

Changing Church-state Relations in Colonial and Post-colonial Hong Kong

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Abstract : The transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China in 1997 marked the end of Britain colonial rule and the establishment of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). While the handover is widely considered a watershed in the political and social development of Hong Kong, there has been little research on its effects on religious lives. From the perspective of church-state relations, I argue how the British Hong Kong government and Hong Kong SAR government have adopted different approaches towards religions and how they can be understood in the larger contexts of colonization and decolonization experienced by Hong Kong before and after its handover. I argue that church-state relations in Hong Kong have changed over the past decade, presenting some challenges to Christianity on the one hand and opportunities for the growth of Buddhism, Taoism, and other folk religions on the other.

Introduction

On 1 July 1997, the British colonial-era flag was brought down, and the HKSAR flag hoisted all over Hong Kong, symbolizing the transition of Hong Kong from a colony under British rule for over 150 years to a Special Administrative Region under Chinese sovereignty. Chinese leaders are highly concerned about the resumption of sovereignty, but they have also shown willingness to maintain the stability of social and political lives and a capitalistic economic system in Hong Kong. Under the “one country, two systems” policy advocated by Deng Xiaoping, Hong Kong maintains a high degree of autonomy and enjoys its executive, legislative, and independent judicial power. Hong Kong “would be allowed to keep their very different social systems in place for half a century or even longer” (Vogel, 2011: 478) and “would remain a free port and a global financial center” (495).

The handover of Hong Kong has attracted a lot of scholarly attention, especially in the areas of politics (e.g., Li, 2001) and law and governance (e.g., Scott,

1998). Most of these studies suggested the increasing interplay between Hong Kong and Mainland China in economic exchanges and political interactions and the growing Mainland Chinese influence on Hong Kong.

In fact, the effects of handover are not just political, economic, or cultural. Religion is also one of the areas on which the transfer of sovereignty exerts its influence. To explore this topic, this preliminary study focuses on two questions: first, what religious policies were upheld by the colonial government and how have they changed since the handover in 1997? Second, how have such religious policies affected the development of religion and church-state relations in Hong Kong?

In this paper, I first introduce the long-lasting secularization debate and the recent religious economy theory. Through discussing the relationships between religious vitality and political liberalization experienced by most East Asian societies in the past decades, such as Japan, Mainland China, and Taiwan, I argue how Hong Kong, whose sovereignty has transformed from a liberal to communist state, may serve as an interesting counter example to most East Asian countries. From the perspective of church-state relations, I argue how the British Hong Kong government and Hong Kong SAR government have adopted different approaches towards different religions and how they can be understood in the larger contexts of colonization and decolonization experienced by Hong Kong before and after its handover. The main idea of this paper is that the transfer of sovereignty and a decolonization agenda upheld by the HKSAR government have changed the church-state relations in Hong Kong, gradually posing challenges to the status of Christianity and favored the development of Buddhism, Taoism, and other folk religions.

Methodology

The first issue concerned in this study is the changes in religious policies in Hong Kong before and after the handover. In this regard, government documents, such as the *Hong Kong Letters Patent* (the constitutional instruments of Hong Kong under British rule), *the Basic Law of Hong Kong* (the current constitution enacted after 1st July 1997), and *Hong Kong Factsheets*, are relevant materials for analysis. Also, since the effects of educational and cultural policies on the development of religion are significant, policy changes in these two areas are also con-

cerned in this study. Through examining the policies and “attitudes” towards various religions adopted differently by the two governments, I look at how the colonization and decolonization processes may serve as significant forces in transforming church-state relations in Hong Kong.

The (De)-secularization Debate and the Revival of Religion in East Asia

In the nineteenth century, the ‘death of religion’ was the conventional wisdom in the social sciences. The secularization theory argues that the world religion would gradually fade with the advent of industrial society:

Once the world was filled with the sacred — in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm (Mills 1959: 32-33).

Dobbelaere (2002) further argued that religion is losing its influences in society at three different levels. (1) Individual secularization (*micro*) is manifested in the decline of church commitment and privatization of beliefs and practices. (2) Organizational secularization (*meso*) refers to any attempt to secularize or modernize the teachings of the Church in order to adapt to the secular values of society. (3) Societal secularization (*macro*) refers to religious authorities of institutionalized religion losing control over other sub-systems, like polity, economy, family, education, law, and the like.

In recent decades, however, secularization theory experiences a reinterpretation in social sciences. Many scholars criticize that the theory fails to explain, for example, ‘the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States, the emergence of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs’ (Inglehart & Norris 2004). Berger (1999), an advocate of the secularization thesis in the 1970s, also admitted to his own miscalculations and concluded that the resurgence of religiosity can be widely observed in the mod-

ernized world. Similarly, Stark (1999) argued that no recent religious changes in Christianity are consistent with the secularization thesis. He even argued that 'it is time to consign secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories' (1999: 270). Moving beyond the secularization debate, many scholars are increasingly paying attention to how deregulation of religious markets may increase religious activity through increasing the supply of religious goods (Stark, 1999; Iannaccone, 1997). Some even turn their eyes to East Asia to look for interesting insights.

Japan, for example, experienced a revival of religion after the World War Two along with democratization, demilitarization, and the breakdown of State Shintoism. This period is known as *kamigami no rasshu awa*, the "rush hour of the gods" (McFarland, 1967). According to Nakano (1987: 131), 403 new religious groups were being founded by 1949, and 1,546 other groups established independence when compared to 13 Shinto sects, 28 Buddhist denominations, and two Christian groups. Membership in non-traditional religions rose from about 2 million in the early 20th century to over 21 million in 1975 (Barrett, 1982: 419 – 420). Political transitions provide opportunities for Japanese religions to restructure themselves under the new systems in the new settings.



Fig. 1 Map of East Asia (Google map)

Taiwan has also experienced similar transition. Following its defeat in the Civic War and retreat to Taiwan, the authoritarian Kuomintang (Chinese Nation-

alist Party) strengthened its rule in all aspects of Taiwanese society including religion. Buddhist and Taoist groups were required to register with the state. Religious groups that used to have strong ties with Mainland China, such as Yiguan Dao, were strictly prohibited. The government struggled to eradicate all communist influences and prevent communist spies intervening in Taiwan in the disguise of religion. In the 60s – 80s, Taiwan experienced rapid economic development and peaceful democratization. Political liberalization has also led to liberalization of the religious environment in Taiwan. After the end of martial law in 1987, the number of religious groups and believers has increased exponentially (see Chiu, 1996; Katz, 2003). The rapid revival and flourishing of religion in Taiwan is a result of the liberalization of religious policy (Lu, Johnson, and Stark, 2008).

The People's Republic of China is also a case worth discussing. In the early Communist rule of China, religions were against the atheist ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and therefore strictly prohibited. Believers were forced to renounce their beliefs; people who refused to do so were sent to jail or even executed. Practicing foreign religions was regarded as colluding with foreign forces and espousing capitalistic ideology. The Communist attack on popular religion was especially high during the periods of land reform (1950 – 1954) and collectivization (1954 – 1979) for it “reinforced traditional social alignments by emphasizing community solidarity and autonomy” (Cohen, 1992: 29), values the Communists wished to replace with class consciousness and the integration of collectivized communities into a socialist economy and polity. Since the 1980s, the loosening of control over religion after the economic reform has opened up more space for both religious demand and supply to grow. For example, official statistics show that from 1956 to 2009, the numbers of Catholics and Protestant have increased from 2.7 to 5.3 million and 0.7 to 16 million respectively. The numbers of clergies and religious facilities have also increased steadily (Yang 2012: 93 – 5). Along with the deregulation of state control, the religious market has also become more pluralistic, and supply of “religious goods” continues to grow. The long-suppressed religious sentiment is looking for a vent to release. Such religious revival is also catalyzed by the rapid economic reforms in China, where many Chinese people have struggled in “the wild market with existential anxieties” and begun to seek “peace, security, and meaning in religion” (Yang, 2005: 432).

From the above, we see that Japan, Taiwan, and the Mainland China have ex-

perienced an increased level of freedom and vitality in their religious markets which is partly brought by liberalization of their political systems and economic policies in the past decades. However, Hong Kong appears to be an exception in this “trend” of political and religious liberalization witnessed in most East Asian societies. Hong Kong has experienced its sovereignty transferred from a liberal state to a communist state since 1997. Instead of moving from authoritative rule to democratization or liberalization in regime, Hong Kong is actually experiencing “de-colonization” in a way different from former colonies, such as India and most African countries, which gained independence after the end of World War Two. Instead, it is transforming itself from a British Colony to a Special Administrative Region of China. Such political transition is rare in contemporary history (Macau is another interesting example). By considering religion in Hong Kong during the colonization and decolonization period, this paper may offer a counter-example to existing studies that primarily focus on the positive effects brought by political liberalization on religion.

In short, there are at least two important reasons for using Hong Kong as a case study. Firstly, the sovereignty of Hong Kong is transferred from a liberal state to a communist state. In this sense, Hong Kong represents an interesting counter-example in the existing studies of religion in East Asia which tend to emphasize the positive influence of political liberalization on religious vitality. Secondly, considering the historical background of Hong Kong, the idea of political liberalization is not very useful in explaining changes in the dynamics of religion in Hong Kong. Instead, it is the colonization and decolonization process that have played a significant role in shaping church-state religion and religious life in Hong Kong. Therefore, religion in Hong Kong has to be understood in the larger contexts of colonization and decolonization experienced by Hong Kong before and after its handover.

Changing Religious Demographics of Hong Kong

Religion has a strong presence in Hong Kong society. As a hub of Chinese and Western cultures, a large variety of religion has flourished in this multicultural society. Both local Chinese religions and Christianity have a strong influence in the life of Hong Kong people. One can easily find Buddhist temples, Taoist shrines,

San-jiao temples (mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism), and Christian churches, as well as social and welfare facilities operated by religious groups in every part of Hong Kong. Among the most popular religions are Buddhism and Taoism, followed by Christianity, including Catholic and Protestant churches.

Table 1. Major Religions in Hong Kong (1997 – 2016)

Religion	1997		2002		2007		2012		2016	
	Size	Facilities	Size	Facilities	Size	Facilities	Size	Facilities	Size	Facilities
Buddhist	A large local	>600 temples	A large local	>600 temples	> one million	>400 temples	around one million	over 400 temples	> one million	hundreds of organizations
Taoist	A large local		A large local		About one million	>300 temples	>one million	>300 temples	>one million followers	>300 temples
Protestant	300,000 (4.62%)	1,300 congregations	300,000 (4.45%)	1,300 congregations	320,000 (4.63%)	1,400 congregations	480,000 (6.71%)	1,450 congregations	480,000 (6.51%)	1,450 congregations
Catholic	242,500 (3.74%)	60 parishes	230,000 (3.41%)	54 parishes	246,000 (3.57%)	53 parishes	363,000 (5.07%)	51 parishes	379,000 (5.14%)	52 parishes
HK Total Population	6,489,300		6,744,100		6,916,300		7,154,600		7,377,100	

Source: *Hong Kong Factsheet*

According to the data published by the Hong Kong government (Table 1), there has been no drastic changes in the religious demographics of Hong Kong since its handover in 1997. Buddhism and Taoism continue to be the majority (around 1 million each) and Christianity remains around 10% of the total population of Hong Kong. The number of religious facilities has not changed significantly either. The slow but gradual growth in religious population also suggests that there has been no negative influence of handover on the general religious participation in Hong Kong, despite the regime has changed from a liberal state to a communist state, which, ideologically speaking, is atheist. Therefore, this trend seems to contradict to the religious-market theory, which argues that political liberalization leads to religious vitality and vice versa. In Hong Kong, political “de-liberalization” has not (yet) caused any decline in religious vitality in terms of *religious population*.

If religious population could not tell us much about the religious changes in Hong Kong, another perspective to make sense of such changes is desperately needed. This preliminary study represents an attempt to examine the religious changes in Hong Kong through the lens of *church-state relationships* during the colonial era and after the handover.

Changing Church-state relations in Hong Kong

Yang (2012) suggests that four forms of church-state relations can be identified in the world: (1) *Eradication of all religion* (e.g., Albania and China under the radical Communists). (2) *Religious monopoly* (e.g., medieval Europe). (3) *Religious oligopoly* (in which several religions are sanctioned whereas others are suppressed). (4) *A free market* (in which no religion is singled out for subsidies or suppression, the operation of religions is regulated at a minimal administrative level.) Borrowing Yang’s typology, religion in Hong Kong appears to be a *free market* both before and after the handover. The policies or philosophies upheld by the two governments, *in its ideal form*, protect religious freedom and ensure fair competition among religious groups. Nevertheless, we should note that, *in practice*, some policies might have actually favored the development of particular religions. This part discusses the tenets of religious policies under the Colonial and HKSAR government and argues how they have shaped church-state relationships in the

two periods differently.

Religion under the Colonial Rule

Hong Kong first became a British colony in 1842 when the Qing Dynasty was defeated in the First Opium War. The Kowloon Peninsula and New Territories were added later after the Second Opium War in 1860 and the signing of the *Second Convention of Peking* in 1898 respectively (Fig. 2). In the early colonial era, the Britain showed respect to local traditions and religious customs. As long ago as 1841, Charles Elliot, the key founder in the establishment of Hong Kong as a British colony, issued a proclamation:

They [Hong Kong people] are hereby promised protection, in her majesty's gracious name, against all enemies whatever; and they are further secured in the free exercise of their religious rites, ceremonies, and social customs; and in the enjoyment of their lawful private property and interests (Bridgman and Williams [1832–1851] 1941: 63 – 4).

In the *Hong Kong Letters Patent 1917 to 1995*, the principal constitutional documents of British Hong Kong, there were no mention of religion or regulations of religious affairs. The British Colonial Government made no attempt to impose any control on religion in the colony or intervene in the religious life of its “inhabitants”. Following this principle, there was no policy at all and no department in the colonial government to regulate religious affairs. The idea of “laissez-faire” was not only applied to economic policies but also to religion, as government control over religion was kept at a minimum. Religious groups were only required to register as legal associations, societies, or limited companies. As long as religious groups complied with the laws, the government would not interfere in their affairs. Since there was literally no law to regulate religion at that time, Kwong (2000: 49) vividly argues that religious freedom was “administratively secured, but not constitutionally protected” in the colonial era.



Fig. 2 Map of Hong Kong (Google map)

It was not until the *Bill of Rights* (1991) was enacted in 1991 that the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion was first officially protected by law in Hong Kong. Article 15 of the Bill states that:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.
4. The liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions shall be respected.

During the colonial era, religious freedom is protected through administra-

tively means (and finally constitutionally since the enactment of the Bill of right in 1991). Every religion was treated equally *in theory*. Nevertheless, some religions was treated “more equal” than others *in practice*. Christianity, in particular, was to a large extent privileged by the government. It could be attributed to that fact that the colonial government and Christian churches share a lot of commonalities in their ideologies, cultures, as well as language. Britain was a Christian country, and the Church of England had a significant role to play in social and political affairs in the United Kingdom. Therefore, the Anglican Church in Hong Kong did share similar rights in the colony. For example, in public ceremonial protocol, the Bishop of Anglican Church was just ranked below the Governor, the Chief Justice, the Chief Secretary, and the Commander-in-Chief (Kwong, 2000).

During the colonization period, Christianity was treated more “friendly” than other religious groups in order to strength British cultural influence on Hong Kong society. Even though Christianity has never been enjoying a full monopoly on the religious market of Hong Kong, Christian churches including Roman Catholics and Protestant churches were given privileges and greater shares of social resources than other religions. Kwong (2000: 57) summarizes some of the rights received by Christianity in Colonial Hong Kong, which include education and social services, marriage ceremonies, the leadership of ceremonies in particular national functions, and with seats in the legislative council. It is hard to say it was just a ‘coincidence’ that Christian churches enjoyed more privileges than other religions in Hong Kong considering the socio-political contexts at that time.

In the 50s to 60s, Hong Kong was still in the early stage of economic development. Churches played a dominant role in relieving poverty through engaging in charity works and social services. These activities included providing food and living necessities to people in need and establishing hospitals, nurseries, and community centers to serve the general public. Many people who received help from Churches became believers, and Christianity successfully built up an image of charitable organizations (Carl, 1999: 340). In 1981, the colonial government reached a compromise with the leaders of the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church, and the Hong Kong Christian Council. This agreement meant that the government would offer special consideration to these groups when they apply for the establishment of new churches, provided that they would operate one of the social services. Since then, Christian churches have developed a “partnership”

with the government in providing public services and social welfare.

Many Christian groups in Hong Kong were supported by churches based in Britain and other Western countries which had enormous financial and human resources. Comparing to other religions, they were more resourceful and ready to promote education in Hong Kong. In Carl's study (1985) on the early development of Christianity in Hong Kong, he found that as soon as 1845 the British colonial government had appointed priests and missionaries to be counselors of educational affairs and education inspectors working out policies to promote and manage education development in Hong Kong. In the late 19th century, William Lobscheid from Chinese Evangelization Society, E. J. Eitel, a former missionary, and Sir John Bowring from Unitarian Church, were appointed School Inspectors (Carl, 1985), further consolidating the influence of Christianity on education. School facilities, such as school halls, classrooms, or even playgrounds could become fully utilized as religious facilities for masses and worships on weekends for the promotion of Christianity. Such practices are still permitted nowadays. Besides, in most Christian schools, Bible Studies were mandatory, and students were required to attend worship and taught to pray and follow the teachings of Christ. Clergies usually enjoyed more power than school principals. And these schools in turn preferred hiring teachers and staff who were also Christians to strengthen the "sacred canopy" (see Berger, 1967) for socializing students into faithful believers.

In the 1950s and 60s, the government supported Christian churches to establish new schools in respond to the growing population after the World War II. According to Kwong (2002: 151), around 70% of secondary schools in the 60s were operated by the Christian Churches, including the Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican. Primary and secondary schools recognized as "traditional famous schools" are mostly established by Christian groups. Many of their graduates are social elites or government officials with high English proficiency (Carl, 1985: 349). Their existence inside the "institutions" further consolidated the influence of Christianity on HK society.

Until today, Christianity still enjoys the largest share of the education market. According to *Secondary School Profile 2012–2013*, among the 454 secondary schools in Hong Kong, there are 234 (51.5 %) sponsored by Christian organizations (Catholic 88 and Protestant 146). Buddhism (21, i.e., 4.6%) and Taoism (6, i.e., 1%) are remarkably the minor sponsors of secondary education. Similarly, *Primary*

School Profile 2012–2013 reveals that among the 516 primary schools, 284 (55%) are of Christian background. Buddhist and Taoist schools account for 3% and 1.5% respectively. This structure is not likely to change shortly.

Apart from social services, Christianity also has a significant role in the cultural life of Hong Kong people. A look at the legal holiday of Hong Kong reflects the privileges enjoyed by Christianity before 1997. During Colonial rule, religious festivals originated from Christianity including Easter (3 days) and Christmas (2 days) were included in the legal holiday. Easter and Christmas are widely promoted and celebrated as an important occasion for family and friends. No other holidays were associated with any other religion. Some religious leaders see this as a form of unfair treatment. For instance, Venerable Kwok Kok, the Chairman of the Hong Kong Buddhist Association writes:

While the foreign beliefs were entitled to a lot of festive activities, the birthday of the Buddha did not even get enough respect to be marked as a public holiday. It is a clear indicator of the unfair treatment under colonialism (Kok 1997; quoted in Kwong 2000: 140).

Furthermore, there were only two ways to get married in Hong Kong before 1997: visit a Marriage Registration and Records Office operated by the government or visit a church. It was because under the colonial rule, the rights to conduct and administer legal wedding were held by Christian churches and the marriage registration office. Ceremonies held in Taoist or Buddhist facilities were not legally recognized. In most cases, non-Christians had to visit the Marriage Registry of the Hong Kong Government to finish their wedding swear that would be the only way to grant their wedding legal status.

In short, the colonial government imposed a minimum level of regulation on religion. All religions were allowed to operate freely as long as they did not break the law. However, due to the close proximity between the colonial government and Christian churches, church-state relationships at that time were characterized by a kind of “favoritism” towards Christianity. Compared to traditional religious groups, Christianity had been privileged in terms of public resources and given more opportunities in welfare development. These favoritisms have had a

long lasting effect on Hong Kong's welfare structure even until today, as shown in the large amount of Christian welfare facilities and the government subvention they receive.

Religion in Post-1997 Hong Kong

Hong Kong is returned to China on 1 July 1997. The policy of "One Country, Two Systems" guaranteed Hong Kong to carry on its capitalistic economic systems and maintain its own legislative, administrative, and judicial independence. The Article 32 and Article 141 of *the Basic Law* 基本法 (the mini-constitution of Hong Kong) are the cornerstones for the safeguard of religious freedom in Hong Kong.

Article 32:

1. Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of conscience.
2. Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of religious belief and freedom to preach and to conduct and participate in religious activities in public.

Article 141:

1. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall not restrict the freedom of religious belief, interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations or restrict religious activities which do not contravene the laws of the Region.
2. Religious organizations shall, in accordance with law, enjoy the rights to acquire, use, dispose of and inherit property and the right to receive financial assistance. Their previous property rights and interests shall be maintained and protected.
3. Religious organizations may, according to their previous practice, continue to run seminaries and other schools, hospitals, and welfare institutions and to provide other social services.
4. Religious organizations and believers in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region may maintain and develop their relations with religious organizations and believers elsewhere.

The two articles guarantee freedom of religious belief and freedom to preach

and to conduct and participate in religious activities in public and, protect property rights of faith-based organizations. However, as the transition of sovereignty has brought about changes to the social, political, and cultural lives of Hong Kong people, religion has no exception in this regard.

One of the most obvious changes is that the government has adopted a more lenient policy towards other non-Christian religions since the handover. It has invited organizations of various religious traditions to join partnerships as government’s re-distributors in the provision of education and social services in Hong Kong. Table 2 is a summary of the amount of government subvention allocated to NGOs by religious backgrounds in the fiscal year 2014 to 2015 and 2015 to 2016. In both fiscal years, nearly 90% of government subvention that are allocated to religious welfare organizations goes to Christian-affiliated groups, and only around 10% goes to Buddhist and Taoist groups. Each Christian welfare organization received an average of nearly 70 million in each fiscal year, whereas each Buddhist and Taoist group received only about 36 million and 45 million, respectively. However, comparing to the 1960s when Buddhist and Taoist organizations were almost absent from and uninterested in Hong Kong’s social welfare (Ng, 2016), they are actually catching up gradually in recent years. Therefore, while Christian NGOs remain the largest provider in social welfare services after the handover, Buddhist and Taoist charitable organizations have started to challenge the “monopoly” enjoyed by Christianity in Hong Kong’s social welfare.

Table 2 Subvention Allocation by Religious Background

Religious NGOs	Number	2014-15		2015-16	
		Subvention	Average	Subvention	Average
Christianity	67	4,528,887,495 (89.87%)	67,595,335	4618813729 (89.86%)	68,937,518
Buddhism	8	289,980,825 (5.75%)	36,247,603	293477689 (5.71%)	36,684,711
Taoism	5	220,592,074 (4.38%)	44,118,414	227497578 (4.43%)	45,499,515
Total	80	5,039,460,394 (100%)		5139788996 (100%)	

Source: Constructed by author based on Social Welfare Department (2015)

Regarding education policy, the government has also tried to reform the power structure in school management by proposing the School-Based Manage-

ment Policy. The main purpose of the reform is to enhance transparency and accountability of school governance. The Education Bureau (2014) states that:

1. School-based management seeks to provide schools with enhanced flexibility and autonomy in their daily operations and resources management according to the needs of their students.
2. School-based management seeks to enhance transparency and accountability in the use of public funds and school operations by providing a participatory decision-making mechanism where all key stakeholders are involved.

Under this policy, all primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong are required to set up incorporated management committees by the year 2010. Also, the proportion of board members representing the school-sponsoring body will be reduced to 60%, allowing teachers, parents, alumni and community members to make up the rest of the 40%. It is even said that the government can intervene in the management of schools if disputes between committee members are unresolved. This move has stirred up a large debate in the society. Many Christian groups voiced out their concerns over the effects of this policy change and criticized the government for violating the rights enjoyed by sponsoring organizations. The Methodist Church of Hong Kong (2004), for example, showed their concerns and dissatisfaction over the policy, as they worried the new policy would “violate the spirit of school-based management, disregards the contribution of sponsoring bodies, and disrespect the concerns of sponsoring agencies”. Zen Ze-Kiun, the Sixth Bishop of Roman Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, who is outspoken on social issues and has been named “the new conscience of Hong Kong”, urged the government to rethink this policy. He criticized the government:

The government requires the sponsoring bodies to pass their power to individual school committees, but (the government) itself grasps all the power to control every school directly (Zen, 2004).

Despite intense opposition from Christian groups, the policy was finally passed in 2004. The power of decision-making no longer lies solely in the hands of

the sponsors. This policy could weaken the control of church over school because other different parties, which may not be Christians, can have a say in school affairs. It is believed that Christianity is the most affected because of its large amount of educational establishments.

Another area of change is related to the cultural life of Hong Kong people. Before 1997, festivals associated with Christianity were included in the legal holidays of Hong Kong but not for other religions. Starting from 1999, under pressure from Buddhist organizations and groups that advocate Chinese cultures, the government finally legalized the Buddha's birthday as a public holiday. In an activity held by the Hong Kong Taoist Association on 11 August 2012, the Secretary for Home Affairs Tsang Tak-sing openly supported the idea to designate a Sunday as Taoist Day to organize celebrations and promote Taoism (Hong Kong Government Press Release, 11 August 2012).

Here are another two examples showing the growing influence of Buddhism and Taoism in the cultural life of Hong Kong people. (1) In 1999 and 2004, at the invitation of Buddhist groups and with the help from the Hong Kong government, the Shakyamuni tooth sarira and Shakyamuni finger sarira arrived in Hong Kong and were worshiped by the general public. (2) Since 2001, the Cheung Chao Bun Festival, a local folk tradition of Cheng Chao (an island located South of Hong Kong), has become a representative festival of Hong Kong, attracting hundreds of thousands of local and foreign visitors. With government efforts in promoting the Bun Festival, it was recognized as Grade 3 China Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009 and World Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2011. These changes show that the government has become more responsive to voices from Chinese religious groups and more active in promoting local traditions.

Government officials also began to show up as distinguished guests in many religious activities held by Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian groups. Government official frequently raises the idea of "harmonic society" during these events. In the first Taoist Day held on 11 March 2013, Leung Chung Ying, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong at that time, highly recognized the contributions of Taoism in promoting a harmonious society. He said:

Taoism finds its roots in Chinese cultures and has a very long history. Taoism promotes harmony between human and nature, peace, and contentment,

ideas that agree with Chinese traditional moralities and cultures...Taoism emphasizes tolerance that is very important for social harmony (*Taikungpo*, 11 March 2013).

Leung's remarks show that the Hong Kong government is increasingly aware of the social functions played by Chinese religious in promoting social harmony, especially when political debates over democratization have destabilized the society in recent years.

Policies regarding wedding also became more open and fair. Since 2004, the government has gradually allowed religious facilities to be used as legal wedding venue other than marriage registries and churches. Such facilities include Hong Kong Kun Chung Buddhist Temple and Taoist Sik Sik Yuen Wong Tai Sin Temple etc. In 2006, the government further liberalized the "legal wedding system" by allowing people to conduct their wedding anytime anywhere in the presence of approved lawyers. The church lost its monopoly over the wedding ceremony, and rental income from wedding halls may decline, affecting the finance of church in the long term.

Government statistics offer another interesting perspective to this subject matter. *Hong Kong Factsheet* is the official publication of the Hong Kong government. The colonial government and early HKSAR government seemed to have little understanding about the size of Buddhist and Taoist believers and usually used "a large local" or "many followers" to describe their existence, as in the case of 1997 and 2002. However, since 2007, the SAR government estimated that the numbers of Buddhist and Taoist are over 1,000,000 each. The fact that the government attempted to provide an official estimation of the size of Buddhist and Taoist population implies that the government has began to recognize the significance and prevalence of traditional religions. This approach also agrees with the pro-Chinese cultural policies adopted by the HKSAR government after 1997: to promote the *status quo* of Chinese traditional religions.

The decolonization principle to reduce British Colonial influences in Hong Kong was further made explicit by Chen Zuor in 2015, the former vice-director of Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office of the State Council (Chinese Communist Party's body governing Hong Kong's and Macau's issues). Referring to the rising anti-Mainland Chinese movement in Hong Kong, he said:

Because de-colonization wasn't implemented in accordance with the law, things that should be put in the history museum ran into the streets. (*South China Morning Post*, 2015)

Although Chen did not clarify which aspects of Hong Kong should be “decolonized”, his statement was seen as a reminder to the public that the Chinese Communist Party has set an agenda of decolonization in Hong Kong society. According to this logic, Christianity may be considered a form of “British colonial legacy” that “should be put in the museum” in the eyes of the Mainland Chinese government.

In spite of the government's increasing affinity towards Chinese religions, Christianity still maintains some social and political influence in Hong Kong. It still prevails in the area of politics as seen from a large amount of self-proclaiming Christians inside the cabinet and government bureaucracy. In the last cabinet, there were ten Christians out of fifteen members. Mr. Donald Tsang, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong from 2005 to 2012, is also a Catholic himself. Around 60% of Legislative Councilors (similar to members of parliament) are Christians. The newly elected Chief Executive in 2017 Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor is also a Catholic. The strong presence of Christians within the government system may have some effects on policy design.

Nowadays, Christianity continues to show a strong presence in social and political movements. Christian leaders (e.g. Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium and general secretary of Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement Wu Chi-wai) have been vocal about social and political issues. For instance, in the Umbrella Movement, a democratic protest unfolded in September 2014, Christianity has been a visible element of the demonstrations “with prayer groups, crosses and protesters reading Bibles in the street” (Levin, 2014). As a result, Christianity has become a target for attack by the pro-Beijing camp, who alleged some local churches that have ties with foreign countries had provided resources such as shelter and food to the protesters (Kung, 2014). As Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Hong Kong Government are increasingly concerned about foreign forces intervening in the politics of Hong Kong, Christianity may face growing pressure enforced by the authority.

Under the decolonization driven by the Communist state and the Hong Kong SAR government, there are significant changes in church-state relations witnessed in the past ten years. Realizing its over-reliance on Christianity in the past, the Hong Kong SAR government has adopted a more open policy towards non-Christian groups in social services and cultural activities. There is a shift from Christian favoritism during the colonial period to pro-Chinese religions after the handover. Such shift in church-state relationships are consistent with the state's de-colonizing agenda to get rid of Western influences in Hong Kong and to promote Chinese traditions and cultures in this former colony.

Conclusion

This paper compares the religious policies in Hong Kong before and after the handover in 1997. It shows that the colonial government had built strong relationships with Christian groups by providing opportunities for them to engage in social affairs through education and charitable services. The SAR government, on the other hand, appears to be more responsive to the voices of Chinese traditional religions and folk cultures to promote the status of Chinese cultures and facilitate the decolonization process (i.e. to eradicate the legacy of British colonialism in Hong Kong). The strong influence of Christianity on social and political activity is seen as a colonial legacy by the Chinese government. The active participation of Christian organizations and members in the recent democratic movements is especially considered as a threat to the rule of the Chinese government. Therefore, it is likely that the Hong Kong government (receiving the order from the Chinese government) may try to reduce the influence of Christianity by weakening its role in social welfare services and promoting the pro-government Chinese religious groups to play a more active role in Hong Kong society.

Religions in Hong Kong will remain an important topic in the sociology of religion because they are going to face both opportunities and challenges that come along with political transition. The question of how to deal with these challenges and turn them into opportunities would continue to intrigue various religious groups. Due to the increasing influence from China, religious freedom in Hong Kong will continue to attract a lot of attention from the academia. The *meso* (organizational) and *micro* (individual) level of religious life in post-1997 Hong Kong

are also important topics in future studies.

In short, Mainland China, Japan, and Taiwan have experienced liberalization of their political systems in recent decades. Many studies have reported how religions have revived and flourished in these societies. On the contrary, the transition of sovereignty of Hong Kong, from a liberal state to a communist state, is rare in contemporary history. Changes in sovereignty brought about changes in church-state relations. During the decolonizing process advocated by the Chinese government, Chinese religions face opportunities to grow, while Christianity is no longer privileged by the authority. In this sense, Hong Kong serves as a very interesting case (and counter-example) in the study of the relationships among religion, state, and society in East Asia societies, which have seen liberalization taking place in the past decades.

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