

Making Toys in China

by *Natalie Man Se Chan*



Christian toy manufacturers in Hong Kong are taking a moral stand against bribery and other corrupt practices, as well as promoting better working conditions in large companies.

Recently I carried out an investigation to evaluate the scope and effectiveness of existing marketplace ministry in my own city of Hong Kong. In the course of this, I looked at various types of organisation: general marketplace ministry organisations, Christian professional associations, and marketplace ministry within local churches. I evaluated them along the lines of David Miller's Integration Box with four 'E' types, according to whether they focused on Ethics, Evangelism, Experience or Enrichment¹. One of my conclusions is that a more holistic approach, entailing elements of all four, is desirable.

Among the various organisations I surveyed, however, one stood out. This is the Toys Christian Fellowship of Hong Kong (www.tcf.org.hk). TCF is unusual in that though it only has twenty plus members, these are all business owners who employ thousands and tens of thousands of people in their companies. Their companies are based in Hong Kong but they carry out most of their work in mainland China. The owners share a vision to turn their companies into ones dedicated to carrying out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). Given their position, power and resources, the owners of these toy manufacturing companies can be very effective in influencing the company on a top-down

basis, in almost every aspect from ethics and culture to intentional witnessing opportunities. For instance, some of the owners worked with a consultancy company to turn each company gradually into a Commission company. Initial steps included hiring special consultants to care for the workers on practical as well as spiritual issues. Libraries and other facilities were built and social activities were organised to build up a caring atmosphere. They also worked with local Three-Self churches, which are the official government-sponsored churches in China², to launch some of the social events within the factories.

Unlike the other professional fellowships I investigated, which tend to focus on evangelism, TCF does a lot to influence the industry and uphold standards for safety and fair treatment to workers. For example, its Chairman TS Wong helped set up various standards to ensure the safety and protection of workers when he became the Chairman of Hong Kong Toys Council in 1997 and the President of the International Council of Toy Industries (ICTI) in 2004. I interviewed Mr Wong. The most interesting part of the conversation was, in fact, the integration of faith and business, and the way he looks to God for help in the taking of a strong moral stand. China was a country plagued with corruption and other irregularities in business dealings; the natural question is



▶▶ how one can act rightly in an environment where no one else does and still be successful? Wong's answer is surprisingly simple, or so it seemed to me. He believes that if one makes up one's mind to act righteously before God, there will always be alternatives that open up. It is just a case of someone needing to pray and search a bit harder. At least, that has been his experience so far, and he is not short of examples.

Mr TS Wong is the Chairman of Jetta Company Limited. Jetta is one of the best known toy manufacturers in the world, employing close to 40,000 people with production and warehouse space of over 4.5 million square feet located in Guangdong, China and an annual turnover of USD 400 million. It specializes in making electronic, plastic and stuffed toys – see www.jetta.com.hk. Wong is the first Asian elected to become the President of International Council of Toy Industries (ICTI) in 2004. He is also a well known philanthropist who helps build and fund over eighty schools and colleges in China.

Up until a few years ago, bribery was still common practice in areas such as importing and exporting goods. Wong's company once made a clerical mistake on the invoice that was not consistent with the goods in the truck. It was detained by customs. A person who claimed to have connection with the authorities proposed a little bribe to solve their 'problem', so that they would not experience any delay in the delivery. When the driver asked the company what to do, the company was very clear that they would not pay any bribe; rather, the company ordered the truck driver to return and pay whatever fine was required by law. Payment was still made, but in a way that openly and honestly acknowledged the company's mistake. Wong jokingly said that from then on, they didn't have any similar demands. Of course, their refusal to pay bribes or kickbacks meant that there was a heavy onus on the company to uphold the highest standard and quality of their goods all the time – they had cut themselves off from the easy way out. But this was a cost that Wong was well prepared to bear.



T S Wong

Another impressive example he gave me concerned the company's biggest customer who regularly accounted for 50 to 60% of total turnover. At one time, this client requested Wong's company to discontinue shipment of a product to another much smaller client. The larger client was developing a product targeted at the same market sector as that of the smaller client. The larger client threatened to cancel all existing business if Wong refused to oblige. Wong was not prepared to give way. He felt he had to honour the commitment to his clients, and that it was certainly not right to gang up with the big guy against the smaller ones. Despite the struggle that this provoked, he diplomatically declined the request, accepting that the worst would happen. But the worst never did happen. The larger client never took any business away. He valued the work of Wong's company too much. In fact, months later the big client asked if Wong's company would produce a similar product for him when he received no delivery from anywhere else. The client continues to do so much business with Wong's company for a very good reason: they cannot find any other company that delivers the same quality and price as his.

This is a powerful story. Wong chose to act rightly before God, though most people in his situation might understandably bow to the ▶▶

▶▶ pressure of this major customer. Wong also shared some other incidents about going the extra mile to make sure the workers were treated rightly - to an extent that might appear foolish by worldly standards. As most owners do not have much bargaining power with their customers, they tend to squeeze the margin out of the workers with overtime or delay payments. Wong introduced major changes to the code of practice in the toy industry to promote a safer environment and protect workers from unfair treatment and

excessive overtime during his tenure as the Chairman of Hong Kong Toys Council in the late 1990s.

What we see in his and other toy companies run by Christians is an integration of the different Es: notably a concern with evangelism that is supported by ethics and informed by experience. These are Christians who 'walk the talk'. Their witness to Jesus Christ is credible because of the way that they behave in their business dealings. ■

Dr Natalie Man Se Chan has just completed her dissertation on marketplace ministry, a subject very close to her heart after spending 20 years in the finance industry, the bulk of which was with Goldman Sachs.



1. See David Miller's book *God at Work* (OUP 2007), which was reviewed by Richard Higginson in *FIBQ* 12:2.

2. The 'three selfs' are self-governance, self-support and self-propagation, which respectively reject foreign church leadership, foreign financing and foreign missionaries. They operate under the oversight of the communist government.

In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as in Her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as a result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion.

But is it astonishing? How can anyone remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of their life? The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.

Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly - but what use is all that if in the very centre of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made Heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself; for any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie.

Dorothy L. Sayers, Creed or Chaos? (1940) - still available