

Spiritual Power: Ethnic Chinese Managers and the Rise of Charismatic Christianity in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

This article explores the conversion of ethnic Chinese managers in Indonesia and Malaysia to charismatic Christianity, a movement characterized by experiential spirituality, healing, and prophesying. The spiritual turn among ethnic Chinese managers is positioned against literature on spirituality in organizations and the acclaimed need for managers and business leaders to bring spirituality to work in order to enhance efficiency and employee well-being under the present *Zeitgeist* of growing global competition and organizational change. An important missing link, however, in this rather instrumentalist literature is a contextualized approach to the inner meanings of religion-based spirituality in the lives of the managers involved. By analyzing the experiences as narrated by converted managers in Indonesia and Malaysia against the background of their cultural, political, social and economic context – in this case the ethno-religious power relations at national levels – this article takes the analysis beyond the goal-oriented leadership literature. Additionally, it applies a comparative approach to show that the spiritual turn may have divergent meanings to actors in different contexts. The outcomes of the research illustrate that religion-based spirituality among ethnic Chinese managers in Indonesia and Malaysia is empowering at the managerial level but also, although differently constituted, at the ethnic level.

Keywords: spiritual leadership, religion-based spirituality, charismatic Christianity, ethnic Chinese, Indonesia, Malaysia

Introduction

In some quarters of the management and leadership literature it is claimed that the modern management paradigm, featuring rational decision-making and competition for scarce resources, is making way to a post-modern paradigm centring on meaning and purpose. This post-modern 'spiritual paradigm' is said to constitute a crucial factor in the judgement, guidance and inspiration of managers and professionals in practicing leadership (Biberman and Whitty 2000; Fernando and

Jackson 2006). The aim of this article is to critically review this claim by analysing the spiritual turn among ethnic Chinese managers in Indonesia and Malaysia.¹ The analysis will focus on the ongoing conversions from traditional and mainstream religions to charismatic Christianity against the background of the particular power relations underlying the position of this economically dominant but politically contained and culturally contested ethno-social group.

Being latecomers in the global growth of charismatic Christianity, Asian countries witnessed a rapid expansion of charismatic movements from the 1980s onwards.² Countries like Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia and Malaysia are said to have the fastest-growing Christian communities and the majority of the new believers are upward mobile, urban, middle class Chinese (Vatikiotis 2005; Yang 2005). As such, Asia has reached the second largest number of Pentecostal-charismatic Christians of any continent with growth numbers of 10 to 135 million between 1970 and 2000 (Burgess and van der Maas 2002: 301).

In Southeast Asia, the growth in Pentecostal-charismatic churches facilitated new groups like the International Christian Chamber of Commerce, the Fellowship of Companies for Christ International, and the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International. These groups explicitly recognize God's blessings in business activities, contribute to Christian business leadership and care for spirituality among businessmen. A remarkable spiritual turn happened in the 1980s when a number of Southeast Asian countries experienced exuberant economic growth. Interestingly enough, the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s also saw an influx of people into charismatic churches. It might be reasoned that the explicit prosperity narrative found in many charismatic churches worldwide offers answers both in times of plenty (endorsing wealth creation) and in times of hardship (giving guidance in times of insecurity). However, such explanations reduce complex realities to an economic imperative.

Ethnic Chinese managers in Southeast Asia who turned charismatic make an intriguing case within the growing academic interest in spirituality in organizations.³ Although spirituality-at-work literature is supposedly geared towards the rejection of rationality as the core foundation of all knowledge (Gibbons 2007), the manner in which spirituality is studied is still characterized by logical-rational approaches focusing on tangible results for the organization in terms of increased productivity and enhanced efficiency albeit in terms like organizational morale or employee well-being. We do not intend to argue that spirituality has

no place in organizations; in fact, this is not our concern. Our concern is to employ our 'ethnic Chinese case' to attend to the missing link in the rather instrumentalist literature: the manager-in-context. Most of the claims made on the need or importance of spiritual leadership either lack context and/or insights into the life world of the manager involved. As aptly stated by Gotsis and Kortezi (2008), spirituality should not be made into an end in itself in organizational environments.

By departing from the experiences as narrated by converted managers against the background of their cultural, political, social and economic context – in this case the ethno-religious power relations at national levels – we aspire to take the analysis beyond the goal-oriented management and leadership literature. Moreover, we wish to establish that the spiritual turn among managers may have divergent meanings to actors in different contexts. Therefore, we advocate a comparative approach in order to be able to identify the impact of situational and contextual similarities and differences of organizational environments. The two interrelated questions addressed in this article are (1) how do we interpret the appeal that charismatic churches exert on ethnic Chinese managers in Muslim religious national contexts, and (2) how do we account for differences in this appeal between Malaysian and Indonesian Chinese compared? The answers to these questions will serve a twofold aim. Firstly, they offer an in-depth understanding of the meaning of religion-based spirituality in the economic lives of the managers under study; hence we go beyond mere visible behavioural explanations. Secondly, they challenge the inherent claim that leadership and management – as perceived in western economies – represent universal principles and make a plea for more context-embedded leadership studies.

Following upon a presentation of the research methods underlying this study, we will critically review the debates on spirituality and leadership. In order to substantiate our plea for a context-embedded approach, we will position the ethnic Chinese managers in their specific Southeast Asian context and address the issue of the growing popularity of charismatic Christianity. In the empirical part we present narratives on reasons for conversion, spiritual power and participation in religious business groups and charity activities. Subsequently, based on our empirical findings, we shall address the question of how to interpret the conversion of the ethnic Chinese managers from a comparative perspective.

Research Approach

In terms of methodology, this article fits into an emergent ethnographic tradition in organization studies (Czarniawska 1998; Dahles 2008; Neyland 2008). Ethnography, for long the method proper in anthropology, is slowly making ground into organization and management studies. Ethnography is concerned with meaning making and 'is predicated upon attention to the everyday, an intimate knowledge of face-to-face communities and groups' (Marcus 1995: 99). The larger question is 'how men and women give meaning to their life and capture these meanings in written, narrative and oral forms' (Denzin 1989: 10). Whereas organization and management studies are traditionally more geared towards structural analysis and less concerned with how managers and organizational members make sense of their organizational 'life-world' (Tennekes 1995), the ethnographic approach combines such agency perspective with an understanding that organizations are embedded in socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. This implies that we perceive of human sense-making as negotiated and socially constructed, and that ethnographic data such as interviews, observational field notes and documents are analysed in their contexts of origin (Schwartz-Shea 2006). Therefore, ethnographic fieldwork offers an understanding of social worlds where the social constructions of meaning and interpretations 'from within and from below' are practiced and reflects the polyphony of the world under study and produces situated rather than universal knowledge (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Bate 1997). Hence, the major concern of this article is 'the description of persons, places and events' embedded in the local contexts and not a generalization across time and space (Janesick 1998: 50).

The empirical data were generated through fieldwork carried out in 2004-05 in Indonesia (in the city of Yogyakarta) and Malaysia (in Petaling Jaya, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur). The choice of these locations is related to our longstanding research background in these two settings. It was in the early 2000s that we took notice of the religious turn among the ethnic Chinese business community in both countries. The research population was contacted via the snowball method. In both locations people were approached through local churches, religious organizations and charismatic groups, and from thereon we asked about other possible interviewees. In total some twenty managers and professionals, mainly male, have been interviewed on different occasions; most of the interviews were tape-recorded with consent of the interviewees.⁴

In Table 1 we present an overview of our interviewees.⁵ The majority is third or fourth generation ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and Malaysia with an average age between 35 and 55 years old. Before moving into charismatic Christianity the majority was either Protestant or Catholic. Although many come from humble migrant backgrounds they have become successful upper- and lower-middle class professional people.

In-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted focusing on the 'life-business histories' of our informants, a merging of life and business biographies (Dahles 2004). In addition, we also assembled conversion stories and participated in meetings of charismatic groups, in particular in meetings of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, an international group of Christian businessmen with a mission of fellowship and destiny with God and man (Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International online).⁶ The interviewees talked openly about the role and meaning of their new found religion in their professional and personal lives. Surprised as we were at first we soon came to understand that for born-again Christians, the telling and retelling of religious encounters often constitutes 'a means of recreating and re-converting the charismatic self' (Coleman 2003: 17).

The interview data and reports of meetings have been transcribed and systematically analysed through identifying the major themes: reasons for conversion, experiences of faith in professional lives and participation in specific religious business groups and charity activities. The analysis followed the standard qualitative methods of analysing from open coding to more selective coding (Miles and Huberman 1994; Ritchie and Lewis 2004). This implies that the topics with which we entered the field also became our major tools for the (comparative) analysis in terms of consistencies and inconsistencies. In other words, the narratives of the interviewees have been interpreted in context with the intention of gaining in-depth knowledge of meaning-making as explained above and to 'explore the variation of meanings across context' (Schwartz-Shea 2006: 92).

Although there are various shortcomings to this approach, such as the small data set and the purposeful selection of interviewees, this approach is appropriate for exploring the theme of religious meaning in professional lives and capable of illuminating the life-world perspective of the managers-in-context. As such no claims are made about the representative nature since this is beyond the epistemological point of departure as elaborated upon above.

TABLE 1: Ethnic Chinese managers and religious change in Indonesia and Malaysia

Name & Gender	Residence	Gen#	Business	Former religion	Current religion§
Hock Seng (m)	Kuala Lumpur	3 rd	Car sales franchise	Protestant	P/charismatic
Thomas (m)	Same	3 rd	Engineering bureau	Protestant	P/charismatic
Clarence (m)	Same	3 rd	Food distribution chain	Protestant	Pentecostal
Tim (m)	Same	4 th	Printing firm	Catholic	C/charismatic
Paul (m)	Same	3 rd	Air-transportation firm	Protestant	P/charismatic
Lisa (f)	Same	4 th	Bank	Protestant	P/charismatic
Henry (m)	Same	3 rd	University	Catholic	Pentecostal
Clarissa (f)	Same	4 th	University	Pentecostal	Pentecostal
Mary (f)	Same	3 rd	Beauty parlour	Catholic	C/charismatic
Harri (m)	Yogyakarta	3 rd	Computer firm	Protestant	P/charismatic
Ronald (m)	Same	3 rd	Contractor business	Protestant	P/charismatic
Otto (m)	Same	3 rd	Juice/soy production	Protestant	P/charismatic
Alief (m)	Same	3 rd	Building materials	Confucianism	P/charismatic
Herman (m)	Same	4 th	Printing firm	Pentecostal	P/charismatic
Yunas (m)	Same	3 rd	Care tires	Confucianism	P/charismatic
Go (m)	Same	4 th	Publishing house	Pentecostal	P/charismatic
David (m)	Same	4 th	Sanitary products	Confucianism	C/charismatic
Sri (f)	Same	3 rd	Sanitary products	Confucianism	C/charismatic
Samsul (m)	Same	3 rd	Multilevel marketing	Protestant	P/charismatic

Source: fieldwork data Koning in Indonesia and Dahles in Malaysia 2004/2005

Generation ethnic Chinese; first generation are those Chinese that migrated to Indonesia and Malaysia (hence the first generation in Indonesia/Malaysia), the second generation are their children, the third generation are their grandchildren and so on.
 § P/charismatic = Pentecostal-charismatic; C/charismatic = Catholic-charismatic

Spiritual Leadership

The last two decades have witnessed an invasion of themes related to spirituality in the business and management literature. The reasons for this increase are many, including growing global competition, problems of downsizing, workplaces as sources of community, the demise of the dominant formalized bureaucratic organizational structures, and the general interest in mind, body and spirit relationships (Fry 2003; Fernando 2007; Gotsis and Kortezi 2008). Spirituality is viewed as having healing power, the potential to help solve organizational problems and to boost management processes and leadership practices. However, there are also concerns such as the unease about spirituality as 'instrument'; passivity among managers and weakened self-reflection because of a strong belief in a higher power who will make things all right; authenticity issues (spirituality used as yet another tool to enhance workers performance or to seek legitimacy among stakeholders); and the danger of religious impositions under the banner of spirituality (Fernando 2007: 119-31). Despite these concerns, the majority of the literature pictures spirituality as the next best step for leadership development and organizational practices in the present *Zeitgeist*.

The latest development, related to the rapidly changing world of business and economy under globalization, is what Fry (2003: 694-95) calls a major organizational shift towards the 'learning organization'; it is ultimately the spiritual leader who can make this new organizational form a success by creating vision and understanding (see also Burns 2003). The discourse on spirituality in organizations can be divided into a non-contextual consequential epistemology (instrumental, attaches positive outcomes to spirituality at work) and a contextual exploratory one (particularistic, departs from specific theoretical, religious, cultural and/or philosophical perspectives) (Gotsis and Kortezi 2008: 579-94). Both are considered to inhibit the creation of an interdisciplinary-universal framework.

Hence, the challenges are many. Relevant for our discussion is the position of religion-based spirituality in this literature.⁷ Hicks (2002) shows that in most of the spiritual leadership literature the role and position of religion is either ignored or at least judged as unwelcome because of the potential conflicts involved in bringing religion to the workplace. There are a few more integrated studies, such as Pratt's (2000) study on spiritual/religious sense-making, Kriger and Seng's (2005) approach for leadership with inner meaning and Fernando's (2007) study on religion-

based spirituality. These more integrated perspectives hold the promise of going beyond the functional linking of specific beliefs with specific leadership behaviour. However, unless we gain more understanding of such beliefs at the level of inner meaning (instead of actual behaviour) and present them in their proper contexts, these debates seem fruitless. Another challenge is found in moving into a more qualitative, non-positivist way of knowing, since spirituality denotes meanings that go beyond materialistic understandings of values (Forniciari and Dean 2001; Dean, Forniciari and McGee 2003; Benefiel 2005).

Based on these challenges we have a two-fold contribution to make to a more informed understanding of the development of religion-based spirituality in the lives of managers and professionals. First of all, we draw on a culturally embedded qualitative approach in order to move spiritual leadership issues away from their overtly context-poor realm and secondly, we zoom in on the experiences of the actors themselves because, in the end, 'leadership is often a product of subtle, invisible feelings, thoughts and intuitions' (Kriger and Seng 2005: 773).

Southeast Asia's Ethnic Chinese

The ethnic Chinese presently residing in Southeast Asia are the descendants of migrants born in the southern provinces of China who left the mainland because of trade and labour opportunities and/or because of war, poverty, hunger, national disasters and political turmoil. Some go back several generations but the majority traces their roots to their grandfathers who left China at young ages. Many arrived in conditions of poverty and securing survival was one of the first necessities.⁸

It is estimated that some 75 percent of all Chinese outside China, Hong Kong and Taiwan reside in Southeast Asia (Ma 2003: 13) and large numbers of these ethnic Chinese can be found in the private sector of the economy. In Indonesia there are some three million ethnic Chinese, which is about 1.5 percent of the total population (Suryadinata, Ariffin and Ananta 2003: 101).⁹ Malaysia has six million ethnic Chinese (26 percent of the total population) (Phang 2001: 96). Because of historical circumstances the ethnic Chinese are mainly found in entrepreneurial and business occupations, as they were not allowed to occupy civil servant positions or own land. On the one hand, the ethnic Chinese are the pillars of the Indonesian and Malaysian economy in that they control some 70-75 percent of private (non-state) enterprises in Indonesia (Hefner 1998: 17) and hold 60 percent of total GDP and 40-50

percent of the national corporate assets in Malaysia (Yeung and Olds 2000: 7-9) where they also constitute 52 percent of the managerial and 25 percent of the professional occupations (Mohamad 2005: 28). On the other hand, their citizenship remains contested in the Islamic context of both nation states despite their long-standing presence (Nonini 1997; Ong 1997; Koning 2009).

In both countries, the state is responsible for 'the selective creation and manipulation of ethnic identities' (Tan 2001: 952) in the process of nation building. This process can be characterized as an ongoing attempt to forge a national identity out of a multi-ethnic populace. Although there are differences, it can be argued that ethnic Chinese have been and still are confronted by socio-economic and socio-cultural discrimination, either through selective economic policies (such as the New Economic Policy in Malaysia) in which Chinese companies have to take on local business partners in order to restore the economic imbalances between Chinese and local groups or through a total assimilation policy as was the case in Indonesia (Kahn 1996; Pinches 1999; Susanto 2008). It is also true that wealthy Chinese capitalists formed coalitions with powerful politicians and bureaucrats. Conversely, small- and medium-scale Chinese enterprises – by far the majority among the Chinese entrepreneurial class – suffered the most because of lack of economic capital and patronage linkages with power holders (Kahn 1996: 69).

In terms of religion, both countries are predominantly Islamic. In the case of Malaysia, while the constitution guarantees freedom of religious practice, the domination of Islam has far-reaching consequences beyond the religious realm. The Malay population is Muslim by birth and constitutional fiat, and as the Malay claim privileged indigenous status, Islam is de facto state religion (Lee and Ackerman 1997: 21). Those with other religious beliefs are largely excluded from government-sponsored positions and programs. In the Indonesian case, the *pancasila* state-philosophy obliges each and every Indonesian to have a religion that honours *one* God, the choice being Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. After the military takeover in 1965 to prevent a so-called attempted communist coup, being ethnic Chinese, not having a religion, or having a religion that does not honour one Almighty was equal to being atheist/communist; in those days a severe threat on one's life (Freston 2001).¹⁰ As a result many Chinese opted for Christian religions, often inspired by a preference for educating their children at Christian schools after Chinese schools were forced to close down in the mid-1960s as an outcome of the above mentioned assimilation policy.

The relative 'freedom of faith' in both countries does not imply that tensions between the Muslim majority and Christian minority are absent. The severe religious clashes between Muslims and Christians in the late 1990s in Indonesia prove the fragile balance. In particular the newly arising charismatic groups with their 'noisy' worship receive a fair amount of complaints from Muslim neighbours and 'radical Muslim groups have forced several churches and other places of worship to close in recent years' (*International Herald Tribune [IHT]*, September 2008). Hence, the contested economic and ethnic status of the ethnic Chinese is becoming even more contested with the growing popularity of the charismatic movements to which they turn. One of the expressed threats as experienced among the Muslim majority is the fear that they will try to convert Muslims (*IHT*, September 2008).

The ethnic Chinese managers of our study come from a migration background and reside in countries in which they have often been portrayed and treated as outsiders, have been forced to cooperate with partners not of their own choosing and have been met with discriminatory regulations that at least partly support the claim that intra-ethnic trust, personal relationships and paternalistic management are still practiced and considered important (Crawford 2000). However, we have also witnessed emerging intra-ethnic cleavages and inter-ethnic relationships, which question the frozen image of *Chinese capitalism*.¹¹

Southeast Asia's Charismatic Turn

Charismatic Christianity is in many ways a representation of a 'global cultural flow' (Robbins 2004: 118). With its origins in the early twentieth century US, by now two-thirds of its 523 million adherents (Barrett 2001: 19; Burgess and van der Maas 2002: 301) are found in Africa, Latin America and Asia. The growth of charismatic Christianity worldwide is often viewed as being motivated by the political, economic and cultural influence of western industrialized nations. Hunt (2000), however, shows us that such a hegemonic paradigm – the mere imposition of the theological doctrines of American ministries on the rest of the world – is too limited to explain the spread of this particular born-again Christianity. Although some charismatic movements are inspired by American origins, there is often a distinct local cultural expression implying that specific patterns of worship almost seem universal but that form, context and messages have clear localized contents (Poewe 1994; Robbins 2004).

In charismatic Christianity 'believers receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and have ecstatic experiences such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesying' (Robbins 2004: 117). As a variant of evangelical Christianity it emphasizes conversion and experiential spirituality; being born again, which means having left behind a 'sinful past'. Investing in faith (through Bible study, evangelizing, paying tithes, activities in charity, church work) sets into motion a process of continual self-overcoming and results in personal success. Salvation is very much 'this-worldly' and results in a 'new life' in both material and spiritual terms (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001: 7).

Charismatic Christianity has an enormous worldwide appeal, most often explained by its egalitarian character as salvation and the gifts of the Spirit are open to all; everyone can evangelize once inspired by the Spirit. The strong social organization, from global networks to local prayer groups, creates cohesion, and ritual life and spirituality – alternating control and release – offer looked-for contrasts to the daily lives of the converts (Robbins 2004: 123-27). The global attraction also lies hidden in the 'theology of practice'; theology is acted out rather than philosophized (Anderson 2004: 197). Finally, charismatic Christianity is not tied down to one place in particular and is quick in addressing local issues and concerns (Robbins 2003: 222).

Whereas more mainstream churches have an economic ethos that focuses on hard work and avoiding extreme poverty instead of a consumer lifestyle, the charismatic movements explicitly endorse success, wealth and prosperity as expressions of both meritocratic achievements and divine approval. Such teachings found fertile ground in various parts of the Pacific Rim, especially in nations with booming economies where charismatic churches give expression to a 'new capitalist culture' (Hunt 2000: 340).

In Indonesia and Malaysia, ethnic Chinese citizens converting to charismatic Christianity do so from more orthodox Christian traditions such as Protestantism, or from Buddhism and traditional Chinese religions. There are no accurate data about the number of ethnic Chinese that now adhere to charismatic Christianity. The *International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements* makes mention of half a million adherents in Malaysia and several million in Indonesia for the early 2000s, but these data are not specified for ethnic groups (Burgess and van der Maas 2002: 170, 126). As the ethnic Chinese in both countries are rarely Muslim (as Malays are rarely Christian) the growth of the charismatic movements mainly comes from ethnic Chinese constituents. An indication of the

ethnic Chinese adherence can be found in newspaper headlines such as: 'Mega church opens in Muslim-majority Indonesia' (*IHT*, September 2008), 'In Indonesia, the Chinese go to Church' (*IHT*, May 2006), and 'Heavens, Asia's going Christian' (*Asia Times*, 2006). One of these news reports argues that of the several million ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, over 70 percent are now Christian, most commonly charismatic (*IHT*, May 2006).

Pentecostalism in Malaysia commenced with the arrival of the first Pentecostal missionary in 1934 and showed a remarkable growth since the mid-1970s (Ackerman 1984: 35). The movement attracts participants from among the Roman Catholic and the established Protestant churches alike. There are three Pentecostal denominations in Peninsula Malaysia and an abundance of inter-denominational and post-denominational charismatic groups that may not be registered as churches but as associations under the Society Act, or even incorporated as public companies under the Companies Act, such as the Fellowship of Companies for Christ International. Since the English-educated Chinese elite remains in the established Protestant Churches, it is mainly from among the *new* middle classes that the Pentecostal-Charismatic groups recruit their members. The new middle classes emerged from a heterogeneous layer of Chinese-educated small entrepreneurs, traders and artisans on the one hand and lower professional groups such as Chinese school teachers and cultural workers on the other (Yen 2000: 30). Therefore, with the ethnic Chinese dominating these occupations, the growing membership of the reformist movements may also be regarded as an expression of Chinese ethnic revitalization (Lee and Ackerman 1997: 81).

Although Indonesia's Pentecostal history dates back to the early 1920s, its explosive growth is of a more recent date. The first peak-growth took place in the 1980s as a result of the rapid modernization processes. New religious movements such as the charismatic movement are said to have filled the ideological vacuum created by the manifold transformations (urbanization, industrialization, rural-urban migrations) that transpired under the development ethos of the former New Order regime. The influx of adherents mainly came from the new middle class, such as professionals and business people (Robinson 2005: 337-38). The second moment of growth is registered with the start of the economic crisis and the end of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1997/1998. The country as a whole underwent dramatic economic downfalls and political commotion. These were particularly insecure times for the ethnic Chinese, who were often scapegoats in times of turmoil. In May 1998 anti-Chinese riots broke out in several cities. In Jakarta houses and shops of ethnic Chinese

were put afire and ethnic Chinese women were raped. It increased feelings of insecurity among ethnic Chinese all over the country (Susanto 2006). Many opted for refuge in this booming religious movement; the transformative nature, the assurance of personal salvation through Jesus Christ, and Bible teachings about matters that affect people's everyday lives offered new hopes in these insecure times. It is also 'a modern movement' (Robinson 2005: 340-43), characterized by entertaining worship styles (singers, musicians, dancing groups), pragmatic preaching and preachers who are former businessmen and professionals (Wiyono 2005: 318-19) that attract many active in local and global businesses.

The middle class managers in our study and their spiritual turn needs to be understood within the above outlined context. Notwithstanding their dominance in the private sectors of the economy and their growing presence in professional quarters because of educational mobility, the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia and Indonesia have a history of contested citizenship and lack political power. The nation state in both cases has played an important role in these dispositions. In the charismatic movements, outer expression of religious experiences and emotions, known as 'power encounters', are regarded as an expression of religious authenticity. The new movements represent a turn to contemporary interests, which may be described in terms of rationalization and secularization within the religions. In their midst, the professional expertise and entrepreneurial skills that characterize the new middle class are highly appreciated and bestow status and prestige on individuals.

Religion-based Spirituality

In order to understand the ongoing conversion among ethnic Chinese managers in Indonesia and Malaysia, we shall draw on our empirical research. The aim is to come to a more informed understanding of why they convert and in what manner this charismatic turn is experienced at a professional level. We shall address subsequently the turning point moment that made them convert, the manner in which the new-found spiritual power relates to their professional lives and participation in religious business groups and charity activities (see Table 2).

Turning Point Moments

We depart from the perspective that conversion should be understood as a personal experience within social, political and institutional contexts. Conversion is to be seen as 'continuing and practiced', as a 'passage', and

TABLE 2: Conversion, spiritual power, and charity among ethnic Chinese managers in Indonesia and Malaysia

Name	Turning point moment	Spiritual power	Charity & organization
Hock Seng	Business crisis and organizational change	Guidance, support and success	FGBMFI
Thomas	Insecurity in finding business assignments	Guidance, support, success and trust	FGBMFI
Clarence	In search of community and professional favours	Community, guidance, support and trust, success	FGBMFI
Tim	In search of community and professional favours	Community, guidance, support, success, trust	FGBMFI
Paul	Feeling lonely and isolated, looking for like-minded people	Community, success, trust	FGBMFI
Lisa	Insecurity on the job, fear of failure	Guidance and support, community, success, trust	Donates money in church Charismatic sorority
Henry	Feeling lonely and isolated, looking for like-minded people	Community, success, trust	Na
Clarissa	Feeling lonely and isolated, looking for like-minded people, women in particular	Community, success, trust	Through charismatic sorority
Mary	Personal crisis (divorce)	Comfort, community, success, honesty	Donates money in church
Harri	Business crisis (problems with business partner)	Guidance, support, success, honesty	FGBMFI
Ronald	Business crisis (corruption)	Guidance, support, honesty	Through Giddeons
Otto	Experiment	Guidance, support, honesty	Through own church
Alief	Business problems	Healing power, bring about change, success, honesty	Through Hope of God
Herman	Business crisis (debts, corruption)	Support, strength, honesty	FGBMFI
Yunas	Family crisis (illness daughter)	Guidance, support, honesty	Through Mission care
Go	Calling from God	Presence of God, mission	Through own church and school
David	Business crisis (problems in the family business)	Support and strength	FGBMFI
Sri	Follow conversion children	Support and strength	Na
Samsul	Experiment and problems	Inspiration, guidance	FGBMFI

Source: fieldwork data Koning in Indonesia and Dahles in Malaysia 2004/2005.

a 'response to dilemmas intellectual and practical' (Austin-Broos 2003: 9). Rereading the life-business histories of the ethnic Chinese in this study the argument that conversion is both an intense personal experience linked to moments of personal and professional problems, as well

as a social and political phenomenon (contested citizenship and ethnic positions) seems established. We shall elaborate this claim below.

The majority of the interviewees converted to charismatic Christianity from a mainstream and traditional religious background, which does not mean they also were religiously active at the time. Herman (Yogyakarta) expresses it as follows:

The church I went to did not appeal to me at all; I did not feel any power or strength. So I stopped going there and did not go to church for several years. During that time a friend of mine introduced me to a prayer group led by a man who was called by God. It was there that I found a dynamic atmosphere and a closer relationship with God.

It is the dynamic character and clear messaging of these movements that is inviting and triggers some to become a full member, as was explicated by Henry (Kuala Lumpur) who was raised in a Taoist tradition. Remembering his childhood, he noted:

The Bible makes sense, you know, it is logical. As a child, my parents took me to the Chinese temple, and we did all the things, the rituals, but I did not understand why. My parents did not know either, they could not explain. But the Bible makes things clear. It explains why it is good to pray to the Lord and trust in Jesus. It's rational.

Of all the stories we assembled, the main trigger to convert turned out to be business and personal problems. The managers testify about a 'sinful' past in business and/or personal life such as being involved in corrupt business practices or not paying attention to family matters. Their introduction into the new faith often goes via 'some friend', as is the case with Harri (Yogyakarta):

It happened at a time when I was encountering serious business problems. In fact I was on the verge of a bankruptcy. Then someone told me he could help me with my problems; I was very surprised. How could he know about my problems? He invited me to come to his charismatic church. I was still somewhat sceptical but he showed me how to pray and how praying will get us answers from God. This person became my preacher for more than six months before I started to experience a difference, to feel the Holy Spirit at work. Before my change I had to overcome all the business problems alone, it was up to me. Now I can master such business problems with the help of the Lord.

Lisa (Kuala Lumpur), a young Catholic bank manager, was introduced to a Pentecostal sorority by a female colleague:

The first year at my present job came down harsh on me. I met with so many problems I could not solve and I felt incompetent and helpless. Then I was

sent to this training for young managers where I met this lady who offered to coach me. She helped me a lot on the job, but the best thing she did for me was to take me to these meetings, the sorority, where all these friendly ladies got together to pray and sing and share their problems and concerns. We meet once a week to worship the Lord, and then we go out for lunch together and we discuss fashion and beauty, you know, women's stuff.

Although most of the conversion stories are narrated at the very personal level, there are also remarks about the wider environment in which the ethnic Chinese managers have converted. For instance, Go (Yogyakarta), the owner of a large (Christian) publishing house, is quite explicit about the context in which both Christian and ethnic Chinese live, and he directly refers to 'the politics of the Lord' as a way to cope with these insecurities and problems.

Indonesia is full of problems, especially since the crisis (1997). There are increasingly more Islamic movements and we have a growing terrorist fear. The political and law system is extremely weak. Do you know that Indonesia is the third most corrupt country in the world? That is why praying is so important. We (as Christians and Chinese) cannot join practical politics. We can only follow the politics of the Lord.

Or Thomas (Kuala Lumpur), the owner of an engineering business:

Malaysia is a spiritual economy, it is rooted in a strong culture and it cannot do without a strong religion. There are many religions in Malaysia and they have different values. But for doing business, you need to trust people and you trust people only if these people share your values. I find people who share my values in my church and in the Fellowship. We pray together and I hear them utter the same words that express my values. Then I feel that we are the same, we are one community and I trust them.

The actual turning point moment is for most a very emotional happening. Many refer to crying intensively or to feeling supernatural powers they had never experienced before. This physical occurrence is a very decisive force in making the actual change. It is explained as the first token ever in their lives of the presence of the Lord. It is not the case that conversion is instantaneous and immediate. Yunas (Yogyakarta) is quite clear about what happened to him in this regard:

From the first moment onwards I kept going to this charismatic church, I even went to Bible classes for more than a year. Since then I feel and believe that God guides me. But I must admit that I was not a complete Christian immediately. I still asked God often 'why do you do this' if I encountered problems. Now I realize this is not the way to be a good Christian. I now know that God is always with me and whatever happens there is a good reason for it.

The reasons for conversion that come forward from the narratives have a few things in common. First of all, in most cases there is a combination of business and/or personal problems, moments of deep trouble. In that state of trouble they meet 'a friend' who takes them to a charismatic church. After a period of struggle and learning the total surrender is there which brings inner peace and a feeling that there is someone at their side. This act of surrendering often has a similar pattern: 'a confession of sinfulness followed by repentance and an admission of faith' (Goh 1999: 100). Secondly, there are also signs that the conversion is not restricted to the level of the Self. Mention is made, although more implicit than explicit, of the problematic (minority) position of ethnic Chinese and Christians and the possible dangers this causes for them. And finally, there is the sharing: sharing with like-minded people, a community that shares the same 'values' and sharing the burdens of life with God. The charismatic turn can be translated into being guided through life by the Lord, but for this to happen they all had to 'liberate' themselves and consign their trust in the hands of God. The next question would be, in what manner does this new spiritual level imbue their leadership positions as professionals and business-owners?

Spiritual Power

Whereas the triggers to convert can be found in personal, professional and socio-political issues, converting to Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity reveals the faith-related choices. The emotional experiences of the charismatic turn are inner changes we denote as religion-based spirituality (Fernando (2007: 72, 77)). The question is how this inner change is experienced at the level of their professional lives. In his interfaith study, Fernando (2007) discovered that the common feature among the businessmen was an expressed 'connection' with 'an Ultimate' that was encountered as more powerful, and once the connection is established (through religious practices) what follows is not just a sense of inner well-being but also inspiration, solace, protection and guidance. There are some interesting similarities between Fernando's findings and our cases. The managers in our study are quite clear about specific religious changes in their professional lives after their conversion. For all managers involved in our study, praying and worshipping has become an integral part of their professional lives. Apart from the regular Sunday masses they attend, or the praying sessions during specific business group meetings, they have all taken up the habit of daily prayer, very often at the start of the working day. Since they have accepted Jesus

Christ in their lives, praying is the way to reassure their relationship with God. Mary (Kuala Lumpur) carries a tiny altar in her bag, which she sets up in her office or in the room where she performs a beauty treatment:

I want to be close to the Lord all day, in body and in spirit. This is why I carry this altar with me. The owner of this beauty chain, my boss, is also a Christian. He shares my belief and allows me to have this altar in the business. But he says that we should not force our belief on our customers. They may have a different religion and may feel offended. So I set up my altar only if I meet like-minded customers.

There are only two explicit examples of managers who pray with their complete workforce (including the non-Christian staff) in order for the work to be blessed; the majority of the managers refrain from such practices because of the large number of non-Christian workers in their organizations. Some managers however prefer to have Christians in their management team in order to pray together. Mary (Kuala Lumpur) is convinced that she got her present job, despite the lack of proper education and experience, because her boss prefers to employ Christians. And Harri (Yogyakarta) explains:

For some positions in my company I am a bit more careful and choose more focused on religion. This is because I want to be able to pray with the managers in case we have problems. I cannot do this with someone of a different religion.

Hock Seng (Kuala Lumpur) employs a multi-cultural and multi-religious workforce. He explained that overt expressions of his faith, such as joint prayers, would meet with negative response, in particular among his Muslim staff. Nevertheless Hock Seng manages to implement his faith on the work floor:

I think of myself as a Christian manager. This means that I practice the love of Jesus on the work floor. When some incident happens to one of my employees, I pray and think of what Jesus would do in a situation like this. So I will show empathy. If they are in need of money, I borrow them some without interest. If an employee makes a mistake, I think of what will happen to their family if I fire them. Then I give them another chance.

As mentioned, private praying is the more common practice among the managers, usually before the start of their working day either at home or in their office. It has an explicit goal and result: it gives strength and guidance for the working day ahead, as Alief (Yogyakarta) acknowledges:

One of the major changes in my business life is that since I have met Jesus I pray every morning before opening up the store. I pray with my wife. This strengthens my faith and power. Before I became born again I was only conducting my business for me alone, now I am conducting my business for God.

But the praying also has more direct outcomes. Tim (Kuala Lumpur), a manager of an air transportation company, pointed out that his prayers are heard and his problems are solved immediately when he confides in the Lord. This 'success' factor is found in all of the conversion stories:

It happened only last week on a business trip to the Philippines. I was on the plane and when it approached Cebu City, there was a thunderstorm. The plane did not get clearance for landing and was forced to circle above the city for quite some time. I got worried about missing my appointment with my business partners. This was about an important business deal we had worked on for months. I turned to the Lord and said a simple prayer. 'Dear Lord, please make the storm die down and the sky to open up, so that the plane can land and I will be able to do good business.' I tell you, within ten minutes it happened that way and the trip came to a very successful conclusion.

The charismatic turn has yet another dimension, one quite revealing for business leaders in both countries. One of the many themes that came up in the conversations and interviews is the pressing question of how to be a good Christian in an overtly corrupt business environment. In general it was admitted that this is a challenge that they had to conquer as Christian managers but their firm belief and support gives them the strength to stay away from such practices, as Ronald (Yogyakarta) explains:

In the past I did not know the ethics of a Christian businessman. I was only familiar with the principle of making a profit. I paid a lot of corruption money. Only recently I understand the ethics of a Christian, this started a few years ago when my business went very bad, not yet bankrupt, but very bad. It was the moment I found God. I switched to the private sector but this is a much smaller market, much more difficult to make profits.

The manner in which the conversion has brought about changes in the professional lives of the managers under study shows several similarities. A saying by one of the Indonesian managers sums it up quite nicely: 'there is no clash between the Bible and business but it is about priority; the Bible first.' For charismatic Christians, the gifts of the Holy Spirit (healing, speaking in tongues, prophesy, wealth) befall them if they are good Christians (praying, going to church, paying tithes). We see the particular activities of praying and worshipping that provide them with inner strength and spiritual power; power to heal, power

to change, power to resist and power to succeed. It seems indeed the case that 'Jesus is not a lofty King or Judge but a Friend' (Flinn 1999: 69). It goes hand in hand with inner feelings of being able to cope with whatever circumstances they are confronted with. The protection (not to fall in sin) and guidance (support) strengthens and empowers them in their leadership positions. The deeper awareness of God (who stands next to you) and divine encounters have the effect of increased 'self-esteem' and changes in the 'self-concept' (cf. Poloma 1997). Through their new faith, the managers and professionals under study feel they have received the potential to become better and more successful leaders. In both countries, however, too overt expressions of their faith meet with restrictions posed by the dominant religion. In the following we shall consider one more aspect, that of Christian stewardship, and how it relates to leadership.

Religious Business Groups and Charity

Two other features stand out: almost all managers are involved in Christian business organizations and in forms of charity. In this section we shall explore the manner in which such networks and activities relate to their leadership positions.

Most prominent among the organizations they are involved in is the earlier mentioned Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International (FGBMFI) that brings together business people (mainly men) who are born-again Christians. Yunas (Yogyakarta) explains:

Full Gospel is a good place for Christians who run a business. Their problems are not discussed in the churches they go to. But at Full Gospel they do. The Full Gospel meetings are also used to discuss business opportunities although this is not among the major intentions. However, it is natural that business issues arise among this group.

Although FGBMFI has primarily a Christian mission, it also functions as a network of managers and professionals. This is not just any network, but a network in which people respect and trust each other as they are united in their belief that they are the 'chosen' people. As the managers and professionals attending these meetings are leading enterprises, branches, departments or projects characterized by a simple, top-down management structure, they are generally the sole person responsible for the organization or project. Support from and guidance by the Lord (as was expressed above) is what they seek; FGBMFI is an important medium through which they find it. This being a small network, with

people just like themselves, implies immediate sharing and understanding at a very practical level. In Herman's (Yogyakarta) words:

As a businessman I do not need a theology study or background first, sharing daily life experiences and testimonies can be done immediately. That is the strength of Full Gospel. Full Gospel offers safety, protection. In this global world of doing business, Christianity, belief can give you protection.

The business leaders know that their 'success also depends on someone beyond themselves' (Cavanagh 1999: 198). The following meeting of a FGBMFI group in Kuala Lumpur illustrates this point:

During a Friday lunch meeting Hock Seng stood up in front of the fifteen members to share his testimony. Being an agent for the German automobile producer AUDI for many years his business ran into trouble in the aftermath of the Asian crisis. Although he did not want to give up his business, a lucrative opportunity emerged in a promising new business sector. This move would probably turn out well for his personal earnings, but would leave employees jobless. He did not know how to solve this dilemma and sat down to pray for guidance to make the right decision, a decision that would bring about the success he desired both for himself and his business. After his intense prayers, he decided to stay in the automobile sector, but to switch to another brand. He became a Nissan dealer offering good and affordable cars. This change happened only shortly before the FGBMFI meeting but having received the first sales overviews, Hock Seng was confident that he had made the right decision. Hock Seng finished with expressing his gratefulness to Jesus, accompanied by enthusiastic responses of the other members.

Apart from sharing and testimonies, the FGBMFI chapters frequently invite guest preachers to support the businessmen in Bible reading. This act of Bible reading is closely related to what Goh (1999: 101) refers to as the 'ideology of discipleship'. Bible reading not only empowers people to transcend themselves (to testify to God's glory) it also provides 'moral and inspirational content' (Goh 1999). It is the medium through which God speaks to one personally and mastering this is one of the lessons these managers seek. The following is an excerpt from a FGBMFI meeting in Yogyakarta. It was a gathering of some twelve ethnic Chinese businessmen who had invited a charismatic preacher; the latter is the one who speaks:

The Bible has many verses that show that from the very beginning businessmen took part in the work of the Lord. In their business activities businessmen can serve God and provide heavenly care to the people around them by running their business in a Christian way: by not exploiting their workers; by conducting their business in an honest way and by using the profit of their business to help develop the work of God.

As mentioned, all the managers also practice Christian charity. This includes helping the poor, supporting an orphanage, donating money (beyond tithing), and starting mission schools. Obviously, charity and religion have a shared history. In the light of the spiritual empowerment among the managers in this study, the acts of charity seem closely related to serving the Lord: first of all by seeking new converts (which is vital in many charismatic movements) and secondly, as an attribute for further spiritual revival (cf. Bowpitt 1998). The preparations for a charity event as carried out by a local FGBMFI group in Kuala Lumpur gives a good impression:

During a lunch get-together preparations for a charity meeting are on the agenda. As the chairman explains, the members of this chapter volunteer to organize such meetings every last saturday of a month. It is their habit to attend these meetings together with their spouses. The charity meetings take place in neighbourhoods where the poor live and involve joint prayers and hymn singing and a shared meal is offered by the chapter to the inhabitants. As one of the chapter members explains: 'We need to feed the people before we make them share the gospel.' This activity is of great importance for the chapter and the chairman personally involves himself with dividing the tasks.

Such monthly joint charity projects as outlined above cement the ties among the members through shared responsibilities, which extend into the wider community. Such charity within the charismatic context has various meanings: it can be seen as a form of giving in which the giver replicates God's actions on earth, as giving with an expected return, blessing (Coleman 2006), but also as converting others, which is closely related to reconverting the self and personal growth (Coleman 2000).

Both the Christian business meetings and the charity activities in which the managers and professionals of this study are involved, are occasions of 'sharing', i.e. sharing with people who, in their leadership, encounter similar problems, sharing interesting knowledge among business leaders and meeting prospective trustworthy 'partners', and sharing in further learning, growth and protection.

Spiritual Power and Leadership in Context: An Analysis

In this section we will evaluate the empirical data presented above against the background of the theoretical debates on spiritual leadership combined with the local socio-economic and socio-political contexts and global religious processes in which the ethnic Chinese managers under study are situated. As we argued above, conversion should be understood both at the individual level and in a broader societal context. Rambo and

Farhadian (1999:24-25) who distinguish between the macro (political and economic systems), micro (the personal world of the individual) and the meso context (local government, regional politics), state that processes of religious change cannot be understood without paying due attention to 'contextual infrastructures'. We have singled out three dimensions of what we have called the 'charismatic turn' among ethnic Chinese managers in order to reveal the inner meaning and life-worlds of the managers-in-context. We shall discuss and compare the results one by one.

The first dimension we explored concerns the reasons these managers convert. We detected a blending of personal, business and situational features, some acting at the same time. *Turning point moments* were easily remembered and narrated by the managers and issues of bankruptcy, organizational change and job insecurity, corruption, and/or family troubles were brought to the fore frequently as well as the insecure situation for ethnic Chinese and Christians in both countries with discrimination, terrorist attacks and the rise of new Islamic movements. The latter developments were more pronounced in the Indonesian than in the Malaysian case. The turning point has been experienced as emotional and has brought deliverance. It is the start of a changed life at the personal, professional and group level. The key word related to all these turning points is 'sharing'; the sharing of business, personal, but also social group anxieties. This is not just sharing with an Almighty for the manager/professional in his or her leadership position. We would miss a very important reason if we would only zoom in on the aspect of leadership. The fact that these are managers, professionals and business leaders of *Chinese* descent, an ethnic minority with a very ambivalent position in majority Muslim cultures, is a contextual argument that vindicates the charismatic turn. Lacking political power, becoming engaged in the 'politics of the Lord' is more than a second best option because such refuge in the Lord is felt as strengthening them as leaders and as an ethnic minority. It has been argued that conversion is often found among ethnic minorities, stigmatized as inferior, where it 'acts as a revitalization and assertion of moral standing' (Martin 2005: 28; see also Viswanathan 1998). In other words, the charismatic turn is empowering; the minority status of the ethnic Chinese, which strongly contrasts with their economic success in Malaysia and Indonesia, inspires their turn towards the charismatic movement.

The second dimension concerns the manner in which religion-based spirituality relates to professional lives: what is denoted and experienced as *spiritual power*? Keywords turned out to be praying, being

heard, guidance, success, and walking 'the straight line'. 'Viewing God as a personal agent guiding action' is a known message in charismatic movements worldwide (Watling 2005: 93). It aligns with the narratives of the managers under study that after having found Jesus, leading their business has become a less selfish, less lonely, and less stressful endeavour, literally 'giving the day into the hands of the Lord'. By praying, worshipping, and being a good Christian, they receive spiritual power. Spiritual power is a form of self-esteem that supports them in practicing a more 'honest' business, particularly in the case of the Indonesian owner-managers in our database. In the volatile business environment the explicit use of personal experiences and testimonies offers the necessary 'assistance' to find the right balance in order to stay on that straight line. In the case of the Malaysian managers, the spiritual power is, in particular, success and community related. It is suggested that the direct personal relationship between the worshipper and the Lord pays off in terms of the timely solution of problems and fulfilment of wishes. As much as these business-related favours are granted because of the unfaltering belief of the individual, they may also be mediated through the joint prayers during a FGBMFI meeting. As one of our informants explained, it is this collective effort that generates a critical mass for pointing out the importance of business interests to the Lord, while general church services address all kinds of private concerns that may divert His attention. This 'born-again culture' (cf. Bielo 2007) engenders a born-again personhood that firmly believes in material success: 'God wants the faithful to be rewarded with prosperity' (Bielo 2007: 318). This prosperity message, so well-known of charismatic churches (Meyer 2006; Coleman 2006), appeals to business leaders in general as it does to the managers in our study. From a leadership perspective it can be argued that empowerment through the charismatic turn is found in that it helps these business leaders be 'strong' and 'virtuous' leaders (cf. Cowan 2005; cf. Diddams *et al.* 2005) as their personal relationship with God helps them to manage their business problems, has the promise of success and offers a road to becoming a more honest and successful leader. However, it is important to realize that this leadership dimension derives explanatory power only within a broader context of power relations in which the business leaders under study are embedded. This 'born-again culture' offers important amenities to our informants because they are *Chinese* managers and business leaders who require empowerment of their professional lives because of their Chinese identity in a hostile environment.

The third and final dimension zoomed in on was *organized business-cum-religious activities* in which the managers are involved. It seems that religion-based spirituality finds its culmination in these gatherings and activities. There are three features that deserve elaboration: Bible reading, charity and religious business networks. As explained above, in Asia, charismatic movements have a quite literal approach to the Bible as the Word of God (Anderson 2005). Many of the FGBMFI meetings are organized around a better understanding of the Bible, to discuss and share everyday (business) problems, and to do charity. In writings on the charismatic movement we can find references to the role and meaning of words, reciting the Bible, praying, speaking in tongues, and testimonies but also of tithing and giving (charity). Words and giving in these settings act as agency and carry meaning beyond their immediate existential significance in that they enhance charismatic power within but also beyond. Words and charity are not just 'pure gifts' as there is an expected return, that of prosperity and the continued development as a 'powerful charismatic personality'; words and charity reinforce 'the charismatic persona of both donors and recipients' (Coleman 2000: 201). The networks that facilitate this charismatic growth are, in the cultural contexts under scrutiny, characterized by a rather homogeneous make-up: ethnic Chinese, middle class, managers, professionals and business owners and very often male dominated. Such conditioned networks are especially important among minority religious groups who are excluded from mainstream society and 'access to professional advice and services through the religious or ethnic network may be a matter of no small consequence' (Dodd and Seaman 1998: 73). Religiously active managers often have strong personal ties of trust with co-worshippers as 'the network reinforces the behavioral norms of the faith, and also provides a primary source of contacts for the individual' (Dodd and Seaman 1998.). Prayer meetings facilitate the getting together of like-minded people who may figure as business partners in the future. The importance of personal and professional networks for business owners is a common theme in studies on the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia and Malaysia (Mackie 1998; Crawford 2000; Gomez and Hsiao 2004). This specific blending of religion, ethnicity and professionalism can be interpreted as forms of social and cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1977), as the religious networks offer information, contacts, sharing, and guidance in both practical and spiritual ways (Dahles 2007).

Taken out of its context, religion-based spirituality among ethnic Chinese managers might be interpreted as yet another way for managers

to reinvent themselves as managers in order to improve organizational effectiveness, workplace well-being and success. However, if the focus is restricted to a causal link between the leader and spirituality an important dimension remains hidden, and that is the manner in which this religious turn is empowering at a societal level.

Returning to the empowerment thesis, it is important to address the differences detected among the Indonesian and Malaysian managers in this study. In general terms it is the minority status of the ethnic Chinese, which strongly contrasts with their economic position, that encourages their move to the charismatic movement. In the Malaysian and Indonesian context, being or becoming an adherent of Christian belief is a statement. However, there are some interesting differences. In Malaysia, empowerment should not be understood in the narrow sense of improving the situation of economically marginalized and politically disempowered people. Instead, we are dealing here with a social category in a rather insecure class position, i.e. the position of social climbers who have to establish themselves vis-à-vis the established ethnic Chinese intellectual elite who remain members of the traditional Christian churches. The charismatic movement conveys the status ambitions of the new middle class, which gives expression to its wealth through participation in the worldwide consumer culture. This appreciation might constitute an important factor in the struggle against *status insecurity*, which characterizes the position and mindset of social climbers in general. The new middle classes have to find their place in society. Consumption as the only marker of distinction is too narrow a basis. Modernity, instead of pushing towards secularization, seems to generate modes of religiosity that allow for a contemporary experience of belief, which comprises both rationality and spirituality. In the Indonesian case, the empowerment is in particular a statement against, or away from, the nation state in which Chinese Indonesians have always been regarded and treated as second rank citizens and had to erase their Chineseness. The aggressiveness against the ethnic Chinese during the economic and political crises of the late 1990s was for many so harsh a reconfirmation of their never ending *insecurity* and *outsider status* that they went looking elsewhere (some literally by leaving the country altogether). The charismatic movement offers an escape from such depressing local circumstances. By opting for a global Christian identity, self-esteem is refurbished; a new sense of belonging is established that also holds the promise of protection, protection by the Lord in business but also protection by being part of a larger community of co-Christians.

Concluding Remarks

In this article we have addressed the intriguing turn among ethnic Chinese managers in Southeast Asia to charismatic Christianity. By looking closely at two countries where this phenomenon is occurring, Indonesia and Malaysia, and by using the anthropological approach to organization studies, we have attempted to better understand the appeal of this expressive form of Christianity for ethnic Chinese managers and professionals, an ethnically and politically contested but economically dominant group. The analytic tools we applied consisted of life-and-business histories positioned in the proper local contexts and global religious processes. We have tried to move beyond the functionalist theoretical debates on spiritual leadership by studying the inner meaning of religion-based spirituality among managers-in-context.

We can conclude that the charismatic movement and ethnic Chinese business leaders in Indonesia and Malaysia have found each other in a dialectic encounter of empowerment at the managerial level. From a managerial perspective, the religion-based spiritual turn can be related to several 'matches' between ethnic Chinese managers as middle class managers and professionals in volatile business environments and the vibrant, this-worldly and spiritual character of the charismatic movements. It provides a global and modern identity fitting their economic position while, at the same time, it provides spiritual guidance and support in how to be an 'honest' and 'successful' manager. Moreover, the charismatic movement is unique among religious movements in its prosperity gospel; wealth creation is a reward, an expected return to giving (charity, tithing) and praying, but more importantly, there is an inner reward, that of spiritual self-growth and growing self-esteem. Finally, the charismatic organizations provide a forum where insecurities and business problems can be shared with like-minded people. There is instant care and relief, and the get-togethers with fellow Christian businessmen (most often co-ethnics) bring material as well as immaterial support, protection and guidance. The dialectical encounter offers another form of empowerment as well, one easily missed had we restricted the analysis to the level of the manager-without-context. The move of ethnic Chinese managers towards charismatic Christianity can also be interpreted as a deliverance from their specific ethnic minority position, which – as history has proven in both countries – is an insecure ethnic position and is rather ambiguously related to their economic positions. This empowerment, however, is differently constituted in

Indonesia and Malaysia. In the latter case the empowerment speaks to the insecure status and class position of the social climbers among the ethnic Chinese who experience an ethnic and economic revitalization vis-à-vis the older elites. In the Indonesian case, the empowerment takes the form of a new sense of belonging for a socio-ethnic group that is confronted time and again with an outsider status. Notwithstanding these subtle differences that prove our claim for a contextual approach, the overall conclusion must be that spiritual power empowers.

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NOTES

- ¹ We shall use the term *manager* throughout this paper denoting professionals in organizations and business-owners of small, medium and large enterprises. In all cases they are in management/leadership positions.
- ² In this article we use *charismatic Christianity* to denote both Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity (the largest groupings) and the charismatic developments in Catholic churches. The charismatic movement encompasses 'those churches within the established denominations that have been open to Pentecostal influence through the dynamics of Charismatic Renewal, along with itinerant ministries and para-church organizations outside of these structures' (Hunt, Hamilton and Walter 1997: 2). Pentecostalism stems from the Protestant evangelical tradition (Methodists, Baptists) and their nineteenth century Holiness movements.
- ³ Although our study focuses on ethnic Chinese managers in Malaysia and Indonesia, we do not argue that there are no other ethnic groups in both countries that convert as well or that it is only managers who make this religious move. However, among those who do convert, ethnic Chinese active in business domains are prominently represented.
- ⁴ As we worked via snowball methods and via male-dominated organizations, we were often referred from one male manager to the next. We do acknowledge this gender-omission in our data set.
- ⁵ All the names used have been changed for privacy reasons.
- ⁶ The FGBMFI is seen as one of the most important vehicles through which charismatic Christianity spreads around the world (Ackerman and Lee 1990).
- ⁷ For an elaborate overview of studies on religion and spirituality, see Dent *et al.* (2005).
- ⁸ For the purpose of this paragraph we mainly talk in generalized terms about the ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Malaysia. Obviously, the ethnic Chinese are a highly heterogeneous people, not only based on class, gender, age,

beliefs and occupations, but also based on issues of ethnic identity, political ideals and cultural preferences. See Ooi (2007) and Koning and Susanto (2008) for a more critical stand.

- ⁹ The 2000 Population Census of Indonesia for the first time since the colonial 1930-census again mapped ethnic Chineseness. Ever since the 1930s the estimated number of ethnic Chinese was held at five to six million. The results of the 2000 census, based on self-identification, provided a lower number and is said to be an under-representation.
- ¹⁰ Many Chinese adhered to traditional Chinese beliefs and Confucianism that were not included in the choice.
- ¹¹ For critical discussions on this so-called Chinese Capitalism see the special issue of *East Asia; an International Quarterly* 24 (2) edited by Ooi & Koning (2007) and the special issue of *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 25 (2007) edited by Kui Beoy Ng & M. Jacobsen.

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