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Beyond Civil Society: Spiritual Empowerment, Work, and Social Engagement in China

[*abstract]

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the spiritual empowerment in the workplace enables Chinese Christian professionals to exert positive impacts on the wider society. Much of the broader literature on spirituality, religion and the workplace shows how religious values can contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of business leaders, the creation favourable workplace environment, the improvement in the workers' and organizational performance, etc. Many such studies tend also to advocate that business leaders, managers and entrepreneurs pay much more attention to the cultivation of a conducive environment for workers to integrate spirituality and religiosity into their working life. Insights from such studies, while useful in certain cultural and political contexts (such as those in Euro-American societies where most of these studies are conducted), might not be applicable in an authoritarian political regime like China due to the high level of political sensitivity surrounding religious matters. Based on in-depth interviews and participant observation, and utilizing concepts of spiritual and religious capital, this paper shows that, firstly, Christian professionals eschew a clear separation between religious faith and work. Importantly, they seek to exert positive impacts in the workplace as a way to transform the wider society deemed mired in serious moral crisis. Many respondents discursively construct a boundary separating Christians and non-Christians in the workplace, regarding themselves as more 'moral' and imbued with positive qualities that are lacking in the workplace and contemporary society. This happens in a socio-political context where Christians constitute a religious minority and where religion, especially Christianity, is still deemed a highly sensitive cultural and political issue in China. Secondly, this paper argues for an alternative to the usual 'civil society' approaches to understand religious social engagement in authoritarian political regimes.