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Chinese Diaspora Christian Community in Britain: A Survey

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Introduction

I’ve been asked to offer a survey of British Chinese Christianity today. However, before I do that, I thought it would be worthwhile to see an overview of the four major periods which have brought shape to what we have now.¹

Periods	Sino-British Relations	Blatant Sinophobia	Christianity
1800s–1940s Napoleonic and World Wars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860) • UK need for cheap seafarers • China need for modernisation (=education) 	Home Office forced deportations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1919 labour disputes (~800 ppl.) • 1945/1946 labour and housing shortage (1,500+ ppl.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese Students’ Christian Union (est. 1908, UK-wide) • Gospel Hall Chinese Mission, Liverpool (est. 1910)
1950s–1970s: Post-War British Appetite for Chinese Food	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British Nationality Act (1948); Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962, 1968) • Cultural Revolution causing refugee and economic crisis in HK • Chinese Vietnamese refugees 	Minimal blatant Sinophobia due to growth in Chinese catering, because... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographically dispersed to avoid competition in catering • Not recruited into wider labour market 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese Overseas Christian Mission (est. 1950, UK-wide) • Chinese Church in London (est. 1951) • Liverpool Chinese Gospel Church (est. 1953)
1980s–2010s: Rise of China and Sino-British Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China’s economic reforms • Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984) for return of Hong Kong in 1997 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Debate around British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act (1990) • Foot-and-mouth outbreak (2001) blamed on Chinese catering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 200+ new independent Chinese churches • 15 new Chinese Methodist churches
2014–present: New Exodus and Promise Land?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Umbrella Movement (2014) • Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Movement (2019–20) • Hong Kong BN(O) Visa route (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘China virus’ • Mainland Chinese–Hong Kong Chinese intra-ethnic tensions transplanted to the UK 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Hong Kongese churches in the UK • New Cantonese fellowships in CofE and RCC

¹ For a fuller account, see Alexander Chow, “British Immigration Policies and British Chinese Christianity,” in *Ecclesial Diversity in Chinese Christianity*, edited by Alexander Chow and Easten Law (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 99–120.

We can notice how each of these periods is demarcated by significant sociopolitical events related to Sino-British relations. The first of these, of course, was the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860), which erupted out of British financial interests in trafficking opium into China, despite the Chinese empire’s campaign to protect the livelihood of its people by prohibiting its trade. The first of these wars ended with the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, in which British negotiators forced China to open five trading ports and annexed Hong Kong—what would eventually be one of the last British colonies by the end of the 20th century. From that point until today, Sino-British relations have been complexly linked.

These Sino-British relations would have a knock-on effect on the Chinese who came to the United Kingdom. All have experienced some form of racial microaggressions. But most prominently, we can see each of our periods where blatant Sinophobia has existed. It is worth highlighting one period—in the 1950s–70s when blatant Sinophobia did *not* exist. In all other instances, racism was experienced most dramatically when Chinese were perceived to be taking away jobs, housing, and health from mainstream populations—health and livelihood. The basic physiological and safety needs in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. And in this one period of the 1950s–70s, when the British public had extra financial means and were intrigued by exotic Chinese food, things were virtually calm. Yet this was because 85% of the Chinese employed in the country were in the catering business, and so they weren’t generally seen as competition to the mainstream population.

Now my talk is not all about racism. I highlight this in part to demonstrate the ways in which racism in the United Kingdom—contrary to the dominant discourse—is not just Black and White.² But furthermore, and especially for this event, it is to demonstrate how Christianity in the United Kingdom is not just Black and White. And what we see in each of these four

² Whilst the discourse on racism in the United Kingdom is still very focused on Black and White issues, a classic discussion of Sinophobia in America is Frank H. Wu’s *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). A recent attempt at producing a Christian engagement with Asian American identity and racism is Jonathan Tran’s *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

periods are, on the one hand, waves of influx of Chinese migrants, most of whom were likely not Christians, and, on the other hand, waves of creation of new churches and networks to minister to them. Most of these have been Chinese-led and created out of a lack of interest from mainstream churches.

I will focus my time on two of the most significant sociological changes in recent decades amongst the ethnic Chinese in the United Kingdom: on the one hand, the surge in Hong Kong migrants since the January 2021 introduction of the Hong Kong BN(O) visa route; and on the other hand, the steady growth of bicultural British Chinese—1.5 generation migrants, and second, third, or subsequent generation British Born Chinese.³

Hong Kong Ready

First, Hong Kong migration since January 2021. We should begin by recognizing the very positive contributions of an organization like Welcome Churches which has had a UKHK initiative encouraging British churches to be “Hong Kong Ready.” Krish Kandiah has held high-level conversations with the British government, and secured government funding to benefit the transition of many Hong Kongers to the United Kingdom. It has also heightened the profile of Hong Kong migration to British Christians. This has been a monumental task in itself, including training British Christians about cross-cultural ministry to Hong Kongers as they are arriving on their doorsteps. Mindful of this, I am hesitant of some of the language being employed when speaking about Hong Kong migrants.

For instance, this wave of migration is often juxtaposed against Windrush, noting the failures of the British church in “making people from the Caribbean feel welcome in our nation

³ As I will later discuss, “British Born Chinese,” as well as its Scottish and Irish equivalents (Scottish Born Chinese and Irish Born Chinese), is an imperfect term. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, I will use it as a general umbrella term for the group of individuals I am meaning to speak of.

and in our churches.”⁴ Firstly, whilst past failings should be acknowledged, the language underscores guilt and regret as motivating factors to respond. That is, we should welcome Hong Kongers now because we were unwelcoming to Caribbeans in the past. Whilst I think Kandiah is rightly mindful of the past as a source for lessons learned, this can lead to a faulty logic whereby we care for newcomers as a way to atone for our past sins. Secondly, the focus on Windrush misses the historic patterns of Sinophobia. What about the 800 Chinese men illegally deported in 1919 or the 1,500 in the 1945—many husbands and fathers were dragged onto ships without their families’ knowledge, seen as taking up valuable jobs and housing from the mainstream population.⁵ Or we may consider the ways many British churches have overlooked or, worst, discriminated against Chinese populations that came in earlier waves. For a large part, the 200+ British Chinese churches exist today because mainstream British churches didn’t welcome or engage these earlier generations.

Another limitation has been in the language of “integration.” Kandiah, for instance, explains that UKHK encourages integration in three areas: social integration, educational integration, and professional integration.⁶ Likewise, the British government has published guidance for local authorities “to support integration and promote community cohesion,” especially given that “new arrivals to the UK can struggle to find opportunities to interact and spend meaningful time with British people and other UK residents beyond their own migrant community.”⁷ Whilst integration is quite important for the immediate practical concerns of any migrant, Hong Kongers notwithstanding, the language implies a one-directional flow of change of foreigner integrating with the domestic society. There seems to be little discussion of how

⁴ OMF International, “Krish Kandiah on Welcoming Hong Kongers,” *OMF Billions* (September–December 2022), <https://billions.omf.org/krish-kandiah-and-welcoming-hong-kongers/>, archived at <https://archive.ph/kbpDn>.

⁵ Gregor Benton and Edmund Terence Gomez, *The Chinese in Britain, 1800–Present: Economy, Transnationalism, Identity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 26–31.

⁶ OMF International, “Krish Kandiah on Welcoming Hong Kongers.”

⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, “Hong Kong UK welcome programme – guidance for local authorities,” 8 April 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/hong-kong-uk-welcome-programme-guidance-for-local-authorities>, archived at <https://archive.ph/8Ndks>.

British society, culture, or, indeed, Christianity are shaped by the mass migration of Hong Kongers. How is British society integrating with these newcomers? How is British Christianity evolving with the evolving population? Is Britain willing to be transformed by these changes or, several years or decades down the line, will these migrants eventually be seen as a liability or nuisance and, therefore, once again expelled?

We should consider the magnitude of the Hong Kong BN(O) visa route for the British social and religious landscape. From January 2021 until December 2022, the UK government has issued 153,708 visas for Hong Kong BN(O) passport holders.⁸ Based on the last complete United Kingdom census figures of 2011,⁹ this means we are looking at around a 30–35% increase in the ethnic Chinese population based on new Hong Kong migration alone. Furthermore, according to a study conducted by the British and Foreign Bible Society, an estimated 20–25% of the new arrivals are Christians. This figure is higher than both the Christian population amongst the pre-existing British Chinese (approx. 18.9% in 2011) and the Christian population within Hong Kong (approx. 16% in 2020).

We are at a stage in British history whereby the national churches of the four nations of the United Kingdom have all reported record declines in church attendance, and yet the fastest growing sector of British Christianity is amongst the British Chinese. Most British Chinese churches have at least doubled in size, with one that has grown from 200 congregants to 2,000 in the first year of the new visa.

Furthermore, geopolitical conflict in Asia often gets transplanted elsewhere—both in actual and in perceived terms—and have historically proven to cause intra-Chinese tensions in the United Kingdom.¹⁰ Testament to this can already be seen in the nearly two dozen new

⁸ National statistics, “How many people come to the UK each year (including visitors)?”, 23 February 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022/how-many-people-come-to-the-uk-each-year-including-visitors>, archived at <https://archive.is/RmGy0>.

⁹ At the time of this paper, Census results for 2021/2022 have not yet been completely analyzed and released.

¹⁰ This was already the case prior to the new visa route in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, since the social problems which resulted were often associated with mainland China. See Yinxuan Huang, Kristin Aune, and

congregations established by and ministering to new Hong Kongers, rather than working with pre-existing British Chinese churches.

A final factor to be mindful of is that many Hong Kongers have chosen to migrate—not as individuals, but as family units. They migrate to provide opportunities for themselves and for future generations. This is why many of the British Chinese churches have had to rethink children and youth ministries to accommodate the influx of these migratory families. The children have had less say on the matter—less agency, if you will—and they have yet to fully realize the liminal space they occupy, as a new 1.5 generation, wrestling with an in-betweenness in terms of cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical identities. We must seriously consider how Christianity fits into this equation and who will serve as partners and role models in a pilgrimage of discovery and rediscovery—not just today, but ten, twenty, thirty years down the road.

Bicultural Ready

This leads to the other focus of my talk: that is, pre-existing 1.5 generation British Chinese and British Born Chinese. As with the current situation, the earlier waves of migration included children who left Asia with their parents or who were born in the United Kingdom as part of the second, third, or subsequent generations. The self-understanding of this group is *less* as a “diaspora,” given that “home” is more found in the United Kingdom.

The vast majority of these individuals were introduced to Christianity as children and effectively grew up in the faith alongside their parents. British Chinese churches have served as sites whereby family, culture, and religion have intersected and maintained shared values. But as these children are ethnic Chinese Christians *in Britain*, the bicultural reality of their faith becomes increasingly sharp as they are faced with the wider contours of British society. Comparatively, many American Born Chinese become Christians in high school and university settings. In part,

Mathew Guest, “COVID-19 and the Chinese Christian Community in Britain: Changing Patterns of Belonging and Division,” *Studies in World Christianity* 27, no. 1 (March 2021): 18–21.

this is connected to the proliferation of evangelical parachurch organizations in American universities, such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Navigators, Cru, and Asian American Christian Fellowship—all of which have developed ministries focused on Asian Americans. This is quite different from the British context whereby most British universities will have, at most, the Christian Union with a White British focus or, in some London universities, an organization like the Overseas Christian Fellowship, which tends to focus on transient students from Singapore or Malaysia.

Another dynamic is the historic tendency for Chinese to be Britain's most regionally-dispersed ethnic minority group. In the 1990s, a whopping 85% of Chinese working in the UK were in the catering business. This meant they had to be geographically scattered to minimize competition between Chinese restaurants and takeaways. Many 1.5 generation and second generation British Chinese have been “takeaways kids,” often helping with food preparation after school before working in the evenings at the front counters whilst their parents were in the kitchen cooking. They took the orders and, as children, would have been translators for their parents with limited English. The counter becomes the meeting place with the world which offers everything from friendly banter to racial or sexualised encounters.¹¹ Furthermore, few of these takeaway kids continue in the family business, but are generally instructed to study hard and to take up white collar professions.

Given the geographically scattered population, most British Chinese children grew up without ever encountering another Chinese in their schools or neighborhoods and, therefore, lacking any sense of strong collective identity—let alone social or political voice. Terms like “Chinese” or “Oriental” still remain standard for referring to anyone of East Asian heritage, whereas the term “Asian” is reserved for those of South Asian heritage. There has long been the designation of British Born Chinese—but some see this as describing a person who is basically

¹¹ For first-hand accounts of this, see Angela Hui, *Takeaway: Stories from a Childhood Behind the Counter* (London: Trapeze, 2022).

ethnically or culturally Chinese but incidentally born in the United Kingdom. It was only in the 1990s when the term British Chinese began to emerge for these newer generations to underscore a complex hybrid identity drawing from both British and Chinese cultures and experiences. In the height of the racism experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, another term has gained currency—British East and Southeast Asian (BESEA). This term is meant to capture the complexities of Chineseness coming from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as well as other Asians with roots in Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and so forth. It is a way to highlight solidarity across those of Asian background who see themselves quite differently from South Asians, although it tends to still be dominated by ethnic Chinese.¹²

Comparatively, whilst the terms of British Chinese and BESEA have come about in the 1990s and the 2020s, they are quite latecomers when compared to the term Asian American coined in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement and as an alternative to derogatory terms ‘Oriental’ or ‘Asiatic’. In other words, this kind of solidarity is still very much at an early stage in the United Kingdom. There are limits to what British Chinese churches can do, as Chinese ministries (often in Cantonese and Mandarin) are created in parallel with English ministries, the latter being uncritical evolutions of the migrant’s children’s and youth ministries. Of the over 200 British Chinese churches, few have full-time ordained English ministry staff and only a handful of the staff are British Born Chinese themselves. Ironically, because of the intersection of family, culture, religion, few of the British Chinese churches are readily equipped to move beyond and engage the complex concerns which shape the Christian faith, such as questions around bicultural identity and experiences of racism.

We also need to recognize that the 1.5 generation and British Born Chinese do not always attend British Chinese churches. This is particularly true of the third generation, who tend to be the most cultural-linguistically distant from Asia. It goes without saying that even with over

¹² Diana Yeh, “Becoming ‘British East Asian and Southeast Asian’: Anti-racism, Chineseness, and Political Love in the Creative and Cultural Industries,” *British Journal of Chinese Studies* 11 (July 2021): 53–70.

200 British Chinese churches, this doesn't come near the number of cities with ethnic Chinese in the United Kingdom. Even if these individuals attended British Chinese churches as children, if they continue in the church, they may find spiritual homes elsewhere as they become adults, find partners who may not be British Chinese, and move around the country.

Comparatively, it is useful to consider how many Asian American migrant churches in the 1990s were experiencing what was called a “silent exodus” from their English ministries.¹³ Whilst Chinese American church leaders worried about this phenomenon, several decades later, they found that the departure from the migrant church did not necessarily mean a departure from the Christian faith. Rather, it was an exodus to a new promised land in multiethnic churches—often large pan-Asian American congregations.¹⁴ Today, Asian Americans have become integral to the shape of American Christianity. Many lead American Christian organizations—from InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and the Gospel Coalition, to deans and presidents of seminaries like Fuller Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Claremont School of Theology. This is different from the United Kingdom, wherein ethnic Chinese are welcome in the pews but not the pulpits, as theological students but not as theological educators. Even Archbishop Justin Welby has openly acknowledged that the Church of England is “still deeply institutionally racist.”¹⁵ And what he was speaking about was Windrush—which doesn't even touch the nuanced reality that racism is more than Black and White.

¹³ Helen Lee, “Silent Exodus,” *Christianity Today*, August 1996, 50–53

¹⁴ Helen Lee, “Silent No More,” *Christianity Today*, October 2014, 38–47.

¹⁵ Justin Welby, “Archbishop Justin Welby's remarks during Windrush debate at General Synod,” *The Archbishop of Canterbury: Justin Welby*, 11 February 2020, <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/archbishop-justin-welbys-remarks-during-windrush-debate-general-synod>.

Conclusion

As I conclude, there are perhaps a few things worth briefly mentioning. First, in contrast with what is seen from the outside, within British Chinese churches there is a tremendous amount of diversity. It is hardly as homogenous, as some missiologists may claim. And with this variety has come, at times, intra-Chinese tensions. Second, British Chinese churches tend to be broadly evangelical, and have historically focused on gospel proclamation as opposed to any major interest in the broader society. This should not take away from the very important civic function of these churches in helping immigrant populations to settle and orient themselves to living in a foreign land. Furthermore, as second and third generations develop, increasingly British Chinese Christians are beginning to wrestle together with questions about how the Christian faith may speak into racial and social experiences in the broader British society. Finally, we should not only see these churches as primarily made up by migrants or diaspora in the United Kingdom, but rightly as *British*. This is now home. And this subsection of society have shaped and continue to reshape all that is British and British Christianity.