

Chapter 3

Hong Kong Christian migrants in search of identity and a home in the UK

Yvette To

Abstract

This chapter examines the various strategies used by Christian migrants from Hong Kong who have emigrated to the UK since 2019, to engage with local Christian organisations to establish their footing in their new country. While the focus on Hong Kong Christian migrants in the UK has predominantly centred on the rapidly growing Chinese Christian communities and newly established Hong Konger churches, this chapter examines the lesser-known inter-ethnic activities occurring within local English Christian churches. The chapter presents three cases of local English churches that Hong Kong Christian migrants have joined. These cases represent three unique models of inter-ethnic incorporation, promoted and facilitated by English church leaders and Hong Kong elite migrants endowed with social and cultural resources. This study foresees a part of the Hong Kong migrant community gradually integrating into UK society.

Introduction

How will our church become in a few years' time? I'd love to be able to think of us having a really strong integrated team; greater sharing, stronger fellowship and relational interaction between Hong Kongers and the non-Hong Kongers. I'd love the Hong Kongers to continue to feel settled and welcome here. It would be nice to see Hong Kongers and non-Hong Kongers doing some joint evangelistic outreach across our neighbourhood.

— An English church pastor

Most Hong Kong (hereafter “HK”) Protestant Christian migrants to the UK have joined three types of Christian churches. First, Chinese Christian churches (華人基督教會), established by earlier Chinese migrants, most offering Cantonese, Mandarin, and English congregations to meet the diverse needs of migrants and their descendants.¹ Second, HK Christian churches (港人基督教會), set up by HK migrants to the UK after 2019, in which Cantonese is the medium of instruction. Both of these churches can be referred to as “ethnic or immigrant churches”. Third, English-speaking Christian churches hosted and attended by local British congregations (本地英國基督教會). Many recent HK migrants have joined existing Chinese Christian churches throughout the UK, while others have become congregants of newly established HK Christian churches. The phenomenal growth in the number and the congregation size of these Chinese and HK churches has been noted (Burgess, 2023; Huang, 2023; To & Chan, 2023). However, less attention has been paid to HK Christian migrants integrating into local English Christian organisations, which is the specific focus of this study.

HK Christian migration to the UK provides a useful lens to study migrant integration. Christians represent a significant proportion of HK citizens who have left for the UK since late 2019. Christianity is one of the major religions observed by people in HK. In 2021, there were about 1.3 million Christians in the city, representing 17% of the population; most of them were Protestants (Hong Kong Government, 2022). Since January 2021, over 150,000 HK people have moved to the UK through the HK British National (Overseas) (“BN(O)”) visa (UK Home Office, 2024). An estimated 30% of these, around 45,000, identified as Christians (Tung, 2022). Incoming HK Christian migrants had already quadrupled the number of existing Chinese Christians in the UK, estimated to fall between 7,000 and 10,000 (Tung, 2022). Such large inflows of Christian migrants have disrupted the ethnic balance in many Chinese Christian churches in the UK, prompting new tensions and necessitating new approaches to incorporation (To & Chan, 2023). Furthermore, most post-2019 HK migrants to the UK were families with children; some also brought older relatives (Yu, 2024). Though most HK migrants prefer Chinese or HK Christian churches in the UK (Huang, 2023), some have chosen to integrate into local English churches despite language differences and variations in religious practices. While individual choices matter, specific contextual factors have also facilitated the process of migrant incorporation. Government programmes and certain social actors have played a part in promoting, organising, and actualising these inter-ethnic religious interactions, leading to several unique forms of migrant incorporation into local faith communities.

This chapter investigates how HK Christian migrants to the UK engage in religious organisations in their destination country. It presents three unique models of inter-ethnic incorporation, detailing how HK Christian migrants become part of local churches, focusing on three English churches as case studies. The study departs from research focusing on the dynamics of co-ethnic religious networks within migrant communities (Cao, 2005; Gemignani & Olupona, 2007; To & Chan, 2023; Yang, 1999), demonstrating that inter-ethnic religious communities of migrants and non-migrants are both possible and desirable under certain circumstances. Given that the role of religion in influencing migrant settlement remains open and contingent, this study of HK Christian migrants in the UK offers new empirical information about migrant integration through religious communities. It explains the formation of different migrant incorporation patterns and contributes to understandings of different migrant religious organisational forms.

Migrant incorporation and social integration

How migrants settle in their destination society is frequently explored by migration scholars adopting different approaches to analysing processes and patterns of settlement. Some have focused on social actors' capital (Nee & Sanders, 2001) and agency (Adler et al., 2014; Henaway, 2023), while others emphasised the role of structural forces (such as uneven global development) in shaping migration and settlement (Castells, 1975). Even in the same destination country, different groups of migrants with varying resources/social capital and influenced by different contextual factors may encounter divergent settlement experiences across time (Alba & Nee, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). To understand the extent and means by which migrants become part of the host community, theoretical concepts including “incorporation”, “assimilation”, “integration”, and “multiculturalism” have been developed to capture the dynamic process and outcomes of migrant and non-migrant interactions in specific societies (Castles & Miller, 2009; Laubenthal, 2023; Martiniello & Rath, 2014; Statham & Foner, 2024).

Incorporation is broadly understood as the process of migrants becoming members of the host society (Castles & Miller, 2009). There are different aspects of incorporation — political, economic, and sociocultural (Bishin & Klostad, 2012; Black, 2011; Portes et al., 2008). Sociocultural incorporation denotes how migrants develop social ties with the natives and adopt the cultures and practices of the majority population (Glick Schiller et al., 2006). Migration and diaspora studies have long recognised the role of religion in influencing migrant adaptation and settlement, documenting how migrants of different heritage and sociocultural backgrounds have established or joined religious communities in the host society for various reasons (Connor, 2014; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Gordon, 1964; Herberg, 1960; Min, 1992). Hirschman (2004, p. 1228) summarised the centrality of religion to migrant communities as “the search for refuge, respectability, and resources.” Religious faith provides migrants with psychological comfort and offers opportunities for migrants to maintain certain cultural continuity (Herberg, 1960). Religious participation may facilitate migrants' incorporation into the host society through cultivating and deepening social networks (Baumann & Salentin,

2006), and promoting higher levels of civic engagement (Foley & Hoge, 2007). Importantly, affiliations with religious associations may also enhance migrants' and their descendants' socioeconomic mobility (Cao, 2005).

However, instead of facilitating the integration of the migrant minority into the majority populations, in some contexts, diasporic religious groups reinforce in-group solidarity and foster the development of ethnicised communities within the host society. Sometimes, these ethnic-based groups may reinforce exclusion and hinder migrant integration (Connor, 2014). Whether migrant religiosity can lead to social incorporation is contingent upon institutional and contextual factors. Bond (2022) observes that religion can be a “bridge” and also a “barrier” to the inclusion of migrants and their children. Different geographical and social environments explain these variations. Additionally, migrants can influence non-migrants in the host countries, transforming their religious practices (Frederiks, 2016) and the religious landscape of the host countries (Gallo, 2014; Henkel & Knippenberg, 2005).

This chapter draws on the concept of migrant incorporation and focuses its analysis on forms and processes of non-ethnic or inter-ethnic migrant incorporation (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2009; Glick Schiller et al., 2006), in particular, the interactions between newcomers — the Chinese Hong Kongers — and members of the host population — Anglo-Saxons and other non-Chinese. In cases of inter-ethnic incorporation, migrants form social ties with both natives and migrants of different ethnicities (Glick Schiller et al., 2006); in some circumstances, these interactions will result in the creation of multi-ethnic groups. Inter-ethnic migrant incorporation is thus different from co-ethnic migrant incorporation, in which migrants settle into the host society through forming social networks with those who are ethnically and culturally similar. HK migrants forming and joining Chinese networks and groups in the destination country is an example of strengthening co-ethnic ties.

This study focuses on the sociocultural aspects of inter-ethnic migrant interactions. It investigates how different modes of such interactions in religious communities work and how they emerged, drawing inspiration from Glick Schiller et al.'s (2006) ethnographic research on two churches started by African minorities in the United States where, instead of being populated by migrants of African origins, the congregants of these churches were diverse, including many white natives. Using born-again Christianity as a key message while downplaying migrants' foreignness, these churches drew together migrants and non-migrants. Pastors' and church leaders' social and cultural capital was also important for strengthening ties between the migrants and the non-migrants, making a unity project possible and desirable. Additionally, the scale of the cities and associated population composition and dynamics should be considered when accounting for the processes and outcomes of incorporation. Glick Schiller and colleagues thus suggested the usefulness of discarding the ethnic lens and attending to other non-ethnic-based forms of incorporation.

HK Christian migrants forming religious communities in the UK provide a relevant, contemporary, empirical case of social integration. Examining how existing local English religious communities accepted newcomers (of Chinese ethnicity) distinguished three types of incorporation models — integrated worship, hybrid worship, and one-church-dual

congregations. These capture the mechanisms bringing together newcomers and existing populations, reflecting the innovations of key social actors to help migrants settle into the host society and the ways in which new migrants transform local communities (Foner, 2024).

Data and method

This research focuses on three English-speaking Protestant churches in Sutton, Bristol, and Reading, all of which have welcomed HK migrants since late 2019. I have used pseudonyms for individuals and churches to protect informants' identities. Data were collected during fieldwork between November 2022 and November 2023. I visited all of these churches, attending multiple services at each of them, including regular Sunday services and special services such as family worship and baptisms. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 informants, including church pastors, ministers, and congregants of these churches. They included 10 English-speaking locals and 12 HK migrants. Each interview lasted between one and 1½ hours.

Additionally, I observed interactions among congregants and engaged in casual conversations with some of them at tea and coffee sessions after the services. These discussions primarily revolved around the reasons HK congregants chose their respective churches, whether they fit into local churches, and how local and long-standing congregants perceived HK Christian migrants.

Inter-ethnic migrant incorporation: Processes, conditions and transformations

Many HK migrants in the UK viewed churches as an accessible gateway to connect with and seek support from the Cantonese-speaking community. While it may seem natural for HK Christian migrants to join established Chinese Christian churches or emerging Hong Kong churches in the UK due to familiarity and a sense of home attachment, not all preferred to join a church of the same ethnic and cultural origin. Some HK migrants opted to become part of English-speaking churches. The trend of new migrants joining these local religious communities, and its resulting impact have received far less research attention than the rapid expansion of Chinese Christian churches across the UK.

In the three local English churches that welcomed both Christian and non-Christian HK migrants that are the focus of this study, I discovered three distinct integration methods and interrogated their underlying motivations. Despite differences in ethnic origins, sense of belonging, and length of residence in the host country, these individuals were brought together by sharing certain religious beliefs that took precedence over linguistic differences and cultural barriers. Importantly, these integration processes and outcomes were not natural occurrences but resulted from deliberate actions by social actors within a given context. They were influenced by a nationwide movement in the host society encouraging migrant incorporation, the vision and leadership of lead clergy, the agency of elite migrants, and the availability of material resources supporting new migrants. Understanding these integration processes and dynamics and investigating the conditions that underpin their possibilities and extent can provide insights into the prospects of migrant assimilation and incorporation.

National HK–UK welcome initiative

On 1 July 2020, the day following the imposition of a national security law on HK, then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a special immigration pathway for HK citizens holding BN(O) passports to live, work, and settle in the UK (Wintour, 2020). This initiative:

..... delivers on the UK’s historic and moral commitment to the people of Hong Kong who chose to retain their ties to the UK by taking up BN(O) status in 1997. It provides them with a pathway to live in the UK should they choose to do so. BN(O) status holders have had their rights and freedoms restricted by the National Security Legislation imposed by the Chinese government and it is right that we change the entitlements in the UK which are attached to their status (UK Government, 2021).

The new HK BN(O) immigration route was more than just a political-legal construct granting HK citizens settlement status in the UK; it was accompanied by an active state-sponsored campaign to facilitate HK newcomers’ integration into the UK community that was significant for these new migrants’ reception in the host country. The British government launched the HK–UK Welcome Programme, a dedicated support package providing practical information, government funding, and tailored services to HK BN(O) visa holders settling in the UK in April 2021 (UK Government, 2021). Administered by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the programme mobilises government agencies and non-governmental social actors to deliver a range of activities to enable new arrivals from HK to “quickly integrate and contribute to local communities” (UK Government, 2021). At the national level, an online welcome pack was assembled to help new arrivals from HK access important information. The 51-page practical guide, available in English and traditional Chinese characters (which are familiar to HK people), contains information on the new BN(O) visa, local doctor registration, voter registration, taxation, accessing local services, applying for jobs, and types of schools and application procedures. Links to useful websites are also provided.

Public funds were allocated to various initiatives to facilitate the integration of HK migrants into UK society despite the UK experiencing a period of economic downturn and public finance challenges, especially resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2021, the UK government announced over £43 million (~US\$54 million) funding for local authorities, earmarked for targeted assistance for Hong Kongers, including English language courses and housing cost support. In addition, 12 welcome hubs were established within the existing “Strategic Migration Partnerships” throughout the UK, which received additional funding to provide coordinated support and practical advice on employment, school applications, healthcare services, and business start-ups (UK Government, 2021). The government also introduced grants to encourage voluntary, community, and social enterprises to organise projects supporting HK migrants in areas such as mental well-being, job opportunities, and social cohesion. For example, 47 projects focussing on one or more support areas, including English language skills, employment access, mental and physical health services, housing access, and support for specific groups such as children, young people, and the elderly, received £2.6 million (~US\$3.3 million) between July 2023 and March 2024 (UK Government, 2023).

A significant component of this nationwide welcome programme involved preparing churches to receive new arrivals from HK. This initiative was led by Welcome Churches, a non-profit organisation whose mission is to assist refugees and asylum seekers through the work of local churches and Christians running projects nationwide to raise awareness of the needs of people seeking refuge and promote their integration into local communities (Welcome Churches, 2024). Following the announcement of the HK BN(O) immigration route, Welcome Churches launched a dedicated UK/HK project involving a network of churches and organisations supporting Hong Kongers arriving in the UK. A key initiative is a welcome course featuring six weekly videos (with Chinese subtitles) introducing life in the UK, accompanied by quizzes and discussions. Many churches utilise these free materials when welcoming new migrants from HK. Additionally, the UK/HK project website provides an online map displaying the locations of different churches, their contact details and language information, and information on festivals, activities, employment, healthcare, and schools, such as a series of webinars on job skills, taxation, and housing options. The UK/HK project also hosted Friendship Festivals in 17 cities across the UK between May 2022 and June 2023, bringing together churches, charities, HK migrant groups, and local councils to build closer relationships (Welcome Churches, 2023).

The UK's nationwide welcome to HK migrants is a significant factor in understanding migrant incorporation and integration. As Portes and Rumbaut (2014) noted, government policies represent the initial phase of incorporation as they determine the acceptable scale of inflows. Their varying approaches — exclusion, passive acceptance, or active engagement — further influence how migrants are received and the resources available to them (Portes & Rumbaut, 2014). The host society's friendly stance towards incoming HK migrants and the array of tools and resources assembled to assist them in settling into the UK create a migrant-friendly atmosphere and environment. Local English churches play a crucial role in the welcome initiative. Welcome Churches' initiative resulted in around 600 churches of different denominations in the UK pledging to be "Hong Kong-ready" (a term used by Welcome Churches) to welcome HK migrants into their communities by August 2021 (Sherwood, 2021). Several "Hong Kong-ready" churches emerged as key facilitators in incorporating HK migrants into the host society.

Sutton: Integrated worship

Sutton, an outer London borough, is approximately 16 kilometres south of central London. Sutton has been a chosen destination by many HK families since the introduction of the HK BN(O) immigration route. An unofficial record suggests that around 4,000 new residents in Sutton are from HK, earning the town the nickname "Little Hong Kong" (Day, 2023). Unlike other cities or university towns with large numbers of Chinese students, Sutton had no established Chinese Christian churches, explaining why HK Christians settling in Sutton quickly established their own HK Christian church.²

However, some HK migrants in Sutton opted to join local English Christian churches. The weekly Sunday services at Church X, affiliated with the Church of England, are attended by

approximately 120 congregants from 19 different nationalities and various backgrounds. In early 2020, the church began welcoming new arrivals from HK. By May 2023, 12 Hong Kongers became regular congregants. As Church X offered only one Sunday service each week, new HK migrants joined the native congregants in the service. The church leaders believed in encouraging migrants and non-migrants to interact in the same space to foster mutual understanding over time, so had made no plans to create a separate HK congregation or a Cantonese service alongside the English one. For example, the English kids' school (or Sunday school) is held during the Sunday service, where children of different ethnicities come together to play and learn about the Bible. One of the primary goals of some HK migrants was to adapt to their new environment quickly. They considered joining English-speaking faith communities and forming new social relationships as a strategy to achieve this. Grace, an HK migrant who joined Church X two months after arriving in the UK, shared:

I want my children to learn English and to be able to communicate with local children. This will help with their transition from Hong Kong to the UK. Attending the kids' church and other children's activities in this church helps to achieve this.

The warm reception and support offered by Church X also attracted newcomers from HK. The church organised orientation sessions for new HK members, during which they screened videos developed by Welcome Churches. During these sessions, Reverend John, the church's British vicar, also introduced himself to the newcomers and answered their questions related to settling in the UK. Anna, a recent migrant from HK with over 20 years of experience as an educator, missionary, and preacher, was another key figure. She joined the church as a congregant and later took on the role of a lay minister. Her proficiency in English, knowledge, and experience serving Christian communities in HK quickly became an asset to both the Sutton church and the new arrivals from HK. Anna often acted as a translator, facilitating communication between Reverend John, other local people, and HK migrants lacking English proficiency. Some months after settling in Sutton, Anna initiated a weekly evening conversational English class at the church for HK migrants, involving a local church member, enabling migrants to practise conversational English and discuss British life and culture, including table manners, football, and festivals.

Anna's language proficiency, experience, and dedication allowed her to act as a bridge between the church leader, the local people, and the new migrants. Eager to welcome the HK community into the church, Reverend John was receptive to many of Anna's suggestions to help HK Christians integrate into the local church community, including providing a Chinese service booklet to assist them in following the liturgy. Anna also led a weekly Bible study fellowship for HK migrants. On one occasion, a vicar from HK participated in a service at Church X, following which he led a sharing session with fellow migrants from HK. None of this would have been possible without Anna's connections.

During my several visits to this church, I observed the active participation of HK migrants in various church activities. At one Sunday service, a Hong Konger was among the three musicians leading hymn singing. During the service, some children from HK joined children

of other ethnicities in the side hall for activities designed for young children. After the service, two mothers from HK assisted in providing tea and coffee. Meanwhile, the church also adapted its practices to the needs of an increasingly international congregation. The traditional practice of congregants drinking wine directly from the chalice in Communion had been replaced by congregants receiving the bread in their hands and dipping it in the wine before consuming it — a common practice among Chinese Christians. This change was partly driven by hygiene considerations triggered by COVID-19 and reflected efforts to accommodate the culture and preferences of people who were not comfortable sharing a cup with strangers.

Bristol: Hybrid worship

Bristol, a city in the South West of England with a population of around 440,000 and situated about 190 kilometres from London, has long been a popular destination for migrants seeking a location that combines rich heritage with a lower cost of living. The Bristol Chinese Christian Church began as a fellowship in the 1990s, serving mainly Chinese students in the city's universities. Before the arrival of HK migrants in late 2019, the church had a congregation of approximately 150, but by the end of 2023, this exceeded 300. Most attended the Cantonese service on Sunday morning and the bilingual Cantonese and Mandarin service on Sunday afternoon, while about 20 joined the English service also in the afternoon (Bristol Chinese Christian Church, 2024).

The arrival of HK migrants not only increased the size of Chinese church congregations in Bristol. Several English-speaking churches in the city and the surrounding areas also saw a hike in attendees at Sunday services. Interview data revealed that by the end of 2023, at least 270 newly arrived Hong Kongers attended various English Christian churches in and around Bristol, exceeding the number of Hong Kongers attending Chinese Christian churches in the area and reflecting the preferences of this new group of HK migrants to be part of the local community. Church leaders' and elite migrants' actions also helped facilitate this integration process.

Church Y, an inter-denominational Christian church in Bristol, developed a new hybrid Sunday service incorporating both local and migrant elements. The hybrid service was held on the first and third Sunday of each month. It began with all congregants in the main hall, singing hymns and listening to Bible readings, all in English. After the Eucharist and church announcements, congregants separated into two simultaneous sessions held in different venues. Approximately 120 congregants, mainly English-speaking natives and migrants, remained in the main hall for an English sermon, while around 60 Cantonese-speaking congregants moved to a nearby room for a Cantonese sermon delivered by Reverend Luke, a retired pastor from HK who had recently moved to the UK. The Cantonese session also included Cantonese hymns and prayers, allowing HK migrants to worship in their native language.

This model of hybrid worship was the brainchild of Reverend Carl (a Briton), chief pastor of Church Y, and Reverend Luke. When HK migrants began settling in Bristol in 2020, Reverend Carl offered free English classes to migrants in his neighbourhood. After establishing trusted

relationships with these migrants, Reverend Carl wanted to invite them, their relatives and friends to his church. However, he recognised that the language barrier could pose a challenge for them to feel motivated and fully participate in his English-speaking church. While searching for a practical way to integrate these Cantonese-speaking Christians into his church, Reverend Carl was introduced to Reverend Luke by a Hong Konger in his English class. As a senior pastor in HK before emigrating to the UK, Reverend Luke had experience nurturing Christian churches of different denominations in HK.

Reverend Luke was a strong proponent of inter-ethnic social and religious integration and believed in creating opportunities that allowed new HK migrants to contribute to the local community for several reasons. Many local churches in the UK suffered from declining and ageing congregations, and young HK migrant families could help revitalise these churches. Additionally, ethnic-based migrant religious groups often struggle to sustain themselves in the long run. Historically, Chinese Christian churches serving the Chinese diaspora had benefitted from the influx of Chinese migrants during different immigration waves. Such growth in congregation size, boosted by periodic population mobility, had proven temporary in many places. Meanwhile, new blood from subsequent generations to sustain migrant churches was limited. Most second- and third-generation Chinese migrants do not face the same language barriers as the first wave of migrants and are more open to local practices and cultures after growing up in the host country. Some may even struggle to speak their native language. Given these circumstances, they have less incentive to remain in a migrant church. The declining participation of subsequent generations in immigrant churches is evident in some migrant communities (Kim & Pyle, 2004; Molteni & van Tubergen, 2022; Nelsen, 1974). Another issue with Chinese immigrant churches is their ethnocentric nature limiting their ability to recruit people from other backgrounds. As Reverend Luke explained:

How can you welcome people of other nationalities, and people who speak languages other than Chinese, into your community when it is dominated by one ethnicity? Some Chinese churches offer an English-speaking service, but it is primarily for the second- and third-generation Chinese who are fluent in English. If you were an English speaker, you have many other choices. Why would you choose to join the English ministry of a Chinese church? The congregation base of Chinese Christian churches is bound to be limited. This ethnic-based model is unsustainable.

The hybrid worship form met the needs of some HK Christians as they gradually participated in the local church community while still getting what they needed in terms of religious faith and worship. Michelle, a congregant attending the Cantonese session, expressed:

Even though my English is sufficient for daily communication, worshipping in my mother tongue feels more natural. Having been raised in Hong Kong, I read the Chinese Bible. I'm accustomed to hymns and prayers in Cantonese. I can express myself more freely in my native language.

Since starting the hybrid worship, Church Y also adapted its liturgical practices to the needs of the new HK cohort. For example, bilingual English and Cantonese hymns were sung at the Christmas service. Sociocultural events were also organised to bring together local people and migrants and give migrants new responsibilities inside the local church. For example, to celebrate the Lunar New Year, the broader church community held a party where traditional Chinese snacks were served. Julia, who helped out in church activities, commented:

People are very welcoming here. I am so happy that I could take on more roles to serve the church community. This is what I did with my church in Hong Kong. I feel I belong to this church, and my contribution is valued.

Since its inception in April 2022, the hybrid model had attracted an increasing number of HK Christians to Church Y. However, Reverend Luke viewed the adaptation as temporary with the ultimate goal of adopting the model of Church X, enabling local people and migrants to worship together. Social actors taking real actions to accommodate diversity, in addition to procedural change of the service, were essential to achieve this. As Matthew, a HK migrant living in Bristol, commented: “One needs to be extremely humble; humility, patience, and endurance are key when interacting with people from other cultures.”

Reading: One church, dual congregations

Reading is a town with a population of around 162,000 located 32 kilometres west of central London. Many HK migrants have chosen to settle there due to its comparatively low cost of living, excellent transport links, and job opportunities. While there are no official figures for the number of Hong Kongers who have moved to Reading recently, interview data revealed that by the end of 2023, around 500 HK migrants (350 adults and 150 youth and children), attended the Cantonese congregations newly established within a local English Christian church. This figure excludes HK migrants attending Chinese Christian churches in Reading and other non-Christian HK migrants in the area.

The early HK arrivals initially dispersed among three existing Chinese Christian churches in Reading, mostly attended by Chinese students at the University of Reading and long-time migrants. However, the experiences of HK migrants at these churches were not entirely positive due to linguistic and political differences. For example, services in one Chinese Christian church in Reading were conducted in Mandarin and switched to both Mandarin and Cantonese after more new HK migrants joined. In a typical service, an interpreter translated each line of prayers and the sermon delivered in Mandarin into Cantonese and vice versa, depending on the native language of the pastor. Many HK migrants found this kind of service protracted, and existing Mandarin-speaking congregants were also less receptive to the change. But more than just the language used, some HK interviewees expressed that the beliefs and values held by the incumbent congregants at these Chinese churches did not represent them. When prayers were dedicated to the “China motherland”, and there was no mention of HK’s changing political situation, some HK Christians felt alienated. Intra-ethnic tensions within certain Chinese Christian churches heightened after the arrival of HK migrants to the UK (To & Chan, 2023). Furthermore, the rapid growth in HK migrants overwhelmed existing congregations, resulting

in overcrowding and straining resources. In short, incorporating large numbers of HK migrants into these Chinese Christian churches was not sustainable.

In 2021, as the number of HK arrivals continued to grow, Graham, a pastor at a Chinese Christian church in Reading, recognised the need to find a new home for new HK migrants. Graham had lived and worked in Singapore and HK before arriving in the UK in early 2019, where his first post was to serve in a Chinese Christian church in Reading. Instead of establishing an independent Hong Konger church, as some had done in other parts of the UK, Graham approached Reverend Paul, the British vicar of Church Z, and explored how the HK Christian migrants could become part of the local Christian community. Reverend Paul shared Graham's vision for one integrated church — “integrated in terms of planning, finance, governance, and leadership”. “Our hearts felt very open and we were ready to support the Hong Kongers given the recent history,” commented Reverend Paul. “The inclusion of a large non-native congregation within our church is indeed an ‘experiment’ and a new ‘venture’ for us. We knew God is in all of this.”

While aiming for one integrated church, Reverend Paul, pastor Graham, and other church leaders at Church Z noticed the strong need for Cantonese worship, given that the migrant group included some older people with limited command of English. The number of new arrivals was also stunning: 500 HK migrants compared with 150 existing native congregants in the church. Given the large numbers and the likely language barriers, asking the HK group to join existing English services was not feasible. These challenges indicated the need for separate congregations and services. In April 2022, an Hong Kong ministry within Church Z offering a Sunday afternoon Cantonese service, serving around 350 congregants led by Graham was initiated. In June 2023, another Cantonese congregation (also part of Church Z) was inaugurated in a nearby English-speaking church. Around 100 adults and 50 youth and children — an ever-increasing number — attended the Sunday morning Cantonese service.

Unlike Church X in Sutton and Church Y in Bristol, where local British and HK migrants attend the entire service (or part of it) together, Church Z featured a new HK congregation (with a Cantonese service) nested in an English Christian church. Despite separate congregations, inter-ethnic social integration still took place at Church Z, albeit in different forms. Reverend Paul preached at the Cantonese service and met with HK congregants once a month. In special services that were attended by local British people and HK migrants, a mix of English and Cantonese hymns was sung, and a Cantonese summary of the English sermon was provided. Importantly, Hong Kongers assumed leadership, management, and administrative roles in the church. One of the four HK pastors serving the Hong Kong ministry became a church council member, with a greater role and responsibilities in managing church matters, such as finances and outreach programmes. Two Hong Kongers were employed as administrators in the church, one of them backstopping the church's treasurer. One Hong Konger also served as an independent auditor for the church. At the organisational level, the Hong Kong ministry shared certain running costs of the church and contributed to the church's general fund. At the time of the interview, there were plans to organise English and Cantonese carol singing led by local people and HK migrants. A combined worship of the English congregation and the Hong Kong

ministry was also in the pipeline. As Reverend Paul put it, “all of this, though taking place gradually, moved towards realising ‘one church’.”

What drives migrant incorporation?

These examples of English Christian churches welcoming new migrants from HK illustrate the various modes of migrant incorporation and the circumstances that gave rise to them, demonstrating the possibility of inter-ethnic pathways of incorporation and their facilitation under certain conditions. Church leaders described their models of incorporating HK migrants as “processes” and “experiments”, initially driven by a divine calling to support those in need, regardless of their ethnicity or background. These varying models reflected the resources available to the churches, the visions of their leaders, the agency of elite migrants, and differing local dynamics. Moreover, these models required ongoing adaptation to respond to changing circumstances, serving as procedures to transition migrants from outsiders to integral local community members. Such social change involves not only migrants adopting dominant practices and rules of engagement but also dominant ethnic groups adapting to new changes brought by migrants (Crul, 2023).

Examining the processes of inter-ethnic migrant incorporation in these religious settings reveals certain facilitating conditions. First, the national initiative to welcome migrants from HK, coupled with material aid and support provided to social groups assisting these newcomers, sent a powerful message to the public to embrace these new migrants. UK Church leaders were also determined to learn from history and not repeat the mistakes of discriminating against black Caribbean migrants to the UK between the late 1940s and early 1970s, known as the Windrush Generation (Sherwood, 2021). Many churches in areas where new HK migrants settled took a proactive approach in preparing for the arrival of Hong Kongers, rather than passively waiting for them to reach out. All three churches in this study utilised Welcome Churches materials as part of their orientation for Hong Kongers. The author also observed the acceptance of these newcomers by the majority group at Sunday services, as evidenced by collaboration between Hong Kongers and local people in preparing the service, and informal chatting among congregants of different ethnic origins at the coffee and tea corner. The supportive stance of the British public and community groups was partly driven by the understanding that China’s hardline approach to HK was a major reason for Hong Kongers leaving their homeland. British and international media widely reported the social protests in HK in 2019, the confrontations between the police and protesters, and the implementation of the National Security Law in 2020, coverage that contributed to the British government’s narrative of fulfilling its “moral commitments to the people in Hong Kong” (Wintour, 2020).

Second, the clergy and elite migrants played a pivotal role in shaping the processes of migrant incorporation. The clergy, including pastors and other ministers in these three churches, were open to experimenting with new forms of worship and altering long-standing practices to accommodate the needs of newcomers. While religious organisations are generally perceived as welcoming to all, irrespective of their backgrounds, these cases demonstrate that a genuine and substantial welcome requires more than simply opening doors to outsiders. It necessitates innovative approaches, experimentation with new procedures, adaptations to local contexts and

reconfiguring practices that have been in place for decades to facilitate social integration. Reflecting on his church's experience, Reverend Paul remarked:

After COVID, we had a strong feeling about not going back to where we were, but reimagined church life. So we reorganised our worship services, we invested in making our church more open and welcoming, we even built an operations team. It was when the Hong Kong ministry came about then we realised that we are expanding our reimagining massively, integrating personnel and finances as our relationships grow.

British clergy in the UK generally had a limited understanding of Chinese or HK-style Christian worship and the challenges HK migrants faced. Therefore, elite migrants, who possessed the social and cultural capital to act as a bridge between non-migrants and migrants, became critical. Factors such as ethnicity, language proficiency, emotional attachment, work experience, and personality contributed to successfully bridging the majority group and newcomers. For example, Anna, a lay minister at Church X in Sutton, had previously served as a missionary in HK. Her bilingual proficiency in English and Chinese, coupled with her dedication to helping new migrants become valued members of the church community, significantly contributed to transforming the Sutton church into a migrant-friendly and internationally-oriented institution, serving a congregation of 19 different nationalities. Similarly, the hybrid worship model developed in the Bristol English Christian church was heavily influenced by Reverend Luke's conviction that inter-ethnic, rather than mono-ethnic worship, was the way forward to build sustainable church communities. He advocated for new HK migrants to contribute to local churches and other communities. Pastor Graham in Reading was crucial in establishing a Hong Kong ministry within a native church. Having lived and worked in Singapore and HK, he was fluent in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. His ability to gain the trust of HK migrants and local British people made him a pivotal actor in connecting the English church, the Hong Kong ministry, and the other Chinese Christian churches, which mainly served earlier and long-time Chinese migrants.

Third, the church's style and worship form are significant. All three churches adopted less dogmatic and informal liturgical practices that appealed to certain HK migrants who preferred fewer traditions in religious services. Despite being part of the Church of England, which has a long history and tradition, Church X in Sutton incorporated many contemporary elements into its Sunday service, such as blending traditional and contemporary hymns, enhanced by rhythmic guitar and keyboard accompaniment. Reverend John also showcased his musical talents during the service. Dressed casually, he played the guitar and sang at the service's start. Church Z in Reading offered two distinct English Sunday services, one traditional and one contemporary, to cater to different preferences. Reverend Paul said that the church downplayed their denominational link but prioritised maintaining flexibility in liturgies to appeal to a broader spectrum of believers. Church Y in Bristol was an independent entity, unaffiliated with any Christian denominations.

While these three churches shared common characteristics, their different integration models suggest underlying factors. Conversations with the pastors and elite migrants from these churches revealed that the leaders' visions and the capacity of these churches significantly influenced the eventual models. Amongst various factors, the size of the HK cohort seemed to

dictate the different models adopted. In Reading, as the number of HK congregants was four times that of the English congregation, having an integrated service (such as Church X in Sutton) was not feasible due to space limitations. Therefore, a separate HK congregation was needed; meanwhile, the church leadership team permitted and encouraged integration in other areas of the church. In Church Y in Bristol, the main worship hall was at maximum capacity after HK migrants joined the hybrid worship. There was an agreed cap of 60 on the number of HK attendees. Apart from space restrictions, the limit was designed to prevent the Cantonese community from outnumbering the existing English-speaking congregation. Reverend Luke commented, “We aim to facilitate the integration of HK Christians into the local church community, not to have them outnumber the native groups. If there is more demand, we will explore organising hybrid worship in other English churches”. Church X in Sutton had an international mix of congregants, and the HK congregation remained relatively small compared to the entire congregation, making sense to encourage them to participate in the English service. Meanwhile, additional support was made available to those with language difficulties. The churches’ capacity also conditioned their incorporation pathway. Reverend John in Sutton confessed that finding a suitable pastor was a barrier to establishing a Cantonese-speaking Sunday service. Cantonese-speaking pastors in the UK are scarce, with many already serving in Chinese Christian churches. Reverend John and other church leaders believed a sustainable model would support HK migrants participating in the existing English service.

The impact of each of these emerging models of incorporation is beneficial to the settlement of HK migrants in the UK in different ways. The hybrid worship model in Bristol facilitates the gradual adaptation of migrants as they transition from newcomers to members of the local community. The limited Cantonese services serve as an interim arrangement; more HK migrants are expected to join the main English congregation over time. The integrated worship model in Sutton, where all new HK arrivals join the main English worship from the start, expands contact between new migrants and the existing population. Migrant families find this setting conducive to a quicker adaptation to local culture and practices. Finally, the one-church-dual-congregations model in Reading, which offers weekly Cantonese services, serves the needs of the large numbers of older migrants there, who are less proficient in English. This church encourages Hong Kongers to take up various roles in managing the church, thus representing a much deeper form of migrant incorporation among the three models.

Conclusion

Recent Christian migrants from HK to the UK have employed various strategies to integrate into Christian communities in their new environment. Some have opted to join established Chinese Christian churches in the UK, others have chosen to remain within the familiar confines of fellow HK migrant groups, and yet others have decided to engage with English-speaking religious organisations. This chapter explores three English Christian churches in the UK, revealing their diverse methods for incorporating new HK migrants. Drawing on the migrant incorporation literature, I examined how these new migrants developed social networks and became part of the host society through participation in religious activities. The modes of inter-ethnic incorporation observed — integrated worship, hybrid worship, as well as one-church-dual-congregations — appear to be facilitated by the host society government’s

policies, orchestrated by key actors and elites, shaped by the particular agency of religious organisations in question, and influenced by local contexts. The models discussed in this chapter reflect emerging patterns of interaction between migrants and non-migrants. Further research will be necessary to understand the sustainability of these models. Additionally, more research is needed to determine whether these examples of social integration within religious settings aid or impede migrant incorporation in other areas, such as economic well-being, political participation, and communal life in the neighbourhood. Further research could also explore the relationships between these various migrant incorporation processes and generational persistence and/or change in religious participation among HK migrants.

References

- Adler, L. H., Tapia, M., & Turner, L. (Eds.). (2014). *Mobilizing against inequality: Unions, immigrant workers, and the crisis of capitalism*. Cornell University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801470240>.
- Alba, R., & Nee, V. (2003). *Remaking the American mainstream: Assimilation and contemporary immigration*. Harvard University Press.
- Baumann, M., & Salentin, K. (2006). Migrant religiousness and social incorporation: Tamil Hindus from Sri Lanka in Germany. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 21(3), 297–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537900600925958>
- Bishin, B. G., & Klofstad, C. A. (2012). The political incorporation of Cuban Americans: Why won't little Havana turn blue? *Political Research Quarterly*, 65(3), 586–599.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912911414589>
- Black, J. H. (2011). Immigrant and minority political incorporation in Canada: A review with some reflections on Canadian-American comparison possibilities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55(9), 1160–1188. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211407843>
- Bond, R. (2022). Religion and migration. In R. Bond (Ed.), *Understanding international migration: Social, cultural and historical contexts* (pp. 141–163). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16463-7_7
- Bristol Chinese Christian Church. (2024, December 28). *Online church bulletin*. Bristol Chinese Christian Church. <http://www.bristolccc.org/online-church-bulletins/>
- Burgess, K. (2023, October 21). Britain's fastest-growing Christian services held in Chinese. *The Times*. https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britains-fastest-growing-christian-services-held-in-chinese-0j5dgtt7m?gad_source=1
- Cao, N. (2005). The church as a surrogate family for working class immigrant Chinese youth: An ethnography of segmented assimilation. *Sociology of Religion*, 66(2), 183–200.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/4153085>
- Castells, M. (1975). Immigrant workers and class struggles in advanced Capitalism: The Western European experience. *Politics & Society*, 5(1), 33–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/003232927500500102>
- Castles, S., & Miller, M. J. (2009). *The age of migration*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Connor, P. (2014). *Immigrant faith: Patterns of immigrant religion in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe*. New York University Press.

- Crul, M. (2023). Integration into diversity theory renewing – once again – assimilation theory. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(1), 257–271.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2258688>
- Day, O. (2023, October 27). Inside Little Hong Kong: How a single London borough is attracting thousands of families and students fleeing China as influencers use photos of Poundland, Starbucks and Lidl to entice others to the area. *Daily Mail*.
<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12676059/Inside-Little-Hong-Kong-single-London-borough-attracting-thousands-families-students-fleeing-China-influencers-use-photos-Poundland-Starbucks-Lidl-entice-area.html>
- Ebaugh, H. R., & Chafetz, J. S. (2000). *Religion and the new immigrants: Continuities and adaptations in immigrant congregations*. AltaMira Press.
- Foley, M. W., & Hoge, D. R. (2007). *Religion and the new immigrants: Social capital, identity, and civic engagement*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195188707.001.0001>
- Foner, N. (2024). Immigration and the transformation of American society: Politics, the economy, and popular culture. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(1), 114–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2236906>
- Frederiks, M. (2016). Religion, migration, and identity: A conceptual and theoretical exploration. In M. Frederiks & D. Nagy (Eds.), *Religion, migration, and identity: Methodological and theological Explorations* (pp. 9–29).
- Gallo, E. (2014). *Migration and religion in Europe: comparative perspectives on South Asian experiences* (1 ed.). Ashgate Publishing Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315595320>
- Gemignani, R., & Olupona, J. O. m. K. h. (2007). *African immigrant religions in America*. New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814762585>
- Glick Schiller, N., & Çağlar, A. (2009). Towards a comparative theory of locality in migration studies: Migrant incorporation and city scale. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(2), 177–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830802586179>
- Glick Schiller, N., Çağlar, A., & Guldbrandsen, T. (2006). Beyond the ethnic lens: Locality, globality, and born-again incorporation. *American Ethnologist*, 33(4), 612–633.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2006.33.4.612>
- Gordon, M. M. (1964). *Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion and national origins*. Oxford University Press.
- Henaway, M. (2023). *Essential work, disposable workers: Migration, capitalism, and class*.

- Henkel, R., & Knippenberg, H. (2005). Secularisation and the rise of religious pluralism: Main features of the changing religious landscape of Europe. In H. Knippenberg (Ed.), *The changing religious landscape of Europe* (pp. 1–13). Het Spinhuis.
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4959.2008.264_5.x
- Herberg, W. (1960). *Protestant. Catholic. Jew: An essay in American religious sociology*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Hirschman, C. (2004). The role of religion in the origins and adaptation of immigrant groups in the United States. *The International Migration Review*, 38(3), 1206–1233.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00233.x>
- Hong Kong Government. (2022, September 7). *Hong Kong Yearbook 2021*. Hong Kong Government. <https://www.yearbook.gov.hk/2021/en/>
- Huang, Y. (2023). *The Bible and the Chinese community in Britain*. The British & Foreign Bible Society and The London School of Theology.
- Kim, H. H., & Pyle, R. E. (2004). An exception to the exception: Second-generation Korean American church participation. *Social Compass*, 51(3), 321–333.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768604045633>
- Laubenthal, B. (2023). Introduction: Assimilation, integration or transnationalism? An overview of theories of migrant incorporation. *International migration*, 61(1), 84–91.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13118>
- Martiniello, M., & Rath, J. (Eds.). (2014). *An introduction to immigrant incorporation studies: European perspectives*. Amsterdam University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt128780b>.
- Min, P. G. (1992). The structure and social functions of Korean immigrant churches in the United States. *The International Migration Review*, 26(4), 1370–1394.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2546887>
- Molteni, F., & van Tubergen, F. (2022). Immigrant generation and religiosity: A study of Christian immigrant groups in 33 European countries. *European Societies*, 24(5), 605–627. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2044067>
- Nee, V., & Sanders, J. (2001). Understanding the diversity of immigrant incorporation: A forms-of-capital model. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 24(3), 386–411.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870020036710>
- Nelsen, H. M. (1974). Ethnicity, Americanization, and religious attendance. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79, 906–922.

- Portes, A., Escobar, C., & Arana, R. (2008). Bridging the gap: Transnational and ethnic organizations in the political incorporation of immigrants in the United States. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(6), 1056–1090. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701874827>
- Portes, A., & Rumbaut, R. G. (2014). *Immigrant America: A portrait* (4th ed.). University of California Press.
- Sherwood, H. (2021, August 14). 600 UK churches sign up to welcome Christian arrivals from Hong Kong. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/14/600-uk-churches-sign-up-to-welcome-christian-arrivals-from-hong-kong>
- Statham, P., & Foner, N. (2024). Assimilation and integration in the twenty-first century: Where have we been and where are we going? Introduction to a special issue in honour of Richard Alba. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(1), 4–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2293537>
- To, Y., & Chan, Y. W. (2023). Same God but different? Politico-religious dynamics and the new Hong Kong Christian diaspora in the United Kingdom. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231194189>
- Tung, J. W. (2022, June 9). 基督教華僑佈道會 COCM 總幹事呂子峰牧師: 英國華人教會面面觀 [Reverend Henry Lu of Chinese Overseas Christian Mission: About Chinese Christian churches in the UK] (No.67)[Audio podcast episode] In *Missional Discipleship*. <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=VcK019ul7fw>
- UK Government. (2021, April 8). *National welcome for Hong Kong arrivals*.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/national-welcome-for-hong-kong-arrivals>
- UK Government. (2023, June 26). *Hong Kong BN(O) welcome programme: VCSE grant recipients Year 3 (2023/24)*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/hong-kong-bno-welcome-programme-vcse-grant-recipients-year-3-202324>
- UK Home Office. (2024, August 22). *National statistics: Safe and legal (humanitarian) routes to the UK*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-june-2024/safe-and-legal-humanitarian-routes-to-the-uk>
- Welcome Churches. (2023, March 31). *Report and financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2023*. Welcome Churches. https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search?p_p_id=uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=2&p_p_state=maximized&p_p_mode=view&p_p_resource_id=%2

Faccounts-

resource&p_p_cacheability=cacheLevelPage&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_objectiveId=A14312393&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_priv_r_p_mvcRenderCommandName=%2Ffull-print&_uk_gov_ccew_onereg_charitydetails_web_portlet_CharityDetailsPortlet_priv_r_p_organisationNumber=5115188

Welcome Churches. (2024). *Welcome churches*. <https://welcomechurches.org/>

Wintour, P. (2020, July 1). China is breaking Hong Kong treaty with UK, says Boris Johnson. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jul/01/china-is-breaking-hong-kong-treaty-with-uk-says-boris-johnson>

Yang, F. (1999). *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, assimilation, and adhesive identities*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271031231>

Notes

¹ Cantonese is a Chinese dialect which is spoken by people from HK, Macau and the Guangdong area of mainland China. Mandarin is spoken by most people from mainland China.

² Author's field observation and interview, Sutton, 23 November 2023.

