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An Ecumenical Experiment in Colonial Hong Kong: The Start of the Tsuen Wan Ecumenical Social Service Centre (1973 to 1997) and Its Local Praxis

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Abstract: Based on both documentary research and a series of interviews, this study retrieves the ecumenical spirit of the beginning of the dismissed Tsuen Wan Ecumenical Social Service Centre (TWESSC), a Christian non-governmental organization. Early ecumenical praxis among six local churches (including one Catholic parish) testified to the need to work for (and with) the poor and to advocate for social justice, as promoted and sponsored by the World Council of Churches in the early 1970s. The TWESSC was recognised as an effective activist group in colonial Hong Kong, but was disbanded in 1997, due to conflict between the executive committee (including church representatives) and its frontline social workers and its service recipients. This article contributes to the study of ecumenism in Hong Kong in two ways. Firstly, it examines the emergence of the ecumenical movement in Hong Kong against the broader background of the involvement of church groups in community development. Secondly, it explores how the Hong Kong churches were occupied by the subvention of frontline services by the government since the 1980s, and how they sought to silence dissenting voices in the ecumenical movement.

Keywords: ecumenical movement; Tsuen Wan Ecumenical Social Service Centre; colonial Hong Kong; Church and Social Service; community development and social action

“Catholic—the name itself is a challenge.” (Roger 2006, p. 52)

1. Introduction

The Christian Church, throughout its long history, has often been prone to schisms or denominational divisions (Van der Bent 1994, p. 1). Modern Christianity has evolved into its current state, dominated by the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Churches, through a process of church schism. The fruits of the ecumenical movement in the early 20th century facilitated the establishment of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948.¹ The WCC promotes dialogue and recognition of different denominational traditions and encourages the witnessing of local ecumenism by collaborative services among churches (Van der Bent 1994, p. 8). An example would be the call for “Unity of the Church—Unity of Mankind” in 1971 set by the WCC’s Faith and Order Committee to actively seek for praxis and witness outside the Church through social action (Meyendorff 1972, p. 31; Song 1978, pp. 65–105). Based on the logo of the WCC with the Greek word *Oikoumene*, which

¹ The WCC was established by three Christian global cross-denominational networks in the early 20th century, comprising the World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh in 1910 (the International Missionary Council was later established in 1921), the Life and Work Conference (held in 1925 to show concern for the social responsibility of Christians) and the Faith and Order Conference (held in 1927 to discuss issues of church unity) (Chan 1983, p. 6; Van der Bent 1994, pp. 3–5).

refers to our inhabited earth and the global world, church unity and mission (including the strive for social justice) are two sides of the same coin for ecumenism (Raiser 1991, p. 741; Van der Bent 1994, p. 3). Coincidentally, ministers from six local parishes in Tsuen Wan, Hong Kong, formed a fellowship in 1971, which would eventually lead to the foundation of the Tsuen Wan Ecumenical Social Service Centre (TWESSC) two years later. The centre was then funded by the WCC as a pilot community development project from 1973 to 1977 (Tung 1979). The TWESSC became one of three pressure groups formed by progressive Christians and the HK churches in the 1960s and 1970s. They were all sponsored by ecumenical organisations.² Their platform of social action under the emerging community development approach in social work was the normative means for the collective voice of the poor. During the colonial period in Hong Kong, the TWESSC was recognised as an effective activist group. Unfortunately, the TWESSC betrayed its early ecumenical witness. A conflict between its executive committee (which included church representatives) and its frontline social workers led to its disbandment in 1997.

The demise of the TWESSC in 1997 was preceded by several months of tension between its executive committee and its staff. The immediate conflict that triggered its dissolution was from the executive committee's forceful imposition of three social action principles toward the staff proposed in the middle of 1996. It was controversial because it violated the staff's self-determination to participate in other social actions even in their off-duties. As the experts on social action, a few staff with active local leaders used a name of "Friends of the TWESSC" on 18 September 1996 demonstrating against the Japanese occupation of China on the same day in 1931. It was a trickery to assert the staff's right against the three social action principles. By November 1996, the tension between the executive committee and staff further deteriorated. Six colleagues had been fired by the executive committee because they requested to sit in on its scheduled meeting. It was anticipated that the three social action principles which the staff resisted against would be discussed and endorsed at that meeting. After that, the staff called for a strike against the executive committee. Because of the acute tension with the staff, the founding churches were withdrawn and the TWESSC was dissolved in January 1997 (Heyibianweihui 1998).

As a former staff of the TWESSC, I admit that I was involved in a war to make us divide. Initiated by my former colleague, on one Sunday in October 1996, I joined the silent protest during the service at the church which was ministered by one of our executive committee members. I was silent with a judgmental gaze at the minister who preached on the pulpit. I regret that I failed to respect the attendants of that Sunday service. When I strove to stand for our Catholic faith, one God, one baptism, and one Catholic Church, I failed to take the solemn worship and the communion sincerely. This is my wound of the fall of ecumenical witness caused by the dissolution of the TWESSC.

The demise of the TWESSC was a sad occasion, and was regretted not only by myself but also by its church ministers, its lay Christian staff and by the many common people in Tsuen Wan who had benefited from its services. It was also a sad day for the worldwide ecumenical movement and for the Universal Church. The local media enjoyed itself at the expense of Christians in Hong Kong. A documentary by RTHK, a local television station, entitled "Together but not United," reported the conflict between the organization's executive committee and its staff in some detail, noting that this was hardly a shining example of Christian ecumenism (Li 1997). My personal wound took a long time to heal, but now, twenty years later, as a committed supporter of ecumenism and a former staff member of the TWESSC, I would like to revisit the history of the TWESSC and to showcase its modest but real contribution to ecclesiastical ecumenism during its brief lifetime. I hope this local case study will help to heal the scars of the past and enable all of us involved in the events of 1996 and early 1997 to turn to the future in a spirit of reconciliation. Based on both documentary research and a series of interviews, I intend in this study to discuss the history of the TWESSC and illustrate the ecumenical spirit which

² The Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee and the Society for Community Organization, founded in 1968 and 1971, respectively, were two similar organizations. For details of their background, see Section 2. For clandestine surveillance by the colonial government, see (Mizuoka 2018, p. 31); (Pepper 2008, pp. 177–78).

animated it in its early years, as an activist organization working among the poorer residents of the Tsuen Wan district in the final decades of British colonial rule in Hong Kong.

2. The Early Fruit of Ecumenism in Local Churches in Tsuen Wan, Hong Kong

I will begin by describing how the TWESSC came into being. It developed out of a fellowship established between several ministers from mainstream denominations serving in the Tsuen Wan district. Tsuen Wan was the first of several New Towns built in the New Territories from the 1960s onwards. It had a large population and was an important industrial centre. The fellowship was established by clergymen from six local churches: Rev. David Y. Kao of the Chuen Yuen Church of the Christ of Church in China, Rev. Andrew C.L. Leung of Sheng Kung Hui Crown of Thorns Church (the Anglican Church), Captain P. Ho of the Salvation Army Tai Wo Hau Corps, Rev. Abraham Shen (1924–2016) of the Asbury Chinese Methodist Church (later renamed the Methodist Church, Hong Kong), Rev. Eugene Gia of the Grace Lutheran Church (Tsuen Wan), Fr. Nicolai Pime Ruggiero (1925–2012) of the SS Cosmas and Damian Church and Rev. Hans Lutz (1936–), residing in Tsuen Wan. In 1971, two years before the foundation of the TWESSC, they began to meet to eat dim sum at the Red House Garden Restaurant in the Far East Consortium Building (now the Silka Far East Hotel) in Castle Peak Road, Tsuen Wan, every Wednesday or every other Wednesday morning. They shared their opinions freely, discussing their church ministry and discovering a shared concern for community problems (Lam and Pao 2004; Kao 2005, p. 33; Mak 1978, p. 42). Rev. Kao, who was serving at the Chuen Yuen Church (1965–1975), noted that the Tsuen Wan district was not safe at that time: some church members had been grabbed by the throat and robbed; while women living in the public resettlement blocks in Tai Wo Hau had been annoyed by “Peeping Toms” and also encountered sexual violence such as rape, there being only public toilets and shower facilities available (Beyns 1974, p. 33; Kao 2010).

It is worth noting that these ministers did not merely discuss the problems but also tried to make a change. They met with a British official from Tsuen Wan District Office at the Red House Restaurant to discuss community problems. According to Rev. Kao, the official in question said that public safety was a matter for the police, not for the District Office, and suggested that the churches were taking too negative a view of matters. “You should be more positive!” (Kao 2005, p. 33). Realizing that the District Office was unlikely to respond further to their concerns, the pastors called on the local British police superintendent. He complained about their visit in the following terms: “I’ve been out all night in the hills looking for robbers, I’ve been bitten to death by mosquitoes and bugs, and I haven’t had any sleep! And now I’ve got to talk to you!” (Kao 2005, p. 33). He said that the police did not have the manpower or resources to tackle every community safety problem, and the meeting ended without result. The pastors, however, were not deterred. They contacted the district social workers of the Social Welfare Department at the Princess Alexandra Community Centre. Here, too, the response was disappointing, and they made three unsuccessful appeals. The social workers said that they were sympathetic, but also insisted that they were too busy and were unable to cope with any more work (Kao 2005, p. 33; Kao 2010). Given the views of the officials they had met with, the pastors concluded that they would have to take the initiative themselves if they wanted to solve many of Tsuen Wan’s community problems (Lutz 1973, p. 42).

On the recommendation of the Hong Kong Christian Council (HKCC in short) and the Hong Kong Christian Service, these pastors obtained sponsorship from the WCC to start the “Tai Wo Hau and Kwai Chung Community Development Project” (the predecessor of the TWESSC) in 1973 (Buma 1972). Pastors from the six denominations and several community leaders formed an executive committee which met frequently to supervise the project (Beyns 1974, p. 32). The next vicar of the SS Cosmas & Damian Church, Fr. Mario Marazzi (1928–) offered the use of an office on the ground floor of Block 9 of the Tai Wo Hau Estate and introduced Mary L. Beyns as the first project director (Quan Yuen Tang 1974, p. 8). Hans Lutz recollected that Rev. David Kao was the convener of the pastoral fellowship and he originally intended to apply for the funding to build a youth centre next to the Chuen Yuen

Church. However, Lutz himself thought that the WCC might not sponsor expenditure on a capital project such as the construction of a youth centre and suggested instead that they should undertake a locality-based community development project in Tsuen Wan with the collaboration of the six local churches (Lutz 2010). Coincidentally, the funding body, the Commission on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service of the WCC, at that time was encouraging “programmes of social advancement” (Van der Bent 1994, p. 200), and a proposal of community development project in Tsuen Wan would meet its project criteria. Eventually, they acquired the necessary sponsorship. Rev. Kao happily recalled the pioneer fund in the interview: “They said that they had received many proposals and all had been written well. Yours was only moderately written, but they gave you their approval” (Kao 2010).

After briefly introducing the start of the TWESSC, I will now focus on two key ministers who contributed to its solid foundation. David Kao and Hans Lutz had a better understanding and grasp of the niche of community development among the Tsuen Wan ministers. Rev. Kao studied in the United States in the mid-1960s and had witnessed the volatile American civil rights movement. The Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China sent him to Garrett Theological Seminary (later Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) of the United Methodist Church to study for one and a half years under the sponsorship of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, where he spent several months participating in a social ministry programme ran by the American Church.³ As the seminary was located in Evanston, Illinois, close to Chicago, he had the chance to visit the non-governmental organization for civil rights there and got to know Saul Alinsky (1909–1972), the founder of the Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation.⁴ He also visited the United States Congress in Washington D.C., and met Jesse Jackson (b. 1941), the celebrated African-American leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Kao also joined a training workshop for two weeks led by Dr. Marshall Scott, one of Jackson’s close companions, in Memphis, Tennessee, with more than ten clergymen from the Presbyterian Church (USA) before the assassination of Martin Luther King (1929–1968). Those activities not only helped Rev. Kao to familiarize himself with the aims and methods of the American Civil Rights Movement, but also to recognise the nature and practical implementation of community development and its tendency towards social action. In other words, Rev. David Kao understood the direction and goal of community development before writing the proposal which indirectly gave the direction for the TWESSC—a social service organisation devoted to social action. However, in an interview, Rev. Kao denied that the American ways of social action were directly copied by the TWESSC. He admitted that the impact was only indirect, as social problems in the US were far removed from the situation in Hong Kong’s Tsuen Wan district. The American trip widened Rev. Kao’s horizons and strengthened his determination to address social concerns. In short, consolidating ministers in Tsuen Wan to deal with community problems was a natural expression of his participation in society (Kao 2010).

The active advocacy of Hans Lutz and his contribution must be mentioned in addition to David Kao’s. Hans Lutz not only instituted the first community development project of the six local churches but also actually promoted the community development approach in Hong Kong in the 1960s and 1970s, both in churches and in the wider field of social welfare. He was a missionary from the Swiss Basel Mission, and had once participated in industrial missionary work in France. He was the

³ The column of “Updates of Personnel” of the Hong Kong Council of the Church of Christ in China records the news of Rev. David Kao’s studies in the US. In addition to social ministry program, Kao studied and gained a Master of Divinity at Garrett Theological Seminary. He returned to Hong Kong on 1 April 1969 to continue the ministry as the minister-in-charge of Chuen Yuen Church (*Zhonghua jidujiaohui xianggang quhui huixun* 117 (1 February 1967): 3; 124 (1 September 1967): 4; 129 (1 February 1968): 4; 144 (1 May 1969): 5–6).

⁴ Saul Alinsky was a famous community organiser in America. He was actively involved in the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s. Many activists of the student movement in the 1960s learned the methods of community organisation of Alinsky and promoted the American Civil Rights Movement by adopting his organisational strategies. His work *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (Alinsky 1971) was prestigious and he was a spiritual master for organisers. The Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation was a famous school which trained organisers then in America and also a base for the Alinsky group to organise social movement activities (Fung 2004, p. 37; Von Hoffman 2010).

vice-chairman of the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee (CIC in short) in 1968–92, and called for the establishment of a labourers' church which promoted the association of the gospel with the spirituality of grassroots labourers (Tong 2007, pp. 24–28). Rev. Lutz witnessed and participated in the founding and development of three community development-based organisations by Hong Kong churches (bodies or individual leaders): the CIC, the Society for Community Organization (SoCO in short) and the TWESSC. While they were all recognised as pressure groups in the colonial Hong Kong of the 1970s to 1990s, the foci of their social concern and their relationship with ecumenism were different.⁵ Of particular interest, the open-minded Christian activists in Hong Kong actually participated in community development organising through social action. In 1970, shortly after the CIC was founded (March 1968), a group of church members who were interested in community development—including the staff of CIC, the vicar of Sheng Kung Hui Holy Carpenter Church, one Maryknoll priest and a Maryknoll Sister working in community development—joined the regular meetings.⁶ As the CIC was confined to working for labour rights in Hong Kong's manufacturing industries, the abovementioned study group on community development decided to establish the SoCO in September 1971, with its focus on community development for other vulnerable groups facing social and housing problems. Their long-term donors were the Urban-Rural Mission of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA-URM) and the Asian Committee for People's Organisation (ACPO).⁷ The CIC not only facilitated the founding of SoCO in September 1971, through the resources of EACC-UIM (later called CCA-URM) and the ACPO, but also invited Alinsky (mentioned above) to visit Hong Kong when he worked as a consultant on the promotion of community development in Asia in 1971.⁸ Alinsky stated outright that community development had no future in HK under the territory's undemocratic colonial rule and the unstated political attitudes of both the United Kingdom and China.⁹ Despite his flamboyant views, Alinsky's two books were popular with Hong Kong community organisers and community social workers. He indeed was a "spiritual leader" among the first generation of community development workers in the 1970s (Lam 2012, p. 82). In addition, Alinsky's social action advocated the mobilisation of community organisational power to transform society, which was often cited in programmes on community development practices of the social work professional training sessions in Hong Kong. However, there were few community development projects implementing a more aggressive so-called "Alinsky" type of social action, because most NGOs did not wish to imperil their government subsidies by drawing attention to themselves by taking part in controversial social action activities. The SoCO and TWESSC, both founded by church members, adopted Alinsky's radical approach (Mok 1994, p. 63; Fung 1990, p. 21).

On top of the open-minded Christian activists of the 1960s and 1970s mentioned above, Hans Lutz was praised by Alinsky as promoting community development in Hong Kong with gusto (Conversation

⁵ Pressure groups were groups promoting collective interests in the 1970s and 1980s such as professional bodies, residential organizations, labour unions, and commercial lobbies. They attempted to influence government policy either by mobilizing public opinion or by direct lobbying (Chan 2009, pp. 143–44).

⁶ (Society for Community Organization 1982, p. 7). The Anglican priest who joined the study group would have been Rev. Francis Yip. He was the vicar of Sheng Kung Hui Holy Carpenter Church at that time. Furthermore, he was the first chairperson of the newly founded SoCO in 1971 (Urban Industrial Mission of the East Asia Christian Conference 1971, p. 7).

⁷ The Urban and Rural Mission of the Christian Conference of Asia was renamed in 1973 at the CCA's assembly. Before that, it was called the Urban Industrial Mission of the East Asia Christian Conference (EACC-UIM), which was established in 1968. CCA-URM was a long-term donor of the CIC (Fung 2004, p. 38). The ACPO was also the fruit of the ecumenical movement for organising people's movement for social justice. It was co-founded by the Office for Human Development of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) and the EACC-UIM (the previous name of CCA-URM) in 1971. The SoCO was funded by ACPO since its founding year (Asian Committee for People's Organization 1987, pp. i, 7–17).

⁸ According to the memoirs of Raymond Fung, Alinsky's trip to Asia was in 1970 but the occasional paper of the Institute on the Church in Urban-Industrial Society states that the Asian trip took place in June 1971. Other references also noted the year of visit as 1971 (Fung 2004, p. 37; Poethig 1972; Lam 2012, p. 82; Leung 1978, p. 146).

⁹ The comment of Alinsky on the difficulties of conducting social action in Hong Kong should not be omitted when mentioning community development in Hong Kong. See: (Fung 2004, pp. 37–39; Lam 2012, p. 82; Leung 1978, p. 146; Lo 2003, p. 65). In an interview in Manila in June 1971, Alinsky also mentioned several times that the political and social environment of Hong Kong was not conducive to social action (Conversation on Community Organization in Asia 1972, pp. 3, 8, 11).

on [Community Organization in Asia 1972](#), p. 3). He also actively participated in the Community Development Division of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service in its early days and was the chairman in 1974–1976, when he zealously promoted community development service.¹⁰ Rev. Lutz also educated and vigorously promoted community development in church circles. He wrote seven consecutive articles in the column “Pastors and Community Development” in the *Monthly Journal Message* of the HKCC (the column was later renamed “Community and Parish”), in which he noted that when church/community resources were scarce, church workers could participate in social services via methods of community development (ref. ([Lutz 1979a](#), p. 7; [Lutz 1979b](#), p. 7; [Lutz 1980a](#), p. 6; [Lutz 1980b](#), p. 6; [Lutz 1980c](#), p. 7; [Lutz 1980d](#), p. 7; [Lutz 1980e](#), p. 7)). Interestingly, this series of articles written by Lutz in the 1980s was published again in a book about church participation in community development edited by Rev. Lo Lung Kwong in Taiwan in 2003. This indicates that Lutz’s articles were broadly representative in promoting community development in the HK Church ([Lo 2003](#), pp. 222–42). Because of Lutz’s zeal for promoting community development, he was appointed as the professional executive committee member of the TWESSC on its establishment in 1973 and served on this committee until its dissolution in early 1997. He also served three terms of office as chairman of the executive committee on several occasions (1980–1981, 1984–1985, and 1989–1991).¹¹

In short, utilising oral history and literary research, this section retrieves the ecumenical spirit of the beginning of the TWESSC among six local churches for the livelihood of low-income people in their locality. Local ministers sought to initiate a dialogue with local officials about community problems in 1971. In particular, I have examined two ministers who played an important role in the foundation of the TWESSC in 1973, i.e., David Kao’s calling for the clergymen’s concern for local community problems, and Hans Lutz’s promotion of community development approach in the three pressure groups with Christian backgrounds (including the TWESSC) and in social service in general.

3. From Social Concern to Church Unity—The Aftermath

The TWESSC was actively involved in community development in the Tai Wo Hau resettlement area in its early period. Its work expanded to other neighbouring public housing estates, including Kwai Shing West and Lai King Estates in 1977 and Kwai Chung Estate in 1978. In 1980, it was finally named officially as the Tsuen Wan Ecumenical Social Service Centre ([Quanwan heyi shehui fuwu zhongxin 1988](#), pp. 4–5). Before its dissolution in 1997, the TWESSC had four community centres and one centre for the elderly (subvented by the colonial government), one self-financed dentist clinic and one Grassroots Development Centre for the urban poor. Founded by six local churches, the TWESSC affirmed its locality base in the Kwai Chung and Tsuen Wan districts and adopted a community development approach to organize the grassroots to conduct advocacy work related to their welfare and rights from a district level to a public policy level in general. Besides pursuing the core social welfare mission through the TWESSC, the aforementioned Tsuen Wan pastoral fellowship also worked to promote church unity locally ([Yu 2006](#), p. 8). A minister of the Salvation Army in the 1970s, Major Gideon Lam, remembered that:

We initiated a United Youth Fellowship (full name: Tsuen Wan Christian Youth Ecumenical Movement). Each church nominated certain young people as members of the United Youth Fellowship. They organised an activity every three months. That was good. A camp lasting seven days was held one summer at Sheng Kung Hui Christopher’s Home ... Young people

¹⁰ According to the record of the Community Development Resource Book, Rev. Lutz was a committee member of the Community Development Division in 1973 and the chairman of the Community Development Division in 1974–1976. It showed that Rev. Lutz was once active in promoting community development at the level of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service before community work was formally included in the professional scope of social work ([Community Development Resource Book 1973](#), p. 107; [Community Development Resource Book 1974](#), p. 87; [Community Development Resource Book 1977](#), p. 71).

¹¹ ([Yu 2006](#), p. 2), footnote 3 and table 5: List of Chairman of the Executive Committee of the TWESSC, 67.

from different churches took turns to be the chairman to head the fellowship. It was extended afterwards to our pulpit exchange on the annual ecumenical Sunday at the call of the HKCC. I also had a chance to preach at the Catholic parish in Tsuen Wan. I also invited a priest to preach in my church. He preached very well. In the early days, neither the Salvation Army nor Sheng Kung Hui from other districts would do that. It started in the Tsuen Wan district. (Lam and Pao 2004)

The work for church unity at that time included inviting pastors from other denominations to preach in other churches besides their own, so that believers of one denomination might better appreciate the faith and practice of other denominations. The Tsuen Wan Christian Youth Ecumenical Movement (which did not include the local Catholic parish) was set up in March 1973, the same year which saw the founding of the TWESSC. Youth representatives formed the executive committee and their pastors were ex-officio advisors. Major Lam recalled that its regular activities included united worship, seminars, film evenings, music and drama shows, and summer camps.¹² According to Rev. Yu Ying Ngok, the pastor-in-charge of Chuen Yuen Church, the Youth Ecumenical Movement only existed for a few years, and had ceased to function by 1983 (Tang 1983a, p. 4). Despite its unfortunate demise, the TWESSC established a community-based network for young Christians in early 1986 under its community education centre—the “Social Concern Group of Tsuen Wan/Kwai Chung Christians.” Under the political climate of the 1997 handover, social awareness of the local Christian groups gradually rose. The Social Concern Group of Tsuen Wan/Kwai Chung Christians aimed at furthering the holistic development of humankind and witnessing the spirit of church unity through community involvement. The Annual Report of the TWESSC mentioned that the social concern group had promoted the concern of the Basic Law in churches in the 1980s (Chan 1991, p. 77; Quanwan heyi shehui fuwu zhongxin 1988, p. 20). However, its participating members did not necessarily come from the six founding churches of the TWESSC and the group eventually faded out afterwards.

4. A Frail Ecumenism in HK Church in the 1980s

This ecumenical vision nurtured and facilitated by the ministers of six local churches slowly ebbed away as 1997 approached. As previously mentioned, the TWESSC was disbanded in 1997 due to the breakdown of the relationship between its executive committee and staff. Apart from the proximate conflict in 1996–1997 previously mentioned in the introduction, I will illustrate hereafter three ultimate causes of the demise of the TWESSC. First, the TWESSC did not have internal successors. Second, the role of the Hong Kong Church in participating in social service changed. Third, the enthusiasm of the mainline denominations for ecumenism declined before and after the Handover. Both the second and third factors were external causes beyond the control of the Hong Kong Church, but all three factors were related.

First, the TWESSC was constrained by frequent changes of church personnel, making it difficult to find successors to sustain its original ecumenical mission. The ministers who established the TWESSC gradually left Tsuen Wan in the 1970s as they were reassigned, retired, or resigned. They no longer led the TWESSC. Subsequently, the new pastors had to head the TWESSC. Rev. Shum, Major Lam, and Rev. Pao had all been transferred to other parishes from the mid-1970s to early 1980s. David Kao, who had all along participated in promoting gatherings for Tsuen Wan pastors and advocating community development, left the Chuen Yuen Church in 1975 and migrated to the US to pursue his ministry in another church.¹³ Rev. Kao also admitted in the interview that the church was not

¹² According to the records, young people from the original four churches (the Chuen Yuen Church, Crown of Thorns Church, Asbury Church, and Tai Wo Hau Corps of the Salvation Army) would have taken part. Later on, young people from Grace Lutheran Church also joined this youth ecumenical ministry ((Quan Yuen Tang 1974, p. 8; Tang 1983a, p. 4). About the Activity of Youth Ecumenical Movement, see: (Pao 1977, p. 1)).

¹³ It was alleged that Rev. Shum was transferred from Asbury Church in 1975. In the same year, Rev. David Kao migrated to America (Yu 2006, p. 42; footnote 16; Huen and Bong 2005, p. 17). Major Lam was also transferred from the Tai Wo Hau

successful in nurturing its Christian youth to continue the community development project in the Tsuen Wan district.¹⁴ Furthermore, these six churches could not find successors to continue the ecumenical movement smoothly. With the exception of Rev. Lutz, there was a high turnover rate among the pastors and church representatives who served on the executive committee, thus rendering the role of the churches in the TWESSC insignificant.¹⁵ Even though church representatives still sat on the executive committee, the original ecumenical vision of the TWESSC of the six local churches abated. It is not surprising that Tommy Lo (Director of the TWESSC, earlier called Centre-in-charge) who led the TWESSC for many years (1978–1984, 1991–1997) also misunderstood the relationship of the TWESSC and ecumenism as merely a united ministry among the six local churches (Hui 1983, p. 5). Generally speaking, staff members such as Lo and myself (I worked there from 1993 to 1996) did not understand ecumenism and how it related to community development and social action. The relevant literature shows that few individual pastors could explain clearly how the global ecumenical movement was revealed by the local witness of the TWESSC. Indeed, Hans Lutz would be one of the few who understood the essence of ecumenism demonstrated by the TWESSC and served in the executive committee from its establishment to its dissolution (Chow 1988, p. 12; Lutz 1994, pp. 235–37).

Besides the internal difficulty of maintaining its initial ecumenical vision at the TWESSC and the six local churches, two external factors were also at play: the role of Hong Kong churches participating in social service and the weakening ecumenical movement of Hong Kong churches before and after the Handover.

The second cause contributing to the demise of the TWESSC was that the church's role in social service changed after the colonial government responded to the popular discontents revealed by the 1967 riots by spending more money to subvent the provision of social services. The publication of the White Paper "Future Development Plan of Hong Kong Welfare" in 1973 marked a significant change in the allocation of government resources. Before that, in response to the huge influx of refugees from Mainland China during the upheavals of the 1950s and 1960s, the church played a pioneer role in the provision of social services in HK. When the government expanded its subvention of social services on a large scale in the 1980s and 1990s, the Church became a significant contractor of most social welfare services—a phenomenon which persists even today as the Church (or Christian NGOs) still delivers 60% of government-subsidised service today. When community development services peaked in 1994, church organisations undertook around 80% of the total service.¹⁶ As there are expanded subvented services involving a large sum of expenditure and hundreds or thousands staff in numbers, the Christian background NGOs develop their administrative and management systems to meet the government's request. It is undoubtedly a process of "De-Christianisation." The original mission of Christian NGOs such as "to serve, not to be served," or to mobilise believers to care for vulnerable groups has changed. The Church became in essence a "pseudo-boss," managing and supervising services for the government. Not surprisingly, a number of church leaders today point out that as the Church undertakes subvention services of the government and is subjected to increasing limitations,

Corps of the Salvation Army around 1975–76, two or three years after the establishment of the TWESSC. Rev. Peter Pao, who was once the chairman of the executive committee (the years of 1974–1975 and 1977–1978), was also transferred from the Sheng Kung Hui Crown of Thorns Church in 1983 (Fan 2014, p. 4).

¹⁴ (Kao 2010). According to Yu Yan Ming, the churches taking part in establishing the TWESSC had once actively encouraged believers to participate in the community work of the TWESSC in the early period but were not successful. Church representatives later appointed by the churches to be the executive committee members did not understand the mission of the TWESSC and were not involved in frontline work (Yu 2006, pp. 8, 43 & 51).

¹⁵ It is necessary to clarify that individual believers of the six churches were staff, volunteers, and executive committee members, for example Lau Choi Hung of the Tai Wo Hau Residents' Association from the Salvation Army, Leung Siu Chun from the Grace Lutheran Church.

¹⁶ (Lo 2003, pp. 214–15). This data includes subvented community work in two categories, namely the community centres and Neighbourhood Level Community Development Project (NLCDP), which were run by non-governmental organisations. In addition to other Christian NGOs, Lo Lung Kwong also includes another two NGOs, the Neighbourhood Advice-Action Council and SoCO were founded by church members. The Executive Council officially announced the termination of all major working teams of community development (i.e., NLCDP) in December 1995.

this goes against and hinders the Church's mission.¹⁷ Similarly, the support from the overseas Church was declining and the major funding source of the small-scale NGO like TWESSC during the 1980s and 1990s was the government.¹⁸ Without the need to spend anything at all, it is expected that the executive committee (including the church representatives) became detached from the implementation of its services. Unfortunately, the only theological study of the TWESSC to date highlighted the management of its subvented social service as a key issue in its conclusion (Yu 2006, pp. 57–58). It is dangerous to reduce the conflict and parting between the executive committee and staff as simply an issue of "management imbalance."¹⁹ The study has failed to reflect on the problems inherent to playing the role of management and supervision under government subsidy.²⁰ In addition, it also neglects the founding objective of the TWESSC—to manifest global ecumenism through local praxis and to fight for social justice through social action-based community development.²¹ To complicate matters, Fung Ho Lup pointed out the ambivalence of the relationship between the Church and Christian activist groups like the TWESSC. While the Church was involved in the executive committee at the top of the hierarchy, it did not actively instruct frontline workers, nor did the staff need to follow the direction from the Church. Even though the Hong Kong Church in general was more conservative than the Western Church, the local churches did not strongly attack the comparatively aggressive social actions led by the staff of the TWESSC, but rather accepted them (Fung 1999, pp. 5–6). Interestingly, the Church's alienation from frontline services unintentionally offered a space for former staff (including myself) to continue the social ministry of the TWESSC from its original ecumenical vision in the 1980s–90s.

Third, the dissolution of the TWESSC reflects the withdrawal of the mainstream Church towards the mission of social transformation at the time of post-colonial Hong Kong. When the time of Handover was foreseeable after the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, the Christian Protestant churches intentionally avoided any discussion on politics and evaded any clear political expressions on controversial social issues. They were fearful of the political suppression of Christians by the Chinese government, such as happened during the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, they actively gave signs of goodwill towards the Chinese sovereignty and the Chinese churches. This conciliatory attitude contrasted deeply to that of the social movements caused by the rise of political and social identity of the Hong Kong people (including individual Christians) in the 1980s (such as the Democratic Campaign in 1988, Support of Democratic Movement in Beijing in 1989, and the Feminist Movement and Gay Rights Movement from the 1980s onward). One notable example was the prophetic role of the ecumenical church body, the HKCC, in the early 1980s, as they actively liaised with and led the mainstream denominational churches in their fight for the betterment of peoples' livelihood on issues such as rallying against increases in bus fares. However, denominational churches consensually stopped appointing more open-minded representatives to join the HKCC's executive committee in 1987. In their stead, they appointed more pro-China church leaders. After the power restructuring of

¹⁷ (Chow 2007, pp. 82–85; Lo 2011, pp. 13–15). The church leader Lo Lung Kwong, the former chairman of the Methodist Church, Hong Kong, and the former director of Divinity School of Chung Chi College, the Chinese University of Hong Kong critiqued in several public meetings on the problems of the Hong Kong Church undertaking governmental subsidy services on a large scale. He pinpoints the problems caused by receiving a lump-sum grant for social service works from the government since 2001 on several occasions, such as the seminar of "Tension and Integration of Church and Social Service" organized by the HKCC on 15 August 2008; and the seminar of People's Well-Being: Look at Christianity and Social Service from the Long-term Plan of Social Welfare organized by the Hong Kong Christian Institute on 26 July 2010 (Kwan 2010, pp. 110–11; Lo 2011, p. 13).

¹⁸ According to the annual reports of the TWESSC from 1982 to 1995, overseas church support began to decline in the late 1980s. Comparatively speaking, the governmental subvention was relatively reliable in those years. The mean and median of the overseas donation were 11.8% and 10.5% and its government subvention were 61.1% and 60.9% of the total income (Tsuen Wan Ecumenical Social Service Centre 1982–1995).

¹⁹ According to the understanding of Rev. Kan Kei Piu, the representative of the Asbury Methodist Church and the chairman of the last executive committee of the TWESSC, management imbalance is the problem of losing decision authority of the executive committee (including church representatives) on the TWESSC and the power shift to the paid staff (Yu 2006, p. 52).

²⁰ Reflection on the problem of the management of social service agencies raised from the dissolution of the TWESSC. See (Cheung 1999, pp. 256–64).

²¹ This direction of ecumenism was widely promoted in the Hong Kong Church in the 1970s. See (Yip 1971, pp. 65–66).

the HKCC, the space of public expression of its subsidiary Committee on Public Policy was restricted and the leadership and term of office of the General Secretary was weakened and shortened. This led to a collective resignation of all committee members on Public Policy and the general secretary of HKCC, Rev. Kwok Nai Wang, as well. After that, Rev. Kwok with 120 Christians set up the Hong Kong Christian Institute in 1988 to continue to struggle for social justice.²² Regrettably, when the Hong Kong mainstream Church stopped calling unambiguously for human well-being, the direction of ecumenism turned to internal denominational dialogue in doctrines, rituals, and theology.²³ While the Hong Kong ecumenical movement gradually weakened in the mid-1980s, it was not surprising that comments like those of Rev. Yung Chuen Heng, another executive committee member during the final term of the TWESSC and the representative of the Chuen Yuen Church, came about. He stated that the role of the Church was to provide a social service, not to promote social change (Yu 2006, p. 49). In other words, the Church could offer a social service for the needy. However, the community development approach adopted by the TWESSC had all along been to mobilise the grassroots for collective action and social advocacy. In other words, the stand held by Rev. Yung then already went against the ecumenical vision sought by the founding ministers from the six churches. Law Man Wai even argued that there was a change of theological stance of the Church (Law 1997, p. 1). Furthermore, Rev. Hans Lutz also pinpointed that before the events leading up to the dissolution of the TWESSC, one of the local churches had intended to withdraw from the TWESSC.²⁴

Significantly, the three previously mentioned ultimate causes are interrelated. Since church representatives at the TWESSC's executive committee were not stable, new succeeding ministers from the mainline denominations were not necessarily equipped with a strong ecumenical commitment, as reflected by the weakening ecumenical movement in HK in general. This led the new executive committee members to undertake a mere administrative management approach rather than a frontline praxis. A detached relationship between the executive committee and staff and their different views on the controversy of social action eventually resulted in the TWESSC's dissolution in 1997 before the change of sovereignty from British to Chinese government.

5. Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the TWESSC was founded in a vigorous ecumenical spirit. The TWESSC was praised as a pioneer in the Hong Kong local ecumenical praxis (Tang 1983b, p. 3; The Outpost 1973, p. 14). It transcended the barriers of denominationalism and dealt with real social problems by uniting the efforts of several churches, echoing the call of the WCC in the 1970s for the Church to seek social justice in solidarity with humankind. Importantly, the establishment of the TWESSC was initiated from below (locally), rather than grudgingly imposed by the upper strata such as denominational headquarters, and the wider church bodies like the HKCC or WCC. This ecumenical witness not only promoted cooperation among ministers in different denominations but also raised their concern for the livelihood of grassroots people in their locality. Through community development, the TWESSC organized residents to make a collective voice to the government for the improvement of their livelihood. In addition to being the social witness, this church network in Tsuen Wan further facilitated the exchange of pulpit at the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity yearly; this helped educate the churchgoers of the importance and feasibility of church unity irrespective of denominational

²² (Brown 1993, pp. 267–74; Kwok 2004, pp. 110–16, 125–30; Lo 1994, p. 60). Deborah Ann Brown's work particularly highlights this controversial issue as an example of Sheng Kung Hui (the HK Anglican Church) with the mainline denominations formed a "holy alliance" with the Chinese communist government.

²³ I have to admit that there have been few Christian NGOs concerning social justice since the 1980s. See (Chan 1991, pp. 74–80).

²⁴ (Liuming beijingu tonggong yu luhansi duitan [1996] 1998). Besides, this transcript also explained and outlined simply the different stands of the executive committee and staff of the TWESSC in social action as the method of community development. As a promoter of community development of the earlier generation, Hans Lutz had reservation towards the use of aggressive social action by the TWESSC's staff and residents with the danger of being arrested after the controversial intervention of Rooftop residents in 1994.

divisions. Lastly, this network also encouraged local Christian youth to establish the Youth Ecumenical Movement working for the collaboration among different denominations. After the youth group was terminated, the TWESSC developed the social concern group of Tsuen Wan/Kwai Chung Christians in the late 1980s.

Due to the limited length of the article, this paper does not discuss further contributing factors which led to the dissolution of the TWESSC in 1997, such as the breakdown in the relationship between the executive committee and staff, the bleak future of the Hong Kong community development service, the controversial role of social workers in social action, political space, and the role of aggressive social action in Hong Kong before the Handover. Undeniably, as I said, the fragile ecumenical vision in HK since the 1980s made the dissolution of the TWESSC inevitable. In addition to overriding the social aspect of ecumenism, i.e., radical social transformation, the church did not even seek reconciliation when discords arose between the executive committee and staff. This goes against a teaching emphasized repeatedly by the contemporary Church—"church unity" and "living together with our brothers in unity."²⁵ From the retrieval of the founding of the TWESSC and its ecumenical spirit, this article contributes to the study of ecumenism in Hong Kong in two ways, firstly by examining the active engagement at the beginning of the ecumenical movement in Hong Kong against the emerging community development approach from the field of social work. Secondly, this article has explored the two subtle changes in the Hong Kong Church in the 1980s that indirectly played a part in the dissolution of the TWESSC, suggesting that the causes include the Church's appropriation of subvented services from the colonial Government which led to the alienation from frontline services, and the mainline Church's discouragement of dissenting voices in the ecumenical movement as they struggled for survival after the Handover. Turning to my story in the introduction about a wound, this micro history study undoubtedly shows a frail ecumenism and a wounded vision for advocating social justice in the HK Church. I have to admit that in terms of Global Christianity, our ecumenical vision has weakened and diffused since the last half century (Jonson 2013). As an ecumenical Christian, I am concerned with building up a diverse local ecumenical praxis and linking it globally; this is probably our "alternative visions" for today and tomorrow. Following the failure of the "Umbrella Movement" in 2014 to influence the present government's thinking, Hong Kong currently faces a wide range of problems: a growing gulf between the richest and poorest members of our society, increasing political and social cleavages, dwindling hopes for any real form of democracy in Hong Kong, the increasing authoritarianism of the unpopular Hong Kong Special Administration Region's government, and blatant intervention by the Chinese government. These problems continuously challenge us to rethink how the ecumenical agenda of the Church can be addressed in solidarity with the people of Hong Kong today.

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²⁵ During the interview by Yu Yan Ming, Rev. Li Yun Hung, one of the church representatives of the last executive committee, expressed regret over the lack of earnestness in seeking reconciliation with staff on the part of the TWESSC executive committee (Yu 2006, p. 43). Finally, facing dissolution, Rev. Hans Lutz, who was one of the founders, met the terminated staff to look for reconciliation too. However, it might not be the will of other executive committee members, including the churches. By contrast, staff who had gone on strike to protest against the attitude of the executive committee had the attitude of seeking reconciliation (Liuming beijiegu tonggong yu luhansi duitan [1996] 1998; Staff Association of the TWESSC 1998; Yu 2006, p. 43).

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