Book Review


Reviewed by: Dr Katrin Fiedler, China InfoStelle & Ostasienreferat, Zentrum für Mission und Ökumene – nordkirche weltweit, Agathe-Lasch-Weg 16, 22605 Hamburg, Germany. E-mail: K.Fiedler@nordkirche-weltweit.de

Denise A. Austin holds a number of theological degrees, and is currently teacher at the School of Christian Studies and academic director at Alphacrucis College, Sydney. “Kingdom-Minded” People is the product of her doctoral research in history, which she completed at the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland in 2004 under adviser Chi-Kong Lai.

Austin’s book falls into two parts. Part 1 forms the core of her book with its quest into the social contributions of Chinese Protestant businessmen in early-twentieth-century China. Austin describes the historical business context and retraces the making of Chinese business Christians. She explores the social contributions of Christian businessmen, both as entrepreneurs and in wider society. Austin discusses the philanthropy and social works of Chinese business Christians in the context of their own cultural heritage, as well as Western traditions of Christian-initiated social work. The last chapter of Part 1 outlines the contributions of Chinese business Christians to the development of the Chinese Church through church building, evangelization and involvement as church leaders.

In Part 2 of the book, Austin offers comparative analyses of her findings with other contexts. After comparing the social contributions of Chinese business Christians with those of their Catholic counterparts, she widens her perspective to discuss the role of Chinese business Christians in early-twentieth-century Australia. Austin’s last chapter is dedicated to contemporary Protestant businesspeople in China, a group that has received much scholarly attention over the past few years. It has to be noted, however, that the bulk of Austin’s research was conducted before the surge in interest in contemporary Chinese “boss Christians”. Hence, part of Austin’s merit lies in having contributed to discussions on Chinese business Christians at a time when the topic was still under-researched.

The central part of Austin’s book is her research into the role of business Christians in early-twentieth-century China, and she has unearthed a wealth of material that serves to understand their role in Chinese society at that time. As she shows, Chinese Christian businessmen were at the head of enormously
important and influential business enterprises, and Christian entrepreneurs were often forerunners when it came to social reforms in the management of enterprises. Austin’s book fills a lacuna by compiling and interpreting historical materials that document both the social involvement of Chinese Christian businesspeople and their faith-based motivations.

However, the book’s title, as well as its subtitle, reflect a vagueness of the research question that Austin ultimately does not manage to shed. As Austin herself puts it, “This book explores the relationship between the Christian identity of Chinese business Christians and their motivations to contribute to their immediate environment.” “Immediate environment” thus alternately means the Chinese environment of the early twentieth century, the Australian environment of the same period and the contemporary mainland Chinese environment. Likewise, Austin phrases her research interest in terms of Christian identity, yet offers no theoretical framework related to the term.

Austin’s subject matter of religious and professional motivations and their effects is ultimately located in the individual, yet her analysis focuses on Chinese Protestant businesspeople as a social group. This supra-individual approach means that Austin’s work should not be read in the context of modern psychological theories of the Protestant work ethic. Neither does she refer in depth to Max Weber’s Protestant work ethic or his reflections on Confucianism and capitalism. Austin’s book should therefore be read as a strictly historical exploration of the social role of Chinese Christian businessmen as entrepreneurs and church members.

For a subject matter tinged, as it is, with Austin’s quest in the Chinese context, with overtones of mission and colonialism, a reflection on the sources available and the related methodology would have enhanced the book. Uncommented on by the author, the virtual non-existence of Chinese-language sources in her bibliography strikes the reader as odd, though it may well reflect the historical reality. Perhaps English-language documents left behind by foreign missionaries and by the Chinese Christians she writes about are typical of the mission-educated social class she describes. Still, it would have been helpful to discuss the implications of this reality – an elite history written in a foreign language – in the context of post-colonial theories on historical research. This would also have helped to clarify Austin’s own role as a contemporary Western researcher on a subject set in missionary times in a semi-colonial context.

For those doing research on contemporary Chinese “boss Christians”, Austin’s book offers valuable historical background information, and students of contemporary Chinese Christianity will discover interesting historical continuities. However, readers with a broader interest in Chinese Christianity or the relationship between faith and business will probably gauge the hefty price of the volume against the very specialized knowledge it has to offer. In summary, Austin’s book should be read more for the substantial sources she collates and interprets rather than its theoretical contributions to the field.