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Pedagogical Impulses and Incommensurables: Lived Mormonism in Hong Kong

Stacilee Ford

Globalization is a brutal phenomenon. It brings us mass displacement, wars, terrorism, unchecked financial capitalism, inequality, xenophobia, and climate change. But if globalization is capable of holding out any fundamental promise to us, any temptation to go along with its havoc, then surely that promise ought to be this: we will be more free to invent ourselves. In that country, this city, in Lahore, in New York, in London, that factory, this office, in those clothes, that occupation, in wherever it is we long for, we will be liberated to be what we choose to be.¹

WRITER MOHSIN HAMID'S TAKE ON GLOBALIZATION feels relevant to Mormonism in Hong Kong, where I live as a participant-observer in a cosmopolitan community of Latter-day Saints deftly (and often quite creatively) incorporating principles and practices into their lives. As a cultural historian who is interested in chronicling how individuals are changed by their cross-cultural encounters, I think, write, and teach about the intersection of gender, national identity, class, ethnicity, and historical time. I analyze stories of cross-cultural encounter through

1. Mohsin Hamid, *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), xi–xii.

the lens of transnational feminism, narrative inquiry, and diaspora/Sinophone studies. Since 1993 I have observed, firsthand, the ways in which “rising China” (and much of Asia) engages or ignores “America” (read the United States) in its material and virtual forms.

Today, as a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong is also marked by its British colonial past and the ongoing presence of American neocolonialism. Dueling notions of national exceptionalism are evident in the public sphere. The question of what constitutes the “foreign” in the context of Mormonism in Asia often follows similar tributaries. The processes of globalization and self-invention that Hamid notes above are evident in LDS congregations in Asia.

Shu-mei Shih’s caution against neocolonial attitudes in transnational feminist practice in Asia is a helpful way to view what is happening in the microcosm of Mormonism I know best. Shih calls attention to “productive incommensurables” in relationships where individual differences inform institutional practices and balances (or imbalances) of power. She argues that once we acknowledge that certain differences will never be completely reconciled we can move toward acceptance of these “incommensurables” in ways that energize a community by acknowledging the “restless dialectic between the translatable and the untranslatable.”² My research, teaching, and service as a district Relief Society president in the

2. Shu-mei Shih, “Is Feminism Translatable? Spivak, Taiwan, A-Wu,” in *Comparatizing Taiwan*, ed. Shu-mei Shih and Ping-hui Liao (London: Routledge, 2015), 172–73. Shih was speaking of a dialogue she witnessed between a famous postcolonial critic and women in Taiwan. She writes: “Even with the best of intentions and a keen spirit of solidarity, we may still be complicit with the neocolonial production and circulation of knowledge, if we are not attentive to the unavoidable, and I’d like to think, productive incommensurability in transnational encounters. Translation does not presume translatability; neither is solidarity sufficient ground for commensurability. It is the restless dialectic between the translatable and the untranslatable, the commensurable and the incommensurable, that compels both the possibility of communication and the self-critical awareness of one’s own knowledge formation.”

Hong Kong China District are in a “restless dialectic” of their own. To use Anne Taves’s term, my “multiplex subjectivity” informs my worldview.³

As Mormonism “goes global,” I see the ways in which its members and leaders wrestle with incommensurables; whether the process is productive or not depends on many factors, not the least of which is members’ and leaders’ ability to be more nimble in dealing with—rather than simply paying lip service to—difference. At the macro level, many Hong Kongers encounter Mormonism through the missionaries they see out and about in public. While LDS leaders and public affairs officials in Hong Kong worry about negative views of the church that circulate online, and there have been conscious attempts to address discordant translations between Chinese and English words and concepts, most of my university students know very little about Mormonism.

In class we discuss Mormon history as an important case study in US history and one of many Christian traditions. We also think about Mormonism outside North America as an example of transnational American studies and the ways in which culture and traditions travel across borders. Students repeatedly conjecture that the confidence they see many Americans and Americanized Hong Kong residents exude (which they sometimes read as arrogance, although there is a certain grudging admiration as well) is related to links between faith and citizenship in US civil society. I have written about this elsewhere as a historical phenomenon associated with US culture—including but not limited to evangelization among women—called a “pedagogical impulse.” The phenomenon is evident in various Americanized LDS congregations in Hong Kong. (As an LDS sister from Japan asked me after we finished our Primary teaching one Sunday, “Why is it that American women are always trying to teach me something?”)⁴

3. See Taves’s quote and Fluhman’s critique of a lack of methodology in Mormon studies in J. Spencer Fluhman, “Friendship: An Editor’s Introduction,” *Mormon Studies Review* 1 (2014): 4–5.

4. This anecdote and a more detailed discussion of links between American exceptionalism and women’s narratives of self are found in Stacilee Ford, *Troubling American Women: Narratives of Gender and Nation in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong

Men as well as women can express pedagogical impulses, but what the above comment illustrates is that Mormon notions of chosenness can piggyback on larger narratives of American exceptionalism in an environment where Americanization in multiple forms has expanded rapidly from the Cold War period through recent globalization and neoliberalism. Assumptions made about how things should be done, and about how new converts or reactivated members should dress, talk, teach, and testify, often conform to conservative middle-class American norms. Caucasian members still, generally, dominate the conversation in Gospel Doctrine class or Relief Society and priesthood meetings. In some cases, white privilege is upheld in congregations where whites are in the minority, partly because of an ethos of harmony—born of Hong Kong’s turbulent past that encourages its highly mobile population to be pragmatic and restrained—but also because of a deep-rooted legacy of colonial privilege that segmented Hong Kong society for much of its history.

Some leaders understand the depth and diversity of culturally ingrained patterns of behavior (and the ingrained cultures hail from many places), but there is little consensus about how to deal with such incommensurable differences other than to promote another type of harmony—that of unity in belief—that may actually postpone a day of reckoning with neocolonialism in institutional structures and individual hearts and minds. Few members consider the ways in which Mormonism piggybacks on an expanding American presence in Asia, but there are links. Religion becomes entwined in the flow of people, resources, and ideology transiting the Pacific, and more work is needed to better understand how Latter-day Saint communities have been shaped by Hong Kong’s unique identity as an in-between but increasingly Americanized space.

For many Latter-day Saints, particularly recent converts, a strategic borrowing of “bits of America” via consumerism, identity documents, or attitudes is accentuated by exposure to LDS norms and cultural

University Press, 2011). I wrote the book with students and Latter-day Saints in Hong Kong in mind but did not explicitly discuss Mormon notions of exceptionalism.

codes. This may or may not translate into acceptance of American values or mores. However, the encounter with Americanism via Mormonism occurs regularly in various congregations, including special units such as a Mandarin Chinese-speaking branch, where subethnic identity (PRC, Taiwanese, Hong Kong, and American Chinese) and larger geopolitical shifts—as well as gender, class, and generation—may have an impact on how members see and interact with each other.

For as American as Mormonism may be perceived to be, LDS leaders at the local and area level are keen to foment locally grounded sensibilities. Hong Kong and PRC government policies are upheld with caution and care, something that frustrates members who wish the church would join other religious groups in agitating for civil rights and social justice reforms. And there are, of course, incommensurable differences in families as well as in congregations when it comes to just how “American” children, as well as the church, should be.

For example, in many local Cantonese-speaking congregations (wards), young women who are considered to be too Americanized struggle to negotiate between familial expectations and their own desires for self-individuation. It is women in this group—as well as many young, single, professional women in the Mandarin and English-speaking family branches—who are quite cognizant of recent discussions about women and the priesthood, and gender in LDS culture more generally. This discourse dovetails with discussions of single women in their mid-thirties as “leftover” in Hong Kong and PRC society. Today, like their North American sisters, more and more LDS women navigate within and between patriarchal structures of all sorts cognizant that their expectations for combining motherhood and satisfying careers are less novel than in previous generations, but they are still met with a certain amount of familial and institutional resistance.⁵ In their efforts to harmonize with local government policies and promote traditional family values, LDS Church leaders will have to assess how the ongoing use of the term *patriarchy* and the doubling down on the rhetoric of the traditional family will place

5. See Grace Ka Ki Kwok, “Mormon Women Identities: The Experiences of Hong Kong Chinese Mormon Women” (master’s thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2012).

them at odds with members keen to overcome gender discrimination or sexual abuse as well as sexist mindsets at church.

Demographically speaking, the majority of Latter-day Saints (like the approximately 95 percent of the general population) who live in Hong Kong are Cantonese speaking and ethnically Chinese. But the small cohort of individuals who are members of the Hong Kong China District are, as I have noted elsewhere, an interesting community where local Hong Kongers share the space with “foreigners” who have come for opportunities of various sorts—mostly economic—as Hong Kong remains a key node for commerce, migration, and relative freedom of expression and movement in the region.⁶ In these units there are members who served missions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or in other Chinese-speaking communities and who have returned to capitalize on hard-earned language skills in a place they feel tied to in various ways. Many within this population belong to or have married into the Chinese/Asian diaspora that has, for generations, been moving between nations, congregations, and social contexts, appropriating aspects of home and host national cultures as well as Wasatch Front and more localized (or even subethnic) expressions of Mormonism. They are making inroads in leadership positions and have blended leadership styles that make them particularly well equipped to mediate between various stakeholders in the church community in Hong Kong and beyond.

However, the majority of the Hong Kong China District is a unique population that challenges existing structures yet exuberantly embraces Mormonism as a way of finding meaning in a society that depends upon but exploits them. These are the women (and a few men and children) from the Philippine Islands (more than 1,000 out of about 1,800 members), and a smaller group from Indonesia and Nepal, who are employed as domestic or hospitality workers. This fact makes the Hong Kong China District arguably the most gender-imbalanced entity of its type in the LDS Church. Lived Mormonism in the “sister branches” is very different from more “typical” congregations that include the

6. Stacilee Ford, “Crossing the Planes: Gathering, Grafting, and Second Sight in the Hong Kong China International District,” *Dialogue* 47/3 (Fall 2014): 23–52.

branches with large populations of more economically privileged foreign expatriates and their families. The domestic worker branches are structured so that the Sabbath is a lively and rewarding but lengthy day of worship and fellowship. Sundays include a regular three-hour block of meetings, home and visiting teaching, Relief Society activities, and family home evening.

There are structural issues to reckon with in order to keep things running smoothly and provide domestic workers with opportunities to learn and grow spiritually. Branch and district leaders seek to uphold official guidelines while adapting to particular circumstances. Women are called and set apart as executive secretaries/administrative assistants (names are often blended and/or used interchangeably), branch mission coordinators (with responsibilities similar to those of branch mission leaders), Sunday School superintendents or coordinators (with assistants rather than counselors and responsibilities similar to those of a Sunday School president/presidency), and assistant membership clerks. They attend branch council meetings and constitute the bulk of the branch council.

While the mostly male leadership in the sister branches seeks to adapt to the needs of the members (including the opening of the Hong Kong Temple on Sundays once a quarter), there are incommensurables that have yet to be productively reconciled. Hong Kong is a very socioeconomically as well as culturally segmented society, and that segmentation often follows Latter-day Saints to church. District events are held on public holidays when many expatriate families desire to gather on their own. The very existence of these special units can, at times, exacerbate the gulf between members from different backgrounds, and some members worry that colonial mindsets may deepen rather than recede over time.

For the most part, LDS domestic workers seem quite unfazed by such talk; rather, they establish informal networks and microcommunities within larger congregations. Even as they do so they remain deferential to structural limits while allowing for nontraditional behavior. They borrow bits of America—particularly in their embrace of American

slang, popular culture, snack food, fashion, and websites celebrating aspects of Mormon culture—but their home cultures are their touchstones. They draw upon the church to recharge on Sundays, to express creativity through activities, and to suit their own individual needs. It is interesting to watch the leaders (many of whom are senior missionary couples) adapt their initial expectations to members' rhythms and visions of "girl power Mormonism."

One must be careful not to overstate the power wielded by members of sister branches. As a subaltern and expendable pool of laborers, domestic workers are, generally speaking, frequently infantilized or seen as sexual objects in Hong Kong society. Their low wages, limited rights, curfews and housing restrictions, and exploitative contract status further marginalize them, as does the vital but poorly compensated work of care they do. Many are deeply in debt, malnourished or in poor health, or struggling to provide for extended family members with difficulties of their own. While the church provides a refuge, a community, and an expression for creative outlets, the circumstances of their lives are vastly different from other Latter-day Saints in Hong Kong.

Despite attempts to combat neocolonial attitudes and sexism, and the efforts of members from many places who "cross over" ethnic and economic borders, segregation is still evident and incommensurables seem difficult to manage. LDS families who employ domestic workers try to level the social asymmetry by treating them with care and respect, but even at church it is not uncommon to see expressions of deference in conversation or self-segregation in seating arrangements or in social settings. Yet individual agency is evident as domestic workers come to various conclusions about what business/shopping they do on the Sabbath, how they calculate tithing given the fact that paychecks are often committed to pay debts or support needy family members before being cashed, and how those with children of their own uphold traditional models of LDS motherhood when they are raising other people's children *and* trying to long-distance parent their own. Efforts to teach practical lessons about self-reliance have empowered many women, and leaders have, for the most part, taken a more flexible stance towards

gender-role conventions than they do elsewhere (including in other branches in the district and in other wards in Hong Kong).

Most important for Mormon studies scholars, and religious studies more generally, is that the Hong Kong China District is a rich case study of a faith community in a global age. There is, thanks in part to the structure of an all-male cohort of priesthood leaders overseeing a large and underserved female population, a conservative ethos overriding less orthodox behaviors. But beneath the surface there are other factors in play. Many of the men in positions of power patiently and respectfully serve women domestic workers in ways that transgress conventional gender norms. Men cook, serve, and participate in traditionally “female” spaces including Relief Society meetings and activities. They and their spouses often become advocates for greater structural flexibility and more cognizant of the ways in which the church needs to shed certain US-centric mindsets.

In Hong Kong, then, there are unique opportunities for members to envision a global Latter-day Sainthood that takes account of the complexities of gender, national, cultural, economic, and political identities and dynamics while forming and nurturing a community where “all are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33) despite the incommensurables of mortality.

Stacilee Ford (BA, Brigham Young University; EdM, Harvard University; EdD, Columbia University; PhD, Hong Kong University) has lived in Hong Kong since 1993. She is an Honorary Associate Professor in the Department of History and in the American Studies Program at the University of Hong Kong. Her scholarship focuses on the intersection of gender, national identity, and culture. She is the author of two books: *Troubling American Women: Narratives of Gender and Nation in Hong Kong* (2011) and *Mabel Cheung Yuen-Ting’s “An Autumn’s Tale”* (2008). She is currently working on a study of men and leadership in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Greater China/Diaspora/Sinophone communities.