

MAX WEBER'S *THE RELIGION OF CHINA*: AN INTERPRETATION

SU-JEN HUANG

The Religion of China is an overlooked but pivotal key to understanding Weber's life work. A careful reading of this work shows that Weber's analysis of the rise of rational capitalism in the West and its absence in China is intrinsically contradictory. While Weber's official position is that the ultimate cause of the absence of capitalism in China (and inversely, its presence in the Occident) was to be found in religion, his political analysis indicates that the politico-legal conditions alone were sufficient to prevent the rise of rational capitalism in China. Moreover, he finds that the Chinese religion, which was unfavorable to the rise of rational capitalism, was to a significant extent the product of Chinese political conditions. This contradiction reflects the tension, never resolved, between Weber's institutional and religious explanations of the Occidental development.

Interpretations of Weber's work have been enmeshed by persistent tensions between his institutional and religious explanations of Occidental development. Curiously, the key to this major problem in Weber scholarship may be found in his often neglected and misunderstood work, *The Religion of China*,¹ in which his attempt to synthesize institutional and religious explanations leads to contradicting political analysis and his "official" conclusion regarding the absence of rational capitalism in China—a contradiction reflecting the tension within Weber's conception of the Occident. Disentangling this contradiction sheds light on the most important disputes concerning Weber scholarship.

THE NEED FOR REINTERPRETATION

The significance of *The Religion of China* is four-fold. First, it is Weber's first major historical study which systematically uses many of the comparative ideal types later regarded as the cornerstones of Weber's sociology.² These include configurational ideal types (i.e., patrimonial bureaucracy vs. urban economy, patrimonial vs. rational bureaucracy, world empire vs. competing states, and world adjusting ethic vs. prophecy/asceticism) as well as developmental ideal types (i.e., political and religious rationalization). If we seriously consider Weber's distinction between history (which studies causality) and sociology (which provides ideal types), then *The Religion of China* signals the emergence of Weber's sociology as he himself envisioned it.

Second, *The Religion of China* is also Weber's first major historical work in which he merges his comparative-analytical insights on interactions among religion, domination, and economic organization. It is his first—albeit incomplete—attempt at synthesizing his two major lines of historical study: the study of politico-economic development that begins with Mediterranean Antiquity,³ and the study of religiously-based economic ethics that begins with *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Current Weber scholarship appears to be divided between a focus on his religious studies (Wolfgang Schluchter, Friedrich H. Tenbruck, Wilhelm Hennis) and an emphasis on his politico-economic studies (Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Randall Collins). *The Religion of China* effectively illustrates Weber's conception of the causal relations between politico-economic and religious development.

SU-JEN HUANG is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a staff member at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan.

Third, his extensive use of comparative ideal types and his attempted synthesis of two lines of historical study led Weber to devote much of *The Religion of China* comparing China with other societies—especially Europe. While it is well known that Weber's explanation of the rise of modern Occidental capitalism can be found throughout his voluminous works without a synthesized summary, most scholars overlook the fact that a synthesized account of Europe is presented in *The Religion of China* in the form of a China-Europe comparison. In other words, it appears that Weber chooses to summarize his conception of modern European development in this work.

Finally, in *The Religion of China* Weber offers his official conclusion that the ultimate reason for the absence of rational capitalism in China (and, inversely, its rise in the West) was to be found in religion, while his political analysis indicates that politico-legal conditions alone were sufficient to prevent the rise of rational capitalism in China. This inconsistency mirrors the tension between Weber's institutional and religious explanations for the rise of rational capitalism in the West that has long confused Weber scholars. An interpretive understanding of the contradiction in *The Religion of China* offers a key to the ambivalence in Weber's conception of Occidental development.

Important as it may be to understanding Weber's sociology, a comprehensive analysis of *The Religion of China* has not been done.⁴ Most interpreters of this work have concerned themselves only with either the evaluation/elaboration of Weber's understanding of individual Sinological matters, or the application of Weber's concepts to Chinese studies; these scholars failed to decipher the entire essay; thus, their analyses are only marginally relevant to the interpretation of Weber's arguments.⁵ Those who have attempted to interpret the entire essay often presented a static reading without comprehending the historical dynamics and causal relations between political and religious development that are Weber's essential insights.⁶ Some have used it merely as an example to support an alleged thesis of Weber's which is, in fact, hardly discernible in *The Religion of China*.⁷ To date, this work has neither been regarded as vital to understanding Weber, nor has it been subjected to an analysis of its complex argument. The intent of this paper is to reinterpret *The Religion of China*.

In the second section I review Weber's analysis of Chinese politico-socio-economic conditions as presented in the first half of *The Religion of China*, then review his analysis of Chinese religion as found in the second half of his book. After showing that Weber's account of the rise of rational capitalism in the West and its absence in China is intrinsically contradictory, I will discuss the intent and contradiction found in *The Religion of China* in the final section of this paper. A diagram that summarizes my interpretation is provided at the end of the text.

MAX WEBER'S CHINA I: POLITICO-SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Weber traces the development of Chinese politico-socio-economic and religious conditions to three historical facts: the pacified world empire, the patrimonial bureaucracy, and the Confucian literati. In this section I will review Weber's discussion of these three facts and the politico-socio-economic effects of their unique conjunction in the course of Chinese development. Much of Weber's analysis is made with the aid of ideal-typical concepts.

The Pacified World Empire

Weber presents two versions of how China came to be ruled by a unified central authority. The first version—which echoes the oriental despotism thesis—asserts that the need for river regulation led to a centralized patrimonial bureaucracy (20, 25, 37, 51). However, this kind of functional explanation hardly fits Weber's own historical view, as he mentioned it only half-heartedly. The second version is given much more emphasis in *The Religion of China*.

According to the second version, with the decline of later Chou authority after 770 B.C., the Chinese feudal order deteriorated into wars between feudal princes (40). These struggles gradually reduced the number of Warring States to "an ever smaller circle of rationally administered, unified states" (42). Finally, in 221 B.C. the Ch'in Prince succeeded in unifying China and in placing it "under his own bureaucratic administration" (43). Yet Ch'in rule proved to be a harsh form of sultanism⁸ that was soon overthrown in a popular uprising and replaced by the Han dynasty (45–46). Under the Han, "feudal elements in the social order gradually receded" (47), and a unified world empire ruled by a patrimonial bureaucracy was consolidated.

The Patrimonial Bureaucracy

The Chinese bureaucracy arose from competition for political power among Warring States during the later feudal period. According to Weber, this competition induced the princes to initiate administrative rationalization (41) with the effect that "bureaucratic administration displaced the administration of vassals" (42). The most successful political reform was carried out by the Ch'in Kingdom—reform which eventually enabled it to unify China into a single state (41).

Following unification, the primary concern of the imperial authority was always to prevent the empire from once again disintegrating. To do this, "the emperors ingenuously employed characteristic patrimonial means," including short terms of office, a prohibition on appointments to one's home province, a spy system of censors (48), and (later) the creation of the examination system (50). The result was that "the emergence of feudal status and thus the emancipation of officials from central authority was prevented" (50).

Yet what was established in China was not a rational bureaucracy, but a patrimonial bureaucracy that differed greatly from "a precise and unified administration." One problem was "the small number of authorized officials" (48). Also, officials were prohibited from employment in their home provinces and prescribed a tri-annual shift. "These measures contributed to the external unity of the empire but its price was the failure of the authorized official to strike roots in his bailiwicks" (49).

In financial terms, "the official, like a feudal lord or satrap, was responsible to the central government . . . for the delivery of certain amounts [of revenue]. In turn, he financed most of his administrative expenditures from fees and tax-income and retained a surplus" (56). Officials were, in fact, tax farmers (85).

In summary, the Chinese Empire was ruled not by a rational bureaucracy, but by a patrimonial bureaucracy which historically preceded the latter⁹ and which displayed "all the irrationalism of a patrimonial officialdom emerging from the management

of the household and the conduct of ritual" (264). In China, this patrimonial bureaucracy was managed by a unique official stratum: the Chinese literati.

The Literati

The Chinese literati were men with "knowledge of writing and of literature as such" (109). Ever since the later feudal period, they had become the bearers of a homogeneous Chinese culture (39-41, 107) as well as "of progress toward a rational administration and of all 'intelligence'" (107). During the later feudal period, literati knowledge was used by princes "in rationalizing their administrations for power purposes;" princes competed to recruit the best (41).

After the pacification of the empire, "a strictly bureaucratic order developed which was open to all and which promoted according to merit and favor" (43). As emerging opportunities were increasingly taken exclusively by literati, "ultimately only the literati profited by them" (46). The examination system further solidified the almost complete monopoly of office by literati (50, 116). Consequently, "for more than two thousand years the literati have definitely been the ruling stratum in China and they still are" (108).

This monopoly of political power by literati was a unique phenomenon; by comparison, patrimonial officials in the Middle East and Egypt "rose from a state of slavery" (157). One significant consequence of literati rule was that it enabled the Chinese bureaucracy to curb Sultanism (44-45, 138-140).

In Weber's analysis, the most significant consequence of the conjunction of the pacified world empire, the patrimonial bureaucracy, and the literati in China was the prevalence of traditionalism which inclined the Chinese patrimonial bureaucracy to resist any kind of reform.

*Traditionalism*¹⁰

The traditionalism of the Chinese patrimonial bureaucracy was entrenched in its prebendal interests. To Weber, "it was thoroughly in keeping with the nature of patrimonialism to have considered the official's income from administering a district as his prebend, from which his private income was not really separated" (56). Under this system, "alongside the purveyor to the state and the great trader, the officeholder . . . was the personage with the most opportunities for accumulating possessions" (135). Consequently, "any intervention in the traditional economy and administration impinged upon the unforeseeable and innumerable interests of the dominant stratum in its fees and prebends . . . [This led to] the complete hopelessness of reform because of the vast material interests opposing it." Thus, what characterized the Chinese prebendal structure "was its extreme administrative and politico-economic traditionalism" (60).

However, this traditionalism came only after unification; before unification, the patrimonial bureaucracies of the Warring States were actually both the products and the carriers of relentless political rationalization. "We may recall that, in the Warring States, the very stratum of state prebendaries who blocked administrative rationalization in the world empire were once its most powerful promoters. Then, the stimulus was gone. Just as competition for markets compelled the rationalization of private enterprise, so competition for political power compelled the rationalization of state economy and economic policy both in the Occident and in the China of the Warring States . . .

The impulse toward rationalization which existed while the Warring States were in competition was no longer contained in the world empire." In other words, unification eliminated the necessity of further rationalization and gave rise to traditionalism. To Weber, modern Europe was a great historical exception to this traditionalism that plagued most patrimonial states "because, above all, pacification of a unified empire was lacking."¹¹

This is probably one of Weber's most important political-historical insights, yet this analysis of pivotal historical dynamics has been neglected by most Weber scholars. Only Yang and Alexander seem to have taken notice.¹²

In Weber's analysis, international competition—in both later feudal China and modern Europe—was the force that compelled bureaucracies to break from traditionalism and to rationalize themselves from within. However, in the post-Roman Occident the absence of a pacified world empire also gave birth to independent social forces (such as the Christian church and autonomous cities) that could break traditional authority and introduce world-historical innovation from without (62). In China, no such independent social force existed; the internal tension essential to Occidental development was excluded from China by the patrimonial world empire. The absence of an independent religious organization will be discussed in the next part of this paper.

The City

To Weber, "in contrast to the Occident, the cities in China and throughout the Orient lacked political autonomy" (13). Chinese cities neither developed independent military forces nor gained "charters" guaranteeing autonomy and privileges from the imperial administration (14–20). Internally, this weakness was because "the fetters of the sib were never shattered" (14). Yet external conditions were more important. In the Occident, "the polis of Antiquity originated as an overseas trading city" (15); in contrast, "the Chinese city was predominantly a product of rational administration" (16). In other words, the lack of urban autonomy in China "is explained by the early development of bureaucratic organization in the army . . . and civilian administration" (20).

To Weber, the consequence of the absence of urban autonomy in China was the "absence of fixed, publicly recognized, formal and reliable legal foundations for a free and cooperatively regulated organization of industry and commerce, such as is known in the Occident. These were the legal foundations beneficial to the development of petty capitalism in occidental medieval artisan craft but in China they were absent" (20). In other words, the lack of urban autonomy in China hindered the development of the legal foundations required for capitalism.

It should be noted that Weber's analysis of (the absence of) urban autonomy and its effect on capitalist development is consistent with his findings in both his essay "The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization" and his book *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilization*. In these earlier works Weber argues that independent ancient and medieval cities were the carriers of capitalism, while unified empires caused its decline. Also, in the first half of *The Religion of China* Weber links political conditions directly to the development of capitalism without referring to any kind of ethos as an intermediate variable. This is in line with his Antiquity studies, but far from *Protestant Ethic*. This connection helps us to locate *The Religion of China*—and even *Economic Ethic of World Religions* as a whole—within Weber's oeuvre; while *Economic*

Ethic of World Religions is commonly read as a logical extension of *Protestant Ethic*, a careful reading of his political analysis in *The Religion of China* hints at other roots in Weber's Antiquity studies.

Legal System

The Chinese legal system lacked those modern elements conducive to capitalist development; this was directly due to the Chinese patrimonial world empire. According to Weber, "our modern occidental rationalization of law has been the result of two forces operating side by side. On the one hand, capitalism was interested in strictly formal law and legal procedure . . . On the other hand, the rationalism of officialdom in absolutist states led to the interest in codified systems and in homogeneous law to be handled by a rationally trained bureaucracy striving for equal, interlocal opportunities of promotion. No modern system of law has emerged when one of these two forces was lacking" (149-150).

That was precisely the situation in China. "Chinese patrimonialism, after the unification of the empire, had neither to reckon with powerful and indomitable capitalist interests nor with an autonomous estate of jurists . . . Therefore, not only did formal jurisprudence fail to develop, but a systematic, substantive, and thorough rationalization of law was never attempted."¹³

Economic Consequences of the Patrimonial World Empire

In Weber's analysis, Imperial China was a stagnant society in which "'progressivism' . . . emerged neither in the field of technology, nor economy, nor administration" (55). As far as capitalism is concerned, during later feudalism "there was a capitalism of money lenders and purveyors which was politically determined" (84). After unification, there was office holding, which Weber terms "booty capitalism" (86). However, the rational capitalism that characterizes the modern Occident was lacking.¹⁴

To Weber, the primary cause of China's failure to develop rational capitalism was the Chinese patrimonial world empire. The absence of international competition and internal challenge meant that the patrimonial bureaucracy lacked the motivation to break with the politico-economic traditionalism which acted as a barrier to capitalist development. Therefore, "rational and calculable administration and law enforcement, necessary for industrial development, did not exist . . . On the one hand, the cities lacked corporate political autonomy and on the other, decisive legal institutions, fixed and guaranteed by privilege, did not exist. Yet it was exactly by aid of these combined principles that all the legal schemata appropriate to capitalism were created in the occidental Middle Ages" (100-101).

Village and Agriculture

The traditionalism embedded in the Chinese patrimonial world empire also exerted an indirect negative effect on capitalist development through its influence on the rural economy and sib organization. In Weber's analysis, "decisive changes in the rural economy apparently always emanated from the government" (67), and "military and financial reform determined fundamental changes in the rural economy" (64). Actually, the agrarian structure was—to a certain extent—determined by the political stability

of the empire. "Periods of great internal unrest have always known the rise of large landlordism" (73). During the period of pacification, however, the patrimonial bureaucracy always favored small holdings; the state wanted to prevent the rise of independent landed notables (64-65) and to maintain a healthy source of military manpower, while the peasants wanted land (79). The equal land distribution system of the Tang dynasty was an extreme form of this policy (73-74).

Since Weber sees the unified empire as the normal state of affairs in China, he concludes: "On the whole, the tendency to protect the peasantry prevailed."¹⁵ The long-term economic consequence was that "in the countryside there were typically more and smaller holdings of peasants rather than the large scale agricultural enterprises."¹⁶ This meant that "technological improvements were almost ruled out; tradition held sway despite a developed money economy" (83).

*The Persistence of Sib (Sippe)*¹⁷

One peculiarity of Chinese society is the persistence of sib. While the sib bond had been broken in other old civilizations, "in China [it] was completely preserved in the administration of the smallest political units as well as in the operation of economic associations" (86).¹⁸

In Weber's analysis, the persistence of sib should not be taken as a natural propensity of the Chinese. "In a patrimonial state . . . filial piety was held to provide the test and guarantee of adherence to unconditional discipline, the most important status obligation of bureaucracy" (158). Thus "piety and especially ancestor-worship were retained as politically indispensable foundations for patrimonialism." In other words, patrimonial political consideration was decisive for the persistence of Chinese sib.¹⁹

To Weber, this persistence had profound consequences for Chinese economic development. First of all, "the sib association strongly supported the self-sufficiency of the households, thereby delimiting market developments" (90). On the other hand, "the sib stood as one man in support of any member who felt discriminated against . . . In this fact alone, 'work discipline' and the free market selection of labor which have characterized modern large enterprises have been thwarted in China" (95). In the long run, strong sib cohesion encouraged the Chinese to develop a personalist social ethic (236). As a result, "to a striking degree they lacked rational matter-of-factness, impersonal rationalism, and the nature of an abstract, impersonal, purposive association"—exactly the ethos that Weber regards as indispensable to modern rational capitalism.²⁰

I will summarize the first half of *The Religion of China* as follows: Based on comparisons with European conditions, Weber regards Chinese political traditionalism, the city, the legal system, the rural structure, and sib (all of which were products of the conjunction of the pacified world empire, the patrimonial bureaucracy, and literati) as restrictions to the development of rational capitalism in China.

MAX WEBER'S CHINA II: CONFUCIANISM AND TAOISM

The Confucian Literati

It is clear that Weber believes that politico-socio-economic conditions prevented China from developing rational capitalism. However, the agenda he set at the beginning

of *Economic Ethic of World Religions* leads him to insist that the most pivotal factor in explaining the absence of rational capitalism in China was to be found in the ethos of the Confucian literati—the bearers of Chinese culture.

According to his analysis, three elements defined the Confucian literati: they were Confucians, they were cultured intellectuals, and they were bureaucratic officials or aspirants to office. "As a rule, the Chinese literati strove for princely service both as a source of income and as a normal field of activity."²¹ Consequently, "the educated stratum of China simply has never been an autonomous status group of scholars . . . but rather a stratum of officials and aspirants to office" (122).

This distinction between intellectual/scholar and bureaucrat/official is important, since Weber regards the nature of a religion's carrier stratum as essential to determining the character of that religion. To Weber, "A bureaucracy is usually characterized by a profound disesteem of all irrational religion, combined, however, with a recognition of its usefulness as a device for controlling the people . . . Its hallmark is an absolute lack of feeling of a need for salvation or for any transcendental anchorage for ethics." Therefore, "wherever a bureaucracy has determined its nature, religion has assumed a ritualist character."²²

In contrast, intellectuals "were the bearers of the ethic or the salvation doctrine." However, the invention of salvation religion should not be attributed to intellectuals in general, but rather to privileged intellectuals who turned away from political power—either voluntarily or otherwise. In such cases, the privileged intellectuals "come to consider their intellectual training in its ultimate intellectual and psychological consequences far more important for them than their practical participation in the external affairs of the mundane world." The religions created by these apolitical intellectuals were usually "characterized by a disposition toward an 'illumination mysticism.'" One consequence was the "distinctive world-fleeing character of intellectualist religion."²³

In China, the indigenous salvation religion of apolitical intellectuals was Taoism. In contrast, "Confucianism was the status ethic of prebendaries" which "rejected all doctrine of salvation."²⁴ In other words, the religious orientation of Chinese literati as represented by Confucianism was dominated by a bureaucratic irreligion rather than an intellectualist pursuit of salvation. This insight is the key to comprehending Confucianism and the Chinese state cult.

Confucianism and the State Cult

In Weber's understanding, in ancient China "the cult of the great deities of heaven and earth . . . was an affair of the state. These cults were not managed by priests but by the holders of political power" (143). "Then the Chinese spirits, especially the mighty and universal ones, increasingly assumed an impersonal character" (22).

This inclination toward an impersonal conception of divinity was further facilitated by unification. "No longer was there legitimate opportunity for internal warfare . . . Thus, in China, the God of Heaven could not assume the form of a hero-God who revealed himself in the irrational destiny of his people through its foreign relations, or who was worshiped in war, victory, defeat, exile and nostalgia [as Yahweh by the Israelites]." In China, therefore, "the God of Heaven was victorious as the God of heavenly order, not heavenly hosts. It was a turn of religion which was specially Chinese . . . Not a supramundane lord creator, but a supra-divine, impersonal, forever identical and eternal existence was felt to be the ultimate and supreme." All of these features were established before the ascendancy of Confucianism.²⁵

On the other hand, Weber also views the ascendancy of Confucianism as a consequence of Chinese unification. "The opportunities of the princes to compete for the literati ceased to exist in the unified world empire. The literati and their disciples then came to compete for the existing offices, and this development could not fail to result in a unified orthodox doctrine adjusted to the situation. This doctrine was to be *Confucianism*" (112). In other words, "the rule of orthodoxy followed the unity of the theocratic world empire and its authoritative regulation of doctrine" (152).

Here Weber presents a historical insight concerning the causal relation between political and religious development—one which is usually overlooked by Weber scholars; most of them fail to see the relation between the unification of the empire and the consolidation of the state cult with impersonal supreme divinity and the establishment of Confucian orthodoxy.²⁶ Therefore, there has been a tendency to overestimate the autonomous development of Chinese religion. In fact, Weber also relates the development of ancient Judaism to the Israelites' suffering and depression as a small nation in international politics.²⁷ These facts highlight the error of those "inner logic" readings of Weber's sociology of religion, as proposed by Tenbruck, Schluchter, and Jürgen Habermas.²⁸

Confucian Rationalism and the Chinese Personality

Weber regards Confucianism as representing a practical rationalism which was indifferent to the religious salvation that was the core of Protestant rationalism (151). "Here as elsewhere this intellectualism inwardly despised religions unless they were needed for the taming of the masses" (142–143).

According to Weber, without the prophecy of a supra-mundane God to raise ethical demands, "completely absent in Confucian ethic was any tension between nature and deity, between ethical demand and human shortcoming, consciousness of sin and need for salvation, conduct on earth and compensation in the beyond, religious duty and socio-political reality" (235–236). This Confucian "radical world-optimism" (235) or "optimist rationalism" (206) "reduced tension with the world to an absolute minimum" (227). In lacking this tension, "Confucianism was only interested in affairs of this world such as it happened to be" (155, 156). Accordingly, Confucianism led to an "adjustment to the world, to its order and conventions" (152, 235). The problem was that "such a way of life could not allow man an inward aspiration toward a 'unified personality (*Einheit*),' a striving which we associate with the idea of personality" (235). Consequently, "there was no leverage for influencing conduct through inner forces freed of tradition and convention" (236).

In Weber's sociology of religion, the unified personality—which can only be produced by an ascetic ethic leading to a methodical life conduct oriented toward transforming the world—is exactly the key that linked the Protestant ethic to the spirit of modern capitalism (238–240). Since they were unable to promote such a personality, Chinese orthodox religions also failed to produce the necessary psychological imperative to break with traditionalism and bring about modernity.

Taoism as an Intellectual Pursuit

According to Weber, Confucianism was the status ethic of Chinese bureaucracy. However, for apolitical Chinese intellectuals the primary religious ethic was Taoism as created by Lao-Tzu—a contemporary of Confucius.

To Weber, "*Tao' per se* is an orthodox Confucian concept. It means the eternal order of the cosmos and at the same time its course . . . With Lao-tzu, *Tao* was brought into relationship with the typical god-seeking of the mysticism" (181). What resulted was a "contemplative mysticism" in which "all tension between the divine and the creatural is lacking." Consequently, "this world happens to exist . . . what matters is to accommodate one's self to its way." Therefore, an ascetic ethic in Chinese thought was precluded by both Confucianism and Taoism (183-186).

This Taoism was basically a religion for apolitical intellectuals. However, as most Chinese literati pursued careers in office, the Taoism's main influence was not on intellectuals, but on the uneducated masses.

Taoism as a Folk Magic Religion

According to Weber, one fatal ramification of Confucianism was that such "proud renunciation of the beyond and of religious guarantees of salvation for the individual in the here and now could be sustained only among cultured intellectuals."²⁹ The reason was that the uneducated masses required personal gods who promised individual salvation. In China this religious need was once met by folk deities, but they were gradually pushed aside by official doctrine (175).

With the spread of Lao-Tzu's doctrine, a popular version of Taoism—one which combined folk deities with certain Taoist concepts—was born as a Chinese folk religion under the patronage of a magician-turned Taoist priesthood (177, 180). Taoist magic thus created not only prevailed in what might properly be called religion, but also penetrated the whole domain of knowledge; It "transformed the world into a magic garden" (200). While the Confucian literati treated this Taoism with disdain but tolerated it as a means of taming the masses (143, 204, 217), the masses "lived in these conceptions with unbroken faith" (229).

To Weber, this kind of magical religion could only be rationalized by an ascetic prophecy that raised ethical demands (142, 229-230). Yet "any rationalization of popular belief as an independent religion of supra-mundane orientation would inevitably have constituted an independent power opposed to officialdom" (144). Hence, the bureaucracy "suppressed all upheavals arising from religions of redemption" (230). "The mere thought of prophets led it to eliminate violently and systematically every heterodox movement as heresy."³⁰ Thus the Confucian literati negatively influenced the popular religion by suppressing prophecy and eradicating the orgiastic elements of animist religion without positively transforming it (230). The result was that "magic has never been displaced by a great prophecy of salvation or by an indigenous savior-religion" (224), and that the "Chinese 'soul' has never been revolutionalized by a prophet" (142).

Here Weber actually argues that the absence of a prophecy/salvation religion in China can be—at least partly—attributed to suppression by the patrimonial bureaucracy. Therefore, "it was not an insurmountable 'natural disposition' that hindered the Chinese from producing religious structures comparable to those of the Occident" (219). The religious potential of the Chinese is clearly displayed in the "iconoclastic and anti-magical prophecy" of the *Tai Ping Tien Kuo* religious-political revolution of 1850-1864. "The movement signified a break with orthodoxy in important ways and allowed an indigenous religion to arise which inwardly was relatively close to Christianity" (220-223). This last attempt to create an ascetic religion was suppressed by the Confucian state through a decade-long civil war.

Here again, this causal relationship between political and religious development has been ignored by most Weber scholars in their explanations of Chinese popular religion.³¹

Economic Consequences of Folk Religion

According to Weber, popular Taoism reinforced the negative effect of Confucian orthodoxy which hindered a break with traditionalism. "Taoism, in its effects, was essentially even more traditionalist than orthodox Confucianism" (205). One dimension of this Taoist reinforcement of Confucian traditionalism was that it was also incapable of bringing about a methodical life conduct aimed at transforming the world (206). In fact, "Taoist magic necessarily became one of the most serious obstacles to such a development" (205). A second dimension of this reinforcement was the lack of an impersonal, universal trust (225, 236-237, 241). In the economic arena, "this distrust handicapped all credit and business operations and contrasted with the Puritan's trust" (244). Finally, the traditionalism which was reinforced by Taoism was inherently hostile to innovation (199, 205, 233). Thus, "in the magic garden of heterodox doctrine (Taoism) a rational economy and technology of modern occidental character was simply out of the question" (227).

CONCLUSION

I will now address two questions: (1) What is the agenda of *The Religion of China*? and (2) What is Weber's thesis on this matter?

In light of the repeated references to capitalism, it is clear that in *The Religion of China* Weber is primarily concerned with explaining the absence of rational capitalism in China. In fact, Weber explicitly states that this is "our initial problem" (63). These facts highlight the error of those recent interpretations which deny the relevance of the capitalism issue in Weber's *Economic Ethic of World Religions*.³²

If the explicit question in *The Religion of China* is the absence of rational capitalism in China, then what is Weber's thesis? One finds an irreconcilable gap between Weber's "official" conclusion and his institutional analysis of the Chinese failure to develop rational capitalism.

There is no doubt that from the outset Weber intends to explain the Chinese failure in terms of both institutional and intellectual causes. "Both economic and intellectual factors were at work. The former . . . pertained to the state economy and were therefore political in nature" (55).

However, in the first half of *The Religion of China* the politico-socio-economic conditions are accepted as the sufficient cause of China's failure to develop rational capitalism. "A number of reasons—most related to the structure of the state—can be seen for the fact that capitalism failed to develop" (99-100). Weber's point is that "the rational capitalism which is specific for modern development originated nowhere under this regime. Capital investment in industry is far too sensitive to such irrational rule and too dependent upon the possibility of calculating the steady and rational operation of the state machinery to emerge under an administration of this type" (103). In other words, when compared with politically-divided Western Europe, the Chinese patrimonial world empire was an especially unfavorable condition to the rise of rational capitalism.

If this is the case, then what was the role of Chinese religion in explaining this failure? The only logical argument is that Chinese religion simply made the rise of capitalism

even more difficult. In fact, as shown above, even the unfavorable Chinese religion was, to a large extent, determined by political conditions; thus political conditions should be first and foremost in explaining the Chinese case.

However, this is not Weber's "official" conclusion. Despite his unfavorable evaluation of Chinese politico-socio-economic conditions and his assertion as to the political foundation of Chinese religion, when addressing the general theme of his analysis Weber insists that religious conditions made the difference.³³ "Above all it [that is, the absence of capitalism] has been handicapped by the attitude rooted in the Chinese 'ethos' and peculiar to a stratum of officials and aspirants to office. This brings us to our central theme" (104). The central theme is, of course, that Chinese religion was responsible for China's failure to develop modern capitalism. And this official conclusion is accepted by most unsuspecting interpreters.³⁴

Why does Weber contradict himself to this extent? Part of the answer is that this contradiction is a reflection of the tension within Weber's conception of the Occidental breakthrough to modernity—more precisely, a tension between his institutional and religious explanations of this breakthrough. The root of this tension appears to be Weber's passion for both politics and religion.³⁵

To begin with, from his doctoral dissertation to his last lecture course,³⁶ the institutional side of the history of Occidental capitalism was a major theme in Weber's work. When religion later became a prominent research subject upon the publication of *Protestant Ethic* in 1904, it entered Weber's oeuvre as a separate project which increased his understanding of Occidental development without obviously contradicting his previous institutional conception. That in the early modern Occident both institutional and religious factors were favorable to capitalism, and that Weber never wrote a comprehensive account of Occidental development, spared him the hair-splitting task of clarifying the logical relation between these two lines of explanation.

Then his new interest in religiously-based economic ethics led Weber to write *Economic Ethic of World Religions*. This project apparently began with an assumption that religion was the ultimate factor in explaining the divergent development of societies. The first essay, *The Religion of China*, turned out to be more than just a study of religiously-based economic ethics; in fact, it contained a synthesis of institutional and religious analyses that Weber never attempted with the Occident.

This attempted synthesis forced Weber to state the logical connection between his institutional and religious explanations. Here the logical conclusion of his institutional analysis directly opposes the initial assumption of his *Economic Ethic of World Religions*. In other words, in the counter-case of China, Weber finally faces the tension between his political insight and his religious passion. Since the Chinese-European comparison in *The Religion of China* not only indicates that the Chinese politico-socio-economic conditions were unfavorable to rational capitalism, but also implies that the politically-divided European state system was conducive to the rise of rational capitalism (with or without the aid of religion), abandoning the primacy of a religious argument in the Chinese case would not only have devastated his *Economic Ethic of World Religions*, but also jeopardized his Protestant ethic thesis. Weber therefore gives primacy to political factors in his historical analysis of China, yet he insists on highlighting the decisive significance of religion in his "official" conclusion. This contradiction became buried in his disorderly writing, and therefore has evaded most interpreters for seven decades.

So why does Weber contradict himself? It appears that he wants to protect his Protestant ethic thesis and world religions project from his own political insights; and,

consequently, he is willing to find a way to reconcile his religious and political arguments. In *The Religion of China* his attempted compromise is that "to be sure the basic characteristics of the 'mentality,' in this case the practical attitude toward the world, were deeply co-determined by political and economic destinies" (249). Weber's bottom line is that "rational entrepreneurial capitalism, which in the Occident found its specific locus in industry, has been handicapped not only by the lack of a formally guaranteed law, a rational administration and judiciary, and by the ramifications of a system of prebends, but also, basically, by the lack of a particular mentality" (104). This is hardly an effective defense of his religious arguments in the face of his Chinese polity analysis.

Yet his insistence on the religious argument is maintained not only in *The Religion of China*, but also later in *General Economic History*. "In the last resort the factor which produced capitalism [in the West] is the rational permanent enterprise, rational accounting, rational technology and rational law, but again not these alone. Necessary complementary factors were the rational spirit, the rationalization of the conduct of life in general, and rationalistic economic ethic."³⁷ In other words, the tension between Weber's institutional and religious analyses continued through his later years.

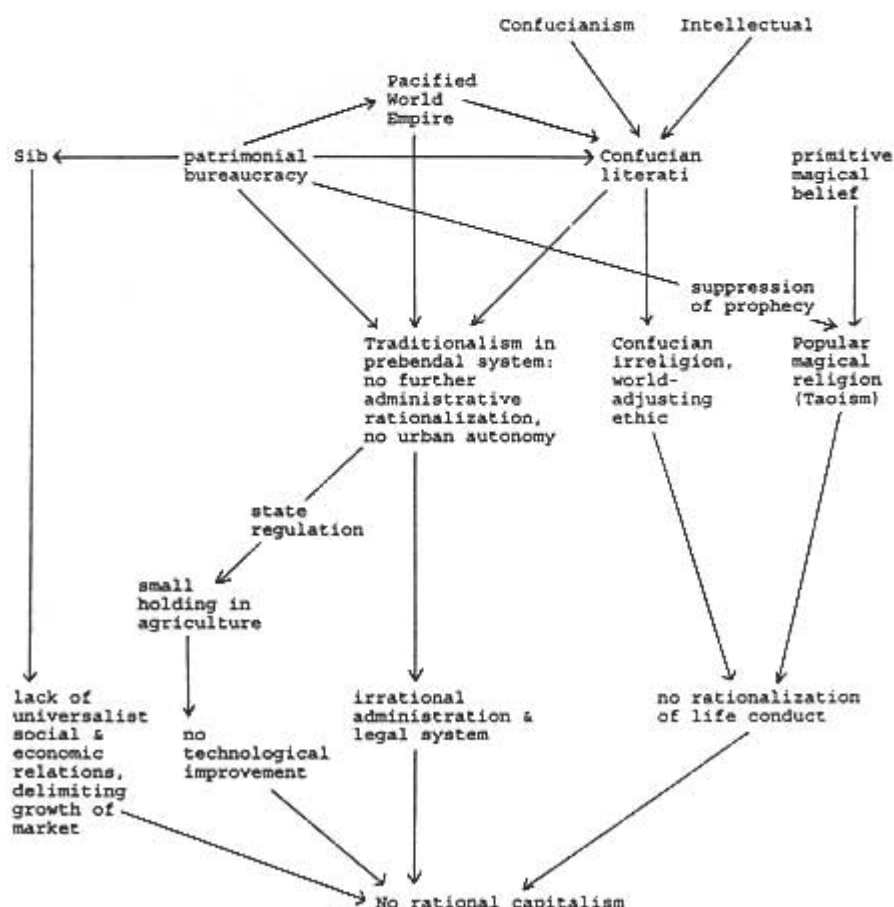


DIAGRAM SUMMARY OF *THE SUMMARY OF CHINA*

NOTES

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1. My exegesis is based on Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, trans. by Hans H. Gerth (NY: Free Press, 1968). The English translation is based on the second German edition, "Konfuzianismus und Taoismus" in Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), pp. 276-536; this is a revised version of Max Weber, "Konfuzianismus und Taoismus," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 41 (1915): 30-87, 335-386. A comparison of the first and second German editions shows that Weber reworked the essay but did not change his basic argument. Of concern here is the insertion of texts that double the length of the essay and the insertion of the majority of footnotes and citations. The insertions mostly address the politico-socio-economic side; however, Weber kept his conclusion largely intact, apparently indicating that he was content with the original conclusion which emphasizes the religious argument. I agree with Wolfgang Schluchter that Weber did not change his outlook in the second edition (See Wolfgang Schluchter, *Rationalism, Religion, and Domination: A Weberian Perspective*, trans. by Neil Solomon [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989], p. 87). In other words, the argument and contradiction that are discussed in this paper exist in both German editions. For the historical background and work history of *The Religion of China*, see Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, "Einleitung," in *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen, Konfuzianismus und Taoismus, Schriften 1915-1920, Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, Part I, vol. 19, Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer Eds., in collaboration with Petra Kolonko, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), pp. 1-25, and Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, "Editorischer Bericht," *Ibid.*, pp. 31-73.

2. Weber began using ideal types in his 1904-1905 *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Talcott Parsons, (NY: Scribner's, 1976), and the 1909 (third) version of *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, trans. by R. I. Frank (London: Verso, 1988). However, the application of ideal types in these two works is quite rudimentary.

3. See Max Weber, "Zur Geschichte der Handelsgesellschaften im Mittelalter. Nach südeuropäischen Quellen," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924), pp. 312-443 (originally published in 1889); *Die römische Agrargeschichte in ihrer Bedeutung für das Staats- und Privatrecht*, *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, Part 1, vol. 2, Jürgen Deninger Ed., (Tübingen: Mohr, 1986, originally published 1891); "The Social Causes of the Decline of Ancient Civilization," in *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*, trans. by R. I. Frank (London: Verso, 1988), pp. 387-411 (originally published 1896); and *The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations*.

4. One important reason for this negligence is that China is generally regarded only as a counter-case to Europe. See Schmidt-Glintzer, "Einleitung."

5. For instance, Arthur von Rosthorn, "Religion und Wirtschaft in China," in *Hauptprobleme der Soziologie, Erinnerungsgabe für Max Weber*, Melchior Polyi, Ed., (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1923), pp. 221-233; Otto B. van der Sprenkel, "Chinese Religion (a review of Max Weber's *The Religion of China*)," *British Journal of Sociology* 5 (1954):272-275, and "Max Weber on China," *History and Theory* 3 (1964):348-370; Marie-Claire Bergere, "On the Historical Origins of Chinese Underdevelopment," *Theory and Society* 13 (1984):327-337; Andreas E. Buss, *Max Weber and Asia: Contributions to the Sociology of Development*, (Munich: Weltform, 1985); Ying-Shih Yu, "Chung-Kuo chin shih tsung chiao lun li yu shang jen ching shen (The Religious Ethic and Entrepreneurial Spirit of Early Modern China)," *Chih Shih Fen Tzu (The Intellectual)* 1986 Winter:3-45; Yoshinobu Shiba, "Max Webers Beitrag zur Geschichte nicht-europäischer Gesellschaften: China," in *Max Weber, der Historiker*, Jürgen Kocka Ed., (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Reprecht, 1986), pp. 242-256; Arnold Zingerle, *Max Weber und China: Herrschafts und religionssoziologische Grundlagen zum Wandel der chinesischen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1972); and articles by Wolfram Eberhard, Sybille van der Sprenkel, Mark Elvin, Karl Büniger, Arnold Zingerle, Peter Weber-Schäfer, Thomas Metzger, Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Nathan Sivin, and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt collected in *Max Webers Studie über Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, Wolfgang Schluchter Ed., (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983).

6. For instance, Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (NY: Free Press, 1968); Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: an Intellectual Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); C. K. Yang, "Introduction," in Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, trans. by Hans H. Gerth, (NY: Free Press, 1968), pp. xiii-xliii; Günter Abramowski, *Das Geschichtsbild Max Webers. Universalgeschichte am Leitfaden des okzidentalen. Rationalisierungsprozesses* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1966); Dirk Käsler, *Max Weber: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Theoretical Logic in Sociology vol. 3: The Classical Attempt at Theoretical Synthesis: Max Weber* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Chung-Hua Ku, *Traditionalismus und Rationalismus- Problem einer Unterscheidung am Beispiel der China-Studie Max Webers* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 1987); Wolfgang

Schluchter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism: Max Weber's Developmental History*, tran. by Guenther Roth, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), and *Rationalism, Religion, and Domination: A Weberian Perspective*, see footnote 1.

7. For instance, Stephen Molloy, "Max Weber and the Religion of China: Any Way Out of the Maze?" *British Journal of Sociology* 31 (1980): 377-400. This article imposed an exaggerated version of Tenbruck's "inner-logic thesis" on *The Religion of China*, and thus created a maze for readers.

8. "Where domination is primarily traditional, even though it is exercised by virtue of the ruler's personal autonomy, it will be called *patrimonial authority*; where it indeed operates primarily on the basis of discretion, it will be called *sultanism*." See Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 232.

9. *Economy and Society*, pp. 229, 1014.

10. According to Weber, "Traditionalism" in the following discussion shall refer to the psychic attitude-set for the habitual workaday and to the belief in the everyday routine as an inviolable norm of conduct." See Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills Eds. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 267-301. Quotation see p. 296.

11. Weber, *China*, pp. 61-62, also pp. 110, 113.

12. Yang, "Introduction," pp. xx-xxii; Alexander, *Theoretical Logic*, pp. 61-62.

13. Weber, *China*, pp. 101-102, also pp. 148-149.

14. *China*, pp. 84-86, 97, 103. For Weber's types of capitalism, see Gerth and Mills, "Introduction," in *From Max Weber*, pp. 65-68.

15. *China*, p. 80, also pp. 81-83.

16. *China*, pp. 63-64, also p. 83.

17. In his translation of *The Religion of China*, Hans H. Gerth used *sib* for *Sippe*, which is usually translated as clan by others. Weber used *Sippe* to refer to what apparently is called *tsu* in Chinese. *Tsu* can be translated as a common descent group, patrilineal clan, or patrilineal lineage. It includes all who are descended from the same distant patrilineal ancestor who first settled in a given locality. The member families of a *tsu* own common property for religious, educational, and relief purposes. See Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London: Athlone, 1958), p. 34; Hsien Chin Hu, *The Common Descent Group in China and Its Functions* (NY: Johnson, 1948), p. 9.

18. Weber, *China*, pp. 35, 85-89, 237.

19. Weber, *China*, pp. 87, 158, 213, 230, 236, 241.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 241, also p. 96.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 112, also pp. 108-110.

22. See Weber, "The Social Psychology of the World Religions," pp. 279, 283; *Economy and Society*, p. 476.

23. *Economy and Society*, pp. 503-506.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 504; "Social Psychology of the World Religions," p. 268.

25. Weber, *China*, pp. 26-28, 153.

26. For instance, Parsons, *The Structure*; Bendix, *Max Weber*; Yang, "Introduction;" Abramowski, *Geschichtsbild*; Alexander, *Theoretical Logic*; Schluchter, *Rationalism, Religion, and Domination*.

27. Weber, "Social Psychology of the World Religions," p. 273; *China*, p. 23.

28. Friedrich H. Tenbruck, "The Problem of Thematic Unity in the Works of Max Weber," tran. by M. S. Whimster, *British Journal of Sociology* 31 (1980):316-351; Schluchter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism: Max Weber's Developmental History*, tran. By Guenther Roth, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, tran. by Thomas McCarthy. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

29. Weber, *China*, p. 173, also pp. 145-146, 174, 208, 230, 233.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 142, also pp. 143-145, 202, 214-223, 229.

31. For instance, Parsons, *The Structure*; Bendix, *Max Weber*; Yang, "Introduction;" Käsler, *Max Weber*; and Alexander, *Theoretical Logic*.

32. Tenbruck, "Thematic Unity;" Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction*, tran. by Keith Tribe, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 21-104.

33. In fact, sometimes Weber's defense of his religious argument seems quite absurd from the viewpoint of his own political analysis. "The pacification of the Empire explains, at least indirectly, the non-existence of political capitalism but it does not explain the non-existence of modern capitalism in China" (248f. 249).

34. See Parsons, *The Structure*, pp. 541-542, 577; Yang, "Introduction," pp. xix, xxvii, xxxvi; Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim, and Max Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 178.

35. See Arthur Mitzman, *The Iron Cage* (NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969).
36. Weber, *Zur Geschichte der Handelsgesellschaften im Mittelalter*; *General Economic History*, tran. by Frank H. Knight, (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1982, originally published 1923).
37. *General Economic History*, p. 354.