



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Comparing LDS Church Growth in Hong Kong and Singapore

Author: Matt Martinich

Overview

Hong Kong and Singapore share many cultural characteristics including some of the world's highest standards of living, the prominence of Chinese culture, an urbanized cosmopolitan atmosphere, integration into the world economy, importance as regional centers of trade and commerce, and comparatively small populations among East Asian nations. Notwithstanding these commonalities the LDS Church has experienced vastly different growth trends in Hong Kong and Singapore over the past half century. This essay examines the influence of culture, missionary tactics, mission policies, and legislation on LDS Church growth in Hong Kong and Singapore and identifies reasons for differing church growth trends.

Demography

In Hong Kong, the population was 7.12 million in 2011 and grew at an annual rate of 0.448%. Chinese constitute 95% of the population; notable ethnic minority groups include Filipinos (1.6%) and Indonesians (1.3%). Cantonese speakers constitute 90.8% of the population whereas native English speakers comprise 2.8% of the population and other Chinese languages account for 4.4% of the population. In 2011, the fertility rate was 1.07 children born per woman.[\[1\]](#)

In Singapore, the population was 4.74 million in 2011 and grew at an annual rate of 0.817%. Chinese constitute 76.8% of the population; notable ethnic minority groups include Malays (13.9%) and Indians (7.9%). Mandarin Chinese is spoken by 35% of the population. Other commonly spoken languages include English (23%), Malay (14.1%), Hokkien (11.4%), Cantonese (5.7%), Teochew (4.9%), and Tamil (3.2%). In 2011, the fertility rate was 1.11 children born per woman.[\[2\]](#)

History

In Hong Kong, archaeologists have dated the earliest human settlement back to 3,000 B.C. Han Chinese began settling the region in the seventh century A.D. Trade with Britain commenced in the early eighteenth century and the British annexed Hong Kong following the Chinese defeat in the First Opium War in 1842. Conflict between the Chinese and British formally came to a close at the end of the Second Opium War in 1858. The geographic size of Hong Kong expanded dramatically in 1898 as a result of the United Kingdom obtaining a 99-year lease of the New Territories from the Chinese government out of defense concerns. The British used Hong Kong as center of economic activity and commerce for East Asia during the twentieth century. Following the communist takeover of mainland China, hundreds of thousands fled to Hong Kong. During the latter half of the twentieth century, Hong Kong emerged as a regional economic power due to its success in manufacturing, tourism, finance, and commerce. Consequently standards of living greatly improved, reaching some of the highest levels of life expectancy, GDP per capita, and literacy in Asia. Sovereignty of Hong Kong transferred to China in 1997 when the British lease expired. With the exception of foreign relations and defense, Hong Kong remains highly autonomous and will retain its economic, judicial, and political systems until 2047.[\[3\]](#)

In Singapore, Malay sultans ruled the area until 1819 when the British received permission to build a trading post on the island. The entire island came under British control in 1824. During World War II the island was invaded and held by Japanese forces. An independence movement began in the 1950s. Independence was declared in 1963 and the country joined the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore seceded from Malaysia. Due to its geographic location, free-market economy, and comparatively small population to other nations, the country was transformed into one of the world's wealthiest.

Economy

In Hong Kong, the GDP per capita was \$49,300 in 2011. Services constitute 93% of the work force and GDP whereas industry comprises most of the remaining 7% of each indicator. Major industries include textiles, clothing, and tourism. In 2011, the unemployment rate was 3.3%. In 2011, Hong Kong Ranked as the 12th least corrupt country in the world according to Transparency International.[\[4\]](#)

In Singapore, the GDP per capita was \$59,900 in 2011. Services constitute approximately 70% of the work force and GDP whereas industry accounts for most of the remaining 30% of each indicator. Major industries include electronics, chemicals, and financial services. In 2011, the unemployment rate was 1.9%.[\[5\]](#) In 2011, Singapore ranked as the fifth least corruption country worldwide according to Transparency International.[\[6\]](#)

Religion

In Hong Kong, those who do not affiliate with a religious group constitute a slight majority (57% of the population). Those who follow traditional Chinese religions comprise the largest religious group but this group accounts for only 21% of the population. Christians constitute 15% of the population whereas Muslims account for 1.5% of the population. Individuals who follow other religious traditions comprise the remaining 5.5% of the population.

In Singapore, Buddhists are the largest religious group and account for 33% of the population. Provided with the percentage of the population, other major religious groups include Christians (18%), Muslims (15%), Taoists (11%), and Hindus (5.1%). Unaffiliated individuals constitute 17% of the population whereas other religious groups or individuals with unknown religious affiliation comprise 0.9% of the population.

LDS Background

In Hong Kong, the first permanent church presence was established in the early 1950s. The Southern Far East Mission was organized in 1955 and headquartered in Hong Kong. Membership reached 1,300 by 1959 and the first district was organized in 1965. In 1987, there were 14,000 members on church records meeting in 24 congregations. Membership increased to 18,000 in 1993, 20,702 in 2000, 22,263 in 2005, and 24,425 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates ranged from 1.03% to 1.85% between 2000 and 2010. In 2009, membership increased by 3.8% but this appeared to occur due to the transfer of hundreds of "lost" members on church records in Macau to Hong Kong where the mission is headquartered. The number of congregations reported by the Church was 24 in 1987, 32 in 1993, 39 in 2000, and 41 in 2001. After 2001, the number of congregations declined to 39 in 2002, 37 in 2003, 36 in 2005, 33 in 2006, and 32 in 2008. As a result of the number of congregations declining by over 20% between 2001 and 2008, the average number of members per congregation increased from 514 to 726. In 2010, the average congregation had 763 members on its records. In 2011, 12-16% of church membership in Hong Kong appeared active. In 2010, one in 292 was nominally LDS.

In Singapore, the Church first established a permanent presence in the early 1960s. In 1968, the first missionaries were assigned. In 1969, the Southern Asia Mission was organized in Singapore but closed the following year and reopened in 1989. In 1987, there were 1,300 members meeting in five congregations. Membership increased to 1,800 in 1993, 2,162 in 2000, 2,443 in 2005, and 3,337 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates ranged from 1.7% to 13.6% between 2000 and 2010 but typically varied from two to seven percent. The year with the highest annual growth rate for membership within the past decade was 2010, at 13.6%. The number of wards and branches totaled five in 1987, six in 1993, eight in 2000, nine in 2005, and 11 by year-end 2011. The average number of members per congregation increased from 270 in 2000 to 371 in 2010. In 2011, 35% of church membership in Singapore appeared to be active. In 2010, one in 1,421 was nominally LDS.

Factors Influencing Differing LDS Growth Trends in Hong Kong and Singapore

Culture and Society

At present, receptivity in the general population appears higher in Singapore than in Hong Kong although both nations are highly secular. In Hong Kong, the dominance of Chinese culture, lack of ethnic diversity, relatively long duration of economic prosperity, and intense secular influence from Western Europe has disinterested most in Western religion and devalued personal religious practice. Materialism and wealth have occupied much of the void left by organized and traditional Chinese religion. Secularism has likely reduced member activity rates for the LDS Church in Hong Kong. Notwithstanding Chinese comprising a clear majority, Singapore exhibits a more cosmopolitan atmosphere as demonstrated by the acceptance of sizable minority groups such as Malays and Indians into mainstream society. Government-backed efforts to promote interethnic harmony appear to have also facilitated the evolution of the present-day multiethnic society. Greater societal tolerance for religious diversity in Singapore than in Hong Kong appears another contributor to higher receptivity to the LDS Church in recent years. In the 1970s and 1980s, more rapid membership and congregational growth in Hong Kong than in Singapore appears partially attributed to rapid economic development and modernization. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the surge in LDS membership growth rates and the organization of two new wards may be partially influenced by strong economic growth in Singapore experienced during this period.

Religious affiliation appears another factor influencing differing LDS growth trends in Hong Kong and Singapore. In Hong Kong, the majority of the population is irreligious whereas in Singapore, Buddhists and Christians together account for over half the population. In Singapore, some Trinitarian Christian groups target the LDS Church in counter-proselytism efforts and ridicule members and perspective converts as un-Christian. Although a common occurrence in most countries, differing theology and religious practice have grown from common interdenominational disagreements to harassment and intolerance. These somewhat adverse conditions appear to have strengthened member testimonies and solidified convert devotion to live church teachings and remain active after baptism as more courage is required to accept and follow through with the associated commitments. In Hong Kong, missionaries report that many converts struggle with counter-proselytism efforts by Christian groups as well.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Differing mission policies regarding convert baptismal standards and reactivation work appear major issues with why the Church in Singapore exhibits member activity rates twice as high as the Church in Hong Kong. Mission policies for convert baptisms in Hong Kong appear driven to reach arbitrary quotas rather than concentrating on baptizing investigators who have firmly-developed habitual church attendance and reasonably strong personal testimonies. Good convert retention, fellowshiping, and testimony building activities applied in the 1980s and 1990s in Hong Kong appeared to help compensate for some of these issues but in the 2000s these programs did not appear to operate as consistently as in previous decades. Strong member-missionary involvement in Singapore is a major contributor to higher convert retention and member activity rates than in Hong Kong.

Local Laws

Legislation and government policies pertaining to missionary activity appear one of the primary influences on differing growth trends for the Church in Hong Kong and Singapore. The LDS Church in Hong Kong operates without any proselytism restrictions resulting in reduced emphasis on member-missionary work. The reduced responsibility placed on members to provide missionaries with investigators to teach and to share the gospel with friends and neighbors has necessitated full-time missionaries to find and teach investigators through less fruitful approaches such as street contacting. Government efforts in Singapore to promote religious harmony have discouraged open proselytism by religious groups. This government policy has encouraged greater member-missionary involvement which has increased convert retention and member activity rates.

Missionary Tactics

Approaches to finding, teaching, baptizing, and retaining converts appear strikingly different between the Church in Hong Kong and Singapore notwithstanding many cultural similarities. In Hong Kong, missionaries struggle to find investigators to teach and many converts become inactively shortly after baptism. In 2011, missionaries reported that the mission set a goal for 400 convert baptisms yet noted that by the end of the year many converts had already become inactive. With the exception of only a handful of individuals, all of the approximately 90 missionaries assigned to the China Hong Kong Mission serve in Hong Kong whereas only eight missionaries serve in Singapore at a time.

In Hong Kong, local church leaders have provided mentoring and leadership development to the newly established Church in mainland China. This has provided invaluable assistance for the fledgling church outside of Hong Kong but has shifted leadership focus away from Hong Kong.

The LDS Church in Singapore has demonstrated greater vision geared toward member-missionary work, organizing additional congregations, and reaching ethnic minority groups. Restrictions imposed by the government on the number of missionaries that can serve in the country has resulted in efficient use of limited numbers of missionaries and stronger involvement from ordinary members who must supply investigators and play an active role in the conversion process.

Comparative Growth

In Singapore, the LDS Church reports more members and congregations than Seventh Day Adventists but generally has less members than most major Christian denominations. During the 2000s, the Seventh Day Adventist Church experienced slow membership growth. The number of Adventists increased from 2,267 in 2000 to 2,752 in 2010 whereas the number of Adventist congregations was unchanged during this period.^[7] The government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 and continues to uphold this ban. Witnesses do not have an official presence today, possession of Witness literature is prohibited, and no estimates are available for membership.

In Hong Kong, the size of the LDS Church is comparable to Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and other missionary-focused Christian groups. Between 2000 and 2010, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Hong Kong and Macau reported increases in membership from 3,924 to 4,771 and in the number of congregations from 17 to 20.^[8] In 2011, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 5,307 active members meeting in 64 congregations.^[9] Adventists and Witnesses exhibit higher convert retention rates than the LDS Church and have not experienced a decline in the number of congregations in recent years like Latter-day Saints.

Future Prospects

Differing mission policies, level of member-missionary engagement, and government legislation appear the primary causes for differing LDS Church growth trends in Hong Kong and Singapore notwithstanding many cultural similarities. Steady membership and congregational growth will likely continue for the LDS Church in Singapore in the coming decade which may warrant the creation of a second stake. In Hong Kong, the trend of congregation consolidations may persist and necessitate the consolidation of an additional stake within the next decade but stabilization of active membership appears a more likely outcome which would result in stagnant congregational growth. Based on statements by church leaders, distance from operating temples, and increasing numbers of new congregations and church membership in Southeast Asia, a future temple may be built in Singapore within the medium term.

[1] "Hong Kong," The World Factbook, retrieved 9 February 2012.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/hk.html>

[2] "Singapore," The World Factbook, retrieved 9 February 2012.
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sn.html>

[3] "Background Note: Hong Kong," Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs," 3 August 2010.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2747.htm>

[4] "Corruption Perceptions Index 2011," Transparency International, retrieved 9 February 2012.
<http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/#CountryResults>

[5] "Singapore," The World Factbook, retrieved 9 February 2012.
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[6] "Corruption Perceptions Index 2011," Transparency International, retrieved 9 February 2012.
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[7] "Adventist Statistics - Singapore Mission," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 9 February 2012.
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[8] "Adventist Statistics - Hong Kong-Macau Conference," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 9 February 2012.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10193

[9] "2011 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 9 February 2012.
http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm