


Article

Religion, Social Resources, and International Migrants' Volunteer Participation: Evidence from Yiwu City, China

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Abstract: A large body of research has explored various factors influencing volunteer participation, particularly revealing the association between religious beliefs and volunteer engagement. However, there was relatively limited research on volunteer participation among international immigrants in China, a newly emerging immigrant country. Further investigation was needed to identify the factors influencing the volunteer engagement of international immigrants in China and the underlying mechanisms. This study analyzed data from international immigrants in Yiwu, China and found that their volunteer behavior was significantly influenced by their religious beliefs. Additionally, social resources were closely related to their volunteer participation. Furthermore, although perceived discrimination among international immigrants in China was not directly associated with volunteer participation, it promoted their religious participation and frequency, consequently encouraging their volunteer engagement. Further analysis also revealed two mechanisms through which religion impacted volunteer participation. On the one hand, religious beliefs influenced volunteer participation through the mechanism of religious indoctrination. On the other hand, though perceived discrimination among international immigrants did not directly influence volunteer participation, it did encourage them to engage in religious meetings to establish social networks for support, thereby enriching their social resources and subsequently promoting volunteer engagement. We discussed the implications of our findings for encouraging volunteer participation and for promoting the social integration of international immigrants.

Keywords: religion; social resources; volunteer participation; international immigrants



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1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, China has developed its economy rapidly and increased its international influence significantly. Now, China is becoming a new destination country for transnational migrants, particularly for south-to-south migration, and a huge number of foreigners are attracted to China as employees of transnational corporations, self-employed traders, or international students. In China's 2010 census, there were 593,832 foreigners from 128 countries or regions ([Census Office of the State Council, Population and Employment Statistics Department of the National Bureau of Statistics 2012](#)), and a report from the UN showed that there were about 1 million foreigners in China in 2017 ([United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2017](#)). Data showed that the number of foreigners in China was still on the rise ([Ning 2021](#)).

Compared to the abundant research on international migration in developed countries in Europe and the United States, only a small amount of academic work was being carried out on international immigrants in China. Prior research on international immigrants in China mainly focused on broad topics: (1) International immigrants' integration. Despite

their successful transnational businesses, these individuals often faced disparities and obstacles when accessing various urban services in China (Amoah et al. 2020; Adebayo 2020; Bodenstein 2021). They tried to build up new networks to attain social support from immigrant communities, immigrant organizations as well as business associations to cope with inequalities (Castillo 2014; Xu 2009); (2) Ethnic relations. China might have been economically ready for foreigners, but not culturally (Han 2017). A study showed that, although Chinese people appreciated Africans' presence in the economy and expressed openness to interact with them, they tended to perceive Africans negatively in general (Zhou et al. 2016). Another study on the perception structure of international immigrants in China found that, in Guangzhou, international immigrants were primarily engaged in business, but they did not enter the Chinese labor market. The attitudes of the local people towards them were mainly determined by the perceived threat. Their socio-economic status and group interactions did not significantly affect their attitudes towards international immigrants (Liang and Liu 2016); (3) Ethnic enclave and community. Based on the study of African associations such as the African Business Associations in Guangzhou, Niu introduced the concept of transient communities (Niu 2018). Other studies showed that the formation of transnational immigrant communities in Guangzhou was the result of differentiation and agglomeration evolving together (Xu 2016, 2012). Li and his colleagues discovered that the economic status of immigrant ethnic enclaves gradually declined after experiencing growth and prosperity (Li et al. 2009), while others argued that international migrants were not granted to form enclaves within the dominant cities of African residence in China, due to the state's urban regulation concerns (Jin et al. 2021; Niu et al. 2020). Recent research has focused on the impact of religion on the subjective adaptation of international immigrants (Du and Liang 2023), but there was little study on the religion of international immigrants and how religion fostered volunteer participation among them.

There is an inevitable impact on the target country with the flow of a large number of immigrants. While most studies have addressed how social participation contributes to social cohesion for international immigrants arriving in developed countries (Dustmann 1996; Martinovic et al. 2009; Şahin 2016), limited works have studied immigrants' volunteering in a new destination country in a south-to-south context. Using survey data from Yiwu City, a commercial hub for transnational commodity wholesale, the current study aims to examine the characteristics and mechanisms of volunteering of immigrants in China, paying special attention to the connection between discrimination and religious participation, the social resource behind religious involvement, and their relationship with volunteer participation. This shift allows us to examine whether immigrant volunteer participation in developing countries like China still aligns with that in developed countries and whether previous theories are still applicable. Moreover, China is currently committed to promoting social co-governance. The findings of this study have significant implications for encouraging volunteer behavior among the general population, especially international immigrants, and for promoting the social integration of international immigrants.

1.1. Religion and Volunteer Participation

Volunteering was commonly employed in everyday communication language and among policymakers in Western societies; ongoing academic debates persisted regarding the specific activities encompassed by this terminology (Musick and Wilson 2008). The vast majority of scholars believed that volunteers referred to individuals engaged in any activity in which they freely dedicated their time to benefit another person, group, or organization. However, volunteering was a complex and ambiguous phenomenon that was not delineated and spanned a wide variety of activities, organizations, and sectors. To some extent, it referred to any activity in which time was given freely to benefit another person, group, or organization (Wilson 2000), which placed volunteering within a civic engagement and, more broadly, an active citizenship paradigm. Adler and Goggin's conceptualization of civic engagement, for example, resonated with the definition of volunteering: an engaged citizen actively involved themselves in the affairs of a community, to enhance the well-being

of others or contribute to the community's long-term development (Adler and Goggin 2005).

In this article, we defined volunteering as unpaid activities that were performed out of free will for the benefit of others beyond kinship ties (Hustinx et al. 2014). This conceptualization aligned with the sociological volunteering framework put forth by Wilson and Musick (Wilson and Musick 1997). At the core of their volunteering theory lied a unique premise: the mere presence of human and social capital did not typically initiate one's inclination to volunteer; an ethical impulse or moral catalyst was often indispensable. Those who engaged in volunteer work often viewed it as a moral imperative, a demonstration of their commitment to being a virtuous and ethical individual. This ethos of goodwill served as a valuable reservoir from which to draw for volunteering efforts (Wilson and Musick 1997).

The topic of volunteer motivation (MTV) was extensively explored in the realm of volunteer research (Handy and Hustinx 2009). Despite the varied approaches to studying MTV, researchers consistently uncovered that MTV was a multifaceted interaction encompassing both altruistic and self-interested factors (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen 1991; Wuthnow 1991).

When it came to elucidating the variations in motivations for volunteering, the inclination towards altruistic motives was predominantly linked with religious affiliations and beliefs. Altruism held a significant value in the teachings of numerous religions, emphasizing selflessness and a sense of duty towards the less fortunate. Essentially, this encouraged individuals who were religiously inclined to partake in social endeavors, such as volunteering (Batson et al. 1993; Ellison 1992; Graham and Haidt 2010). Wuthnow (Wuthnow 1991) observed a robust correlation between belief and engagement in acts of benevolence. Volunteering served as a significant avenue for the expression of religious beliefs and values (Wood and Hougland 1990).

Almost all major religions, despite differences in doctrine, advocate universal love, emphasize donation, and encourage participation in volunteer activities, thus promoting altruistic behavior. Charity, service, and helping those in need are central tenets of Christian denominations in the United States. Individuals who felt their religious beliefs were important to their identity were also likely to align with values central to religious congregational volunteers (Unruh and Sider 2005; Ammerman 2007). In Islam, charitable giving was exemplified through Sadaka (voluntary charity) and Zakat (mandatory almsgiving). These acts of charity promoted the welfare of the less fortunate. Charitable giving in Islam informed volunteering by inspiring Muslims to actively engage in community service, such as providing food, shelter, and medical care to those in need (Kayikci 2020; Peucker 2020; Peucker and Kayikci 2020; Hustinx et al. 2010). Muslims' engagement within their Islamic community context might also be viewed as self-isolation.

Religion is closely related to civic and social engagement, particularly with regard to voluntary participation. Research revealed that religious Americans were more inclined to participate in activities such as charitable donations, volunteer work, and community voting (Putnam and Campbell 2010). An increasing number of studies indicated that religious social networks were a key factor in connecting religion and volunteer services. People who regularly visited religious venues were more inclined to receive invitations to engage in volunteer activities compared to individuals with less frequent attendance (Lewis et al. 2013; Becker and Dhingra 2001; Paik and Navarre-Jackson 2011; Park and Smith 2000). According to the findings of a study, 45% of those who regularly attended religious services volunteer, while only 26% of non-attendees volunteer (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Compared to the followers of other religions, Protestants were more actively involved in volunteer activities (Lam 2002; Ruiters and De Graaf 2006). The difference could be attributed to two main factors. Firstly, Protestant churches abolished the church's hierarchy system and often divided themselves into smaller parishes, which facilitated social accountability (Hart and Dekker 2005). Secondly, Protestantism placed a greater emphasis on encouraging its members to pursue social responsibility (Lam 2002). The positive relationship

between religious beliefs and volunteer participation had been confirmed by a substantial body of research in Western countries (Wuthnow 2004; Vermeer and Scheepers 2012).

Religion was considered to be the most significant predictor variable for volunteer participation, as the greater the religious involvement, the higher the number of individuals engaged in volunteer service activities (Hustinx et al. 2014). Two main mechanisms explained the positive relationship between religion and volunteer participation: religious beliefs and religious practice. On the one hand, religious doctrine often conveyed values of altruism and concern for others, emphasizing the importance of helping and caring for those in need. Individuals with religious beliefs were more likely to internalize these behavioral norms, increasing their likelihood of becoming volunteers. Engaging in volunteer activities was a significant manifestation of internalizing and adhering to these principles. Theological beliefs played a pivotal role in shaping the level and destination of contributions. Individuals adhering to more conservative theological beliefs tended to allocate more of their donations to religious organizations, while those with more liberal beliefs tended to favor secular charitable entities (Lunn et al. 2001). Religiosity and religious orientation appeared to more directly influence religious giving than secular giving.

On the other hand, in religious practice, attendance at religious services has been found to be of crucial importance. Rather than religious conviction, religious networks emphasized the role of social connections among religious individuals. The frequency of attending religious services, which tended to vary among different age groups, stood out as a significant predictor of charitable giving within religious contexts (Wilhelm et al. 2007). Those who regularly participated in religious rituals and activities enhanced their connections with religious practitioners. They gained more information and encouragement regarding volunteer service from their religious community and were more likely to engage in volunteer activities (Ruiter and De Graaf 2006). Based on these findings, we propose two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. *There is a close connection between religious beliefs and volunteer participation among immigrants; different religious beliefs have varying impacts on volunteer participation.*

Hypothesis 2. *Religious service attendance has a positive impact on volunteering.*

1.2. Social Resources and Volunteer Participation

Social resources were essential for volunteering, as individuals with extensive social networks had a higher likelihood of engaging in volunteer work (Rossi 2001; Wilson and Musick 1997). Furthermore, more sociable individuals were more willing to volunteer. Additionally, there was a positive correlation between the time spent in socializing with friends and family and volunteering (Bowman 2004; Putnam 2000; Wilson and Musick 1997). Similarly, being a member of organizations and having associational ties encouraged volunteering. Engaging in organizational activities helped broaden one's social network, offered information regarding volunteering opportunities, and, in some cases, might even necessitate volunteering. Furthermore, consistently being approached and asked to volunteer was among the most influential factors predicting volunteer participation (Freeman 1997; Bowman 2004; Musick and Wilson 2008).

Many studies had found a positive association among attendance at religious services, congregational involvement, and the level of volunteering (Lam 2002; Wilson and Musick 1997). However, recent research indicated that social networks played a crucial role in the relationship between religious beliefs and volunteering. Social networks could moderate the effect of involvement and were more powerful predictors of volunteering than beliefs or values (Lewis et al. 2013; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Religious participation expanded an individual's social network, increased their exposure to volunteering opportunities, and ultimately increased their likelihood to participate in volunteer activities.

Social networks, rather than beliefs, dominated as the mechanism leading to volunteering, and it was the social networks formed within congregations that made congregation

members more likely to volunteer (Becker and Dhingra 2001). Putnam and Campbell demonstrated that individuals closely connected to religious networks were more likely to increase their level of civic engagement, while those with fewer connections to religious networks exhibited lower levels of civic participation (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

The social resource theory explained why individuals with higher socioeconomic status were more inclined to engage in social participation. People with higher socioeconomic status tended to participate in more social organizations and were more active within these organizations (Wilson and Musick 1997). Additionally, social networks helped us understand why extroverted individuals were more willing to engage in social participation. Extraverted individuals with more acquaintances participated in more clubs and organizations, which in turn provided them with more opportunities to engage in volunteer activities (Herzog and Morgan 1993).

However, the likelihood of being asked to volunteer was not evenly distributed among individuals. Research suggested that individuals with higher levels of education and wealth were more likely to be approached for volunteering opportunities (Brady et al. 1999). Furthermore, women, homeowners, individuals with children at home, and those residing in rural areas were recruited more frequently for volunteer work (Bryant et al. 2003). It had been found that recruitment through close relationships or strong ties tended to be particularly effective. People were more inclined to decline or overlook volunteer requests from acquaintances with weaker connections. In contrast to individuals recruited through weak connections, those who were approached by close friends or family members tended to volunteer for a greater number of hours and engage in a wider range of volunteer activities (Musick and Wilson 2008). The recruitment process within religious networks deserved particular attention, as being personally asked to volunteer was identified as one of the most influential factors in predicting volunteer engagement (Freeman 1997; Musick and Wilson 2008).

How did religious networks foster volunteering? There were generally two main explanations. The first perspective emphasized the social resources and social capital that were generated within religious networks. The second explanation revolved around the influence of social norms and shared social identities. On the one hand, religious networks played a crucial role in generating social resources. Churches served as spaces where like-minded individuals, including friends and family members, came together and actively involved themselves in social and political issues. Regular churchgoers tended to have broader social networks and enjoy stronger social support compared to those who did not engage in religious activities. Moreover, religious networks served as effective channels for recruitment. By participating in religious congregations and engaging with the networks, individuals could expand their social resources, thereby enticing more people to become involved (Bradley 1995; Ellison and George 1994). On the other hand, religious networks might foster particularly strong norms of altruism and reciprocity (Smidt 2003; Lewis et al. 2013). Participation in religious networks fostered the creation of bonding social capital, increasing the likelihood of successful recruitment attempts (Paik and Navarre-Jackson 2011). The normative influence present in religious networks created peer pressure to accept volunteer requests (Bekkers and Schuyt 2008). As Putnam and Campbell suggested, “religiously based ties are morally freighted in a way that most secular ties are not, so that pleas for good works. . . seem more appropriate and weightier than comparable requests from a coworker or someone you know from the gym” (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Hypothesis 3. *People with more social participation are more inclined to volunteer.*

2. Data, Variables, and Model

2.1. *Yiwu as a New Host City for International Migrants*

Yiwu was a county-level city in the middle of Zhejiang Province, with a strong commercial atmosphere in its history. International merchants initially arrived in Yiwu for the

purchase of small commodities under the guidance of Northwestern and Xinjiang Muslims. Since China entered the World Trade Organization, it has gradually evolved into a popular hub for the procurement of small commodities and has quickly become a global commodity trading center in just a few decades. Although Yiwu was only a small or medium-sized city, nearly 500,000 overseas merchants came to Yiwu to purchase goods every year, and more than 13,000 overseas merchants lived in Yiwu (Hu 2018). Currently, international migrants registered in Yiwu came from nearly 219 countries and regions around the world, mainly from the Middle East, Africa, India in South Asia, South Korea, and Japan in East Asia. There were also merchants from Europe, Latin America, North America, and Oceania. Most of them were Muslims, and, even though they were far away from their home country, they still devoutly engaged in religious worship activities. However, due to the restrictions imposed by Chinese law and the differences in ceremonial traditions, different religious groups had varying forms of participation in religious activities. Muslims, apart from attending the Friday congregational prayer at the mosque, also engaged in various collective activities at fixed religious venues within their residential communities at other times. On the other hand, Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, were required to attend formal religious services at designated places of worship on weekends. This difference to some extent influenced their engagement in social activities. Muslims, influenced more profoundly by their religious organizations, were more willing to participate in various internal organizational activities, including volunteering. In contrast, Christians, due to their higher degree of secularization, engaged in a wider array of social activities, both organized and individual. Therefore, Yiwu is a good place for research on international migrants, as immigration are highly diverse.

2.2. Data

Data used in this study are from the Survey of Foreigners Residing in China (SFRC2018) Yiwu sub-sample. The SFRC study was initiated by Sun Yat-Sen University in 2016, and a follow-up study was conducted in Yiwu in 2019 by Zhejiang Normal University. Lacking a sample frame of foreigners in China has always been a headache for quantitative researchers, so, instead of using random sampling, the SFRC Yiwu research team recruited respondents through convenience sampling. To be specific, in the summer of 2019, the research team spent a month in the reception hall of the Exit or Entry Administrations of Public Security in Yiwu City, conducting a questionnaire survey. They introduced the goals of the SFRC study to foreigners, and approximately one-third of the foreigners participated in the study. There were a total of 980 valid cases in the Yiwu sub-sample. Information on respondents' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, employment status, immigration experience, health status, and social life in China has been collected (Fan et al. 2020). The survey targeted respondents without Chinese citizenship or holding a Chinese visa valid for over 3 months. Since the major service that Exit or Entry Administrations of Public Security institutes offered to foreigners was visa extension, most of our respondents were international immigrants who had resided in China for at least 3 months.

2.3. Variables

2.3.1. Dependent Variable

Volunteer participation. In the questionnaire, there was a question asking about their volunteer participation, "whether a respondent participated in volunteer activities in Yiwu city". The answers were yes or no; we coded them 1 and 0 in the analysis.

2.3.2. Explanatory Variables

In this study, *religion* was measured by two variables, namely, *religious affiliation* and *religious meeting*. Social resources were also measured by two variables, including *associations in hometown* and *ethnic associations in Yiwu*.

Religious affiliation was measured by asking respondents to identify their religion; the available answers were Catholic, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, other religion, and no religion.

Religious meeting was a dichotomous variable, asking immigrants whether they had attended a religious meeting in China. The alternative answers were yes or no.

Ethnic associations in Yiwu were represented as a dichotomous variable, determined by querying immigrants about their involvement in immigrant chambers of commerce or other immigrant associations. The alternative answers were yes or no.

Associations in hometown, as a dichotomous variable, was measured by asking immigrants whether they participated in any kinds of association in their hometown; the alternative answers were yes or no.

Discrimination was also a binary question, expecting either “yes” or “no”, by asking whether international immigrants in China perceived being discriminated against. The relevant variables are described in Table 1; see Table 1 for all descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Participation Status.

	Volunteer Participation		Chi ² Test <i>p</i> -Value
	Nonparticipant	Participant	
Age groups			0.055
<21	3.20%	4.90%	
21–30	41.90%	45.90%	
31–40	35.90%	29.90%	
41–50	13.00%	15.10%	
>50	6.00%	4.10%	
Gender			0.155
Male	89.10%	91.70%	
Female	10.90%	8.30%	
Educational attainment			0.114
Illiteracy	0.80%	1.40%	
Elementary school	2.10%	1.90%	
Middle school	4.30%	3.30%	
High school	18.60%	13.60%	
College or above	74.30%	79.80%	
Chinese fluency			<0.001
Know nothing	13.6%	5.0%	
know a little	43.2%	31.7%	
Good, enough for daily life	28.7%	40.6%	
Fluent	14.6%	22.7%	
Marital status			0.029
Married	54.70%	47.80%	
With partner	3.80%	3.10%	
Single	41.50%	49.20%	
Attended associations in hometown			<0.001
No	75.70%	60.90%	
Yes	24.30%	39.10%	
Attended religious meetings in Yiwu			<0.001
No	87.30%	60.70%	
Yes	12.70%	39.30%	
Attended ethnic associations in Yiwu			<0.001
No	77.36%	54.55%	
Yes	22.64%	45.45%	
Perceived discrimination			0.866
No	61.60%	62.00%	
Yes	38.40%	38.00%	

2.3.3. Control Variables

The control variables included gender, age, education level, Chinese proficiency, and marital status. Sex was a dichotomous variable. Age was divided into 5 age groups based

on the respondents' answers. They were, respectively, under 21 years old, 21–30 years old, 31–40 years old, 41–50 years old, and above 50 years old. Educational level was an ordinal variable, which was divided into five ordinal groups: illiteracy, elementary school, middle school, high school, and college or above. Chinese proficiency was also an ordinal variable, which was categorized into four ordinal groups: fluent, good, know a little, and know nothing. Marital status was measured as a categorical variable; optional answers were arranged by married, single, and with a partner.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Statistics of Participants and Nonparticipants

These international immigrants came from various regions such as Africa, the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Among them, 19.61% were from Africa, 42.24% from the Middle East, 8.51% from Europe and the Americas, and 29.63% from Asia. In terms of specific numbers, the top five countries from the Middle East were Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Palestine. Among the top African countries were Kenya, Mali, Somalia, and Sudan. The Asian countries with the highest numbers were India, Pakistan, and Nepal, while European and American countries had relatively fewer immigrants, with Russia and Switzerland being the top two (Supplementary Tables S1 and S2).

Before conducting regression analysis, we compared descriptive statistics of participants and nonparticipants in volunteer activities. From the categorical variables, we used cross-tabulation and chi-square tests to examine variation across groups. Age distribution and educational attainment did not vary significantly between participants and nonparticipants. Around 80% of all four groups of immigrants were 21 to 40 years old, and the educational attainment of over 70% of all four groups was college or above, indicating a high degree of migrant selectivity. This also implied that Yiwu was still in the early stages of immigration. According to the general patterns of immigration, during the early stages of immigration, it was typically only those who possessed more wealth, higher education levels, and higher socio-economic status who were more likely to successfully immigrate. While there were no significant variation between the gender proportion of participants and nonparticipants (around 90% of both groups were male), a higher proportion of ethnic association participants than nonparticipants were male (95.2% compared to 87.6%). The fluency in Chinese was positively associated with participation rates. Immigrants who participated in volunteer activities had a higher likelihood of being single than nonparticipants (49.2% compared to 41.5%), while participants and nonparticipants in activities organized by ethnic associations had a similar marital composition. Both association participation back in their hometown and religious meetings in Yiwu were positively associated with the social participation of immigrants. The chance of being discriminated against was about the same for participants and nonparticipants. Participants in ethnic association activities were more likely than nonparticipants to feel discriminated against in China.

3.2. Logistic Regression Results

The results of Model 1 showed that the different types of religious belief and religious participation significantly affected the volunteering participation of foreigners. In particular, when compared to Protestantism, there was a slightly lower likelihood of voluntary participation among followers of Islam and other religions, with no significant difference observed among adherents of Taoism, Buddhism, and other faiths. This indicated that Hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

In addition, religious participation could promote the participation of volunteers. When compared to individuals who did not attend religious ceremonies, those who frequently did so were 4.43 times more likely to engage in volunteer activities. This meant that Hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

The results of Model 2 showed that, after adding social resources variables, religious beliefs and participation still had significant impacts on their volunteering participation. Meanwhile, the results also showed that both the pre-migration and post-migration social

networks of foreigners had significant impacts on their volunteering participation. Specifically, if foreigners frequently participated in various community activities in their home country before migration, they would continue to participate in volunteering activities after coming to China. Participation in hometown community activities before migration could promote their volunteering participation. At the same time, after migrating to China, if they continued to participate in various ethnic association activities, it would still positively promote their volunteering activities in China. This indicated that participation in social activities by foreigners could positively promote their volunteering participation in China.

The results of Models 3 and 4 showed that, after adding the variable of immigrant perception of discrimination in the destination society, previous religious beliefs, religious participation activities, social networks, and social resources variables still had significant impacts on immigrants' volunteering participation in China. At the same time, we also found that there was no direct correlation between the social discrimination variable itself and volunteering participation, but social discrimination could promote immigrants' participation in religious activities, and the development of religious activities promoted their volunteering participation. While social discrimination might not have a direct impact on volunteering participation, it did exert an indirect influence on volunteering to some extent. This indicated that Hypothesis 3 was confirmed. See Table 2 below.

Table 2. Logit Regression Models Predicting Volunteering.

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Religious affiliation (Protestantism = 0)				
Catholic	−0.801 (0.519)	−0.830 (0.533)	−0.844 (0.534)	−0.844 (0.534)
Islam	−1.267 *** (0.450)	−1.319 *** (0.461)	−1.303 *** (0.461)	−1.303 *** (0.461)
Taoism	1.513 (1.030)	1.449 (1.109)	1.465 (1.119)	1.465 (1.119)
Buddhism	−0.977 (0.951)	−1.172 (0.968)	−1.179 (0.966)	−1.179 (0.966)
Other religions	−0.691 (0.543)	−0.734 (0.554)	−0.731 (0.553)	−0.731 (0.553)
Associations in hometown (No = 0)		0.629 *** (0.234)	0.615 *** (0.235)	0.615 *** (0.235)
Religious meeting (No = 0)	1.488 *** (0.237)	1.010 *** (0.257)		
Ethnic associations (No = 0)		1.029 *** (0.237)	1.015 *** (0.238)	1.015 *** (0.238)
Discrimination (No = 0)				0.179 (0.316)
1.Discrimination × 1.Attended religious meetings			1.161 *** (0.372)	0.982 ** (0.434)
0.Discrimination × 1.Attended religious meetings			0.989 *** (0.309)	0.989 *** (0.309)
1.Discrimination × 0.Attended religious meetings			0.179 (0.316)	
Control variables	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	−2.598 * (1.503)	−2.986 * (1.600)	−3.064 * (1.621)	−3.064 * (1.621)
N	720	720	720	720

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

4.1. Discussion

4.1.1. Association between Religion, Social Resource, and International Immigrants' Volunteering

Through analyzing empirical data from a survey conducted in Yiwu, this study revealed the relationships between religion, social capital, and volunteer participation. The study found that there was a strong connection between various aspects of religion, such as religious beliefs and the organization of religious activities, and volunteer participation.

Social capital and social networks also had a positive influence on immigrant volunteer participation. The specific conclusions were as follows:

Firstly, religion had a significant influence on immigrant volunteer participation. Specifically, not only did religious belief promote immigrant volunteering, but participation in religious activities also positively affected immigrant volunteering in China. On the one hand, although there was a close connection between religious beliefs and immigrant volunteer activities, different religious beliefs had different effects on volunteer activities. In relative terms, Muslims and Catholics were less likely to participate in volunteer activities than Protestants. This conclusion was consistent with previous research in the United States, which showed that different religious types had different impacts on volunteer activities. Some studies showed that Protestants were more willing to participate in volunteer activities than other believers because the Protestant Church had no hierarchy and usually divided itself into smaller parishes, which were more suitable for social control and sanctions. However, it also encouraged its members to fulfill social responsibilities more than other religions (Wuthnow 2004; Lam 2002). Other studies had shown that the members of conservative churches were more likely to participate in volunteer activities than those of liberal churches. Yeung found that Lutheran members had the lowest probability of participating in volunteer activities through religious participation and that volunteer activities had little help in linking and bonding social capital accumulation. Conversely, the members of Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses obtained the most social capital by participating in volunteer activities (Yeung 2004). However, this conclusion contradicted the numerous previous findings in Europe that suggested a positive association between Islam and volunteer activities (Day 2016; Peucker 2020; Peucker and Kayikci 2020; Hustinx et al. 2010; Kayikci 2020; Handy and Hustinx 2009). To delve into the reasons, apart from the unique forms of donation associated with Islam and the closed characteristics of volunteer activities, as indicated in previous research (Kayikci 2016, 2020), which might lead to misunderstandings in Western societies, this might also involve the measurement and misinterpretation of the variable of volunteer behavior in this study. In this study, we merely conducted a comparative survey asking whether individuals in Yiwu engaged in volunteer activities. Concerning this general question, many Muslims might consider it as inquiring about organized collective volunteer activities rather than individual volunteer activities. Consequently, many Muslims might choose "No," even though they were involved in some volunteer activities. However, individuals from other religions with a higher degree of secularization did not tend to have similar misunderstandings about their participation in volunteer activities.

On the other hand, religious activities significantly promoted immigrant volunteer participation. Immigrants who frequently participated in religious rituals or activities were more likely to participate in volunteer activities. This conclusion was also consistent with previous research, which suggested that volunteering was not driven by church members themselves, but by religious rituals and activities (Bowman 2004; Rossi 2001; Wilson and Musick 1997; Ruiter and De Graaf 2006). Frequent participation in religious rituals and activities increased contact among religious people, thus increasing the likelihood of obtaining information about volunteer services and being asked to participate in volunteer services. In addition, people who frequently went to religious places were more willing to participate in volunteer activities than those who did not go often (Becker and Dhingra 2001; Lewis et al. 2013; Paik and Navarre-Jackson 2011; Park and Smith 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Secondly, there was a close connection between social resources (social networks) and volunteer activities, and social networks promoted immigrant volunteer activities. The analysis of this study showed that the social networks of immigrants, regardless of whether they were formed before or after migration, helped promote their volunteer activities in China. Specifically, if immigrants frequently participated in various community activities in their home country before migration, they were more likely to be enthusiastic about participating in volunteer activities even after coming to China. Those who frequently

participated in their ethnic or interest groups in China were also more enthusiastic about participating in volunteer activities. Immigrants who participated in various social activities or organizations might have two possibilities. First, people who participated in more social activities were more likely to meet more people, thereby expanding their social networks. Previous research had shown that people with wider social networks usually had more social resources and were more likely to participate in social participation activities such as volunteering (Bowman 2004; Rossi 2001; Wilson and Musick 1997). Second, more participation in social activities indicated that they were good at social communication. People who were good at social communication were usually more willing to participate in volunteer activities because volunteering could also meet their social interaction needs (Janoski et al. 1998; Smidt et al. 2008; Robert Wuthnow 2012). In the meantime, outgoing people could make acquaintances with more people and participated in more clubs and organizations; they, in turn, had more opportunities to participate in volunteer activities (Herzog and Morgan 1993).

Additionally, although social discrimination against immigrants in China was not directly related to volunteer activities, it could promote their participation in religious activities in China, and participation in religious activities could significantly promote their volunteer activities. Many previous studies had shown that social networks could provide immigrants with certain social support, including material and spiritual support, especially when immigrants encountered discrimination in the host country. They would seek support from their own ethnic group (Szaflarski and Bauldry 2019; Chuatico and Haan 2020; Zhou et al. 2016). This study revealed that, when immigrants faced social discrimination, they would seek social support from religious organizations, which could provide them with material or spiritual social support. However, at the same time, an unexpected consequence was that they also participated more in volunteer activities, due to the frequent participation of immigrants in religious and other activities and the influence of religious indoctrination or practice mechanisms.

4.1.2. Mechanism of Religion and Social Resources

The influence of religion, social resources, and social discrimination on volunteer activities might be attributed to several different mechanisms. Behind the influence of religious beliefs on volunteer activities lied the role of religious indoctrination. Religious doctrines typically conveyed values of altruism and concern for others, emphasizing the importance of helping others and those in need. Individuals with religious beliefs were more likely to internalize these behavioral norms, thus increasing their likelihood of becoming volunteers. Engaging in volunteer activities was the most prominent manifestation of internalizing and adhering to these principles.

The promotion of religious participation by social capital revealed the practical mechanism of how religion influences volunteer activities. In religious practices, the religious network emphasized the role of social connections among religious individuals. People who regularly participated in religious ceremonies and activities increased their contacts with fellow religious individuals, gaining more information and appeals related to volunteer services, as well as inspiration and group pressure from the religious community. As a result, they were more likely to participate in volunteer activities frequently (Ruiter and De Graaf 2006).

Why did people with larger social networks tended to have higher levels of social participation? Researchers in social capital have found that individuals who were more involved in social networks were seen as capable of developing more civic skills, enhancing a sense of political efficacy and general trust, and encouraging civic spirit, volunteerism, and other forms of civic engagement. On the one hand, an individual's social network status influenced their mobilization and utilization of social information and resources. Being in a central position within a social network provided access to a greater amount of information and interpersonal pathways, as well as more channels to connect with others within the network. This advantage of network centrality might increase an individual's

sense of autonomous participation and strengthen their confidence in self-control and autonomy, leading to a higher degree of reliance placed on them by others. On the other hand, social networks facilitated trust and solidarity within organizations, leading to shared expectations and social cohesion, which in turn generated a sense of collective efficacy. As a result, members within the network increased their emotional dependence on the organization, thereby promoting frequent participation in civic activities.

Social networks, rather than beliefs, dominated as the primary mechanism leading to volunteer service, and it was the social networks formed within congregations that made congregational members more likely to volunteer. Putnam and Campbell demonstrated that individuals closely connected to religious networks were more likely to increase their level of civic engagement, while those with fewer connections to religious networks exhibited lower levels of civic participation (Putnam and Campbell 2010).

It should be noted that, in Western societies like the United States, there has been a trend of secularization in recent decades, with the declining influence of religion in people's lives. Furthermore, as the influence of religion weakened, the participation rate in volunteer activities actually increased, with the proportion of non-church members among volunteers multiplying. Although scholars have focused on the spillover effect of religion, which suggested that individuals participating in church activities could bring friends who did not participate in religious activities into volunteer activities, and have pointed out that contemporary religion still played a strong role in promoting volunteer participation even as the number of religious organization members decreased, the impact of religious participation on volunteer participation has weakened significantly compared to the past (Lim and MacGregor 2012).

In China, as a society with relatively low religiousness and high secularism, we could observe that, although different types of religious beliefs had different influences on volunteer activities, the presence or absence of religious beliefs did not bring about substantial differences in volunteer activities. Theoretically, in a society with a high degree of secularization, the participation of immigrant volunteers might be influenced by both the religious influences in their home country and the influences in the host country. However, the results of this study showed that deeply ingrained religious values and behaviors among immigrants might not shift with changes in their place of residence or living.

The conclusion of this study once again confirmed that both religious beliefs and religious practices significantly influenced the volunteer participation of international immigrants in China. It also contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between perceived discrimination among international immigrants in the Chinese context, religious practices, and social resources, as well as the mechanisms of how their interactions affected volunteer participation. The study revealed that, while perceived discrimination among international immigrants did not directly influence volunteer participation, it did encourage them to engage in religious activities to establish social networks for support, thereby enriching their social resources and, subsequently, promoting volunteer participation.

This study also had some limitations: certain variables such as the measurement of volunteer activities and religious activities were overly general and need further refinement in future research. Additionally, due to policy and practical constraints, the data used in this study were derived from a single typical city in China. If larger-scale survey data could be obtained in the future, this would not only contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the social integration of international immigrants in China, but also facilitated international comparisons, thereby revealing unique behavioral characteristics and integration mechanisms of international immigrants in Chinese society.

4.2. Conclusions

Based on an analysis of survey data from foreigners in Yiwu, China, it was found that the types of religious beliefs and the frequency of participation in religious meetings significantly influenced immigrants' volunteering. Furthermore, there was a strong connection

between social resources (social capital/social networks) and volunteer activities—social networks facilitated immigrant volunteer activities. Additionally, although social discrimination against immigrants in China was not directly related to volunteer activities, it could promote immigrant participation in religious activities in China. In turn, participation in religious activities significantly promoted their volunteer participation.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/rel14101262/s1>, Table S1: Countries of origin for international immigrants; Table S2: Regions of origin for international immigrants.

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