

國學院大學學術情報リポジトリ

Globalizations and Religious Cultures in East Asia : East Asian regional preliminary workshop for SISR 2017

メタデータ	言語: English 出版者: 公開日: 2025-04-30 キーワード (Ja): 宗教史. 各国の宗教, NDC8:162.2 キーワード (En): 作成者: 國學院大學研究開発推進機構日本文化研究所 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.57529/0002001622

Localism and Christianity After Umbrella Movement: Growth of ‘Localist’ Churches in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Almost two decades after the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997, there has been a growing level of mistrust of the government and worry about the interference from the Chinese government. Movements advocating for higher autonomy and a ‘local Hong Kong identity’ have been developing rapidly. The Umbrella Movement (a series of sit-in street protests that occurred in Hong Kong 2014) and the flourishing of localist groups are some good examples of rising local consciousness. Localism has also spread in Christianity, with increasing number of the so-called ‘localist churches’ formed in recent years, such as Slow Church and the Ekklesia Hong Kong. These churches are composed of members who are politically active and concerned about the benefits of the local. They are highly spectacular in protests and on media, advocating their vision for a more autonomic and a ‘China-free’ Hong Kong society. This paper explores the rise of localism in Hong Kong and the role of Christianity in the recent localism movement using Slow Church as an example. I argue Slow Church intends to distinguish themselves from traditional churches by building a politically active and pro-local image. It also represents a form of localism movement growing within Hong Kong’s Christian community that aims to challenge the conservative and politically-apathetic mainstream churches.

Introduction

Twenty years have passed since the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997. Under the principle of ‘one country, two systems’, Hong Kong continues to have its own political, legal, economic systems. However, a number of incidents that happened after 1997 seem to have undermined the high degree of autonomy of Hong Kong and the benefits of the local people. For instance, the latest Chinese government’s interpretation of the Basic Law of Hong Kong over two ‘localist’ lawmakers’ swearing-in oath in 2016 is seen as an intervention into Hong Kong’s legal system (SCMP 2016). Another frequently used example is the social impacts brought by the Individual Visit Scheme, which allowed travelers from Mainland China to visit Hong Kong on an individual basis (SCMP 2014). The Umbrella Movement or the Occupy Central in 2014 also represents public resistance against PRC’s tightening control over the political reform and democratization in Hong Kong.

Many local people, especially the younger generation, are concerned over China’s growing influence and the future of Hong Kong after 2047, which is the year that marks the end of the promise that ‘the way of life shall remain unchanged for 50’ stated in the Basic Law. Amid growing concerns over the social and political development of Hong Kong, there has been an acute rise in localism, advocating local benefits and local identity to resist the “Mainlandization” of Hong Kong.

Against this backdrop, this preliminary study attempts to explore the recent rise of localism in Hong Kong from the perspective of religion. Through a case study of a “localist” church called Slow Church, I study how Christian communities, which have long played an important role in the social development of Hong Kong society, have reacted to the rising localism in Hong Kong. In particular, I argue that Slow Church intends to distinguish themselves from traditional churches by building a politically active and pro-local image. It also represents a localism movement growing within Hong Kong’s Christian community that poses challenges to the conservative and politically-apathetic mainstream churches. Given that this is only a preliminary study, the analysis is conducted based on materials gathered from the internet, such as homepage and Facebook of Slow Church, articles written by members of Slow Church, and other resources such as news articles.

Rising Localism in Hong Kong

Localism is not a new phenomenon in Hong Kong’s history. According to Law (2014), localism in Hong Kong can be divided into three waves. The first wave refers to 1960s to 70s when Hong Kong experienced rapid social and economic development. Baby boomers at that time play a major part in the formation of local identity (Lui 2007). Different from their parents, they were born and raised in Hong Kong and have a strong sense of belonging. Local movements were mainly in the form of student movements consisting of some liberal, Chinese nationalist, and anti-colonialist elements. The Chinese Language Movement (that made Chinese to become the official language of Hong Kong along with English), the anti-corruption movement, and defense of the Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Island) movement are representative examples of this first wave of

localism emerged in Hong Kong.

The second wave of localism occurred in the late 1980s to 90s when sparked by the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre (known as the June Fourth Incident in China). When the student-led demonstration was suppressed by the Communist government, causing hundreds to thousands of civilian deaths, 1.5 million Hong Kong citizens took to the street to show their support to students and condemn the Communist government. China's "uncivilized" crackdown of democracy protest made Hong Kong people realize the huge difference between Mainland China and Hong Kong. To contrast between the two systems and to highlight the distinctive features of Hong Kong have become the accent of the second wave of Hong Kong's localism. Local cultures strongly emphasized the cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong as an international city, a diverse civil society, civic education, press and academic freedoms, which are elements that were not available in Communist China.

The third wave of localism has gained its momentum since the mid-2000s when growing Chinese influence on the political, economic, and social life of Hong Kong has forced the local to reconsider their own identity. For instance, the protests organized by local communities against the demolition of the Edinburgh Place Ferry Pier in 2006 and Queens' Pier in 2008 were regarded as important civil movements to protect Hong Kong's history and identity against government's decolonization process. The civil discontent occurred in 2009 and 2010 against the construction of the Guangzhou–Hong Kong high-speed rail (a high-speed railway that would link Hong Kong with mainland China's growing high-speed rail network) also highlighted similar notions. Worries over the blurring of the Hong Kong–Mainland border as a result of connecting Hong Kong to the Mainland rail system, along with other concerns, such as cost, noise pollution, customs and border control complications, and environmental damage to local communities are the main reasons for opposition.

In addition to the demolition of colonial legacy and construction projects fusing Hong Kong and Mainland China, Hong Kong's immigration policy is also an important aspect linked to rising localism in Hong Kong. Since the start of the Individual Visit Scheme in 2003, travelers from Mainland China have been allowed to visit Hong Kong on an individual basis. While it has brought about economic benefits to Hong Kong, the increase of tourists has also caused a great disturbance (e.g. bad manners, 'explosive shopping'¹) to the daily life of local residents. Anti-Chinese sentiment among local Hong Kong people has intensified. Furthermore, under the Hong Kong's Immigration Department's "Quality Migrant Admission Scheme" (QMAS), "Capital Investment Entrant Scheme" (CIES), an "Entry for Employment as Professionals" scheme (EEPS) and an "Employment of Non-Local Students" scheme (ENLS), there is a gradual increase of high-skilled

¹ Known as bakugai in Japanese. Used by the Japanese media to describe the shopping spree carried out by Chinese tourists traveling to Japan. For more details, see <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/08/22/business/chinese-tourism-surge-continues-but-explosive-shopping-shifting-to-cosmetics-supplements/>

Mainland migrants in Hong Kong's labor market. The link between Mainland migrants and growing social inequality in Hong Kong has helped fuel growing localism, intra-ethnic distinction, and discrimination (Nagy 2015).

In 2014, the Umbrella Movement (or sometimes called Occupy Central), a series of sit-in protests fighting for the universal suffrage of the Chief Executive (CE) without pre-screening by the Chinese government, broke out and last for 79 days. Chinese government inaction to respond to the local demand for democracy and tightening control over Hong Kong political and legal system (disqualify lawmakers who were elected democratically) further exacerbated the growth of anti-Chinese localism already taking root in Hong Kong society.

In fact, according to the Public Opinion Program (1997-2016) run by the University of Hong Kong, there has been a rise of anti-Chinese sentiment in Hong Kong since its handover in 1997. In the question 'are you pound of formally becoming a national citizen of China after the 1997 Handover?', people who answered 'no' has increased from 45.7% in 1997 to 64.8% in 2016. In recent years, there is a flourishing of localist groups in Hong Kong advocating higher autonomy and local benefits. Some groups show banners and distribute leaflets in the busy areas of Hong Kong and university campus, and hold gatherings and protests in the key shopping districts where Chinese tourist usually visit, advocating their vision of 'Hong Kong's independence'. Some groups even took part in the elections for Legislative Council, trying to bring the localist voices into Hong Kong's parliament. The rise of localism is, therefore, an important topic to understand the political and social development of Hong Kong and the changing Mainland-Hong Kong relationships.

Localism and Hong Kong's Christian Community

Christianity appears to have a long history of political participations in Hong Kong. Christian-affiliated social groups and leaders have been active and vocal in movements advocating democracy, equality, and social justices (e.g. Butenhoff 1999, Pavey 2011). Christian members also had a strong presence in the 'July 1st Protest' in 2003 and 'Umbrella Movement' in 2014, the two largest political movements seen in Hong Kong since the 1997 handover. In particular, 'Christianity has been a visible element of the demonstrations' in the Umbrella Movement 'with prayer groups, crosses, and protesters reading Bibles in the street' (Levin 2014).

Despite the fact that Christian groups in Hong Kong have been engaged in political and social development in the past decades, most of them have adopted a conservative or even a critical approach to the rising localism, for the narratives in the recent movement that highlights "anti-China" and "Hong Kong first" seem to be in big contradiction with the teachings of an all-loving god. For instance, in his Archbishop's Christmas Message 2013 for the Hong Kong Anglican Church, Paul Kwong criticized the localism movement that causes "discrimination, xenophobia and a "Hongkonger first" attitude" (Kwong 2013). He says:

Some politicians, with an eye on votes only, incite a kind of vernacularism by calling for

restricting and reducing the quota of immigrants from the Mainland. Such views, which stand in opposition to family-reunion, are not in line with basic human rights and justice. The claim of the mother of a missing baby that the baby was kidnapped by a woman with a “mainland accent” was hyped up by some mass media to give people the wrong impression that all criminals were from the Mainland. The purpose of such labeling is to create conflict between Hong Kong people and brothers and sisters from the Mainland resulting in alienation and division (Kwong 2013).

Nevertheless, there is still a sign of rising localism within Hong Kong’s Christian community. This can be seen from the recent formation of Slow Church, a small group of Christians committed to promoting localism. In his study of the Protestant community and Umbrella Movement, Chan S. H. (2015) argues the significance of the development of Slow Church:

After the occupation in Mong Kok, some Protestants became members of the Slow Church, while others connected with the church through Facebook. These Protestants endeavored to continue their faith and action together. As such, they represent a rising new generation of young progressive Protestants in Hong Kong who have committed themselves to democratization and social change in the years to come (Chan S. H. 2015: 392).

For this reason, the rise of localism movement and local church (e.g. Slow Church) is an important key to understanding Hong Kong’s Christian community and political and social changes. In the following, I introduce how Slow Church has developed in the context of rising localism in Hong Kong society. I then discuss the “localist characteristics” of the Slow Church, and suggest the significance of understanding the recent development of Christianity and Hong Kong society through this group of “Christian minority”.

Slow Church

The development of Slow Church can be traced back to 2012. It began as a small Bible study group in 2012 and evolved into a church group after the Umbrella Movement in 2014. The Church introduces themselves on Facebook in this way:

In 2012, a group of people who knew each other on the internet started to organize a Bible study group. Until 2014, we came up an idea: “why don’t we really open a church by ourselves?” And then we started our first worship on 7 Sept 2014. On 28 Sept 2014, the Umbrella Revolution broke out. We ask ourselves “how could we just sit inside a church and do nothing?” Then we decided to take to the street. During the revolution, we organized worship and prayer in a small church temporarily built in the occupied area in

Mong Kok. After the revolution, we rent an office in a commercial building in Mong Kok for gathering until today. (Slow Church's Facebook, translated by the author)

The preacher of Slow Church is Wong King Yip (in his 30s), who is also known as Chan Do among other members. Wong has been active in social movements and vocal on political issues through writing on media platforms, such as VJ Media (輔仁媒體), Passion Times (熱血時報) and his personal Facebook. He is also a member of the political party Civic Passion (熱血公民), which is widely regarded as a radical and localist group in Hong Kong by the conservative parties. The Church currently rents a space in Mong Kok and expenses (rent, utility, inviting guest speakers etc.) are covered by donations from members. The church has nowadays around 20 active members and aims at recruiting at most 100 people in the future.

In terms of belief, Slow Church is similar to mainstream Protestantism, believing in the Holy Bible and three creeds (Apostles' Creed, The Nicene Creed, The Athanasian Creed). They call themselves Slow Church to uphold the idea of 'slowness' and to criticize the business-like nature of mainstream churches in Hong Kong:

Churches in Hong Kong are too "McDonaldized", emphasizing too much on developments and too business-like. We advocate slowness. Slowness is to lower our speed, everyone should grow according to his/her own pace, no matter quick or slow. There is no intensive three-year disciple training course, no one will urge you to baptize, and no one will ask why you do not go to church. (Slow Church's Facebook, translated by the author)

As a church committed to promoting local identity and benefits, Slow Church can be characterized in five ways: (1) Critical of Hong Kong's government, (2) anti-Mainland Chinese, (3) radical (compared to Mainstream church), (4) recruitment strategy that emphasizes their difference from mainstream churches, and (5) responsive to local issues. The following discusses these features in more details.

1. Critical of government

Slow Church is highly critical of the Hong Kong government. Leaders frequently comment on policies and social issues and criticize the Hong Kong government and officials for betraying the benefits of Hong Kong people by submitting themselves to the Mainland Chinese government. For instance, Pastor Chan has been an active writer for the media platform VJ Media and Passion Times, which are famous for their strong positions for an equal and democratic society and against capitalist and bureaucrats. In an article called "A theory of cursing", he criticizes that government misbehaviors have already aroused "the great indignation of both men and gods", and urges God to "give divine punishment because there is no justice on earth" (Chan 2016b).

In addition to social critique, in most of Slow Church's promotional materials, the church usually portrays the authority as an enemy to Christ. For instance, in one of their posters for Bible studies class, the title "Gospel of Luke: declaration of war to the authority" is used, with an image showing two men seemingly to be Christ on the right and a demon on the left arm-wrestling with each other, and a caption below: "you want war then we'll give you a fucking war!" (see Slow Church's Facebook). Undoubtedly, "declaring war" on the authority is merely metaphoric, but demonizing the government that has to be fought with expresses the church's strong criticism against the government. The underlying message of such propaganda is clear: all Christians should come together with Christ to stand against the government (the demon).

2. Anti-Mainland Chinese

Slow Church has a strong color of anti-Mainland Chinese. A series of four posters on their Facebook provides the best references. With a loving image of God on the first page comes with a rather contradictive phrase "God loves everyone but also hates a sinful Mainland China". It is then followed by many examples of "sins" committed by Mainland Chinese on the second page, such as "corrupt officials", "uncivilized behavior", "suppression of freedom of speech", "destruction of Cross" and the like. The third page shows a picture of the 2015 Tianjin explosions that killed 173 people and injured hundreds of others with a caption "Look! The judgment day has come! No one can escape!" It then states the importance of "repent, confess, and act justly". The last page urges Mainland Chinese people (1) not to come to Hong Kong, (2) not to believe in Communist Party but in God, (3) to confess one's sins and repent, (4) to urge others not to come to Hong Kong, and (5) read the Bible and pray. A reminder is also added at the bottom: "If you do not repent, you too will experience a horrible end just like the Chinese Communist Party."

The contents of the posters may look offensive and are in many ways against the teachings of a loving God. However, Pastor Chan explains how such an anti-Chinese sentiment can be compatible with the Bible in his article titled "Spreading the gospel to locust in the world" (this title is also considered offensive as it equates Mainland Chinese to locust). Chan argues:

Popular gospel nowadays is always about "Jesus loves you and blesses you." However, what Jesus says in the very beginning is "repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near"...I made some posters, talking about how God loves people but also hates the sinful China, like corruption, destroying the environment, suppressing freedom, and the like...China is really the 'hell' in reality...all people should be responsible for these sins when the final judgment comes...If Mainland Chinese want salvation, they should repent and confess, and cultivate their faith. This is the gospel in a true sense...I warn them of God's judgment and suggest what they should do...This is the responsibility of being a Christian. (Chan D. 2015, translated by the author)

From the above, we can understand the anti-Mainland Chinese position of Slow Church seem to have formed as a result of some kind of theological reflections. Their “understanding” of Mainland China and the actions of Chinese people, which are sinful in their eyes, is the origin of such sentiment. They believe that such “sins” have to be condemned by taking an anti-Mainland Chinese position, in order to “help” these “sinful men” realize their own wrongdoings and confess, and be saved eventually.

3. More radical compared to mainstream churches

Slow Church criticizes mainstream churches in Hong Kong for being trapped in the “PRNN” ideology, which stands for peace, rational, non-violence, and non-profanity. The Christian community has a history of engaging in social and political movements in Hong Kong, but most of them are in the form of peaceful gathering, non-violent protest, or civil disobedience. It is because the majority of Hong Kong Christians considered PRNN as the guiding principles for civic movements according to biblical teaching. In contrast, Slow Church argues the use of force is acceptable in some circumstances. For example, the church organizes martial arts classes for its members for a number of purposes:

Whether it is for promoting physical health, or for fighting against the corrupt police force or for Hong Kong independence, it would be advantageous to learn *Kung-fu* (martial arts). Come on, our church is probably the only church in Hong Kong that provides “training for activists”. We have “mass training” every Wednesday (730-830) in Kun Tong, focusing on developing both stamina and technique. We have a master as the instructor, and students will be able to practice together. (Slow Church’s Facebook, translated by the author)

The church offers martial arts training for their members so that they can protect themselves and be more effective when confronting police during protests. Moreover, the promotional poster for the martial arts class displays a crucified, muscular Jesus breaking the cross, and a caption “train hard every day”. Such an image of Jesus Christ is quite different from the more common, companionate and victimized one. The “macho Jesus” is used in the poster instead of the more common one to indicate the importance of physical strength for fighting against injustice.

In short, Slow Church does not actively promote the use of force, but a certain degree of it seems to be acceptable when dealing with injustice as a last resort, as Chan writes in another article:

Protecting homeland, bringing order out of chaos is justice in itself. I urge members of the God’s family to become strong and unite with all Hong Kong people and fight together (Chan 2016a, translated by the author).

4. Recruitment strategy emphasizing uniqueness

Slow Church recruits members by highlighting their differences from mainline churches. This is achieved by (1) criticizing the weakness of other churches and by (2) emphasizing the special role members are given after joining Slow Church.

Slow Church has been critical of other churches since the first day of its establishment. The church is formed by Christians who were not happy with their previous churches and quitted. Due to such background, the membership of Slow Church is highly critical of the mainstream Christian community, and a recruitment strategy that purposely highlights their differences from mainline churches has also been developed. For example, the promotional materials of Slow Church often criticize the teachings of other churches. One of the posters for their discipleship training course writes:

This course is not for members of Slow Church, but for people outside of Slow Church. To unlearn the *stupid things* you learned in the past, and to start from zero, strength your foundation and return to the *right track*. (Slow Church's Facebook, translated by the author; author's italic)

Slow Church criticizes mainstream churches for teaching their members only stupid things. The course also has a very symbolic title called "Sword of exorcising devil", which implies the knowledge that members learned from other churches are evil that need to be exorcised. They also claim that members can learn the "orthodox" of Christian teachings by taking the course (i.e. return to the right track) and such knowledge is an important weapon to stand against injustice.

Apart from being critical of other churches, Slow Church has also promoted itself by emphasizing the special meaning of joining their church: to become "a special force of Christianity". The following is a passage from their Facebook:

If churches are the army of Christianity, then I would say mainstream churches are the regular forces, and Slow Church is a special force.... We are recruiting 100 people...Try to imagine, we are like 100 *Avengers*, not 100 Stormtroopers!...If you are still a believer of god, looking for a community of faith...we welcome you to join us. But please be prepared, Slow Church is walking at the *margins*. We are very different from the mainstream churches. (Slow Church's Facebook, author's italic; translated by the author)

Slow Church believes their members are different from the majority of Christian because they play a special role (i.e. Avengers) for Christianity. While mainstream churches do not "take local issues seriously", Slow Church's members are committed to building a church for local people, responding to local issues, and not submitting themselves to government authority and standing by the weak (Slow Church's Facebook). This "special" mission makes them feel marginalized in

Hong Kong Christian communities, but they believe only themselves, as “a special force for Christianity”, are capable of achieving such goal. This sense of being endowed with a special mission (i.e. to serve the local people) is attractive to those who want to contribute to Hong Kong society and are seeking a sense of purpose.

(5) Responding to local issues

Slow Church is committed to serving the local people regardless of their relatively small membership. Charitable activities organized by Slow Church include distributing used clothes collected from the public to the needy, such as the homeless and poor, visiting homeless shelter, especially on cold winter days. As some members are also supporters of local political groups, they participate in their activities on an individual basis. As the church is expanding its membership, they might be able to organize more social programs for the local in the future.

Slow Church is still at an early developmental stage. In the context of rising localism, it has a high potential to grow by attracting Christians who are tired of the socio-moral conservatism of mainline churches. In fact, many of the promotional strategies used by Slow Church show that they intend to target this group of potential recruits. However, although they appear to be critical of mainline churches and government, and have a strong anti-Chinese sentiment in terms of ideologies, they are far from being radical in terms of the actions they have taken so far. It is interesting to see how they will apply such pro-local and anti-Chinese ideologies to social actions in the near future.

Conclusion

Localism movement prioritizes the local history, culture, and identity, which usually arises as a result of globalization and growing external influence, which have a negative influence on the livelihood of the local. Hong Kong has experienced at least three waves of localism in the past and a new one is emerging when the Chinese government is tightening its control over Hong Kong’s issues. The rise of “localist church”, such as Slow Church, can be seen as a form of localism movement growing within Hong Kong’s Christian communities, whose narratives specifically focus on anti-Chinese influence, pro-local benefits, and is critical of the mainstream churches that chose to remain “political apathetic” and “obsessed with spiritual faith” even in a rapidly “Mainlandizing” Hong Kong society. When the PRNN (i.e. peaceful, rational, non-violent, and non-profane) approach adopted by church groups in civil movements has failed to help promote democratization in Hong Kong and protect the local against rising Chinese influences, localist Christian groups (e.g. Slow Church) that advocate localism and are more tolerant of a non-PRNN approach towards civic movement began to gain popularity among those dissatisfied Christians.

The development of Localist churches is significant in at least two ways. First, they can become an alternative choice for Christians, especially for those who are not happy with their churches in terms of political stances. Mainstream churches may, therefore, need to respond to these

new competitors if they want to maintain their membership. Whether they choose to resist the spread of localism ideologies to their members, or to embrace localism, making such decision requires careful organizational and theological reflections, and may have long-term effects on church development. Second, the ideas advocated by localist churches may be absorbed, digested by members of mainline churches in the long term. The spread of localism may cause internal and/or substantial changes in the culture of mainstream churches, promoting the political participation and localism movement of Hong Kong Christian on the whole.

This study shows the development of Slow Church as a form of localism movement growing within Hong Kong's Christian community, but many important questions remain unanswered given the preliminary nature of this study. For example, can such localism movement sustain? What is the influence of such movement on Hong Kong society and on mainstream churches? What are the reactions of mainstream churches to such movement so far? For further studies, interview with members of Slow Church and other localist churches, and mainstream churches should be conducted. The development of localism movement in Hong Kong should also be examined from a wider range of perspectives, such as national identity, value orientation, and political participation. This approach will provide a new perspective for understanding Christianity and political and social changes in Hong Kong as well as in Mainland China.

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