

## Book Review

*“Kingdom-Minded People”: Christian Identity and the Contributions of Chinese Business Christians*

**Denise A. Austin**

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This book provides a rich historical account regarding the Chinese business men and women who were converted to Christianity in the form of either Protestantism or Catholicism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period, which was approximately seven decades, witnessed innumerable changes in Chinese society. After several centuries of the ‘closed-door’ policy against foreigners, the Chinese people experienced their first encounter with Western civilization in the areas of education, religion, military, politics, legislation, and business strategy. Concurrently, China underwent a dramatic political transformation, instantaneously shifting from a fossilized monarchical domination adopted for thousands of years to an infantile republican and democratic political system imported from the West. During this period of time, missionaries had great freedom to preach the gospel, with the aid of educational, medical, and other philanthropic means, which was impossible before the 1840s and has remained impossible since 1949.

Focusing on this unique historical period, Austin dedicates the first part of the book to proving that Chinese Christians business people bore a philosophy of business trading characterized by their

Christian faith. She begins the analysis with the missionary efforts on training Chinese converts to engage in business activities, believing that these local “evangelists” would preach the gospel while running businesses. This assumption proved to be an illusion as they discovered their students simply focused on running businesses. Nevertheless, the training brought to China Western business strategies and skills, the concept of a safe and hygienic working environment, labor welfare, observation of the Sabbath, all of which countered selfish business motifs of maximizing profits without regard for the well-being of workers. She suggests that as the country searched for resolutions to its backward social and cultural circumstances, Christianity provided a stepping stone towards Western civilization and modernization, which enabled these Chinese Christian business people to be successful. In this regard, the YMCA and YWCA served as major contributors.

Next, Austin introduces some prominent Chinese Christians business people who engaged in printing or establishing modern department stores in Hong Kong and China. Some of them were migrants in Australia where they started as traders of agricultural products. Austin highlights that these Chinese Christian business

people were not only concerned about profits, but also in providing substantial welfare and training for their employees so that they would provide good services and products to their customers. They zealously participated in philanthropic projects such as building schools, hospitals, orphanages, and humanitarian relief and generously supported the financial needs of Chinese churches, which hugely assisted the independence of some churches from missionaries.

In the second part of the book, Austin attempts to lay out three comparisons between the Protestant and Catholic Chinese business people in terms of their business strategies and philanthropic engagements, the Chinese Christian business people in Australia and China, and the contemporary Chinese Christians business people and those in the early twentieth century.

This research is original in the sense of focusing on how business contributed to the development of Christianity in China, both from the missionary and local converts' perspective. It certainly enhances contemporary study on Chinese Christianity. However, I would raise two ideological questions. The author provides evidence of how Christianity directed the business motifs and philosophy of the Chinese business people and because Christianity was brought to the Chinese through Westerners and missionaries, this Christian-like business practice in Chinese society was attributed to them. The phrase "role model" is mostly linked to Western Christian business people, missionaries, and Westerners, but seldom to Chinese business people or Chinese Christians. Quite possibly, these Chinese Christian business people were also role models to missionaries and Western business partners with their Confucian courtesy and diligence. They probably corrected the biased way the Westerners perceived the Chinese in that period. The author could

have provided a balanced view by reflecting on cultural influence as a reciprocal and dynamic process rather than a monopolistic and hegemonic imposition.

One faces a biblical dilemma when focusing on worldly profit and the kingdom of God, which requires sacrifice of personal wealth and reputation. This is a challenge facing the young rich man in the Bible and I suppose Austin also has this question in mind in her research. To prove her "kingdom-minded" theory, she quickly argues that this dilemma does not really exist because the Chinese Christian business people made philanthropic contributions to the society and were concerned about labor welfare. She also opposes Carl Smith's argument that the prophetic role of the Church would diminish if Christians had both economic power and status. However, would Austin consider that, since these Chinese Christian business people benefitted in the social and political structures, they did not voice out injustice in the society? Would she consider the possibility of exploitation when the business people were reaching the goal of maximizing profit?

Based on her "kingdom-minded" theory, the author continues to suggest that Christian business people served as pillars of the church and Christian institutes because of their financial support. If Christianity is pillared by strong financial power instead of the truth and the Holy Spirit, is it still the religion to which people should adhere? The issue that faces churches nowadays is not only political persecution, but also the corruption of capitalism in the name of the prosperity gospel.