

Boss Christians: Entrepreneurs in Asia's Spiritual and Economic Awakening



TRANSFORMINGBUSINESS

by Peter Heslam

The economic rise of Asia is more widely known than its spiritual rise. But in this article, Peter Heslam highlights how they converge in the growing number of Christian entrepreneurs on that continent. Frequently referred to as 'boss Christians', they could play a decisive role in the world's future.

To get two hundred countries to agree on common goals for humanity may seem an impossible project. Yet this is what happened when the United Nations met at the start of the millennium. Together they launched eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), to be achieved by 2015, ranging from poverty eradication and universal primary education to environmental sustainability.

With only a few more years left to go, the UN recently held a summit to assess whether the world was on track to achieve them. Delegates took stock of the devastating impact of the global economic crisis, while cautiously noting areas of progress. The one goal about which they were overwhelmingly optimistic was the first one – to halve by 2015 the proportion of people who in 1990 had an income of less than \$1 per day.

The key reason this target may be met is not international aid but the phenomenal economic growth of China and India. When such growth is looked at from the bottom up, the real change-makers in overcoming poverty turn out to be entrepreneurs, even though aid programmes that deliver infrastructural improvements can help them succeed.

But whereas the economic awakening of Asia's giants has long been widely reported, their spiritual awakening has gone largely unnoticed. When it reports on the world's largest religion, the Western secular media prefers stories about Europe's dwindling churches than about the rapid growth of Christianity in emerging economies.

At the forefront of this dual awakening are what in Asia are often called 'boss Christians'. Typically migrants from poor rural areas who convert to Christianity through the work of city churches, these highly successful urban entrepreneurs are as dedicated to leading and building churches as they are to leading and building businesses.

One of the hotbeds of their activity is the Zhejiang province in China, especially its booming coastal area of Wenzhou. Once a favoured destination amongst western missionaries to China, it is now a key player in China's spiritual and economic development, having the highest proportion of Christians and the highest proportion of private enterprises in the country. It is not uncommon for the city of Wenzhou to be referred to as 'China's Jerusalem'.



▶▶ Similar developments are underway in India. Hotels in Mumbai were the scene of the atrocious Islamist attacks in 2008 but more recently a Mumbai hotel hosted a large gathering of Christian entrepreneurs dedicated to generating wealth amongst the poor in ways that embody transparency, commitment, excellence and trust.



Ashish Raichur in Bangalore, who combines leading an IT software firm with running a church, doing both from opposite ends of the same office.

Was Max Weber right, then, to argue that Christianity is the mother of capitalism? The fact that the Chinese version of his famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* of 1904 is ubiquitous in Wenzhou and is devoured by its boss Christians seems to suggest that these actors at *today's* interface of Christianity and capitalism think that the two are related.

Academics are generally less willing to affirm causal links. But a professor of economics at China's prestigious Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was involved in a state-funded research project in 2002 in which he was sent to the US for three months to compare Western economies with that of China. His mission was to account for the former's success and to make recommendations to his government.

The professor and his team studied everything they could from a historical, economic and political perspective. But eventually they reached an unexpected conclusion: it was above all the moral and spiritual legacy of Christianity that accounted for Western success.

However sound their conclusion - the jury has been out on this issue for more than a century - Wenzhou's boss Christians pursue their ecclesiastical and commercial ventures with youthful vigour. Their hope is that the Christianity and capitalism that call on their best efforts are helping China to recover its spiritual and economic strength.

Questions have been raised about the way boss Christians combine their leadership

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'Boss Christians' in Chinese

roles in church and business. Sometimes their penchant for efficiency rubs with more widely accepted styles of church management. The business models that have helped many Asian cities to become global outsourcing hubs may need further adjustment before being applied as models of church.

But the best research on this new type of spiritual leader reveals that boss Christians tend to be intelligent, open-minded and modest individuals who are determined to promote democratic ways of governing their institutions. In Asian countries in which political liberty and human rights are frequently violated, their impact could be decisive.

The implications will be felt worldwide. For with Asia's rapidly increasing economic importance in the global economy, it is no longer only when America sneezes that the world catches a cold. The fact that Jerusalem became an agent of blessing to the whole world when on the day of Pentecost it gave birth to a global church gives hope that the blessing on Asia's Jerusalem will also permeate the globe.

As international development organisations step up their anti-poverty strategies in the run-up to 2015, perhaps they could acknowledge and encourage the role of entrepreneurs. For without wealth creators, there are few prospects for a life of dignity for the millions trapped in poverty. Even if we regard the release of these millions more as a matter of aid, rather than of enterprise, there is no wealth distribution without wealth creation. And perhaps when the church prays for its ministry amongst the poor it can remember the vital role that is played by its boss Christians. ■

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