

ESTHER HUI AND INFOSAIL

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Esther Hui is cofounder and president of Shenzhen Infosail Electronics Co., Ltd. Infosail provides support services in website management, e-commerce, and Internet-related software development. Although Infosail is a small company, recently it outbid eight big-league players to win a major contract to build and to maintain one of the most important official Chinese government news websites—Dragon News (21dnn.com). Newspapers and magazines have interviewed Esther because of her success as a businesswoman, and a national television documentary about her is in the works. Her biography is about much more than business, however. A native of Ningpo in Zhejiang Province, Esther has been a choir member for the Shenzhen Church since the mid-1980s.

THE CALL

Esther was born into a non-Christian family in Shanghai. Her grandfather was a rather wealthy businessman who lost everything when the communists took power. Both her father and mother were senior government cadres who divorced when Esther was a teenager. Her mother took Esther to Ningpo, her mother's hometown, where the family had run a business before 1949. Esther attended high school back in Shanghai in the early 1980s because she still retained her residential registration there. In Shanghai, however, she had neither relatives nor friends. Students in school bullied this rural girl.

One day, passing by a church, Esther heard the beautiful hymn-singing. Soon she began attending the services. During this time, Esther's mother moved to a new area without telling her. Esther struck up a friendship with an old man and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Chu, in the church. The friendship quickly deepened, and this childless couple took Esther as their foster daughter. The man saw something in Esther—a special talent in business—even before Esther had a chance to demonstrate it. While Esther lived with the Chus, they formed her in the strict disciplines of daily Bible reading and prayer.

The man, Chu Chunen, came from an extremely wealthy background. His father-in-law had been an oil magnate in the 1920s and 30s. At some point the couple had experienced a miraculous healing, and they converted to the Christian faith. Mr. Chu, using his family wealth, then built a successful banking business. However, the Sino-Japanese war and later the Civil War destroyed most of his wealth. In the late 1940s, Mr. Chu decided to fold his business and study theology. Then the communists came, and the couple lost all that they had managed to hold onto. Mr. Chu had to work as a teacher in a factory school. Finally, they retired in the late 1970s. In a period of reform, the government later compensated them for wealth it had confiscated from them years before.

Her foster father told Esther, “If you have talent in a field, excel in it.” She did. After high school, Esther got a job as a sales clerk at a government retailer. This was in the

early 1980s, when the government was taking its first tentative steps in the transition from a planned to a market economy. In the company training program, Esther scored the highest among 500 people. Although the company sent her to study bookkeeping, she was soon transferred to the accounting department and given more responsibility. Within a month, Esther made a suggestion to increase the sales volume fourfold. In fact, her division's weekly sales jumped from 40,000 to 160,000 RMB. Soon, the salary of people in her division jumped even higher, from 40 to 200 RMB per month, with overtime—rather attractive when the average worker's salary was around 60 RMB. Esther quickly became a rising star, attracting both admiration and jealousy.

In 1985, Esther convinced her boss to start doing business in Shenzhen, the newly designated Special Economic Zone next to Hong Kong. After a couple of successful deals, the company promoted her to sales manager. Within a year, she had netted 1 million RMB in profits for her division. Esther's monthly salary was now 1,500 RMB. Soon the company sent her to Hong Kong to solicit more international trade. Before she left, Mr. Chu gave her two biblical passages—Psalms 1 and 23—for comfort and inspiration. Evidently, they provided both.

After a couple years of success in Hong Kong, Esther went to Shenzhen to start her own business with just a couple thousand RMB in her pocket. She saw an opportunity in commodity trading, taking advantage of price differences between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, and between Shenzhen and the rest of China. Soon she made her first million and was well-known in business circles. Esther also became involved in trade, real estate, stock markets, and even black market currency exchanges and currency remittances, in which illegal private banks respond to market needs in place of the notoriously inefficient official banks.

Esther made enough money to enjoy a comfortable living from the interest on her wealth. Flush with success, Esther thought she might show her gratitude for God's blessings by going into "full-time ministry." Her foster father—who by then had started a church in his home village in Jiangsu and had received his ordination as a pastor—told her, "Your talent is more than just becoming a preacher. It is not realistic for you to become a pastor. Your heart is not there. Do not make the decision in a rush. Your talent is in business, and your call is to be a good Christian entrepreneur to witness to Christ in the business world." (Mr. Chu himself had grown a church from fewer than a dozen believers to several hundred people within just a few years. The church had constructed a new building with seating for 500 people.)

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL LAUNCH

Esther had never attended college, had never studied economics, business, or management. Although Shenzhen is a very commercialized city, few, if any, church members were businesspeople in the mid-1990s. She had virtually no guidance from the church. Few in the church even knew her as a businessperson.

As Esther pondered her future, she began to formulate her business philosophy. After much reflection, she came to three conclusions. First, people need to strive for a

meaningful existence in life with a higher goal than simply making money. Second, entrepreneurs do not only work for themselves, but for all those who work under them; they have a moral obligation toward their employees. Third, businesses can create jobs and provide livelihoods for many people in society.

As she explored her options, in 1997 Esther took some courses in Internet and information technology (IT) and encountered a Mr. Ma, a computer engineer and brilliant IT instructor. Together seeing a future in Internet related businesses, they launched Infosail. They spent almost the entire first year getting a feel for the market, facing competition from thousands of similar enterprises. They had many cash flow problems and near collapses of the business. However, during each crisis, Esther prayed and saw a series of unexpected eleventh-hour events that rescued Infosail. Esther took this as a sign from God to continue.

THE BUSINESS PLAN

Infosail specializes in building and maintaining news websites in China. It has a special competitive advantage by linking its human resources with several regional universities. Infosail provides scholarships to students who take their summer internships there and promise to work for the company for two years after graduation with below-market salaries but high projected bonuses. In this way, Infosail gets a constant supply of high quality graduates at a bargain rate. These workers are full of ideas and are aware of the latest Internet technology.

Infosail has secured several big projects. One of the most important coups was its successful bid, in March 2001, to build and maintain a major government news site (21dnn.com). The Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party sponsors this site, which will be the official news site of the government (hence named 21dnn, to rival with CNN in the twenty-first century). Infosail prevailed over eight larger companies, including Yahoo, to secure the contract. Remarkably, Infosail did not pay a single cent in bribes or in entertainment expenses. Mr. Ma heads the newly established Beijing office and Esther is stationed at company headquarters in Shenzhen. Infosail has already produced a software package for provincial governments to establish their news websites. Some provincial governments are already lining up to use Infosail's products and services.

GROWTH OF BUSINESS

Most of Infosail's thirty-five employees work in Shenzhen. Yet it needs to hire five more staff and open a new office to respond to growing demands. It also plans an internal restructuring with specialized divisions and teams to sustain current projects. Infosail has some cash flow problems that can be alarming at times, although probably not fatal.

Other than Esther, there is only one Christian in the company. Mr. Ma shows some interest in Christianity but has not made a commitment. However, Esther finds outlets for her ministry impulses in other ways. She has created the only government-sanctioned private Christian website in China (which is not related to the official sanctioned church)—Chinachurch.com. After initial skepticism, both the Shenzhen municipal and

the Guangdong provincial governments welcomed this site. Esther is now linking with Christian groups outside of China to improve it. Chinachurch.com provides devotional, evangelistic, and pastoral training materials on the Web. Eventually, Esther wants to build the first virtual reality church in China, as well as an on-line pastoral training school.

Esther upholds Christian principles of justice and compassion in her personal management. Admitting that some staffers have abused her Christian charity, she often sets the example for the kinds of behavior required. After sealing business agreements, Esther sends small gifts, making a distinction between gift giving—an Eastern way of cultivating relationships—and bribery. She expects nothing in return.

However, Esther will take business that may not be strictly legal. Some laws in China are simply irrelevant, contradictory, or unreasonable. For example, some prohibit freedom of worship or evangelizing others in public. Others demand that you take the government exchange rate, which is far lower than the real (or black) market rates. To follow these rules would make tasks such as purchasing needed equipment nearly impossible. Still other laws require you to get approval from twenty-seven ministries just to put up a small factory—a task that takes several years if you follow the letter of the law.

On the other hand, Esther stays out of businesses that may be profitable and legal but which she believes are unethical. For example, she turned down an opportunity to make huge profits exporting weapons to tyrannical regimes in Southeast Asia. Esther holds Christian principles above the law of the nation.

EVALUATION

Esther's business is rather ethical from a Christian standpoint. She successfully navigates through the gray seas of relationships and gifts. She maximizes her strength to compete with other firms in the market. She cares for her staff and sets a good example. Her integrity as an honest and trustworthy businessperson is well-known in the corporate circles of Shenzhen.

Infosail has established itself as a rising star in the field, with much potential in related areas such as e-commerce. Infosail is experiencing some healthy growing pains. It is a lean and effective enterprise, flexible enough to compete in the market. Chinachurch.com may become a powerful tool to empower the tens of millions of Chinese Christians who lack information to help them become solid disciples of Christ. With a doubling in the number of Internet users every six months in China, this site can be a powerful means to reach not only these people but Web surfers as well.

However, Esther lacks relevant models integrating faith and business practices in China. She laments that the church in China not only fails to provide her with spiritual direction but at times openly condemns business practices as worldly. Yet given the right support, Esther can be a powerful witness for Christian faith in the emerging business community in China. She knows that businesses can be both profitable and ethical—for the advancement of the kingdom of God in China.

