

## **Mission of Merchant Believers in Contemporary Times**

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Marketplace Teaching Instructor



The Chinese people call businessmen “merchants” (the pronunciation in Chinese is “Shang Ren”). The expression originated from the “Shang Dynasty” in ancient times. “Shang Dynasty” was the earliest established society in which records of Chinese writings were found.<sup>1</sup> Like what Awen said, business activities in China were accessible to all and innovative in nature. Back then, merchants were a powerful group, controlling the Chinese society for 600 years (from 1700 B.C. to 1100 B.C.) However, in the past several thousand years, China has been an agricultural society where business activities have been suppressed and special business traditions established.<sup>2</sup>

The “Zhou Dynasty” succeeded the “Shang Dynasty”, and Confucius believed that the most important mission of the government was not to amass wealth, but to uphold ethics and justice. Confucius positioned merchants as the lowest stratum in the four levels of society, namely: scholars, farmers, workers and merchants, as merchants primarily focused on pursuing personal gains. This kind of mentality has influenced the Chinese people for over 2,000 years.<sup>3</sup>

### **Transforming the Mindset of “Scholars Being Superior to Merchants”**

Looking at the situation from now to several decades later, there is a definite need to transform the management model of Chinese enterprises. Meanwhile, it is also important for international enterprises from the rest of the world to adjust to the Chinese market. Amidst such efforts, creativity and innovation should be the key in China’s globalization process. With innovation, Chinese enterprises should be able to win in the global market.

However, as noted by Obschonka, Chinese merchants are still very much rooted in the traditions of Confucianism, and the Chinese people hope to maintain their own “identity”.<sup>4</sup>

In Hill’s opinion, apart from being creative, innovative and industrious, the Chinese people also respect the management stratum, which helps define different parties’ responsibilities. Such respect is also linked to “relationships” in the Chinese culture, wielding great influence in the marketplace.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, “Business as Mission” gives the missionaries a businessman’s identity which is extremely important in their evangelism work, providing missionaries with a cover to dispel any doubts as whether they should stay in a certain country. Doing business also offers missionaries a chance to get in touch with people from various backgrounds. In particular, in the Chinese society, a boss is more influential than ordinary people.<sup>6</sup>

In the church particularly the China church, believers also embrace the mentality of “scholars being superior to merchants”.<sup>7</sup> This is related to our cultural background and historical development of our church. In the Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) No.59, it is noted that merchants in the church are often looked down upon.<sup>8</sup> Such is also the common attitude in the China church. Another common thinking is the dualistic view of the physical and spiritual worlds, whereby matters are categorized either as “holy” or “secular”. For instance, going to the church and spreading the gospel are holy, and that missionaries and pastors are holy occupations. On the contrary, other occupations are secular without any spiritual value. As noted by Leung Ka Lun, this remains the mainstream thinking in the China church.<sup>9</sup> In addition, there are also different classes of work with different spiritual value, with missionaries and pastoral workers taking up spiritual work at a higher level, whereas the business sector’s work is considered to be of a lower spiritual value. Paul Stevens pointed out that this kind of dualistic spiritual perspective is still embraced by some church goers.<sup>10</sup>

## **“Business as Mission” to Enhance Chinese People’s Soft Power**

In China, the central government is in control of many state-owned and semi-state-owned enterprises, which in turn control most of the resources including human and training resources. According to a study report in 2019, the total budget for training in 2018 was over RMB300 billion. However, enterprises are often just seeking short-term returns and unwilling to invest in developing human resources in the long run by providing training. As a result, individuals do not share in the fruits of economic success. They are often paid a meagre income and have to work long hours.<sup>11</sup> As noted by Leng, over 600 million people in China have an annual disposable income of RMB11,485.<sup>12</sup> Wang and Tom said studies show that a worker in China works on average 44.7 hours each week, and over 40% of the workers work more than 50 hours.<sup>13</sup> They lack resources (money and time) or fail to enroll in training, such as inhouse training or courses on the know-hows of work, which can bring them immediate benefits. While the literacy rate in China compares favorably with other countries in the region, most Chinese in the mainland have low education attainment, limiting the individual’s ability to learn.

As the Chinese economy becomes more open, religious policies have also been relaxed. However, the fundamentals in the political and economic systems in this seemingly strong country remain fragile, as Wild and Wild (2019, p. 105) mention, creation of economic value and rapid growth cannot be last long if the economic system is unchanged, for the cost is raising and limited private ownership. Behind the country's remarkable achievements lie many threats. The Chinese economy has been marked by a high growth rate, yet the shrinking European and US markets are adding uncertainties to the market outlook. If the country's economic growth cannot be sustained, the society's stability will be at stake, which might prompt the government to tighten its policies. As Professor Zhiwu Chen mentioned in his book "China Model Never Exists", the "China Model" will not succeed.<sup>14</sup> However, history has bestowed upon Hong Kong a special identity, and that many aspects of the Chinese life including its policies, economy, society, culture, technology, environmental protection and laws are related to "Business as Mission".<sup>15</sup> Should we seize the present opportunities to make use of the "Business as Mission" model to enhance Chinese people's soft power? Should we do our utmost in spreading the gospel and transforming the Chinese society, or should we do nothing while the government is stepping its control over religious affairs and tightening its policies towards Christianity under the immense pressure it is facing?

## The Emergence of the Self-Employed and SMEs Bring Opportunities for the Training Sector

The case of Haier, a major home appliances production enterprise in China (it is a major conglomerate with diversified businesses yet its main production line is still home appliances) provides a good example of how Chinese merchants can overcome various global challenges. Every individual employee in the company considers himself an SME owner, working for his own personal gains. He works hard and makes use of the limited resources to upgrade himself.<sup>16</sup>

Luo and Chong (2019) are of the view that the number of self-employed and private SMEs will increase as a result of measures to encourage start-ups and to develop and reform financial institutions. Urbanization and construction of information transmission infrastructure are other contributing factors.<sup>17</sup> All these provide excellent opportunities for the training sector to flourish.

In 2011, Mrs. Zhou attended the foundation training course on "Business as Mission" while Mr. Zhou joined a follow-up study group in Guangxi. The couple got married in 2015. Before they founded a tutorial centre in 2017, Mr. Zhou was a driver and Mrs. Zhou worked as an accounting clerk in a property agent. The couple saw



The tutorial centre founded by the Zhou couple.

that in most Chinese cities, parents were often on full-time jobs, leaving their children to be cared for at tutorial centres where the children studied, ate and slept. They therefore seized the opportunity to establish a tutorial centre on the principle of “Business as Mission”. However, in the past several years, owing to some unfavorable factors such as schools setting up their own tutorial centres as well as a hike in teachers’ licence fees and meal costs, business has been declining, so much so that their income could no longer sustain the centre’s operation and provide for the family’s daily living. The pandemic has dealt a further blow to their business, and consequently the couple had to find alternative means to support themselves. With the assistance of some teachers, Mr. Zhou had successfully switched to working as an insurance agent. Although he has now become a self-employed person instead of running an SME, he still insists on playing the role of a spiritual leader in the marketplace and is waiting patiently for new opportunities.

Businessmen in China are still confronted with a number of challenges, and the question is whether merchant believers can grasp the opportunities to do business under the “Business as Mission” model whereby they run an enterprise and spread the gospel at the same time in order to transform the society and help expand God’s Kingdom?

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## How much is changed in ten years?

### - A bible school on the Silk Road, you're never alone!

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Book Gifting Team member

With the labile rules and regulations imposed upon religion and publication in the mainland, the Book Gifting Team constantly faces the challenge that perhaps this year is our last chance to deliver books to mainland seminary graduates. Despite countless obstacles, each year we strive to identify the optimal materials and deliver them to our recipients. Years past, upon reflection, it becomes clear that had it not been our Heavenly Father's guidance every step



of the way, CCL would not have been able to sustain the Book Gifting ministry for an entire decade.

From 2012 until now, the number of seminaries involved in the Mainland Seminary Graduates Book Gifting project has expanded from 6 to 50. The project has served more than 27,000 teachers and graduates. The direct recipients are not the only beneficiaries, the communities served by these steward leaders throughout the regions are beneficiaries as well. Our persistence in treading the long and winding road does not result in vain. Together with us, Book Gifting beneficiaries at every subordinate level are witnesses too of how God is looking after and walking with us incessantly in the mainland, His merciful love never ceases.

### Partnership for a quarter of a century

We thank God for CCL's initiatives in the Book Gifting ministry. A bible school in the northwest region has been CCL's partner for 10 years and CCL has witnessed its growth. Back in the 1990's, the principal of this bible school had the chance to study in Hong Kong. She got to know how CCL uses publication resources in its Literature ministry. She also visited CCL, shared her experience, and has since then established firm and mutually trusted relationships with CCL colleagues. She specifically mentioned Mr. Thomas Tang, General Secretary, and how he earnestly and caringly prayed for her family, her ministry, and her study. Being an ordinary minister at that time, she was deeply touched. This is a precious gift of genuine friendship in her life.

We have partnered with her while she was a pastor and witnessed the change of her role to become principal of a bible school. It is her aspiration to nurture and develop workers for God in the greater northwest region. This bible school is situated in a province with 400,000 believers. To date, there are only 75 pastors and 89 elders in the entire province. This means one minister has to shepherd nearly 2,500 believers. The bible school puts strong emphasis on the students' preaching capability and their message must be based upon biblical truth. If a minister's teaching is skewed, even slightly, the consequences can be serious! "The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict" is an item included in the Book Gifting package. A teacher of the graduating class read this book and found its contents very useful in helping students establish a firm and solid faith foundation. Since 2013, this book has become the required reading of the school's apologetics course.



"The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict" has become the school's required reading on apologetics.

In addition, ministers need shepherding resources and stimuli to fuel long-term growth of the spiritual community they serve. The bible school strives to strengthen its students' ability to acquire knowledge and theory as well as transform knowledge and theory into practice. Mainland churches lack materials on practical church management. Thus, books such as "Church Management Make Sense" are highly recommended by teachers. The principal said, "We have about 120-140 graduates each year. CCL's Book Gifting project is a wonderful support to the graduates both in their ensuing ministry and personal spiritual growth. The positive impact can be seen in various areas including evangelism, shepherding, preaching, and so on."

## Delicate support and care despite studying online

As the coronavirus pandemic has lasted for more than a year, online classes became the school's new chapter. It brought new opportunities for the school as well. Being the only bible school along the Silk Road, planning for construction of a new school building is already underway, new teaching programs that can be conducted online are being investigated as well. Such efforts will enable more Christian leaders to have the chance to be equipped. Church growth is never easy to achieve in the mainland. Despite relentless constraints, the school strives to keep up its mission of nurturing and developing Christian workers with the ultimate goal of healthily building up the body of Christ.

CCL collaborates with various bible schools and seminaries to fulfill their needs for online learning. This year, besides continuing the issuance of Book Gifting packages to mainland ministers upon their graduation, CCL has also invited pertinent authors to produce video clips to instruct students how to use their books, and also prepared words of encouragement to give to the graduates. It is our belief that when a person is helped,

he/she will help others. CCL has also launched the mini-learning platform for equipping future leaders. The platform is an integration of learning resources, video recordings and real time live tutorials. Its goal is maximizing the utilization of resources and enhancement of users' learning experience.



Dr. Annie Pan Yi Jung filmed a video to give instructions to graduates on how to read her publication.

What a blessing it is that CCL was able to partner with the bible school in the northwest region for ten years. The prayers and donations of our supporters are also indispensable. We plan to offer Book Gifting packages to 4,000 graduates in 2021. Each individual will receive about 20 reference books on shepherding and a mini-learning platform user set. The operating expenditure amounts to USD307,693. Please remember our needs and we sincerely invite you to take action to donate. Thank you!

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*Editor's note: The Mainland Seminary Graduates Book Gifting Project has now entered its 10th year. This newsletter will review the development and impact of the ministry in the past 10 years, highlights of which will be published in ensuing issues of this newsletter.*

# Prayers

## 1. Mission of businessmen and marketplace Christians

Alongside economic growth, mainland businessmen have enjoyed improved social status, and yet churches view them as being profit-oriented; quite many churches are affected by the dichotomous concept of 'secularism vs. sacredness', making a clear differentiation between spiritual learning and working for a living. Pastors should be prudent and seize the chance to provide businessmen with proper nurturing to help them spread the gospel and advance social transformation.



May the Lord help churches see the urgency of marketplace ministry and be willing to walk together with businessmen and marketplace believers, help them understand their unique identity, and witness for the Lord in the society and marketplace, sharing the gospel and Christian values with their co-workers.

## 2. Ministry needs in the Northwest



It is common to find that there are few shepherds for the many sheep in mainland churches. The situation is even worse in the northwest. One province with 400,000 believers has less than 170 pastors and elders, meaning each has to nurture about 2,500 believers.

May the Lord call on more believers in the northwest to receive theological training, and bless theological seminaries in the region, let students get appropriate nurturing in the areas of preaching, ministering and handling church matters through their teachers' teaching and literary materials.

## 3. Pastors and believers joining hands in ministry

Quite many pastors have returned to a busy schedule after churches resumed face-to-face gatherings. A pastor in the southwest shared: "Under the new normal, I have a busy schedule of pastoring online and offline,



preaching, leading small groups, visiting, spreading the Gospel, handling church matters etc.”

May the Lord protect the physical and spiritual health of pastoral workers, and raise up more believers who are willing to serve as group leaders, caring for fellow congregations, preparing internet equipment etc.

#### 4. After-School Support for Children



After school, quite a number of children living in the cities are cared by outside school agencies, since their working parents have no time for them. The children also do drilling exercises for examinations there. And yet the quality of the organisations varies; some result in increased pressure for the kids.

May the Lord help urban parents seek appropriate tutorial centres with loving and patient tutors for their children.

~ THE END ~

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#### Pray for China

Published since 1974

~ Pray for China publications can be served as a platform to express the latest situations and needs of churches and leaders in the mainland.

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