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Neglected Agents and the Cultural Nexus of Power within Protestant Churches and Associated Institutions in the Latter Half of the Twentieth Century in Hong Kong

Haocheng Chen 

Department of Chinese History and Culture, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR, China; 19048668r@connect.polyu.hk

Abstract: In the latter half of the twentieth century, Protestant churches in Hong Kong and institutions associated with them played a significant role in the daily lives of the people of Hong Kong. However, the role of ordinary people in the social functions of Protestant churches in Hong Kong during this period has rarely been explored in the previous literature. Interpreting several cases from written archives and oral history archives, this study aims to demonstrate how Protestant churches in Hong Kong held special significance as a public place for the ordinary people of the local community, who played an active role in these churches to serve the local community and derived self-satisfaction from doing so. This study also reveals how these local Protestant churches and the associated institutions emerged as a cultural nexus of power along with individuals who contributed to them to provide different types of welfare and social services to the community, which the colonial government in Hong Kong failed to provide.

Keywords: social agents; Hong Kong history; Chinese immigrants; Protestant churches in Hong Kong



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1. Background, Introduction, and Methodology

Many Chinese people, including some scholars, were under the impression that Protestant churches symbolized Western religion, and some even believed that these churches were related to Western imperialism. For example, in the early twentieth century, a fierce anti-Christian movement occurred in China, during which Protestant churches and related institutions were regarded as part of Western imperialism (Guo 2007, pp. 158–68).

In recent influential research on culture studies, Law Wing Sang pointed out that Protestant missionaries could be regarded as a kind of collaborative colonial power in the history of Hong Kong (Law 2015, pp. 37–73). He argued that the English language as an instructional medium was a part of cultural coloniality and that Protestant missionaries and their associated, related church schools played an active role in the implementation of English language education in Hong Kong in early colonial history (Law 2015, pp. 37–73). Law Wing Sang proved that many graduate students from these church schools became compradors or translators or acted as agents between China and the West (Law 2015, pp. 42–43). In the academic field of history, Law Wing Sang's view is neither entirely innovative nor novel. Before Law's study was published, in an early and influential study of Protestant Christian missionaries within the framework of imperialism, Arthur Schlesinger pointed out that the missionary enterprise influenced local culture and values, which can be considered a kind of cultural invasion (Schlesinger 1974, pp. 336–76). Based on these previous studies, Protestant missionaries and churches in China were considered collaborators in Western imperialism or a kind of enterprise related to Western cultural imperialism.

However, history has various dimensions that need to be discovered and discussed. As pointed out by Peter C. Phan, strenuous efforts have been made to indigenize religion in local societies; according to twentieth-century history, such efforts were also made by

Protestants to build local Chinese Denominations (Phan 2018, pp. 396–421). Phan (2018, p. 403) mentions the efforts of several clergy members in building local Chinese Denominations, including members of the clergy like Ni Tuisheng (倪柝聲), Wang Mingdao (王明道), and Jing Dianying (敬奠瀛). Many studies have discussed these Chinese clergy members who had a great influence on the rise of Chinese Independent Churches and Chinese Independent Christianity.

Although the aforementioned research on Protestant churches in Hong Kong and in mainland China overall regard Protestant churches as collaborators with Western imperialism or as churches with strong indigenous theological components, research on the role of ordinary people, rather than that of clergy members, in the churches is limited. This study therefore aims to address this gap in the literature and claims that ordinary believers and visitors viewed Protestant churches as special public places and used these spaces for specific purposes, not just the local residents, but also new immigrants from mainland China. These public places played an important role in the daily lives of these ordinary people in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Various empirical materials, including written historical materials and oral history archives, will be used to prove how ordinary people played an active role in these churches, becoming social agents and leading to the emergence of special social patterns during the specific period. As the existing historical materials were limited, this study uses historical materials with typical characteristics to support the arguments in this study.

As several important arguments in this study are grounded in oral history archives, it is essential to introduce these archives. The two oral history archives used in this study are “Chinese Women and Hong Kong Christianity: An Oral History Archive” and “An Oral and Documentary History of Hong Kong Protestant Christians”, which were both conducted by professional scholars. Both of these two oral history archives used unstructured interviews which allowed the interviewees to have enough freedom to share their own experiences and reflections. The oral history archives for Chinese women, mainly conducted by Choi Po King and Wong Wai Ching, used a narrative focused method of oral history and presented the overall life story of the interviewees from the early twentieth century to the late twentieth century (Choi and Wong 2010). The interviewers knew the general backgrounds of the interviewees and asked general questions according to their backgrounds to help the interviewees to represent the stories of their entire lives and their experiences in their churches or church-related institutions (Choi and Wong 2010). The other oral history archive used in this study, “An Oral and Documentary History of Hong Kong Protestant Christians”, mainly focused on the Christians who were leaders of the social activities and organizations (Kwok 2019). The interviews of this oral history were event focused, and although the oral history project focused on the social engagement of these individuals, there were also questions about their early experiences and the community lives related to the churches (Kwok 2019). For this oral history archive, the entire collection of recordings and videos are accessible on the internet.

2. Protestant Churches as a Special Public Place in Hong Kong

Traditional Chinese religions are regarded as diffused religions in the field of religious studies, while Protestant Christianity is considered an institutionalized religion, with importance given to the place of worship and gathering. With its own professional clergy and religious classics, a Protestant church normally functions in its own building or has its individual space, which is the case with Protestant churches in Hong Kong as well.

Although the normally usable spaces in Protestant churches are private spaces of the church meant to be used for religious purposes only, during the latter half of the twentieth century in Hong Kong, these spaces played a special role for the public, the reasons for which are described as follows.

One of the reasons for calling these churches a special public place is because these churches provided, on their premises, welfare services for the large number of new immigrants arriving from mainland China to Hong Kong in the 1950s and the 1960s. The various

crucial needs of the local residents, along with the needs of the new immigrants from mainland China, were accommodated through social welfare services, projects, and activities conducted by these churches (Wong 2020). In providing these services and conducting these projects, the Protestant churches functioned as special public places: for instance, the rooftop schools held by local Protestant churches in Hong Kong during the 1950s and the 1960s provided essential education for the children in the Resettlement Area, and, in some cases, such schools also provided essential food for the children around (Gangao Jiaosheng 1961a, p. 2).

Apart from being a special public place for local residents by providing welfare services, these churches were also another kind of special public place for their normal attendees,¹ who were allowed to hold nonreligious activities on the premises, thus forming special communities in the process. This study discusses, in detail, the significance of such social functions of the church and the meanings they hold for normal attendees.

A point to note is that among these normal attendees, while some may have been followers of the Christian faith, others may have gone to these churches merely to participate in the various activities held in them. Since it is impossible to distinguish who the real believers are or to identify the motivation of the attendees, this study considers all people who went to the churches regularly as normal attendees. For example, some elderly women who wished to pursue their hobby of flower arrangement would do so in a Protestant church and hence attended church (Choi and Wong 2010, pp. 124–25). Hence, the church was a space for these women, who could be counted as normal attendees.

The empirical materials collected in this study reveal various nonreligious activities conducted in Protestant churches in Hong Kong during the 1950s, the 1960s, and thereafter as well. These nonreligious activities are the focus of this study, especially the underlying social meaning they held for local residents and the new immigrants from mainland China.

Although Ying Fuk-tsang and Leung Ka-Lun have conducted research on Protestant churches' welfare services in the concerned period and their detailed practices in Hong Kong (Ying 2002; Leung 2000), research on the significance of Protestant churches as a special public space for their normal attendees in Hong Kong and its social meaning during the related historical period is lacking in the related academic disciplines.

The social sciences have demonstrated that a supportive community has a positive effect on a person's mental health. Recent research by Chih-ling Liou and Dena Shenk, based on different kinds of empirical data, shows that the Chinese Church Community provided supportive services and functions for the older Chinese new immigrants in the United States, which helped the immigrants adapt better to their new lives (Liou and Shenk 2016, pp. 293–309). According to this study, the social function of Protestant churches as communities for Chinese immigrants is evident from how ethnic churches in the United States helped older Chinese immigrants, with their limited English language skills, easily meet some of their needs, although their emotional needs may not have been fully satisfied (Liou and Shenk 2016, pp. 293–309).

Unlike the abovementioned research, since this study is mostly focused on history, and the materials available for the concerned period are limited, it may be difficult to measure whether the expectations and needs of normal attendees were fulfilled completely in their churches. Nevertheless, using the available historical archives, the study will attempt to interpret the meanings underlying the community life of normal attendees in Protestant churches and reveal the connections and patterns among individuals, institutions, and the social and political environment in Hong Kong during that period.

There are also some statistical data to demonstrate the influences of Protestant churches in Hong Kong.

As estimated by the Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement (HKCRM), there were 1181 Protestant churches conducting their worship in Chinese in Hong Kong in 2004 (Hu and Xie 2006, p. 6). This number was 1129 for the year 1999, and the number was 634 and 872 for the years 1980 and 1989 (Hu and Xie 2006, p. 6). According to the above data, the average growth rate of Protestant churches using Chinese in worship in Hong Kong was

7.75% from 1980 to 2004. And according to statistics from the Hong Kong government, the population in Hong Kong was over three million in the 1960s and grew to over six million in the early 2000s (Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong Special Administrative Region People's Republic of China 2008). As calculated by the author of this study, the average growth rate of the Hong Kong population from 1982 to 2004 is 1.03% (Census and Statistics Department, The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2023). Due to Hong Kong's limited area, it is evident that the number of Protestant churches was substantial, and the number of the Protestant churches grew rapidly from the 1980s to the early 2000s compared to the growth rate of the local population. For comparison, data from Singapore, a city similar to Hong Kong, shows that the average annual growth rate of Protestant Christians in the entire population was 0.225 percent from 1980 to 2000 (Facts and Details.com 2015). Thus, compared to other similar regions, it is clear that Protestant churches in Hong Kong have had significant and increasing influence on the city residents throughout history.

In addition, a recent figure shows that a large proportion of the entire Hong Kong population, 17.2% in 2021, identifies as Protestant Christian, which indicates that the number of Protestant Christians in Hong Kong was 1.04 million (Hong Kong Christian Council and Divinity School of Chung Chi College 2022, p. 6). This recent survey conducted among Hong Kong residents found that 49.5% of interviewees held positive attitudes towards the social services provided by local Protestant churches, while 47.6% of interviewees held neutral attitudes towards these services (Hong Kong Christian Council and Divinity School of Chung Chi College 2022, p. 19). Regarding the education services provided by local Protestant churches, 52.7% of interviewees held positive attitudes, while 44.2% of interviewees held neutral attitudes (Hong Kong Christian Council and Divinity School of Chung Chi College 2022, p. 19). This recent survey suggests that various services provided by Protestant churches in Hong Kong have been well regarded by local residents, particularly the education services.

From the above facts, it is obvious that the Protestant churches in Hong Kong have obtained significant success and have had a substantial impact on the city. This is evident not only in the increasing number of churches in the history and the great proportion of the believers but also in the recognition by local residents regarding the social services and education services provided by these churches.

As mentioned, the number of Protestant churches in Hong Kong grew rapidly from 1980 to 2004 according to the statistical data, and the recent data indicate that there is a large proportion of the population who identifies as Protestant Christian in Hong Kong. However, due to a lack of historical material, it is hard to know the data of the participants in the nonreligious activities within Protestant churches in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century, while the historical data show that there is a certain proportion of Protestant church members who took part in the Sunday School or fellowship activities within their churches in Hong Kong.² As estimated by the HKCRM, in 2004 in Hong Kong, 30.8% of Protestant church members attended the Sunday School activities, while 52% attended the fellowship activities within their churches (Hu and Xie 2006, p. 16).

3. Self Satisfaction in Acting as Agents in the Churches

Normal attendees in Protestant churches in Hong Kong played a significant role in the various activities and projects conducted in this special public place. For example, according to a church journal, in 1961, a car-repair training course was held (Gangao Jiaosheng 1961b, p. 2). The course was mainly conducted by normal church attendees and good-hearted people from church-related welfare institutions (Gangao Jiaosheng 1961b, p. 2). These people took on teaching duties and even bought essential repair tools for teaching (Gangao Jiaosheng 1961b, p. 2). The record describes the educational service provided by Protestant churches during the 1960s in Hong Kong, while normal attendees of the church contributed a lot in the process.

Another case reveals how St. Paul's Church, an Anglican church with a long history on Hong Kong Island, had a youth department that organized various religious and non-religious activities regularly. The youth involved were normal church attendees and were not necessarily of the clergy. According to the church journal of the Hong Kong Anglican Church, the youth department celebrated the Youth Day of their church in 1959 and 1960 with various cultural performances and shows (Gangao Jiaosheng 1959, p. 2; 1960, p. 2). The 1959 event included a musical with popular songs performed, a dance show, shadow play, crosstalk, and a costume drama "Zheng Chenggong" (Gangao Jiaosheng 1959, p. 2). In the 1960 event, a play called "Wild Rose" was performed in the church, along with musical performances (Gangao Jiaosheng 1960, p. 2). The interesting programs of the Youth Day events of 1959 and 1960 reveal how the church was a special public place for normal attendees and visitors to conduct social functions for entertainment and a place to make friends. Furthermore, such events, including plays and dance shows, needed a large number of volunteers to contribute their efforts. Based on the above record, normal youth attendees in this church showed their potential for being both volunteers and participants in these programs. The records even mention the applause from the audience during the event (Gangao Jiaosheng 1959, p. 2). Thus, the normal attendees in this church achieved self satisfaction from their performances and activities during these events.

Apart from the written records, the oral history archives also contain information about normal church attendees and their roles in the churches. Ms. Luo, a normal attendee at St. Paul's Church in Hong Kong (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121) took on the duties of Christian fellowship and other activities in the church (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121). After her marriage, she moved to the Hop Yat Church (合一堂) and was a normal attendee there (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121). Recalling her experience as a woman leader in this church (Choi and Wong 2010), she said she invited her friends to teach cooking and jewelry-making at the church, and she believed that these activities had many positive effects since they drew many women members who were interested in such activities (Choi and Wong 2010). Although no accurate dates are recorded in the oral history archive, such activities were held sometime beginning in the early twentieth century and continued for many years, well into the late twentieth century, as this woman served for a long time at the Hop Yat Church (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121).

Ms. Luo also mentioned that the church was a positive influence in improving the status of women (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121). It was difficult for a woman to assume an important administrative position like deacon in a Protestant church in Hong Kong during the period in which the above woman was active in her church (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 119). Ms. Luo expressed her deep satisfaction with the results of the activities and projects she conducted when she was the leader in the church (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121). Considering that women held a social status that was subordinate in Hong Kong society and in many Protestant churches in Hong Kong during the twentieth century, Ms. Luo felt a great sense of achievement and self satisfaction in conducting many nonreligious activities and projects in her church, and hence, she believed that women's status could be improved through activities held in the church, which could showcase their true potential (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121). Additionally, the oral history archive used in the above case is a special oral history database focusing on the Chinese women related to the Protestant churches in Hong Kong during the twentieth century which shows the stories of the lives and subjective feelings of Chinese women related to the Protestant churches in Hong Kong.

The abovementioned cases cover different categories of normal attendees in Protestant churches in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century. These categories include youth, Chinese women, and technicians. Since typicalness of cases is important for qualitative studies, the cases mentioned here typically represent such groups of people who had similar historical experiences in Protestant churches in Hong Kong. For example, Ms. Luo was a church leader who showed her potential and obtained satisfaction with the activities she organized in the church. She attributes the success of these activities greatly to her friends' efforts (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121). These friends also actively participated

in activities in the church and contributed to them (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 121), thus obtaining self satisfaction and a sense of achievement. In the church journals of the Hong Kong Anglican Church, many such cases can be found wherein normal attendees in their churches actively held nonreligious activities, thus revealing a history of typicalness.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the daily lives of Chinese new immigrants from mainland China were influenced by Protestant churches and related institutions in Hong Kong. Although their proportion among the active normal attendees in Protestant churches during the period under study in Hong Kong cannot be estimated, it is reasonable to assume that some of them may have become active normal attendees in community life in their churches.

In the oral history archive, a Chinese woman's experience provides evidence to support this hypothesis. Ms. Dan was a new Chinese immigrant who moved from mainland China to Hong Kong in 1955 (Choi and Wong 2010, pp. 59–60). After settling down in Hong Kong with her husband, Ms. Dan (Choi and Wong 2010, pp. 59–70) became a normal attendee at a Protestant church (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 65). She served in the Sunday School and took on the duties of the women leaders at the Protestant Chuen Yuen Church (全完堂) in 1976 (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 66), actively volunteering for various activities as well. According to the oral history archive, as a leader in her church, Ms. Dan served young people and the elderly (Choi and Wong 2010, pp. 66–67). The activities she conducted required her to travel outside Hong Kong, for instance, to mainland China and Thailand (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 66). Despite her busy schedule, she always made time to listen to other fellow attendees when they shared their family problems or visited other attendees when they were sick (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 66). Her visits to other members of the church made her a popular figure and many people relied on her for her helpful nature (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 66). After serving as an active volunteer leader in her church for many years, she was ordained as a deacon in 1990 (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 66).

Thus, as a new immigrant moving to Hong Kong in the 1950s, Ms. Dan became an active normal attendee of her church and gained recognition both from her church as well as from the people she served. Her community services and the social and moral value generated from these services gave her an immense sense of satisfaction (Choi and Wong 2010, pp. 66–67).

Like Ms. Dan, who found personal meaning in her life, many Chinese immigrants too, who moved from mainland China to Hong Kong during the twentieth century, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, lived in Hong Kong after immigration and had similar experiences.

Ms. Min was another Chinese immigrant who moved from Guangzhou in mainland China to Hong Kong in 1938 (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 71). She lived in Hong Kong after her immigration and was baptized as a Christian when Hong Kong was occupied by Japan during the Second World War (Choi and Wong 2010, pp. 85–87). She was a regular churchgoer, who also performed various voluntary services at St. Matthew's Church of HKSKH for many years (Choi and Wong 2010, pp. 89–90). She led the women's affairs in the church from 1975 to 1990 (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 90). Despite being just a normal attendee, she became an indispensable figure for the many activities held in the church. Several other cases also exist in which the interviewees were born into families that migrated from mainland China to Hong Kong in the twentieth century, and they became active members of the church, although they were normal attendees (Kwok 2019). Considering the scale of this study, the details of these cases will not be mentioned here. Thus, Ms. Dan's story can be regarded as a typical case for a group of people who had similar experiences.

Therefore, it is clear that normal attendees, including new Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong, played an important role in their churches and in the community life in Protestant churches in Hong Kong in the 1950s, 1960s, and thereafter. From the above cases, clearly, the success of many nonreligious activities or projects in these churches could be largely attributed to these active normal attendees apart from the clergy and staff in these churches. It may be noted that normal attendees derived a sense of self satisfaction when involved in the church activities and projects. This self satisfaction could be due to the

enhanced social status they gained from their involvement in the church activities, from the personal abilities they demonstrated during some performances and activities, or from the social values they achieved when caring for other people in the church communities.

4. The Cultural Nexus of Power Related to the Local Protestant Churches

4.1. The Concept and the Historical Background

The government in twentieth-century colonial Hong Kong was ineffective in fulfilling the needs of its local residents; social welfare services were lacking too for a long time (Wong 2020). In this social and historical context, local residents, including Chinese new immigrants, had to choose their own strategies to live in the city. This was when Protestant churches became the providers and contractors of many social welfare services because of their special political and historical backgrounds (Leung and Chan 2003, pp. 23–46). With many welfare services and activities held in Protestant churches and associated institutions in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century, the Protestant churches, and associated institutions created a cultural nexus of power in the local communities, which had positive influences on residents' daily lives. The concept of the cultural nexus of power can be used to interpret the social pattern in the daily lives of Hong Kong residents, which was related to the local Protestant churches. The cultural nexus of power is an academic concept originally proposed by Prasenjit Duara in his classical work *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942*. In Duara's work, the concept of the cultural nexus of power includes different kinds of institutions and networks in traditional rural societies in northern China (Duara 1988). The "cultural" aspect is important in this concept since this nexus of power provides some kinds of symbols and norms to the local community members, coercing them in a way toward a cultural functioning (Duara 1988). In Duara's work, rural brokering organizations, including lineages and temples, had a cultural function in the rural society of northern China in the specific history, and Duara demonstrated the changes and the roles of these rural brokering organizations during the process of China's pre-1949 state building (Duara 1988).³

Reviewing historical records, a similar cultural nexus of power is identified in local communities in Hong Kong in the latter half of the twentieth century, which also relates to the special state–society relationship and the process of state building in the local context. As mentioned, the social and welfare services provided by the Hong Kong colonial government were limited compared to the crucial needs of the residents, especially during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Ying 2002). According to Beatrice Leung and Shun-hing Chan's research, faced with the great need for welfare services and the crucial Cold War political environment during the 1950s and 1960s, the Hong Kong colonial government preferred to trust and collaborate with Protestant churches to provide welfare services due to the churches' social-cultural background and the previous collaborating history in Hong Kong (Leung and Chan 2003, pp. 23–26). According to Brian Tsui's research, even though the Hong Kong government began to consider providing more welfare services to new Chinese immigrants, Governor Grantham preferred to use *kaifong* or neighborhood associations to provide welfare services because these institutions served as state surveillance mechanisms (Tsui 2023, pp. 1055–74). As revealed in Tsui's research, Grantham's consideration was related to the Cold War environment in Hong Kong in the 1950s (Tsui 2023, pp. 1055–74).

Due to the special political environment in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s, the Protestant churches and associated institutions became a kind of special brokering organization in the process of state building in Hong Kong which provided various welfare services and social functions in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century. The Hong Kong government provided the land for churches for free or for a low price if the land was used solely for religious or charitable purposes (Brandner 2023, p. 26). And the Protestant churches and associated institutions also used the cultural nexus of power related to the local Protestant churches to impart Christian culture to local residents.

The services provided by the Protestant churches and related institutions had considerable coverage of the local residents during the specific history. Taking the services provided by the Hong Kong Anglican Church as an example, according to one report from the Hong Kong Anglican Church published in 1969, the Hong Kong Anglican Church planned to run 30 primary schools and 18 secondary schools in its diocese, accommodating 50,000 students from 1970–1975 (quoted in [Wickeri 2021](#), p. 93). According to another report from the Hong Kong Anglican Church in 1974, there were 49 primary schools and 23 secondary schools in the diocese (quoted in [Wickeri 2021](#), p. 114). These services accommodated the crucial educational needs of residents.

In this section, this study will use several typical cases to demonstrate the cultural nexus of power related to the Protestant churches and associated institutions in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century.

4.2. Cases of the Cultural Nexus of Power Related to the Local Protestant Churches in Hong Kong

Many social issues plagued twentieth-century colonial Hong Kong, with social insecurity being among the most important ones, especially during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Riots broke out frequently due to political unrest and affected the daily lives of ordinary people. Ms. Dan was a teacher at a local school in the Kwai Chung region in the early 1970s ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65). She recalls many children wandering in the streets around the Shek Yam Estate (石蔭村) of the Kwai Chung region, and some of them even ended up joining the Triads ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65). Dropping out of school could have made these children a security risk to the local community. Since the provision of educational services in Hong Kong was limited in this period, many local communities faced such social issues, whereby local residents had to step in and develop their own strategies to change the situation.

As mentioned, Ms. Dan was a teacher in the 1970s. She was baptized in a Protestant church in 1964 and was a normal attendee of the church ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), pp. 65–66). In 1971, she became a Bible teacher in a school near Shek Yam Estate ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65). Out of her own interest or pursuit, she took some of her students to Sunday School, held at the Protestant church near Shek Yam Estate ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65). Since they had to walk some distance to the site where the Sunday School was held, and the team comprised around 40 people, they were supposedly well known in the region ([Choi and Wong 2010](#)). Considering the social insecurity issues mentioned in this region, with some children even joining gangs, an increasing number of students and some of their parents joined the team to attend Sunday School ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65). The team then grew to over a hundred people walking to Sunday School together ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65), which is a considerable number for a team to attend Sunday School in a small suburban village. Finally, the principal of Ms. Dan's school agreed to hold a Sunday School in Ms. Dan's own school, and during the peak period, almost 400 people attended Sunday School ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65). Different classes were held for primary and middle school students, and the student Christian fellowship was also held at this Sunday School ([Choi and Wong 2010](#), p. 65). The social meaning underlying this case can be interpreted as follows.

Considering how the children wandered in the streets, it is clear that social stability was lacking in the community, and the children did not receive sufficient care from their families as some children had even joined gangs. Hence, the situation had become serious and challenging for families with children. For children who were sufficiently cared for by their families, it is possible that the parents were worried about the spare time their children spent on weekends. Since the power and provision of welfare services from the local state were limited, these parents would have had to consider their own solutions when faced with such social insecurity issues. Ms. Dan, being a warm-hearted teacher and a normal attendee of church activities, removed these anxieties from the parents' minds by organizing the Sunday School. Thus, the Sunday School activities became the cultural nexus of power in this community.

In joining Ms. Dan's Sunday School team and attending the Protestant church programs, it is clear that the local community had accepted the culture of Christianity or at least wished to know more about it. Considering that the Sunday School started in Ms. Dan's own school progressed well, it is clear that such a culture was welcomed by the local community. The term "power" is a key word in the cultural nexus of power in this study. In the humanities and social sciences, in some contexts, "power" refers to a kind of coercion exerted by one actor over another. Here, "power" implies that some social agents used their influence to change the lifestyles or life preferences of the local communities. These changes had social effects on the communities. In this case, Ms. Dan used her personal influence to enroll a great number of people in the Sunday School. Furthermore, due to her efforts, the school she worked for began to hold Sunday School classes in the community and achieved good results. The oral history archive shows that many who attended Sunday School became volunteers in local churches later on (Choi and Wong 2010, p. 65). Ms. Dan thus influenced the lifestyle or the pursuit of life of many people in the local community.

As mentioned earlier, the changes brought about by the cultural nexus of power have specific social functions in the local community. In the above case, Ms. Dan helped resolve the serious social security issues of the local community that threatened the healthy development of children by providing a valuable option for the local children and their parents. She helped in providing children with a safe and secure environment during the weekends and in keeping them away from temptation and the threats of the gangs.

In the abovementioned case, it should be noted that Ms. Dan alone was not the cultural nexus of power in the local community. True, she was an important and influential person in this cultural nexus of power. However, since Sunday Schools were held by the local Protestant churches, and Ms. Dan actively included local people in the services provided by the Protestant churches, the influences of these churches or church-related institutions diffused within the cultural nexus of power in the local community, and leaders like Ms. Dan were important connections between the cultural nexus of power and ordinary people in the local communities.

Ms. Dan's case is not unique. According to historical records, many such people played similar roles in different local communities in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century. Ms. Xi's story may directly show the cultural nexus of power of the local Protestant churches.

Ms. Xi was a Chinese woman born in Hong Kong in 1951, and her parents were Chinese new immigrants who moved from mainland China to Hong Kong in 1949 (Wu 2019). She was deeply involved in her Protestant church from her high school period, dedicating much of her time to the voluntary work of the various church activities (Wu 2019). According to the oral history archive, during her early life in the church in the region in which she lived, she believed that the local church should be concerned with the local community and serve it (Wu 2019). She and her fellow members were trained to deeply understand the issues in the local community and to make plans to revitalize the community (Wu 2019). After she graduated from university, a pastor in Shek Kip Mei district requested her to be the principal of a kindergarten and Ms. Xi was expected to use the kindergarten to influence the local community and make them understand the concepts and culture of Christianity (Wu 2019).

In the early 1970s, she embraced this role, leveraging kindergarten resources to provide educational courses and volunteer projects for parents, aiming to broaden their understanding of education (Wu 2019). Ms. Xi believed that these projects and the special education provided by kindergartens would benefit the local community (Wu 2019).

Furthermore, Ms. Xi and her colleagues also held a regular annual activity called the Community Festival in the local church, which attracted the locals since it was like a carnival, with different themes each year (Wu 2019). Ms. Xi and her colleagues wanted to use this opportunity to encourage local residents to contribute to their own community, while she also viewed these activities as practical expressions of Christian faith (Wu 2019).

Ms. Xi's case is a typical one demonstrating the cultural nexus of power in the local Protestant churches in Hong Kong. The Protestant church and its associated kindergarten offered many activities and services to the local community. In this cultural nexus of power, Ms. Xi and her colleagues in the kindergarten and in her church used various ways to successfully influence the daily lives of residents in the local community (Wu 2019). Additionally, the Shek Kip Mei district was a special district in Hong Kong in the 1970s. As there were a great number of refugees in the district, the residents of the local community had low self-esteem and a poor self-image, which was detrimental to community development (Wu 2019). Therefore, the efforts of Ms. Xi and her colleagues and the cultural nexus of power of the local Protestant church functioned to provide a special social space for the local residents and community in this district during the historical period under study.

The above two cases illustrate the influences of the cultural nexus of power related to the local Protestant churches on local residents and communities in Hong Kong during the specific period. As mentioned, Law Wing Sang posits that Protestant missionaries could be regarded as a form of collaborative colonial power in the history of Hong Kong (Law 2015, pp. 37–73). Since the Protestant churches and associated institutions acted as a brokering organization in Hong Kong in social and welfare services, Law Wing Sang's view seems relevant regarding the history during the latter half of the twentieth century in Hong Kong.

This study posits that the cultural nexus of power related to the local Protestant churches in Hong Kong should not be regarded as collaborative colonial power in the latter half of the twentieth century. It is commonly known that the British colonial government in Hong Kong adopted a *laissez-faire* approach to many aspects of its governance, encompassing education and other social services. Economically, it was advantageous for the colonial government to engage religious organizations and NGOs in the provision of various social services. As a result, both Protestant churches and other religious organizations, as well as NGOs, played significant roles in the provision of social services in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century. For example, similar to Protestant churches in Hong Kong, the local NGO Tung Wah Group of Hospitals also received various forms of support from the colonial government for its social services in the latter half of the twentieth century (Tung Wah Group of Hospitals n.d.).

Additionally, the two cases mentioned above demonstrate that the cultural nexus of power related to the local Protestant churches in Hong Kong provides many opportunities for active ordinary local residents to influence their communities by utilizing the resources within this cultural nexus of power. According to aforementioned two cases, such a cultural nexus of power has had a positive impact on the development of local culture and communities in Hong Kong, rather than benefiting the culture of the colonists. Furthermore, there is a long history of the Sinicization of Christianity in China, including Hong Kong. It is hard to regard the cultural nexus of power as a collaborator with colonialism solely because of the Christian culture. There were various denominations of Protestant churches in Hong Kong in the latter half of the twentieth century, and some denominations were established and operated by Chinese people, thus considered Chinese denominations. For example, The Church in Hong Kong Church Assembly Hall (Christian Stewards) is a Chinese denomination deeply influenced by Watchman Nee's theology. This denomination established reading rooms in poor neighborhoods and provided other community services such as counseling and study support during the latter half of the twentieth century (Brandner 2023, p. 55). Overall, Law Wing Sang's opinion does not seem applicable to the cultural nexus of power related to the local Protestant churches in Hong Kong in the latter half of the twentieth century.

As mentioned before, according to the statistical data, the Protestant churches and the associated institutions significantly influenced the daily lives of residents in Hong Kong, particularly in terms of the social services and the education services. Due to the limitation of the qualitative study, it is hard to know the representativeness of the above two cases. However, based on the statistical data, it is evident that the cultural nexus of power related to the Protestant churches played influential roles for the residents in Hong Kong and the

above two cases provide a deeper understanding of such a cultural nexus of power in addition to the existing statistical data.

5. Conclusions

This study focuses on the role played by ordinary people of the Protestant churches in Hong Kong during the latter half of the twentieth century. Protestant churches in Hong Kong turned into a special public place because they provided welfare services for the local communities, which was crucial as many of the local residents were new immigrants from mainland China and their daily needs could not be fulfilled by the colonial government in Hong Kong at that time.

Further, by describing several cases from oral and written history archives, the study points out that normal attendees of these Protestant churches conducted various nonreligious activities in churches, gained a sense of self satisfaction from these efforts, and served the local community through these activities. The success of these nonreligious activities and projects in Protestant churches could therefore largely be attributed to the normal attendees of the churches. Based on the above arguments, this study attempts to identify a special social pattern to interpret the historical facts that appeared in the latter half of twentieth-century Hong Kong through the cultural nexus of power in the local Protestant churches. Thus, Christianity is the culture that provides meaning to the people involved in the cultural nexus of power within the local Protestant churches in Hong Kong, wherein normal attendees of these churches played a significant role in organizing various services and projects that served the local communities. These activities were diffused into the communities as it was easy for local residents to access this cultural nexus of power.

Although the concept of the cultural nexus of power is used as a social pattern to interpret the historical facts related to the Protestant churches, for the people involved in these churches and church-related institutions, the power in this nexus was soft as no coercion was used to influence the daily lives of the local residents. As mentioned earlier, the colonial government in Hong Kong was not very strong, with “positive non-interventionism” being its administrative strategy. Under such circumstances, the cultural nexus of power within the local Protestant churches proved to be a positive social pattern, reducing the burden on the government, especially in terms of providing social welfare and community services.

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Notes

- ¹ The normal attendees defined in this study are the ordinary people who attend the activities in the Protestant churches and are not the clergy or staff of the churches.
- ² Sunday School and fellowship activities within Protestant churches include both religious and nonreligious components.
- ³ Duara’s research neglected the important work of the Catholic and Protestant missionaries and churches in the community services and the role in the cultural nexus power in China from late nineteenth century to the Republic of China era. For instance, Rolf Gerhard Tiedemann’s research provided examples on Catholic missionaries’ community work and powerful influences on the people suffering from famine in rural north China during the late nineteenth century (Laamann and Lee 2019, pp. 267–69).

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