

Article

# Redefining Religious Nones: Lessons from Chinese and Japanese American Young Adults

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Academic Editor: Peter I. Kaufman

Received: 13 June 2015 / Accepted: 27 July 2015 / Published: 30 July 2015

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**Abstract:** This analysis of Chinese and Japanese American young adults, based on the Pew Research Center 2012 Asian American Survey, examines the religious nones of these ethnic groups. Rather than focusing on their beliefs and belonging to religious denominations, it highlights their spiritual practices and ethical relations using an Asian-centric *liyi* (ritual and righteousness) discourse. Despite being religious nones, these groups have high rates of ancestor veneration and participation in ethnic religious festivals, as well as strong familial and reciprocal obligations. These findings indicate that, similar to other American Millennials, these groups may be better understood by how they do religion than in what they believe.

**Keywords:** religious nones; spiritual but not religious; Chinese Americans; Japanese Americans; Asian Americans; millennials

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## 1. Introduction

According to the 2014 American Religious Landscape Study, the number of Americans unaffiliated with any religion has risen stunningly by over 40% in the past seven years, from 16.1% to 22.8%. The report accounted for this change by noting the generational replacement of Catholic and Mainline individuals by Millennials who are religious “nones”. Regarding this major shift in Americans’ religious identities, it states:

As the Millennial generation enters adulthood, its members display much lower levels of religious affiliation, including less connection with Christian churches, than older generations. Fully 36% of young Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25–33) [1].

An emerging field of scholarship now seeks to explain why so many Americans, especially Millennials, are rejecting religious affiliation [2].

Two groups of ethnic Americans, however, have historically been religiously unaffiliated instead of shifting to this category. Both Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans—at 52.1% and 32.5%—have the highest rates of religious nones in the United States [3]. Their young adults under 30 have even greater proportions of being unaffiliated, at 65.6% and 44.4%.

We suggest that the Western conceptualization of religion along the dimensions of belief and belonging are less than adequate in understanding these religious nones. Instead, we argue that an East Asian *liyi* spiritual discourse, which emphasizes moral rituals (*li*) and right relationships (*yi*), is a more appropriate framework to discuss and analyze the spirituality of Chinese and Japanese Americans. Even for the second, third, and fourth generations of these groups who are acculturated, an emphasis on rituals and relationships better accounts for their spiritual realities. Chinese Americans may be characterized with a hybridized “familism” and Japanese Americans with a “natural religion” of reciprocal obligations that shape their ultimate aims and ethics. Further, we posit that this discourse can be a helpful way to describe the emerging outlooks of American Millennials who are religious nones.

## 2. American Religious Nones

The emerging research on American religious nones, those who do not affiliate with any religious tradition or identity, offers typologies and social characteristics of this group. The Pew Research Center has divided this umbrella group into three subgroups: atheists, agnostics, and nothing in particular. The nothing in particular category has been further conceptualized and categorized, including the use of a range of terms: unchurched believers [2], humanists [3], spiritual but not religious [4], and liminals [5]. American religious nones are more likely to be male, unmarried, college educated, and residing in the West [6]. Four other characteristics mark the religiously unaffiliated, which provide explanations for their growth in the last two decades. They are (1) demographic shifts; (2) religious socialization; (3) political trends; and (4) cultural turns towards individualism.

First, as this Special Issue on religion and young adults observes, the rise of the nones is attributed to generational replacement as Millennials enter adulthood and older Americans, who were more religious, pass away. The Pew Research Center suggests that “These generational differences are consistent with

other signs of a gradual softening of religious commitment among some (though by no means all) Americans in recent decades” [4].

Second, Baker and Smith assert that the religious socialization of those who are unaffiliated significantly correlates with their subsequent religious identification as adults [2]. Religious nones are more than three times likely than others to have an unaffiliated mother or father, who long serve as their primary reference group. Their parents’ non-affiliation, in turn, shapes the extent to which they bring their children to religious institutions [7]. Religious nones were much less likely to attend organized religious services as twelve year olds than those religiously affiliated.

Third, Hout and Fischer observe that American religious nones tend to retain traditional religious beliefs, but are disenfranchised by organized religion [8]. They correlate highly with political liberals who have disaffiliated from religion and have been alienated by the incursion of conservative Christian politics within the last few decades. Similarly, Baker and Smith find that both atheists and unchurched believers share strong opposition to religion in the public sphere [2]. Thus, their growth of religious nones is a political act of disaffiliation, an expression of antipathy both to organized religion in general and to some churches’ stances on divisive issues such as same-sex marriage [9].

Finally, the overall privatization of religion within the United States has promoted the development of personal spirituality, which may be independent of traditional religions. Peter Berger has maintained that increased pluralism destabilizes religious belief and organizations. The availability of alternatives to a single, unified religious worldview opens new options, including secularism and individually crafted spirituality [10]. As religious institutions decline, Americans continue to retain spiritual beliefs and individual religious practices in a bricolage fashion, which Bellah *et al.* have described as “Sheilaism” [11]. Among Millennials, the increase of religious individualism in the United States is an overall cultural trend, which follows secularization trends in Europe [12].

These explanations address the shift towards religious nones, but do not explain why Chinese and Japanese Americans have been historically religiously unaffiliated. To better theorize their religious patterns, a reconceptualization of religious nones is necessary.

### 3. Conceptual Issues in the Categorization of Religious Nones

Western sociological conceptualizations of religion focus on belief and belonging. Since American Judeo-Christian faith traditions emphasize belief in religious teachings and in membership to denominations, these paradigmatic assumptions about religious participation have been valid and reliable. The rise of religious nones, then, is thus assumed to relate to nonbelief and nonbelonging. For instance, the title of Baker and Smith’s article, “None Too Simple: Examining Issues of Religious Nonbelief and Nonbelonging in the United States” reflects this paradigm [2].

Current research on religious nones debates the appropriate classification, terminology, and measurement of this category. The General Social Survey (GSS) automatically assigned persons according to their belief on a fundamentalist-moderate-liberal continuum. Refining this classification system may better identify distinctions among the “other” category [13]. For example, by measuring religious affiliation at the congregational level, rather than at the broader denominational level, Dougherty, Johnson and Poulson find that the percentage of religious unaffiliated is significantly lower while the numbers of Americans who are Evangelical is higher [14]. In contrast, Smith and Kim argue

that these numbers do not indicate better measurement of nones and evangelicals, but simply a measurement of different responses [15].

Even while being contested, the belief and belonging religious paradigm is dominant and it assumes binaries between belief and non-belief, belonging and non-belonging. Hence, the spiritual but not religious category assumes a bifurcation of two concepts: religion is tied to organized, traditional faith traditions and spirituality is connected to hybridized, individualistic orientations toward the transcendent [16].

Asian American sociologists of religion also employ the belief and belonging paradigm, especially when studying Christianity. Fenggang Yang includes four elements in his definition of a religion which highlights belief: (1) a belief in the supernatural; (2) a set of beliefs regarding life and the world; (3) a set of rituals manifesting the beliefs; and (4) a distinct social organization of moral community of believers and practitioners [17]. Carolyn Chen prioritizes belonging, as she defines religion as “living traditions of meaning grounded in institutionalized communities [18].

One issue regarding this belief and belonging religious paradigm is that East Asians, such as Chinese and Japanese, have historically conceptualized and employed very different terms for their spiritual practices. For example, Chinese rarely use the term, “religion” for their popular religious practices and they also do not use the vocabulary that they believe “in” gods or truths [19]. Their linguistic schemas are based on the facts that Chinese popular religion has no sacred text or doctrines, hierarchical priesthood, or rites that express particular beliefs [18,20]. Instead, Chinese popular religion is better conceptualized around spiritual practices and forms of sociality, that is, around ritual and relations (*liyi*). Adam Chau’s title, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, names this religious orientation away from belief and belonging and toward enacting ritual and relations [21].

Likewise, Japanese culture has been greatly influenced by Chinese religions and Confucian philosophy, including the importance of reciprocal obligations. Categorizing these practices as religious or not religious has been the struggle of sociologists of religion, given that Japanese have responded in surveys that they are not religious, yet they regularly perform ritual obligations [22].

In examining Japanese rituals and relations, Toshimaro Ama defines Japanese “natural religion” as the practices which includes these reciprocal obligations, folkloric beliefs, and the value of being “ordinary”—practices, which Japanese do not categorize as religious [23]. They relate to a broad cultural ideal of maintaining community harmony, such as hosting, anticipating others’ concerns, prioritizing care for others, respecting family and ancestors, and humility.

By examining the moral rituals of Chinese and Japanese American young adults, as well as their understanding of virtuous relationships, we better distinguish and capture their religious sensibilities and values. Categorization as religious nones does them a disservice; they do lead devout lives of devotion and commitment—even the atheists. Data from the Pew Research Study, “Asian Americans: A Mosaic of Faiths” demonstrates how a redefinition of religion may be helpful in not only understanding this grouping, but American Millennials overall [24].

#### 4. Methodology

This study analyzes survey data made available by the Pew Research Center. Phone interviews were conducted of 728 Chinese Americans and 523 Japanese Americans in early 2012. In analyses, we will provide unweighted figures in percentages. The use of percentages conforms to PEW’s own analyses of

its data for ease of cross-study comparison and simplifies the range of possible responses. We were not able to weight the figures by age because the age groups do not match either PEW or Census reports, and not able to weight religious affiliations because there are also no available figures on Asian American religious affiliations broken down by age outside of the data we are examining.

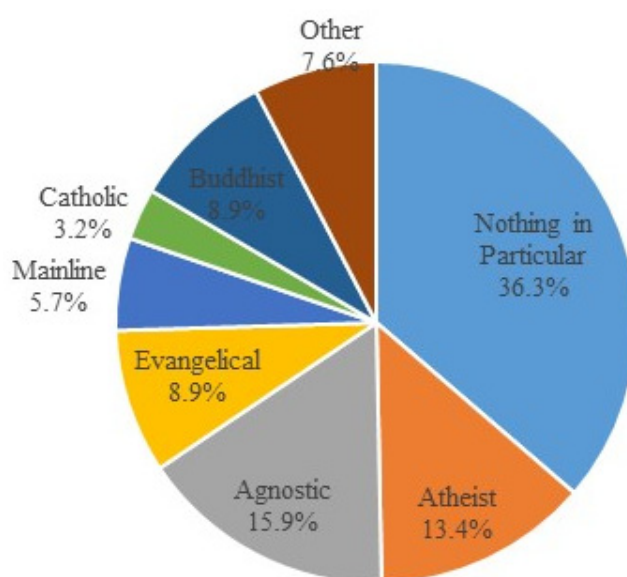
In our sample, 157 of the Chinese Americans (21.5%) were under 30 years of age. Atheists made up 13.3% of this group and nothing in particulars comprised 36.3%. Among the Japanese American respondents, 36 were under 30 years old. In this group, two were atheists, one was agnostic, and thirteen were nothing in particular. Due to the small sample size of Japanese Americans, we can only make preliminary observations about Japanese American young adults and primarily, nothing in particulars. The percentages of religious nones who are under 30 are greater than the overall group: 5.6% of young Japanese Americans are atheists and 36.1% were nothing in particular, as compared to 2.7% and 25.8% of all Japanese Americans, respectively.

Since atheists and nothing in particulars are the categories that make up the largest proportions of Chinese Americans, this study compares them to identify both similarities and differences in rituals and relationships. It also details how Chinese and Japanese American religious nones, who are young adults (under 30 years of age), stand in relationship to their overall subpopulations.

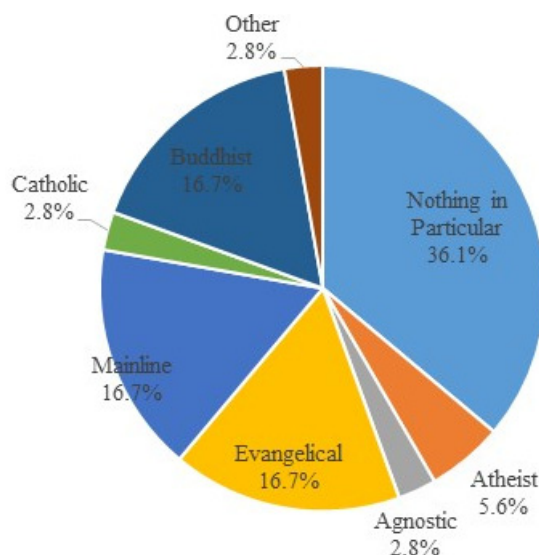
## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Belonging

Using the survey categories provided by the Pew Research Center, young adult Chinese and Japanese Americans are more likely to be unaffiliated than the average young American (Pew Research Center 2010). Over 1/3 of Chinese Americans (36.3%) and Japanese Americans (36.1%) self-identify themselves at “nothing in particular,” as compared to 18% of all American young adults. Young Chinese Americans (13.3%) were four times more likely and Japanese Americans (5.6%) were two times more likely to be atheist than the average American (3%) (Figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1.** Religious Affiliation of Young Chinese Americans.



**Figure 2.** Religious Affiliation of Young Japanese Americans.

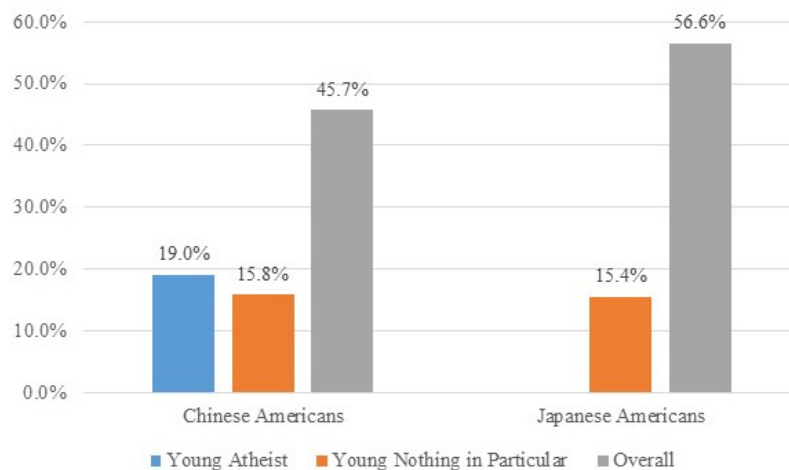
Compared to their ethnic subpopulation, these Chinese American Millennials are also more likely to be atheists. Overall, Chinese Americans included 8.7% who were atheist. On the other hand, the percentage of all Chinese American nothing in particulars (37.4%) was roughly the same as the Millennials. Among all Japanese Americans, only 2.7% were atheist and 25.8% were nothing in particular.

## 5.2. Beliefs

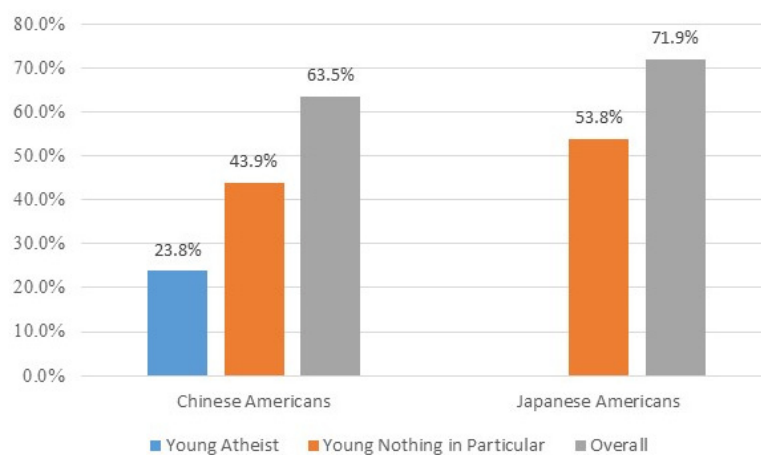
As religious nones, Chinese and Japanese American young adults have much more variegated beliefs than other Asian Americans or other Americans their age. Overall, they rate religion as less important to them than those who do affiliate with religion. Among Chinese Americans, only 19.0% of atheists and 15.8% of the nothing in particulars view religion as “somewhat important” to them and none said it was “very” important to them. Among all Chinese Americans, 20.6% said religions was “very” important and 25.1% said it was “somewhat” important. Of the young Japanese Americans, 15.4% of the nothing in particulars considered religion somewhat important (7.1% of all Japanese American atheists). In contrast 12% of American young adults who were religious nones stated that religion was “very” important to them (Figure 3).

In terms of belief in God or universal spirit, religious nones clearly varied again. Among Chinese American young adults, 43.9% of the nothing in particulars believed in God, but only 23.8% of atheists did, in contrast to the 63.5% of Chinese Americans overall who believed in God. Even more Japanese American nothing in particulars, at 53.8%, believed in God (21.4% of all Japanese American atheists). On the other hand, 36% of American Millennials who were unaffiliated were certain in their belief of God [25] (Figure 4).

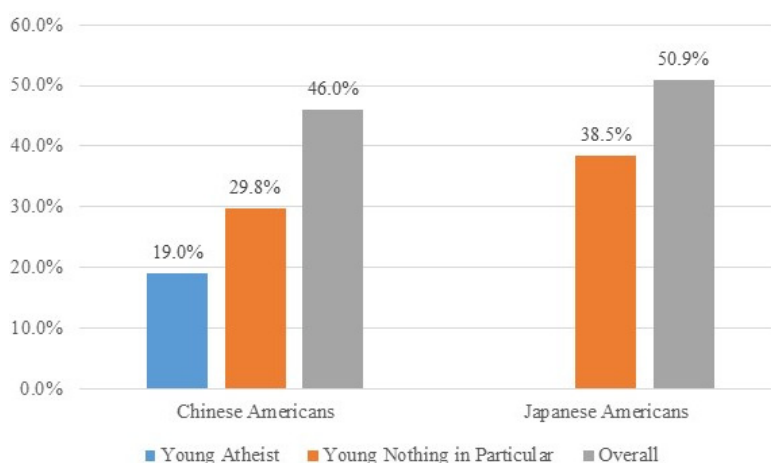
Although large percentages believed in God, Asian Americans had much lower rates of belief in heaven. When asked about a heaven where people are eternally rewarded, 19.0% of Chinese American atheists and 29.8% of nothing particulars expressed their belief as compared to 46.0% of all Chinese Americans. Young adult Japanese American nothing in particulars were slightly higher at 38.5%. In contrast, almost half (46%) of American religious nones who are young adults believed in heaven (Figure 5).



**Figure 3.** Importance of religion.



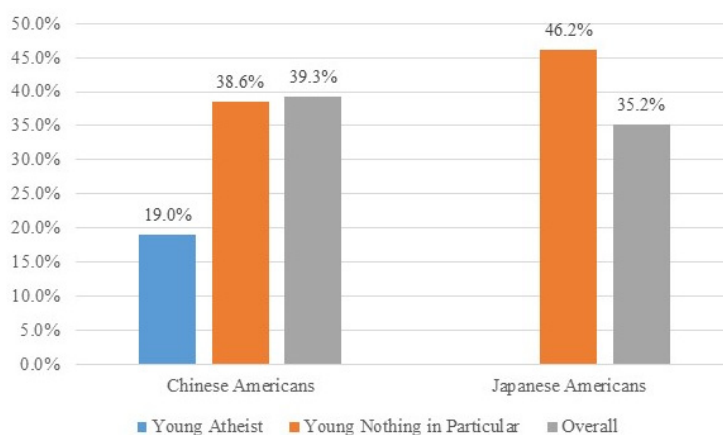
**Figure 4.** Belief in God or universal spirit.



**Figure 5.** Belief in heaven.

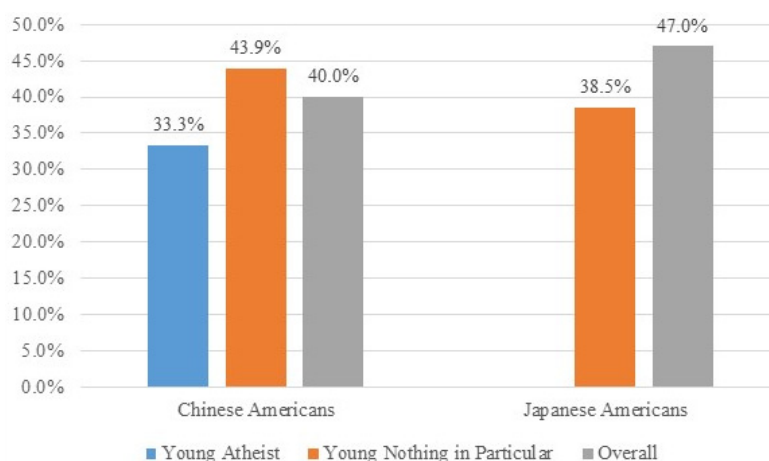
While these Asian Americans may not espouse belief in God and Western religious concepts as European and African Americans might, they do believe in East Asian supernatural forces. Regarding *qi*, or spiritual energy located in physical things, 19.0% of Chinese American atheists and 38.6% of

nothing particulars did, in comparison to the 39.3% of all Chinese. Japanese American nothing in particulars had an even higher percentage at 46.2% (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Belief in spiritual energy.

Likewise, large percentages of Asian American religious nones believed in ancestral spirits, even the atheists. In fact, Chinese and Japanese Americans were more apt to believe in ancestral spirits than in God. One third of Chinese American atheists (33.3%) and 43.9% of nothing in particulars acknowledged that their deceased relatives continued to exist. Indeed, a higher rate of Chinese American nothing in particulars believed in ancestral spirits than the average Chinese American (40.0% believing). Of the young adult Japanese Americans, 38.5% of the nothing in particulars believed in ancestral spirits (21.4% of all Japanese American atheists) (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Belief in ancestral spirits.

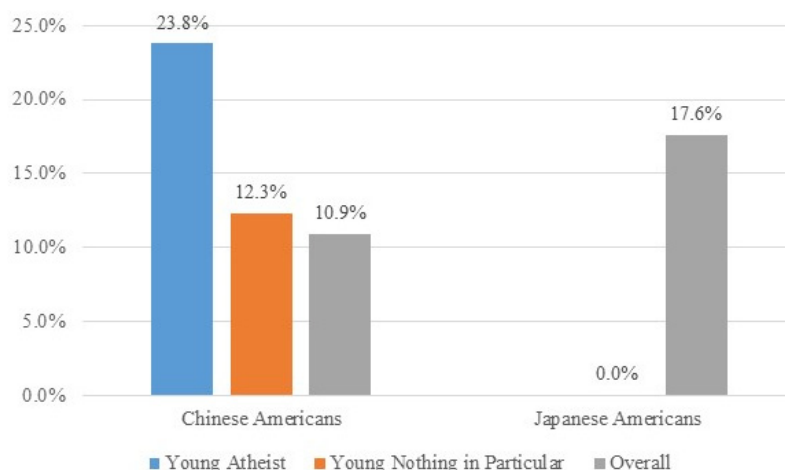
### 5.3. Practices

Since Chinese and Japanese Americans have high rates of nonbelief and nonbelonging, they rarely attended religious services, prayed, meditated, or fasted. Only 7.1% of Chinese American nothing in particulars pray more than a few times a week and none of the Chinese American atheists pray this much. Japanese Americans pray slightly more often, but still at low rates, with 15.4% of nothing in particulars



praying weekly and 23.1% praying a few times a month. However, both groups do continue to maintain spiritual practices with Asian roots. These practices include both family home rituals and ethnic festivals.

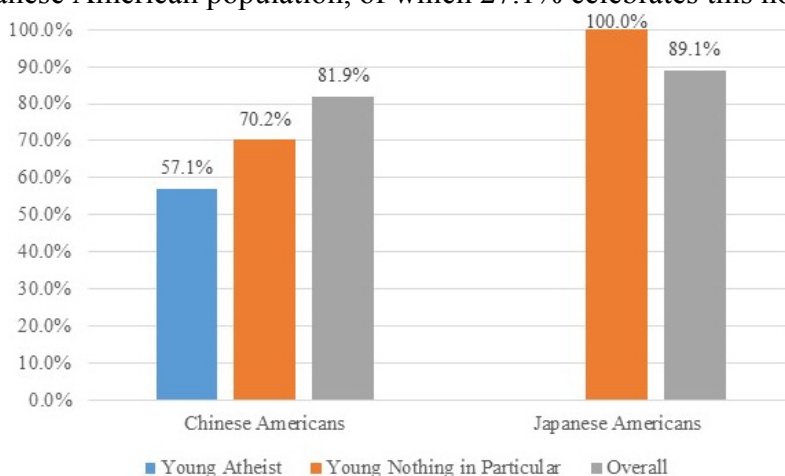
For example, Chinese continue to maintain home shrines despite their religious non-affiliation. In terms of keeping a shrine for prayer at home, 23.8% of Chinese American atheists and 12.3% of nothing particulars had one. Japanese American young adults, on the other hand, were less likely to have a shrine. In general, 10.9% of all Chinese Americans and 17.6% of all Japanese Americans kept a home shrine (Figure 8).



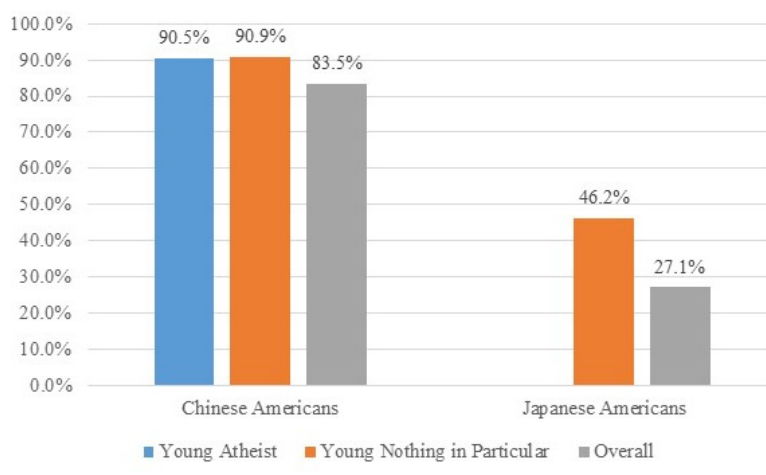
**Figure 8.** Has home shrine.

Although they do not necessarily espouse Christian beliefs, high rates of Chinese Americans celebrate Christmas. Of the Chinese religious nones who are Millennials, 57.1% of atheists and 70.2% of nothing in particulars practice this religious holiday, lower than all Chinese Americans (81.9%). The young Japanese Americans of all affiliations were unanimous in their celebration of Christmas at 100% (Figure 9).

Even higher rates of Chinese Americans celebrate Lunar New Year. Nine of ten Chinese American atheists (90.5%) and 90.9% of nothing in particulars practice this ethnic festival, higher than the overall Chinese American rate of 83.5%. Unlike Chinese Americans, Lunar New Year is not a traditional festival for Japanese Americans, yet 46.2% of young nothing in particulars celebrate it. These figures are higher than the overall Japanese American population, of which 27.1% celebrates this holiday (Figure 10).



**Figure 9.** Celebrates Christmas.

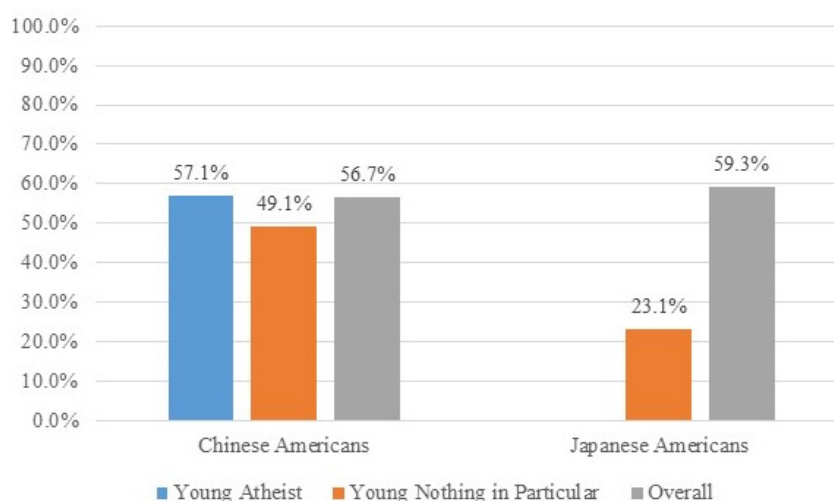


**Figure 10.** Celebrates Lunar New Year.

#### 5.4. Relationships and Ethics

Even though Chinese and Japanese Americans do not have rates of religious belonging, belief, or practices, they hold very high values for close family bonds and reciprocal relationships.

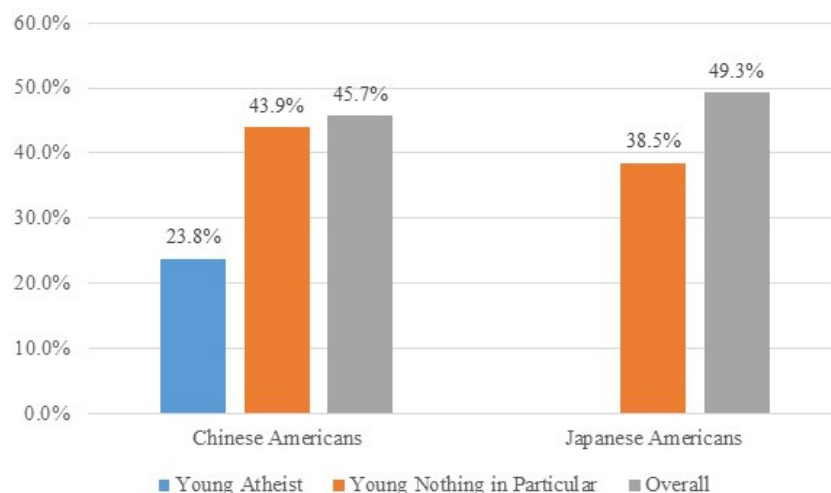
When asked about their most important goals, Chinese and Japanese American young adults valued being good parents slightly higher than other Americans. Among Chinese Americans, 57.1% of atheists and 49.1% nothing in particulars rated this as their top life goals, as compared to 56.7% of Chinese American overall. A similar percentage, 55.6% of young Japanese Americans, valued being a good parent as a top goal, including 23.1% of nothing in particulars, and 100% of the atheists (85.7% of atheists overall). Though the figure for nothing in particular seems low, 69% responded the next tier response of “very important” goal, leading to 92.3% responding very important and most important. About half (52%) of Millennials overall rated being a good parent as a top goal [26] (Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** Top goal: being a good parent.

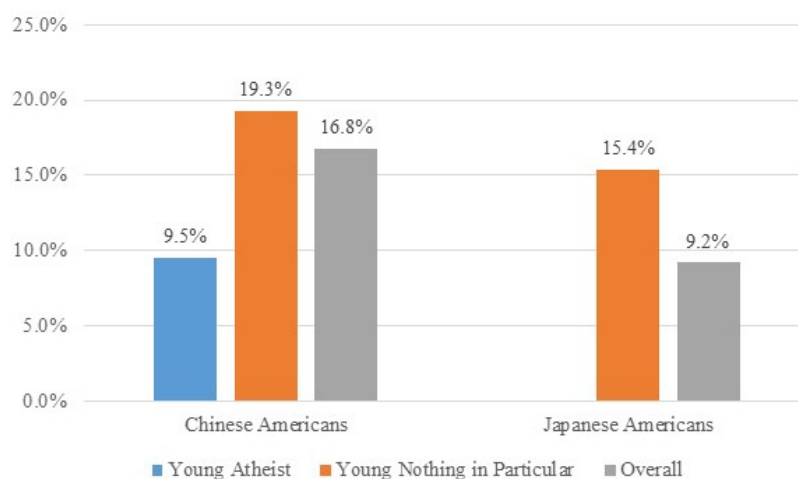
Having a successful marriage is the next highest rate goal, with 23.8% of Chinese American atheists and 43.9% of nothing in particulars citing this value. About half of Chinese Americans in general (45.7%) agreed about the importance of marriage. For young Japanese Americans, 38.5% of nothing in

particulars held marriage as a top goal (57.1% atheists overall). Only 30% of American Millennials rated marriage this highly (Figure 12).



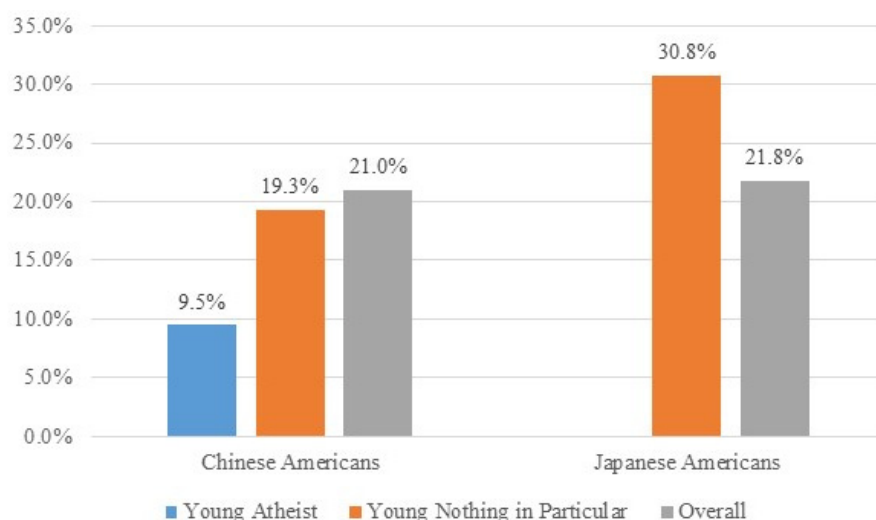
**Figure 12.** Top goal: having a good marriage.

While young adults are at a stage in life to focus on their careers, career is not as an important goal for Asian Americans as their family lives. Only 9.5% of Chinese American atheists and 19.3% of nothing in particulars identified career as one of their top goals, as compared to 16.8% for all Chinese Americans. Similarly for young Japanese Americans, 15.4% of nothing in particulars held their career as a top goal (no Japanese American atheists cited as a top goal). These percentage rates are comparable to other American young adults, of whom 15% wanted a successful, high paying career (Figure 13).



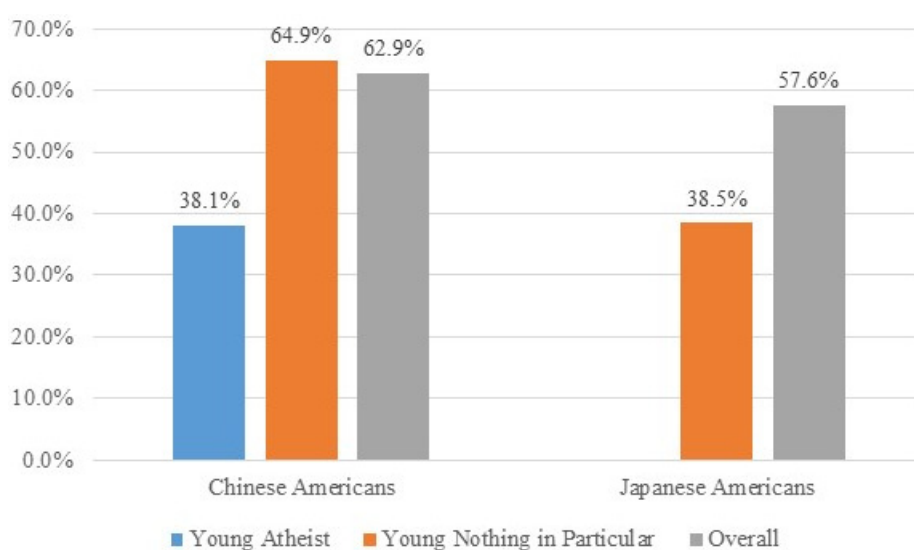
**Figure 13.** Top goal: having a successful career.

One out of ten Chinese American atheists (9.5%) and 19.3% of nothing in particulars listed helping others in need as one of their most important goals. More Japanese American youth held this as a top goal, with 30.8% of nothing in particulars and both young atheists. Overall, 21.0% of all Chinese Americans and 21% of American Millennials rated this value highly (Figure 14).



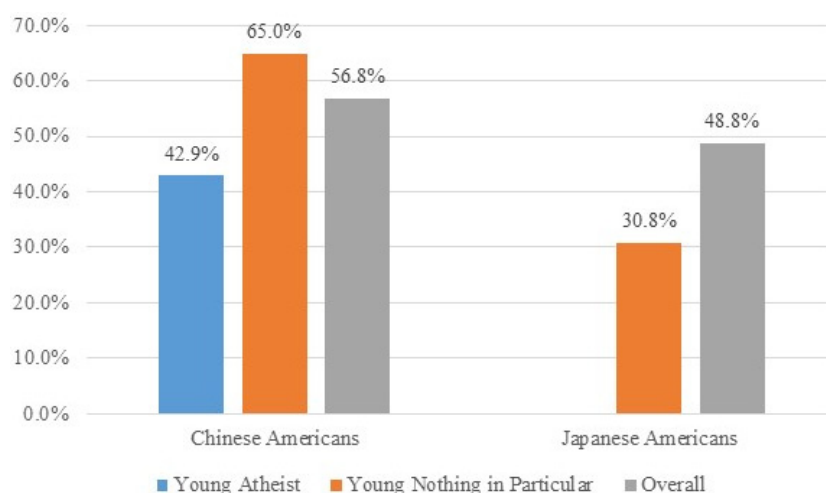
**Figure 14.** Top goal: helping others in need.

Another way to rate family bonds is valuing parental influence over major decisions. Chinese American young adults state that their parents should have some or a lot of influence in their careers and even marriage choice. In fact, 38.1% of atheists and 64.9% of nothing in particulars believe their parents should have some or a lot of say in their choice of careers. Six out of ten Chinese Americans overall (62.9%) feel parents should have such career influence (Figure 15).



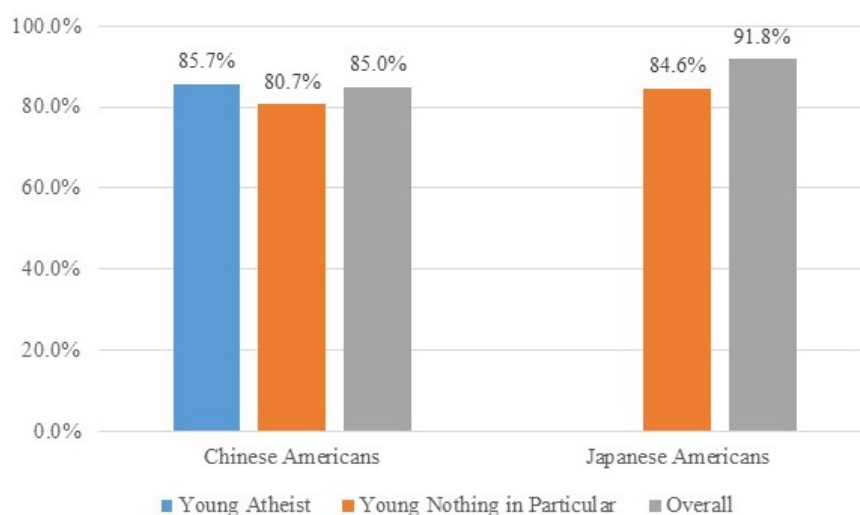
**Figure 15.** Values parental influence in career.

Similarly, 42.9% of atheists and 65.0% of nothing in particulars believe their parents deserve some influence in their choice of spouse, as compared to 56.8% of Chinese Americans who do. By contrast, young Japanese Americans felt that their parents should have less influence over their choice of career, with 38.5% of nothing in particulars. In regards to choice of spouse, 30.8% of Japanese American nothing in particulars felt their parents should have a say (Figure 16).



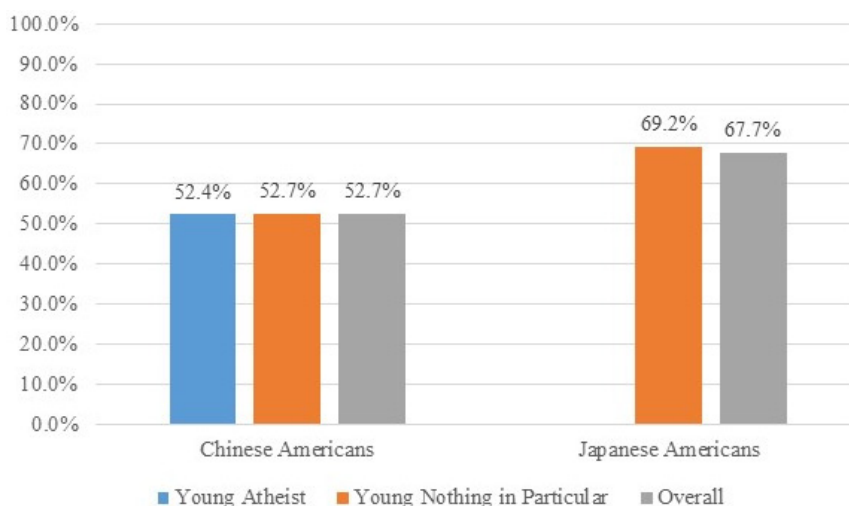
**Figure 16.** Values parental influence in spousal choice.

Along with having strong family bonds, Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans feel that their respective groups get along well with other racial groups in the United States. Young Chinese Americans feel that they get along well with whites, with 85.7% of atheists and 80.7% of nothing in particulars expressing that the groups get along pretty well or better. In general, 85.0% of Chinese Americans also state the same. Young Japanese Americans responded at higher rates, with both atheists (92.9% of all Japanese American atheists) and 84.6% of nothing in particulars feeling this way. And, for all Japanese Americans, the figure is 91.8% (Figure 17).



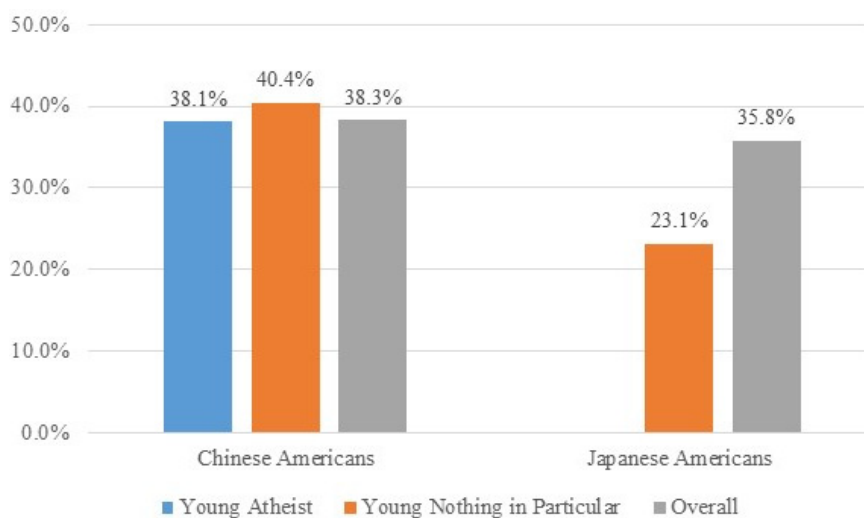
**Figure 17.** Getting along with whites.

In reference to blacks and the Chinese American community, 52.4% of atheists and 52.7% of young nothing in particulars felt that Chinese Americans get along pretty well or higher, as compared to 52.7% overall. Young Japanese Americans again responded higher with 71.4% of all atheists, 69.2% of nothing in particulars, and 67.7% of the total feeling that Japanese Americans get along with black Americans (Figure 18).



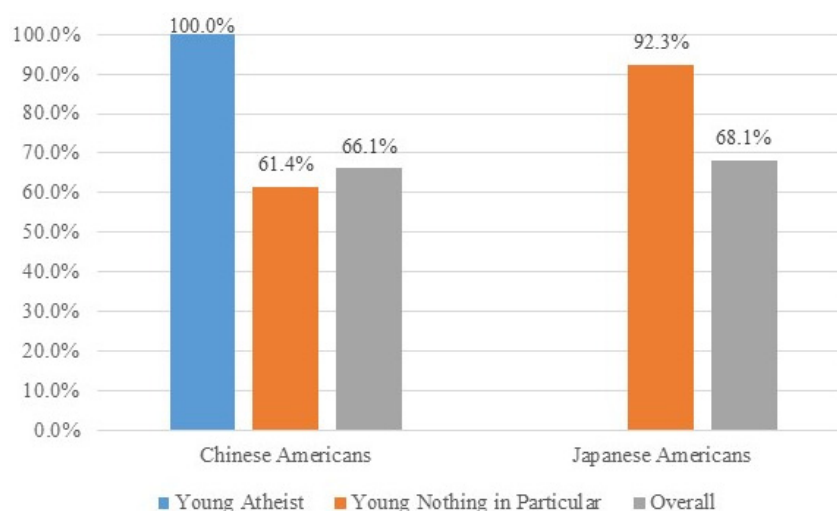
**Figure 18.** Getting along with blacks.

In regards to politics, both young adult Chinese and Japanese Americans tend to identify as moderate, would consider abortion legal in all or most cases, and feel that homosexuality should be accepted by society. Both the Chinese American atheists and nothing in particulars identify as moderate (as opposed to liberal and conservative) at 38.1% and 40.4%. Young Japanese Americans similarly identify as moderate with 23.1% of nothing in particulars doing so. Note that for all Chinese Americans 38.3% are moderate and 35.8% of all Japanese Americans identify as moderate, the highest response for any political ideology (Figure 19).



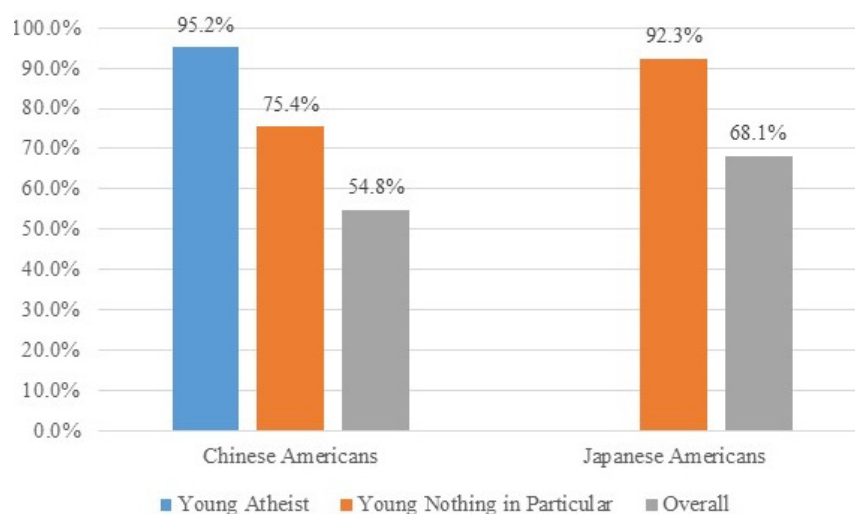
**Figure 19.** Moderate political ideology.

Young Chinese American religious nones tend to consider that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, with 100% of atheists and 61.4% of nothing in particulars agreeing to these statements. Two thirds of Chinese Americans (66.1%) also believe the same. Young Japanese Americans respond similarly with 92.3% of nothing in particulars assenting (Figure 20).



**Figure 20.** Supports legal abortion.

The issue of homosexuality diverges slightly for Chinese and Japanese Americans. Of young Chinese Americans, 95.2% of atheists and 75.4% of nothing in particulars feel that society should accept homosexuality. In contrast, only 54.8% of Chinese American total sample think the same. Young Japanese Americans feel strongly that society should accept homosexuality with 92.3% of nothing in particulars responding in this way, and 68.1% of all (Figure 21).



**Figure 21.** Supports homosexuality.

## 6. Discussion

Chinese and Japanese American young adults have higher rates of religious nones than their ethnic groups overall, as well as their American counterparts of the same age. We suggest that three key factors explain why Asian Americans are the racial group with the highest percentage of religious nones in the United States.

First, 46.4% of the Chinese Americans surveyed came from the People's Republic of China, where atheism is the official doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party. The government regulates religion so that only five major religions are recognized. On the other hand, it labels Chinese popular religion as

*mixin*, or superstition. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1979) sought to eradicate bourgeois elements, including all religion. Consequently, all religious venues were shut down, religious leaders were persecuted, and believers had to make public renunciations [17]. As a result of these policies, a large portion of Chinese Americans from China identify as religious nones.

Second, religion has been historically intertwined with the western colonization of Asia. In fact, the term “religion” itself was imposed on Japan in the mid-nineteenth century, when the United States and European nations used a military envoy to force the nation to accept trade treaties. Included in these treaties was the “freedom of religion”, which meant that Christians were free to missionize Japan. Religion was narrowly translated as “doctrines”, leaving many Japanese rituals, obligations, and emotions outside of “religion” [27]. It also left the term with negative connotations of divisiveness and consumptive aggression. As a result, Asians—and those who became Asian American—often disassociate themselves from the concept of religion and from Christianity, which was considered an imposed, Western religion.

Third, despite their religious nonbelonging, significant portions of both atheists and nothing in particulars maintain beliefs, practices, and ethics that are consistent with Asian popular religious practices. However, these religious rituals and relations have no sociological category that fit them.

Among young atheists, almost one fourth (23.8%) of Chinese Americans believed in God. On the other hand, 1/3 of them believed in ancestral spirits, which is not a belief that atheists are known to hold. A higher rate of Chinese American nothing in particulars, at 43.9% believed in God and the same percentage believed in ancestral spirits. In fact, young Chinese American nothing in particulars were more likely to believe in ancestral spirits than the overall Chinese American population.

Beliefs are similarly strong among Japanese American young religious nones, with 53.8% of nothing in particulars expressing a belief in God or universal spirit. The numbers of young atheists is too small, but 21.4% of all Japanese American atheists expressed this belief, which is similar to the Chinese American figure. Young Japanese American atheists asserted belief in ancestral spirits and the spiritual power of yoga (not noted above), though the small sample cannot convey the extent of belief, except to say that atheists do hold beliefs.

Even though unaffiliated young Chinese Americans do not pray or attend religious services much at all, a small percentage do maintain home shrines where they may venerate their deceased ancestors. Japanese Americans have two traditions of home shrines that can be traced to an organized religion—the *butsudan* (Buddhist) and the *kamidana* (Shinto). However, in practice both shrines can be utilized for memorial and fortune rituals not specific to a religious organization; consequently, those who continue these rituals need not identify with the organization, and those who reject religious affiliation can continue these rituals [28]. Whether Chinese and Japanese Americans do pray or make offerings at these shrines was not asked. Further, altars are not an element of any religion named in sociological surveys. Subsequently, these ethnicities cannot affiliate with any religious grouping, and instead usually identify religiously as “nothing in particular”.

Following ethnic family traditions, Chinese American religious nones are more likely than the average Chinese American to celebrate Lunar New Year, a time when families come together to honor deities and ancestors. It also includes several rituals to bring good fortune and taboos to keep away bad luck. As another key festival of Chinese popular religion, these rituals are often employed to instill moral



values and ethical behavior among its adherents. However, like ancestor veneration they are not part of a named religion, so participants do not classify themselves as belonging to any one faith tradition.

This familism is also reflected in how the Millennial Chinese and Japanese American religious nones seek to be good parents and in how they relate to their own parents. Like other Millennials, being a good parent is the top life goal for Chinese and Japanese Americans. Indeed, Chinese American Millennials do not necessarily seek to become autonomous adults but include their parents in their major decisions. They may believe that since their parents sacrificed so much for them in the immigration process that they have an obligation to consider their parents' wishes in their career choices.

Japanese American Millennials hold the value of family relationships but differ in their interpretation of what results from a functioning family. In Japanese popular religion, correct family and community relationships are supposed to emanate the feeling of warm togetherness and gracious hospitality. In this sense, parental influence over career and spouse feels a bit heavy-handed, and correspondingly no young atheists responded that parents should influence them and young nothing in particulars responded in the thirty percent range.

Responses to questions about holidays, relations with other racial groups, and political stances reveal aspects of this warm hospitality for Japanese Americans. All young Japanese Americans celebrate Christmas, including the unaffiliated. This unanimity illustrates how they may see Christmas as the holiday with the most opportunity to practice hospitality, to have a heartfelt experience with extended family, and to honor parents, elders, and children alike. Young Japanese Americans responded that they get along well with whites and blacks. In this way, young, unaffiliated Japanese Americans cultivate warm hospitality among their friends and colleagues in addition to their family.

The value for hospitality is further illustrated by young Japanese Americans' moderate political identity and support of homosexuality. Being "moderate" concurs with the image of Japanese Americans being open to others and not excluding others, be they conservative or liberal. They are also open to different sexual orientations, with young Japanese American nothing in particulars feeling that society should accept homosexuality. By welcoming sexual orientations and races, mitigating authoritarian pressure, and taking advantage of the common, jolly holiday of Christmas, young Japanese Americans can be unaffiliated yet practice elements of Japanese popular religion.

## 7. Conclusions

Chinese and Japanese American Millennials who are religious nones maintain spiritual practices and ethical behaviors that are unique hybridizations of their ethnic backgrounds and American upbringings. We suggest that to better capture the nature and character of their religious behavior, a *liyi* religious discourse of ritual and relationships is more appropriate than one of belief and belonging.

A distinguishing feature of *li*, which can be translated as Chinese rites or religious rituals, is that they instill normative, proper morals [29]. Rituals of Chinese popular religion, such as ancestor veneration, New Year meals, or cleaning gravesites, are what people should do with pious and serious effort to preserve social order. Not only do these rituals act as concrete guides to follow, but also they may have the power to bring about the moral transformation of the individuals performing them. As stated earlier, Chinese traditionally do not "believe in" religion, but instead they "do" religion.

Japanese popular religion includes similar rituals, some inherited from the Chinese, in order to create a family and community filled with warmth and hospitality. In addition, the term “religion”, translated as “doctrines”, was forced onto Japan by colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, religion does not include rituals and feelings of togetherness, and it connotes divisiveness and consumptive aggression. Japanese do not “believe in” religion, but “do” it.

*Yi*, translated roughly as righteousness or justice, is a moral disposition to do good and the ability to feel what is right and wrong [30]. Indeed, some acts ought to be performed simply because they are the correct and right thing to do. This concept particularly relates to how one relates to others with loyalty and righteousness, as epitomized by General Guan Yu, a Chinese historical figure who was deified. Overseas Chinese especially revere Guan Yu as he reflected the brotherhood and mutual support that they valued in foreign lands [31]. Likewise, Japanese Americans learned to support each other as a family and community through the racist eras of the Exclusion Act of 1924 and World War II. They spread slogans such as “patience and perseverance” and “for the sake of the children” which mean self-sacrifice for the emotional well-being of the family [32].

A focus on rituals and righteousness in relations illuminates how Chinese and Japanese Americans do religion. While the religious nones of these groups may not belong to any religious traditions or espouse Judeo-Christian beliefs, they do maintain certain rituals for their “rightness” and they relate to family and others in highly moral ways. In other words, the rituals and righteousness of Asian Americans provide their ultimate morals and manners. These spiritual practices make up what we term “Chinese American familism” [33]. For Japanese Americans, the rituals and righteous relations are reflected in their hospitality and warmth in relationships.

Likewise, those identifying as religious nones vary so much in their religious orientations that a redefinition of religion is required, including a renewed focus on religious practice [34,35]. Nancy Ammerman observes that the discourses of spiritual but not religious individuals tend to converge around an ethical spirituality, one where “real spirituality is about living a virtuous life, one characterized by helping others, transcending one’s own selfish interests to seek what is right” ([16], p. 272). Her study demonstrates that Americans overall also believe that true religion concerns more with what they do and how they relate than what they believe or with whom they belong.

Despite self-identifying as religious nones, Chinese and Japanese American young adults do maintain hybridized spiritual rituals and value righteous relations. A focus on their *liyi* religious repertoire can similarly illuminate how American Millennials do spirituality in our changing religious landscape.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge Seanan Fong and Helen Jin Kim for their insights on Asian American religious nones and *liyi* religious discourse.

## Author Contributions

Russell Jeung co-wrote the paper. Brett Esaki co-wrote the paper. Alice Liu analyzed the data and prepared the figures.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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