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In Pursuit of Capital: The Charismatic Turn Among the Chinese Managerial and Professional Class in Malaysia

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This article explores a so far neglected dimension of the ongoing debate on the relationship between the politically contested position of the ethnic Chinese and their dominant role in the economies of Southeast Asia in general and in Malaysia in particular. While the prominence of the ethnic Chinese in the business life of Malaysia is ubiquitous, they also seem to be the engine of the striking growth of the Christian community, in particular the Pentecostal-Charismatic groups. This 'charismatic turn', it has been argued, reflects a major shift in the social position and power relations among the ethnic groups and the consolidation of the position of the Malaysian Chinese in the modern Malaysian nation state. This article critically reappraises this 'empowerment thesis' by analyzing the opportunities that conversion to Christianity and membership of Pentecostal-Charismatic groups offer to Malaysian Chinese business people, managers and professionals. In particular, this article identifies the forms of capital (in a Bourdieuan sense) involved and analyzes how these forms of capital are utilized and imbued with meaning in the interface of religion and business.

Keywords: *empowerment, ethnic Chinese business people, Malaysia, new middle classes, Pentecostal-Charismatic movement*

Malaysia is witnessing a remarkable shift in its religious landscape. The once exclusive relationship between ethnicity and religion is disrupted by the striking growth of the Christian communities, both the traditional Christian churches and—most pronounced—in the Pentecostal and Charismatic groups (Goh, 2004, section 17). This growth is generated in particular by conversions among the ethnic Chinese and to a much lesser degree among the Indian population of Malaysia (Ackerman, 1984; Hunt, 1992; Lee & Ackerman, 1997; Anderson, 2004, p. 129; Ma, 2004). While the religious shift among the Chinese, in particular the massive conversion to Christianity, went largely unnoticed (Clammer, 1984), the complex relationship between belief systems and economic activities played a vital role in the literature addressing ethnic Chinese 'business success'. The Chinese dominance of business life in Malaysia, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, has generated much scholarly comment. Inspired by Max Weber's work on comparative religion and, in particular, his analysis of Confucianism, efforts

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have been made to interpret ethnic Chinese economic accomplishments in terms of 'Confucian capitalism' or 'Chinese capitalism' (Redding, 1990). Chinese capitalism has often been described in terms of a 'network capitalism' characterized by both hierarchical relationships within the family and a system of intra-ethnic reciprocal relationships known as *guanxi* (good connections). The image of the networking, family-based, flexible ethnic Chinese entrepreneur has become a trope in the literature on Chinese economic ventures (Redding, 1990; Kotkin, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995; Weidenbaum & Hughes, 1996; Douw, 1999).

Closely related to the image of the Confucian network-capitalists is the diasporic discourse. In Malaysia, as in many Southeast Asian countries, the ethnic Chinese are identified in terms of a shared 'diasporic condition', implying that beyond migration (Cohen, 1997, p. ix) lie experiences of displacement and oppression as much as fresh opportunities stemming from new economic niches (Ong & Nonini, 1997, p. 11; Ong, 1999, p. 13) and undermining political activities and split loyalties (Ong & Nonini, 1997, pp. 24–5). This ambivalent positioning of the ethnic Chinese as 'diaspora' is reflected by the roles they play in the Malaysian nation state. On the one hand, the ethnic Chinese are the pillars of the Malaysian economy in that they hold 60 per cent of total GDP and 40–50 per cent of the national corporate assets (Yeung & Olds, 2000, pp. 7–9) and constitute over 52 per cent of the managerial and 25 per cent of the professional occupations (Mohamad, 2005, p. 28). On the other hand, their citizenship remains contested in the Islamic context of the Malaysian nation state despite their long-standing presence in Malaysia (Ong, 1997; Nonini, 1997).

Some scholars argue that the growth of Christianity among the Chinese is reflecting major shifts in the social position and power relations among the ethnic groups in Malaysia, in particular their increasing self-assertion and the rise of a Malaysian-Chinese identity. It has been pointed out that Pentecostal forms of Protestant Christianity have flourished in particular among 'those from the margins of society' but have come to increasingly reach the middle and upper classes (Ma, 2004, pp. 195, 198; Suico, 2005, p. 198). This 'charismatic turn' seems to provide the 'politically disempowered with alternative sources of social action and meaning' (Clammer, 2002, p. 310; Lee & Ackerman, 1997, pp. 141ff.). Christianity has become associated with modernity and 'individualism denied to the members of more communally based religions' (Clammer, 2002, p. 310; cf. Suico, 2005, p. 208) and a vehicle to consolidate the position of the Chinese in the modern nation state of Malaysia (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, pp. 141–3; see also Kuah-Pearce (2003) for Christian converts in Singapore).

If this 'empowerment thesis' holds true, it is necessary to identify 'alternative sources' that the ethnic Chinese obtain by becoming adherents to Pentecostal forms of Christian belief and members of Charismatic groups. Instead of searching for specific qualities that this belief instills into its adherents, a political-economic approach inspired by the work of Gomez (1999, 2002, 2003) may shed a fresh light on the 'business of religion'. Gomez identified a number of factors of Chinese business operations in Malaysia, a combination of which has sustained the growth of major Chinese-owned firms. Among these factors are entrepreneurial intelligence, access to relevant knowledge and other resources, and patronage relations with influential political players (Gomez, 2003, p. 123). Although Gomez's findings pertain to large incorporated Chinese-owned businesses and his findings may not capture Chinese business practices in general, his approach is worth following. Therefore, I shall raise the question as to what opportunities the conversion to Christianity and membership of Christian groups offer to the Malaysian Chinese and, in particular, the Chinese business

classes, including owners, managers and professionals. To answer this question, I shall elaborate on the forms of 'capital' that come within reach as a consequence of such conversion and church membership. The scope of the concept of capital will be broadened beyond its purely monetary significance and defined in terms of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). The relationship between Christian values and practices, on the one hand, and the creation of different forms of capital, on the other, will be investigated in terms of its significance and meaning for the Chinese business classes in the Malaysian nation state.

The next section will develop the multi-layered concept of capital into an analytical instrument. Then, upon discussing the development of Christianity and the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement in Malaysia, the article proceeds with a brief methodological outline which serves as an introduction to the description of a meeting of a Charismatic group of largely Chinese managers and professionals in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. Subsequently, this case is analyzed in terms of the concepts of capital in order to identify the ways in which diverse forms of capital are generated and utilized through such meetings. In the conclusion, I reflect on the explanatory strength of the 'empowerment thesis' in the light of the capital-based analysis of 'charismatic practice'.

A Theory of Practice

The widely publicized assumption that a common ethnic identity and shared value systems constitute a bond among the Chinese organizing close-knit exclusive business networks ignores the experiences of Chinese communities and individual Chinese entrepreneurs under specific and widely differing economic and political conditions. Instead, mutual interest seems to characterize successful cooperative efforts among Chinese businesspeople within and across national borders (Jesudason, 1989; Gomez, 1999, 2002, 2003; Gomez & Hsiao, 2004). Viewed from a political economy perspective, ethnicity, culture and identity are social phenomena that can be manipulated by governments, individuals and organizations in the pursuit of their own goals and, consequently, can become resources for the advancement of material and political interests. In this vein, ethnic Chinese businesses have been characterized in terms of their strong cultural and social embeddedness in personal relationships, high levels of social interaction among actors in these networks, collective representation through trade and commercial associations and informal business groupings, state patronage and the quest for mutual benefits (Yeung & Olds, 2000, pp. 15–16). One may rephrase these characteristics of Chinese business in terms of forms of 'capital' in a Bourdieuan sense.

Although terms for non-monetary forms of capital have been used in economic and sociological studies since the 1960s (Becker, 1964), it was the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who designed a comprehensive theory of social practice which identifies a number of different forms of 'capital' that serve as both material and symbolic resources in human exchanges. This theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977) views society as an amalgam of partly overlapping and partly conflicting but constantly changing fields. Each field is constituted by a particular set of practices and interests, institutions and laws that define it as unique and delineate it from other fields. Individuals and organizations acting within a specific field develop a particular set of dispositions which provides access to particular resources or 'capitals' that are of more or less value in a given field. Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes economic (wealth in the narrow sense), social (network relations, trust and credentials) and cultural (certified knowledge and expertise acquired through formal education) capital. While both social and cultural

capital can be invested in order to accumulate economic capital, they can be derived from economic capital 'only at the cost of a more or less great effort of transformation, which is needed to produce the type of power effective in the field in question' (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252).

The concept of social capital, which Bourdieu defined in terms of durable network relations (1986, p. 248), has found wide resonance among a large number of social scientists and has been elaborated on both the individual and collective level. Social capital research has focused on membership in formal organizations where people obtain skills such as negotiation, compromise, reciprocity and establishing contact with people of other groups. Focusing on the collective level, Putnam (2000) defines social capital as an attribute of social organizations that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Conversely, at the individual level, social capital accrues to personal investments that consist of the 'potential resources inherent in an actor's set of social ties' (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003, p. 26). These resources may be established by membership of an age group, an ethnic or dialect group and a religious community. Although social capital can be exchanged for other forms of capital such as money, knowledge, jobs or promotions (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253), it can be made operational only by securing the cooperation of other actors. Social capital is closely intertwined with the concept of social networks. Individuals benefit from social capital only if they are embedded in social networks that provide the conditions for sustainable social ties.

In the field that we may describe in terms of religious life, church membership constitutes an important source of social capital. Iannaccone (1990) introduced the concept of religious capital which he defined in terms of religious practices, training and upbringing, exposure to specific religious traditions, knowledge and skills (such as Bible reading, rituals, hymns and so forth). Where Iannaccone is looking at resources resulting from membership of formal religious organizations, his concept of religious capital resembles Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital which is a 'long-lasting disposition of the mind and body' that implies 'a labour of inculcation and assimilation' (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 243–4). It has been defined as an instrument of the dominant classes using institutionalized and certified knowledge to consolidate power relations to their advantage. Similarly, religious capital takes a long time and considerable effort to accumulate and acts as an instrument of exclusion by distinguishing the church members from the non-members and concentrating power in the hands of the Church.

Putnam (2000) argued that, with an overall decline of social capital marking increasing individualism in the US and worldwide, Church-based social capital, i.e. Iannaccone's religious capital, is eroding quickly. Instead, voluntary associations, such as faith communities, come to play a crucial role in reversing the decline in social capital. However, these voluntary associations cannot reverse the weakening of religious capital, as this form of capital is inherent to the formal church organizations and is lost with their decline. This is where another form of capital emerges, i.e. spiritual capital, which is based on values instead of institutionalized practice. Following the distinction between 'religiosity' and 'spirituality' (Zinnbauer *et al.*, 1997), spiritual capital is a fuzzy concept that blurs the conventional distinctions between the religious and the secular domains and consists of the relationship with God embedded in group activity such as a faith community.

In this article, the religious life of Chinese Christians in Malaysia will be viewed as a field in the Bourdieuan sense in which diverse forms of capital are both invested and generated in interactive processes between and among adherents of different Christian churches and faith communities. These forms of capital may also serve as resources to

be drawn on in Chinese business life at the national and global levels. The aim is to identify the forms of capital involved and to analyze how these forms of capital are utilized and imbued with meaning in the competitive relations within the field of religious life and between the fields of religion and business.

Christianity in Malaysia

The development of Christianity and the Charismatic Movements

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society with much ethno-religious congruence (cf. Table 2 below). The Malay majority, which constitutes 53 per cent of the total Malaysian population (Census 2000, 2001), is Muslim ‘by birth and constitutional fiat’ (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 21). The Indian population in Malaysia, which constitutes 11.7 per cent of the total population, adheres largely but not exclusively to Hinduism. The ethnic Chinese, constituting 26 per cent of the total population (Census 2000, 2001), show a striking religious heterogeneity (cf. Table 1) (Tan, 2000, p. 60). Following the distinction between the ‘Great Tradition’ and the ‘Little Tradition’ of Chinese religion as made by Wee and Davies (1999, pp. 80–1), the former is represented by canonical Buddhism and other scripture-based religions (such as Confucianism and Daoism), whereas the latter is represented by a mix of ancestor worship, Chinese folklore and religious practices indigenous to the place where the Chinese established themselves.

In Malaysia, during the 20th century, the Chinese have shown a shift away from traditional Chinese religion towards both Buddhism and Christianity (Table 2; figures are available only for ‘Peninsular’ Malaysia, i.e. Malaya or West Malaysia). Only Christian belief cannot be linked unambiguously to one ethnic group in particular, but crosses ethnic boundaries. The Christian population in Malaysia tends to be overwhelmingly of Chinese origin and to a lesser degree of Indian origin. Between 1970 and 2000, the Christian population in Malaysia more than quadrupled (from 220,000 to 2 million), comprising more than 9 per cent of the total Malaysian population of 23 million in 2000 (*ASEAN Statistical Yearbook*, 2005, p. 3). Some

Table 1. Religious faiths of the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia (according to 1991 Census)

Religion	% of population
Muslims	0.4
Buddhists	68.3
Chinese ^a	20.2
Hindu	0.2
Christians	7.8
Other	0.4
No religion	2.7

^aBy Chinese, the census referred to religions other than Buddhism practiced by the ethnic Chinese population (e.g. Confucianism, Daoism and what I refer to above as the ‘Little Tradition’).

Source: Tan (2000, p. 60).

Table 2. Religious composition of the population of Peninsular Malaysia, 1921–2000 (% of population)

Religion	1921	1931	1970	1980	2000
Islam	57.1	52.5	53.3	54.8	60.4
Chinese ^a	28.5	33.1	34.2	17.9	2.6
Hinduism	12.7	12.5	8.7	12.0	6.3
Christianity	1.7	1.9	2.5	4.8	9.1
Buddhism	–	–	0.4	7.3 ^b	19.2
None	–	–	0.4	2.2	0.8
Others	–	–	0.6	1.0	1.5 ^c

^aThis category comprises a heterogeneous mixture of ancestor worship combined with elements from Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist as well as folk religious sources (cf. Wee & Davies 1999, p. 80).

^bThe large increase may be due to unclear categorization of Buddhism vs traditional Chinese religion.

^cA container category comprising the Census categories of ‘tribal’, ‘other’ and ‘unknown’.

Source: For 1921–1980, Chan (1992, pp. 355–6); for 2000, *Census 2000* (2001).

sources claim that this percentage rose to 16 per cent by 2004 (Goh, 2004, section 17). In comparison, the total Malaysian population shows an average annual growth rate of about 2.5 per cent (*ASEAN Statistical Yearbook*, 2005, p. 3). The faster growth of the Christian community during this period cannot be ascribed solely to natural increase, or to any considerable influx or Christian immigration from abroad (Chan, 1992, pp. 359–60). Instead, the rapid growth of the Christian community has to be attributed to a combination of natural increase and conversions (Chan, 1992, p. 360).

Among the Christian denominations, the Roman Catholic Church represents the most important group. According to Ackerman (1984, p. 36), in the early 1980s Catholics constituted 80 per cent of all Christians and the Protestants 19.4 per cent, while the Methodists were the largest and most influential denomination constituting 42 per cent of the Peninsular Protestants. However, the growth rate among the Protestants since the early 1990s in particular has been significantly higher than among the Catholics (7.1 per cent vs 3.5 per cent) (Lee and Ackerman, 1997, p. 124). Chan (1992, p. 367) speculates that this higher annual growth rate among the Protestants is related to the mounting popularity of the Christian evangelical churches in Malaysia, in particular ‘those evangelical churches which were newer and those which were charismatically inclined or Pentecostal in outlook, while less considerable growth occurred among some of the more liturgically inclined or older evangelical churches, for example, the Presbyterian and Christian Brethren’.

In the mid-1980s the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches comprised about half of the evangelical population, growing from 16.2 per cent in 1960 to 50.1 per cent of all evangelical adherents (Chan, 1992, p. 370). According to *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, there were about 540,000 adherents to Pentecostal denominations in Malaysia in 2000, which was about 2.3 per cent of the Malaysian population (Burgess and Van der Maas, 2002, p. 170). However, reliable data on the increase of membership in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches are

hard to find. There are instances of double membership as some mainline denominational churches have become Charismatic, and the influence of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement has become pervasive within Malaysian churches. Moreover, there are Charismatic groups that are registered not as churches but as associations, or even private companies, as noted below.

Pentecostalism in Malaysia, commencing with the arrival of the first Pentecostal missionary in 1934 (Ma, 2004, p. 195), can be traced to the Azusa Street revival (1906–1909) under William J. Seymour in Los Angeles, which is counted among the first wave of classical Pentecostalism. Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is a form of Christianity in which ‘believers receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and have ecstatic experiences such as speaking in tongues, healing, and prophesying’ (Robbins, 2004, p. 117). Most of the classical Pentecostal churches, founded between 1930 and 1952, began as sects that avoided any association with the mainstream Christian churches of both Protestant and Catholic denomination (Ackerman, 1984, p. 36). The so-called second wave of Pentecostal-Charismatic revival started in the 1960s in the US among rural and working-class white and black Americans (Yung, 2005, p. 40), originally bringing together marginal social groups that were largely ignored by the established Christian Churches. The third wave, which also originated in the US in the early 1980s, is referred to as neo-Charismatic and comprises thousands of independent post-denominational groups that show a striking heterogeneity but share a common emphasis on the Holy Spirit (Burgess and Van der Maas, 2002, p. 293). In addition to the three waves of Pentecostal-Charismatic revival originating from the US, a number of Pentecostal movements swept through Asia that seem to be unrelated to the Western forms (Yung, 2005, pp. 45–8).

In Malaysia, the second wave has been enthusiastically received by the Malaysian Christian communities since the mid-1970s (Ackerman, 1984, p. 35). The movement attracts participants from among the Roman Catholics and the established Protestant churches alike, but most of all from the latter. There are three Pentecostal denominations in Peninsula Malaysia, i.e. the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Church of Malaya, and the Independent Pentecostal Church (Ackerman, 1984, p. 36). In addition, there is 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. Burgess and Van der Maas (2004, p. 170) reported the membership of the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Malaysia, both classic and new, comprised 9 per cent Pentecostals, 61 per cent Pentecostal-Charismatics and 30 per cent Neo-Charismatics. It has been argued that the Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Southeast Asia experienced a major shift in the 1980s facilitating new (often US-based) groups like the International Christian Chamber of Commerce, the Fellowship of Companies for Christ International, the Christian Yellow Pages, and Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International (FGBMFI), which explicitly recognize God’s blessings of all business activities, contribute to Christian business leadership and cater to the spiritual needs of, in particular, business people, managers and professionals (Hicks, 2003, p. 125). Historically, this paradigm shift happened at a time when a number of Southeast Asian countries experienced exponential economic growth (Tan, 2005, p. 293).

The (Post-)Colonial State, Ethnicity and the Rise of Charismatic Movements

Protestant Christianity of an Anglo-American stance emerged on the Malayan Peninsula with the consolidation of British colonialism in the mid-19th century (Lee

& Ackerman, 1997, p. 17). The colonial state supported the efforts of Christian missionaries to spread Christian belief among the population of the colonial settlements of Melaka, Penang and Singapore. As the missionaries had to refrain from proselytizing Malays in respect of treaties signed between the colonial authorities and Malay rulers that recognized Islam as the religion of the Malays, they directed their efforts towards the Taoist and Buddhist Chinese and Hindu Indian migrants who had come to work on the rubber plantations and in the tin mines. The schools that were funded by the colonial government and wealthy Chinese and Indian business people (Hunt, 1992, p. 327) offered an academic rather than a vocational curriculum, which emphasized a scientific and rational worldview and created 'a class of English educated professional workers' (Hunt, 1992, p. 327) tailored to the requirements of the white-collar occupations under the colonial administration (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 18). The mission schools reflected the Christian and Confucian traditions of education as a means of individual and social advancement (Hunt, 1992, p. 325). Towards the end of the 19th century, Chinese nationalists in Malaya who were alarmed by the decline of Chinese values and customs among the Chinese population, launched a Confucian revival movement that advocated modern vocational education in the Chinese vernacular with a strong orientation towards China mainland and, at the same time, consideration for the Confucian tradition (Yen, 2000, pp. 12, 14, 24–6; Wang, 2002, p. 2).

With the post-colonial Malaysian nation-state establishing its power, the missionaries had to leave, and the mission schools were taken over by the government which enforced Malay language as the sole medium of secondary and tertiary education in government institutions (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, pp. 59, 114). The content of educational programs shifted from the strong academic emphasis to a more practical orientation towards technological development and civil service employment (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, pp. 59, 119). While the latter offered few opportunities for the ethnic Chinese (as civil service jobs were preferably allocated to Malays), the former catered to the needs of a large group that aspired to employment in the vast segment of small and medium-scale enterprises in the Chinese-dominated private sector of the economy. Generally, the policies of the Malaysian government, like the New Economic Policy (NEP), have been designed to curtail the success of the ethnic Chinese through the formation of state corporations or monopolies; favored access to loans, contracts and licenses by Malay; or other protectionist practices (Pinches, 1999, p. 15). But it is also true that wealthy Chinese capitalists formed coalitions with powerful Malay politicians and bureaucrats (Pinches, 1999, p. 21). Conversely, the Chinese enterprises, by far the majority among the Chinese entrepreneurial class, suffered the most under the NEP because of lack of economic capital and patronage linkages with power-holders (Kahn, 1996, p. 69).

The exposure to Westernization and in particular to English education turned out to be a significant factor in the ethnic differentiation between non-Malays and Malays on the one hand and among the Chinese on the other hand, and has repercussions to the present day (Yen, 2000; Tan, 2000). The English-educated generation of the Chinese developed into an elite segment of the Malaysian nation state after independence. Among them were the wealthy merchant families comprising bankers, plantation and tin-mine owners, big manufacturers and contractors. While this group exerted considerable political power under colonialism because of their relationships with both Malay leaders and the colonial administration, they entered into patronage relationships with the power-holders in the young Malaysian nation state (Trocki, 1997; Lee, 2003, pp. 38–9). In this new political arena, however, many Chinese felt that their

political position was sincerely weakened (Lee, 2003, p. 43). Another group constituting the post-independence elite were the English-educated professionals who received their training in medicine, law or engineering in Europe or the US and who came to enjoy a high income and social status (Yen, 2000, p. 30). Overall, the English-educated Chinese elite has remained in the established Protestant Churches to the present day and does not constitute the pool from which the Pentecostal-Charismatic groups recruit their members.

It is widely accepted that the adherents of the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement in Malaysia have to be sought among the new middle class that emerged with the economic boom—the so-called ‘Asian Miracle’—in the region (Hunt, 1992; Lee & Ackerman, 1997; Kuah-Pearce, 2003). This new middle class transpired 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, p. 30). It is this class segment which marked the shift away from traditional Chinese religion (i.e. Taoism) towards both Buddhism and Christianity, and in particular the new or Reformist forms of Buddhism and the new Christian churches (Ackerman, 1984; Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 59; DeBernardi, 2002, p. 316).

While Confucian traditions and the established Christian churches have idealized the scholarly and academic orientation to both religion and life, the new movements represent a turn to contemporary interests that may be described in terms of both modernization and enchantment *within* the religions. In their midst, the professional expertise and entrepreneurial skills as well as the display of wealth and the participation in consumer culture that characterize the new middle class are highly appreciated and bestow status and prestige on individuals. At the same time, with the increasing integration of the ethnic Chinese in the Malaysian nation state and the decline of Western control of Christian churches, religion becomes more and more indigenized while, simultaneously, seeking affiliation with global networks of worshippers (Lee and Ackerman, 1997, p. 114). As a consequence, the outer expression of religious experiences and emotions takes on forms that have not been part of established Christian practices, while also evoking the enchantment of traditional Chinese religions (Lee and Ackerman, 1997, p. 143). In the Pentecostal-Charismatic movements, these experiences, known as ‘power encounters’, are regarded by many Malaysian Chinese as an expression of religious authenticity or a ‘dual orientation toward ecstatic experience and world mastery’ (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 120). An example of this ‘dual orientation’ is presented in the next section.

The Case

Methodology

The case study presented below is part of a larger research project that aimed at identifying the resources and strategies that Chinese small and medium enterprises applied in ventures across the Malaysian border. Linkages with Christian belief and church membership were mentioned casually but frequently enough to generate a project that focused on the role of religion in this segment’s economic activities. The project involved document analysis and ethnographic fieldwork during two periods of one month each in 2004 and 2005 in Kuala Lumpur. The fieldwork focused on the relationship between economic activity and religion, more particularly on the ways in

which ethnic Chinese managers and professionals are involved in Christian churches, both traditional and new, and the processes of sense-making that accompany this involvement. With the emphasis on sense-making, ethnographic fieldwork seemed to be the most appropriate research method. As Bate (1997) observes, ethnography offers an understanding of social worlds, 'life-worlds' consisting of the social constructions of meaning, interpretations from 'within and from below'. It conveys a sense of 'being there', reflects the polyphony of the world under study and produces situated knowledge to capture the detail of social life.

Ethnographic fieldwork has been mainly associated with qualitative research but can also employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Hirsch & Gellner, 2001, p. 1). Apart from analyzing secondary quantitative material about church membership and occupational structure, I conducted open interviews with professionals and owner-managers of small businesses in terms of what may be called 'career-histories' and 'business life-histories', a merging of life and business biographies. I also attended, upon invitation, round-table meetings hosted by prominent local professionals and business people. Moreover, I participated as an invitee in Sunday church services of Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal churches followed by informal meetings with church members during which peculiarities of both the church and its members were discussed and compared with other denominations. These gatherings not only provided occasions for structured observations but also offered opportunities for arranging follow-up conversations of a more formal and structured kind. One such case, a prayer meeting of a chapter of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International (FGBMFI) (<http://www.fgbmfi.org>), with pre- and post-conversations and interviews, resulted in the case study which is presented below. The FGBMFI is seen as one of the most important vehicles through which Charismatic Christianity spreads around the world (Burgess and Van der Maas, 2002, p. 477). Interviews as well as observations and conversations were based on a topic list that provided the format for the protocols established immediately after each activity.

My research population consisted, first, of a random sample of owner-managers of small-scale Chinese businesses who brought up their church membership during interviews conducted under the larger research project. Available interviews were re-analyzed and the results were used for constructing topic lists for follow-up interviews and conversations. Another segment of informants consisted of local academics and other professionals whom I met through my academic network. These people were attracted by my research partly because of their own academic interest and partly because of their personal involvement in Christian churches. Through their mediation I came into contact with a third segment of informants: the leaders (and regular members) of diverse local churches, religious organizations and Charismatic groups. The results of this exploration were analyzed and positioned in a wider historical and theoretical context with the purpose of feeding back into the database of the larger research project on cross-border business ventures.

The Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship

The FGBMFI is one of many groups that constitute the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement in Malaysia. It is a non-church-based revival ministry, operating independently of any denomination and is part of a worldwide mass revival campaign (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 125ff.). The FGBMFI originating in the US can be counted among the 'second wave' of Pentecostalism. In the early 1950s, the evangelist Oral

Roberts, who organized revival campaigns ‘featuring miraculous healings and Spirit Baptisms as the main agenda’ (Ackerman, 1984, p. 38), founded the FGBMFI together with a Californian millionaire of Armenian descent, Demos Shakarian. They established the FGBMFI with the aim of introducing Pentecostalism to middle-class businessmen and professionals. The organization recruits and maintains contact with its members by organizing banquet meetings at hotels, during which members pray together and evangelize other members by testifying about their personal experiences with the Holy Spirit.

The FGBMFI has spread to over 150 nations around the world. Its organizational structure is a network, both far-flung and close-knit. In each country, the FGBMFI is headed by a national board and is further differentiated into regional divisions. The regions are subdivided into groups (headed by coordinators), fields (headed by representatives) and chapters which, as the ‘basic work units’, are headed by chairmen (<http://www.fgb.com.my>). Chapters are neighborhood-based and of a cellular texture, and those that become too large are divided into new chapters. This organizational structure generates close-knit, small-scale units and creates a large number of leadership positions.

The FGBMFI does not intend to compete with local churches but to complement them. Its web site explains that the organization’s purpose is ‘To provide a basis of Christian fellowship among all men everywhere through an organism not directly associated with any specific church but cooperating with all those of like mind, and to inspire its members to be active in their respective churches’ (<http://www.fgb.com.my>). Conversely, affiliates of the FGBMFI do not forsake the membership of their original denomination. Therefore, the FGBMFI is multi-denominational, welcoming adherents of all kinds of Protestant churches and of the Catholic Church; ‘The emphasis in the name is on Full Gospel Business, that is, the business of these men is the Full Gospel of Jesus Christ’ (<http://www.fgb.com.my>). In particular, the organization aims to bring together people with a shared background: ‘To bear witness of God’s presence and power in the world through the message of total gospel for the total man, and by this to reach men for Jesus Christ, especially those having the same social, cultural or business background’ (<http://www.fgb.com.my>).

As for circumstances in Malaysia, in 1978 a group of Malaysian Christian brothers attended a FGBMFI banquet in Singapore where they were encouraged to start a chapter in Kuala Lumpur. In 1979, the new Malaysian chapter was officially chartered in Singapore and only a few years later, in 1985, a National Body was formed to develop and coordinate the activities of the fast-growing organization. Consequently, FGBMFI was incorporated as a public company under the Company Act 1965. The ministry prospered and multiplied into new chapters established throughout the country (<http://www.fgb.com.my>).

Praying with the Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship

In May 2004, through the mediation of my academic network and introduced by a member of a local chapter of the FGBMFI, I was invited to join a Friday lunch get-together in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur (for reasons of confidentiality, I shall not reveal the name of the chapter or its members). This member, a middle-aged ethnic Chinese, is director of a local automobile franchise. He is Malay-educated, Chinese dialect-speaking, with only a modest proficiency in the English language. Mr Long, as I shall call him, prepared himself well for his task of taking me to the lunch-cum-prayer

meeting of his chapter. He came to my hotel early to take some time to introduce me to the ideas of the FGBMFI. Upon my questioning, he assured me that despite the name of the FGBMFI focusing on businessmen, women were also welcome (but he failed to make clear whether they were actually attending).

After the introduction, we strolled to the hotel parking lot where Mr Long's limousine with chauffeur was waiting to take us to the venue where the meeting would be held. The FGBMFI attempts to build a structure dense enough to enable every single member to reach the weekly get-together within five minutes by car, Mr Long explained, whereupon the limousine pulled out of the hotel premises only to enter the next entrance, which gives access to a neighborhood centre. This building is a little worn down but spacious, with a large patio, a kitchen, and dining hall with round formica tables and plastic chairs. We passed through long corridors offering a glimpse of many empty rooms that can be rented for gatherings. In one of these rooms, about ten men were present, of which seven were of ethnic Chinese and three of Indian descent. No women seemed to attend this meeting. The room has whitewashed walls and windows that offer a view on the patio and it is furnished with red plastic chairs arranged in rows, a desk and a small organ. On the wall next to a pulpit hangs a framed text listing the Six Steps to Salvation as designed by the FGBMFI's founder.

The prayer meeting was about to start. One of the Chinese men, the chairman of this chapter, welcomed us. He urged me to sit down on one of the chairs right in front of the desk where nobody was seated, while I opted more modestly for a seat next to him in the second row, where I sat down after fetching from the seat a paper with prayer texts which was distributed before the meeting. When everybody had taken a seat, the chairman stood up to welcome a new member and me, whom he introduced as a professor from the Netherlands. He spoke in English, the language in which these meetings are held. The new member, a young Indian man, briefly introduced himself with his name and profession. I followed his example but hastened to add that I am conducting research on the meaning of religion in the lives of Malaysian businessmen. The other men nodded in agreement, and nobody seemed to be bothered by the purpose of my presence. After this welcome ritual, the prayers started immediately. A small Chinese man took the pulpit. Standing in front of this small congregation, he raised his voice in prayer, followed by the other members in the room. The prayer was said quickly, rattled off like a mantra. After the prayer, the gathering proceeded with singing. In the meantime, one of the Indian members had taken a seat behind the organ and started playing. The song texts were on the sheet that had been distributed to all attending. The men sang at the tops of their voices, they raised their hands and swung their hips and arms, and shouted 'yes' and 'hallelujah' in affirming the songs' words.

When the singing session ended, the minister announced the next item on the program, but he was frequently interrupted by the chairman who intervened with obviously unannounced program changes. At this point, I got the impression that the cause of this disagreement was my presence, for which an adjusted program had been established. But not all members seemed to be aware of, or in agreement with, these adjustments. The minister raised his hands to calm down the adversaries, and the program proceeded with another young Chinese member who, with a radiating smile, got up to call for testimonies. This call did not stir any reaction at first. After a long silence, my host, Mr Long, got up. Hesitantly, he started to tell his story.

He was an agent for the Swedish automobile producer SAAB when his business ran into trouble. Car sales in general were declining, the sales of expensive foreign cars in particular. When his business was threatened with bankruptcy, he had to intervene. He

did not want to give up his business, but an opportunity emerged to venture into a completely different business sector. He did not know what to do to solve this dilemma and sat down to pray to the Lord. He prayed for guidance to make the right decision, a decision that would bring about the success he desired. After his intense prayers, he decided to remain with the auto sales sector, but to switch to another brand. He became a Toyota dealer, Nissan offering good cars at affordable prices. Mr Long had made this change very recently and, upon receiving the first sales overviews, he was confident that he made the right decision. Mr Long finished his story by expressing his gratitude to Jesus, accompanied by the enthusiastic wails of the other members.

After Mr Long's testimony, another Chinese affiliate stood up to tell of his experience. He spoke about a business trip to the Philippines. When his plane approached Cebu City, there was a thunderstorm, and the plane was forced to circle above the city as it was too dangerous to land. Worried about missing his appointment with his business partners, he said a simple prayer. 'Dear Lord, please make the storm to die down and the sky to open up, so that the plane can land and I will be able to do good business.' Within ten minutes, it happened that way, and the trip came to a very successful conclusion. Upon this testimony, the other members burst into loud and excited wails. Together they thanked the Lord for supporting the business venture of their associate.

After the testimonies was common prayer. The group split into groups of three to four members who sat together and took turns praying for each other. My group consisted of the chairman, Mr Long, myself and a very quiet Chinese man who did not introduce himself. The president asked me what I wanted him to pray for. Unfamiliar with the habits, I suggest 'world peace', but he admonished me to choose something more personal, which I interpreted literally as from the personal sphere of life. Thinking of my family, I suggested my mother's health. Still not satisfied with my choice, the chairman frowned but refrained from further inquiries. As for the others, Mr Long wanted us to pray for a prosperous future for his business, the chairman for a better turnover of his enterprise and the small Chinese man refused to speak. Mr Long was the first to raise his voice. He said a prayer for me, for a successful stay in Kuala Lumpur, good contacts, a safe journey back home and my mother's health. He went on for three or four minutes, repeating his words like a mantra. Then the chairman took over. Again, a prayer was said for my success, good luck, prosperity, my mother's health and . . . world peace! While listening to these prayers, I tried to memorize the proper words and the style, as I realized that the next turn would be mine. Indeed, I was requested to rise to the occasion. I raised my voice to beg for better times for the President's business, strength and patience, excellent business opportunities, trustworthy business partners and clients, success, prosperity and good luck. My words were supported by fervent wails produced by Mr Long and the chairman. The small Chinese man did not utter a word. Then the chairman prayed for Mr Long, and I added a few words of support.

After the prayer session, the meeting assumed a more mundane character. A number of joint activities were on the agenda. FGBMFI associates were encouraged to join a FGBMFI meeting in Singapore at the price of 100 Singapore dollars per person, including travel and accommodation, which appeared to draw a low level of appeal. Then attendees were invited to a healing session. A flyer provided all the details. The last agenda item concerned preparations for a charity meeting organized by this chapter. This meeting would be held in a kampong and involve a meal offered by this chapter to the kampong inhabitants. Mr Long had taken the chair next to mine and

whispered this explanation to me: 'We need to feed the people before we make them share the gospel.' This activity seemed to be of great importance for the chapter as its chairman personally involved himself with dividing tasks among the members, who were rather hesitant in volunteering. The problem here was that the member's wives would be unable to give a hand with this charity meal as they had a meeting of their own that day and the men felt quite embarrassed to provide and serve the meal themselves. Only after the persistent appeal of the chairman did one of the Indian members offer to contribute steamed rice. But after a long discussion he settled for fried noodles. Another member, manager of a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, was talked into providing chicken wings, while the chairman volunteered to donate the fruit. Before the meeting broke up, there was a domestic announcement. The FGBMFI members were urgently requested not to park their cars in front of the neighbourhood centre when attending the prayer meetings since the management of the community complex advised there was insufficient parking space. Instead, members were asked to park their cars at the shopping mall across the street.

After a short prayer, the members moved to the eating hall, where two large round tables were set for the congregation. I was invited to take a seat again next to the chairman. Other members who became involved in the table conversation were a young graphic designer who only recently joined the chapter, an engineer running his own bureau, and the manager of an airline transport service. While the conversation revolved around my religious background and the membership of established churches (I found a few Catholics, Methodists and Baptists in this group), the food was served. It was a simple meal with rice pudding, water-spinach, fried vegetables, jellyfish, chicken wings and fruit for desert. There were soft drinks, tea and water. Then, suddenly, there was a special surprise. A birthday cake with burning candles emerges from the kitchen. One of the Indian members had celebrated his birthday only a few days before, and he received the birthday wishes, a small present and a round of the song *Happy Birthday To You*, with all members joining in. After the singing, everybody left quickly to go back to work. The chairman, the minister and the young Chinese who called for testimonies during the get-together retired to a smaller room, where they had a meeting behind closed doors.

The Business of Religion: An Identification of Capitals Mediated Through the FGBMFI

One conclusion that may be drawn from the case presented above is that the FGBMFI organizes business people and professionals of a (new) middle-class background—social climbers benefiting from the Asian Miracle—of an allegedly 'diasporic' ethnic background. In order to understand the attraction of the FGBMFI for this particular social segment, we need to identify the opportunities that accrue from membership of this organization in terms of the different forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, religious and spiritual) as defined in Bourdieuan terms.

In terms of economic capital pertaining to wealth in a narrow sense, there is no empirical evidence of a direct relationship between membership of the FGBMFI and the enhancement of business success, income or career. Hypothetically, lucrative business deals may be conducted between the members of a chapter, profitable business coalitions may be formed and well-paid jobs may be offered. However, my research has not revealed any benefits of this kind accruing from the Fellowship. At a spiritual level, though, the enhancement of prosperity, success and good luck is implied in the

testimonies. 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 fulfillment of wishes: thunderstorms blow over and business decisions turn out beneficial. As much as these business-related favors are granted because of the unfaltering belief of the individual, they may also be mediated through the joint prayers during a chapter meeting. As Mr Long 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.

In terms of social capital, membership of the FGBMFI provides connections at both the individual and collective level in a rather comprehensive way. It is a hyper-network that crosses different denominations, and class and ethnic boundaries. At the level of the chapters, the Fellowship as such constitutes a network of close-knit local relations with frequent face-to-face contacts among its members. The Friday prayer meetings followed by a joint meal facilitate the exchange of personal experiences and concerns. Monthly joint charity projects further the ties among the members through shared responsibilities. These extend into their families, as their wives are supposed to contribute to the preparation and distribution of food to poor kampong people. Moreover, the family connection is cemented by the organization of activities among the members' wives who have separate but still chapter-related meetings.

At the same time, the chapter members are part of a national (the FGBMF-Malaysia) and international (FGBMF-International) network. Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is a global movement organized at an international level down to the neighborhood level. Members of the Kuala Lumpur chapter of the FGBMFI that figures in my case study are offered the opportunity to attend prayer meetings in other Southeast Asian cities (Singapore is a frequently visited place, but visits may also be paid to Bangkok, Manila and Hong Kong). I learned that a few members had been to the US to attend mass meetings of the Fellowship and other Pentecostal groups. Because of these linkages between the local and the global, individual members may feel connected to believers all over the world, not only sharing the Gospel but also a social position and common lifestyle.

Besides its geographic extension, the fellowship also extends across diverse Christian denominations and brings together people who adhere to different Christian beliefs, both Catholic and Protestant, that otherwise would not meet in joint prayer and even have a history of discord. The FGBMFI leaves membership of these churches intact and accommodates their activities in a non-competitive way. Many chapter members are avowed Catholics or Protestants and attend church, as I witnessed when accompanying one of my informants to Holy mass. This double religious engagement has implications for both the religious and cultural capital mediated by the Fellowship. The FGBMFI does not threaten the religious capital accumulated by the traditional denominations. Knowledge of the scripture and of liturgical practices is not lost, but exists side by side with the simple hymns, improvised prayers and spontaneous testimonies of the chapter meetings. Contrasting with Iannaccone's (1990) argument that the emergence of faith communities would accelerate the decline of religious capital and the rise of spiritual capital, the FGBMFI instead contains both. In this respect, the cultural capital that has been used by the established churches as an instrument of exclusion has become part and parcel of the Fellowship's inclusive strategies. Instead of 'empowering' those with little religious capital at the expense of religious capital, the Fellowship emancipates spiritual capital as a repertoire that complements the formalized forms of religious practice. As a consequence, the overall religious competence of the Fellowship members is enhanced.

As little as the Fellowship is polarizing in the religious domain, so little it does in the social domain. Through accommodating membership in both traditional and new churches, the Fellowship also bridges the gap between the English-educated elite and the Malay-educated new middle classes. It provides additional network relations without jeopardizing existing ones. For example, I was introduced to Mr Long by one of my academic relations who, as a member of an old colonial family and partner of an independent legal firm, belongs to the Chinese elite. The connection between the two was both business- and church-related. In the modern Malaysian nation state, such intra-ethnic but cross-class relationships are of great significance for the new middle classes, who may possess the business zest but lack the right political connections to prevent their efforts from being frustrated by bureaucratic measures. This is where intra-ethnic connections with the Chinese elite pay off, as this segment enjoys a power-sharing arrangement with the Malay political elite (Mohamad, 2005, p. 19).

At the same time, the Fellowship also builds bridges across ethnic groups, in this case the Chinese and Indian people sharing the same social-economic and political position. The Indian members of the Kuala Lumpur chapter are also Malay-educated, third-generation owners of small businesses and/or professionals. In terms of their economic position in Malaysian society where they are well represented among the managerial and professional segments, they can be compared to the Chinese (Mohamad, 2005). Whereas ill feelings between the Malay majority and 'diasporic minorities' have subsided since Malaysia has successfully upgraded its economy and the wealth disparity between the ethnic groups has narrowed (Mohamad, 2005, p. 14), the cleavages between the Malay and the other ethnic groups are thematized in many realms of everyday life. This is illustrated by the Friday meetings of the FGBMFI. The request issued by the (Malay) management of the community complex that Fellowship members not park their cars in front of the building was one of the many quibbles of local government that reflect the covert but still ongoing animosities between the ethnic groups.

Membership of the FGBMFI provides social capital of a specific managerial–professional kind. It should be noted that the FGBMFI is registered and incorporated as a private company and not as a church. The weekly lunch meetings emphasize the business-related character of the Fellowship, as one meets with business associates, not with family and friends. The prayers and testimonies revolve around difficult situations in business life. When in the prayer meeting I suggested prayer for concerns of a general human interest ('world peace') and a personal non-business concern (my mother's health), my input was disapproved, as it did not fit with the narrow, shared mode of business concerns. As a consequence, the prayers said on my behalf first and foremost alluded to the purpose of my presence in Kuala Lumpur, which was my research, and only as a secondary concern addressed human interests. The benefits that accrue from membership pertain to relations of trust between members, which are a valuable asset in cooperative business ventures and may result in more profit (economic capital) and success for the Fellowship members.

At an individual level, FGBMFI membership facilitates business leadership in terms of training in negotiation, compromise, networking and reciprocity—skills that are required and developed by the leadership positions in the Fellowship itself. Its cellular structure provides opportunities for both organizational and spiritual leadership. As chapters divide to form new chapters, the positions of chairman, secretary and lay-minister are allocated to members who have proven themselves to be loyal adherents of the Fellowship. This comes as a reward as well as a challenge. Occupying these

leadership positions, one can practice and improve the skills needed for running not only a chapter but also a company, such as managing conflict, maintaining harmony and meeting organizational aims. In Bourdieuan terms, leadership positions in the FGBMFI provide cultural capital, i.e. tacit knowledge required for doing business and managing companies in a complex, globalizing economy. As the Fellowship is structured similarly to a global networked company, it provides a perfect training ground for the aspiring managers and professionals of the new middle classes.

Fellowship membership provides spiritual capital to people in leadership positions. The businessmen attending the FGBMFI meetings are heading small and medium-scale (often family-owned) businesses characterized by a simple, top-down management structure. Generally, they are the sole person responsible for the company. Likewise, the professionals among the members carry great responsibilities for the tasks entrusted to them. All these people experience in their everyday occupational practice that it is 'lonely at the top'. The firm belief—as expressed in the testimonies—that one's business problems are solved and business concerns are attended to by the Lord, must be an invaluable support for business managers. At the same time, a business leader has to be inspiring, even charismatic, to motivate members to remain loyal to the organization and perform to their best abilities. This charisma mitigates the rationalizing tendency of modern organizations 'because it is creative, disruptive, and revolutionary' (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 12). If the Fellowship imbues its members with a specific attitude towards business, it is not an attitude in the Weberian tradition of the Protestant work ethic that upholds sheer hard work, frugality and self-denial. Instead, we are dealing here with 'emotionally expressive styles of spirituality' (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 13).

Conclusion

Conversion to Christianity, and membership of Pentecostal-Charismatic groups in particular, offers a myriad of opportunities to the Malaysian Chinese, especially those in business, including owners, managers and professionals. Focusing on one specific example of a Pentecostal-Charismatic group, the FGBMFI, it has become apparent that this Fellowship establishes a link between the different religious subfields, both traditional and new on the one hand, and different fields or spheres of life, i.e. religion and business, on the other. The FGBMFI accommodates different religious practices and positions itself within existing practices, building bridges across competing Christian denominations and across Christian belief and traditional Chinese cultural practices. The great strength of this Pentecostal-Charismatic group is that it does not demand loyalty at the cost of other commitments but allows for coexistence of the old and the new. Membership of the Fellowship works in favor of the multiplication of different forms of capital, in particular the access to a far-flung and close-knit network and multiple cultural competencies. Therefore, it provides an excellent vehicle to consolidate the position of the new middle classes of Chinese background in the Malaysian nation state. Moreover, it complies with ethnic Chinese culture at large where inclusion is practiced more often than exclusion. As has been pointed out, inclusive strategies characterize people living in culturally plural societies where they have to 'shift between many different paradigms with no conflict' (Hsiao, 2002, pp. 110–11). Although they may be weighed and valued differently, the different codes of conduct, belief systems and multi-layered discourses together establish the 'matrix of cultural templates' (Hsiao, 2002, p. 111) that enable people to adopt and shift to new repertoires easily.

Returning to the empowerment thesis, one may be tempted to accept that the political minority status of the ethnic Chinese that contrasts strongly with their economic success accrues to the growth of Christianity in general and the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement in particular. In the Malaysian context, being or becoming an adherent of Christian belief is a statement. However, as the discussion above has shown, the polarized image of a Chinese minority being empowered *vis-à-vis* a Malay majority in the Islamic Malaysian nation state offers too simple an explanation. Empowerment should not be understood in the narrow sense of improving the situation of economically marginalized and politically disempowered people. We are dealing here with neither of these categories. As far as the concept of empowerment applies at all, it has to be understood in terms of the optimization of access to resources through capitalizing on economic, social, cultural, religious and spiritual means.

The argument is widely accepted that the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement conveys the status ambitions of the new middle class, which gives expression of its wealth through participation in the worldwide consumer culture (Coleman, 2000). Whereas the traditional churches are averse to conspicuous consumption, and they promote both the accumulation of academic knowledge instead of monetary wealth, and hard work instead of a consumer lifestyle, the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement explicitly endorses success, wealth and prosperity as expressions of both meritocratic achievements and divine approval. This appreciation found in the Pentecostal-Charismatic movement may 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. It may reflect the needs of the new middle classes that extend beyond the purely material into the sphere of the spiritual. It seems that, with the increasing integration of the ethnic Chinese in the Malaysian nation state and the decline of Western control of Christian churches, Chinese religiosity becomes more and more indigenized in Malaysia (Lee & Ackerman, 1997, p. 114). Similar developments have been noted in Buddhism, where shamanistic practices have merged as new cults sponsored by Chinese business people (Ackerman, 2001). As a consequence, the outer expression of religious experiences and emotions takes on forms that have not been part of traditional practices. In particular in the Pentecostal-Charismatic movements, these experiences, known as 'power encounters', are regarded by many Malaysian Chinese as an expression of religious authenticity. As Lee & Ackerman (1997, p. 120) argue, the new Christian churches exhibit a 'dual orientation toward ecstatic experience and world mastery'.

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