
There has been a large body of research on overseas Chinese businesses, mainly focusing on the role of family culture and familial relations in Chinese business operations in diverse places. Many researchers would agree that deep-rooted Confucian notions and practices, particularly those related to ancestor worship, have played a vital role in maintaining kinship ties, communal solidarity and transnational networks among the global Chinese business diaspora. In Overseas Chinese Christian Entrepreneurs in Modern China, Sociologist Joy Kooi-Chin Tong offers an alternative story by looking at the role of Protestant Christianity in the expatriate life of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs who are from Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Southeast Asia and the U.S. and who are now conducting business in Shanghai. With an intention to apply Max Weber’s thesis on the Protestant-capitalist nexus to the Chinese context, Tong sets out to examine the causal relationship of Christian morality and business development in this modernizing and industrializing Chinese metropolis.

The first two chapters put the study into the economic and religious context of post-reform China and the Weberian framework of religion and political economy respectively. It is worth noting that there is a dichotomous notion of China versus the West in the author’s treatment of the encounter between the Christian religion influence of overseas Chinese and the reform-era domestic Chinese context. The former represents a foreign, Western ideology, and Tong is primarily interested in finding out how, through the introduction of overseas Chinese Christians, this powerful Western meaning system may have affected economic development in Communist China.

Tong conducted totally 60 interviews in Shanghai in 2007 and 2008 with overseas Chinese Christian entrepreneurs — mostly men — to explore their religious values and meanings. The study’s snowball sampling is highly selective, mainly based on those Christians with “moral reputations” in the eyes of their peers (p. 21). Ethically problematic individuals would most likely decline interview request in the first instance. Most of the field research was conducted in the Christian congregational context, especially in the context of Overseas Chinese Christian fellowship activities, to derive subjective understandings of the informants. Despite some methodological limitations, the reader should bear in mind the formidable difficulty and political sensitivity of conducting interviews and observing participants among foreign Christian communities in the PRC. Tong admits that “as religious influences are woven into the fabric of daily life, it is difficult to measure exactly the degree of depth to which religious values penetrate people’s behaviors” (p. 144). The fact that this study draws heavily on interviews rather than observations in daily business context inevitably weakens the book’s conceptual claim on the impact of Christianity on economic behavior.

The book is more on the overseas Chinese Christian discourse of business ethics than on the actual workings of the religion in the Chinese context. It places special emphasis on Taiwanese Christian entrepreneurs in Shanghai as the Taiwanese consist of more than half of Tong’s sample size. Considering the large Taiwanese business community in Shanghai and the restrictive policy of the Chinese state on the registration and use of religious sites for non-PRC citizens, it is perhaps not surprising that some Taiwanese
Christian businessmen have combined Christianity with a Taiwanese way of life to create a relatively autonomous urban space in Shanghai that exclusively belongs to them. As Chapter 6 shows, one respondent cites Taiwanese food, Christian songs and a non-smoking, alcohol-free environment as reasons for his preference of a café owned by a business fellowship member in Shanghai (p. 116). Sin Wen Lau’s anthropology doctoral research on overseas Chinese Christian groups in Shanghai, conducted almost during the same period as Tong, has ethnographically shown that the religiosity of overseas Chinese Christians is driven by a desire to be differentiated as a privileged Chinese group in relation to PRC citizens. In my view, Tong’s work may confirm Lau’s finding by emphasizing how her overseas Chinese Christian subjects distinguish themselves by embodying what is perceived as “the bedrock of Western values” (p. 149) in a secular Chinese context. In other words, these overseas Chinese Christians seem to take their religion as conducive to a new type of ethnicity that sets them apart from the local Chinese in both moral and spatial terms. It would be interesting to know how local Christians in Shanghai perceive and respond to the image of this modern, “civilized”, cosmopolitan Christian group.

The book stimulates much scholarly interest in the nature of Christian moral commitment in today’s China and how it relates to the secular state’s version of morality. However, it does not explicitly address, from a social scientific approach, issues surrounding whether or not Christianity facilitates overseas Chinese business practices in China against the larger background of moral decadence, rampant corruption and state-led secularization. To what extent does the Christian faith of these overseas Chinese entrepreneurs cause trouble in their dealing with the secular Chinese state in corporate life? Does shared Christian faith foster stronger bonding ties among overseas Chinese businesspeople than professional associations or native-place based organizations do? How does their Christianity interact with traditional Chinese folk religions that are highly visible among overseas Chinese communities? This sort of questions would demand analytical attention to the role of religion in practice. Given the distinction between rhetoric and practice, the centrality of Christian morality in the business life of Christians may not be assumed or overstated. Moreover, there are multiple domains or layers of what can be considered moral behavior, in each of which one may encounter a distinctive set of moral challenges and thus employ different moral principles and coping strategies. The case of overseas Chinese Christians in Shanghai raises comparable issues regarding Christian morality in other social and geographic contexts. I have found in my research on diasporic Wenzhou Christian communities in France that Paris-based Wenzhou Christian businesspeople often treat religion and business as two separate domains of action based on divergent moral and ethical assumptions. In Wenzhou some Christian businessmen would outsource unethical business practices to their secular factory managers while maintaining their own religious and moral ideals in private life. A few even preach the inevitability of amoral business practices to counter what they perceive as a predatory, immoral state.

Interestingly, on the level of rhetoric such moral principles as frugality, self-discipline and integrity, embraced by Tong’s overseas Chinese entrepreneurs (see chapter 4), seem to resonate well with the “eight honors and eight disgraces” (barong baru) promoted by the socialist morality campaign of the Chinese reformist state. One cannot help but wonder if in the domain of business morality, overseas Chinese Christian