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In Pursuit of Sacred Space : A Study of Modern Chinese Intellectual Businesspeople

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In Pursuit of Sacred Space: A Study of Modern Chinese Intellectual Businesspeople

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INTRODUCTION

It has been thought that the goal of traditional Chinese intellectuals was to become government officials or famous scholars with high social status. Most traditional Chinese intellectuals devoted themselves to research and stayed away from the business community. However, ever since the market-oriented reforms begun at the end of 1970s, modern Chinese intellectuals have recognized that technology and business are closely linked (Jie 2008), partially due to encouragement from the Chinese government. The intellectual class has experienced a major transformation, with some of its members “leaving” to become intellectual businesspeople and a few even becoming billionaire tycoons (Lin 1999).

Many young Chinese are motivated by successful stories of the newly emerging Chinese intellectual business class and dream of becoming successful intellectual businesspeople. With the economic and social influence of such stories increasing rapidly, a number of books and articles have been published on the subject. Famous members of the new class of business-minded intellectuals include Jack Ma, CEO and founder of Alibaba group; Minhong Yu, Chairman and CEO of New Oriental Education & Technology Group; and Robin Li, CEO of Baidu. Most studies have focused on the means by which these people became successful; few have addressed their spirituality.

In the academic world, a few scholars have recently touched upon the issue of spirituality in terms of the experience of the sacred. For example, it has been argued that what makes work sacred is not the work itself but the attitude with which one approaches it (Tewell 2003). Even the secular business world could be an arena in which one can pursue the vocation of serving God (Tewell 2003). Experiences of the sacred refer to a socially influenced perception of either some divine being or some sense of ultimate reality (Larson *et al.*, 1998; Seidlitz *et al.*, 2002; Evans 2003). Sacredness here refers not to religion but to what might be called the supernatural, divine, or transcendent reality that religion confronts, describes, or mediates (Evans 2003). Grant *et al.* (2004) claim that even in the secular workplace, individuals might experience the sacred in a variety of ways, including practicing and discussing spirituality. Drawing on recent sociological research on spiritual practices, experiences, and discourse, Grant *et al.* (2004) scrutinize the above claim through a case study of a university hospital’s nursing staff. In their study, many staffs talk about spirituality

and their struggles in expressing their spiritual beliefs.

Although most studies on the sacred experience have been rooted in Western cultures, it is possible to apply such an approach to the spiritual world of modern Chinese intellectuals in business. In defining “intellectual businesspeople,” some scholars have focused on those who apply Confucianism or Taoism to their business philosophies. The present study uses a broader definition that refers to public intellectuals in the business world. In particular, I focus on the experience of the sacred in modern Chinese intellectual business and explore this spiritual world by addressing three research questions. First, what is a reasonable structure for the experience of the sacred in modern Chinese intellectual business? Second, given that modern Chinese intellectual businesspeople have experienced the sacred in a variety of ways, what stories might be told about their sacred experiences? Third, how is the sacred experience of modern Chinese intellectual businesspeople related to the economic and social foundations underlying the success of these businessmen? Importantly, instead of examining others’ perceptions of intellectuals in business, this study focuses on the sacred experiences as they are expressed in these intellectuals own narratives.

DIMENSIONS OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SACRED

It has been argued that the experiences of prepared individuals at sacred times and places are themselves sacred, as with the travels of pilgrims (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Demerath (1999) proposes a framework for defining the sacred in terms of experienced consequences. Given a conceptual typology of the sacred that pivots around two dichotomies (compensatory vs. confirmatory and marginal vs. institutional), four distinct scenarios exist: the sacred as integrative, the sacred as quest, the sacred as collectivity, and the sacred as counterculture. Confirmatory experience refers to individuals reinforcing their own standing and affirming identity by providing support, assurance, and security. Compensatory experience refers to individuals supplying release or relief from demeaning or unfulfilling situations by providing alternative commitments and communities. Sacred experiences that are marginal refer to those affecting people who are or seem outside the mainstream, while sacred experiences that are institutional affect people within a culturally invested collectivity.

Although Demerath’s original framework might be applied to the sacred experience, the two axes (compensatory vs. confirmatory and marginal vs. institutional) are not comprehensive enough to capture the experience of the sacred in modern Chinese intellectual business. Applying a multidimensional model of sacred experience, the present study attempts to extend the four dimensions proposed by Demerath. Rather than a confirmatory vs. compensatory axis, I will apply a confirmatory vs. transformative one. While confirmatory experience affirms individual identity with support, assurance, and security, transformative experience challenges the strength and identity of individuals by providing pressure, strain, and even pain. Transformative sacred experiences may help rejuvenate the mind and soul, however. Further, instead of the marginal vs. institutional dimension, the study will focus on the active and the passive: the former referring to “willed” individual experience and the latter to experiences influenced by others or constrained by circumstances.

Figure 1 shows the structure of dimensions examined here. The confirmatory vs.

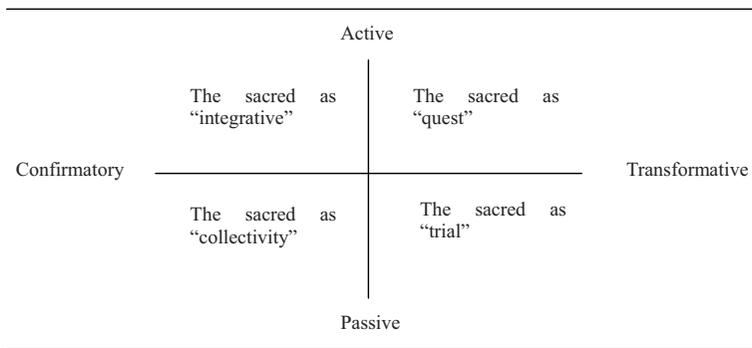


Figure 1 Dimensions of experience of the sacred along two axes in the present study

transformative dimension and active vs. passive dimension generate four distinct scenarios: the sacred as integrative, the sacred as quest, the sacred as collectivity, and the sacred as trial. The integrative experience is confirmatory and active; the quest experience is active and transformative; the collectivity experience is confirmatory and passive; and the trial experience is transformative and passive. Although the terminology here follows Demerath, the meanings do not.

It is also important to examine the relationships among the integrative, quest, collectivity, and trial scenarios while applying a multidimensional approach. If the four scenarios are totally in conflict with one another, it is impossible for someone to experience all four dimensions. In the present case, however, the four dimensions are complementary and form a complete space of sacred experience. Although the nature of each scenario is distinct, then, an individual might experience different dimensions of the sacred at different times. The following sections of the study will explore the sacred experience using the examples of modern Chinese intellectual businesspeople.

THE SACRED AS “INTEGRATIVE”

This category refers to active experiences that are confirmatory. For intellectual businesspeople, an integrative experience might improve spiritual understanding of a business or allow an individual to emerge as a complete person through a business experience. Many intellectuals in business have a philosophy, belief, or mission that is not necessarily related directly to religion but may provide them with religious guidance. It has been pointed out that management philosophy refers to the central, distinctive, and enduring concepts, beliefs, principles, and attitudes guiding business management, all of which are critical in the pursuit of a mission (Analoui and Karami 2002). Integrative sacred experiences might also be those through which modern Chinese intellectuals create their own business and management philosophies.

An example of integrative experience was mentioned by Li, the CEO of the largest search engine company in China. Li was regarded as one of the world’s top search engine

experts and worked as a senior consultant in Silicon Valley before establishing his own company. With considerable effort, Li has turned his company into the largest Chinese search engine, with over 70% of the Chinese market, and the third largest independent search engine in the world. When Li was invited to speak at Beijing University about his experiences, he mentioned his thoughts on why his company succeeded in China:

I believe the reason our company is successful in the search engine market is that I am dedicated to the search engine business, just as to a religious belief. It is beyond imagination that as a huge company we are faced with considerable temptations everyday... An IT engineer of my company said he wanted to enter the online shopping world and I refused. As a result, he quit. Many colleagues left me and began to do business elsewhere. However, our company has been dedicated to the search engine business for many years and we will be focusing on the field for a long time...It is my dream to provide the public with a convenient way of getting necessary information. A person can complete only limited tasks in his life. I believe that dedication to one business makes a person excellent and perfect.

Li describes his dedication to the search engine business as a religious belief. Focusing on the search engine business allows Li to experience the sacred by providing support, assurance, and security. Li explains that the sacred focus of his business philosophy is the reason for his success.

THE SACRED AS “QUEST”

This category includes attempts to find new meanings and experiences when old ones seem inadequate (Demerath 1999). It refers here to experiences that are active and transformative, such as a series of events prompting someone to search for spiritual understanding during the process of transformation into a business intellectual. For a long time, the educated elite and businessmen have been regarded as the highest and lowest social ranks respectively; traditional Chinese thought as reflected in the social hierarchy of Shi-nong-gong-shang referred to the educated elite, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants. While the Shi (educated elite, scholars, or government official) enjoyed great respect and high social status, the Shang (merchants) were placed at the bottom of the socio-political scale. Although traditional ideas are losing power in modern China, it is said that the traditional Chinese social hierarchy still seems to control public thoughts. However, since the implementation of reform and opening-up policies at the end of the 1970s, many members of the educated elite have gone into business, forming a new intellectual class in China's business world. A number of government officials, administrators of state-owned companies, and even university professors chose to leave their jobs and begin their own businesses. Unlike traditional businesspeople, these intellectuals pursue not only the economic wealth but also sacred space in business. While economic interests undoubtedly remain important, modern Chinese intellectual businessmen struggle to pursue their own sacred spaces. When Li talked about the experience of starting a new business, he mentioned the importance of spiritual mentality:

Starting a new business is a very sacred thing, and it deserves pursuing. However, we should have very strong mental attitudes to be well prepared for various difficulties that could arise. When I made up my mind to come back to China to start a new business, the only thing I thought was that I should be well prepared for all kinds of difficulties. A strong mental attitude makes all difficulties sound trivial.

In the business world, the sacred as quest is particularly associated with the experience of starting a new business. When someone makes up his mind to begin a new business, he might seek a new identity. However, his old self-concept might still exist inside him. The experience of a quest is not as supportive and confirmatory as that of integration, but, as Li implied, it might help develop a strong mentality. Although many successful intellectuals manage to find new identities in the business world, some might lose their way. Other stories indicate that some might even return to the intellectual world. To intellectual businesspeople, a quest might be the process through which they establish their authentic identity as both an intellectual and a businessman.

THE SACRED AS “COLLECTIVITY”

The original definition of the sacred as collectivity refers to institutional experiences that confirm one's ties to groups that are considered sacred, from churches and denominations to nations, sports teams, and others. In the present study, experiencing the sacred as collectivity means answering the call of the collective nation or sensing the importance of collectivity. A large number of highly educated Chinese intellectuals have chosen to return to China rather than stay abroad. Li described the sacred feeling when he was invited to take part in the National Day ceremony at Tiananmen Square in 1999. This kind of sacred bonding with his country prompted him to abandon his comfortable life in the U.S. and come back to China (Xinhuanet 2009):

The air was so fresh after a rain in Beijing. Colorful vehicles passed by me, and the voices of the soldiers were so powerful. I was able to sense the strong nation and picture of vitality of our sacred motherland through what I saw. I felt the divine being of the spirit. Not only a business opportunity of my own, the Internet was also a great opportunity for my country.

The sacred experience as collectivity is especially important in the Chinese context. As a number of studies have shown, collectivism is regarded as a core feature of traditional Chinese culture. Li's experience of the sacred as collectivity was one that reinforced the bond between individual and nation. The sacred as collectivity is not necessarily related directly to business activities, but even if the experience itself is distinct from any business activity, it might help individuals sense the strength of the collective and improve their inner spiritual motivation for doing business. Their ultimate purpose is not the pursuit of individual economic interest but something much grander, something related to the happiness and well-being of the whole.

THE SACRED AS “TRIAL”

This refers to experiences that are passive and transformative, often harsh experiences that make people stronger spiritually. A case in point is Yu, CEO of the New Oriental School. After graduating from Beijing University, he became an English teacher there. However, because of the poor salaries at that time, he had to work outside the university to earn extra money. Unfortunately, he was forced to leave the university when it was discovered that he did private work without official permission. After leaving the university, he founded a private school to help Chinese students pass the English examinations that would qualify them to study at overseas universities. As a result of his efforts, the company became successful enough to be listed on the NASDAQ market. Although he encountered many difficulties, he maintained a sense of the sacred and grew stronger through this experience. He spoke once of a time when he suddenly lost electricity in the middle of teaching a class at his private school (Guo and Huang 2008):

When the electricity was off, I had to ask some students to buy candles and light them in the classroom. It felt sacred and grand when the classroom was lightened by the candles. All the students listened to me quietly without any complaint. At that moment I felt that I experienced the sacred and it was out of language!

Although a classroom without power might seem disappointing from a secular viewpoint, Yu experienced something sacred and grand in the candlelight. Experiences that seem harsh and difficult to ordinary people might help those who experience the sacred as trial to form a deeper understanding of their spiritual world.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The present study represents a tentative effort to examine the spiritual world of modern Chinese intellectual businesspeople in terms of their experiences of the sacred. Although it has been claimed that the distinction between sacred and profane travels can be made according to purpose and destination—that the path to a shrine is sacred while a business trip is profane (Fabien 1983; Belk *et al.*, 1989)—this study follows others that see sacred experiences in secular places and claim that work can be made sacred simply by one’s attitude toward it. By changing the framework proposed by Demearth, this study examines the sacred experience in terms of four scenarios: the sacred as integrative, the sacred as quest, the sacred as collectivity, and the sacred as trial. An integrative experience might improve one’s spiritual understanding of business or help an individual emerge as a complete person through business. The quest experience is active and transformative, such as a series of events prompting a search for spiritual understanding during the process of transforming from an intellectual into a businessperson. With the sacred as collectivity one must answer the call of a people, or acknowledge the importance of a collective. The sacred as trial refers to a harsh experience that prompts spiritual growth.

This study illustrates the sacred experiences of modern Chinese intellectual businesspeople

in light of the four scenarios. While integration is described as an experience of practicing a business philosophy, a quest is indicated by the spiritual experience of starting a new business. The sacred as collectivity is shown as one individual senses the strength of his nation and his connection to his people. The sacred as trial is understood through a harsh experience that ultimately leads an individual to a deeper and more spiritual understanding of himself. The above examples may reflect part of the spiritual world of modern Chinese intellectual businesspeople, who are different from traditional businessmen. Although economic interests are important to them, the pursuit of spirituality may be more so.

Finally, it is important to point out that these experiences of the sacred are not isolated from the economic and social contexts of those who narrate them. Modern Chinese intellectuals in business are characterized by cultural-cognitive business wisdom, social-oriented commitment, and high-tech development. Cultural-cognitive business wisdom, including the teaching of traditional Confucian values such as humanity, righteousness, harmony, courtesy, and honesty, has become a pillar of sacred space that guides the spirituality of many intellectual business leaders. Social-oriented commitment refers to the willingness of Chinese intellectuals in business to fulfill their corporate social responsibilities and contribute to a more balanced development of society. Unlike traditional businessmen, modern Chinese intellectual businesspeople are pursuing high-tech development. Many have experience studying overseas at elite universities and working for high-tech companies abroad. Overall, cultural-cognitive business wisdom, social-oriented commitment, and high-tech development are all related to modern Chinese intellectuals' experiences of the sacred in the world of business.

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