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Doing Business as a Christian in Singapore: The Case of C. K. Tang and the Tangs Department Store

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Abstract

Drawing on oral history interviews conducted by the National Archives of Singapore, this article examines the life of Tang Choon Keng (1902–2000), colloquially known as C. K. Tang, an ethnic Chinese Singaporean entrepreneur who founded Tangs department store in Singapore. As the first major retail establishment offering a wide range of consumer goods in what is now the premier retail district of Orchard Road, Tangs is historically significant for helping shape and fashion Singapore into a shopping paradise for domestic consumption and tourist promotion. While C. K. Tang's life was typical of Chinese entrepreneurs of his time, being marked by a long period of hardship and struggle against adversity prior to eventual success in business, he belonged to a small group of Chinese Christian businessmen in Singapore who attributed his triumph not to Chinese or Confucian roots but to his Christian upbringing in his hometown Shantou (Swatow) in south-eastern China. In the context of Singapore's secular and highly calibrated economic modernity, C. K. Tang's overt account of how the Christian faith had positively influenced his business life is intriguing. However, at least initially, he operated Tangs as a family business, following the model of familism, which scholars have conventionally ascribed to "Chinese" commercial enterprises. This article thus suggests the inadequacies and blind spots of viewing Chinese businesses through only the lens of culture, ethnicity and language and of assuming a shared "Chinese" culture and ethnicity between the Chinese in mainland China and those in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: C. K. Tang, Chinese businesses, Christianity, ethnicity, familism

Introduction

The topics of Chinese business, capitalism and trade have long fascinated scholars. For centuries in Southeast Asia, Chinese merchants have acted as intermediaries between local rulers and other foreign counterparts. Freed from the orthodox Confucian view in China that they should be at the bottom of the socio-political scale, Chinese traders have acquired high social status, if not political power, by collaborating not only with indigenous kings and sultans but also, at a later stage, with Western colonial bureaucracies and mercantile networks. Trapped between a home empire that criminalized overseas trade and host societies that did not always welcome their supposedly parasitic presence, Chinese merchants sojourned in the port cities and cleared hinterlands of Southeast Asia, struggling against local discrimination and colonial regimes of control without the backing of metropolitan governments, as was the case in Europe (Wang, 1990). The process of decolonisation in the latter half of the twentieth century resulted in Chinese businesses, many of which were managed by and within families, shifting their allegiances to newly independent nation-states, all the while maintaining their connections with global capitalism. Although their freedoms and civil liberties continued to be curtailed in some Southeast Asian countries, Chinese merchants remained a vital and useful economic force that helped develop domestic economies and plug them into the American-led capitalist world. The rise of China as a great power since the late twentieth century has presented both opportunities and challenges to Chinese businesses in Southeast Asia, and scholarly research on their practices and management styles has gained renewed interest in recent years (e.g. Suryadinata, 2006; Stangio, 2020).

The stellar growth of Asia-Pacific economies since the late twentieth century has led some scholars to credit Confucianism as the impetus for Chinese businesses and entrepreneurs to excel in the region. As one of them remarked, "The almost perfect correlation between Chinese heritage and economic success could hardly be due to chance" (Hicks & Redding, 1983: 22). For them, the "spirit of Chinese capitalism", reminiscent of the Protestant ethic in Europe, suggests a strong link between Confucian values and Chinese overseas businesses. However, during the late 1990s, when Southeast Asia threatened to trigger a global financial crisis due to endemic crony capitalism and distorted lender-borrower relationships, observers called out Confucianism as the culprit behind the downfall of Chinese entrepreneurship, giving rise to the debate on whether so-called traditional values are a boon or a bane for modern Chinese societies (Lee, C. Y., 2003). Other scholars have hinted at Chinese exceptionalism, drawing sharp distinctions between "Chinese" collectivism, familism and religiosity and "Western" individualism, rationality, and secularism. Accordingly, Western business expatriates in China, and those dealing with Chinese firms in general, have to accept that formal contracts are no guarantee for implementing an agreement and that "unprofessional" affection-

based trust (*xinyong* in Chinese) and personal connections (*guanxi*) networks often take precedence over strict calculation of economic costs and benefits (Dahles, 2007). While the input of culture and history in the formation and operation of Chinese businesses (i.e. those set up and managed by self-professed Chinese who identify with the culture, traditions and values that they see as "Chinese") is undeniable, the existing literature tends to generalise business conduct and practices and predetermine the nature of such businesses as being cultural and ethnic, accounting little for their variegated forms and the personal intentions that drive them (Yen, 2013). The notion that Chinese businesses are traditionally Confucian and can be culturally and ethnically characterised in name, if not in practice, is heuristically interesting but empirically lacking. It has led to teleological explanations of the East Asian economic miracle – a miracle because the "tiger economies" of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan did not subscribe entirely to the Western ideals of democratic modernity and laissez-faire economics and were not expected to succeed – reducing the complex process of Chinese capitalism to an assemblage of cultural understandings and ethnic categories that is simplistically defined as Chinese or Confucian. Culturalist arguments, as used by scholars who study the Confucian view of Chinese businesses, also create a false image of the ethnic Chinese as "others" opposed to the indigenous communities of Southeast Asia, amplifying ethnically based nationalistic discourses that justify the marginalisation of those who are labelled as "Chinese" in the census and forcing second- and third-generation Chinese entrepreneurs to deemphasise their ethnic background in rationalising their business conduct (Koning & Verver, 2013).

In contrast, many first-generation Chinese entrepreneurs were proud of their achievements and more willing to share their experiences through autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories. The growing interest in Chinese entrepreneurial history, especially in predominantly Chinese Singapore where Chinese businessmen were more respected than disdained, has sparked a considerable number of biographies on eminent Chinese businessmen and the cultural values to which they had subscribed for their success. These biographies or recollections offer insights into their networks, principles, and modes of thinking and illuminate Chinese business history as a whole (Koh, 2019; Chan, 2020). Drawing on oral history interviews conducted by the National Archives of Singapore, this article examines the life of one such entrepreneur. Tang Choon Keng (1902–2000), colloquially known as C. K. Tang, was an ethnic Chinese Singaporean entrepreneur who founded Tangs department store in Singapore. As the first major retail establishment offering a wide range of consumer goods in what is now the premier retail district of Orchard Road, Tangs is historically significant for helping shape and fashion Singapore into a shopping paradise for domestic consumption and tourist promotion. While C. K. Tang's life was typical of Chinese entrepreneurs of his time, being marked by a long period of hardship and struggle against adversity prior to eventual success in business, he belonged to a small group of Chinese Christian businessmen in Singapore

who attributed his triumph not to Chinese or Confucian roots but to his Christian upbringing in his hometown Shantou (Swatow) in south-eastern China. In the context of Singapore's secular and highly calibrated economic modernity, C. K. Tang's overt account of how the Christian faith had positively influenced his business life is intriguing. However, at least initially, he operated Tangs as a family business, following the model of familism, which scholars have conventionally ascribed to "Chinese" commercial enterprises. This article thus suggests the inadequacies and blind spots of viewing Chinese businesses through only the lens of culture, ethnicity, and language and of assuming a shared "Chinese" culture and ethnicity between the Chinese in mainland China and those in Southeast Asia – the Chinese have not been a homogeneous category (Hoon & Chan, 2021). Confucian precepts and principles did not always take hold in ethnic Chinese businesses, and C. K. Tang went against the grain not only by crediting his achievements to his understanding of what it means to be a good Christian but also by embracing Christian traits to manage his department store. More importantly, C. K. Tang's life and entrepreneurial success reflect the early history of Orchard Road and reveal how a site of cemeteries, fruit orchards and nutmeg plantations defied expectations to become the upscale shopping district of internationally renowned cafes, restaurants, and department stores that it is today.

This article comprises five main sections. Beginning with a sketch of how the culturalist-versus-institutionalist debate on Chinese business success has failed to consider the significant role of Christianity in pioneering Chinese businesses in Singapore, the article proceeds to highlight the defining moments of C. K. Tang's life as documented in the oral history interviews he gave to the National Archives of Singapore as he neared retirement. On that basis, the third, fourth, and fifth sections offer portraits of C. K. Tang as a Christian, a Chinese, and a businessman respectively. The conclusion discusses how his effective merger of identities constructed the Tangs business empire and challenged the simplistic link between Chinese businesses and Confucian culture.

A word is in order regarding the conceptual framework of this article. Although the article revisits the somewhat tired debate about Confucian values and the Protestant ethic, it is not premised on the binary logic that being Christian is not being Chinese; neither does it aim to demonstrate and prove such a logic. Although C. K. Tang, unlike most Teochew immigrants of his time, boarded with a church and not with a dialect-based association when he first arrived in Singapore; enjoyed little connection with the powerful Teochew business fraternity; and dared to defy conventional Chinese taboos about cemeteries, he must not be seen as being "un-Chinese" — doing so would validate the stereotypes of what constitutes Chineseness. Moreover, while C. K. Tang had not depended on the mainstream Teochew business fraternity in Singapore, he sourced his goods from Shantou and had relatives back in his hometown to help manage his businesses there. Most probably, such connections were more native-place than religious — he did not describe them as Christians and had few positive words to say about them. In view of the limitations of relying on C. K. Tang's oral

history recording as a source — he had left no memoirs, and he did not mention the name of his churches in Shantou and Singapore from which archival materials can be collected — and the risk of discriminating somewhat a priori between Chineseness and "un-Chineseness," this article portrays C. K. Tang as a Christian, a Chinese, and a businessman, highlighting key moments of his life when one identity appeared to take precedence over his other identities without obliterating the latter. Like any other person, C. K. Tang may be interpreted as a Christian, a Chinese, a businessman, and perhaps more, and the layering of these interpretations accumulates over time as a process of what historian Prasenjit Duara has called "superscription" (Duara, 1988). In terms of ordering C. K. Tang's multiple identities, superscription creates not a hegemonic discourse. Rather, it produces the means by which scholars can draw upon an event or person to present their argument without undermining the validity of other interpretations. If anything, the case of C. K. Tang demonstrates why the idea of Chineseness remains attractive among scholars of (diasporic) Chinese histories — its explanatory power can be deployed to suggest a critical intersection of concepts, interpretations, and theories as well as a multitude of meanings discursively subsumed under its own analytical category. Insofar as Chineseness has become an object of analysis in itself (Hoon & Chan, 2021), this article examines Chineseness in the way C. K. Tang perceived it, as an assemblage of phenomena and practices. In his own geospatial imagination, C. K. Tang sought "original" Chineseness in Beijing's Forbidden City, where he searched for building materials for his "Chinese-style" Tangs department store. Rather than unpack the ethno-racial analytical category that is Chineseness, the article focuses on how C. K. Tang adapted his Christianity to his Chineseness and vice versa as well as how his various identities inadvertently authenticated and reinforced one another in his life and business practices.

The Culturalist-Institutionalist Debate and Christianity's Role in Singapore's Chinese Businesses

Founded in 1819 by the British as a trading outpost, Singapore depended on entrepot trade for its key source of income in its early decades of development. Chinese merchants from the Straits Settlements of Malacca and Penang played the role of middlemen for Singapore's colonial economy, helping to distribute Western manufactured goods among the native population and gather products in British Malaya for export to global markets (Yen, 2013). Some of them also invested in commercial plantations and fruit orchards, dealing in commercial crops such as gambier, pepper, rubber, sugar and tapioca. Others were involved in banking, manufacturing, revenue farming and tin mining. In 1959, Singapore achieved self-rule under the premiership of Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015), and it eventually gained independence in 1965. One of the key thrusts of his People's Action Party (PAP) government was to industrialise Singapore to create employment and modernise its economy. In

the process, ethnic Chinese businesses came to control the textiles, light industry, and manufactured food sectors. In commerce, they dominated hawking, hotels, shophouses and restaurants. They also had the lion's share of land and coastal transport. Furthermore, almost all major banks in Singapore were Chinese enterprises (Yen, 2013). However, despite their substantial market share in all key industries of the Singaporean economy, Chinese businesses also faced considerable challenges. As the PAP government implemented the strategy of export-driven industrialisation to lift Singapore's economic performance, its leaders looked to foreign multinational corporations for investments. With their global capital and ready markets, the foreign conglomerates, most of which were American, European, and Japanese, held a competitive edge over Chinese companies in Singapore. The PAP government also participated directly in the economy, founding wholly or partially owned corporations that inadvertently competed with domestic Chinese businesses through patronage and reputation. That said, ethnic Chinese businesses managed to thrive under PAP rule, and compared to their counterparts in Southeast Asia, they did not encounter a hostile government with restrictive policies—a situation that still holds true today (Yen, 2013).

Ethnic Chinese businesses in Singapore were not homogenous; each possessed its own size, management style and area of operations. Depending on their respective cultural traits, the businesses may be classified into three broad, non-exclusive categories. The more culturally oriented group, belonging to the first and second generations of immigrants from mainland China, was conservative and traditional. The second group enjoyed a long history and evolved into business conglomerates, such as the major banking corporations; socially, they dominated the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCCI), clan associations and alumni bodies of formerly Chinese-medium schools. The third group was less culturally oriented and did not rely on family lineage or patronage, constituting an emerging group of technopreneurs whom the PAP government was anxious to nurture. Due to their heterogeneous nature, ethnic Chinese businesses in Singapore displayed three distinct types of management practices. Traditional Chinese family businesses depended on family lineage in terms of control and ownership. In contrast, the somewhat more professional approach to business displayed a high degree of formalisation, with structured organisations and operations. Between these two approaches lay the middle way, which involved recruiting professionals from outside the family to operate the business and adopting group decisions made by both family and non-family members at the top management level (Ng, 2006). The rise of China as a great power in the 1990s transformed how Chinese businesses operated in Singapore and abroad. As the PAP government hoped to tap into Singapore's perceived cultural and ethnic affinity with China and promote itself as a gateway between China and the West, domestic Chinese businesses were encouraged to invest in China and serve as a vanguard for Singapore's economic expansion into Chinese markets (Ng, 2006). The heterogeneity of Chinese businesses was revealed again, as not all of them responded to the call and some appeared less interested in setting up branches or factories in China.

Recent studies have moved beyond affirming the heterogeneity of ethnic Chinese business and have cautioned against cultural determinism or culturalist explanations of the nature of Chinese businesses, which tend to ascribe to them generalised cultural traits that are broadly associated with their perceived ethnicity. The existing literature has established that major Chinese businesses in Singapore shifted from being family ruled and managed to becoming professionally managed family-ruled businesses prior to the 1997 Asian currency crisis. Since the crisis, however, Chinese businesses in sectors under the watch of Singapore's developmental state, which faced rising competition from Western corporations and lacked competent and interested offspring, have loosened family rule. In contrast, businesses in sectors that were free from the state's direct intervention, that sought survival in negative market situations and that produced capable and trusted scions maintained family rule. While Chinese conglomerates in Singapore have depended on professionally trained managers to run their operations since the 1970s to meet the challenges of greater integration of the national economy into regional and global economic systems, culturalist scholars attribute the lingering persistence of family control and management to Confucian values. Institutionalists of Asian capitalism, on the other hand, emphasise the institutional foundations of business and management, which include family structure, authority relations, communal networks and the inheritance system. Institutional theorists reject the argument that culture is static, recognising instead that institutions and the cultural norms that they embrace can change in the face of economic challenges and technological advances. These challenges include the Monetary Authority of Singapore's (MAS) mandate that local banks establish nominating committees for top-management positions and obtain approval for personnel selection; Lee Kuan Yew warned that family-controlled banks were "going downhill" without foreign talent and competition (Tsui-Auch, 2004). However, even legal stipulations and the scions' overseas exposure to Western culture and education did not seem to institutionalise the personalism in employment and business matters, thereby giving rise to the hybrid model combining both family rule and professional management that characterises most Chinese businesses in Singapore today. Tangs department store would follow a similar trajectory in its business practices and management style.

To be sure, "culturalist" is a broad term that could well include elements of Christian culture, whether Weberian or otherwise. In fact, the Confucian view of Chinese businesses is not necessarily in contradistinction to the Christian ethos, and the apparent similarities between Confucian values and Protestant or, more broadly, Christian ethics in motivating business activities have led social scientists to apply German sociologist Max Weber's (1864–1920) famously provocative thesis concerning the congruence of Protestantism and the spirit of a market economy to ethnic Chinese businesses in China and Southeast Asia (Tong, 2012). The political turmoil of twentieth-century China had liberated Chinese immigrants to North America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere from pre-existing cultural traditions, allowing them to seek "alternate meaning systems" and convert to

evangelical Christianity (Yang, 1998). Many ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs outside China claimed to have embraced Christian values in achieving success, generating scholarly debates on whether Christianity is truly compatible with Chineseness or merely deployed as a convenient label to rationalise business conduct (Koning, 2007; Hoon, 2013). Informed by writings of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals who were hostile to Christianity, social scientists have assumed that most Chinese people associated Christianity with foreign imperialism and viewed it with suspicion, let alone adopted it as a faith. Other scholars have suggested, on the contrary, that Chinese Christians, both within and especially outside China, had integrated Confucianism into their faith and sought to revitalise Confucianism through Christianity. For many Chinese Christians, Confucian morality was compatible with conservative evangelical Christianity, and both Christianity and Confucianism helped offer solutions to the challenges of the modern secular world (Yang, 1999).

Despite a growing awareness of the multifaceted ethnic Chinese business community across the globe, Christianity has not factored significantly in studies of pioneering Chinese businesses in Singapore. In terms of networking, organisation and business principles, the role of Christianity has overlaid with Confucian elements, as evidenced by the success and life stories of Chinese Christian businessmen in Singapore such as Ng Teng Fong (1928–2010), Thio Gim Hock (1938–2020) and Tan Chin Tuan (1908–2005). Ng Teng Fong was one of the wealthiest men in Singapore, and Far East Organization, his company in Singapore, has continued to be among the largest private real estate developers in the country. They might have left few writings that record their business practices and Christian faith, but Ng was buried in a Christian cemetery (*The Straits Times*, 2010), while his philanthropy was reportedly predicated upon his deeply held Christian beliefs (Chew, 2016). Publicly declared by his son Philip Ng to be a "Christian Enterprise," Far East Organization seeks to "embrace the eternal truths of God's Word" and "apply these truths to our business as these are words of life, and business is, after all, a part of life itself" (Far East Organization). Integrating the late Ng Teng Fong's Christian identity to its brand, Far East Organization has gifted purpose-built spaces at its developments for community use, and its most notable act of philanthropy was donating to Jurong General Hospital and renaming it Ng Teng Fong General Hospital, which became fully operational in 2015 (Sing, 2016). As for Thio Gim Hock, another real estate tycoon who had helmed property developer Overseas Union Enterprise (OUE), he was actively involved in reclaiming land for the Port of Singapore and developing the waterfront of the Central Business District (*The Straits Times*, 2020). While he had also not left autobiographies or memoirs, Thio Gim Hock gave an interview to founders of the Christian-affiliated *Salt & Light* website, in which he attributed his career success to God: "All the developments were very successful because God's hand was in it. I began to learn how to pray for God's help in whatever I did" (Tan, 2020: 80). Having helped OUE and other real estate companies navigate and survive the treacherous currents of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, Thio Gim Hock claimed to have sought

guidance from God and was reminded of a project he had overseen in London, where city living was popular. He thus began working on the very first residential project in the Central Business District of Singapore — The Sail, a waterfront lifestyle condominium on the prime estate of Marina Bay. "Wisdom from above," he revealed, also inspired him to move Mandarin Hotel's lobby to the fifth floor and turn the first four floors into retail space, creating SGD 550 million in value for OUE; he also demolished a multi-storey carpark to make space for OUE Bayfront, which became the company headquarters. "God gave the ideas—new ideas, new designs, the way to layout, the pricing…they were all from God. As you serve God, God gives you these ideas. Sometimes you think it's your own idea but when you reflect back, you know it is Him" (Tan, 2020: 84). Unlike Ng Teng Fong and the Ng family, Thio Gim Hock did not incorporate his Christian faith into his business enterprise, choosing to view God's workings as personal epiphanies that nonetheless had corporate implications. Born a Christian but committed to the religion only later in life, he had no qualms with being successful and making money in the secular marketplace: "I like to make a lot of money because then I can afford to give it away" (Tai, 2019).

The issue of multiple identities that a Chinese Christian businessman could embrace is also evident by the example of Tan Chin Tuan, "a quiet achiever" not only in the banking business but also in politics and civil service (Macbeth, 2003). Having started his career working at one of the banks that would merge with two others to form the Oversea–Chinese Banking Corporation (later renamed Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation) in 1932, Tan Chin Tuan rose through the ranks to become its managing director (1942–1972) and chairman (1966–1983) (Lee, S. Y., 2006). His corporate success brought him into public service, and he had served as the highest-ranking non-European government official and & spokesperson for Chinese economic interests at the colonial-era Legislative Council (Lee, S. Y., 2011). In both his corporate and public careers, he made no mention of his Christian faith, even though he had donated generously to Christian-mission schools. For him, then, his Christian faith appeared to be a private affair, even more so than that of Thio Gim Hock. In fact, his personal beliefs seemed more Confucian than Christian, even though he professed to adopt the Christian faith. Representing his Chinese community, he also sought "not to do to others what he does not like others to do to him" — a Confucian maxim. And unlike Ng Teng Fong and Thio Gim Hock, who profited from Singapore's construction boom, rapid economic growth, and rising land and property prices after independence, Tan Chin Tuan had already made his mark during the colonial period. The heterogeneity of Chinese Christian businessmen was thus no less pronounced than that of their Confucian-minded counterparts as suggested in the current literature (ISEAS Library).

Given the diversity of birthplaces (Ng Teng Fong was born in Putian, Fujian Province while Thio Gim Hock and Tan Chin Tuan were born in colonial Singapore), methods of commitment and private and public experiences, discerning a particular mode of Chinese Christian business

applicable to the Singaporean context might not be possible, as is the case when trying to identify a "Confucian way" of business conduct. In fact, the same could be said about any attempt to determine a religious mode of Chinese business (Hue, Tang & Choo, 2022). Nevertheless, the aforementioned Chinese Christian businessmen shared the concern of reconciling their Christian faith with their corporate career and public profile, choosing to either write it into their enterprise statement (Ng Teng Fong) or maintain it within their private domain, preaching and spreading the gospel in their personal rather than corporate capacity (Thio Gim Hock and Tan Chin Tuan). Set in such a wide context of Chinese Christian businesses in Singapore, this article explores the overlapping and non-exclusive identities of C. K. Tang as a Christian, Chinese, and businessman, focusing on how he merged them in practicing his Christian faith and growing his secular business.

Humble Beginnings

Born in Jieyang in south-eastern Guangdong Province in 1902, C. K. Tang grew up during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), which survived the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) but was fatally weakened by years of conflict and war. His father was a Presbyterian missionary who moved the family to Shantou (Swatow) three years after C. K. Tang's birth. Coming from humble origins, C. K. Tang was born in a church. His father spent almost all his income on the family's expenses, and his mother helped out by doing drawn work. The influence of his father and the Protestant mission depended on the educational level of those who happened to pick up and read the religious tracts for themselves, many of whom were, at best, semi-literate. C. K. Tang's father was one of many locally converted, itinerant Presbyterian missionaries who travelled from county to county to preach to semi-literate commoners and illiterate peasants. Through an extensive marketplace and book-trading networks, some religious tracts found their way into the hands of semi-literate religious specialists and sectarian leaders, a group distinct from the Presbyterian missionaries. In remote areas far from the mission headquarters in Shantou, where C. K. Tang spent his formative years, local readers could interpret the Christian message according to their own needs. In view of this problem, Presbyterian missionaries reckoned that the distribution of Christian tracts ought to be supplemented by itinerant evangelisation. This was the setting in which C. K. Tang grew up (Lee, J. T. H., 2003).

Although the Presbyterian mission included building schools to promote literacy, C. K. Tang received little formal education. He attended nursery and primary school in the church where he was born. He studied Confucian classics, such as the *Three Character Classic*, but did not understand them. As he recalled in old age, he could barely remember what he had read and detested rote learning and teaching. According to him, the tutors were barely qualified, and few of them had ever sat for the civil service examinations (Tang, 1982a). In his teens, C. K. Tang decided to stop schooling and entered into business. In Shantou, which constituted a key city for emigration to

Southeast Asia, C. K. Tang observed that many people went to Singapore, where some made their fortune and returned in style. He shared his idea of emigrating to Singapore, which his parents supported. He had been advised by the British pastors in his church that the British "liked those who sold their wares as a means of living to be honest and not to cheat anybody"; he would bear this in mind when conducting his business in Singapore, as we shall see (Tang, 1982a: 9–10). When he was 21 years old, he packed drawn work in an iron trunk and leather suitcase and left for Singapore, where he sold his wares at prices that yielded only small profits. In Singapore, he stayed at a church and learned Malay, the lingua franca of trade in the colony. Unlike most of his fellow Teochew sojourners, he did not turn to dialect-based clan associations for help. Neither was he well connected to other Teochew merchants, let alone the powerful ones, in Singapore (Tang, 1982a).

C. K. Tang as a Chinese

Despite his "disconnection" from the Teochew community, C. K. Tang was able to leverage on his Chinese identity in promoting and selling his wares. Like many *sinkeh* (newly arrived immigrants), C. K. Tang was frugal and diligent. To save up, he subsisted on "rickshaw porridge", or porridge cooked with sweet potatoes. The church provided him with lodging and little else, and he had to cultivate his own network of suppliers and loyal customers. When asked why he was more successful than other Teochew merchants in selling his goods, C. K. Tang cited that he had endured more hardship and was willing to stay in one place, patiently attending to a stable customer base for several years. He peddled handmade embroidery and lace door to door, hiring a rickshaw to carry his items. For those who were unable to pay upfront, he worked on the principle of trust and allowed his customers to sign IOUs and buy from him on credit. He procured most of his products from Shantou, remitting money through the Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation (OCBC). To gain the confidence of OCBC and other banks, he stopped being an itinerant hawker and set up a shop on River Valley Road, along which many Westerners resided. Subsequently, he constructed a building at the intersection of River Valley Road and Jalan Mohamad Sultan, calling it the Gainurn Building, which was a variation of his father's name, Tang Gan Urn. The store proved to be a success. Most of his customers were Westerners, and the number of people who came was "overwhelming"; he was the only Chinese peddler selling goods from China to Western customers in his neighbourhood, attaining a de facto monopoly of his trade there (Tang, 1982a). His business philosophy in retail sales was to gain the trust of his customers through honesty and reasonable prices and, by selling only Chinese goods, to avoid direct competition with major establishments such as Robinsons and John Little, which were managed by Westerners and sold Western products. Few locals counted as his customers; it was only later, when he founded Tangs at Orchard Road, that he received more local customers. Most of his customers prior to the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) were

salaried employees living in bungalows on the outskirts of town – River Valley Road was near Orchard Road and shared a similar demographic profile. That said, he did face some competition from traders selling Chinese goods on High Street. On the eve of the Japanese invasion, despite the danger of being misidentified as a well-off Chinese merchant who had supported China's war effort against Japan, he chose to remain in Singapore with his shop, which was closed throughout the Japanese occupation (Tang, 1982).

During the occupation, the Japanese requisitioned C. K. Tang's shop for a short while before returning it to him. He turned to selling only bath towels and face towels due to the lack of supplies from war-torn China. However, the Japanese occupation also presented opportunities. As land and property became extremely cheap, C. K. Tang bought several plots in Singapore, including one on Orchard Road that would become the site of Tangs department store. The Orchard site lay opposite a cemetery, but Chinese superstition did not deter C. K. Tang from buying it. He considered Orchard the centre of Singapore. The plot belonged to a Jew who, along with many other Jews in Singapore, closed down all their businesses and settled in newly independent Israel after the Second World War. C. K. Tang wanted to build a store that would be instinctively Chinese so as to expand on his image of being Chinese and retain his Western clientele. He visited Beijing for architectural inspiration and hired Teochew craftsmen who knew how to construct Chinese-style buildings. He bought roof tiles from Malacca, which gave Tangs department store its distinctive, green-tiled roof modelled after the Forbidden City in Beijing. He saw potential in the Orchard area, which was located near the Tanglin area where British housewives – a key group of his customers – resided. For him, Tangs "had to be a Chinese building selling Chinese goods, from the upturned pagoda eaves to red colonnades and stone lions guarding the store front" (*The Straits Times*, 1982, 22 May). Most of his associates were bemused and thought it a capricious folly because not only was Tangs situated near a cemetery but also the proliferation of retail stores was then in Raffles Place (where the old Robinsons was) and High Street. As it turned out, C. K. Tang's regular customers from River Valley Road remained loyal and shopped at Tangs, which opened in 1958 and became the first retail presence at Orchard Road. By the 1960s, C. K. Tang had become the undisputed "Curio King" of Singapore, and Tangs became a favourite spot for locals and tourists alike seeking "oriental curios, ivories, embroideries, camphor wood chests, porcelain, and a hundred and one other souvenirs" (*The Straits Times*, 1982, 22 May).

C. K. Tang as a Christian

No evidence suggests that C. K. Tang had ever read Max Weber's classic and yet controversial *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which was first published in 1905 and later revised in 1920. Nevertheless, his early exposure to the Presbyterian mission back home in Shantou

had helped develop in him a business ethos that was akin to Protestant ethics. Like the Protestant businessmen in Weber's description, C. K. Tang identified material success as a tangible and convenient proof of salvation and inner worth (Tong, 2012). He also believed that endless labour could glorify God. He created a work ethic for himself, one that emphasised diligence, thrift, and delayed gratification. Due to his belief, motivated by his concern for eternal salvation, he offered low prices and quality services. His practices ended up delivering financial benefits, and he acquired loyal customers as his business grew, most of whom were Westerners sharing his Christian faith and might have felt even more predisposed to buying from him. Interestingly, however, he chose to highlight his own personal traits rather than his faith in explaining his success with Western customers. He kept his tin box by his side and continued to lead a frugal lifestyle, endeavouring to live a disciplined life that demonstrated a methodical character of worldly asceticism with the primary intent of glorifying God (Tong, 2012). Whenever he sensed an opportunity, he would buy land and property as a means of investment. This went in line with his Christian faith, which cautioned against wasting earnings on self-indulgence and encouraged its adherents to reinvest profits to attain greater profits to be even more worthy of God's grace and love. For him, work was not only a means of livelihood but also a spiritual tool, and the pursuit of personal wealth was more a duty than an advantage. That said, the role played by his Christian faith in his successful business model should not be exaggerated. The high demand for cheap and exotic Chinese goods among the British expatriates in colonial Singapore, the low land and property prices during and shortly after the Japanese Occupation, and the continued presence of British business and military personnel in Singapore well into the 1970s provided C. K. Tang with favourable structural conditions for growing his business, on which, to his credit, he had been able to capitalise, thanks to his acumen and foresight.

In 1982, Tangs, then known as the C. K. Tang Building, was demolished to make space for a super-sized complex with magnified signature Chinese green roofs. It was renamed Tang Plaza and comprised the podium floors of a new Dynasty Hotel (now Marriott Hotel) (Hee, 2005). A unique feature of Tangs was that it was closed on Sundays despite stiff competition with other malls at Orchard Road. C. K. Tang admitted that the closure on Sundays might cause him losses, but he told himself that he "could not possibly earn all the money in the world." A devout Christian who attended church every Sunday, C. K. Tang believed that his bold move could set a precedent and encourage his Christian employees, albeit indirectly, to attend the Sunday gospel service at their own churches. He foresaw that his customers would visit Tangs on Saturdays or Mondays instead. A prudent person, he was also reluctant to pay his employees double on Sundays. In the end, he was spot on — business at Tangs was best on Saturdays, and the savings he made on wages offset the losses he incurred on Sundays (Tang, 1982b). Arguably, he could have done more to promote the Christian faith at Tangs, such as establishing his own gospel service for employees, assuming

the role of preacher, and setting up moral training dormitories and schools for his staff after office hours (Austin, 2011). However, in the context of Singapore's highly racialised politics, which categorically associated the nation's official races with their prescribed religions, such actions could offend political sensibilities and invite undue suspicion from state authorities.

When asked in his twilight years about his formula for success, C. K. Tang revealed that it was the "doctrines of the church" and "teachings of the Bible" that guided him (Tang, 1982c: 48). Influenced by his Presbyterian upbringing, he strove to be honest in all his dealings and never cheated his customers. Believing that the best value should be communicated honestly to his customers up front, he set fixed, reasonable prices, issued receipts, offered an exchange policy, and sourced quality merchandise worldwide — qualities that were generally lacking in traditional Chinese sales practices (Austin, 2011). He followed the "principles of [his] religion" in conducting business, taking pride in "serving" his customers (Tang, 1982c: 48). Rejecting the notion of luck, he talked only about what God gave him: "We don't say we could do this or that we are lucky. It was all what God give[s] us. We only say that was what God give[s] us" (Tang, 1982c: 49). Having never imagined the success he would achieve with Tangs, he felt that the fortune he made was given to him by God, not that he knew how to make money himself: "If you think that you yourself knew how to make this money, then you would become conceited" (Tang, 1982c: 50). Sociologist Joy Kooi-Chin Tong (2012) has identified three types of business-faith integration in what she calls "Christian-based companies": business as mission, business or mission, and mission in business. For incorporating Christian values into corporate culture, Tangs was first and foremost a mission in business; it did not seek to operate its business as a Christian mission or, at the other end, separate business from religion.

C. K. Tang as a Businessman

Resisting the urge to retain the ownership of Tangs within his family, C. K. Tang registered Tangs as a listed public company. In his own words, "Tangs could last longer as a public company." He had owned several companies and shops in mainland China prior to his shift to Orchard Road, but he lost them and incurred massive losses due to mismanagement by his kin back in Shantou: "[For] public companies, if you buy their shares and find that this person didn't do a good job, then you could sell all your shares and then you wouldn't have anything to do with the company at all" (Tang, 1982b: 46). Following state regulations that imposed mandatory requirements on auditing and reporting to enhance the financial transparency of publicly listed companies along the British model, C. K. Tang and his family had to relinquish both operational management and corporate rule. While holding the majority of the shares to maintain a high degree of control, they recruited outsiders for management, and the structure of the rule was less hierarchical than had it been under

their full command. The principle of professional management and the recruitment of non-family managers became institutionalised, as endorsed by the state, multinational corporations and business schools (Tsui-Auch, 2004). For his sons to become "legitimate" professional managers, he sent them abroad for further education. His eldest son went to Australia, while his second and third sons studied business administration at U.S. universities (Tang, 1982c). His two youngest sons and one of his male nephews managed Tangs, and his eldest son oversaw the operations of Marriott Hotel, which developed a symbiotic relationship with Tangs because the tourists who stayed at the hotel would shop at the mall. Despite C. K. Tang's Christian faith, he adopted ethics revealing a clear link to Confucian thinking, such as monogamy, filial piety, and respect for the elderly. Most tellingly, his daughters were uninvolved in the business, even though Christianity encourages gender parity (Tang, 1982c).

In 1987, C. K. Tang retired, handing the reins of corporate leadership to the second of his three sons. In 1996, adding a twist to the tale, C. K. Tang's successor and his team of non-family professional managers decided to open Tangs for business on Sundays, reversing C. K. Tang's long-held policy and thus, somewhat symbolically, completing the professionalisation of management set in motion years earlier.

Conclusion

C. K. Tang and the Tangs department store he founded reveal sufficient deviations from the standard business practices defined by a fixed sense of Chinese culture and ethnicity. Born and raised a devout Presbyterian, C. K. Tang governed his business according to Christian rather than Confucian precepts, of which he had acquired little and which he had deemed useless in his life. The principles of honesty, thrift and trust, attributed by scholars and those who professed to possess them to Confucianism, were identified by C. K. Tang himself as being Christian instead. C. K. Tang chose to embrace "Chinese" elements of architecture and culture in conducting his business and his private life. He was as diligent, thrifty and proud of being Chinese as any "Confucian" businessman, but his motives were deeply rooted in his Christian faith. Although the ethnic Chinese business community, from the colonial to postcolonial periods, has been heterogeneous in terms of management and organisation, the case of C. K. Tang shows the limitations of culturalist and institutionalist explanations in addressing the full complexity of ethnic Chinese business practices. Going against conventions and what was expected of him as a Chinese businessman, C. K. Tang trusted his own instincts and relied on what he saw as the guiding principles of Christianity. He did not depend on Teochew clan associations for assistance or connections and sold his wares to Western rather than Chinese customers. He chose to build a retail establishment on the site of a cemetery, which was considered taboo in Chinese culture, and thrived on attracting British housewives, who

appeared less bothered by the presence of graves. He closed for business on Sundays to attend church with his family and defied common business sense to profit from the weekend crowd. At the same time, however, C. K. Tang did not create an explicit Christian culture or identity for Tangs, which had not hired a disproportionately high number of Christians or sold Christian paraphernalia on its premises. At his own initiative with little prodding from the state or external stimuli, he decided to list Tangs as a public company to prevent the cronyism and nepotism that had caused the downfall of many family-run businesses during the 1997 Asian currency crisis. He foresaw the competition from multinational malls, adopting more "rational" methods of management to remain competitive in the global marketplace. Most importantly, he adapted to various institutional requirements and laid the foundation for a professionally managed mall, which helped develop Orchard Road from scratch and transformed it into a premier shopping district of choice for middle-class Singaporeans and foreign tourists alike.

By being a Chinese peddling Chinese products to Western customers, C. K. Tang amassed a fortune with which he built Tangs, which retained its Chinese identity through architecture but grew to sell quality merchandise from around the world. His experiences as a Chinese, a Christian, and a businessman were an extension of his Christian identity fostered in his Shantou hometown. Having identified as both a Chinese and a Christian, he did not see these parts of himself as distinct, showing that not all Chinese businesses subscribed to or could be understood only from the lens of Confucian culture. Challenging the simplistic link between Chinese businesses and Confucian culture, the case of C. K. Tang adds to the study of Chinese Christian businesses in Singapore, which, given their wealth and influence on national development, warrants further exploration.

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