. Through much of the 1980s, Takagi argues, Asian Americans
have been used as a racial category to defend arguments against the use of affirmative
action in university admissions policies. Ironically the “Asian American” category has
also denied opportunities to some Asian individuals while other Asian Americans banded
together with supporters of the dismantling of affirmative action. Other studies also point
to the ways in which this socially-constructed category has been an enabler of political
mobilization of diverse communities as well as a complicit (if unconscious) participant in
racial stratification (e.g. Aguilar-San Juan 1994, Chang 2001, Espiritu 1992, Fong 2002,

To add more to the complexity of the matter, in more recent years an additional
cleavage has been suggested that distinguishes the collective experience of all South
Asians in America relative to “Asian Americans,” namely those who identify as Chinese,
Meanwhile, the US Census in the year 2000 created a further distinguishing group that
collects Americans from the Pacific Islands into another distinct pan-ethnic group. On
the one hand these recent changes add further evidence to the argument that racial
identities are highly situated and constantly unstable. On the other hand, it may also be
the case that these developments do reflect a certain reality that has been long ignored even among scholars of race and ethnicity.

What then can we conclude with these concurrent frameworks especially with respect to the case of Asian Americans? For one, ethnic and racial identities, at least in the case of Asian Americans, are somewhat porous as opposed to solid boundary-affirming labels. This is evident in the very ways in which these labels are employed by an individual. Some insist strictly on an ethnic label, others racial, and still other develop some hybrid of both. But more so, the very definitions of what these labels represent vary considerably from person to person and context to context. The current paradigms of assimilation and racial formation provide some explanation for the experience of ethnic and racial identity but arguably, both processes may be occurring together and at a fairly uneven rate within the life of an individual, within the successive generations of a given family and across groups and their collective histories in America.

Consider for instance the recent work by Nazli Kibria (2002) on Asian American identities. Her analysis of interviews with young working second generation Korean and Chinese Americans incorporates not only evidence of the dynamics of racial formation but also of assimilation. Perhaps the most striking example of this is in her analysis of the model minority stereotype and its relationship to identity. She finds that responses to the idea that all Americans of Asian descent are somehow more inclined to succeed due to some cultural proclivity toward hard work (i.e. socioeconomic prosperity), affirmed a racially-informed boundary which produced a sense of positive self-regard in some ways, but also reified conservative political interests. So on the one hand, the model minority stereotype produced a sense of group solidarity that Asian Americans are united by
shared cultural habits and values. But on the other hand, the image also translated into a logic that other minorities should have affirmative action but not Asians—especially since that policy works against their collective values of hard effort. Here we can see that the racial identity and its most well known stereotype act simultaneously in assimilating Asian Americans into the racially-informed political structure.

In view of this burgeoning literature, a typical concern has been raised: broader inclusivity. A wide variety of issues are addressed in all of these studies, but they are addressed unevenly across different ethnic groups and across topics. This is so for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that each ethnic group within Asian America has had a fairly distinct trajectory in its presence in the United States. The Chinese and Japanese for instance have had the greatest numerical presence among the many groups that constitute Asian America throughout US history. And with the complex political relationships between their homelands and America, it may come as no surprise that they are typically the first groups that come to mind when thinking about Asian Americans in general. Recent research has brought to light evidence indicating the added presence of Filipinos, Asian Indians, and Koreans in America as dating back as far as the late 19th and early 20th centuries (e.g. Takaki 1998).

But since the changes to immigration law in the 1960s and the effective change in the origins of the new arrivals to the US, the present state of Asian America has grown more diverse than ever. As mentioned earlier, this diversity at present can be localized to six specific nationalities which total about 88 percent of the Asian American population according to the 2000 Census: Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. Improving our understanding of the meaning and salience of ethnic
identities will be better served by including members of as many of these groups as possible to gain a more detailed portrayal of what is at work within this racially-defined collectivity. How are recent Asian Indians any similar or different from their Korean peers? How do recent Korean immigrant communities compare with recent Chinese immigrant communities? These questions alone could well be addressed from both the assimilation/ethnicity paradigm and the racial formation perspective. Taken in a different light, studies that use the term “Asian American,” now more than ever, require inclusion of a greater diversity among the various ethnic groups regardless of which paradigm is used. Already we are seeing some of the comparative work being done under the research banner of “Asian America” (Lee 1998, Pyke 2000) and in studies of the second-generation of Asian Americans (Dhingra 2003, Min 2002, Min and Park 1999, Zhou 1997). 7

3.3 Asian American Ethnicities in College

This chapter then builds on this previous research by first illustrating some of the shared meanings ascribed to ethnic identity among college-aged second-generation Asian Americans at the beginning of the 21st century. These shared meanings point to the unique characteristics of public ethnic-specific narratives that are appropriated in constructing personal identities. Secondly this chapter aims to integrate the two frameworks of assimilation and racial formation and demonstrate that these frameworks are also appropriated as public metanarratives of race and ethnicity in the formation of personal ethnic identities. The selective appropriation of these public narratives draws
out the “fluid” impression of ethnic identity while also showing the integrated
relationship of personal agency and narrative constraints through the public narratives.

I adopted a mixed method approach which focused on the individual-level
responses to the issue of ethnic identity maintenance and transformation through
interview and survey techniques. I asked the respondents how they would describe
themselves as far as ethnicity is concerned, and further I asked them whether their ethnic
background was important to them. Finally I asked them how they came about to their
conclusions over the salience of their ethnic identity to gain an idea as to what ways they
craft their explanations that make sense of how they think of themselves ethnically. In
the section to follow I will also include some basic tables that report the survey findings
based on close-ended questions that aimed at the same larger research questions
informing this part of the study.

3.4 Asian American Ethnic Identity Salience: A Descriptive Glance

As we saw earlier most interview respondents did say that their ethnic identity
was important to them in some way. The clear majority in each of the ethnic groups
stated that their ethnicity was important to them, and in the case of the Japanese and
Vietnamese student leaders, there were none among them who stated that their ethnicity
was unimportant to them as seen in the following table:
Similar patterns appeared in the survey sample. As the following table shows, nearly 81 percent of the sample selected either “somewhat” or “extremely” important and based on ethnicity nearly all groups except for Indian, Japanese, and Mixed Asian respondents had response rates higher than 80 percent. Those of Indian and Mixed Asian backgrounds had response rates in these two categories of about 78 and 73 percent respectively, but surprisingly the Japanese respondents had a response rate of only 43 percent for these two categories. To a certain extent the pattern for the Japanese respondents seems to be contradictory, where the leaders universally claim that their ethnic background is important to them but less than half of the student sample feels similarly, but the low sample size does not allow us to make any definitive conclusions.
TABLE 3.2
IMPORTANCE OF ETHNICITY
BY ETHNIC BACKGROUND
SURVEY SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Ethnicity</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Filipino</th>
<th>Indian</th>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>Korean</th>
<th>Vietnamese</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Mixed Asian</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Important</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>30.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>48.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very Important</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>57.1</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important at all</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Column percentages add up to 100. Chi-square significant at the .05 level

1 An additional 20 respondents insisted exclusively on using the labels “Asian” “American” and “Asian American” and were excluded from analysis.

3.5 Asian American Ethnic Identity Meaning: A Preliminary Map

In light of this first glance, our next question asks: what do these college-age Asian Americans and mean when they say that their ethnic background is in fact important? And in understanding what ways they describe their ethnic background, we may then ask what significance this has to the current debate between assimilation and racial formation frameworks. In this section I propose a “map” of the interview
responses that reflects some of the complexity involved in how ethnic identities are molded by young Asian Americans and perhaps by others as well. When looking at the responses that these student leaders gave, I found nearly 30 types of answers to the question of what ethnicity means in their lives. Furthermore, not one response clearly predominated among them. So rather than present a nearly incomprehensible laundry list of these comments I suggest the following as one possible way in which these comments cluster together substantively and theoretically.

TABLE 3.3

ETHNIC IDENTITY INTERPRETATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Embodied Expressions</th>
<th>Relational Expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity as Culture</td>
<td>Customs/ Symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kin/ Friendship Networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity as Race</td>
<td>Racial Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Racialized Situations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along the one axis, I found that a large number of respondents described their ethnic background in what might be defined as cultural terms much in the way previous research on ethnicity has typically conceived it. Ethnic identity here reflects a felt connection with a known or perhaps “imagined” community that share a perceived sense of history, a set of beliefs, values, and practices, all of which might be summmed up as a tradition. Along this same line however, I did find a significant number of responses that interpreted ethnicity as a racial experience, which again reflects previous literature that emphasizes a racial political perspective. Ethnic identity is salient in this respect through recollections of everyday experiences of prejudice or discrimination.

Across the other axis of this table I found that two substantive ways in which these responses regarding ethnic identity were typically experienced and expressed. On
the one hand ethnic identity is an embodied experience. In the cultural sense, to be ethnic is to live it out in practices and customs, but in the racialized sense, ethnic identity can also be defined by the racial categories mapped onto one’s physical features or appearance. On the other hand, ethnic identity meanings were sometimes couched in relational experiences. Some of these fit well within a cultural perspective --to be ethnic is to have ethnic ties of affiliation through family and friendship networks. Other responses fit better within the racial formation perspective—ethnic identity is situated in experiences of race and racism which by its very nature involves others. Understanding one’s ethnic identity by way of describing one’s neighborhood or school context in racial terms is one example of how this might play out. These two substantive ways of experiencing ethnicity then form the second axis by which ethnic identity is understood. In the next section we will take a brief glance at some examples of what these responses looked like both in interview comments and in survey responses.

3.5.1 Ethnic Identity as Embodied in Traditional Cultural Attachments

The first set of responses we will look at are examples of describing ethnicity as a culture, particularly a traditional culture that gives a sense of affiliation or felt connection to some the history, way of life, and values and customs of a people. In many ways it is an adherence to and living out of a body of knowledge concerning a people with some shared sense of boundaries whether cultural, geopolitical or both. Among the responses to the question of what ethnic identity means, the majority of them dealt in some way with this interpretive theme. A few referred to their ethnic identity in terms of a shared history and nearly a fifth referred to it in terms of whether they spoke the ethnic
language. Similarly, another 17 referred to the idea of “culture” however vaguely this term may mean in their minds. Another 17 or so made note of specific ethnic festivals, customs, food and the like as a way of referring to their ethnic background. This type of response is reflected in this comment made by Jenn, a Vietnamese American at Irvine:

[When people ask me what my ethnic background is] I tell that I’m Vietnamese. I mean normally I just identify myself as Vietnamese even though I know most of my upbringing isn’t necessarily Vietnamese culture per se. It’s a lot of mixturing. You have language; you have your cultural foods and certain cultural practices. But for the most part I think my values…what my parents hold. But a lot of it has been developed here as an American. So more and more I’m identifying with being Vietnamese American or Asian American. …I mean culture plays a role…language. Language is a unifying source, but oftentimes being a Vietnamese youth or Vietnamese American youth, language can also be a barrier because of the generation issue. [Our parents] don’t necessarily understand English, and you yourself don’t necessarily understand some words in Vietnamese. Jenn, Vietnamese female, Irvine

For Jenn, her ethnic background is marked by the traditional cultural markers of language, food, and custom. Language she stresses multiple times, as a significant marker of her ethnic identity as a Vietnamese American. However, the increasing lack of fluency in it she notes creates barriers between her parents’ generation and hers, and suggests the beginning of a cultural assimilation. Note too that she comments on this transition according to the changing labels she appropriates. Whereas at one time she may have seen herself more as Vietnamese, she sees herself as gradually emphasizing more of the “mixturing” as she calls it. And more so, she also alludes to an identification with being “Vietnamese American,” a bicultural label or “Asian American,” a more racialized label. We are reminded here that these categories of responses are not hard and fast, but rather fluid and contextual.
The relationships between ethnic identity importance and traditional cultural attachments appeared also in the student survey sample. A series of questions were asked regarding the respondent’s personal experience with their ethnic traditions. Particularly, students were asked:

- how important was their ethnic background while they were growing up
- how important was celebrating ethnic festivals or holidays
- how often did their family practice ethnic traditions
- how often did their family celebrate ethnic festivals or holidays
- how often did their family speak an ethnic language

To find out if there was a relationship between these attitudes and behaviors with ethnic identity, I conducted a series of chi-square tests of differences to see if there was any relationship between the responses on their ethnic history and a respondents’ current reported importance of ethnicity. The following table shows some of these results:

### TABLE 3.4

**ETHNIC IDENTITY IMPORTANCE**

**BY CHILDHOOD ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Ethnic/racial Background</th>
<th>Not Important At All</th>
<th>Not Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of ethnicity/ race growing up***</td>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>56.1</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extremely important</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLE 3.4 (contd)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Ethnic/racial Background</th>
<th>Not Important At All</th>
<th>Not Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of participating in ethnic festivals growing up***</td>
<td>Not at all important</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>57.8</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extremely important</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Frequency of respondent’s practice of ethnic traditions growing up*** | Never | 9.1 | 6.8 | 6.1 | 6.4 | 6.5 |
| | Once a year | 22.7 | 13.6 | 8.8 | 3.7 | 8.7 |
| | Several times a year | 40.9 | 40.9 | 43.5 | 22.2 | 35.7 |
| | Once a month | 9.1 | 2.3 | 4.8 | 9.2 | 6.2 |
| | 2-3 times per month | 9.1 | 4.6 | 6.8 | 11.9 | 8.4 |
| | Once a week | 6.8 | 3.4 | 9.2 | 5.6 |
| | More than once a week | 9.1 | 25.0 | 26.5 | 37.6 | 28.9 |
| | Total N | 22 | 44 | 147 | 109 | 322 |

| Frequency of Family practice of ethnic customs growing up** | None of the time | 18.2 | 6.8 | 3.3 | 2.8 | 4.6 |
| | Some of the time | 36.4 | 45.5 | 35.3 | 23.9 | 32.9 |
| | Most of the time | 18.2 | 27.3 | 36.7 | 33.9 | 33.2 |
| | All of the time | 27.3 | 20.5 | 24.7 | 39.5 | 29.2 |
| | Total N | 22 | 44 | 150 | 109 | 325 |

| Frequency of family celebrating ethnic holidays growing up*** | None of the time | 13.6 | 22.7 | 2.7 | 6.4 | 7.4 |
| | Some of the time | 36.4 | 36.4 | 27.5 | 18.4 | 26.2 |
| | Most of the time | 27.3 | 27.3 | 36.9 | 29.4 | 32.4 |
| | All of the time | 22.7 | 13.6 | 32.9 | 45.9 | 34.0 |
| | Total N | 22 | 44 | 149 | 109 | 324 |

| Frequency of family using ethnic language growing up | None of the time | 9.1 | 11.4 | 4.0 | 2.7 | 4.9 |
| | Some of the time | 36.4 | 27.3 | 27.3 | 27.3 | 29.9 |
| | Most of the time | 36.4 | 27.3 | 33.3 | 36.4 | 33.7 |
| | All of the time | 18.2 | 34.1 | 35.3 | 33.6 | 33.4 |
| | Total N | 22 | 44 | 150 | 110 | 326 |

NOTE ** = Chi-square significant at the .01 level; *** = Chi square significant at the .001 level
Column percentages add up to 100.

As the table shows, nearly all questions referring to the respondent’s experiences and attitudes growing up show some expected association with ethnic identity. Those who

65
place a high importance on their ethnic identity while in college also tended to place a high importance on their ethnic background while growing up. The same was true for one’s disposition toward participating in ethnic festivals. Additionally, ethnic activity participation showed a fairly strong relationship with the importance of ethnicity at present with one notable exception. Greater frequency of practice of ethnic traditions was associated with greater levels of ethnic importance in college. The same was true for the frequency of family practice of ethnic customs, as well as family celebration of ethnic holidays. The one notable exception, however, was language. Use of an ethnic language while growing up was not associated with present importance of ethnic identity. This finding is curious but consistent with Jenn’s response and the response of others. Ethnic identity remained important even while acknowledging that loss of language skills was declining. As discussed in the previous chapter, this exception may suggest Gans’ “symbolic ethnicity” (1979). Nevertheless the overall picture from both the interview comments and survey results remains consistent: traditional ethnic identity among young Asian Americans is sometimes understood as an embodiment of cultural attachments.

3.5.2 Ethnic Identity as Embodied in Racialized Experiences

Apart from cultural attachments, some Asian Americans described the significance of their ethnic identity based on their experiences due to their physical appearance. Their darker skin, hair color and texture, height, and eye shape embody a racial interpretation to their ethnicity. Granted the distinction here becomes blurry as some ethnic groups may particularly acknowledge these distinctions as part of their ethnicity. What I point out here is in how these distinctions are reported, the contexts and
the terms used to ascribe meaning to biological difference. About a tenth of the interviewees responded in this manner and while it may be difficult to demonstrate, I noticed that responses of this sort were very matter-of-factly stated. Here are four brief examples of comments from interviewees representing three different ethnic groups (Indian, Chinese, Vietnamese), and three different urban locales (Chicago, Stony Brook, Houston):

I mean, like look at me! I mean they see a colored face, so a lot of times people aren’t knowledgeable in the sense of where I’m from. Ajit, Indian male, UIC

… I’m proud of saying I’m Indian. They could see me “hello,” it’s my color you know? It’s not like, “Oh American!” Please. They know you are from India, whatever it is, you are from India. Sumi, Indian female, SUNY

I guess when I was younger I didn’t realize it, but now that I am in college, and I am involved in these things, it just made me realize that I am Asian, and I am Chinese. And there is no way around that. Everything about my appearance affects what I do. And how I am perceived by other people. Rebecca, Chinese female, SUNY

…For instance when you look at me, you can tell I’m just not American or something. And people would actually ask you know “what are you?” So yeah, that’s pretty much why… Tuyet, Vietnamese female, Houston

In these examples we see that their physical features do not represent what others consider to be “American.” This distinctiveness, is both an acknowledgment of what one is not as much as it is a signifier of something to which they find empowering. For these individuals the color of their skin and the reactions that others have of them is a reminder that they are not part of a generic American image but it is also not significantly limiting either. The meaning ascribed to their physical appearance is perceived in some ways as a fixed reality that they must contend with and accept.
The complex interconnectedness of ethnicity as embodied in racial experience and in traditional culture was also present here as well as in this comment from Soojin, a Korean American student leader at Irvine:

Well I think [being Korean] is really important. My parents are Korean. Also I look Korean, so first race…I mean they’re not going to think I’m American right? When they see me, they’re gonna assume me to be Korean, and I think it’s important to learn about my culture and speak my language so…I think it’s like if somebody asks you: “um so what are you?” Then I mean your response is: “Korean” and they’ll expect you to know something about the Korean culture and…some background on yourself [because] otherwise, like the way you physically look…it just…defeats the purpose. Like, if you’re like: “Oh yeah I’m American”…I mean but you look Korean, so you…have to back up how you look as well so I think in that sense it’s really important too. Soojin, Korean female, Irvine

Soojin’s comments in describing why her ethnicity is important jump back and forth from cultural attachments such as language to racial experiences because she “looks Korean.”

To a certain extent, the racially-sensitive environment works to maintain her ethnic identity in cultural terms. But this environment also creates a blending of signifiers of race that she now attributes to her ethnicity. Her use of the term “American” is the reference point by which she and others in previous examples make a distinction between themselves and the cultural mainstream. This can be a distinction in terms of perceived cultural differences, but in these cases, it is also a distinction in terms of physical features. Presumably, in their minds “American” refers to the stereotype of the blond-haired blue-eyed person of European descent\(^9\). What is also valuable to note is that she refers to some cultural expectation from an undefined other (i.e. “…they’re gonna assume…”), an abstract “American” whose attention will be fixed on her appearance as Korean and racially-other.
3.5.3 Ethnic Identity in Relational Co-Ethnic Networks

While interrelated to some degree, these embodied approaches to explaining ethnicity have a counterpart in relational discourse; that is, ethnic identity is sometimes understood in relational terms that again resemble what we might expect in the cultural framework and/or a racialized framework. We have seen evidence for these patterns in the previous examples and here we will see them in more explicit terms.

Looking first at the cultural relationship responses, ethnic identity is reflected by the presence of same ethnic, or co-ethnic, family members and friends. As one might imagine, the greater the propensity of these co-ethnic networks the greater the degree of identification with one’s ethnic group. Fewer interview respondents employed this explanation overall. Within this theme, however, a few recurring comments arose. By and large the most frequent relational dynamic which described the significance of ethnic identity dealt with courting and intermarriage. The second most frequent response referred to the role of parents in passing down a given ethnic heritage to them. Finally, co-ethnic friendship was another prevalent theme shared by some. The introductory quote from Tuan exemplified the important role that parents play in the how ethnic identity is interpreted for these leaders of the next generation. Jenn and Soojin’s earlier comments also articulated the role of parental values. This explanatory theme was most salient in the comments made by Roshin, an Indian student in Houston, and by Sanjee, an Indian student in UIC:

I guess…I’m here to do my duty, and currently my duty is to be a student, to be a sister or daughter or girlfriend. And as long as I do that, I don’t need to be worrying about peripheral things. I don’t need to really worry about...the “what
ifs” in life, that sort of thing. Do the best that I can. Leave the rest up to God and see what happens. Roshin, Indian female, Houston

[Being Indian] determines who I am in a sense because my friends and the people I associate with tend to be Indian. The tradition and morals that my parents set forth I still carry on. …Like the respect for others, the emphasis on education, there is a lot of stuff as far as social relations such as not having sex and not having boyfriends. Just being very strict I guess. Sanjee, Indian female, UIC

For Roshin, her Indian identity is centered around traditional gender labels such as “sister,” “daughter,” and “girlfriend” which associate herself to other individuals, family most importantly. For Sanjee, her reference to her co-ethnic friendships and her parents help solidify her sense of self which entails an adherence to traditional Indian norms for social behavior.

Similar patterns in the survey data appeared as well. Respondents were asked several questions regarding their ethnic social networks during their time prior to attending college. Specifically they were asked:

- how important was having same ethnic friends while growing up
- how important was participating in (non-religious) ethnic organizations
- how many of their friends were of the same ethnic background
- how would they describe the ethnic/racial composition of their closest friends

Responses to these questions were tested across the importance of ethnic identity responses to produce the following table using a chi-square analysis which tests for categorical differences.

Looking first at the attitudinal responses, we see that a significant relationship appeared between the importance of having ethnic friends while growing up and the importance of ethnic identity in college. Similarly a significant association appeared between the importance of participating in a non-religious ethnic organization (which
arguably provides a greater likelihood of developing ethnic ties). A less strong relationship appears with the reported frequency of participating in these organizations. To some extent greater importance of ethnic identity was associated with greater frequency of participation in these organizations.

Strikingly, however, the actual estimation of co-ethnic friendships did not show any association with ethnic identity in college. In the one question, the respondent was asked to evaluate the rough ethnic composition of their friendships on a four point scale. Regardless of ethnic identity importance, most respondents selected “some” as opposed to “most” or “almost all” or “none.” In another question, respondents were asked to estimate the ethnic/racial composition of their closest friendships while growing up and were given a set of categories to define that composition: the same ethnic background as oneself; Asian backgrounds but not the same ethnicity as the respondent’s; African, Latino, white, racially mixed, and other. Across each of these seven categories, the two largest plurality of responses defined their friendships as being of the same ethnic background as the respondent (30 percent), or as “ethnically/racially mixed” (26 percent). Analysis of the association between ethnic composition of friendships and present importance of one’s ethnic identity importance in this manner was also not significant.\(^\text{12}\)
## TABLE 3.5

ETHNIC IDENTITY IMPORTANCE

BY CHILDHOOD ATTITUDES AND ETHNIC NETWORKS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Ethnic/Racial Background</th>
<th>Not Important at all</th>
<th>Not Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of having same ethnic friends growing up***</td>
<td>Not important at all</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>35.8</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>41.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extremely important</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Importance of having same ethnic friends growing up*** | Not important at all | 59.1 | 58.1 | 25.2 | 17.8 | 29.5 |
|                                             | Not very important   | 18.2 | 20.9 | 34.7 | 35.5 | 32.0 |
|                                             | Somewhat important   | 18.2 | 18.6 | 33.3 | 35.5 | 31.0 |
|                                             | Extremely important  | 4.6 | 2.3 | 6.8 | 11.2 | 7.5 |
|                                             | N                    | 22 | 43 | 147 | 107 | 319 |

| Frequency of part. in non-religious ethnic org. growing up* | Never | 36.4 | 40.9 | 22.7 | 22.9 | 26.2 |
|                                                             | Once a year          | 22.7 | 15.9 | 16.7 | 13.8 | 16.0 |
|                                                             | Several times a year | 22.7 | 20.5 | 24.0 | 15.6 | 20.6 |
|                                                             | Once a month         | 4.6 | 6.7 | 16.5 | 8.9 |
|                                                             | 2-3 times per month  | 9.1 | 4.6 | 4.7 | 10.1 | 6.8 |
|                                                             | Once a week          | 4.6 | 9.1 | 12.0 | 12.8 | 11.4 |
|                                                             | More than once a week | 9.1 | 13.3 | 8.2 | 10.2 |
|                                                             | N                    | 22 | 44 | 150 | 109 | 325 |

| Frequency of same ethnic friends | None | 22.7 | 18.6 | 12.0 | 7.3 | 12.0 |
|                                  | Some | 45.5 | 51.2 | 46.7 | 50.0 | 48.3 |
|                                  | Most | 18.2 | 20.9 | 29.3 | 31.8 | 28.3 |
|                                  | Almost all | 13.6 | 9.3 | 12.0 | 10.9 | 11.4 |
|                                  | N | 22 | 43 | 150 | 110 | 325 |
3.5.4 Ethnic Identity in Racialized Situations

In contrast to this relational explanation to ethnic identity, a parallel set of responses emerged that reflected a relationality within a racial framework. Here the interviewee’s race acted as a marker of difference and distinction from his or her social surroundings. This is not referring to experiences of discrimination per se, but rather a particular pattern in the discourse by which these young Asian Americans defined the meaning of their identity. In other words, a number of respondents immediately defined their identity in terms of experiences where race was a defining factor of the environment that separated them from others in their social surroundings.
The two most prominent ways in which this dynamic was expressed was, 1) through experiences in traveling to the country of their parents, and 2) through the neighborhood context in which they were raised. Looking at the former, a number of respondents spoke of opportunities to visit the country from which their parents emigrated. Some also had an opportunity to study abroad and chose these locales. One might assume that a shared sense of ethnic solidarity would develop from spending time in these other countries. But very often these experiences produced a sense of distinction and separation from those who were native to that land. Consider this response from Takatoshi, a Japanese American who spent some time studying abroad in Japan:

…Before I went [to Japan] I really considered myself really really Japanese. I have a Japanese first name, I speak Japanese. But when you’re over there, you’re really looked upon as gaijin or an outsider, and that really opened my eyes to the perception of other people concerning like where you actually were [from] so...[also] I don’t really consider myself, like outside of school, “American American” –so I label myself as Japanese American. Takatoshi, Japanese male, Irvine

For Takatoshi ethnic identity was a salient feature precisely among those who by American standards should be seen as co-ethnics. His encounter with native Japanese and their distinguishing him as an “outsider” or gaijin helped define the nature of his being neither “really really Japanese” nor “American American.” It was not sufficient to have cultural attachments such as fluency in the language and carrying an ethnically derived name. These attachments created some distinctions between him and his “American” world, but it also did not draw him into the native Japanese experience either.
The second type of racially-situated relationships in the responses to ethnic identity described the contrast from previous social environments that were racially isolating (such as a neighborhood or school) and the present context of encountering co-ethnic networks. The contrast is usually one of being isolated racially from co-ethnics through residence in mostly white suburban neighborhoods and/or isolation through attendance at mostly white public schools. It bears repeating that we cannot know whether it is empirically the case that these individuals were in fact isolated based on their reports here; what is stressed here is the perception that he or she felt isolated and alone and that this is framed along racial lines. Take for example this comment made by Mirabel, a Filipina from UIC and Oscar, a Filipino from Houston:

Yes, [being Filipina is important to me] especially when I got into college. It was a big transition because I went to a predominantly white school in the suburbs and coming here it was very diverse. For the very first time, I was around people who were of the same background and it was important for me to understand that background. Mirabel, Filipina UIC

I guess [being Filipino] became different when I came to college. Cuz I never had…an organization that was based on the Filipino ethnicity, promoting the culture or anything like that. Y’know I learned this stuff at home, but not to the extent that we could have at Filipino Students Association. And I mean I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood. So it wasn’t too much…I graduated [from high school a few years ago]…at a time where I was maybe one of five to ten Asians that graduated in my class. Now that numbers changed dramatically. I’ve gone back to the school and it was just like five years that the whole demographic changed. But yeah, up until then, I guess that’s why I never gave it too much thought. Never gave it too much importance. Because when I got into college, people were saying, one of them actually said like: “Why are you so white?” I didn’t know the meaning cuz that’s just the way I acted. Oscar, Filipino, Houston

For both Mirabel and Oscar, the difference between going to a high school that they perceived to be mostly white racially and attending a university where there were a number of fellow Filipino ethnics made a large difference in interpreting the significance
of their ethnic identity. Oscar’s comments in particular stressed his behavioral change between his previous experience in a mostly white environment and his present social circles in college. In both cases, ethnic identity is important partly because of previous experiences of racial marginality and partly on present experiences of similar ethnic others.

Some evidence for this perception appears also in the survey responses. As the following table shows, most respondents in this survey perceived their neighborhood racial composition in which they were raised as mostly white (62 percent), followed by mostly Asian (29 percent), and lastly, mostly Hispanic or Black (10 percent).\textsuperscript{13} Importantly too, the proportion of respondents for each level of ethnic importance followed this pattern across all types of neighborhood composition. Between 60 and 68 percent of respondents, whether their ethnic background was “not important at all” or even “extremely important” said they came from neighborhoods they perceived to be mostly white. Similarly between 20 and 30 percent of respondents, regardless of the importance of their ethnic background came from neighborhoods they perceived to be mostly Asian. This suggests, at least for this sample, that perceived neighborhood composition had little association with the importance of ethnic background.
TABLE 3.6

IMPORTANCE OF ETHNICITY

BY PERCEIVED NEIGHBORHOOD COMPOSITION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Ethnicity</th>
<th>Not Important at all</th>
<th>Not Very Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Asian</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly White</td>
<td>63.6</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Hispanic or Black(^1)</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: \(^1\)This is a merging of two distinct sets of responses due to low response rates.

While these comments and survey results are mostly impressionistic accounts, they do give us some idea as to what ethnic identity means in terms of a relational orientation. It should be emphasized that even this pattern of response was not prompted by the investigator, which arguably suggests that this is an important feature of the discourse with which some Asian Americans think about their ethnic identity. Ethnic identity (for some young Asian Americans) is salient when compared to a racial reference group (in this case a predominantly white neighborhood or school) and when compared across multiple situations where race is made salient.

3.6 Racialized Assimilation: Non-optional “Ethnic Assets” and Racial Liabilities

In light of the varied meanings ascribed to ethnic identity, we might also ask why these patterns of self-definition are occurring and whether they reflect on the contemporary debates on race. In this section I will suggest two particular concepts that may provide an explanation to this question. The first is that of a racial public narrative.
As mentioned in the previous chapter, a public narrative gives us a framework that is flexible enough to account for the paradoxical presence of simultaneous and divergent claims such as the ones we see above. Public narratives are also durable enough to demonstrate the enduring structural influences on individual thought and action. Public narrative introduces a conceptual framework or schema from which we can understand the constraints evident in the discourse on personal ethnic identity.

What I suggest is that a racial public narrative contextualizes these personal ethnic identity explanations. As we saw earlier, scholars have linked Asian American ethnicity within two theoretical frameworks, one that follows the ethnicity paradigm reminiscent of the assimilation model, and another that follows the more recent racial formation paradigm. Given that the identity definitions reported by these young people could be classified in either camp, perhaps it is more the case that both frameworks are occurring simultaneously as public metanarratives from which individuals draw their identity descriptions and discourse.

I describe these racial public narratives theoretically as “racialized assimilation” narratives. As a formal definition I refer to this as a coupling of cultural persistence and structural assimilation reasoning which effectively justifies and sustains racial stratification and inequality. Racialized assimilation is a series of public narratives on race that contains the grammar and logic to explain why ethnic identity is salient as a culturally negotiated experience and/or as a racially negotiated experience. The racial public narrative incorporates both the immigrant-ethnic-assimilation and the racial inequality plotlines such that an individual can pull from either of these component parts to provide a sense of meaning and significance with respect to their ethnicity. By taking
agency through the use of these stories a dialectic occurs where the racial public narrative provides an explanation for maintaining ethnic identity and the ethnic identity explanations help sustain the racial public narratives I call racialized assimilation.

The second concept that may help us better understand these dynamics of identity salience is that of the ethnic “asset.” Borrowing from economic terminology, an ethnic asset is one in which ethnicity is seen as producing a favorable social outcome at least symbolically. That is, one’s ethnic identity is interpreted as bearing no social cost and at times can even be rewarding symbolically, relationally and perhaps objectively. To turn a phrase by Mary Waters, these Asian Americans exhibit a somewhat “costless” ethnic identity (1990). When Waters describe the nature of white ethnic identity in the late 20th century she noted that ethnic identity was significant precisely because the individual paid no social cost for that identity, and therefore optional as well.

With respect to the second generation of Asian Americans, I believe we are seeing a decoupling of these two concepts. That is, to a certain extent, these young men and women understand their ethnic identity as costless but at the same time they also understand it to be something for which they cannot opt out of. This suggests a certain degree of selectivity in drawing from the racial public narratives in which these young Asian Americans take on those aspects of the narratives which provide a positive outcome. And at the same time the racial public narratives place limits on the ways in which they can construct their personal ethnic identities by continually incorporating the racial element in their identity construction. Thus Asian American ethnic identity might be understood as a “costless” non-optional identity.
One can see how the dual emphases in racial public narratives that take on these concepts of costless non-optionality. On the one hand, the immigrant-ethnic-assimilation narrative helps mold the perception of the costless and even asset-like quality of one’s Asian American identities. On the other hand, the racial formation narrative helps engender a perception of fixedness or non-optionality to their personal ethnic identities.

Moreover, just as the counterpart to an economic asset is the economic liability, the perception of ethnic identity as an “asset” I believe implies a potential racial liability. That is, the effect of creating an ethnic identity as a costless “asset” can accrue a much larger racial liability for Asian Americans and others. If ethnic identity is only understood as being non-optional and yet costless, it can imply that this coupling may be true of others regardless of their ethnic or racial identity. An erroneous connection of different dimensions of racial public narratives can lead to the kinds of attitudes that Dana Takagi (1992) pointed out with regard to Asian American attitudes toward affirmative action in college admission in the 1980s, a very costly consequence indeed.

3.7 Conclusions

From these interview responses we see that the specific meanings of different Asian ethnic identities, while unique in their history and traditions, reflect only part of the story that is taking place in the new millennium. These ethnic identities are important for a variety of reasons, and in many ways reflect the current paradigms available to us in the literature on race and ethnicity. But more so, they evidence the dialectical dynamics of personal agency and structural constraint when seen through the lens of racial public narratives.
Within this contemporary context of ethnic pluralization, I believe there is also some significance to the nature of choice and ethnic identity. On the one hand, many young Asian Americans really are recipients of the choices their parents made in immigrating to the United States. Secondly, they are recipients of their parents’ choices in what ethnic traditions they will practice and what values they will hold. On the other hand, many Asian Americans must also make choices as they negotiate their ethnic identity in the midst of a culture which in some ways may be at odds with the values that were passed down to them. Hence, even the concept of a traditional ethnic identity transforms in its substantive meaning even while insisting that it is consistent with an imagined historic community. Ethnic identity formation and maintenance in the United States at the beginning of the new century remains a complex enterprise, but it is one in which is worthwhile in gaining cultural authenticity in a diversifying nation.
Endnotes

1 This contribution is specifically limited to the discussion over the young adult generation of Asian Americans, especially for those who received an education in college near the end of the 20th century.

2 Elliott Barkan’s (1995) recent summary is a commendable concise presentation of the history of assimilation theory in its traditional sense with a new articulation of it into a six-stage process.

3 This recent expansion is not surprising in one sense. With the changes brought about by the Hart Cellar Act of 1965, larger and larger waves of immigrants have arrived at the borders of the United States. While the average age of the typical immigrant during this time period cannot be determined, it is arguably the case that many arrivals were at child-bearing age at that time. Based on this assumption, we might surmise that the beginning waves of the immigrant generation’s children began entering the hallowed halls of higher education in the 1980s (recall popular accounts of the increased presence of Asian Americans on college campuses, see Takagi 1992, chapter 2). Since then, a growing number have pursued advanced degrees in various areas of study, and for some their focus lay in the world that was perhaps most familiar to them: the Asian ethnic community.


5 In one surprising study, Woodrum (1981) presents an example of the contested differences between functional and critical approaches to ethnicity in his study of three generations of Japanese Americans which anticipates the racial formation theory introduced some years later in the first edition of Omi and Winant’s work (1989).

6 An important distinction that is often muddied in the literature is the multiple uses of the phrase “Asian American.” For the purposes of these citations, I list them as research on the political movement term. Another line of research, which contains some aspects of both an assimilation and racial formation perspective employs the term “Asian American” but refers to specific units within the Census category “Asian American.” Hence for example work by Lee (1991), Lee (1998), Kibria (2002), Min and Kim (1999, 2000), Ng (1998), Okihiro (2001), and Takaki (1998) all focus on Asian Americans but use the term to mean the overall collection of the groups studied (e.g. Chinese, Koreans, and Vietnamese are Asian American) and the ambiguous cultural use of the term (e.g.
interpreting the “Asian American” label in common language among Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese). These uses have some connection to the historical social movement label, but when discussing the political label it is considered as one interpretation among several that Asian American individuals employ.

Two methodological characteristics that nearly all of these studies also share which will not be considered here is that they typically consist of samples of young respondents which reflects the demographic reality that most Asian Americans are only now emerging. Since the beginning of the new immigration began in the 1960s, the transitional and second generation of Asians, whether arriving here as young children or those born here, are only recently coming of age. Second each study is community specific. Studies take place within certain cities and focus on one subset within a given ethnic neighborhood or other ethnic community locale such as a religious congregation.

See survey in appendix for complete wording of this and other questions and response categories used.

The stereotyped image of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant has recently been pointed out as an assumed reality in many of the most popular sociology textbooks, and as Hamilton and Form (2003) show, it reflects less and less of the reality of the American population. Still, for many American minorities, while the WASP image may not be the exact phrase to which they are referring, there remains a fair impression that Caucasian Europeans represent the American mainstream.

The popularity of this response may also be due in part to the reality that the respondents are in the traditional age-range for considering marriage. Hence this response is a reflection of the intersection between ethnicity and life course experiences.

Admittedly the categorical relationship of “girlfriend” is a fairly recent convention, but in some ways articulates an older convention relative to the newer more inclusive relationship terms such as “partner” and “significant other.”

In order to verify if this lack of significance might vary on how the responses were grouped, I conducted further analyses by redividing the seven category question into 1) a dichotomous variable of similar ethnic background and non-similar ethnic background; 2) a dichotomous variable of similar racial background (i.e. Asian), and non-similar racial background; 3) a trichotomous variable of similar ethnic background, similar racial background, and all others; 4) a trichotomous variable of similar racial background, other racial background and racially mixed backgrounds; 5) a four category variable of similar ethnic background, similar racial background, other racial background, and racially mixed backgrounds. In each of these tests, not one of them showed a statistically significant relationship.
These results are based on a collapsing of the original survey question which provided several options for perceived racial composition of the respondent’s neighborhood. The respondent could claim that their neighborhood was composed mostly of individuals who: 1) had the same ethnic/racial background as the respondent, 2) were Asian American (with no specific ethnic group), 3) were African American, 4) were Caucasian or white, 5) were Hispanic. Respondents who claimed that their neighborhoods were mainly African American or Hispanic were merged together since there were very few in either of these categories (N = 6 and 25 respectively). Respondents who stated their neighborhood composition was composed mainly of individuals like themselves were merged with respondents who selected “mostly Asian American” since presumably the respondents are of Asian descent. This reduced potential problematic interpretation of results.
CHAPTER 4

SITUATED RELIGIOUS PLURALISM:

ASIAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

[I]f you want to fulfill the Islamic definition of being a Muslim…the things that you say should reflect your religion. How you treat people, how you talk, how you associate with others, the type of things you choose to buy, the things you choose to look away from, whether you choose to flirt and objectify women. That shows that you’re not really…attached to your religious obligations, [because]…it’s a way of life. Amir, Iranian Muslim male, Irvine

4.1 Introduction

Amir is one of the millions of second generation Asian Americans whose religion is central to his understanding of who he is. Whatever religion he or she professes, it is the lens which they use to order their world. In this sense many Asian Americans join other religious Americans in making their faith an important marker of how they live out their lives and formulate their moral and ethical choices. Religion creates, as Peter Berger describes (1967), a sacred canopy by which one filters personal experiences and macroscopic changes that affect our social environments. Asian Americans are no exception to this model, and in fact bring exceptional complexity to the picture. This is arguably so in light of the fact that the greatest degree of religious diversity is most evident within this socially-constructed category. Buddhists, Hindus and Muslim remain

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predominantly among Asian American communities even as non-Asian Americans increasingly add to the ranks of these ancient world religions.

But so what, we might ask. Just because religious diversity pervades the Asian American world, what significance does this have for our critical understanding of Asian Americans? Is not religion merely a byproduct of structural problems that are better understood in racial terms? These are legitimate questions and it perhaps explains one of several curious problems with the study of Asian American religion and religious identity. In this chapter we will explore the meanings ascribed to one’s religion among these college-aged Asian Americans. I will first point out what we do know about the sociological study of religion as it pertains to religious identity and draw our attention to the curious absence of these paradigms in the research on Asian American religions, despite the increasing numbers of publications on this topic. Next we will look briefly at some of the descriptive statistical characteristics of Asian Americans and their religious identities, followed by a view of the ways in which Asian Americans describe the meaning and significance of religion. Finally I will draw some conclusions from these observations by drawing them within the framework of the religious public narratives and identity formation.

4.2 Reviewing Asian American Religious Identities Part I: The Dominant Paradigms

As suggested above, I believe there is an interesting problem with respect to Asian American religious identity in that while the sociological study of religion has undergone some vast changes in the past 30 years, very little of it seems to have been used in understanding Asian American religions. At the same time there has been an
increasing number of studies that focus on Asian American religion over the past 10 years. How do we account for this? A brief review of two major paradigms within the sociological study of religion that have the strongest bearing on the topic of public narrative will help provide one possible explanation.

Much like the study of ethnic and racial identities, religious identity research has typically been discussed within two theoretical frameworks that have to a certain degree, been at odds with one another. In the first framework, religious identity is said to decline in significance over time through a process called secularization. Much has been debated over the meaning and utility of this concept, and the discussion here is not to belabor these discussions which warrant an entire analysis all by itself. Instead I will start by noting what Edward Bailey once stated: “Secular is quite easy to define!...It always means, simply, the opposite of ‘religious’—whatever that means” (as quoted in Christiano et al. 2002:63). The fluidity with which this term has been used points to the problem of how we conceptualize religion and therefore what is not religious, and whether that conceptualization is any indication of some type of decline. Sociologist Mark Chaves (1994) has helped to clarify some of this debate by organizing the many uses of secularization as a theory by employing a three-layered approach which defines this as a process of religious decline at 1) the structural-institutional level, 2) organizational level, and 3) the individual level. When using this schema, one can make sense of the fact of the paradoxical conditions of the apparent decline of religion in some aspects of modern American culture (e.g. Smith 2003) while an apparent vitality and growth appears in other dimensions such as at the individual level (e.g. Finke and Stark).
For the purposes of this study I will mainly focus on Chaves’ third layer of secularization, the individual-level, which has in many ways been the most controversial.¹

At this individual-level then what does the secularization paradigm expect with respect to religious identity? While no direct studies of this kind have been done, one might argue that religion would decrease in salience based on this paradigm’s assumptions; identification with religious belief systems becomes less plausible. An illustrative example of the confusion surrounding secularization can be observed in the research surrounding American evangelical Protestants. In the 1980s, sociologists such as James Hunter (1983, 1987) used multiple sources of evidence to demonstrate that changes were taking place within this subculture in a direction away from its traditional premises of uncompromising orthodoxy. Religious identity was understood in a zero-sum fashion as Christian Smith and his colleagues observed some years later (1998). The orthodox beliefs which imply strong identity salience either resists the changes taking place in American culture or it accommodates to sustain some degree of relevance with the rest of mainstream society. Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s while pronouncements of victory appeared in popular media through the new presence of evangelical Christianity in American politics, Hunter speculated that this victory would be short-lived, and that every instance of “cognitive bargaining” would eventually result in the contamination of the subculture and the worldview to which it adheres.

More recent research, however, has refuted a number of these arguments based on individual-level aggregate survey findings (e.g. Shibley, 1996; Smith et al. 1998). The disparity in methodological approaches in these studies was reason enough to warrant a clarification on what exactly is secularization and how one should interpret the available
data. Hunter’s well-crafted argument relied on a variety of evidence from content analyses of books and magazines to findings based on national surveys. This left a fair amount of room for interpretation. Recent research has attempted to correct this problem by focusing mainly on the responses of individuals to see if religion was indeed declining in significance for the typical person. Mark Shibley (1996) for instance used data from the General Social Surveys, a nationally-representative cross-sectional study of American adults, to argue that the resurgence of evangelicalism is actually more a result of migration of Southern religion across the United States. He argues however, that theological and moral compromises in these transplanted churches may result in the erosion of Southern religion eventually. In this sense, secularization to the extent that it reflects a “loosening” of moral attitudes and theological beliefs was taking place. Christian Smith and his colleagues (1998) however, found no evidence whatsoever for the secularization argument in their study of religious identity and belief. In a series of theoretical propositions, Smith et al. suggested that the modern condition of pluralism may be the very grounds for which certain religions can thrive. This argument was based also on nationally representative aggregated individual-level data and found that those who self-identified as evangelical Protestants were in fact not showing any evidence of theological compromise; in fact relative to members of all other Christian traditions, evangelicals remain the most resilient in the face of the “acids of modernity.”

The results of these studies were part of a growing body of evidence showing numerous exceptions to the thesis of secularization. And it is here that the second framework for the study of religion entered. In a summary of this vast extant literature on the topic of religious change, Stephen Warner (1993) observed that a consensus was
emerging among sociologists of religion that individual level belief and practice has in fact sustained over time in the case of the United States. In fact the overwhelming evidence pointed to what he called a “new paradigm” for the study of religion. In this new paradigm it is argued that religious decline is an inaccurate way of picturing religion in the modern world since it is based on assumptions derived from the European case. Instead religion in the US is better seen as thriving in light of (and not despite) modernization and its concomitant processes.

What the new paradigm proponents showed was that part of the problem with secularization as a theory was its presumed coupling with modernity and its concomitant processes. Secularization for instance, was associated with increased pluralism which then fractured the overarching worldviews held in society (see Christiano et al. 2002). Pluralism in this sense referred to the proliferation of multiple and competing religions within a society. In the new paradigm, however, pluralization is precisely the mechanism that strengthens belief. It is argued here that encountering and engaging relevant outgroups should lead to a stronger sense of symbolic boundaries for a religious subculture and its religious identity (Smith et al. 1998). Within this paradigm then we might expect that religious identity might actually persist and thrive in a pluralized environment.

These two competing theories of secularization and the “new paradigm” argue for differing interpretations on how religion can and should be interpreted. And in the accumulated discussion over this problem, sociologists have concluded that at the methodological level, better clarity, rigor, and consistency are needed to discuss these issues. So for instance, a more accurate portrayal of secularization requires timeelapsed
data. A decline in religious identity for example would require some documentation of its salience at an early point in an individual’s life, followed by additional follow-ups in years ahead. More so, tracking generational cohorts may also give us a better idea of whether religious identity salience is occurring. Given that no longitudinal study of this kind has been done, we might arguably say that the arguments regarding religious identity, pluralization and secularization have not been conclusively explored.

While the evaluation of the secularization paradigm continues, I argue that in some ways it is significant in a different sense, with respect to perceptions at the individual level. It is here that I turn to the concept of religious public narratives. Much like racial public narratives, religious public narratives house the plotlines within a given religious community as well as public metanarratives such as secularization or religious pluralism. These narratives provide a grammar and syntax so to speak by which individuals construct their sense of religious identity, and by which their constructions are constrained. It bears recalling that these plotlines are not necessarily grasped nor explained in their entirety by any given individual. Rather we hear fragments of them when we listen to the ways in which an individual describes his or her religious identity. Religious public narratives then are one way of describing how the discussions of scholars translate to the popular level through the discourse surrounding one’s personal religious identity.

4.3 Reviewing Asian American Religious Identities Part II: A Curious Absence?

As mentioned earlier, the Asian American case is particularly important when we consider the theoretical discussion over religion in the modern US context as well as in
this present look at public narratives. But in considering the wealth of research thus far in the sociological study of religion with respect to these two frameworks, one finds a curious absence. The study of Asian American religion has been in existence for nearly two decades, but until recently much of it has been fairly spotty and limited to the realm of dissertations and theses. Secondly, of the research that had been published (until the mid 1990s) much of it focused not on issues of secularization or the new paradigm per se but on issues of: 1) immigrant structural adaptation of religion (what might better be described as a form of religious assimilation) and 2) organizational change across generations. Some studies for instance looked at the ways in which an immigrant congregation adapts to its surroundings by transforming the way religion is practiced in the originating homeland to the way it is practiced in the United States (e.g. Fenton 1988, Hurh and Kim 1990, Min 1992, Mullins 1988, Shin and Park 1988, Williams 1988, see also Warner 1998). Other studies since the mid 1990s have looked at generational dynamics particularly between the immigrant first generation and their children or the “second-generation” which is also suggestive of an assimilation model (e.g. Alumkal 2001, Bankston and Zhou 1995, 1996, Chai 1998, 2001, Goette 2001, Hasan 2000). In both of these research subsets, the central question of secularization and its framework which has guided much of the mainstream of the sociology of religion have been somewhat if not completely ignored. The closest interaction that Asian American immigrant religion has had with the scholarly mainstream appears to be as a subset of evidence for the new paradigm (see Warner 1998).

The apparent lack of connection between Asian American religious research and mainstream discussions such as secularization voiced by other scholars suggests that we
conceptualize Asian American immigrant religions as somehow “other,” as if the
religious concerns of most other Americans have no bearing or application to immigrants
and their religions. In fact, it also suggests that immigrant religions, and Asian American
religions are sociologically interesting only for their functional role in preserving or
transforming an ethnic culture or group with nearly no implications for the wider society.
If this reading is correct, sociologists of religion have on the one hand made visible the
religious worlds of these Asian American immigrant communities, but on the other hand,
have also marginalized them by not incorporating them into the larger debates.

This distinction is highly problematic. Even as we discuss the ways in which the
organizational structures that help institutionalize immigrant religion undergo change,
these changes take place within a larger landscape that is simultaneously also undergoing
cultural change. Some scholars have pointed to these macro-social changes as the decline
of the Protestant cultural hegemony in American life (Hunter 1991, Eisenach 2000), a
restructuring of American religious life (Wuthnow 1988), an intensified emphasis on
individualism (Bellah et al. 1996), or a new “spiritual marketplace” (Roof 1993, 1999,
Wuthnow 1998). In all of these studies some mention is made of the increasing presence
or exposure of traditional Eastern religions like Buddhism and Daoism by the religious
mainstream. No corollary research however has appeared that views the effects of these
macro cultural changes from the vantage point of the communities that are in some ways
most affected by them: Asian Americans. If religious pluralism is on the rise, and a good
deal of that pluralism is a result of a significant numerical increase in the presence of
traditional Eastern religions, then Asian Americans of all social groups would be most
affected by this (see chapter 2). With this in mind, the study of religious public narratives
I hope introduces one way in which the worlds inhabited by Asian Americans might converge with the changes taking place in the mainstream so as to better understand the significance of religion in contemporary American life.\(^5\)

### 4.4 Asian American Religious Identities in College

In the rest of this chapter we will consider the ways in which these young second-generation Asian Americans construct and interpret their personal religious identities. The wide spectrum of their religious backgrounds made this group well-suited for the task of exploring this topic. To a certain extent this is a departure from some of the literature since I am considering less of the organizational aspects of religious identity, nor am I focusing on the immigrant generation and religious identity. I am also not looking at the interaction of the immigrant generation and their children and adaptation processes within the context of religious environment. Instead I am drawing attention to individual-level responses within a public, secular and religiously-pluralized environment. Such an approach has its concomitant benefits and limitations which bear keeping in mind.

Methodologically, I followed the same approach as with the ethnic identity discourses by using a mixture of both interview and survey questions. As with ethnic identity I asked the interviewed respondents how they would describe their religious preference followed by a question as to how important this religious preference was, and still further, what meaning do they ascribe to it. The survey asked the respondents similar questions but in close-ended form (see appendix for details). In the following, I will show some of the patterns I observed in these responses that suggest a picture that
reveals the ways in which scholarly discourse over secularization and the new paradigm of thriving religious pluralism have filtered into the language used to express the significance of one’s religion.

4.5 Asian American Religious Identity Salience: A Descriptive Glance

Before exploring the array of religious identity responses, we should first lay out a brief snapshot of the student responses to the importance of religion in general. Looking at Table 1, among the 99 interviewed respondents, when asked independently about their religious background, nearly 74 percent reported that religion was important to them in some sense. This was consistent across all religious groups as well. Note too that there are no noticeable variations between the major western religious traditions and the traditional Eastern religions. The Asian Americans in minority religions in this sample were not all that different in their levels of salience compared to Asian Americans in the predominant religions in America.

TABLE 4.1
IMPORTANCE OF FAITH
BY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND
INTERVIEW SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Jain</th>
<th>Sikh</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>81.8</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>76.5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-square significant at the .01 level
The same pattern appeared in the survey sample as well. The vast majority of respondents regardless of religion, said that their religious identity in college was “somewhat” or “extremely” important (69 percent). Again note that while these results might only be reflective of this sample, the majority of respondents irrespective of the status for their religion in the US claimed that their religious background was important to them.

### TABLE 4.2

**IMPORTANCE OF FAITH**

**BY RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Important</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>55.0</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very Important</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important at all</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>84</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Chi-square significant at the .001 level

### 4.6 Asian American Religious Identity Meanings

Aside from these numerical portraits, the next question asked: what do these students mean when they say that their religious preference was or was not important to them? I divided the transcriptions between those respondents who said their religious
background was important to them and those who said the opposite. In looking at these responses I found that two curious divergences emerged. Among those who had a salient religious identity, some appropriated the traditional terms one would expect for that given religion. Secondly, some stated that while the religious identity was salient, he or she did not practice and/or believe its tenets. Among those who claimed to have a non-salient religious identity some said that they actually did practice or believe in something religious or spiritual. But another group among the non-salient respondents said that a religious preference was unimportant to them and no additional religious belief or practice accompanied them. Table 3 summarizes these patterns and introduces four categories which I will elaborate on next:

### Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Identity Salient</th>
<th>Religious Beliefs/ Practices</th>
<th>No Religious Beliefs Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Nominal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Identity Not-salient</td>
<td>“Spiritual”</td>
<td>Secular</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.6.1 Traditional Religious Identity

For many of the respondents, their religious identity was important to them and along with it came the phrases and descriptions one might expect from a practitioner of a given religion. A typical individual in this category articulated some sense of deeply entrenched belief or practice, much like this comment by Krupa, a female Indian Hindu from UIC:

One of the things that I like to stress about it is that it is a very open religion and you can follow whatever path you want to within it...For me, there is this thing
about doing your duty; you are supposed to do your duty, but not be attached to
the results of it… I like the fact that Hinduism is very optimistic religion in the
sense that the cycle of rebirth allows continual improvement of your soul so that
it’s carried on. The theory of karma states that in this life if you really crave
something, and so in your next life that desire is repeated even higher. So in your
next life, you will take a form that will allow you to fulfill that desire. So you are
continually improving or regressing if you are attached to something. That just
makes me happy. Krupa, Indian Hindu female, UIC

Suggestive within her description is the therapeutic benefit she derives from Hinduism.

Describing Hinduism immediately draws her to the “optimistic” teachings found for
instance in the teaching of the cycle of rebirth. This type of traditional religious
discourse appeared within each of the major traditions as seen in the following example
from Maryam, a Pakistani Muslim female at Houston:

[I]t’s not just spiritual stuff. …[I]ts like considered a whole way of life. So
basically it molds the way I act every day, the way I interact with people, the way
I dress, the way I sleep, the way I wake up…[Be]cause it’s supposed to be a
complete way of life. That’s what we’ve been taught form the beginning. The
way I talk to elders, the way we eat with our right hand and not left… It’s like
important to me [be]cause of the fact that it is a skeleton of how I do
everyday…I like a plan or something that is written out for me. [It’s] like: this is
how you live your life and this is how you act everyday and this is how you do
things... But because of that I feel like sometimes if I’m mad at somebody I have
to remember: you’re not supposed to be angry; you’re not supposed to yell;
you’re supposed to be patient. And that helps me. …So it just helps me
remember to be on the best behavior and stuff. Maryam, Pakistani Muslim
female, Houston

We can see here that Maryam presents her Islamic faith as a complete worldview or “way
of life” as she puts it. It completely encompasses her life and acts as a text in which her
actions and thoughts are instructed and guided. Maryam was not alone in stating this.
Consider this comment by Han, a Korean evangelical Protestant from UIC:

For me? Or for everybody else too I guess it’s the same thing. [O]ne of the
biggest things is like the Gospel and the supremacy of Christ and the insufficiency of man to be saved, except through Christ. I guess everything else...stems off from that. To quote one of the famous [evangelical ministers] like John Piper, having joy in Christ, in all aspects of like serving, why we do things for the glory of God, for the glory of Christ I guess...it all ties back to why we do everything...I guess it means having an understanding of who Christ is and what He did, and the appropriate response of love. Loving Him and out of that love doing things, in response. I guess that's how I would see the Christian religion.

Han, Korean Protestant male, UIC

As Christiano et al note (2002:175), perhaps the most thoroughly studied group in the sociology of new immigrant religious life is that of the Korean American Protestant evangelicals, many scholars are probably quite familiar with the comment made above. For many Korean Americans, evangelical Protestantism has been the most pronounced religious presence within their communities and within other institutions such as evanglistic parachurch organizations (e.g. Intervarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ), and Han’s description of the significance of his faith attests to the absorption of this religious subculture as evident in his language and the concepts he refers. There is no doubt that his faith too, much like Maryam’s is a way of life. Lastly, if we take note of Amir’s comment earlier, we see that religion is significant in its traditional form at least in part due to its functional utility. Religious identity in this sense is a specific filter that enables the adherent to map on moral categories in everyday decisions.

4.6.2 Nominal Religious Identity

A second category among these religious identity interpretations involved a set of responses that indicated that while a religious label was significant to the individual, its embodiment in his or her life was not. Typically, these respondents cited a continued
adherence to some of the beliefs of the tradition in which they were raised or a practice which they follow on occasion. Consider the following comments by Jim a Korean Protestant male at UIC, Takatoshi a Japanese Buddhist male at Irvine, and Roshin an Indian Hindu at Houston. Note the similarities in the way they interpret how and why their religious identity is significant and yet not quite so:

I don’t know. I would like to consider myself Christian, but I don’t practice it or at least I haven’t been going to church on a regular basis for the last eight years….It means a lot because I don’t want to end up in hell. I would like to think that I would end up in heaven. I don’t go out and kill people and stuff. I pray every night, or at least I try to pray every night. I still try to keep the faith in Christianity as much as I can. It’s kind of hard. Jim, Korean Protestant male, UIC

Being Buddhist, I cannot say I go to church every Sunday but in terms of Buddhist belief and philosophy I really guide my life towards that, basically just don’t do anything bad, so and then I remember so...like on judgment calls I refer back to that but I cannot say I’m really truly religious. Takatoshi, Japanese Buddhist male, Irvine

I say I’m a Hindu but a very laid-back Hindu. In terms of I don’t do the so much of the traditional practices, I do eat meat y’know. I don’t go to the temple on a regular basis. I still have that faith and during tough times I automatically find myself saying a quick prayer or something so I still have that inside. Roshin, Indian Hindu female, Houston

Again, we see that for each of these individuals, the low degree of practice is evident in their lives, and it raises some question as to the integrity or authenticity of their religious adherence. But nevertheless they maintain that they do identify with the religion in which they were raised. Perhaps one of the most poignant responses that exemplify this tension of identifying with a religion while not practicing it came from Soojin, a Korean Catholic female at Irvine:

But for me I dunno [being Catholic] doesn’t have…it’s just…weird for me…for you to hear this. …I’m Korean Catholic…but...even though I’m president of a
Korean Catholic club, everyone probably thinks I’m gung-ho Catholic but I think I’m just more…I just wanna…I just feel that whatever religion you are…but whatever religion or whatever you are…you need to lead more by example. I don’t care what religion or religion everyone is, I’m not here to convert…I’m just here to show who I am and if I lead by a good example then they’re gonna [say]: “Oh neat y’know what was she? She’s Catholic oh maybe that’s…” …I don’t wanna force anyone to…so it’s not basically Catholic [teaching]. It’s just something that I strongly believe in but I don’t show. So…I don’t incorporate prayer every 10 minutes or every so often…I think it’s just that need to go in the right direction and whenever I’m steering away from it I have something to go back to, that’s how I define my religion. Soojin, Korean Catholic female, Irvine

Soojin expresses a lot of ambivalence over this felt inconsistency where on the one hand she identifies with the Catholic faith (even president of the local Korean Catholic student club!), while on the other hand she holds to a generalized view of religion which she applies to her own condition. Her emphasis on her belief orientation reiterates this grouping of respondents which emphasizes identification with a religious tradition more with belief even if actions do not follow.

4.6.3 “Spiritual” Religious Identity

Apart from those who identified with some religious tradition, a number of respondents did not claim any affiliation whatsoever. Among these, one subset of respondents exhibited responses which I consider “spiritual but not religious.” As has been discussed by Wuthnow (1998) and others, a growing number of Americans claim this term when discussing the significance of the transcendent in their personal lives. In many ways they eschew religious labels as being too rigid, confining, or irrelevant. Instead they emphasize the functional value of the practices within the religious traditions. Wuthnow differentiates American spirituality along generational lines where the earlier generation interpreted spirituality as a reflection of place and location, while
the more recent generation sees spirituality as a quest for meaning and authenticity, a
search for “the real me.” Among these respondents, religion is one way to talk about a
more global phenomenon of spiritual belief. So for these individuals, spiritual belief and
faith is a given; it simply does not have a strong connection to any traditional religion.
This is not to say that they do respond resolutely that they have no religious preference,
instead its salience is notable weak compared to their traditional and nominal
counterparts. For instance, Kajal was raised in the Hindu faith as was Parminder. Both
now state that Hinduism is not as important to them but they interpret this lack of salience
in slightly different ways:

Personally, I don’t think [being Hindu is] important to me. Just whatever I believe in is important to me…Like just recently not too long ago, events that happened in my life, that said “no” it’s not all that important to be Hindu, it’s just whatever I think is important to myself. I don’t care about what others think, it’s just whatever I find to be important. [Because] they’re not in my shoes. They don’t know. From their perspective…it’s something different. Kajal, Indian Hindu male, Houston

It’s important in that, religion itself is not important but the beliefs in it are….I think that we get too caught up in religion. We do some of the rites and rituals and practices and we don’t really understand what’s behind them and that’s one of the reasons Hinduism as a religion isn’t important to me—because the rituals and practices aren’t a part of my daily lifestyle. What is [important], is the values behind those. Parminder, Indian Hindu female, UIC

For Kajal, his personally developed belief system is the significant aspect of his
religion, something fairly similar to the account of “Sheila” in Robert Bellah’s Habits of
the Heart (1996). In that account, the interviewee known as Sheila describes her religion
as one that is an admixture of beliefs that she deemed suitable to her. Kajal similarly
argues that his values and beliefs whatever they may be is what’s important to him, not
the traditional origins of those beliefs. It is in part a significant reflection of his construal
of himself as someone who must respond to the reactions of others that he feels may be imposed on him. For Parminder, Hinduism is no longer a salient description of her religious preference because they do not get at the heart of “true religion.” Hinduism is mired in practices and rituals that have since lost any connection to their intended meaning. And it is the meaning behind those rituals that are salient. To the extent that these values are not associated with Hinduism, neither will she associate with it either.

For a few respondents, the exposure to a multiplicity of religious expressions produced a degree of ambivalence about religious identity altogether. It produced a certain degree of understanding regarding the “truth-worthiness” of each tradition, but because they were all seen as equally valid, it left the individual feeling hesitant about identifying with any one of them. Take this comment from Philip, a Chinese American from Stony Brook raised in the Catholic tradition:

[M]y dad since he was [formerly] a priest…has like a Catholic upbringing but I noticed that in later years he started to explore other religious things. I see a lot of the books on Hinduism, Taoism. You see like this stack of books, he reads about all of them. …[T]hat’s why I can’t really identify myself as Catholic even though I know I was born Catholic; I don’t follow a lot of the strict Catholic beliefs and what not. And what he always tells me: …there’s like a flaw in every major religion. …For Catholicism, he disagrees with the fact that if you’re not Catholic, then all others are going to hell. Whereas he finds…other hypocrisies in [other religions]. This is his belief, and he kind of instilled it on me. Like if you were to go to heaven it shouldn’t matter what religion you were in. It should just depend on the person you are. So as long as you do good, and as long as you are good then you should go to heaven. And that’s not one major religion…so I guess it’s like his teaching more than anything. …I can tell he knows a lot of the things that he sees wrong with like some of their beliefs. It’s not necessarily wrong but it leans too far this way or leans too far that way. It doesn’t really encompass it whole. It doesn’t really emphasize the person. It says you have to believe this and you have to believe that. It doesn’t necessarily make you think for yourself in a sense. So I’m not really sure how to classify my religious background. It’s mainly I guess from my father’s teachings. Philip, Chinese Catholic male, SUNY
Philip’s exposure to multiple religious perspectives through his father’s influence has brought him to a point where he is unable to identify with any religion. He recognizes the exclusivity in Catholicism as a limitation, and more so, every religion evidences a limitation. Thus no religion “encompasses it whole.” In a sense all religions have ceased to sustain sufficient enough plausibility to be the “way of life” that his traditional counterparts participate in. The same can be said for Samy an Indian male from Houston who describes himself as: “born Hindu, raised Catholic, and Muslim by association:”

I was born Hindu, raised Catholic, I’m Muslim by association. [laughs] I’m Hindu. For practical purposes I’m Hindu….My personal view on it is that there’s too many parallels in each religion. My conclusion is there’s something up there that’s a lot more powerful than I am that put me here and can take me away whenever he/she deems necessary. My belief is that as long as you believe in something pure, you don’t believe in materialistic evil or superficial things, [if] you believe in something pure there are many paths to one truth. What appeals to Americans may not appeal to the French or the Indians or the Asians, so to me it all talks about the same thing as far as the beliefs. Minor differences [exist] here and there but each of them tell you to be pure. Each of them tell you to treat other people good. Each of them tell you to devote yourself to God. I think it’s pretty much the same thing represented in different ways. You can take the three major holy books: the Bhagavadgita for Hindus, the Koran for Muslims, the Bible for Christians—all talk about a great flood. All of them talk about this one person that came down. Whether they believe that was the Son of God or just a prophet, those are part of the minor differences, but they parallel themselves too much. So I just think that religion as a sense is a little bit outplayed. Every religion teaches you to be open-minded yet I can’t walk into a Muslim wedding. A Muslim wouldn’t be looked upon very well coming into a Hindu wedding. Yet we are all supposed to love each other. [R]eligions…restrict you too much. If you’re supposed to be open-minded then you have to be open-minded to everything. You can’t just focus on one set of beliefs, you can’t get anywhere. Samy, Indian Hindu male, Houston

Samy understands the similarities in all of the religions as logically leading to a relativization of them. And much like Philip, he sees each religion as limiting and hypocritical. Two observations might be made out of this. For one, while Smith et al. have noted that religious strength is contingent on engagement with relevant outgroups,
these two examples suggest that in some exceptional situations, religious strength is in fact dampened by exposure to certain outgroups. It may be the case that comparing Hinduism to Islam and Christianity may be inappropriate as a “relevant” outgroup but at the very least it leaves room for reconsideration and further exploration. Second, we can see from both of these examples how a popular version of rational choice theory operates sometimes in the minds of everyday individuals. For Philip and Samy, choosing to distance themselves from any strong affiliation with Catholicism or Hinduism was based on much study and reflection after having been exposed to a multiplicity of religious belief systems. This arguably is as much a pattern of rational choice thinking as goes into the logic to affiliate with a given religion as we saw with the traditionalist adherents.

4.6.4 Secular Identity

One final category is what I describe as a secular identity. This describes those who not only do not affiliate with a given religion, but do not consider religion very much. While this category appears to be no more surprising than those who are more traditional in their religious affiliation, perhaps the most striking pattern within this subgroup was its connection to Christianity. For a number of the respondents, referencing a Christian friend or family member, or an some experience with a Christian formed the basis for which they interpreted their religious affiliation as “nothing” or “atheist.” Consider the following descriptions by Sandy a non-religious Korean female at UIC and Andrea a non-religious Taiwanese female at Irvine regarding their present religious preference:
I think that I’ve had a lot of experiences in the past [where] not being Christian has been used against me. My roommate and friends are very religious and they have me going to these meetings. Maybe I’m firm on my belief because my family isn’t very religious and this is something that I have come into my own realizing. Yeah, there is someone up there, but I don’t know what he does or how we came about. And I’m not about to prescribe myself to Christianity because it is the easiest and closest thing to me. Sandy, non-religious Korean female, UIC

Oh I don’t. Actually in elementary school and middle school, my friend she was Christian and she used to bring me to Christian school. I mean like Friday nights with her, but then I was never like into religion or anything. Before for awhile I did believe in something but then I was never sure. I was never like baptized or Christianized or anything. I just went along with her just to see what it was like. To learn more about things but then when I went to church it was just like another social gathering kind of thing so.....I went through, what do you call it, Evangelical Friends retreats? …With everything else, I’m not in any specific religion or anything, neither were my parents. Andrea, non-religious Taiwanese female, Irvine

For both Sandy and Andrea, having some ties with a Christian church or network of friends exposed them to a religious community but it did not lead to an adoption of this given worldview. They both mention a great deal of cognitive ambivalence and a certain amount of independent thought that helped negotiate the plausibility of this particular religious perspective.

4.7 Analogies from Survey Results

Though translating survey responses into the kinds of categories just mentioned is difficult I suggest that some evidence might be ascertained through them. Students were asked a few close ended questions about their current religious practice and when combined with some of the results presented earlier, we can see a rough resemblance of the four types of religious identity interpretations seen in the interviews. Students were asked about the frequency of their religious participation in organizations outside of the
university and the frequency of their religious practice apart from student organization participation (see appendix for exact wording), and when compared against their responses on the importance of faith, we find predictable patterns. The vast majority of those who claimed that religion was not an important feature in their lives at college were most likely to report that they never participate in non-university religious organizations (about 88 percent). At the other end of the continuum, the majority of those stated that their religious faith was “extremely important” also reported that they participated in non-university religious organizations at least two to three times a month or more (about 72 percent).

### TABLE 4.4

CROSSTABULATION OF IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS FAITH BY FREQUENCY OF NON-UNIVERSITY RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Sample</th>
<th>Importance of religious faith in college</th>
<th>Not important at all</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency of participation in non-university religious organization while in college***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td></td>
<td>88.24</td>
<td>65.22</td>
<td>31.17</td>
<td>13.79</td>
<td>37.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a year</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.84</td>
<td>8.70</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several times a year</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>13.04</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>8.28</td>
<td>13.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a month</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>8.70</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3 times per month</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>6.49</td>
<td>13.79</td>
<td>8.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>19.48</td>
<td>33.79</td>
<td>20.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than once a week</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>24.14</td>
<td>11.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td></td>
<td>51</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: *** Chi-square significant at the .000 level.

A similar pattern appears when comparing importance of religious faith with frequency of religious practice apart from university religious organization participation. Eighty-
two percent of those who stated that their religious faith was not important at all, stated that they never express any religious practice. And again on the other side of the continuum, about ninety-six percent of those who said that their faith was “extremely” important to them practiced some form or religious expression at least two to three times a month or more.

TABLE 4.5
CROSSTABULATION OF IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS FAITH AND FREQUENCY OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE OUTSIDE OF ANY ORGANIZATION IN COLLEGE

| Frequency of religious practice outside of religious organization in college*** | Importance of religious faith in college |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Not important at all | Not very important | Somewhat important | Extremely important | Total |
| Never | 82.00 | 41.86 | 10.67 | 0.69 | 21.73 |
| Once a year | 4.00 | 18.60 | 5.33 | 0.69 | 4.79 |
| Several times a year | 8.00 | 20.93 | 22.67 | 2.07 | 10.54 |
| Once a month | 2.00 | 6.98 | 12.00 | 0.69 | 4.47 |
| 2-3 times per month | 2.00 | 4.65 | 8.00 | 6.90 | 6.07 |
| Once a week | 0.00 | 6.98 | 30.67 | 14.48 | 15.02 |
| More than once a week | 2.00 | 0.00 | 10.67 | 74.48 | 37.38 |
| N | 50 | 43 | 75 | 145 | 313 |

*** Chi-square significant at the .000 level.

Given these results I merged these two measures together to create a scale of overall religious practice while in college. I then combined the religious identity responses with this scale to see if there were some notable differences in how religion is understood among the survey respondents. I combined all individuals who stated any religious identity into one group and created a second group for those who did not, and when compared with the overall levels of religious participation we find some reflection of the
categories evident in the interviews.\textsuperscript{11} About 14 percent of the sample did not claim any religious identity nor did they take part in any religious practice or organization; these resemble the secular identity. At the other extreme, about 38 percent of this sample expressed a high degree of practice and participation as well as adopting a religious identity; these resemble the traditional religious identity interpretation. About five percent reported no religious identity and yet maintained some degree of religious practice or participation; this is reflective of the “spiritual” identity interpretation. Lastly, when combining the remaining individuals, we have a cluster of about 44 percent who stated some religious identity while reporting only a minimal amount of religious participation or practice; these reflect the nominal identity we saw earlier.\textsuperscript{12} While further study of this is necessary, this example is illustrative of the dynamics occurring at least among these young Asian Americans.

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{CROSSTABULATION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY BY OVERALL RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND PARTICIPATION \newline \textsc{survey sample}}
\begin{tabular}{lcccc}
\hline \multicolumn{1}{c}{Scale of religious participation and practice in college***} & \multicolumn{1}{c}{No religious identity} & \multicolumn{1}{c}{Any religious identity} & \multicolumn{1}{c}{Total} & \multicolumn{1}{c}{N} \\
\hline No religious practice or participation & 13.55 & 5.16 & 18.71 & 58 \\
Some religious practice or participation & 4.52 & 39.03 & 43.55 & 135 \\
High religious practice and participation & 0.00 & 37.74 & 37.74 & 117 \\
\hline Total & 18.06 & 81.94 & 100.00 & \\
N & 56 & 254 & & 310 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

NOTE ***Chi-square significant at the .001 level.
4.8 Situated Religious Pluralism: Religious Identities and Public Narratives

How do we make sense of the varied meanings of religious identity given by these young Asian Americans, and does this have any relationship to the previous theoretical discussion regarding the sociological study of religion? I offer one concept that may help move us towards an explanation. As I suggested earlier, the significance of mentioning the frameworks by which religion is understood in America is its utility in understanding religious public narratives. Public narratives we recall are built on a confluence of various relationships and overlapping communities. These stories form the basis for social identities for groups and personal identities for the individuals within these groups. The scholarship that has sought to explain the picture of religion in America over time winds its way to individuals either directly through higher education or more often indirectly through community leaders, friends and family networks. We pass on our stories that help provide some structure or frame of reference to guide our understanding of why things are the way they are. Thus the concepts embedded within secularization theory and the new paradigm, while never fully nor deeply articulated, are implicit in how we shape our religious personal identities.13

With respect to religion, the theoretical lenses used to explain the presence of religion in the modern world actually point to two expressed “realities” we have seen in these identity interpretations. On the one hand secularism is clearly an experience and story for those who may be highly committed to their faith and have encountered someone who had either “fallen away” or chose not to accept it. On the other hand, deep
traditional religious commitment (particularly of the Christian variety) is an experience that many non-practicing non-religious individuals have faced in others. In the eyes of the one, secularization might be quite evident; to the other, a thriving adherence to religious traditions (i.e. the new paradigm’s focus) is evident as well.

Apart from the contrast of these two extremes, the “middle” interpretations, one nominal and one “spiritual” also reflect some degree of the secularization narrative as well as the new paradigm narrative of thriving traditional religious adherence. Seen from the eyes of a traditional religious interpretation, the experience of encountering an individual who interprets religion in either of these two “middle” ways suggests that he or she is of “weak” faith. Considering that nominal, “spiritual,” and secular identities are perceived at the individual level, it comes as no surprise to a traditionalist that secularization is indeed occurring. But seen from the eyes of these latter three interpretations, it is also the case that religious pluralism is alive and well. For many of these young Asian Americans, religious pluralism is a given and is not necessarily a reflection of any religious decline; it is simply a state of reality. Since traditional Eastern world religions are more evident among Asian Americans, the reality of a thriving religious pluralism to many of them is of little significance. The two public narratives in a sense go hand in hand and together they provide frameworks of explaining and articulating the significance of these experiences through which individuals draw a personal sense of religious identity. It is in light of these simultaneous narratives that suggests what I call a “situated religious pluralism.” That is, the experience of religious pluralism varies according to the religious traditions, communities and discourse involved. Each religious tradition and community (and perhaps even the “secular” or
non-practicing non-religious community) provides a way to describe authentic religious adherence and creates symbolic boundaries that distinguish the insider from the outsider. Every encounter that requires these public narratives only brings across certain elements and not others. Thus the use of religious public narratives is situationally contingent.

The situated dimension of religious public narratives suggests both promising and problematic considerations. On the one hand, every situation in which some element of the religious public narrative is appropriated enables the individual to develop his or her personal sense of religious identity. Each encounter, whether it be a piece of religious literature, sacred writings, a sermon, a message, or a conversation with a friend or stranger, test one’s understanding of the religious public narrative to which he or she adheres. Each encounter creates a negotiated space in which to modify or reinforce a part of that narrative as embraced by the individual. For example, working with the homeless or in a soup kitchen can help draw out the altruistic dimension of a Christian public narrative that one may not have accessed before. If one had a skewed understanding of what altruism means from that Christian public narrative, it can be modified and corrected as a result of these experiences. This can be a promising feature of the situated dimension of religious public narratives, where the individual has the agency to interpret and selectively appropriate elements of that narrative based on one’s experiences.

On the other hand, the situatedness of religious public narratives can create three problematic considerations. For one, the situatedness of religious public narratives, from the perspective of a traditional religious adherent, suggests greater latitude of interpretation than may be expected or desired. For instance, sociologists of religion have pointed to a consumerist orientation to religion that many Americans embrace (e.g.
Miller 1997, Roof 1999, Sargeant 2000) which might be seen in the excessive selective agency endemic to the situated nature of religious narrative. If one can pick and choose how to employ and interpret one’s religion, one can theoretically adopt and reject any aspects of any religious public narrative, as evidenced most notably by the character of “Sheila” in Robert Bellah’s study of American individualism (1996).

Second, a religious public narrative, in the way it is given and received, may limit the ways in which situations may be interpreted in problematic ways. For instance, imagine one is raised Christian but only in ways that distinguish oneself from others as “saved” versus “unsaved,” and he or she accepts this narrative as such. Every situation in which the religious narrative is evoked is interpreted only in this single binary logic. Such an approach at a larger scale could produce outcomes like decreased interreligious civic participation since cooperation with the “unsaved” may not be permissible nor desirable.

Third, the personal selectivity from religious public narratives may even limit the kinds of situations one may engage in. While in many ways this can be a valuable asset for sustaining a certain degree of public morality, it can also be a liability of the sort suggested earlier such as interreligious civic participation. Thus while one’s interpretation of a Christian public narrative will inhibit one from seeking illegal drug solicitation, that interpretation may also prevent one from ever engaging a drug user in need of support.
4.9 Conclusion

In these considerations we see the interaction of the specific agency and constraint inherent in religious public narratives. Individual volition is reflected in the public narratives of many religious traditions as well as the legal-political narrative in the US Constitution (i.e. the guaranteed freedom of religious assembly and disestablishment of religion from state intervention). At multiple levels, religious agency is structurally allowed and endorsed. Its consequences however leave open a wide range of possibilities even to the point of rearticulating the religious public narratives themselves. The case of young Asian Americans in their religious diversity show that these patterns run similarly across groups generally, with the possible exception of the coupling of secularization and Christian narratives. In addition, as scholar what may be just as important in determining the state of religion in the modern world through cross-national and longitudinal research, is listening to the interpretations given to the substance of religion in the lives of everyday individuals. It is one thing to know that religious adherence rates are higher than ever, but it is another thing to know what that adherence means to the individual.

Thus far we have seen that racial public narratives offer some explanation about the interactive relationship between personal ethnic identity and the metanarratives of assimilation and racial formation. We have also seen that religious public narratives help explain the relationship between personal religious identity and the metanarratives of secularization and the new paradigm. A further question remains: do these public narratives intersect? And if so, what is the significance of that intersection on ethnic and religious identities? This is the center of the next chapter’s focus to which we will now turn.
Endnotes

1 For a more extensive discussion of secularization, I suggest that the reader consult the summary given in Christiano et al. 2002, as well as Smith 2003.

2 Further still in a follow-up study, Smith, Sikkink and Bailey (1998) also found evidence that challenged Shibley’s argument about the potential prospects of compromise and religious vitality among American evangelicals.

3 A cursory overview of the research also shows a vast amount of attention devoted to the study of Korean immigrant religion and nearly nothing on Filipino immigrant (or otherwise) religion.

4 Still more research has continued since the mid 1990s in the previous strand of immigrant religion (e.g. Angelo 1997, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000a, 2000b, Kurien 2001, Kwon et al. 2001, Lawrence 2002, Min and Kim 2002, Ng 2002, Warner and Wittner 1998, Williams 1996, Yang 1999). Additionally a new strand of research has begun to focus particularly on the issue of religious and ethnic identity interactions which will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

5 Historian David Yoo (1999) makes a similar claim that placing the marginalized perspectives of Asian Americans in American religion onto the center of discussion may prove valuable in considering the nature and legacy of American religion in general.

6 The only modest exception was that of the Buddhists. In most cases we see a linear progression from “Not important at all” to “extremely important” where more respondents selected each increasing level of importance. Buddhists however, selected “somewhat important” more so than “extremely important.” This minor deviation however does not contradict the overall pattern that religious identity is a salient and significant part of the lives of these college-age Asian Americans.

7 In one or two interviews this typology did not map itself very well. These were instances where a respondent said that their religious identity was not important and yet they followed this up with a description of the frequency of their daily prayers and other activities such that it seemed incongruous to me that one could make such a paradoxical claim. I suggest simply that these respondents hold themselves to a very strict standard relative to their religion and under such rigid measures, they personally feel that they do not live up to them enough to warrant the title of “true believer.”

8 The list of research on Korean American Protestants is indeed lengthy and for the most part ethnographic. A number of studies focus on the work of the church in the adaptation process for new immigrants (e.g. Hurh and Kim 1984; 1990; Kim 1996; Kim and Hurh 1993; Kwon, Ebaugh and Hagan 1997; Min 1992) while the more recent research has shifted toward issues dealing with the second generation or the children of immigrant
Koreans (e.g. Alumkal 2001; Cha 2001; Chai 1998, 2001; Chong 1998; Goette 2001; Park 2001).

9 One additional comment that also reflects this dynamic of religion as a way of life or lens which informs one’s beliefs and actions is seen in this comment by Denise, a Filipina Catholic female from Stony Brook:

[Being Catholic] means believing in God, sharing your wealth kind of to others, reaching out. Being charitable and all that. If you see other people who are needy, you don’t need to ask for a price or expect something in return from them. Just reaching out, trying to spread God to other people as well. You don’t have to force yourself [on] them, but be proud of who you are [and not] be ashamed of saying, ‘I believe in God.’ Denise, Filipina Catholic, SUNY

10 As an aside, the fact that Amir’s Islamic faith informs his decisions suggests one example of the type of thinking argued for in rational choice theory (see Stark and Finke 2000). A traditional view of religion is not necessarily reduced to a mere set of taste preferences just because one finds utility in that religion to make rational choices in everyday life. Amir’s logic is clearly one that refers to making choices about some very significant aspects of his life such as relating to members of the opposite sex and how he should think about his consumer habits; this is not in the same order of thought as choosing the color of one’s car or selecting one’s flavor of ice cream. Nevertheless it is a rational choice made on the grounds of his preference for Islam and that religion’s way of motivating everyday decisions.

11 For ease of interpretation I collapsed the scale into more interpretable categories. Those in category 1 reported no religious participation outside of the university or religious practice outside of any religious organization on campus; that is they did neither of both. Category 2 includes those who reported a minimal amount of practice or participation. That is, they participated or practiced less than two to three times in a month in either activity. Lastly, category 3 refers to those who participated and practiced at least two to three times a month or more in both.

12 Some concern may be raised as to the problem of interpreting this latter category. For instance Buddhists are not expected to participate in a religious organization per se, and hence they might be considered “nominal” in this classification. Argue the question which asked the respondent for the frequency of religious practice outside of a campus organization can be interpreted as individual-level practice, sans any community participation. Under this mode, one would expect devout Buddhists and Hindus to report religious practice at least “2 to 3 times a month.” The following table reports the actual results.
TABLE 4.7
PERCENT BY RELIGIOUS IDENTITY
OF OVERALL RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND PARTICIPATION
SURVEY SAMPLE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Hindu</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No religious practice or part.***</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>6.02</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>30.00</td>
<td>75.00</td>
<td>18.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some religious practice or part.</td>
<td>75.00</td>
<td>63.86</td>
<td>27.96</td>
<td>55.56</td>
<td>34.62</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>43.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High religious practice and part.</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>30.12</td>
<td>69.89</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>65.38</td>
<td>20.00</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Chi-square significant at the .001 level

13 The other metanarratives suggested earlier such as the rise of hyper-individualism or spirituality or cultural conflict are also implicit in religious identity narratives which further complicates and diversifies the range of possible identity constructions.

14 As an aside I observed that nearly every account among the secular identity respondents referred to Christianity as the main religion from which they considered the transcendent. It is perhaps the case that secularization, while derived from the experience of European scholars, is adopted into the American religious public narrative precisely (perhaps exclusively) in relation to the Christian public religious narrative.
CHAPTER 5

INTERSECTING PUBLIC NARRATIVES
IN ASIAN AMERICAN ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

5.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters we have looked at how different young Asian Americans describe and interpret their ethnic and religious identities. Through the public narrative framework we see how these identities are constructed through the discourse embedded within these narratives. While no individual ever explicitly states these narratives in their entirety, we do gain a sense that they are assumed within their thinking especially when describing their ethnic and religious identities.

But the picture is more complex than simply focusing on one public narrative or one identity. Thus far we have seen how these public narratives influence the expected identities, the racial with the ethnic, the religious with the religious. For most individuals, a sense of who one is continually changes from situation to situation, relationship to relationship, and location to location in the various stages of life. And within each of these environments, different identities draw together to help make sense of what is happening. Should I attribute this to my ethnic background? Is it because of my religion? Is there something about who I am that accounts for this?
In this chapter we will consider the interconnections between the ethnic and religious identities among these young Asian Americans. In what ways do they explain why one identity is more important than the other or why they are both important, and what can this tell us about the extent and limits of public narratives? We have several angles at which to consider this issue so we will discuss them one by one. Our first look will consider the responses to identity salience as independent factors. As we saw earlier, each interviewee was asked to describe the importance of their ethnic and religious identities independently. From these responses we can divide the respondents into those who stated that both identities were independently important, those who stated only one or the other as salient, and lastly, those who selected neither. Second, we will consider differences in identity salience when directly contrasted with one another. In each interview, after having asked questions about the salience of each of these identities independently, I asked each student leader whether one identity was more important than the other or whether they were both significant, and why they thought this was the case. We can look at the responses again in the same four categories used in the previous analysis and see what differences occur in these descriptions compared to the former. In addition we will look at whether these differences were significant in the survey responses as well.

5.2 The Complexity of Ethnic and Religious Identities: A Brief Review

The literature on interactive relationship between ethnicity and religion is a long and complex one (see Christiano et al. 2002: 152-182 for an excellent summary). The study of the Asian American case however is still relatively new. As mentioned earlier,
studies of Asian American religion have typically focused on the ways in which Asian immigrants: 1) adjust to American life either through retaining or transforming their ethnicity in an ethnic church, or 2) experience religious transition from one generation to the next. Studies of Asian American ethnicity typically concentrate on either assimilation or racial formation approaches, and notably dismiss or suppress the significance of religion in the lives of immigrants or their children. The study of Asian American identities appears to be leaning heavily towards the theories embedded within a racial framework even when the substance of a given study is focused on religion and religious processes.

For those familiar with Asian Americans however know that race and ethnicity are not necessarily the strongest guiding factors at least from the perspective of some Asian Americans. For some, religion is the most salient feature of their lives and for others the two social identities blend in ways that make them difficult to articulate as distinct experiences. We can also intuitively sense a difference between an Asian Indian who practices Hinduism and an Asian Indian who practices Catholicism or some variation of Protestantism. And we would also be correct to intuit that both of these examples are somehow noticeably different from an Anglo-white who practices non-denominational Christianity and an Anglo-white who practices nothing at all.

How then might we conceptualize these many variations of ethnicity and religion? Phillip Hammond and Kee Warner (1993) offer a tripartite view that differentiates some of these combinations. Briefly, the first type is described as “ethnic fusion” where ethnicity lies at the core of a religion, as exemplified by the Amish for instance. To be Amish is to be both ethnically Amish as well as religiously Amish, the two are one and
the same. The second type called “ethnic religion” refers to a condition where “Ethnicity…extends beyond religion in the sense that ethnic identification can be claimed without claiming the religious identification, but the reverse is rare” (Hammond and Warner 1993: 59). Thus any person of Dutch descent for instance can be Dutch Reformed but everyone who claims affiliation with some subset of the Reformed tradition more broadly is not necessarily Dutch Reformed. The third category Hammond and Warner describe as “religious ethnicity” where various ethnic groups participate in the same religion. In this sense Evangelical Protestants for instance can be Italian, Dutch, Korean, Mexican, or Kenyan. This perspective allows us to consider a variety of ways in which ethnic and religious identities interact on one another. And indeed studies of Asian American immigrant religion can readily be subsumed under one of these categories.1

As useful as these distinctions are in Hammond and Warner’s argument, the way these identities interact are more muddy when discussed among individuals at the ground level. Several meanings can be associated with ethnic identity as well as religious identity, and in some cases cannot easily blend together in the combinations suggested here. One dimension that immediately complicates the model is the category of race. As Christiano et al 2002 point out, understanding the relationship of ethnicity and race (at least in the United States) is deeply affected by this latter category, what it means and how it is distinguished with between these two. Recall for instance that the interpretations of ethnicity given by these respondents slipped into racial categories almost seamlessly. This added dimension creates further categories beyond this earlier tripartite scheme.
Secondly, fluidity occurs across these terms interpretively as well. As we shall see, one individual may interpret her experience of ethnic and religious identity in a logic that resembles ethnic fusion whereas her original self-assessment leads one to classify her response within the category of ethnic religion. These notable differences given by everyday individuals further raise questions regarding the nature of ethnic and religious identity in the 21st century.

5.3 Asian American Ethnic and Religious Identities in Comparison: A Portrait

To gain an idea of how ethnic and religious identities interplay on one another, we might look first at how the different possible outcomes appear statistically. Since I asked each interview respondent about the significance of their identities I was able to create a two by two table of these responses as seen in the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of Ethnicity***</th>
<th>Importance of Religion</th>
<th>Interview Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>23.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>64.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12.12</td>
<td>87.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** Chi-square significant at the .000 level.

About 64 percent of the interview sample reported that their ethnic and religious backgrounds were both important to them when asked independently of one another.
Nearly another quarter of the interviewees said that their ethnicity was important but their religion was not (23.2 percent) followed by a little less than a tenth of the sample who reported that their religious background was important but their ethnic background was not (about 9.1 percent). Only three respondents claimed that neither background was important to them. A similar pattern appeared with the survey sample respondents as seen in the following table.

**TABLE 5.2**

**COMPARISON OF IMPORTANCE OF ETHNICITY BY RELIGION**

**SURVEY SAMPLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance of ethnic/racial background in college</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not important at all</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>6.58</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>9.09</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>13.48</td>
<td>5.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely important</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>5.64</td>
<td>16.93</td>
<td>21.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>13.79</td>
<td>46.08</td>
<td>33.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE *** Chi-square significant at the .000 level. N=319

As we saw in the previous chapters, the importance of ethnic and religious identities on the survey were asked along four-point scales ranging from “not very important” to “extremely important.” A crosstabulation of these two measures shows that the majority of survey respondents reported that both their ethnic and religious backgrounds were important to them (21 percent), and the fewest number of respondents reported that neither of these backgrounds was important (about 2 percent).
What then do these identities substantively mean when compared with one another? Do they reflect any change or difference in the patterns we saw earlier when examining their salience independently? Given the parallel format of the interview questions, it is possible to divide the responses into the four categories described earlier. We will look mainly at the three largest categories to gain a sense of how these identities are constructed in light of one another, first in looking at the emphasis of the one identity over the other and lastly the emphasis of both.

5.3.1 Emphasizing Ethnicity Over Religion Independently

Among those student leaders that emphasized their ethnicity over their religious background, it bears noting that all of these respondents fell into the category I termed secular in their religious identification in the previous chapter. So it should come as no surprise that for most if not all who stated that their ethnic identity was independently significant and not their religion, this was a result of their lack of interest in religion altogether. When looking at these responses from this angle, I noticed again that the emphasis dealt greatly with some encounter with Christianity. For most of these interviewees their stories often revolved around the engagement between Buddhist and Christian belief and practice both within their families and their friendships as seen in these examples from Steve a non-religious Chinese American at Stony Brook and Lisa, a non-religious Vietnamese American at Houston:

My sister, I don’t know if she said she was Buddhist, but when she was in her really bad phase she said she was Christian for awhile but I don’t believe that. My mother, she’s Catholic but when I look at her and I look at other Catholics I don’t see the correlation. It does play a part in her life but I don’t think it has much anymore. [My grandparents are] Buddhist, [but] they didn’t really press Buddhism on me. They just wanted me to do all the Chinese rituals like the three
bows, the incense, and various other things. Steve, non-religious Chinese male, SUNY

My dad’s Catholic and my mom’s Buddhist and I had to go to both [religious communities] because my parents got divorced. So I did like 5 to 10 years of both. … I went to Catholic school until I was in 8th grade and then when my parents got divorced I went to temple for about 5 or 6 years. So I got the aspects of both religions and I think that both of them have good aspects and both of them have bad aspects. And to me I just try to please both my parents right now. … I do what they ask me to do but in my own mind I really don’t have like a set religion y’know? Lisa non-religious Vietnamese female, Houston

As Steve and Lisa show, the comparative experience of both Buddhism and Christianity in their family lives complicated the picture of what religion is, such that they could not resolve the tension in any other way than to back off from religion entirely. In this sense, religious pluralism was part of their normal family experience, but instead of intensifying either belief system or even the very concept of religion, they detached any significance typically derived from it. This is arguably one example of the complicated problem addressed by Smith et al. (1998) when they described the nature of relevant outgroups and the strengthening of religious identity. As they note, white evangelical Protestants sustained a strong sense of religious identity through solid boundaries with certain relevant outgroups such as political liberals etc. On the other hand, they also noted that for those who did not ascribe to any religion, it was often on the grounds that their relational networks were disrupted (see Smith et al., 1998: 166-172). While the evidence in these interviews also shows some support for this claim, I believe there is also an added dimension among the non-religious (at least as far as young Asian Americans are concerned). For non-religious Asian Americans, the experience of religious pluralism may also push them away from religious adherence altogether. In short their choice with respect to religion is to not choose at all. Kyungmi, a non-religious Korean American
from Stony Brook exemplified this dilemma when describing her thought process in not deciding between religions. Note the diversity of religious backgrounds in the significant relationships in her life:

When I was really young my grandmother was Christian. So I was brought up until I was about eight as Christian and then my mother broke away and she became Buddhist. And so I used to go to temple every Sunday. And then my family became Buddhist, [except for] my grandmother [who] remained Christian until a few years ago. So with my family split into different ways religiously it was kind of difficult for me to decide exactly what religion was suited for me….A lot of my friends are very Christian. And…they’ve tried to …convert me…but I can’t believe religion is a really important thing. And I can’t say that I believe in something if I can admit to the possibility of other things y’know? So I can’t say that I’m Christian or Buddhist or anything else. [And growing up] I would say a lot of [my friends] were very mixed: Protestant, Christian, Catholic; I had a lot of different Indian friends who were Hindu and I had a lot of Jewish friends.

Kyungmi, non-religious Korean female, SUNY

5.3.2 Emphasizing Religion Over Ethnicity Independently

While a larger number of respondents stated that their ethnic identity was independently more salient (if not exclusively so) than their religious identity, about seven respondents stated the opposite. For these individuals, their ethnicity was not a significant aspect of their lives, and the reasons they gave were fairly uniform. Ethnic identity for them was perceived as an overemphasis of ethnicity based on particular experiences with co-ethnics. One did not want to be “too Filipino” or “too Korean” as seen in the following remarks by Nadine a Filipina Catholic in Houston and Jim a Korean Protestant from UIC:

Being Filipino? Well, to me it’s just, well being Filipino. I’m not really the type of person to be like “Filipino Pride” whatever. That kind of stuff is cheesy because everyone is the same person, no matter what race whatever. Nadine, Filipina Catholic, Houston
Not right now. I don’t choose my friends based on the races. I know some of my friends hang out strictly with Asians. I don’t agree with that….Every culture is different in its own way. ...There are obviously differences, but I don’t think it makes one culture better from the other….When I was growing up, my parents went to a Korean church, so I grew up around a lot of Koreans and Asians. It just repels me how a lot of those people hang out together and they think they are better than everyone else. Jim, Korean Protestant male, UIC

Nadine and Jim both interpret the question of their ethnic identity in racial terms. Both recognize the concept of race but dismiss it as irrelevant. At the same time, they also stress that while they are ethnic, they do not place much emphasis on it in reaction to some generalized alternative that exalts ethnicity to the point of exclusion. Hence there is nothing particularly significant about being Filipino or Korean if it implies some sense of superiority. As long as ethnicity, as an exclusive identity, is the reference point their ethnic background does not play a large role in their lives. In two instances with Muslim respondents, I noticed that they more than the others drew connections from their religious faith language as a means of interpreting the lesser significance of their ethnic identity. Unlike Nadine and Jim Bilal, a Pakistani Muslim, his ethnic identity was not important to him precisely on the grounds that he perceived it to be a problematic one, associated with all manner of immoral and illegal behavior:

…Our religion teaches that you’re a Muslim over anything else and so being Pakistani doesn’t necessarily supercede anything else. And besides that, being Pakistani, whatever stereotypical elements there are, it’s not really a good thing because we’re generally known as lying, cheating, drug-dealing people from Pakistan. Although there’s a large Muslim population, the majority of the population doesn’t practice their religion at all or anything like that. Bilal, Pakistani Muslim male, UIC

For Amir, his ethnic identity as an Iranian was at one time a significant feature of his life based out of a desire for some group connectedness he encountered in nearby (but inaccessible) Iranian communities.
In high school there weren’t too many Iranians on my campus, and I kind of felt out of place sometimes. But I realized that there is a strong Iranian community where the young kids had a chance to associate with one another and they’re real comfortable, and I kind of yearned for that. I wish I had that comfort, so when I came freshman year I associated with the Iranian Club and y’know the general population, of Iranians and I had that comfort. Amir, Iranian Muslim male, Irvine

He continues however in his increasing realization that the significance of his core sense of self has to deal with an identity that he must choose, as opposed to one that is already ascribed to him:

But then I saw that that wasn’t what I was really looking for as a person. It’s more about what you believe that defines you. I mean, that’s something that I have to choose...I mean [being Iranian is] not something I choose, whereas your identity that’s something you choose what you believe in. Amir, Iranian Muslim male, Irvine

Ethnic identity is less significant for these individuals either because it is perceived to be overamplified by others or it produces undesirable outcomes. In a sense these respondents made very calculated choices in determining the significance of their ethnicity in relation to larger discourses with respect to race or religion.

5.3.3 Both Ethnicity and Religion Important Independently

For the largest clustering of responses, independently stating that both ethnic and religious backgrounds were important revealed another set of patterned responses that seemed to cut across religious traditions and ethnic groups. This is not to minimize the significant differences among these various religions; instead I stress that what we are seeing is a uniformity based on the structural and cultural location of the rising generation of Asian Americans. As a whole, regardless of religious and ethnic background, the
same types of discourses occurred across each group, and it is these similarities in response that I believe point to the public narratives which inform their personal sense of identity.

5.3.3.1 Religion within Ethnic Identity Narrative Discourse

Since we have already discussed the interpretations given to each identity independently, I looked at their responses again to see if there was any reference to religion in their ethnic identity responses, and references to ethnicity in their religious identity responses. Beginning with the ethnicity responses, forty of the sixty-four respondents in this category mentioned something related to religion when providing an explanation as to what influenced their sense of ethnic identity. Two prominent patterns in the responses appeared. The first stressed that religion was a distinct and important part of the ethnic culture to which they identified; in these instances, religion played a functional role in establishing a sense of ethnic identity. These responses often evoked a sense that their religious experience was a subset (albeit an important subset) of their ethnic cultural experience. Take for instance these examples of how respondents couched their religious experiences as being part of their “true” or more authentic ethnicity. These responses are based on follow-up questions when asking about the interviewees reflections on their past influences that they feel affected their ethnic identity.

…In everything that I do, the things that I eat, the religion I practice, I think many of the values I keep, I consider to be Indian beliefs. Parminder, Indian Hindu female, UIC

Well like Filipinos are known to be strong Catholics. So I have really strong Catholic beliefs, and...also, even though sometimes I don’t like to follow tradition
and custom, it’s also something I remember in the back of my mind. Angela, Filipina Catholic, SUNY

[My parents and I would] go to a lot of conventions that are religious conventions but [with] Pakistani people there too, and you learn a lot there. Going to the mosque has made me closer too. Maryam, Pakistani Muslim female, Houston

…I think [attending a Korean church] helped me to identify with being Korean because to [others in the congregation] I was identified as a Korean. I had to keep my Korean culture, that’s how they identified me and that was how I identified myself. Jessica, Korean Protestant female, UIC

Irrespective of religious tradition, these second generation Asian American young adults all recall a similar experience where their ethnic understanding of themselves was wrapped together in their religious experience. To the extent that they participated in religious organizations with co-ethnics, so was their sense of being Filipino or Pakistani bolstered in the process.

By far the most prominent and frequent comment in these responses was the influence of the ethnic church. As scholars have noted, the ethnic church has been the site for maintaining ethnic traditions and cultures for most immigrating groups. This was evident for the earlier waves of European immigrants, and has held true for many of the new immigrants as well (see Smith 1978, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Warner and Wittner 1998). Through these ethnic churches, cultural practices and traditions would be sustained and remained within the memories of these interviewees. Friendship ties with co-ethnics also developed as a result of participating in these community structures. One might expect that sheer participation in these organizations would lead to a uniform affirmation such as: “Yes being part of a Filipino Catholic congregation definitely helped me to appreciate my ethnic heritage,” and we do indeed find these examples as seen in the previous comments.
This one-to-one relationship was not always the case with respect to participation in an ethnic-religious organization. In a number of instances where an ethnic religious organization was mentioned, the fact that the individual participated in it did not translate necessarily into an ethnic-identity-influencing experience. For these individuals, the ethnic religious organization was a place where they learned about an ethnic-specific expression of that religion, but it did not necessarily connote that they were learning anything about their ethnic culture. Take for example this comment from Hannah, a Korean Protestant from UIC and Chris, a Chinese Protestant from Irvine:

It is a Korean church, but we always did everything in American, like everything was an English congregation. But we did stuff like [Korean karaoke] and stuff like that. Just little Korean things like that. Hannah, Korean Protestant female, UIC

When I was in elementary school I went to a Chinese American church but I was mainly with the English group because the Chinese group I didn’t understand what they were saying and it was a little too advanced for me. It had some effect on me because it was a Chinese church but it was too extreme. Chris, Chinese Protestant male, Irvine

For both Hannah and Chris, the experience of being in an ethnic-specific religious organization was somewhat conducive to giving them some sense of an ethnic identity, but their recollections of these experiences suggest that the gains in ethnic identity were modest at best. As scholars continue to study the second generation, it bears some consideration that the activities occurring within ethnic-specific religious organizations may not necessarily imply a strengthening of ethnic identity.

In the second subtheme, I found that a few respondents considered religion as the lens in which to interpret their ethnic culture and experience. That is, he or she interpreted her ethnic identity exclusively through religious categories and terms. Derek,
a Chinese Protestant from Irvine recounted this experience while attending an English-speaking Chinese congregation:

…I realized these past 3-4 years of college that my church being Chinese, I associated Christianity with Chinese people. And when I’d see a person that was Chinese, speaking Chinese, I kind of had this notion that they were Christian–[I suddenly realized] “Oh, that’s kind of a twisted notion that I’ve been having.” And also seeing [that] there’s a lot of Chinese-speaking people in my church, and how they interacted with God per se. Derek, Chinese Protestant male, Irvine

Derek attributed Christianity to his ethnic identity to such an extent that it had never occurred to him until he reached college that non-Chinese individuals could be Christian, and that some Chinese individuals were not Christian. For Kevin, a Korean Protestant from Irvine, his Christian identity was so embedded within his thought patterns that he states his ethnic identity did not even emerge until he became Christian. In a sense his Korean identity was a very spiritual experience:

Well before, I did not really have an identity at all. It was when I found myself in Jesus Christ. When I found myself, my identity with Jesus Christ, I was able to come to know that I was Korean American. Being a Korean American to me now, it means that I have a burden or perhaps a responsibility towards Korean and American to share the Gospel. Kevin, Korean Protestant male, Irvine

While the frequency of these types of responses was rare in my sample, one can see the complexity with which religion can be interpreted as a function of ethnic identity or as an identity that supercedes ethnicity in the thinking of these individuals. In light of this subtheme, we can turn our attention to those responses which demonstrated the reverse dynamics; that is, those responses which described the role of ethnicity in helping the individual to understand her sense of religious identity.
5.3.3.2 Ethnicity Within Religious Identity Narratives

Perhaps the most striking feature about the responses from those who stated both identities as salient, was the near one-sidedness in their language use. Clearly religious concepts and language figured into a large number of explanations for the significance of ethnic identity. However, when I examined the significance of religious identity with respect to the use of ethnic language and concepts, I found very few of the respondents employing such discourse. Of the 64 respondents in this subcategory, about seven referred to ethnicity as a factor which influenced their religious sense of identity. This is not to say that ethnicity is not a significant feature of their religious experience; the comments seen earlier attest to that. Instead what is stressed here is the significance that ethnic discourse, the type that could be attributed to a larger public narrative of race rarely ever appeared without prompting. For Helen, her ethnic background as a Korean was actually instrumental in her religious seeking since it was the main feature she could attribute to the feeling of exclusivity in the religious communities she visited.

As you may know a lot of Koreans are Christians, especially my generation, but I am not. And I think that is a big issue as far as why I don’t have that many Korean friends. All of the Koreans pretty much know each other through church. [Some] people within the Christian church don’t mind if you are not Christian, and those are the people that I am friends with. But most of the people kind of have this thing where “she’s not Christian.” It’s really awkward because I don’t see it any other Asian American ethnicities. Like the Chinese don’t have one religion that defines everybody. But like Koreans, [they] assume that you are Christian and I think that’s one of the things that bond all Koreans together, Christianity. Helen, Korean Buddhist female, UIC

Helen perceives that Koreans typically are exclusive because many of them adhere to Christianity which acts as a boundary marker along religious lines. But this religious boundary is the very basis by which she shies away from having many co-ethnic ties.
And interestingly enough, her comparison is toward other Asian ethnic groups, as opposed to a more generalized view of the American populace. Here again, Helen uses categories derived from an ethnic/racial lens to make sense of her decisions as to which religion she herself would adhere to. In the following two examples we can see two distinct ways in which ethnicity factored into the logic of being religious. For Sanjee, an Indian Catholic at UIC, she attributes her ethnicity precisely as the distinguishing factor which marks her uniqueness as a devout Catholic. Second, for Maryam, a Pakistani Muslim at Houston, her deep faith commitment actually leads her to an intentionally moderate view on all other aspects of her life which includes participating in her Pakistani ethnic heritage.

Being Catholic? I think it is different because I compare myself to other Catholics and I think I am more Catholic because I am Indian. I am more strict on myself and I follow [Catholic morals] because in Asian countries [Catholicism] is more traditional and more strictly followed. And you even see that with Latin countries. Sanjee, Indian Catholic female, UIC

I mean I’ll do American things and then I have my religious things, and Pakistani things, a mixture of everything. Some [people] go towards their religion and they totally forget where they’ve come from, other countries and backgrounds, and then others try to like totally become American and then do things that are completely wrong according to our religion. Like drinking or clubbing and stuff. Maryam, Pakistani Muslim female, Houston

Sanjee distinguishes herself as an Indian Catholic in relation to “other Catholics” who are presumably a generalized concept of Catholicism that is European or white, as implied by her description that excludes both Asian and Latin Catholics. Maryam on the other hand distinguishes herself from “extreme” Muslims, either the non-observant or the highly devout. These alternate groups ignore their traditional ethnic heritage either through an unfettered embracing of what she perceives as American mainstream culture, or a
thorough entrenchment of an “acultural” Islam. For both, their religious identity is precisely significant as a result of the boundaries established through ethnic and racial categories.\textsuperscript{7}

5.4 Choosing Traditions

While these descriptions based on independent responses sheds some light on the comparative differences in identity salience among young Asian Americans, I pressed the matter one step further by asking about these differences through a forced-choice question. In both the interviews and in the survey, I asked respondents whether either identity was more important to them, and with the interviewees I asked them further how they came about this decision. In most circumstances, we do not usually see that these are choices that one must prioritize over another in some universal sense. But in asking the question this way I discovered that many of these young Asian Americans had actually thought this question through on their own, and presented a slightly different way of organizing their explanations by bringing some experiences and certain discourses to the forefront of their thinking.

5.5 Comparing Independent and Forced-Choice Responses in Identity Preference

Briefly, the differences between the independent responses and the forced-choice approach were quite striking at the statistical level. In the following table which displays the interview responses, among those who reported that both of their identities were important to them in the independent questions about 37 percent stated the same in the forced-choice question\textsuperscript{8}. Another 19 percent stated their ethnicity was most salient in
both types of responses. Perhaps the most sizeable shift appeared in the responses to the religious identity salience question. Six percent of the total sample overlapped in reporting this as the more significant identity. Of those who independently stated that both of their identities were salient, 18 percent now reported their religious identity as more important when asked in a forced-choice comparison. Finally, the number of those who chose neither background as important in the independent questions was only slightly increased in the forced-choice question.\(^9\)

### TABLE 5.3
COMPARATIVE RESPONSES ON INDEPENDENT REPORTS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IMPORTANCE BY FORCED-CHOICE RESPONSES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVIEW SAMPLE</th>
<th>Forced Choice of Ethnic or Religious Identity Importance</th>
<th>Both Important</th>
<th>Ethnicity Only</th>
<th>Religion Only</th>
<th>Neither Important</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent Importance of Ethnicity and Religion</td>
<td>Both Important</td>
<td>37.37</td>
<td>7.07</td>
<td>18.18</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>62.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity only</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>19.19</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>25.25</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>9.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither Important</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41.41</td>
<td>26.26</td>
<td>26.26</td>
<td>6.06</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NOTE: N=99*

The survey sample responses produced similar results. Much like the interview questionnaire, respondents were asked which identity was more important to them, their ethnic or their religious identities, as well as the option to choose both or neither.\(^10\) The
number of respondents who selected both identities as being important in either the independent or forced-choice comparison questions was about 22 percent. Those who selected their ethnic identity as being more important than their religious identity in both types of questions was about 19 percent, followed by another eight percent of the sample who selected religion on both question forms. Again the most significant number of individuals who shifted their response appeared in the religion forced-choice response. About 23 percent of those who independently selected both identities as being important now switched to their religious identity when forced to compare these two self-understandings. The only comparable switch of this magnitude appears with those who independently selected neither identity as significant. Among the eight percent who selected this, about three percent repeated this response when forced to choose but the larger majority (about five percent of the sample) selected their ethnicity when faced with a choice between the two.\textsuperscript{11}

\section*{TABLE 5.4}
\textbf{COMPARISON OF INDEPENDENT IDENTITY IMPORTANCE AND FORCED-CHOICE IDENTITY RESPONSES}

\section*{SURVEY SAMPLE}

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Independent Identity Importance & Forced Choice Importance of Identity & \\
& Both & Ethnic & Religious & Neither & Total \\
\hline
Both & 21.66 & 8.28 & 22.61 & 4.46 & 57.01 \\
Ethnic & 2.23 & 18.79 & 0.00 & 1.27 & 22.29 \\
Religious & 1.59 & 0.96 & 8.28 & 1.59 & 12.42 \\
Neither & 0.32 & 5.10 & 0.00 & 2.87 & 8.28 \\
Total & 25.80 & 33.12 & 30.89 & 10.19 & 100.00 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textit{NOTE: N=312}

137
These comparisons suggest that the complexity of these identities is evident by the framing or context of the question. When left to answer a question only about their ethnic or religious backgrounds, most would say both are fairly important to them. But when forced to consider whether one identity is more important than another a significant number shift their response to only one of the two identities as their primary emphasis. Note too that these respondents could have selected both identities as being important but a large number of them did not. What reasons do these individuals give for selecting their responses this way?

In the following we will look at the patterns in responses based on the primacy of identity in the forced-choice identity interview question. The significant issue here is not so much that these students differentiate between identities, but rather how they differentiate these identities. Again all respondents gave one of four responses, some who said both identities were important, some who selected only one of the two, and a handful who selected neither. We will begin by examining the single identity choices first, followed by the responses of those who selected both.

5.5.1 Exclusive Ethnic Identity: Significant non-optionality

We will first look at the ways in which ethnic identity is understood among those interviewees who claimed this as their most important identity. The main theme in these responses centered on the idea that ethnicity was a fixed feature in the individual’s life, and because one could not opt out of one’s ethnicity, it was more significant. For Victor, a nonreligious Vietnamese, the greater significance of his ethnicity was tied to his physical appearance: “…I see myself in the mirror everyday, and I see myself being
Asian. So that probably plays more of a role in my life.” (Victor, nonreligious Vietnamese male, Houston). Not only was the stress on physical distinguishing characteristic an important facet for a number of these respondents, but it bears noting that those features were ascribed along racial lines. Andrea describes her Chinese ethnic identity in a similar fashion; again notice that despite my asking her about whether her Chinese identity was more important than her non-religiousness, she immediately employs the pan-ethnic label of “Asian” in contrast to her white surroundings.

Andrea considers her Chinese background as more significant based on her friendship ties that are nearly entirely Asian and housed within Asian communities which exist presumably outside of the white neighborhood that she lived in.

Not only is physical distinctiveness given racial significance, but it is also understood as a fixed characteristic. This is an obvious fact in one sense but the point here is that it is precisely because one cannot choose to be part of some other ethnic or racial group that makes ethnic identity more significant. And to make the point clearer, it is precisely because one can choose one’s religion that makes religious identity by comparison less significant. Grace, a non-religious Korean from Houston states this well:

Being Korean of course is more important to me because that’s what I was born with. Religion, you grow up with and you choose. Being Korean is something you were born with. You can’t change it. You can’t convert from being Korean to being [something else]. Grace, non-religious Korean female, Houston
The very optionality of religion is precisely what makes having a salient religious identity so difficult for some. Jenn, a nonreligious Vietnamese female from Irvine demonstrated this well:

Religion is just too difficult...it’s too much to grasp and I feel like no matter what questions I ask I’m always going to come back to the same spot. ...I mean all I believe is one thing: that there is some Higher Power. I don’t really identify myself with like one religion like Catholicism or whatever. I think it should be a mixture of everything. Like take the good pieces of each one and mix it up. Jenn, nonreligious Vietnamese female, Irvine

Lastly we should look at two responses to this question that were strikingly similar in logic although argued from two different angles. For Takatoshi, his Japanese ethnic identity acted as a means of gaining a particular location in the world religion of Buddhism. He states:

[T]here’s a lot of ethnicities that are Buddhist, but being Japanese American you have to be labeled or have Japanese descent. Takatoshi, Japanese Buddhist male, Irvine

Since Buddhism is multi-ethnic, it does not have as strong a salience since he cannot locate himself within this expansive religion. His ethnicity gives him something concrete on which he can situate his identity. Contrast Takatoshi’s remark with that of Parminder, an Indian Hindu at UIC:

I think you can be involved in certain Indian cultural aspects like the belief system, the value of family, without being Hindu. I think India has Muslims, Christians and Hindus and I think they all adhere to the same sort of belief system, same sort of hierarchy of what’s important in your life. Indian more Hindu definitely. Parminder, Indian Hindu female, UIC

Parminder considers her ethnic identity significant precisely because it encompasses not only her religious identity but that of several other world religions. In short, Takatoshi
sees his ethnicity as significant because it gives him a particular location in a universal religion, whereas Parminder sees her ethnicity as significant because it universally encompasses a variety of particular world religions. In both instances, ethnicity ends up being more salient but for diametrically opposite reasons.

5.5.2 Exclusive Religious Identity: Significant optionality

Among those students who stated that their religious identity was more important to them than their ethnic identity in the forced-choice comparison question, similar themes resonated as we saw just previously in the exclusive ethnic identity responses. For some religious identity was significant on the grounds of distinguishing oneself from co-ethnics. This may come as no surprise when one thinks of the experience in the Indian subcontinent, and indeed these experiences transfer even among some of the second generation in the United States. Prema, an Indian Hindu female from Houston describes this well:

Because like, in India there’s so many different [religions]. There’s Hindus, there’s Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, and all that stuff. So for me to say I’m Hindu first it identifies me. If someone were to say, “What are you, are you Indian?” I would be like, “Yes I’m Indian.” But that doesn’t really identify me; but if someone were to say, “You’re Hindu”, that really identifies me because that’s the unique part of it. Prema, Indian Hindu female, Houston

Distinguishing oneself from one’s co-ethnic peers through religion was also described in terms of reacting from what some understand as an overemphasis on ethnicity. Again, Amir states this very well:

Well I respect my identity as Iranian. In Islam it’s acknowledged that yes there are different nations and cultures and we have to know one another. So cultural awareness is all very good. But the underlying greatness in the eyes of God is not
where you’re from. It’s piety. It’s God-consciousness. That’s all that matters. Whereas in the Iranian community here in Southern California you’ll see that tad bit of arrogance? “Yes I am Iranian.” As if that gives them any points or anything. So in a sense, yeah I’m Iranian…but nothing insofar as this racial arrogance that is often seen. Amir, Iranian Muslim male, Irvine

In a couple of instances, racial discourse was employed to argue that religion is a universal that transcends racial categories. For these responses it’s interesting to notice the shift in reference point. The previous responses focused internally within the individual’s ethnic culture; these responses start from the vantage point of the universality of their religious faith. But consequently, their language with respect to ethnicity then shifts into racial terms. Denise, a Filipina Catholic at Stony Brook states it like this:

I think my religion I more important than where I come from personally. I am happy to be Filipino, but whether I was Filipino or I was born in some other country, I think religion is more important to me than your race. Denise, Filipina Catholic, SUNY

In a second subtheme, some respondents reasoned that their religious identity was more significant because it was an identity that he or she had to choose or because it affected the choices they had to make or the consequences that choices entailed whether now or in the afterlife. First, in contrast to some of the earlier respondents who stated that their ethnic identity was significant because it was an always-present unchangeable feature of their lives, a couple of respondents stated that their religious identity was significant precisely because it was optional. Jessica stated this well:

Being Korean is not as important to me; it’s just something I am. I can’t change it. Religion is a choice that I have. I can’t control being Korean. It’s just what people perceive me to be. Jessica, Korean Protestant female, UIC
For Helen, she relates her feelings of resignation over the fact that her racial status is so fixed that she finds solace in the fact that she could at any time refer back to her Buddhist identity:

For me, it is more important that I am Buddhist because I have already accepted the fact that I am Asian American and society has formed expectations. I try to ignore that and just do what I want to do. And being Buddhist is more important just because right now, I have a lot of pressures in my life and I need that spiritual side. I need something to believe in and have faith. Helen, Korean Buddhist female, UIC

Not only is choosing one’s religion an important feature for many of these particular individuals, but it is also significant in how one makes decisions as well as the consequences that follow. For Michael, a Chinese Protestant at Stony Brook, being Christian is important for eschatological reasons which imply the need to make appropriate choices based on religious belief and not racial grounds:

...I believe there is an afterlife and that it doesn’t matter whether you’re Chinese or you’re black or you’re white. In the end, everyone will have the same consequences. Michael, Chinese Protestant male, SUNY

Eric, also a Chinese Protestant from Stony Brook states the significance of how his actions are influenced by his religious identity in contrast to his ethnicity like this:

I think I see being Christian as more important in my life. I think that being Chinese American is what I am, but in all honesty I don’t see myself doing anything extremely different just because I’m Chinese American. I do things differently because I’m Christian and therefore I think I would associate myself more to be Christian rather than Chinese American. Eric, Chinese Protestant male, SUNY
Sunghwan, a Korean Protestant at Irvine took this reasoning one step further. He integrates racial discourse by using a pan-ethnic lens which for him serves to obliterate any noticeably different characteristics that would make his ethnic identity significant. By comparison, Sunghwan sees his Christian identity as having a specificity that makes it more salient:

…The values of a Christian and the values of religion are important, and if you maintain that focus and things that you do in life, it will be beneficial to you in the future, whereas being just Korean American is kind of too general. There is no real definition of being Korean American. What is a Chinese American? What is a Japanese American? Who are they and how do you define them? How do you distinguish who is who? I believe I have similar approaches to things about the majority of parts of life as far as financial, social, professional [compared to my peers], whether they are Chinese, Japanese, Korean. I have similar approaches and because of that over-broadness and over-generalizing, there is no true definition of a Korean American. Sunghwan, Korean Christian male, Irvine

Among these responses then, the same kinds of descriptions are made with regard to ethnicity as we saw earlier, but strikingly, it is precisely on these points that religion is now seen as transcending ethnicity.

5.5.3 Both Ethnic and Religious: Integrated (Intra-ethnic Religious Diversity) or Distinct (Intra-religious Ethnic/Racial Diversity)

For the larger plurality of the interviewees both ethnic and religious identities were important to them when asked to choose between the two. One might think that the interconnections between ethnicity and religion are quite natural for certain groups. Herbert Gans among others has pointed this out in the case of Jewish Americans, arguing that they exhibit an ethno-religion which is distinct from other types of religion because the majority of the religion’s adherents also overlap as an ethnic or national group
(1976?). The same might be said of Indian Hindus, Filipino and Vietnamese Catholics, and Chinese Buddhists. And indeed we do find a few examples of this fused identity as seen in these remarks by Cynthia, a Vietnamese Catholic, Eugene, a Japanese Buddhist, and Divya an Indian Hindu:

I think they are closely connected to me. Stating that I’m Catholic has a lot to do with the fact that I’m Vietnamese. Even though my beliefs have deviated from Catholicism a bit I have maintained being Catholic because of my family. And because we’re Vietnamese were Catholic, and because they are all intertwined I wouldn’t change my religion because of my family.  Cynthia, Vietnamese Catholic female, Houston

I can’t take my Japanese heritage away, and you can’t take my Buddhist religion away from me because that’s pretty much most of my life. I was just raised in understanding the whole religion of Buddhism and so it’s hard for me to just take that away.  Eugene, Japanese Buddhist male, Irvine

I think it’s hard not for them to be connected. I grew up where I was in both backgrounds at the same time. Sometimes when we celebrate holidays, I’m not sure if they are religious or ethnic. I think for me it’s hard to draw a distinction between the two at times. It’s just from growing up in both backgrounds simultaneously that has kind of interwoven them together.  Divya, Indian Hindu female, UIC

For these individuals, ethnicity and religion are so intermixed in their understanding that it would be impossible to say that either identity is somehow more salient than the other. There were a fair number of respondents who also stated that both identities were significant by referencing some comparison of religious differences within their ethnic group. This intra-ethnic religious diversity motif resembled the type of response given by Saroj:

…Indian’s are just so different—Musso-Indian, Sikh-Indian, Indian-Indian and the culture’s are very similar, [but the] languages are completely different. And religions are completely different. I would say just because I say I’m Indian doesn’t identify my religion; it identifies my ethnicity or the place I’m from or my
genes. And I think saying that I’m Hindu represents to me somewhat of my spirituality. I think [those are] different things. Saroj, Indian Hindu male, UIC

Saroj refers to the varieties of different religious belief systems within his Indian heritage which helps draw out the complex and intertwined nature of his dually-salient ethnic and religious identities. It is also worth pointing out that he refers to these two aspects as having two distinct origins. One refers to his biology and the other his spirituality. In a sense we might see this as a comparison of objective and subjective notions of the self.

In rough counterpoint, a different set of responses emerged from this subcategory which emphasized both identities as salient but because they were in fact distinct matters altogether. More so, the logic employed in these responses reflected an emphasis on racial diversity intra-religiously. That is, both identities were significant because the individual could refer to the racial diversity apparent within the religious tradition to which he or she ascribed. For Derek, the importance of his Chinese identity has recently become a significant feature through his involvement in a pan-Asian Christian fellowship group. His explanation shows this dynamic of intra-religious racial diversity discourse in relating the salience of his ethnic and religious identities:

I’ve been trying to see how being Asian American affects my faith. I would say I usually hold being a Christian a little more important or more my identity, but it was also in this past spring that [I attended] an Asian American conference with Intervarsity [an evangelical Protestant parachurch organization]. And we brought up a lot of these issues and I’ve been thinking about it since. I’m in a gray area right now, where I’m thinking a lot about this and asking some other of my close friends that are Asian American and just kind of discussing with each other what’s this like for us. And [I’ve been] sharing this with some other non-Asian friends that are in Intervarsity, asking them about how they view me, and how I’m viewing them and ways that we’ve been able to share with each other or reconcile in ways that we’ve been I think uncaring for each other’s differences and race. This past summer I also took two Asian American literature classes and I think it’s helped me see that I think there’s a lot more for me to realize how our culture and our society views Asian Americans and how I’m viewing myself within a
society where Asian Americans are still a minority. Derek Chinese Protestant male, Irvine

In time, Derek’s understanding of his ethnicity and religious identity may coalesce in a way reflected by the comments given by Andrew, a Thai-Chinese Protestant from Stony Brook:

I think both are very important because...being Christian I’ve come to understand, God made me a certain way, and God didn’t make me white; God didn’t make me black; God made me a Chinese-Thai, and there’s a reason for that. I’m not really sure what the reason is, but I understand that there’s a beauty to that and that it’s nothing I should just go [and say], “Because I’m Christian now I have to get rid of my culture,” and just conform. [A] lot of Christian society nowadays is like, if you’re Christian, you’re sort of white. You’re in a white culture from what I notice...from my parents [perspective]. I don’t see myself as anything like white culture. I’m still very Asian...because I still follow a lot of what my parents taught me. They’re not that off base from what Christianity’s taught me now. I’m still delving into what it means to hold those two almost identities as one. I believe they really are one identity right now [and] as I’m looking into it, I still see it as two and they’re slowing moving together. [T]hat one crucial tie is that I know God created me this way. …He chose me to be this way.  Andrew, Thai-Chinese Protestant, SUNY

For Andrew, his response is clearly based on his religiously-informed discourse that helps bolster the importance of both his ethnic and religious identities. It is in being Christian that he recognizes a spiritual or sacred purpose to his ethnic identity. His faith has made him aware too that he has a distinct ethnic heritage that stands apart from what he considers to be “white culture.” And interestingly, it is his faith perspective that informs him that he need not abandon his ethnic background in order to be fully Christian. He is convinced that he can be both even while still trying to understand how this will play out in his life.
5.6 Conclusion: Fluid Identities, the Significance of Race, and Public Narratives

Having looked at the varieties of ways in which these young Asian Americans describe the significance of their ethnic and religious identities in independent or forced choice formats, what can we conclude? Three main observations bear mentioning. First, the previous analysis actually points to the curious fluidity of identity construction. Second, despite this fluidity, race as a characteristic feature of many responses remains persistent, significant, and in some ways very non-fluid. These two observations then lead us back to considering the public narrative as a key concept in which to understand identity construction and maintenance. Both personal ethnic and religious identity explanations draw from both racial and religious public narratives, and at times in some surprisingly similar ways.

When looking back at the independent identity responses, the rationales for the less salient identity are framed as reactions to groups or individuals that represent that identity. Low religious identity salience is described as a confusing experience by comparing a variety of religions. Low ethnic identity salience is described as a stand against extremes, what might be called hyper-authenticity. And interestingly, these rationales focus strongly on the concept of choice. Comparing religions obviously implies choice, but the fact that one does not choose from the religious choices also becomes a default choice, what Kosmin and Lachman (1996) describe as the “no religious preference.” Taking a stand against a perceived hyper-extension of authentic ethnicity, being “extremely” authentic, also implies a decision based on this (and the individuals who represent it) as a reference category. And we should bear in mind that
ethnic identity choice in this sense is housed within a previous assumption that ethnic identity is one that cannot be chosen!

The responses to the forced choice identity question brought part of these themes into sharper relief but shifted into new directions as well. Ethnic identity is salient because one cannot choose it; religious identity is not so because one can choose it. Religious identity is salient because one must choose it; ethnic identity is not so because one cannot choose it. The use of similar logic across these two social identities suggests the ways in which identity might be understood as fluid in that the reference group one enlists in his or her identity explanation only changes one’s terms while maintaining the same logic. In another sense these rationales also show how identity appears fixed as well. Ethnic identity whether seen in racial or cultural terms is understood as permanent, while religious identity is seen as contingent or a continual achievement.

In both sets of responses we see too that recalling a target reference group helped make identity salience stronger. Ethnic identity creates distinctiveness within the community of a world religion; in some cases ethnic identity is seen as encompassing multiple world religions. Religious identity similarly creates distinctiveness within the community of co-ethnics, and in some cases religious identity is seen as encompassing a variety of racial groups.

What do these various types of responses tell us about identity formation and maintenance, particularly with respect to their traditional identities of ethnicity and religion? I suggest that we are seeing further evidence of the picking and choosing of personal ethnic and religious identities through larger public narratives that provide plotlines which help make sense of the various priorities ascribed to one identity or
another. Every plotline has an implicit logic and indeed what we see here is the flexible use of these plotlines to serve as satisfying answers for the individual. Thus while Hammond and Warner argued that the freedom to choose a religion or an ethnicity renders these identities less salient (1993:57), the responses of these students suggest a more complex picture. The “freedom to choose,” part of a larger American public narrative, appears to be a flexible discourse which can render an identity either more or less salient according to the needs or preferences of the individual, but within certain limits.

Consider for instance the way racial discourse as a public narrative was expressed in these responses. Even among those who prioritize their religious identity over their ethnic identity, their racial experience in the US is understood as fixed. The ironic puzzle is that despite this “hard and fast reality,” some employ it as a rationale for ethnic identity salience while others use it to explain its relatively lower salience. Ethnicity cannot be chosen according to the plotline logic of the American racial public narrative. Similarly, religion is described as fairly malleable since it is an identity one must choose but it is precisely that choosing that makes this identity more salient for some but not for others. In this sense, religion can never be a fixed feature in one’s identity in the ascriptive sense which reflects a particular parameter of the American religious public narratives.

In the final chapter, we will draw some implications on how these patterned responses reflect the effects of public narratives and the individual agency in utilizing them not just for second generation Asian Americans but for other American minorities the white majority as well.
The variety of studies on Asian Americans and their religions that fall under any of these three categories deserves more attention than space permits. Instead for illustrative purposes, I will mention here a few important examples within each of these themes. Of particular note too is the complexity with which this research extends. Many are embedded within edited volumes and address a variety of combined categories, such as immigrant and second generation Korean Americans, or second generation “Asian Americans,” and each article can arguably be subsumed into any one of these three themes. With that in mind, examples of Asian American ethnic fusion include studies on Sikh immigrant communities (e.g. Angelo 1997); portions of Williams volume on Indian and Pakistani immigrants and their religions (1988). Given that Sikhism and Hinduism are mainly indigenous to one country or another, most Asian American studies within this category will tend to be on these religions.

Examples of studies on Asian American ethnic religions stress the difference that Asian or Asian American ethnicity has on practitioners of a world religion. Most studies of Asian American religion actually fall under this category implicitly if not explicitly. In each religiously-defined group, the same ethnic identity is preserved or transformed through the cultural elements within a religious community. Selections from Kwon, Kim and Warner’s (2001) volume on Korean American religions, Min and Kim’s (2002) edited volume on the varieties of religious expression within Asian America, Ebaugh and Chafetz’s (2000) edited volume on immigrant religions in Houston, and Warner and Wittner’s (1998) edited volume on immigrant religious communities are some examples.

Studies of Asian American religious ethnicity typically focus on the ways that Asian Americans of various ethnicities contribute to multiple perspectives of world religions such as Christianity in America. Examples within this subgroup include Williams’ study (1996) of Indian immigrant Christians, Yang’s study (1999) of Chinese Christian immigrants, selected chapters in Kwon Kim and Warner’s volume (2001) on Korean Christians (immigrant and second generation). Broad approaches to Asian American studies of this sort include Matsuoka’s treatise on Asian American Christianity (1995), Ng’s edited volume (1996) on Asian North American Christianity. Apart from these examples of Asian American varieties of Christian religious expression are the few studies that focus on Asian American ethnicity among other world religions in America such as Islam among Indian and Pakistani immigrants (Williams 1988) as well as Buddhism and Hinduism and Asian folk religions (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Kwon, Kim, Warner 2001, Min and Kim 2002, Yoo 1999). A considerable degree of overlap exists between these last two categories because they can arguably be read as the uniqueness of ethnicity which includes religious expression or the diversity of religious expression of one tradition among various ethnic groups.

As an added observation, Jim’s response demonstrates that he interprets the salience of his ethnic identity based on how he orders his relationships. Contrast this to others as we have seen in chapter three who interpret their identity as a cultural system of values and symbols etc.
The remaining 24 responses were re-analyzed for some distinguishing pattern which might affect the interpretation of this subcategory, but as yet none could be determined. For these respondents, while religion was a significant aspect of their lives, it simply had little if any connection to their sense of ethnicity.

This comment also points to a small pattern of responses that attributed one religion to a respondent’s ethnic national origin. Contrast this response to one given by Mirabel, a Filipina Catholic from Chicago: “I think Spanish influence has made most of Filipinos predominantly Catholic. And the southern part of the Philippines also has a Muslim influence.” Mirabel, Filipina Catholic, UIC

One respondent even reacted to the question by emphasizing that she was not completely immersed in her ethnic culture just because her prior social networks (especially those based on her religion) were: “Even though I grew up in a Korean home and I grew up in a Korean church that doesn’t make me go towards hanging out with only Korean people. I mean even though I know that I’m Korean it doesn’t mean that because of comfort I would just want to make friends with Korean people just for the sake of making it easier.” Catherine, Korean Protestant female, UIC

In one very poignant remark, Sarah, a Korean Protestant from Irvine even found the ethnic-specific nature of her church experience alienating, precisely on ethnic grounds:

I kind of wanted to push myself away from the Korean American church or the Korean church because of past experiences. Korean people are really judgmental about [your] background and where you are from. I guess I got hurt form my past experience, so I kind of want to stay away. I do not really find the Korean church as welcoming, especially to the elder people. For me, it is really important for the adults to have an accurate judgment of me and it annoys me. It is so much stronger about family background within the church as far as where you are from and where are you going to be two or three years from now. It is so important, especially [among the] religiously oriented. Sarah, Korean Protestant female, Irvine

One additional example of this dynamic was well expressed in Jessie’s further description of her friendship ties with Indian Christians and Hindus:

I don’t know if I was proud of being Christian or if it was like I wanted to save my butt from being Hindu. For some reason I thought [being Hindu] was bad but now I am proud that my friends are [Hindu] and I have realized the difference better. Because there are many Indians who are Christians. And I have one friend who is Hindu. And it’s funny because now she feels kind of left out whereas if she were with a whole group of Indians she would be the majority. So now I think I have more pride and I feel more accepted because I am Christian. Sanjee, Indian Protestant female, UIC
The typical phrasing of the forced-choice identity question in the interviews read: “Which is more important to you being [ethnic label] or being [religious label], or do you see the two as being connected? See Appendix for further questions from the interview.

The reports on the distribution of ethnic and religious identities along the forced-choice comparison questions can be seen in the following tables:

**TABLE 5.5**
IDENTITY IMPORTANCE FORCED-CHOICE RESPONSES
BY ETHNIC LABEL PREFERENCE
INTERVIEW SAMPLE

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic label preference</th>
<th>Forced Choice of Ethnic or Religious Identity Importance</th>
<th>Both Important</th>
<th>Ethnic Only</th>
<th>Religious Only</th>
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NOTE: N=99
### TABLE 5.6

**IDENTITY IMPORTANCE FORCED-CHOICE RESPONSES**

**BY RELIGIOUS LABEL PREFERENCE**

**INTERVIEW SAMPLE**

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<td>6.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** N=99

10 See Appendix for actual formulation of the question.

11 Again the distributions of the forced-choice comparisons of ethnic and religious identities along ethnic and religious lines appears as follows:
### TABLE 5.7

**FORCED-CHOICE IDENTITY RESPONSES**

**BY ETHNICITY**

**SURVEY SAMPLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic label</th>
<th>Forced Choice Importance of Identity</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Ethnic only</th>
<th>Religious only</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.41</td>
<td>51.22</td>
<td>26.83</td>
<td>8.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td></td>
<td>47.46</td>
<td>27.12</td>
<td>16.95</td>
<td>8.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.95</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>44.74</td>
<td>5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean</td>
<td></td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>11.76</td>
<td>44.12</td>
<td>14.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td></td>
<td>40.91</td>
<td>31.82</td>
<td>22.73</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>58.33</td>
<td>8.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>40.63</td>
<td>15.63</td>
<td>25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>27.02</td>
<td>32.98</td>
<td>29.47</td>
<td>10.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** N=285

### TABLE 5.8

**FORCED-CHOICE IDENTITY RESPONSES**

**BY RELIGION**

**SURVEY SAMPLE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion label</th>
<th>Forced Choice Importance of Identity</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Ethnic only</th>
<th>Religious only</th>
<th>Neither</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.00</td>
<td>48.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>16.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td>36.90</td>
<td>30.95</td>
<td>15.48</td>
<td>16.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.81</td>
<td>11.83</td>
<td>56.99</td>
<td>5.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td></td>
<td>41.18</td>
<td>29.41</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>92.31</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>20.00</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>82.46</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>10.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.64</td>
<td>33.01</td>
<td>31.09</td>
<td>10.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** N=314
To be comprehensive, I note also that a few respondents explained that their ethnic identity was more important because of a felt desire to connect more with that culture. They gave responses similar to this one by Ray, a Catholic Filipino from Stony Brook: “...I would just like to know more of the history of the Philippines like where we came from and to understand what my parents went through. Why they came to America.” Ray, Filipino Catholic, SUNY

And this pattern of reacting against the perceived overemphasis on ethnicity was not limited only to traditional Eastern religion practitioners. Nadine, a Filipina Catholic from Houston states: “I think being Catholic is more important, rather than being Filipino. I’m proud of being Filipino but...you know how some kids are these days? They have so much pride that they’re all about spreading their Filipino [heritage] and like make everyone learn what they’re about. ...I mean if you’re Filipino you’re Filipino but you don’t have to force everyone to learn about your culture and whatever. Nadine, Filipina Catholic, Houston

Oddly enough however, Helen insists that she does not want her Buddhist faith to have great control over her life: “I don’t want my religion to have much effect on what I do. I only look at religion as something I turn to when I need a kind of hope and meditation where I need some sort of clarification.” Helen, Korean Buddhist female, UIC

While anomalous, one of the most colorful responses illustrating the fused quality of ethnic and religious identities came from Kevin, a Korean Protestant at Irvine:

To me, if you looked at me, I am a Korean Christian. When you go to 7-11 and you get a Slushy, and you mix up Coke and Cherry Coke, it kinds of brings out the flavor. You need flavor. Being a Korean, and being a Christian is me, and they are a part of me. I like dancing, and I like reading. Although Shakespeare is kind of anti-Christian, I like Shakespeare’s plays for the sake that he writes really well. Everything I believe personally makes me [who I am]. So to me, they are both equally important, but I want to say one is more important than the other, but without them, there would not be me. Kevin, Korean Protestant male, Irvine

Again, these distinctions could not be completely attributed to “natural” couplings of ethnicity with religion as seen in this response by David, a Chinese Protestant from Irvine:

Being Chinese I think is totally different because many Chinese people are Buddhist or some other religion. You don’t find a majority of them accepting Christianity. So I don’t think they go hand in hand, but it does help me as a Chinese. It does set certain standards and stuff for me compared to other kids but important-wise I would say either one is more important, I would say to me they’re around the same. David, Chinese Protestant male, Irvine
Jonathan, a Filipino Catholic from Irvine also expressed a similar contrast of identities:

They have the same importance to me but on different levels. Being Filipino because of my outward identity; you can’t look at someone and say like “oh they’re Catholic,” or “They’re spiritual” or whatever but then when they see me, they’ll say, “Oh he’s someone of color. He’s a minority person.” If someone’s colored they’re a minority. So it’s important for me to retain my identity in that sense. But then in my personal life it’s really important for me to be spiritual at the same time. Jonathan, Filipino Catholic, Irvine
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

BRIDGING TO AMERICAN

From these interview and survey responses, we see that ethnic and religious identities do matter, at least among these young Asian Americans, if not for other Asian Americans and other young people regardless of classification. What is also clear is that the meanings with which these individuals attribute to these identities varies considerably. Finally, we see also that these identities are in one sense a means of negotiation with American culture and American identity.

Social identities, those identities that are centered on group affiliations are a complex matter. When looked at as independent identities, we find a fair amount of variation in interpretation of ethnic identity than may seem obvious at first glance. However, the variation circles around common themes, themes of ethnic and racial public narratives. And indeed we see subtle hints of the metanarratives that historians and social scientists have argued as plotlines that inform the way these individuals think about their ethnicity.

The same holds true for religious identity. Some variation again appeared within religious lines but also across groups. These various meanings however did focus on
certain central features, “talk” we might say, that suggest the particular ways in which public narratives work not only in these student’s lives but also in the lives of others. Additionally I believe we see evidence of the metanarratives that scholars have used to explain the grand trajectories of civilization implicit in the concepts and logic employed by these young adults.

When looking at these identities in tandem, for many Asian Americans, what may seem like intertwined relationships (such as being Indian Hindu or Japanese Buddhist) is not necessarily seen to be the case from the perspective of the individual. And for other Asian Americans what should appear to be distinct relationships (such as being Korean Christian or Chinese Christian) is also not necessarily the case as seen in the previous examples. The complexity of how these identities are thought of independently and in relation to one another helped make clear to me that weaving one’s ontological narrative, the story of oneself is indeed a process of borrowing from the public and metanarratives available to the individual. It is as Ann Swidler (2001) points out in her study on how couples talk about their relationships, a matter of internal coherence. That is the logic and explanation of how a relationship came to be, currently is, or may become is a constructive enterprise in which an individual draws fragments of public storylines that fits his or her perception of the state of his or her relationship.

Drawing from insights in the literature on religious identity, Christian Smith’s (1998) reformulation of Peter Berger’s (1967) idea of a sacred canopy into a “sacred umbrella” is a helpful metaphor here as well. Individuals claim to adhere to universal sacred belief systems, worldviews that provide a full-scale explanation of who one is and
how life is supposed to be. However, it is not necessarily the case that in order for this worldview to thrive it requires everyone else around one must also adhere to it. The sacred umbrella metaphor much like the sacred canopy is a cognitive process built upon a variety of symbols that fit together like parts to an umbrella or canopy. To extend the metaphor further, we can reconfigure a separate analogy that Smith discusses: the cultural toolkit. Ann Swidler’s (1986) concept here suggests that in times of great uncertainty individuals and groups refer to their cultural toolkit, a collection of symbols and concepts that they employ to hammer out, so to speak, a way to make sense of the world. Smith points out that American evangelicals employ a particular toolkit by virtue of a central sacred text, the Bible. The Bible for many evangelicals provides a variety of explanations to make sense of their world.¹ We might think of this toolkit in relationship to sacred umbrellas in a somewhat literal sense. Every umbrella requires construction and a variety of tools are needed in order to fashion it. American evangelicals then construct their sacred umbrellas through the cultural toolkit of the Bible. As a final point, Smith also notes that evangelicals apparently employ the toolkit of the Bible in only certain ways; in a sense we might liken it to using only certain tools in a toolbox to create only certain kinds of umbrellas. This in a sense suggests the paradoxical nature of the evangelical presence in American society. The evangelical sacred umbrella is extraordinarily strong and well-crafted, especially relative to other Christian sacred umbrellas. However, its very construction and effectiveness is precisely what many others who encounter them find so offensive and off-putting!

In a similar way narratives provide the same description of explaining the
cognitive process of agency but in a more uniform way and extends the metaphor in new ways. Ontological narratives, the stories that explain who we are as individuals are like these sacred umbrellas. And like the sacred umbrella, these ontological narratives pull from the narratives of others, including those of a more public or group-level nature, much like drawing from the toolkit developed by a religious community. Unlike the sacred umbrella metaphor however, ontological narratives allow for their construction from a variety of other narratives or toolkits that are held by others or by groups with which one associates. In other words, unlike the sacred umbrella metaphor, ontological narratives allow for a plurality of cultural toolkits, which may be more reflective of the experience of many others, especially those for whom religion may not be an important feature in their lives.

Narrativity allows us to understand more widely the flexible, intermingled, and sometimes inconsistent ways that we make sense of the world. While some individuals may align themselves to only one historical public or metanarrative (such as those with an exclusively salient religious or ethnic identity), many, perhaps most, draw their stories from multiple sources based in a dialectical relationship of their experiences and their interpretive communities. Our stories are a patchwork of other stories and their construction is uniquely our own. As Robert Wuthnow writes, “The search that differentiates each individual is itself part of the distinct identity that person creates” (1998: 10).

Taken from the structural perspective however, this creative exercise of narrative building is strongly confined to the particular access to certain public narratives. Few
among us have the opportunities to access the ways other groups or communities might explain a given experience or relationship. Instead we often rely on the stories passed down to us from family, friends, or others in authority over us (teachers, clergy, legal and medical professionals etc.). It is these structural and experiential constraints that allow for a variety of ontological narratives to occur, but they also suggest the possibility of certain patterned stories based on similar experiences and similar modes of interpretation. Thus, a second generation Chinese Christian in New York’s Chinatown might find much in common with a Chinese Christian in the Chinatown of San Francisco when describing their narratives.

6.1 Where Do We Go From Here?

Clearly more research is needed to further explore the ramifications of this study. Multiple other forms of identity among Asian Americans have not been addressed here, all of which can continue to test the pliability and durability of narratives. As Shinagawa and Pang state for instance, race, increasingly more so than ethnicity, shapes the experiences and the development among Asian Americans (1996:144). How then might young Asian Americans relate to the pan-ethnic label, “Asian American?” Will they resemble the kind of responses found by Tuan (1999) in her study of multigenerational Chinese and Japanese Americans, and Kibria (2002) in her study of Chinese and Koreans? For that matter, what might these respondents say with regard to the label “American?” These and other identifiers warrant further studies to broaden our understanding of this interrelationship.
Longitudinal study of identity is another avenue that deserves some attention. In most research on identity for instance very little consideration has been made regarding the changes that take place over the course of one’s life. As one ages, the salience of identity, whether ethnic, religious or otherwise, shifts constantly not only in salience or priority but also in meaning. What one finds significant in being Indian Hindu at age 20 may vary considerably when she is 40. This is less an issue of biology but rather the social consequences that accompany age. Roles change, new ones are adopted; communities change and new ones are introduced; cultures change, and new trends arise. Hence a 40 year-old Indian Hindu in the year 2020, may construct a very different narrative of her ethnic identity based on the many situational changes that have taken place in the intervening years. Nazli Kibria (2002) notes in her study of young Chinese and Korean Americans in Los Angeles and Boston, a good number of these informants rejected pan-Asian identification while in college but adopted that label in the years following. Similar work has not appeared in the sociological study of religion, but one might expect a similar hypothesis that like ethnic and racial identities, they transform over the life course. Studies that track individuals over time would further complicate and enrich our understanding of how public narratives work.

Included in these life course changes that affect the individual, the family dynamics with which ethnic identity is salient is little studied. When we ask a 20-year-old about the ways in which being Chinese is important to him, we often find its significance and salience is based in large part to the family in which he originated. How then do members of that family think of ethnic identity and how do they interact on one
another? The report of one individual within that grouped unit may provide a skewed picture of what occurs in identity formation. As some sociologists and psychologists argue, the process of identity formation is often iterative. That is, how one thinks of her ethnic identity is under constant construction, editing, and reformulation based on new information gained in lived experience. By looking at family dynamics in the construction of ethnic and religious identities, we gain access to that part of the process where public narratives of social identification are created within a group unit such as a family. Addressing these absences in the research on identity will not only improve our understanding of it but also of how such contexts affect other areas in which identity plays a significant part in our social lives. In so doing we may also then consider again the larger and enduring questions of character and community in an increasingly diverse society.

Lastly, comparative work is needed as well. Scholars have long noted for instance, the vast difference in experiences between white and black Christians in the United States (e.g. Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). This strongly points to the need for further comparative work on how ethnic, racial and religious public narratives intersect on each other for different racially, ethnically, and religiously-defined groups both within majorities as well as minorities of these given categories.
6.2 Public Narratives, Group Balkanization and the state of American College Campuses

Perhaps the one notable experience shared by these young Asian Americans bears some reflection. As students, these individuals belong to a community centered on higher learning and creative expression. In no other condition will most of these young men and women encounter such a diversity of people groups, ways of life, and ideas. As Ruth Sidel states:

“[Attending college is the time] when many young people leave home, often for the first time, meet very different kinds of people (also often for the first time), come upon previously unheard ideas, and have the opportunity, and indeed the task, of defining for themselves and others who they are—what they think, the values they hold, their place in a world beyond the one in which they grew up” (Sidel 1994)

One might expect as Sidel suggests that sheer exposure to such an environment would produce a greater employment of alternate narratives of identity that better explain a given condition or experience either through reading or through relationships developed on campus. But as Nazli Kibria (2002) points out, racial balkanization has been an experience well noted by many when reflecting on their college careers. If the same might be said of these respondents, as well as all Americans attending college, we are left with a significant failure in the vision of higher education.
6.3 Pluralism and Authenticity

The question of public narrative is not only relegated to the province of the university experiment. James Hunter (2000) recently wrote about the need for moral cultures to engage the public square for the development of citizens with the capacity for democratic participation. In his analysis of the cultural landscape, he notes a loss of a viable public discourse where the hegemonic hold of the therapeutic renders most attempts at developing character in primary and secondary education untenable. This in turn raises troubling questions as to the next generation of Americans and their ability to govern themselves. In his analysis he surveys the religious communities from which character may be cultivated and finds that the co-opting of the therapeutic in the logic of these specific communities’ approaches to moral education undermines the very character they wish to develop.

The same should hold true for ethnic communities. Character development is not only the within the purview of religious organizations and moral communities; it is part of the socializing process that many ethnic groups and organizations institute as well. These communities do in fact contain an ethos for the cultivation of character, of drawing out the best of what it means to be Chinese, or African American.

But, as Hunter continues, in order to gain a place at the public square, religious communities often face serious choices about what they are willing to sacrifice within their traditions in order to participate actively in the democracy. The cultivation of character is a noble cause but such processes have an additional implicit telos: to become solid participating citizens in a liberal democracy. Within a morally pluralized
environment religiously-informed character development must determine how to instill values that sustain their distinctiveness in their children while also engaging the public square.

Ethnic groups face this problem as well but the tensions have been described under different terms. Instead of “character” per se, the language of identity negotiation is invoked. What is it mean to be “truly Korean” or “more Vietnamese” than someone else? Indeed this negotiation takes on different tones whether one is discussing 3rd generation white ethnics (e.g. Alba 1990, Waters 1990) or 2nd and 3rd non-white ethnics (e.g. Tuan 1999, Waters 1999) but they ask the same question that I believe runs parallel to the questions being asked in studies of character.

To this observation I conclude that social identity (in the sense of belonging to a group) and character must be one and the same. The transformation of meaning with respect to moral character is also a transformation in meaning with respect to ethnic character. The questions asked revolve around a different constellation of scholarly work but in fact are approaching some unified problem: how to remain authentic while participating in a pluralistic society.

As one can see, this is another way of asking the question of how structure and agency play out in reality. Authenticity is a way of describing agency whether for a particular individual or for a collectivity such as a community. Authenticity however does not exist in a hermetically sealed environment of some perceived “closed” community. Instead to the extent that a community exists within a larger geopolitical unit such as a nation, it is forced to negotiate itself with the structures developed and
imposed by that larger body. In so doing, the structure itself undergoes transformation by the very agency of these local communities. In the case of the United States, this larger society acts as the structure in which reside the agents of ethnic, religious, and ethnic-religious communities among others. The very presence of the variety of communities each with their respective notions of identity or character denotes a pluralism that is a fundamental characteristic of the structure at least in this present moment.

Has this always been the case? Our question brings us full circle. The public metanarratives we saw evident in the thinking of these young Asian Americans identifies that at least for some there is a perceived unified and dominant singular cultural mainstream, one that has been in effect for some time and continues to this day. Does this metanarrative actually reflect a “true” community in the sense that one can actually pinpoint it? Arguably the answer is yes. When one considers the many studies of the ethnic, racial and religious map of the United States (e.g. Census 2000, Finke and Stark 1992, Kosmin and Lachman 1996), one might conclude that there is indeed a “white Christian” cultural community of a sort. If it is indeed a community it paradoxically constitutes an array of differences among the many local communities within it (English, Polish, Catholics, varieties of Protestants etc.). But nevertheless, the public narrative of a white mainstream Christian culture exists and perhaps our reliance on the narrative goes hand in hand with empirical findings. In other words, perhaps the narrative of a white Christian mainstream culture exists only to the extent that its public narrative is passed on to the next generation and across multiple communities.

But secondly, this metanarrative is in competition with the alternative
metanarrative of American pluralism. The plot of American pluralism emphasizes the many different subcultures that cohabit the nation both now and in previous generations. Again just as some referenced the one metanarrative, so others referred to this one. And again empirical evidence for this story can be found. Ironically enough, the same sources of data can be at times be used to demonstrate that indeed the United States is pluralized and yet still remains largely white and Christian (Census 2000, Eck 2001, Kosmin and Lachman 1996).

These competing metanarratives offer plotlines that emphasize or single out one part of the continually transforming story of American society. Scholars, politicians and community leaders take part in shaping these metanarratives and individuals receive them in their classrooms, places of worship, and homes and refer to them when building their sense of personal identity or their ontological narrative—their character.

Asian Americans in this regard might be thought of as contributing to the vitality of the American experiment by introducing communities that embrace some of the traditions of the West as exemplified in its Christian communities. Asian Americans however, also introduce new faith traditions that test the possibilities of a democratic civil society with new religiously-informed voices added to the conversation. Their community-level public narratives add to the growing repertoire of American stories. Conversely, Asian Americans are also affected by the existing narratives in American society. The interaction of these public narratives forms the basis of personal identities not only for Asian Americans but for all Americans in the 21st century.
Endnotes

1 William Sewell (1992) makes this point clear in explaining the relationship of schemas and resources. The material world in which we live requires some meaningful explanation in order for a given object (“resource”) to be useful. These explanations are what he terms schemas developed by groups, cultures, and civilizations. These are sometimes evident in particular texts such as sacred works like the Quran or the Bible which provide sacred meaning to objects and relationships.
APPENDIX

REVIEW OF METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES AND APPROACHES AND IN THE STUDY OF ASIAN AMERICAN ETHNICITY AND RELIGION AND RATIONALE FOR THE APPROACH OF THE PRESENT STUDY

A.1 Representativeness of ethnic and religious Asian Americans

The methodological approach to this study aimed at addressing several absences in the literature on Asian American ethnicity and religion. As mentioned earlier since Asian Americans are an ideal group to study the interrelationship between ethnicity and religion representativeness by these two identities was perhaps the most significant issue. In reviewing the literature on Asian American ethnic and religious identity, multigroup studies in either domain seemed few and far between. Most studies asserting themselves as “Asian American” have often been limited to an analysis of two ethnic groups at most. Nazli Kibria’s (2003) recent work on becoming Asian American for instance used Chinese and Korean Americans in Boston and Los Angeles. Mia Tuan’s (1998) study on Asian ethnics focused on multigenerational Chinese and Japanese in California. Thus when speaking about the “Asian American experience,” representation of only a handful of ethnic groups creates difficulties in interpretation. Admittedly, research in this area is fairly recent and simply requires further work. Representativeness by religion was another issue. Again most research to date has been ethnographic in nature, typically
focusing on one religious community in one location (e.g. Hurh and Kim 1983; Yang 1999). However, rarely are these studies mislabeled as “Asian American.” Two recent anthologies on Asian American religions edited by (i.e. Yoo 1999; Min and Kim 2002) approximate the kind of even-handed representativeness of this multinational collective. Based on these observations, I constructed an approach that would account for variation across ethnic and religious groups (see Chapter 2 for additional details).

A.2 Representativeness of regional differences

A third form of representativeness I wanted to account for was regional differences. Variation by region in the US is important for comparative reasons. Previous studies on Asian American ethnic groups have typically been studied in one location in the US. Thus, for instance we have valuable contributions concerning Vietnamese Catholics in New Orleans (e.g. Bankston and Zhou 1995), Korean Protestant Evangelicals in Boston (Chai 1998), and Chicago (Chong 1998), and Chinese Christians in Washington DC (Yang 1999). However, we do not know how these findings might relate to other ethnic groups and other location. We know for instance that different regions have relatively different populations of Asian Americans. Thus I stratified the study sites according to Census region and selected the one state that had the largest percentage of Asian Americans residing in that region. These include: California, New York, Texas, and Illinois which account for 55.9 percent of the US Asian population. Secondly, some states contain a larger proportion of Asian Americans than others. California takes up nearly 40 percent of the Asian American population but the state of California only has about 11 percent of its population as Asian American. While Texas
holds the third largest share of the Asian population (5.5 percent), they constitute the smallest fraction of the state’s population among the states selected.

TABLE A.1
STATES WITH THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF ASIAN AMERICANS PER CENSUS REGION
(CONTIGUOUS US ONLY)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(West) 5,003,611</td>
<td>3,697,513</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, Indian, Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Northeast) 2,119,426</td>
<td>1,044,976</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Chinese, Indian, Korean, Filipino, Japanese, Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(South) 1,922,407</td>
<td>562,319</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Vietnamese, Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Midwest) 1,197,554</td>
<td>423,603</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>Indian Filipino, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 SOURCE: Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001 (US Census) and various briefs available at www.census.gov

Additionally, one might add that the size of the Asian ethnic groups may also play an important role in the establishment of co-ethnic or non-co-ethnic ties. The density of ethnic social networks then may also be related (if not influenced by) the density of the state’s population of Asian Americans. Thus, incorporation of regional variation in the same study would be an important component for understanding the nature of social ties. Yet another reason why regional variation may be important deals with the climate of prejudice and discrimination. In states where more Asians reside in proportion to the population of all residents in the state, more or less prejudice and discrimination could be experienced depending on the receptivity of the non-Asian residents in the area.
Additionally, the South has had a long history of discrimination towards African Americans, and it is not clear whether such a history has any impact on minorities who are not of African American heritage. Thus regional variation within the same study would be an important component for studying ethnic discrimination among Asian Americans. Finally, what is also interesting is the potential religious variation among Asian Americans among different regions and by relative size of the population. If there are more Asian Americans in California than in Illinois we may expect to find a greater prevalence of Eastern religions practiced by Asian Americans in California than in Illinois.

A.2.1 Representativeness of social environment

A fourth form of representativeness under consideration was local environment conditions. Previous research that has focused on Asian American religious identities typically used “churched” samples. In locating a study within a church setting, one should expect religious identity salience to be at least modestly high. We know less about how this identity operates on a day to day level outside of an environment that fosters it. Typically too, Asian American churches are often monoethnic which then limits identity salience comparisons across groups respect to ethnicity as well. Thus it would be valuable to know the relative salience of religious and ethnic identity for Asian Americans by selecting a sample that is not based within a local religious body. This may add a critical dimension of diversity in the sample that will help us to understand better the meaning and process of religious identity. Thus I chose a public non-religious location to encounter Asian Americans to gain a different perspective on how Asian
Americans may differ and may overlap in their understandings of ethnic and religious identity. Additionally I felt that there would be an important contribution to our understanding if we could also meet those who are decidedly non-religious in order to compare their experiences with their religious counterparts. These individuals would not be found in the congregational studies available in previous research.

Thus in light of the representativeness by region criteria and the need for a non-religious environment, I concluded that a public university location may garner the highest probability of Asian American participants from that state. The presence of Asian Americans in the elite colleges and universities is popularly known but it is interesting to note that the universities with the largest percentages of Asian Americans are public. With that in mind, from these states, I chose one national university per state with the largest Asian American populations as listed in *U.S. News and World Report: America’s Best Colleges* (2000). The categorization of colleges into national universities and liberal arts colleges is based on the Carnegie college classification system, a recognized scheme that organizes the schools based on resources, selectivity, and other important criteria. For the purposes of this study I began my selection process by limiting the pool to national and regional universities, which have an additional affiliation based on private and public funding. Again I select only those schools which are public in affiliation. Selection of respondents who attend publicly funded schools increases the likelihood that they are from that particular region of the country. Again, public records found in *US News and World Report: America’s Best Colleges* (2000) bears this out. This pattern helped instill regional variation. Several types of schools are excluded from this analysis including:
1) All schools outside of the contiguous US, including Hawaii; 2) All specialized institutions including seminaries, medical schools, other health profession schools, exclusive engineering schools, business schools, art and music schools, law schools, teacher colleges, other specialized institutions (i.e. those that Carnegie could not classify), and all tribal colleges. Given the above conditions the following schools were selected for inclusion in the study: the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of California at Irvine, the University of Houston, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**TABLE A.2**

SELECTED SCHOOLS FOR SAMPLING OF ASIAN AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT LEADERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>State/ Region</th>
<th>Student Population</th>
<th>Asian Population</th>
<th>Percent Asian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of California -Irvine</td>
<td>CA/ West</td>
<td>13700</td>
<td>7535</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Houston</td>
<td>TX/ South</td>
<td>16186</td>
<td>3075</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUNY Stony Brook</td>
<td>NY/ Northeast</td>
<td>10981</td>
<td>2306</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois at Chicago</td>
<td>IL/ MidWest</td>
<td>14200</td>
<td>3124</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: A list of “backup” schools (3-5 per state or region) is available along with same categorical information listed above in the appendix. While these percentages may appear extraordinary I appeal to the *U.S. News and World Report* guide (see especially pp. 131 (UC -Irvine), 155 (UIC), 223 (SUNY-Stony Brook), 272 (U. Houston)) as well as their website for further verification of these numbers.

In addition to gaining a more representative sample further value is gained in using a sample of Asian American college students. A university setting for instance is a well-controlled environment (with respect to doing research) thus allowing for reasonably adequate comparisons across region. More substantively, the college environment is also
the site for much potential exposure to various public narratives and communities of various kinds. This experimental site is one that cannot be replicated in any other public setting which again makes it suitable for studying these kinds of phenomena.

A.3 Shifting level and type of analysis from community to individual

Upon selecting the public university as the site for research on ethnic and religious identity among Asian Americans, I further adopted a different level and type of analysis. Relative to most previous scholarship in this area which has been primarily ethnographic in nature and typically focused on the study of Asian American immigrants and their religions (e.g. Chong 1998, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000, Warner and Wittner 1998, Yang 1999), I opted to employ individual-level analysis and research tools. Instead of focusing on contextual variables that ethnographic research accounts for (e.g. documentation, material symbols), I chose instead to focus on the individual biographical factors that affect religious and ethnic identity. A look at these individual biographies illuminates the ways in which personal interpretation of social contexts affects identity ascription. After all, most of the life of an individual is not spent solely in a congregation, even if one’s central identity is religious. The benefit then of this individual level of analysis allows us to compare the degree to which unique characteristics may actually carry over from person to person. Additionally, it allows us to encounter those who have few associations that may affect ethnic and religious identities. The secular or “Americanized” individuals for instance may not be accessible in environments with specified religious and ethnic foci.

Secondly, changing the level of analysis affected the way sampling should occur
both practically and substantively. By the latter I refer to the need to hear articulate voices when asking difficult and personal questions with respect to ethnicity and religion. For this reason, I felt that contacting a student who was a leader of a campus organization would more likely be the kind of person who could provide lucid responses to these questions. Leadership often requires students to invest further in an organization’s vision and purpose. If the vision and purpose of the group is focused either on religion or ethnicity then we might expect that the salience of issues surrounding these matters will be better articulated in the leadership than among the typical student members. In addition, leadership in university-recognized organizations may represent potential leadership in communities and organizations after college. Therefore, a study of Asian American college leaders may allow one to make modest forecasts of the future leadership of Asian American communities as well as trends in the leadership of Americans of Asian descent.

A leader conceptually is any individual in a recognized position of authority in an established group or organization on a given college campus. Specifically, I selected those individuals who are 1) leaders of organizations that are recognized by a selected university and 2) who are registered in the university as “Asian American.” This study then may be useful for our understanding of the present state of identity among Asian American college leaders and it may be generalizeable to other Asian American leaders in other university settings, and perhaps other community settings in which Asian Americans might be in positions of leadership.

At a practical level, issues of privacy and the difficulties in gaining a solid and broad coverage of the student body made selecting student leaders as the potential
respondent pool more amenable. Student organizations are often made public in order to garner support and interest in their activities. This allowed me to present a non-threatening request to interview leaders of an organization when contacting them.

To keep with the issues of representativeness, from the student organizations I divided the groups (based on recent lists provided by the student activities offices of the respective universities) into four rough categories that followed the aims of the study: ethnic organizations, religious organizations, ethnic-religious organizations, and non-ethnic, non-religious organizations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE A.3</th>
<th>ORGANIZATION TYPE</th>
<th>BASED ON THE LIKELY SALIENCE OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salient Religious Identity</td>
<td>Salient Ethnic Identity</td>
<td>Non-Salient Ethnic Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korean Christian Fellowship</td>
<td>Chinese Student Association</td>
<td>College Democrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UIC Christian Fellowship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student leaders from these four types of organizations theoretically would provide for the different kind of categorical responses I sought on issues dealing with religious and ethnic identity. One might expect a leader of a religious campus organization would have a relatively high religious salience for instance. In cases involving ethnic and ethnic-religious organizations, obtaining a leader of Asian descent was relatively straightforward since most or all leaders are expected to be Asian in background. Obtaining student leaders of Asian descent in the religious and non-ethnic, non-religious groups was slightly more problematic. In most instances I contacted individuals based on surname
and through local knowledge made available by the campus student group coordinators and/or other student interviewees. All in all 100 student leaders were obtained, roughly 25 per university.  

A.4 Shifting toward instrumentation parity

Having set the sampling methodology rationale and frame, the practical details were required. First as an additional departure from the previous literature I employed a two-part strategy to obtain self-reported data which reflect the affiliations, attitudes, and behaviors of Asian American college leaders. The first part consisted of brief personal interviews (about 30 minutes each) of Asian American college student leaders at the four selected public universities. The second part consists of a college-level internet survey which asks a series of questions regarding the respondent’s ethnic and religious background and present status, as well as basic background demographic information. This two-part approach contains qualitative and quantitative components that can inform the entire study in both depth and breadth, especially with regard to the complex nature of identities.

A.4.1 Content of the Interview Guide

Second, I intentionally designed the interview guide to give parity to both identities to leave open as many possible combinations of salience as the respondent gave. The questions were oriented to read as parallels regarding both ethnic and religious identity issues. After asking some initial questions about the individual’s current status at the university and some demographic inquiries, they were then queried about their ethnic
background, its importance in their lives, and the social origins of this response. Next they were asked about their religious preference and in like manner, the respondents were asked about its importance in their lives and its social origins. An additional inquiry was made regarding conversion or spiritual experiences the respondent may have experienced. A follow-up question asked the respondents if either identity was more important than the other or whether both identities were important to them. The next section of questions dealt with the national and pan-ethnic identities. Interviewees were asked about the term “Asian American,” its meaning, the extent to which it applies among the various Asian-ethnic groups in the US, and the respondent’s self-identification with the term. Interviewees were then asked a similar battery of questions with regard to the term “American.” Finally a series of social engagement questions were asked of the respondents regarding their reported ethnic and religious identities. Interviewees were asked if they had ever discussed their ethnic background with non-co-ethnics and if they had ever experienced any acts of discrimination due to their ethnic background. They were then asked if these experiences in any way helped them to understand better their ethnic identity. Likewise respondents were asked the same form of questions about their religious preferences with regard to experiences of describing their religious preference and any experiences of discrimination. And in similar fashion respondents were asked if these experiences helped them to better understand their religious preference better.

A.4.2 Content of the Survey

The survey itself consisted of open and close-ended questions that tap into various dimensions of the individual and was designed to take no more than 20 minutes to
complete. Initial questions inquired into the present participation and leadership status of the respondent as well as the school which he or she attends. The remaining components addressed issues related to the ethnic and religious labels used by the individual, his or her socialization and past social networks, their present ethnic and religious practice and social networks, and any experiences of ethnic and religious discrimination or sharing. In this design, parity across both identities was approximated as well. Demographic questions regarding immigration status, age, gender, and their parents’ socio-demographic characteristics concluded the survey.

A.4.3 Contact Approach of the Student Leader Interviews

Instrumentation issues aside, contacting student leaders in a systematic fashion proved more challenging than I originally anticipated. While I deduced that a list of all student organizations one each campus was needed, I was surprised at the sheer number of student organizations at each site. From these organization lists I contacted by phone or email the individuals posted as the contact person or representative and invited them to participate in the project. If the individual did not claim any Asian American affiliation, I asked for a reference of someone within the leadership of that organization. Gaining the trust of these contact persons was vital and thus I began first by establishing contact with a faculty member at each school as well as administrators that focus on campus multicultural issues or student life in general. I contacted these faculty and staff with letters of institutional support from the University of Notre Dame’s Director of Student Activities (Joe Cassidy) and the Director of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (Iris Outlaw). With their help and permission I referred to them as my local contact in
the email or phone dialogues with the student leaders to establish a sense of trust and increase the likelihood of cooperation. With each acceptance I then arranged to travel to the given site (through the fall of 2000) and meet with the respondents in a public environment (campus libraries, university office space etc.) to conduct the interviews.

A.4.4 Contact Approach for the Survey Website

The second phase of the project consisted of an internet survey focusing on the same topic. In order to reach this particular sample, I consulted with each student leader at the conclusion of each interview to explain the nature of the survey. With their cooperation I asked them to distribute to their respective organizations an email invitation to the survey with a weblink embedded within the message. This approach minimizes the amount of work on the part of the respondent since they need only “point and click” to access the survey. Since this sample is entirely college-based most potential respondents had access to university computer facilities or some other personal computer. In addition, a recent study published by the Pew Forum discovered that the population of young Asian Americans used the internet far more than any other racially classified group in the year 2001 (Spooner 2001). Thus we have some reason to think that response rates would be relatively high with respect to this subpopulation.

The website itself consisted of eight letter-sized pages for the survey along with links to: 1) all scanned institutional support forms (requested from all administrators, and student leader respondents); 2) a project general introduction; 3) a personal information webpage (including a scanned photograph, to provide a visual cue and add further perceived legitimacy to this survey since the researcher is of Asian descent). These links
provided further evidence of the validity of the study and the importance of their participation.

In the spring I delivered an email message to the administrator who then forwarded the message to all individuals on the list. The email message will consist of a brief description of the project director, the project itself, guarantee of privacy, a promise to report findings, and an accompanying weblink to the survey. All recipients were contacted two additional times with follow-up reminders to complete the survey if they have not done so.

This led me to the approach for this undertaking. I exchanged contextual richness for greater cross-group comparisons at the individual level. And given that there have not been any quantitative-based studies of this type for this population, the mixed method approach employed here is also a first step in further research needed in this area. Included below is a sample of: 1) the initial contact message sent either through electronic mail or through a phone call; 2) the consent form presented to each interviewee; 3) the actual interview schedule; 4) the email invitation to participate in the survey; 5) a printable version of the internet survey.
Sample Initial Letter of Invitation to Participate in Research Interview

Dear Steve

My name is Jerry Park and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Notre Dame. I am currently undergoing a national-level research project for my dissertation where I investigate the meaning of ethnic and religious backgrounds of Americans with Asian backgrounds. With the help of Sharlene Holly and a brief encounter with some of the members of your organization, I was recommended to try and reach you.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study through a 30 minute face-to-face interview sometime during Nov 29-Dec1.

Your responses will remain confidential, and I will be more than happy to share the findings once the interviews have been transcribed.

Would you contact me by Friday (Nov 10) to schedule a time and place to meet sometime during Nov 29-Dec1. My interest is in conducting a 30 minute face-to-face interview.

I feel that this research may help all of us to understand better the meaning of our ethnic and religious backgrounds in our personal lives and I think you will find this personally enriching in that regard.

So please contact me by email: jpark@nd.edu or by phone 219-634-4287 and we will try and set a date and time to meet.

If you prefer that I call you, I would be happy to call if you can provide a number where you can best be reached.

Your help and consideration are deeply appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jerry Park
University of Notre Dame
jpark@nd.edu
Face-to-Face Interview Written Consent Form
Participation in The Rising Asian American Elites Project

To participants in this study:

I am a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Notre Dame. The subject of this research project is an investigation of ethnic and religious identities of Asian American college students. I am interviewing Asian American college student leaders at the University of Illinois-Chicago, the University of Houston, the University of California-Irvine, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook. You are one of approximately 96 participants (24 from this school). As part of this study, you are being asked to participate in one, audio-taped in-depth interview, preferably lasting no more than 30 minutes. The questions asked will cover the meanings and experiences associated with your ethnic and religious identities. Through a research grant, I am visiting each of these respective campuses and will meet with a number of Asian American student leaders. Each audio-taped interview will be later transcribed by me or an assistant.

My goal is to use these responses to gain a better understanding of the interests and meanings behind Asian Americans’ self-perception. I may use these responses in a dissertation, book, journal article, or scholarly presentation in a professional meeting.

There are no known risks involved in participating in this research project. Benefits may include a greater awareness of matters that affect many people today.

You may at any time withdraw from the interview process. You may withdraw your consent to have specific excerpts used, if you notify me at the end of the interview. If I were to use any of these materials in any way not consistent with what is stated above, I will ask for additional written consent. Withdrawal from this study will not prejudice the relationship with Notre Dame or other institutions.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will be anonymous. The code number used will only identify the number of the respondent and cannot be used to trace the name or identity of the person. Your participation in the interview indicates that you have read and understood the information presented above, and that you have decided to participate, and that you consent to the procedures described above. All participants are 18 years of age, otherwise parental consent will be sought.

This project has been reviewed by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. If you have any questions about your rights as a subject, you may contact us at 713-743-9204.

And further questions, please contact the principal investigator:

Professor Helen Rose Ebaugh
Department of Sociology
713-743-3952

Jerry Park
Department of Sociology
810 Flanner Hall
Notre Dame, IN 46556-5611
219-631-6585
jpark@nd.edu

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RISING ASIAN AMERICAN ELITES

INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE FALL 2000

Introductory Questions

What year are you in college?

What do you study?

What organization are you currently a leader in?

Did you immigrate to the United States or has your family been here for several generations?

So how long have you been in the US?

Ethnic Identity

When people ask you, how do you describe your ethnic background?

Is it very important for you to be [ethnic background]? How so? Why do you say that?

How do you think you came to this understanding of what it means to be [ethnic background]?

Prompts (if necessary):

Did family play a part in helping you to understand your ethnic background?
Did friends play a part?
Did your school or school environment play a part?
Did your neighborhood you grew up in play a part?
Were you a part of any ethnic organizations or religious organizations growing up - did any of that play a part?

Religious Identity

When people ask you, how do you describe your religious preference?

Is it important for you to be [religious preference]? How so? Why do you say that?

How do you think you came to this understanding of what it means for you to be [religious preference]?

Prompts (if necessary):
Did family play a part in helping you to understand your ethnic background?
Did friends play a part?
Did your school or school environment play a part?
Did your neighborhood you grew up in play a part?
Were you a part of any religious organizations growing up -did any of that play a part?

Have you ever experienced any kind of religious conversion or significant spiritual experience in your life?

*Present Comparative Salience of Ethnic and Religious Identities*

Is either more important to you? Being [ethnic background] or being [religious preference]?
Or do the two seem closely connected to you?

*American and Asian American Identities*

What does the term ‘Asian American’ mean to you? Does it bring to mind any particular images or ideas or meanings for you?

What ethnic groups do you see as part of this category?

Would you consider yourself an ‘Asian American’?
How about the label “American?” What does it mean to you to be ‘American’?

Would you consider yourself an American?

*Experiences of Sharing and Discrimination and Identity*

Have you ever talked about or described your ethnic background with others who were not [respondent’s ethnic background]?

Have you ever experienced any acts of discrimination because of your ethnic background?

Do you think these experiences of sharing or discrimination have helped you to better appreciate what it means for you to be [respondent’s ethnic background]?

Have you ever talked about or shared your religious preference with others who were not [respondent’s religious preference]?

Have you ever experienced any acts of discrimination because of your religious preference?

Do you think these experiences of sharing or facing discrimination helped you to better appreciate what it means to be [respondent’s religious preference]?
Sample Initial Email Invitation to Participate in Web Survey

Date: Tue, 30 Jan 2001 13:31:10
To: jpark@nd.edu
From: Jerry Park <jpark@nd.edu>
Subject: National survey invitation

Dear students,

My name is Jerry Park and I am a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Notre Dame. Through a research grant, I have visited your campus (and four others across the US) and met with a number of student leaders of Asian American descent, some of whom are leaders in organizations in which you participate. With their help and permission, I am contacting all of the persons on this email list or listserv to ask for your help.

You are invited to participate in the first national-level college student survey on the internet intended for undergraduates who are Americans with Asian ancestry.

The survey consists of questions relating to your ethnic and religious backgrounds. Would you please take 10-15 minutes of your time and read the consent page and fill out the survey at the following address:

www.nd.edu/~jpark/RAAEConsent.html

Any information that is obtained in connection with this survey that can be identified with you will remain confidential. The following information is NOT ASKED of you in the survey:
name, address (home or school), social security numbers, or telephone numbers

For those who would like a preliminary copy of the results, I ask for your name and email so that I can send it to you later in the semester. This information will only be used for the purpose of sending the results.

If you have any comments or questions, please feel free to contact me. Your participation is greatly appreciated!

Sincerely,

Jerry Park

810 Flanner Hall
Department of Sociology
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN 46556-5611
(219) 634-4287
College Ethnic and Religious Identities Survey

Instructions
Please answer all of the questions that apply.

1.1 Name of College/University that you currently attend:
1 University of Notre Dame
2 University of Illinois-Chicago
3 University of California-Irvine
4 University of Houston-University Park
5 SUNY-Stony Brook

1.1a Are you an undergraduate or graduate student
1 Undergraduate  2 Graduate

1.2 How did you receive the email invitation to complete this survey?
1 from a student organization
2 from the primary investigator, Jerry Park
3 from a friend who forwarded the invitation

1.3 How many student organizations are you involved in presently? ___

1.4a Please list all of the organizations in which you are currently involved
(if more than 3, please list only the top 3 in which you are most involved):

1.4b Are you a leader in this student organization?
1 YES  2 NO

1.5a Of all the organizations in which you participate, please name the one organization in which you spend most of your time:
___________________________________________________________________

1.5b Are you a leader in this organization?  1 YES  2 NO

1.6 How often do you participate in the activities and meetings of this organization?
7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never

1.7 If you participated once a year or more, how would you describe the ethnic composition of the people of this organization (Select one):
1 Mostly Caucasian/white
2 Mostly Asian, no specific Asian ethnic majority
3 Mostly Asian, one specific single ethnic majority (please specify ethnic group): ____________
4 Racially mixed, no specific ethnic or racial majority
5 Other (please specify): ______________________
Ethnic Labels

2.1 Would you describe your racial/ethnic background(s) as any of the following (Select Yes or No for each):

American YES NO
Asian YES NO
Asian American YES NO
Chinese YES NO
Filipino YES NO
Indian (Asian) YES NO
Japanese YES NO
Korean YES NO
Vietnamese YES NO
Other: YES NO
If Other: __________________

2.2 Which of these would you say best describes your racial/ethnic background? (Select one):

1 American
2 Asian
3 Asian American
4 Chinese
5 Filipino
6 Indian (Asian)
7 Japanese
8 Korean
9 Vietnamese
10 Other: _______________

2.3 Would you consider yourself an Asian American?  1 YES  2 NO

2.4a Would you describe your mother's ethnic/racial background(s) as any of the following (Select Yes or No for each):

American YES NO
Asian YES NO
Asian American YES NO
Chinese YES NO
Filipino YES NO
Indian (Asian) YES NO
Japanese YES NO
Korean YES NO
Vietnamese YES NO
Other: YES NO
If Other: _______________
2.4b Would you describe your father's ethnic/racial background(s) as any of the following (Select Yes or No for each):

American YES NO
Asian YES NO
Asian American YES NO
Chinese YES NO
Filipino YES NO
Indian (Asian) YES NO
Japanese YES NO
Korean YES NO
Vietnamese YES NO
Other: YES NO
If Other: __________________

2.5 Which ethnic/racial label do you most often use to describe yourself when you are among:

friends of your specific ethnic/racial background(s)? __________________________
friends of Asian American background(s) other than your own? __________________
friends of European or Caucasian American backgrounds? _____________________
friends of African American backgrounds? _________________________
friends of Hispanic Latino/a American backgrounds? ______________________

2.6 What ethnic/ racial label do your closest friends use to describe you? ______________

Ethnic Experiences Growing Up

3.1 While growing up, how important were the following items:

Your ethnic/ racial background in your life
1 Not Important At All  2 Not Very Important  3 Somewhat Important  4 Extremely Important

Celebrating festivals and holidays of your ethnic heritage?
1 Not Important At All  2 Not Very Important  3 Somewhat Important  4 Extremely Important

Having friends of your ethnic/ racial background?
1 Not Important At All  2 Not Very Important  3 Somewhat Important  4 Extremely Important

Participating in an ethnic (non-religious) organization?
1 Not Important At All  2 Not Very Important  3 Somewhat Important  4 Extremely Important

3.2 How often did you participate in a non-religious ethnic organization while you were growing up?

7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never
3.3 Aside from participating in this organization, how often did you practice your ethnic traditions and customs while you were growing up?

7 More than once a week  
6 Once a week  
5 2-3 times per month  
4 Once a Month  
3 Several Times a Year  
2 Once a Year  
1 Never

3.4 How often did your family speak English while you were growing up:

1 None of the time  
2 Some of the time  
3 Most of the time  
4 All of the time

3.5 How often did your family speak their ethnic language while growing up:

1 None of the time  
2 Some of the time  
3 Most of the time  
4 All of the time

3.6 How often did your family practice their ethnic customs while growing up:

1 None of the time  
2 Some of the time  
3 Most of the time  
4 All of the time

3.7 How often did your family celebrate ethnic holidays/festivals in a given year?

1 None of the time  
2 Some of the time  
3 Most of the time  
4 All of the time

3.8 What was the main ethnic/racial background of your closest friends while you were growing up?

1 Same ethnic/racial background as myself  
2 Asian American (other than my own)  
3 African American  
4 Caucasian/European/ White American  
5 Hispanic Latino/a American  
6 Ethnically/racially mixed  
7 Other

3.8a If you selected "Other", please specify the main ethnic background of your closest friends

3.9 How many of your friends had the same ethnic/racial background as you while you were growing up?

4 Almost all  
3 Most  
2 Some  
1 None

3.10 How often have you experienced any acts of discrimination because of your ethnicity or race while you were growing up?

4 Often  
3 Occasionally  
2 Once  
1 Never
3.11 How often have you had an opportunity to describe your ethnicity or race with someone who is not of the same ethnicity or race as you?

4 Often 3 Occasionally 2 Once 1 Never

Religious Preferences
4.1 How would you describe your religious preference prior to attending college?
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination if known, in the box below)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known in the box below)
8 Other (please specify in the box below) ________________________
9 None

4.2 How would you describe your religious preference presently?
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination, if known, in the box below)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
8 Other ________________________
9 None

4.3 How would you describe your mother's religious preference presently?
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination, if known, in the box below)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
8 Other: _______________________
9 None

4.4 How would you describe your father's religious preference presently?
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination, if known, in the box below)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
8 Other: _______________________
9 None
Religious Experiences Growing Up

5.1 While you were growing up, how important were the following items:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your religious faith</th>
<th>1 Not Important At All</th>
<th>2 Not Very Important</th>
<th>3 Somewhat Important</th>
<th>4 Extremely Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attending a religious service regularly</td>
<td>1 Not Important At All</td>
<td>2 Not Very Important</td>
<td>3 Somewhat Important</td>
<td>4 Extremely Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having friends with the same religious faith</td>
<td>1 Not Important At All</td>
<td>2 Not Very Important</td>
<td>3 Somewhat Important</td>
<td>4 Extremely Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in a religious group or organization</td>
<td>1 Not Important At All</td>
<td>2 Not Very Important</td>
<td>3 Somewhat Important</td>
<td>4 Extremely Important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2 How often did you participate in a religious organization (e.g. church, temple) while you were growing up?

7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never

If your response was more than "never" please answer 5.2a-5.2f and continue onward. If you answered "never" then continue at 5.3:

5.2a Did you attend the same religious services as your parents? YES NO

5.2b Was the service you attended primarily spoken in English? YES NO

5.2c Did you attend the same religious organization as your parents? (e.g. the same church or temple) YES NO

5.2d What is the name of the organization which held these services? _______

5.2e What is the religious tradition of this organization (if known)?
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination, if known, in the box below)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
8 Other _______
9 None

5.2f How would you describe the ethnic composition of the people in this religious organization:
1 Mostly Caucasian/white
2 Mostly Asian, no specific Asian ethnic majority
3 Mostly Asian, one specific ethnic majority (specify ethnic group): _______
4 Racially mixed, no specific ethnic or racial majority
5 Other (please specify): _______
5.3 Aside from participating in a religious organization, how often did you practice your religious faith while you were growing up?
7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never

5.4 How many of your family had the same religion as you while you were growing up?
4 Almost all          3 Most          2 Some       1 None

5.5 How many of your friends had the same religion as you while you were growing up?
4 Almost all          3 Most         2 Some        1 None

5.6 How often have you experienced any acts of discrimination because of your religion while you were growing up?
4 Often                3 Occasionally       2 Once     1 Never

5.7 How often have you had an opportunity to describe your religious faith with someone who is not of the same religion as you while growing up?
4 Often               3 Occasionally        2 Once     1 Never

5.8 While you were growing up were most of your friends primarily related by:
1 The high school which you attended
2 The neighborhood in which you lived
3 An ethnic organization to which you belonged
4 A religious organization to which you belonged
0 My friends were not related primarily by any group or organization
5 Other

5.8a If you selected "Other" please specify the primary group in which your friends were related:

5.9 While you were growing up did most of your friends have the same:
1 ethnic/ racial background as yourself
2 religious preference as yourself
3 both ethnic/ racial background and religious preference as yourself
0 neither the same ethnic/ racial background or the same religious preference as myself
4 Other

5.9a If you selected "Other" please specify the main interest or background your friends had in common: __________________________
Present Ethnic Experiences
6.1 Since you've been in college, how important are the following items:

Your ethnic/ racial background in your life presently?
1 Not Important At All   2 Not Very Important   3 Somewhat Important   4 Extremely Important

Celebrating festivals and holidays of your ethnic heritage?
1 Not Important At All   2 Not Very Important   3 Somewhat Important   4 Extremely Important

Having friends of your ethnic/ racial background?
1 Not Important At All   2 Not Very Important   3 Somewhat Important   4 Extremely Important

Participating in an ethnic (non-religious) organization?
1 Not Important At All   2 Not Very Important   3 Somewhat Important   4 Extremely Important

Having classes that teach about Asian American ethnicity and culture?
1 Not Important At All   2 Not Very Important   3 Somewhat Important   4 Extremely Important

Marrying someone of your specific Asian ethnic/ racial background?
1 Not Important At All   2 Not Very Important   3 Somewhat Important   4 Extremely Important

Marrying someone of an Asian ethnic background?
1 Not Important At All   2 Not Very Important   3 Somewhat Important   4 Extremely Important

6.2 What language(s) do you speak regularly? (List all or the top 3 languages most often used)

__________________
__________________
__________________

6.2a Which language(s) do you speak most often with your family?
(List all or the top 3 languages most often used)

__________________
__________________
__________________

6.3 How often do you speak your ethnic language(s) while you are in college?
7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never

6.4 How often do you practice your ethnic customs and traditions while you are in college?
7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never
6.5 Think of your closest friends in college. What is their main ethnic/racial background:
1 Same ethnic/racial background as myself
2 Asian American (other than my own)
3 African American
4 Caucasian/ European/ White American
5 Hispanic Latino/a American
6 Ethnically/racially mixed
7 Other (please specify in the box below): __________

6.6 Are most of these friends primarily related by (select one):
1 The residence area in which you live presently
2 A student religious organization on campus that is not connected to a church or temple
3 A religious organization such as a church or temple?
4 A college ethnic organization
5 Other: (please specify): __________
6 My friends are not related primarily by any group or organization

6.7 Since you have been in college, how often have you experienced any acts of discrimination because of your ethnicity or race?
4 Often 3 Occasionally 2 Once 1 Never

6.8 Since you have been in college, how often have you had an opportunity to describe your ethnicity or race with someone who is not of the same ethnicity or race as you?
4 Often 3 Occasionally 2 Once 1 Never

Present Religious Experiences

7.1 Thinking of your time at college, how important are the following items:
Your religious faith?
1 Not Important At All 2 Not Very Important 3 Somewhat Important 4 Extremely Important

Attending a religious service regularly?
1 Not Important At All 2 Not Very Important 3 Somewhat Important 4 Extremely Important

Having friends of your religious faith?
1 Not Important At All 2 Not Very Important 3 Somewhat Important 4 Extremely Important

Participating in a religious group or organization?
1 Not Important At All 2 Not Very Important 3 Somewhat Important 4 Extremely Important

Having classes that teach about your religious tradition or faith?
1 Not Important At All 2 Not Very Important 3 Somewhat Important 4 Extremely Important

Marrying someone of your specific religious faith?
1 Not Important At All 2 Not Very Important 3 Somewhat Important 4 Extremely Important

Marrying someone with some kind of religious faith?
1 Not Important At All 2 Not Very Important 3 Somewhat Important 4 Extremely Important
7.2 How often do you participate in a non-university-sponsored religious organization (e.g. a local church or temple) while you are in college?
7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never

If your response was more than "never" please answer the following 7.2a-7.2d. Otherwise continue to 7.3:

7.2a Are the activities of this organization primarily conducted in English? 1 YES 2 NO

7.2b What is the name of this religious organization in which you participate? ______________

7.2c What is the religious tradition or denomination of this religious organization (if known)
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination if known)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known in the box below)
8 Other (please specify in the box below) __________________
9 None

7.2d How would you describe the ethnic/racial composition of the people of this religious organization:
1 Mostly Caucasian/white
2 Mostly Asian, no specific Asian ethnic majority
3 Mostly Asian, one specific single ethnic majority (please specify ethnic group): __________
4 Racially mixed, no specific ethnic or racial majority
5 Other (please specify): __________________

7.3 Aside from participating in a religious organization, how often do you practice your religious faith while you are in college?
7 More than once a week
6 Once a week
5 2-3 times per month
4 Once a Month
3 Several Times a Year
2 Once a Year
1 Never

7.4 Have you ever experienced a religious conversion? YES NO

If you answered "Yes" to 7.4 please answer the following questions 7.4a-7.4d
7.4a How old were you when this conversion happened? ____
7.4b What was your religion (if any) prior to the conversion:
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination if known in the box below)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known in the box below)
8 Other (please specify in the box below) _________________
9 None

7.4c What was your religion after the conversion:
1 Buddhist (specify tradition, if known, in the box)
2 Christian, Catholic
3 Christian, Non-Catholic (specify denomination if known in the box below)
4 Confucian
5 Hindu (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
6 Jewish (specify tradition, if known, in the box below)
7 Muslim (specify tradition, if known in the box below)
8 Other (please specify in the box below) _________________
9 None

7.4d Do you have the same religious preference that you had after your conversion experience?
YES      NO

7.5 How many of your family have the same religion as you presently?
4 Almost all          3 Most         2 Some        1 None

7.6 How many of your friends have the same religion as you presently?
4 Almost all          3 Most         2 Some        1 None

7.7 Since you have been in college, how often have you experienced any acts of discrimination because of your religion while you have been in college?
4 Often              3 Occasionally         2 Once          1 Never

7.8 Since you have been in college, how often have you had an opportunity to describe your religious faith with someone who is not of the same religion as you?
4 Often              3 Occasionally         2 Once          1 Never

7.9 Which is more important for you, your ethnic/racial background or your religious preference?
1 my ethnic background
2 my religious preference
3 neither my ethnic background or religious preference
4 both my ethnic background and religious preference
Background Information

8.1 Age ____

8.2 Sex:  
1 Male  
2 Female

8.3 Marital Status  
1 never married  
2 married  
3 divorced or separated  
4 widowed

8.4a How many siblings do you have? __

8.4b Were you adopted as a child?  
1 YES  
2 NO

8.5 Are you the oldest among your siblings?  
1 YES  
2 NO

8.6 What is the marital status of your parents presently:  
1 married  
2 divorced  
3 separated  
4 widowed

8.7 Which of your parents did you live with primarily:  
1 both  
2 mother  
3 father  
4 neither

8.8 Which city and state did you live in prior to college:  
City  
State

State

AL Alabama  
AK Alaska  
AR Arkansas  
AZ Arizona  
CA California  
CO Colorado  
CT Connecticut  
DE Delaware  
DC District of Columbia  
FL Florida  
GA Georgia  
HI Hawaii  
ID Idaho  
IL Illinois  
IN Indiana  
IA Iowa  
KS Kansas  
KY Kentucky  
LA Louisiana  
ME Maine  
MD Maryland  
MA Massachusetts  
MI Michigan  
MN Minnesota  
MO Missouri  
MT Montana

NE Nebraska  
NV Nevada  
NH New  
NJ New Jersey  
NY New York  
NH New Hampshire  
TX Texas  
UT Utah  
VT Vermont  
VA Virginia  
WA Washington  
WA Washington

WV West Virginia  
WI Wisconsin  
WY Wyoming

8.9 What was the ethnic/racial makeup of the neighborhood where you grew up:  
1 Mostly the same ethnic/racial background as yourself  
2 Mostly Asian American (no specific ethnic group)  
3 Mostly African American  
4 Mostly Caucasian/ European/ White American  
5 Mostly Hispanic Latino/a American

8.10 How long has your family lived there:  
1 Less than one year  
2 One year  
3 Between 2-5 years  
4 More than five years
8.11a How many of your father's relatives (e.g. cousins, aunts, uncles etc.) live in the United States:
0 All 1 Most 2 Some 3 Few 4 None

8.11b How many of your mother's relatives (e.g. cousins, aunts, uncles etc.) live in the United States:
0 All 1 Most 2 Some 3 Few 4 None

8.12a How close do most of your father's relatives live to your family:
1 same neighborhood
2 same city
3 same local region
4 same state
5 other state

8.12b How close do most of your mother's relatives live to your family:
1 same neighborhood
2 same city
3 same local region
4 same state
5 other state

8.13 How important are your father's relatives to you:
1 very important 2 somewhat important 3 not very important 4 not important at all

8.13 How important are your mother's relatives to you:
1 very important 2 somewhat important 3 not very important 4 not important at all

8.14 What is the occupation of your father: ______________________
8.15 What is the occupation of your mother: ______________________

8.16a Which generation on your mother's side of the family was the first to immigrate to the US?
1 Your Parents 2 Your Grandparents 3 Your Great Grandparents 4 Before Your Great Grandparents

8.16b Which generation on your father's side of the family was the first to immigrate to the US?
1 Your Parents 2 Your Grandparents 3 Your Great Grandparents 4 Before Your Great Grandparents

8.17 Do you have US citizenship 1 YES 2 NO

8.18a Is your father a US citizen? 1 YES 2 NO

8.18b Is your mother a US citizen? 1 YES 2 NO

8.19 Were you born in the United States?: 1 YES 2 NO

8.20 Did you immigrate to the United States? 1 YES 2 NO

8.20a (IF you answered YES in 8.20) How old were you when you immigrated? ___

8.21 What kind of high school did you attend?
1 Public
2 Home school
3 Private Christian
4 Catholic
5 Private Non-Religious
6 Other
8.22 How much education did your father receive?
1 Less than high school
2 High school
3 Some college
4 College
5 Graduate school

8.23 How much education did your mother receive?
1 Less than high school
2 High school
3 Some college
4 College
5 Graduate school

8.24 What was your family's total income in the year 2000?
0 Less than $10,000
1 $10,000 to $19,999
2 $20,000 to $29,999
3 $30,000 to $39,999
4 $40,000 to $49,999
5 $50,000 to $59,999
6 $60,000 to $69,999
7 $70,000 to $79,999
8 $80,000 to $89,999
9 $90,000 to $99,999
10 $100,000 or more
Endnotes

1 The term Asian American as I noticed in the review of the extant research follows several interrelated but somewhat distinct meanings. “Asian American” research can refer to identification with this socially-constructed category. It can also refer to the study of a variety of groups that the US Census places within this category. Asian American research sometimes focuses on the history and development of the social movement borne out of the 1960s civil rights era. A further complication to these descriptions is the focus on immigration and generational transitions and differences. An example of how these terms interrelate occurs in the study of Asian American religion. For some “Asian American religion” refers to the immigrant generation experience of Chinese, Filipino, Korean communities. But for others it refers to the second generation “de facto congregationalism” (Warner 1998?) or the emergence of second generation pan-ethnic congregations. A systematic and comprehensive review of this research could be helpful in distinguishing the various modes of scholarship done on this/these group(s).

2 Even these two studies reflect a small minority of research. On the one hand such research is problematic in that it sets out to discuss the “Asian American experience” but fails to account for a broader degree of representativeness. On the other hand, the very inclusion of a second group improves upon earlier research which has focused primarily on ethnographies of one group in one location (e.g. Korean Christians in a Boston congregation (Chai 1998) or Chicago congregation (Chong 1998)). The nature of the data collected for this project, while intentionally more comprehensive, is not intended nor well suited for strict group to group analysis. Some findings along these lines however are reported.

3 My rationale for selecting schools on this secondary qualification is that there may be marked differences among Asian students in the selection of their college attendance. Financial or familial costs may play a significant role for these students when deciding which college to attend. This I believe can affect the type and affiliation of school they choose. For the purposes of this study, I am only selecting student from public universities which may further reduce generalizeability.

4 One concern was whether I might procure enough Asian Americans as student leaders especially given the low numbers relative to the rest of the US population. Consultation with Ryan Willerton, Student Development Coordinator at the University of Notre Dame (where I resided at the time of the study), about ten percent of the Asian American population there were currently in some position of leadership. Since there is no evidence that Asian Americans will be over- or under-represented in the population of student leaders, we can reasonably assume about ten percent of the Asian American population at each campus which increased the original pool of candidates for the study. From the total population of all Asian Americans at all four sites about 1558 students would at the very least qualify as Asian American student leaders.
REFERENCES


