

## 1 The Introduction of Max Weber to China: An Overview

As one of the three founders of social theory, Max Weber (1864–1920) was known much later in China than the other two in the trio – Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Emile Durkheim (1858–1917).<sup>1</sup> Marx's reputation arrived in China as European socialism began to spread in East Asia and news about the Russian October Revolution in 1917 made its way to China. After the 1950s, the oeuvre of Marx and Engels was published in the form of a complete collection by the official Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (中央编译局). As a national belief system, its influence can be felt everywhere. Durkheim's works were first introduced through translation into Chinese by Xu Deheng (*Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique*, 1925), who had studied abroad in France, and Wang Li (*De la division du travail social*, 1934). The introduction of these two monographs not only made Durkheim well known in Chinese academia but also made functionalism, which he strongly advocated, take root in sociological circles and become the dominant theory and methodology in the study of anthropology and sociology at the time.

Max Weber, on the other hand, was introduced to China much later than either Marx or Durkheim. Since Chinese sociology followed the Anglo-Saxon tradition of positivism imported via Japan, it was Comte's reductionist social organism and Durkheim's holistic functionalism that was on almost everybody's lips in the early days. The Weberian approach to studying society through understanding and interpreting motives and individual actions was relatively lesser known. Weberian sociology was later introduced to the world through the English translation of American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Although Weber and Durkheim were contemporaries, Weber gained international fame much later than Durkheim and the *Annales* school he influenced. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why at that time we did not see a lot of work about Weberian sociology in Chinese.

In 1952, when China was in its early days of Communist rule, the instruction and research of sociology were interrupted by the process of readjusting the disciplinary formation

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1 This article was written by the author at the invitation of the Max Weber Foundation of Germany after attending the conference on the reception of Weber's academic thought in China held at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Peking University in the spring of 2018. Some of my views discussed here have been published in previous articles, see Su Guoxun 2007, 2015.

in colleges and universities to the ideology of the Cold War era. This interruption resulted in China's isolation from international trends in academia, lack of access to books, and information occlusion for a long period of time. Sociology only met its spring when the "Cultural Revolution" ended in 1978 and China adopted the "Reform and Opening Policy" (改革开放). In a speech made in March 1979, Deng Xiaoping pointed out that, "we have long neglected the study of political science, law, sociology, and international politics. It is time for us to catch up."<sup>2</sup> Colleges and universities resumed instruction of sociology afterward, and in the early 1980s, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences also established an Institute of Sociology headed by Fei Xiaotong. This marked the revival of sociology after being banned for almost three decades.

It was at this juncture of sociology's revival that Weber's works started to become known in China. In 1987 *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *Protestant Ethic*), translated by Yu Xiao and Chen Weigang, was published in Beijing. Thereafter Chinese scholars had begun to read Weber's writings in Chinese translation as works of sociology. Hong Tianfu and Wang Rongfen translated Weber's *Confucianism and Taoism* from German in 1993 and 1995 respectively, and *Economy and Society*, translated by Yan Kewen from English, was published in 2010. Weber's works on methodology in the social sciences and other works on political sociology were also translated and published, and at the same time, certain important research on Weber (e.g., works by Wolfgang Schluchter and Wolfgang J. Mommsen)<sup>3</sup> were introduced in China. Weber's thought became more widely known in the field of humanities and social science.

However, the earliest contact Chinese scholars had with Weber can be traced back to the 1930s. Weber's *General Economic History* (German: *Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Abriss der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 1923), translated by Zheng Taipu in 1936, was published by the Commercial Press, then located in Shanghai.<sup>4</sup> The book had been compiled by students of Weber's based on his lecture notes at the University of Munich in his later years. This is the first time Max Weber's name appeared in the Chinese world. Zheng Taipu studied mathematics and physics at the University of Göttingen during his youth. After having returned to China, Zheng taught mathematics and German at Tongji University in Shanghai, while working at the Commercial Press as an editor. Zheng had an extensive academic interest but mostly focused on introducing Western achievements in natural sciences to China. He had also contributed to the cultural dialogue between East and West by translating important works such as Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles*

2 Deng Xiaoping 1983, 180.

3 Shiluhete [Wolfgang Schluchter] 2001, 2004; W. Mengsen [Wolfgang Mommsen] 2016.

4 Makesi Weibo [Max Weber] 1936. Yao Zengyi (1912—1976)'s translation of the *General Economic History* published in 1981 uses a different phonetic transcription for Max Weber's name in Chinese (Weibei'er 维贝儿). This clearly shows that Zheng Taipu's earlier translation wasn't very well known at the time.

of *Natural Philosophy*. However, Zheng's translation of *General Economic History* was published as a work of economics and that naturally shadowed the book's sociological importance. That is, unfortunately, the reason why Zheng's translation did not lead to greater recognition of Weber in China.

When, in recent years, the sociology department of Peking University put its archive left from the former Yenching University in order, it discovered a manuscript by the social anthropologist Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005) titled “The Relationship between Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism” (新教教义与资本主义精神之关系), which is the earliest Chinese academic article written about Weber's thought to date. According to Wang Mingming, who participated in editing the manuscript, it might have been written during or prior to Fei's stint in Kuige 魁阁, Yunnan (1938–1945) during the Second World War.<sup>5</sup> There are some overlaps between this manuscript and the representative work of Fei from this period, *Lucun Farmland* (禄村农田, 1944). Moreover, some influences of British historian R. H. Tawney (1880–1962) can also be seen. Tawney published his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* in 1926 and had written a preface to the English version of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (1930) translated by Talcott Parsons.<sup>6</sup> During his days at the London School of Economics, Fei was a student in Tawney's class, which shaped his understanding of Weber's sociological thought. Fei's *Lucun Farmland* was guided by a Weberian problematic: whether East Asia as a geographical area has the potential and opportunity to develop capitalism. The manuscript also contains a number of English translations of Weber's work, and the bibliography includes works discussing capitalism by Karl Marx, Werner Sombart (1863–1941), and Tawney. In the manuscript, Fei attempted to explore how capitalism would have been possible in China at that time. (It is a pity that, for unknown reasons, the article was shelved after it was completed and never published.) This shows that Weber's thought had already been introduced to China along with the development of sociology in the country in the 1930s and 1940s. Beginning in the 1930s, Japanese imperialism led to the occupation of the northeast and north of China, and soon the war spread all over the country. The war motto “salvation overwhelms enlightenment” (救亡压倒启蒙) explains why the development of sociology, including the spread of Weber's thought in China, was suspended during this period.

Only at the beginning of the Reform and Opening Policy in the early 1980s was Weber's thought reintroduced to China. Chinese social scientists had only just begun to have contact with international academia and had adopted what Chinese author Lu Xun

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5 Fei Xiaotong 2016. This includes editorial notes written by Wang Mingming.

6 The Chinese translation of this preface can be found in Yan Kewen's Chinese translation of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which introductions to the different English translations are assembled. See Makes Weibo [Max Weber] 2010c, 8.

(1881–1936) called “grabism” (拿来主义) in order to better grasp what was going on outside the country. Emphasis was placed on how Western culture – or “the other” – perceives, narrates, and challenges Chinese culture. Driven by the old Chinese saying that “hearing from all sides helps one grasp the full picture” (兼听则明), Chinese scholars hoped to learn from others in order to make up for their own shortcomings and find reference points for self-development. Such a drive is demonstrated by the vast surge in publications in the 1980s that are either translations of Weber’s works or introductions to his thought. For example, important works such as *Protestant Ethic* and *Confucianism and Taoism* each has more than three translations published, either from English or German. The translation of *Economy and Society*, a huge categorical study of the various fields in social life, was published in separate volumes. These were published under titles such as “Sociology of Law,” “Sociology of Religion,” and “Sociology of Domination.” This way Chinese academia was finally exposed to the extensiveness of Weber’s thought.<sup>7</sup> During this period, one of the Chinese works on Weber was my book *Rationalization and its Limits: A Critical Introduction to Weber* (1988), which represented the first introductory work in Chinese academic circles to systematically elucidate Weber’s thought, and one of the earlier works to examine the concept of modernity using a Weberian perspective. The two approaches in this book, namely, typology and causal analysis, elaborate and introduce respectively Weber’s religious (including economic), political (including legal), and sociological views and his social science methodology.

During this period, past dogmatic criticism against Weber borrowed from Soviet textbooks – in Lenin’s words, about the “highly learned” “Herr Professor Max Weber” with his “professorial wisdom of the cowardly bourgeoisie,”<sup>8</sup> to the false claims of “subjective idealism,” “one of the sources of revisionist ideological theory,” and “the fierce enemy of

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7 “Weber’s Collected Works” (*Weibo zuopinji* 韦伯作品集), originally published in Taiwan, was published in mainland China by Guangxi Normal University Press in both paperback and hardcover versions. The paperback version includes twelve volumes: (I) Science and Politics 学术与政治; (II) Economy and History/Types of Legitimate Rule 经济与历史支配的类型; (III) Sociology of Domination 支配社会学; (IV) Economic Activity and Social Groups 经济行动与社会团体; (V) The Religion of China/Religion and the World 中国的宗教—宗教与世界; (VI) Illegitimate Rule/Typology of Cities 非正当性的支配—城市的类型学; (VII) Basic Concepts of Sociology 社会学的基本概念; (VIII) Sociology of Religion 宗教社会学; (IX) Sociology of Law 法律社会学; (X) The Religion of India: Hinduism and Buddhism 印度的宗教—印度教与佛教; (XI) Ancient Judaism 古犹太教; (XII) The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism 新教伦理与资本主义精神. The hardcover version includes the same content as the paperback and was published in ten volumes. Published in September 2016, it was reprinted six times just in that same year.

8 *Liening quanji* [The Complete Works of Lenin] 1975, vol. 23, 256.

Marxism” as found in the *Soviet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*<sup>9</sup> – were abandoned as ideological remnants of the previous era, and Weber’s academic status as one of the three founders of modern social theory was firmly recognized.

Around the 1980s, when the Chinese sociological community imported Weber’s thought, the international academic community paid attention to the relationship between the economic growth in East Asian and traditional Confucian culture. Prior to this, American Sinologists had already held two international academic conferences in Japan and South Korea respectively on the relationship between Confucian tradition and modernization. In the early 1980s, an international academic conference on “Chinese Culture and Modernization” was held in Hong Kong, with a focus on the relationship between Confucian ethics and East Asian economic take-off. Many people had tried to interpret the rise and modernization of East Asia’s economy using Weber’s ideas of how religious beliefs may influence economic behavior; some of them regarded “religious ethics” as “cultural value,” and others regarded “Confucian culture” as a replacement of “protestant ethics.”

In interpreting the rise and modernization of East Asia’s economies, some see the relationship between Confucian tradition and the “Four Little Dragons” (Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore) as analogous to the relationship between Christianity and Europe, or between Buddhism and East Asia. Some also expand Weber’s rationalism which was rooted in Western European Enlightenment beyond the West to Japan and others. All of these, no matter which side of the issue one takes, peg the cultural discussion about the economic progress of traditional Confucian countries in East Asian to Weberian thought on the origins of modern capitalism and the Chinese culture. Due to the materialistic nature of education in the past, people tended to avoid discussing the influence of spirit and concepts on social behavior, but once China opened up and its people came into contact with fresh ideas from the outside world, this led to a greater focus on Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* and his series of comparative cultural-historical studies assembled together under the title “The Economic Ethics of the World Religions,” and they, logically, interpreted Weber as a culturalist.

In comparison, Chinese scholars paid less attention to the key role of factors in the economic system which determine people’s social actions, wherefore they did not give adequate recognition to Weber’s later works, published after *Economy and Society* (1910), including his *General Economic History* (1936) and the preface (dealing with the capitalist spirit and rationalization) he wrote for the *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* (1920–1921), especially in view of their integrative importance in the development of Weber’s thinking. They wrongly believed that questions about the economic system which are related to material benefits fall into the realm of economics but not sociology.

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9 *Sulian zhhexue baike quanshu* [*Soviet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*] 1984 (1960), 438.

Only shortly thereafter, as China's economic growth continued, the role played by material benefits in social life has become apparent, and the interest in Weberian economic sociology has grown ever since. In addition, with the introduction of new institutional economics, people began to view human social actions from the perspective of interest analysis. In this context, research on Weber naturally turned to an interpretation from an institutional perspective. From the discussion of the relationship between economics and other disciplines in Chinese academic circles in recent years, it is not difficult to see that economists mostly interpret social life from the perspective of an interest-driven perspective, while sociologists pay more attention to the role of social structure. This is also in line with international academic trends in the twentieth century.

Within sociological circles, in terms of the understanding of Weberian thought, there exists a difference in perspective between the cultural approach and the institutionalist approach. One of the differences is that culturalists rather emphasize the importance of the voluminous *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* and the comparative religious-cultural approach in Weber's thinking, while institutionalists acclaim the importance of the broad topic of "economy, social spheres and their powers" expressed in his masterwork *Economy and the Society* as well as in *General Economic History*, both published after Weber's death. If we regard the 1970s and the 1980s as a period when Chinese academia was learning and receiving Weberian thought, then we may say that now, after three decades, is a time when it is absorbing and reflecting on it, showing more clearly a "cultural awareness" (Fei Xiaotong) of the Chinese people in their contact with foreign cultures.

In recent years, as China makes significant economic progress, the relation between this development and culture has captured widespread attention from international academia. In the last decade of his life, Weber studied Eastern religions and just before his death he revised his *Confucianism and Taoism*. He placed this work at the beginning of the *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*, indicating that he treats Confucianism and Taoism as "historical individuals," which play an indispensable role in his process of expounding and establishing the meaning of Western rationalized "universal history." Chinese academic research on Weber has always attached importance to *Confucianism and Taoism*. Currently, there are two translations of the original German (Hong Tianfu 1993; Wang Rongfen 1995) and one from the English translation (Kang Le and Jian Huimei 2004) that references the original German text as well as the edited Japanese translation by Kimata Tokuo (木全徳雄) from 1971 (including all the footnotes of the Japanese translation in the appendix).

The sheer quantity of articles examining Weber's writings on China (including the dissertations of graduate students) has clearly increased since we entered the new millennia. These articles tend to favor the argument that the conclusion of *Confucianism and Taoism* is that Confucianism lacks formal rationality in the political-economic domain and theoretical rationality in the scientific-cognitive domain, which led Chinese and Western cultures to take very different paths: Western Protestant culture, represented by Puritanism,

aims to rationally dominate the world, while Chinese culture, represented by Confucianism, is characterized by its tendency to rationally adapt to the world.<sup>10</sup> This conclusion is made possible by comparing the *longue durée* of the nature and characteristics of Eastern and Western cultures. It demonstrates a grand, overarching perspective that traces the future paths of major civilizations in the world and the immense knowledge and insights of a generation of European scholars. Such can be consulted in order to understand the future development of today's Chinese society and culture.

In recent years, thanks to the sophistication and avid participation of a new generation of scholars, significant progress has been made in improving both the depth and breadth of research on Weber. For instance, the volume *Weber: Law and Value* (韦伯: 法律与价值), edited and published by a group of young scholars, collects articles that have deviated from the well-trodden path of following the economic system or religious ethic, which have limited the discussion of institutional theory and cultural theory. Instead, they directed the discussion to the previously under-researched link between social rationalization and ethical rationalization, namely the legal arena. Among these young scholars, Li Meng, in his article on "The 'British Law' Problem in Weber's Social Theory," explains why in England, laws with a relatively low level of rationalization were not an obstacle to the rational development of the economy (embodied in the development of capitalism) and the rational development of the political system (embodied in the development of a stable democratic system) but rather promoted it. This article explores in depth the intricate relationship between legal formal rationality and substantial rationality in Weber's social theory and reveals the profound thinking of a new generation of scholars.

In Weber's complex analysis of social rationalization and ethical rationalization, personality and the cultivation of individuality are the most important links between the two. In Weber's eyes, personality refers to the dignity of a person and is the ultimate value of human beings. It means that one organizes one's life entirely according to this established value. The so-called ethical rationalization, or the unity of faith and morality, enables one's faith to reflect in one's action, thereby making it effective. In other words, a person can only acquire "personality" through ethical rationalization, which is what freedom truly means. Accordingly, the ethical rationalization of freedom promotes the "methodization" (*Methodisierung*) of behavior in daily life through an "inner-worldly asceticism" characterized by "disciplinization" (*Disziplinisierung*). It also constructs a well-developed formal technique for the "disenchantment of the world" and thereby promotes the rationalization of society. Consequently, such ethical rationalization of freedom possesses an essentially rational nature. That is to say, "discipline" on the one hand constitutes the technical foundation of the rationalization of society, and on the other hand, it has also become a technique

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10 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber's Collected Works] V: *Confucianism and Taoism*, 332.

which one uses to organize and plan one's own life. It is the link between social rationalization and the ethical rationalization of freedom.

However, in modern social theory, legislative rationality (formal rationality) that combines democracy and the rule of law has always been an oppressive force, and the rationality of the judicial practice in common law has long been neglected. Legislative rationality is set to become the only rational force by merging with bureaucratic rationality. Some developing countries have formed such legal authority based on this kind of rationality and do so without autonomy. These countries build "modern," "rational" systems in a top-down manner, much like the "legal state" (*Rechtsstaat*) in Germany, making it difficult to shake off the binary predicament of materialization and formality, rendering rationalization and freedom a dilemma in which only one can be achieved. The danger of legislative rationality is starkly demonstrated in the "law and development" failure in post-war Latin America. We can see from this instance that the introduction of a system and the formal borrowing of procedural technique in developing countries are always implemented via a top-down approach by state authorities. The support that it enjoys comes solely from the state authority, entirely detached from any effort in promoting ethical rationalization, and it lacks any technique with practical rights as a support for action. Ultimately, this has led to the departure of rationalization from freedom, and the former has become meaningless and "ritualized." Here, the meaning of Weber's prophecy has become clear: when the institutional conditions of freedom are detached from personality and the technology of freedom has become merely a tool and formality, this kind of rationality will "turn the cloak on the shoulders of the saint to an iron cage."<sup>11</sup> Rationality without freedom has pushed people into a new iron cage of slavery.

## 2 Aid and Inspiration from Weber's Thinking

### 2.1 Bridging the Conflict Between Agency and Structure

Weber's intercultural comparison constitutes an important part of his "interpretive sociology" (*verstehende Soziologie*). An important inspiration to us is his approach to combine the interest-driven motivation behind social action with structural constraints. It is the "interpretive" key in understanding the subjective meaning behind all social phenomena which are constituted by various kinds of social actions, and it shows that Weber was the first in sociology to reconcile "benefit-motive-institutional analysis" and "social type-culture-structural analysis."

Weber's analysis of China is worthy of our attention. First, he argues that China is a unified state with a patrimonial bureaucratic system, while Western Europe had long been

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11 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber's Collected Works] XII: *The Protestant Ethic*, 187.

in the situation where numerous feudal states competed with one another. Patrimonial bureaucracy has reduced every relationship to interpersonal relationship with blood as a link, rendering a lack of non-personal causality in social life. China did not feel the need for overseas colonial expansion for the free flow of capital as the West did in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times, for it had enjoyed prolonged peace and stability. As a result of this, formal law and rational administration to guarantee the free competition of capital have so far been absent in China. Thereafter, Weber explains that China is a society that is centered on agriculture and peasants, governed by bureaucracy, and based on family economy; Western Europe, on the other hand, is an economy based on free competition with cities and citizens at the center. Cities and citizens, Weber writes, tend to believe in ethically rational religions, as economic rationalism and some form of strict ethical religion share a certain affinity. In China, however, due to the practice of ancestor worship and exogamy, citizens maintain unbreakable ties with the village and the clan, resulting in the lack of an underlying foundation of religious-ethical rationalization and even economic rationalization in Chinese social grassroots organizations. These are what constitute the structural resistance to China's modernization. Lastly, Weber expounds on the effect of religious culture on social structure and system. Weber classifies religious teachings into ethical prophecy (*ethische Prophetie*) and exemplary prophecy (*exemplarische Prophetie*). The former is ascetic and the latter mystic in nature. All religions are striving to reach a status of "union with God." What is different among them is that ascetic religions believe that men are the "tools" of God, while mystic religions believe that men are the "carriers" or "vessels" of God. Weber argues that the orthodoxy of Chinese culture is Confucianism, while Taoism is heterodoxy. The former carries the character of traditionalism, and the latter is steep in witchcraft superstition. Hence, China's religion belongs to the type of inner-worldly mysticism, and Western culture, as embodied in Protestantism, belongs to the type of inner-worldly asceticism. Due to the lack of an ethical, transcendental, and personal deity in Chinese religion, the necessary tension between the present world and the other world (transcendence) is still absent at the institutional level of Chinese society.

In other words, through his comparative perspective Weber concludes the essential features of Chinese and Western cultures: the rationalism of Confucianism implies rationally adapting to the world, while the rationalism of Puritanism implies rationally governing the world. For Weber, adapting to the world may lead to the rise of a bureaucratic form of ethics restricting all ethical behavior to absolutely practical instructions and rules, while no attention is paid to transcendental or ultimate reasoning. As such, the ultimate meaning of the world becomes a second priority, and traditionalism and pragmatism that view all issues from a purely utilitarian perspective prevail. Everything is in place to maintain the stability of the social order, and as a result, everything in social life is glutted with blind obedience and superstitious traditions.

In this tradition-oriented culture, the principles of "natural law" do not develop from itself, and there is even less space for consistent logic or empirical, experimental science. As

a result, Confucianism lacks formal rationality in the political economy, and theoretical rationality in the field of scientific cognition. For example, Weber writes that “there is still a great distance between Confucianism and all other Western real rationalism.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Confucianism teaches merits, Protestantism emphasizes ethics, and only ethically rational actions possess religious value. Protestants, out of the fear of God, create a kind of inner tension between God’s will and the secular world, which causes them to come forward with a certain enthusiasm for achievement in their life, stemming from the desire to be a tool for God. This is a kind of transcendence emerging from an inner spirit and expressed in external behavior, which becomes the motivation for Protestants to act according to a “vocational ethic” (*Berufsethik*) that took shape on the basis of religious grounds. In the *Analects* it says: “A craftsman who wishes to practice his craft well must first sharpen his tools” (*Lunyu* 15.10).<sup>13</sup> From a certain point of view this shows a very rational side of Confucianism. However, as seen from its exclusion of transcendental thinking, it also has a very utilitarian and practical side. This is a kind of success-oriented ethics, an assessment of motives and means based entirely on success, and a moral responsibility that is based solely on practical utilitarian values. Just as in the Chinese saying, “winners become kings, losers become thieves” (成王败寇), it shows that the pursuit of success sees no moral judgment of the means. This inevitably causes what Christian theology calls idolatry and leads to the social psychology of worshipping success and power. This constitutes the psychological factor of why it is difficult for Chinese religions to become ascetic religions. Weber’s intention is to reveal this structural impediment in Chinese social life, that is, to indicate the institutional and cultural barriers.

## 2.2 Multicausality

In demonstrating the influence of religious beliefs on economic activities, Weber asserts that even according to the principle of maximizing benefits, actions made based on purely purpose-oriented rationality have a cultural aspect to them. Market-oriented activities are not only based on economic interests but also in accordance with economic and corporate culture. Today, American society’s obsession with work also carries the traces of asceticism and Puritanism,<sup>14</sup> Asians, including the Japanese, are known as “workaholics,” and Europeans are famous for their hedonism. Cultural factors play a part in these, and there are various political cultures behind the various dazzling power operations. Through many examples in history, Weber illustrates that quite different modes of action appear in systems with very

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12 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber’s Collected Works] V: *Confucianism and Taoism*, 325.

13 Translators note: All quotations of *The Analects* (*Lunyu*) follow the translation by D. C. Lau 1979.

14 See Stephen Kalberg’s introduction to his English translation of the *Protestant Ethic*. Chinese translation by Su Guoxun et al., see Makesi Weibo [Max Weber] 2010b, 307.

similar structures. Similarly, the same pattern of actions occurs in very different structures and systems.

The various ways in which cultural values form the context of action, even if obscure and difficult to observe directly, are often able to survive even after undergoing major structural changes (such as industrialization and urbanization), and their effectiveness makes it a force that connects the past and the present. This shows that Weber's "views about society" are different from the holism that originated from the theory of evolution and through the mechanical analogy with biological organisms, which regards society as a "single entity." Weber believes that society is composed of religion, law, domination (rule), and economy. Each of these interacting "parts" has its own causal driving force along its respective path, and they are not parallel to each other. Therefore, sociological studies that exclusively look at economic or political interests, social structure, class, power, organization, or institution are not theoretically sound and as a matter of fact cannot be taken as authoritative.

This also shows that Weber's idea, according to which the power of cultural value can shape the context of social action, is not only opposed to the "homo economicus" in the presupposition of classical economics and modern rational choice theory but is also irreconcilable with Parson's structural functionalism. These theories are either presented as economic or political interests, or as trial-and-error sociological analysis in the form of "system requirements" and "functional prerequisites." The former raises a certain variable to the decisive status of causal priority, while the latter includes a wide gap put up between the self-evident dichotomies of tradition and modernity, universalism and particularism, community and society. Weber's understanding has weakened causal analysis and instead focused on the contextual environment and conditions, which is in line with big data analytical methods in modern science.

### 2.3 Transcending the Opposition Between Materialism and Idealism

While Weber did not like many of his contemporaries, who were captivated by romanticism or "cultural pessimism" (such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Simmel and others) and showed an indifference and lack of enthusiasm for the modern world, it is an indisputable fact that he disapproved of the trend that everything in modern society is based on utilitarianism and materialism, or a strictly bureaucratic and organized lifestyle. In other words, in Parson's "practical-rational" interpretation, Weber appears to be a modernized prophet, who has entirely eliminated his inner doubts and contradictions toward modernity. Weber actually has used "swimming against the tide of the material development" as a metaphor to describe himself, and although he could not change this objective trend, he looked heavyheartedly at the direction modern society was taking. He was concerned that after the "triumph of capitalism," the "person of vocation" (*Berufsmensch*) would disappear along with the Puritan devotion to vocation and be replaced by the efficacy and calculation of the "organization man" (*Organisationsmensch*), who indulges in

sensory pleasure without restraint and whose mind is entirely set on climbing the ladder within the great bureaucratic machine.<sup>15</sup> This possible prospect for future development was undoubtedly dismaying and unbearable to Weber as a forceful advocate of putting an ethic of responsibility into practice. For this reason, he calls for people to resist bureaucracy while at the same time singing the praises of rationalization. His works profoundly reveal the paradoxes of modernity and expose the inner struggle and contradictions of a German humanities scholar who lived at a time of transition from the traditional to the modern era.

As such, one may consider Weber a true conceptualist or cultural determinist, but he is not. Weber has repeatedly stated that cultural factors can play a role in human social action only if they are combined with material or systemic factors. The so-called system refers to the sum of rules and habits that people follow in social life. The function of the system is to establish the framework of social conditions and consequences, so that the consequences and risks of action can be clearly understood in order to reduce uncertainty in people's actions and interactions – thus, leading to reasonable expectations of actions, and thereby improving the efficiency of action. By observing the common rules, the negotiation process necessary in human interaction can be simplified, ensuring a certain degree of stability in human actions. Weber summarized these systemic factors in his *General Economic History* and elsewhere as follows: (1) free trade; (2) developed monetary economy; (3) commercialization of labor; (4) use of rational technology; (5) division of operational and family property; (6) application of a double-entry bookkeeping (accounting) system that correctly describes the relationship between borrowers and lenders; (7) guarantee of a formal legal system; (8) commercialization of economic life. This shows that the modern capitalist system is a system that integrates production, consumption, and distribution. It is a way of life created by combining specific spiritual and material conditions. Its basic feature is rationalization. In this way, Weber combines the two aspects of material and spiritual aspects and thus abandons a one-sided understanding of social life.

### 3 A Dialogue with Weber on the Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Cultures

*Confucianism and Taoism* is a work on Chinese religion and culture written a hundred years ago. Weber did not know Chinese, nor had he ever been to China. All he had available to him were some incomplete translations and writings by Western missionaries of the time, which makes his work all the more incredible. Some of the historical details and materials may not be very accurate, but we cannot be too demanding to a foreign man born in

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15 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber's Collected Works] XII: *The Protestant Ethic*, 187–188.

the nineteenth century, not to mention that he himself admits to being “reserved” about his own discourse on China given the “inadequate conditions” at the time, and he had hoped that future scholars may make up the deficiency.<sup>16</sup> Hence, our dialogue with Weber about his arguments on China will focus on theory and methodology, without getting too entangled in questions about historical accuracy.

There are currently two major trends in intercultural research. One is cultural relativism, which is based on multiculturalism and suggests that each culture has its own intrinsic value and particularity. It demands respect for each particular culture. An extended implication is that “every culture is equally valuable,” denying hierarchies and differences between cultures. This often shows in the struggle for the equal rights of vulnerable groups. The other trend is ethnocentrism, which stands in opposition to cultural relativism. Ethnocentrism holds that each culture has its own specific subjectivity. It is the value and cultural subjectivity of the mainstream group within that culture. Cultural studies are ultimately an exploration of this subjectivity. Only in this sense can we compare Chinese culture with German culture, and popular culture with elitist culture. In other words, culture is based on ethnicity, “it is ethnocentric,” and “self-centered.” It is intended to emphasize cultural identity, which implies a tendency toward cultural racism referring to the claim or self-promotion of cultural superiority and legitimacy of the powerful. So-called intercultural research involves carrying out a comparative analysis between different subjectivities; as a consequence, the perspective needs to shift from focusing on one subjectivity to that between different subjectivities, or in other words, to shift from subjectivity to intersubjectivity. Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schütz have discussed in depth the concept of intersubjectivity from the perspectives of philosophy and sociology respectively. Their analysis can be used as a reference in our dialogue with Weber. As far as intercultural comparative research is concerned, I advocate a “middle way” between cultural relativism and self-centrism, that is, to maintain a dynamic balance between these two concepts and to reject an “either/or” stand-off between them. Any intercultural comparative study must first relativize the absolute semantic meaning of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism and make compromises between them. It must oppose “total” beliefs like “all things are relative,” and “I am the center of everything,” and instead strive for a relative, polytheistic, and heuristic interpretation, and reject any absolutist, purely monotheistic, and normative interpretation. This is also my position in this dialogue with Weber.

On this issue, Fei Xiaotong expressed his general view on the path and prospects of the future development of human society and culture in an exchange with Japanese scholars in 1993: “Each praise their own beauty, and praise the beauty of others, if praising beauty is

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16 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber's Collected Works] V: *Confucianism and Taoism*, 376.

shared, then All-Under-Heaven is in great unity” (各美其美, 美人之美, 美美与共, 天下大同).<sup>17</sup> This succinctly captures the essence of cultural awareness — this is the way for the Chinese people to co-exist with the rest of the world as well as the way to a symbiosis of all cultures in the world.

### 3.1 On the Comparability of Confucianism and Puritanism

Whether Confucianism should be defined as a “religion” in the Western sense of the word is a long-debated question in Chinese academic history. Up until the present age, even those who believe Confucianism to be a religion merely think that the civilizing function of Confucianism in Chinese social life is equivalent to the function of Protestantism in the West. Confucianism has a widespread and profound influence on social life in China, which means that Confucianism is a religion in the sense of a functional comparison. This is not the same as Weber’s comparison of Confucianism with the monotheistic salvation religion of Puritanism. Weber completely ignores any debates in the history of Chinese religion and directly takes “Confucianism” as a self-evident presupposition. He does so without further analysis or discussion on the civilizing function Confucianism plays in social life, and directly assumes that Confucianism is a religion in the sense of Western culture. For example, his interpretation of the concept on the “unity of heaven and men” (天人合一) and ancestral worship obscures the essential difference between, on the one hand, morals and customs reflected as a whole in secular etiquette or belief in the sense of a functional comparison, and, on the other hand, monotheistic religion with its “ultimate concern” in the salvation of the soul (through confession, repentance, and redemption). This is one of the main reasons for Weber’s misinterpretation and misapprehension of Chinese religious and historical phenomena.

Confucianism, Taoism, and other folk rituals in China are local folk beliefs, which are dispersed through the customs, perception, and culture passed down from ancestors. Most of them feature ancestral worship, which emphasizes the unbroken line of lives and the continuity of ethnic groups. Ancestral worship involves rituals of “respecting heaven and following the examples of ancestors” (敬天法祖). Hoping to connect the living with the dead, the rituals’ purpose is neither individual salvation nor the individual quest for everlasting life, but rather to create a link between an individual’s life and both his ancestors and descendants. It seeks to preserve the blood ties of a clan, that is, the Confucian emphasis to “conduct the funeral of your parents with meticulous care and let not sacrifices to your remote ancestors be forgotten, and the virtue of the common people will incline towards fullness” (*Lunyu* 1.9). Even though the ancestor is not a deity, he or she embodies our innate blood relationship with the family and with the world. This natural emotion is of principal importance since it exists before our emotions toward any deity and thus carries ontological priority. In this

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17 Fei Xiaotong 1999, vol. 14, 196.

sense, the belief in customs and rituals is familial, clannish or ethnic, and local. It is the connection between the living and the dead, the inner-worldly and the other-worldly, this world and the afterlife. It is the embodiment of the universal communitarian belief that all human beings live in groups. Therefore, it can be called universal.

While both Chinese and Western cultures emphasize the value of human beings, there are still differences in the specifics. In Christian heritage, men exist as the most valuable beings in the universe. As “children of God,” men manifest, and even more intrinsically than all things in the world (including natural ecology and all other creatures and living beings), the infinity and absoluteness of God. Hence, in the sense of individualism and uniqueness, human beings are the most valuable creations. China’s traditional culture as represented by Confucianism, however, never understands the individual as isolated but as the center of a network of relationships. Since the constant improvement of oneself is the common behavioral norm of members in a group, it is beneficial to form a community consciousness (family, clan, country) of a constantly expanding relationship network and to position oneself within it. Here, “life” means the day-to-day living conditions of real human beings, and the “ultimate meaning” of life is realized through day-to-day life practice. This optimistic belief in “the secular as sacred” leads Chinese culture to have the faith that people do not have to rely on external help to transform the world from within and do not need to resort to any form of extreme transcendence or absoluteness. Moreover, in the Chinese mindset the argument in Western religion that the adoption of a religious belief is nothing less than a *vita nova*, “new birth” or “regeneration” is all but a metaphor, symbol, myth, or a mere construction of the relationship between the religion and the individual created by Western Christian theology. Chinese traditional culture advocates relying not on the immortality of the soul, but to positively affirm life in the present world. Confucianism advocates establishing virtue, achievements, and teachings (立德、立功、立言). This idea of the “three imperishables” (三不朽) then became the idea of an “eternal life” as passed on for generations among Chinese. However, this notion of imperishables and eternal life was never used as a criterion to be imposed on others. Thus, it can be seen that Chinese traditional culture looks upon the value of life from how men relate to their surroundings. This indistinct thinking is precisely what implies that the subject and the object are indistinguishable, and that nature and men are an integral whole. By means of “becoming unconscious of the boundary between oneself and the outside world” (物我兩忘), men see the world in which they themselves exist as an ever-moving and changing unified entirety, and conceive and explain the world through the concepts of “interaction and resonance between all living things” (萬物交感), “resonance between Heaven and men” (天人感應), and “the mutual destruction and mutual engendering of the five elements” (五行相克相生). This kind of thinking contains a wealth of dialectical ideas which can make up for the deficiency in Western culture that breaks up the kaleidoscopic world into shreds and pieces, and considers them to be static, rigid, and isolated parts.

In the social world, Chinese traditional culture no doubt lacks the individual rights advocated by Western culture, but it manifests the value of the individual by using the interrelationship between the self and the group.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, “the human heart, nature, and the heavenly Way become one in virtue” (人心与自然、天道合一合德), making people part of the cosmic order. This is the rationale for men to exist in interactive relationships as a “species being,” and it makes participating in secular affairs in the present world and attaching importance to social ethics and cultural intermediaries a kind of obligation and responsibility for all human beings. There is a strong tension between this humanitarian spirit that takes “the secular as sacred” and the rational humanitarianism of Western culture that is characterized by the adage of Francis Bacon: “knowledge is power.” At the same time, the Chinese humanitarian spirit transcends the biases that stem from the dichotomy, binary opposition, and zero-sum game between eco-centrism (e.g., some people suggest that even the HIV virus has the right to live, which is borderline eco-fascism) and anthropocentrism (the measures of men are the purposes of the world). It also becomes a rationale behind the condemnation of modern civilization for its purely instrumental, rationality-driven, and greedy nature manifest in the excessive and unrestrained exploitation of natural resources. As such, Tu Wei-ming believes that Chinese traditional culture is neither cosmological nor anthropological, but is, undoubtedly, anthropocosmic.<sup>19</sup>

A related question is that of immanent transcendence in Confucianism. In the words of the neo-Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), the skill of “inner sageliness” (內聖), such as cultivating “uprightness and sincerity” (正心诚意), as well as “investigating things and extending knowledge” (格物致知), is to attentively establish one’s ideas, with “benevolence” (仁) as the starting point of everything, taking “life” (生命) as the foundation from beginning to end, and in real life taking “people” (人) as the basis, which means “nursing one’s own life on the inside, while arranging for the lives of all people on the outside.” Therefore, the relation of Confucian inner sageliness and interhuman relationships is of a naturally humane organic character (that is, “benevolence”), and the ties of this relation are more congenial and intimate than anything based on “intelligence” (intellect, cognition) in Western culture. Therefore, Chinese culture with its worldly wisdom grasps the virtues of heaven cherishing life, and verifies that the transcendent absolute entity is a “universal moral entity,” that is, “benevolence.”<sup>20</sup> That explains why, in Chinese culture,

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18 For example, Yan Fu 严复 (1853–1921) translated John Stuart Mill’s (1806–1873) *On Liberty* (自由论) as *On the Boundary between the Group and the Self* (群己权界论, 1903). He thereby clearly reveals the essence of “society” as a unity of opposites between functional self-preservation and collective moral constraints.

19 See Tu Wei-ming 2001.

20 Mou Zongsan 1978, 66.

nothing can go beyond this universal moral entity and be seen as legitimate. Such is the immanent moral transcendence of Chinese culture.

What neo-Confucianism emphasizes as “immanence” signifies “human nature,” that is, the inner spirit that makes men worthy to be men, such as “benevolence.” “Transcendence” refers to the foundation for the existence of the universe or the being of the universe, that is, “the heavenly Way” (天道), “the heavenly principles” (天理), “the supreme ultimate” (太极), and so forth. As a result, contemporary neo-Confucianism understands “immanence” and “transcendence” in respective correspondence with the concepts of “nature and destiny” (性命) and “the heavenly Way” in traditional Confucianism.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Confucian philosophy also believes that “transcendence” and “immanence” are in unity. This unity, also known as “immanent transcendence,” becomes the ideological basis of Chinese culture’s “unity of heaven and men” (天人合一). This is not only the ideal realm pursued by Chinese culture it is also the spiritual root of the essential differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Evidently, the “transcendence” emphasized by Western religions is an ontological commitment and establishes the basis of the separation of the sacred and the secular. Neo-Confucianism emphasizes that the unity of “transcendence” and “immanence” employs “immanent transcendence” in a relative sense, and such becomes the rationale behind the “unity of heaven and men” in Chinese culture. The “transcendence” of the West, as characterized by the “Oedipus complex,” is about the logic of separating and dividing. It aims to cut off tradition, and to eliminate the old in order to make way for the new. China’s “immanence,” as embodied in filial piety, is about the logic of uniting and becoming one. The aim is to respect ancestors and extend the familial line. The difference between them gives us an idea of why Chinese and Western cultures have taken so different paths of development.

Western culture can be generalized by a “Faustian spirit,” representing the profound individualism in Western civilization and the spirit of insatiable pursuit and desire for domination in the exploration of knowledge. This exuberant ambition worships instrumental rationality with the purpose to conquer the external world. Chinese culture, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of the former. Take the example of Daoism which advocates an attitude of restraint and modesty; one is not to be avid (the concept of “selflessness” 无欲) and not to take rash action (the concept of “non-action” 无为). The monotheistic mode of thinking in Western culture is not limited to religious forms but is a deep-rooted mindset that displays itself in all aspects of social life. Judging from Weber’s “struggle of the gods” in the field of modern social values, all choices come with a price tag in real life: what the powerful group does out of its cherished values will inevitably ignore or exclude that of the other relatively powerless groups, and vice versa. Thus, it can be seen that certain “mysterious”

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21 Tang Yijie 1991, 2–3.

junctions in one culture often become a blind spot or threshold of consciousness in understanding another culture.

In this situation, it is especially necessary to promote tolerance, to judge another's feelings by one's own, to think another's thoughts, and to show compassionate understanding. Chinese traditional culture advocates keeping a dynamic balance in view of the tension between cultural relativism and ethnocentrism: on one hand, one must oppose the powerful group's condescending arrogant posture which seeks to define cultural differences as an ideology and uses it as a means of imposing domination. On the other hand, one must resist the extremist stance that some powerless groups take to protect equality, lest we come to a point where the oneness of humankind and universalism are challenged. In terms of assessing the development of the world's main civilizations, Weber gives unduly high praises to the divisive approach of Western rationality, and strongly depreciates the unified approach of Eastern irrationality. Weber's tendency to painstakingly pursue "causality" in the spiritual realm, consistent and at all times, and the "objective possibility" of "prediction" is, in a way, fundamentally consistent with Comtian positivism. These factors together led Weber to misjudge Chinese religion and culture.

### 3.2 Advantages and Disadvantages in Using Ideal Types

In his sociology of religion, in looking at the theodicy question, Weber analyzes the various ways to redemption that have emerged in different religions throughout world history and constructs the ideal type of religions by using complex and intertwined concepts. The aim was to use asceticism/mysticism and inner-worldly/other-worldly as two dimensions to determine the relationship between different religions and their economic mentality, thus constructing a framework for his comparative religious studies. Out of the four types of religions constituted by the above described two dimensions, Protestantism is classified as "inner-worldly asceticism," and Confucianism as "inner-worldly mysticism." "Ideal type," also called "pure type," is a subjective construction. Weber uses it both as an epistemological and also as a conceptual tool for his interpretive sociology. For example, inner-worldly mysticism and inner-worldly asceticism, Confucianism and Protestantism, moral particularism and moral generalism, irrationalism and rationalism – these are all pairs that correspond to each other. First, it is a kind of subjective construction, used to understand and explain phenomena and to explore the "reality" of phenomena with "possibility" as an intermediary. The "ideal," indeed, never exists in reality in its pure form. Second, ideal types are subject to the logic and rules of "historical-cultural phenomena" at a particular phase in time. According to Weber, the basic units of interpretive sociology are the forms of social action of the individual, and religion, as an ethical system, is linked to specific types of action through social psychology (with selective affinity). Mysticism and asceticism can be regarded as rules and restrictions on forms of action as represented by Confucianism and Puritanism, respectively. Weber uses a mutually exclusive binary to construct the ideal type of people's social

actions. This method resumes the binary oppositional thinking that has taken shape over a long history in the West. It stresses the uniqueness of Western religion in ethics, transcendence, personality, and its functional mechanism that triggers people's motives to act by way of psychology, and thus reveals the choice affinity between religious beliefs and economic, political, legal, and other actions. Weber's ideal type, on the one hand, is insightful and helps people understand the meaning behind concepts. On the other hand, it also leads to a narrowed understanding of social phenomena, conflating the differences of constructed concepts as differences of historical fact. The ideal type turns into rules, norms, or restrictions in understanding social actions, thus obliterating the diversity and pluralism of historical phenomena.

Such thinking in Weber's works devises a series of binary oppositional conceptual categories in his understanding of nature, society, and life, thus indicating that his understanding of things uses an Aristotelian binary logic that excludes the intermediate state (*tertium non datur* or the law of the excluded middle). In Western culture the thinking pattern of "one divides into two" is prevalent. Everything is broken down into two opposing poles, such as object and ego, mind and body, spirit and flesh, and so forth. It then strives to unite them again. Chinese culture, by contrast, has always emphasized that objects, or our understanding of objects, should be based on the concept of "one divides into three." The *Book on Cadence* (律书) in the *Grand Scribe's Records* (史记) states: "Numbers start from one, end with ten, and are complete at three" (數始於一, 終於十, 成於三). "Numbers start from one," means that all objects or the understanding of objects begin with one. "Ends with ten" implies the decimal system. The opposites (one and ten) are then revealed, and we now know the "middle," which is three. At three, the evolution of objects is complete or is completely known. In the *Daodejing*, Laozi says: "The Way bears one, one bears two, two bears three, and three bears all things on earth" (道生一, 一生二, 二生三, 三生萬物). This can be understood in the same way. "Three bears all things on earth" means that "three" is plenty, and "three" is embodied by "all things on earth."<sup>22</sup>

The concept of "one divides into three" implies that in terms of social action there is a "middle way," or "course of the golden mean" (中庸之道). While it sees the position of the middle way against the opposites, it also recognizes a unity in this oppositional relationship. This is precisely how it differs from Western binary oppositional thinking. Cognitively, it advocates finding a fulcrum between the opposing poles that can balance both sides, leveraging on the fulcrum to unite the opposing poles, and making the actions more appropriate and reasonable to avoid falling for cognitive fallacy or biases. As to social ethics, it advocates that individuals should fulfill their social responsibilities, but at the same time, they should also satisfy their reasonable personal desires and aspirations. In terms of emotions, it recognizes that emotions come from human nature but should be expressed appropriately. In order to

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22 Pang Pu 2011, 109.

prevent bias, they must be rationally controlled to make sure “an action impelled by emotion should stop within the limit of propriety” (发乎情、止乎礼)。

It has to be pointed out that the course of the golden mean really is not equivalent to eclecticism. Confucianism actually maintains that the essence of the course of the golden mean is not to change one's position when being put in the middle of the two poles. It also rejects the “Mr. Nice Guy,” who is unprincipled and compromises on everything, as “hypocritical” and regards him as the enemy of virtue: “The village worthy is the ruin of virtue” (*Lunyu* 17.13). Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, also sees the middle way as virtuous and considers being “excessive” and “falling short” as evils.<sup>23</sup> He shares the same view as Chinese Confucianism on this point. In the *Analects*, Confucius sees the “middle way” as the most appropriate way: “Having failed to find moderate men for associates, one would, if there were no alternative, have to turn to the undisciplined and the over-scrupulous. The former are enterprising, while the latter will draw the line at certain kinds of action” (*Lunyu* 13.21). “Enterprising” means being “excessive,” and to “draw the line” means “falling short.” This is what “overshooting the mark is as bad as falling short” (*Lunyu* 11.16) means. This paragraph in the *Analects* has had a far-reaching impact on the social actions of the Chinese. Aristotle only noticed the opposition between the middle and the two opposing poles, but he did not see their oneness. This may be where Western culture's emphasis on dichotomy began. Weber's “ideal type” methodology inherits this shortcoming of Western culture.

In *The Society of Society* (*Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 1997), German sociologist Niklas Luhmann argues that the dominant worldview in old European culture is an ontological one. The fundamental flaws according to Luhmann are as follows: firstly, it assumes epistemological premises to be facts, and it proceeds from a differentiation between existence/non-existence, admitting only the rationality of existence yet excluding negated matters as non-existent. This type of epistemology, based on the differentiation between existence and non-existence yet absolutizing existence, has a certain affinity with modernity, which is fundamentally characterized by functional differentiation. In other words, the hypothesis, according to which “only existence exists and non-existence is non-existent” matches the reality of modern social life in which differentiation possesses immense power of persuasion, thus contributing to the increasingly evident tendency of European social theories to emphasize division rather than unity and to disregard the idea that within division there is unity. Secondly, in this ontological worldview paradoxes are excluded. “The law of the excluded middle,” expressed in formal logic, views paradoxes as a disturbance to rational thinking that should be avoided at all cost and therefore excludes them. This particular mode of considering problems, which stresses that thought and existence have an identical ontology, inevitably brings about the rationalization of the standpoint “one or the

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23 Yalishiduode [Aristotle], *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1990, 106.

other” (if not white then black) and denies the existence of gray areas in life (phenomena that are both black and white), thus disregarding that the two sides in a paradox may also unite.<sup>24</sup> Weber’s ideal type embodies this fundamental flaw in traditional European culture, and Luhmann’s criticism of the ontological mode in the European tradition goes right to the heart of the problem with this particular Weberian concept. In fact, it shows aspects which are extraordinary close to the “harmony and unity” (和合) thinking in traditional Chinese philosophy.

Weber believes that the intellectualistic nature of Confucianism has brought about a gnostic characteristic in its understanding of the world and the meaning of life in Chinese culture. This, in conjunction with the linguistic defects of pictographic writing – being image-based and remaining at the figurative descriptive state, it lacks logical reasoning and systemicity, and its extreme practicality makes this tool of thought unable to move past forms such as fables and metaphors<sup>25</sup> – led Weber to classify Confucianism as an inner-worldly mystical religion. This fully exposes Weber’s limitations in understanding the Chinese language, its semantic method, and its aesthetic sense. It also illustrates that Weber knew very little about the role of the pictographic writing system in ensuring China’s unity as a multiethnic country for more than a millennium, as well as its economic and social development.

Contemporary intercultural comparative research may make out the differences between Chinese traditional culture and Western culture by mere comparison of the former’s concepts of “All-Under-Heaven” (天下) and “All-Within-the-Seas” (海内) with the latter’s “universalism” or “cosmopolitanism.” On the one hand, cosmopolitanism recognizes world citizenship from a normative or philosophical level and emphasizes the importance of world citizenship to religion, culture, ethnicity, and other integrating ties of the nation-state from Kant’s a priori concept of “universal law” or Hegel’s speculative concept of “unity.” On the other hand, this kind of thinking, when expressed in social theory, opposes the nation-state as a closed, self-sufficient, independent unit, and attempts to separate the concept of “society” from its presupposed relation with the nation-state. Following the dichotomy in European traditional theory and applying it to social change, cosmopolitanism regards the present era as a time of universalism that deviates from and stands in opposition to the past, and that represents the logic of the West as the powerhouse in contemporary international politics. However, the notions of “peace in All-Under-Heaven” (天下太平) and “everyone Within-the-Four-Seas belongs to one family” (四海一家) are firmly embedded in the Chinese traditional concepts of “All-Under-Heaven” and “All-Within-the-Seas.” Hence, traditional Chinese culture is opposed to “ruling by force” and “hegemony”

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24 See Qin Mingrui 2016.

25 See *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber’s Collected Works] V: *Confucianism and Taoism*, chap. 5 and 6 on the literati and the Confucian life orientation.

and instead advocates ideas of order, peace, coexistence of differences, complementation by diversity and mutual reinforcement, with the aim of achieving “natural equality” (自然齐一).

From this point of view, globalization by no means implies a future in which the world is unified and society homogenous, but rather one that respects differences and recognizes diversity, “harmonious without homogeneity” (和而不同, *Lunyu* 13.24). Weber’s argument that the field of values in modern society is characterized by “the struggle of the gods” is precisely what makes the ideal of “universal values” impossible. In an age of “the struggle of the gods,” universally applicable ultimate values cannot exist. Hence, relativism and eclecticism have become wildly popular. It is no wonder that Leo Strauss, when thinking about Judaism’s dictatorial belief in monotheism, criticizes Weber as having fallen into the mud pit of historical nihilism.<sup>26</sup> On this issue, Chinese traditional culture maintains the idea of “one principle in diverse appearances” (理一分殊), in the words of the Song-era Confucian scholar Cheng Yi 程颐 (1033–1107). This carries the meaning that the same ontology appears as a variety of things, but that the essence of these very different things is identical. That is taking the middle way between universalism and particularism, absolutism and relativism, one and many; and in regard to the thousands of ways things differ, to hold on to the impartial way of their sameness. First, it is admitting that there is universal and ordinary existence; then, to believe that the universal is embedded in the individual and particular; finally, to maintain that through the individual and particular one may understand the universal. As Pang Pu states:

Aristotle said that all philosophers use opposition as the first principle. Chinese philosophers, however, seem reluctant to stay on this unstable opposition and always go further to find the harmony that includes, transcends, and constraints the oppositions. That is like finding “three” after having found “one” and “two,” and taking this as the first principle. This is probably where the wisdom of the Chinese lies.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.3 About “Universal History” and the “Historical Individual”

Weber’s comparative religious-historical research at the same time uses typology and historical method to combine static and dynamic research. This is a major feature of his research on the sociology of religion. From the historical process of religious development, Weber chose Protestantism with its greatly important religious ethic as the ideal type for his comparative study. By way of comparison he makes out whether the characteristics or overall character of a historical religious phenomenon are close to this ideal type, that is to determine

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26 See Lie’ao Shitelaosi [Leo Strauss] 2006, 29, 34.

27 Pang Pu 2011, 138.

the degree of closeness between the historical phenomenon and the theoretically constructed ideal. Or, we may say that he explores the uniquely determinant features of this religious ethic in shaping the patterns of real life in the Christian world, as well as how these features make this religion different from other religions. Weber relates Protestantism to the formation of economic mentality, representing the general direction of religious-historical development, hence "universal history." All other religions, albeit their distinction is highly complicated, only signify a certain "new phase" in the historical development of religions, and hence they belong to specific or particular "historical individuals."

Weber's typological and historical research attempts to bring correlations between the ethics of different religions and their economic mentality into a unified set of individuals. His aim is to reveal that what seems disorderly and unsystematic from the point of view of the historical individual is in fact, from the point of view of universal history, part of the endlessly and constantly progressing developmental process of human nature. In other words, the Reformation and Protestantism, although born out of a specific historical context, have "universal meaning" and validity in regard to the cultures of different regions. This is exactly what the meaning of the word "universal history" implies. It is an entanglement of universality and particularity, and it combines ideas and history into an ideal type without losing its tension.

The term "universal history" originates from Immanuel Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*.<sup>28</sup> Kant hoped that future historians of philosophy would compose a history of humanity, revealing the extent to which human beings have approached and departed from this ultimate aim in different eras. In Kant's usage universal history is regarded as a rational concept (*Idee*) that has not yet appeared in reality; despite having an objective purposiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*), it does not yet exist in reality. Weber directly follows Kant's concept of universal history and uses it as a standard in typology. And he uses historical individuals as the opposite category in his historical comparative analysis: the development of universal history is attributed to the self-realization of rational principles. As far as normativity is concerned, human history has purposiveness; as far as actuality is concerned, human history has regularity.

Both the "Protestant ethic" with its great exemplary importance as well as the materialized form of its economic mentality – "capitalism" – are in fact "reality" in the field of experience; and the "idea," already detached from the field of consciousness, has long become an "entity" in the field of experience. The difference between the two is as follows: if we say that Kant regards the world citizen and the resulting "permanent peace" as "universal history" and considers it to be the ultimate goal of humanity and the most perfect state system, he is roaming around in the field of theoretical rationality while wanting to write a

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28 See Kangde [Immanuel Kant] 1996a, 1996b.

work of philosophical anthropology. For Weber, as a neo-Kantian sociologist, Protestantism, with its ethic and capitalism, is “universal history,” and he regards it as an achievable goal for humanity as well as the embodiment of the perfect social system. Hence, he is attempting to write a work on religious anthropology in the field of practical rationality. Here everything in the development of human history is undoubtedly centered in Europe. Weber follows Kant’s critique on historical reason and tries to compare religions (historical individuals) at different stages of historical development (type) with the ultimate goal (universal history) guided by the core standard (Protestantism) while examining the correlation between religious characteristics and their economic rationality. This in the end reveals the prospects for the future development of human universal history. On a positive note, Weber’s comparative religious-historical research, or to say his attempt to establish a kind of religious anthropology, still has profound and long-term theoretical significance. And although it contains a relatively strong element of Eurocentrism, it is certainly theoretically inspiring Eurocentric thinking.

However, in the field of practice, Weber’s comparative religious research is demonstrably in serious contradiction with his theory. His theoretical focus is on the logical consistency between different religions, the purpose of which is to highlight the uniqueness of Protestantism, but he passes over the actual development processes of these religions. On the “Economic Ethics of the World’s Religions,” Weber explains his comparative religious research in a footnote:

The geographical order of our investigation – from East to West – is decided by mere chance. In fact, it is not the external geographical distribution, but rather the inner rationale for the purpose of the discussion that is the decisive factor in the order of investigation. This shall be clear if more attention is paid to this matter.<sup>29</sup>

Weber’s three-volume *Sociology of Religion* is exactly arranged in this manner. At the beginning of the first volume, the ideal type of religious rationalization is established in the *Protestant Ethic*. Only then follows *Confucianism and Taoism*, the first part in the overall topic of “Economic Ethics of the World’s Religions.” The second volume is *Hinduism and Buddhism* and the third, *Ancient Judaism*. Weber had planned to write about Islam and Catholicism, but the plan was never realized due to his sudden death. This tells us something about the “inner rationale” of the order of investigation. On the one hand, it is a diachronic perspective that implies an evolutionary view on religion, according to which the evolution of religion follows a path from pantheism (animism) to polytheism, and then to monotheism. That is to say that monotheism is also supposed to demonstrate a higher or even the highest degree of “disenchantment” (*Entzauberung*), which also means that it is the highest stage in the development of religions. On the other hand, accompanied by the

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29 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber’s Collected Works] V: *Confucianism and Taoism*, 494.

evolutionary direction the selective affinity between religious ethics and its economic mentality becomes increasingly closer, and this is a synchronic perspective. Although Weber asserts that he chose the six major world religions as his object of inquiry based on a value-free (*wertfrei*) standpoint, this standpoint is still associated with certain value conceptions, and it is only in the interpretation that no value judgment is added. For example, Weber writes: "We shall use these two previously written papers which are now included at the beginning of this essay collection as examples. Therefore, (the research on the world's religions) really should be seen under the premise of understanding these two papers."<sup>30</sup> These two papers refer to the *Protestant Ethic* and the preface, "The Spirit of Capitalism and Rationalization," written for his comparative religious studies. According to this suggestion by Weber, the direction and degree of development of all other religions does not only follow the developmental path of the Protestant ethic and its association with economic mentality, but in logical terms one also has to reach the following conclusion: In terms of rationalization and economic progress, China's Confucian civilization of the Far East inevitably lags behind the civilizations of the West, Middle East, and the other civilizations in the Near East.

However, this "inner rationale" brings about the following problems that are difficult to surmount. First, historically, it goes against historical fact to claim that from antiquity to the Middle Ages Chinese society was institutionally and culturally less advanced than Europe or the Middle East. This "inner rationale" does not stand historically; regardless of whether looked upon by empirical observation or abstract meaning, it is not convincing.<sup>31</sup> Second, methodologically, it confuses the diachronic perspective within Protestant (religious) culture with the synchronic perspective between different (religious) cultures. This led Weber to place Protestant ethics, a product of the Reformation, on a par with Confucian ethics, a product of the axial age, causing a dislocation of time and space in his comparative research.<sup>32</sup> Third, in terms of theory, if Kant's "universal history" is in unity with the identity of the world citizen, Weber's universal history is based on the Protestant ethic or the spirit of capitalism. For both, the direction of universal history represents the ultimate destination of human history and the perfect social system. However, in the conclusion of his *Protestant Ethic*, Weber believes that the prospect for the future of society is an "iron

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30 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber's Collected Works] V: *Confucianism and Taoism*, 462.

31 During the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1126), a highly developed economic and political culture existed in China. Yet, as has been pointed out by the American historical sociologist Charles Tilly, "Europe" (as a concept) did not exist until the tenth century. The thirty million people living in Europe at the time did not have any common history or culture, or an identity that connected them to one another. See Tilly 1990, 38. A Chinese translation of this book was published in 2007.

32 See Lin Duan 2014.

cage.” In this sense, in Weber’s theory, practical rationality deviates seriously from theoretical rationality, indicating that his “historical method” of comparative religious studies is seriously contradicted by his “typology.” This obviously reduces its academic value. Finally, the evolutionary ideology that is implied in his comparative religious study is also contradicted by his consistent resistance to the progressive view of universal progress, according to which advanced societies are the result and consequence of the development of primitive societies. This has caused his “typology” to have fallen from a somewhat enlightening Eurocentrism in its original sense into the pitfall of normative Eurocentrism. After having defended his typology, Weber, maybe out of frustration, after all gives this supplemental explanation as a conclusion: “all qualitative contrasts in reality, in the last resort, can somehow be comprehended as purely quantitative differences in the combinations of single factors. However, it would be extremely unfruitful to emphasize and repeat here what goes without saying.”<sup>33</sup>

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33 *Weibo zuopinji* [Weber’s Collected Works] V: *Confucianism and Taoism*, 492.

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