

INTRODUCTION TO “BETWEEN APPROPRIATION AND REFUTATION – ON THE SIGNIFICANCE AND RECEPTION OF MAX WEBER IN CHINA”

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Introduction

As the tremendous and unprecedented economic and social upheavals in China since the 1980s continue to amaze the world at the end of the 2010s, the question of the character of Chinese modernization and capitalism is a constant topic of debate among scholars in as well as outside China. Max Weber remains an important focus point in these debates not only because of his classic thesis on the emergence of modern capitalism in Europe but also because of his study on China, *Confucianism and Taoism*. Weber’s research on Chinese society and religion derived from his inquiry into the origins of modern capitalism in Western Europe. He turned to China (as well as other regions of the world) to confirm his hypothesis of cultural factors behind the emergence of the capitalist spirit. Not surprisingly Weber’s classic ideas on the emergence of modern capitalism have received much attention from Chinese scholars. The number of translations gives a first impression of the scope of Chinese reception. *Confucianism and Taoism* (1915/1920) is available in six Chinese translations and *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–05/1920) has been translated nineteen times and is published in at least thirty-seven editions.¹ There are various factors which have to be taken into account in explaining this high number. Among them are the existence of different book markets in mainland China and Taiwan, translations of different English versions as well as of the German original, selective translations (in many cases the extensive footnotes in the original are omitted entirely), bilingual editions (English/Chinese), and scholarly editions as opposed to those intended for a wide readership (many with added illustrations). Even without further detailed analysis the number of translations alone remains a significant indicator in assessing overall Weber reception. Edith Hanke’s survey of Weber translations worldwide shows that Chinese belongs to the “latecomer” languages but has caught up in recent decades and continues to do so. She argues that Max Weber “attained special attention and importance during phases of substantial changes in economic, social and political order.” Weber’s analytical concepts are used “to explain it and also to accompany it, both reflectively and critically.”²

1 Detailed lists of all the translations are found in Appendix 1 (*Confucianism and Taoism*) and Appendix 2 (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*).

2 Hanke 2016, 71–72. This is the English translation of Hanke 2014b. Also see Hanke 2014a; Hanke 2015.

It is without question that the Chinese reception of Weber must be understood in the context of the tremendous social change and rapid economic development in China during recent decades. A reception in the proper sense of the word only began in the 1980s.³ Of course, a few Chinese scholars had already noticed Weber's work in the 1930/40s, but their discussions on Weber remained rather limited and with one exception no full translations of his writings were published. The reception remained largely indirect and therefore limited for the following decades. In the People's Republic of China, as in other socialist countries, Weber was labeled as "bourgeois" and therefore was not studied. This was only to change with the opening of the country under the reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping. The 1980s then witnessed what has been called a "Weber fever" (*Weibo re* 韦伯热). This distinct interest has to be seen against the backdrop of the so-called "Culture Fever" (*wenhua re* 文化热), a larger intellectual and cultural phenomena prevalent in the latter part of the 1980s. Intellectuals and students debated the extent to which China's cultural tradition was holding back the modernization of the country. As part of this movement manifold new ideas and theories by Western thinkers were introduced. Among these was Max Weber, who by some was welcomed as an alternative to the dogmas of official Marxism. In fact, in other parts of the sinophone world the reception had begun a little earlier. The economic rise of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore reactivated ideas about "Confucian capitalism," which had first been brought forward by American sociologists Robert N. Bellah and Norman Jacobs in the 1960s to explain the development in Japan. This idea at times has been deliberately pitted against Weber's notions of capitalism rooted in the Protestant ethic, refuting his thesis that Confucianism inhibited the development of a capitalist system.

Of course, the reception in mainland China and Taiwan were not the same due to differences in the economic, political, and social context. On the mainland it was imbedded in the context of the reform politics and the early reception of Western sociological theory at large. It was about how to make use of Weber's ideas about culture and modernization for economic and political modernization strategies. In Taiwan, on the other hand, the reception was integrated into the sociological discussions of Western academia. At the same time there were efforts toward indigenization in the social sciences. However, the different academic communities devoted to Weber studies in Taiwan, which have been identified by Tsai Po-Fang, all had close ties to Western scholars: for instance, Kao Cheng-Shu 高承恕 with his collaborator Gary Hamilton, who formed a scholarly circle at Tunghai University; Ku Chung-Hwa 顧忠華 and Lin Duan 林端 (1958–2013), who were both students of Wolfgang Schluchter in Heidelberg and followed his approach.

3 The following account of the reception history is based on: Kolonko 1987; Gransow 1992, 177–191; Gransow 1994; Gransow 2000; Trauzettel 1993; Zang 2014; Tsai 2016; Li Yongjing 2015, 11–21; Yu Zhejuan 2009.

In mainland China the relatively liberal and open-minded period, which gave ground for the “Weber fever,” ended abruptly in 1989 with the violent crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests and with the tightening of the state’s ideological grip over all areas of Chinese life that followed. Don S. Zang argues that the Weber reception in mainland China entered a new phase from 1993 onwards. This period is “characterized by efforts among leading intellectuals to *re-read* Weber,” treating him as an icon of Eurocentrism. For Zang this constitutes a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of Weber, which has its roots in the increasing nationalism, promoted and sponsored by the Chinese state, in which he essentially sees an “anti-modern project camouflaged in postmodernist terms.”⁴ However, whether all of the Weber reception from 1993 onwards has to be seen in this light is rather doubtful. In fact, Zang’s paper is confined to the reception in the field of legal studies. The view from inside China by Li Yongjing sees a rupture among Chinese scholars discussing Weber in the 1990s. On the one hand, there are those voices who continue to make use of Weber seeking theoretical support for the modernization of China. On the other hand, Li also makes out scholars who question theories of modernity like that of Weber as inherently Western and claim that they are not applicable to China.

The 2000s saw a distinct increase in the number of scholarly publications on Weber. To a large extent this has to do with the substantial growth of universities, including an increase in students and staff, from around that time on. However, the increase in quantity is not tantamount to an increase in quality. Li Yongjing points out that most of these publications either remain entirely descriptive or completely depart from Weber’s work, creatively transforming his thought to express their own “totally subjective” views. Yu Zhejuan comes to a similar conclusion in his brief analysis of the Chinese reception of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He diagnoses a widespread misreading of Weber often led by ideologically informed wishful thinking than by true analysis and understanding. Frequently a Confucian ethic, as a functional equivalent to Weber’s Protestant ethic, is determined as being either agent in the development of capitalism in China or contrary remedy to the social ills of modern capitalist society. For Yu the reasons behind this are, firstly, that Chinese scholars naturally focus on development in East Asia and China in particular and thus diverge from Weber’s point of departure to explain the special development of Western civilization; secondly, that Chinese scholarship on Weber is not as mature and developed as Western scholarship, because of its comparatively short history. Since Yu Zhejuan made this assessment in 2009 studies on Weber have turned up in even greater numbers. Although not another “Weber fever” the ongoing modernization of Chinese society continues to be accompanied by great interest in Weber’s ideas. This is also evident in the translations of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the majority of which have been published since

4 Zang 2014, 48.

2007. In this context, one should also mention the undertaking to translate the entire Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe. For this purpose a Max Weber Research Center was founded at Shandong University in 2018. Initiated and led by Yan Kewen 阎克文, who has already presented a number of translations, this ambitious endeavor is supposed to be completed within the next twenty years.⁵

The five articles assembled in this thematic focus of *Oriens Extremus* are, with one exception, outcomes of the “Between Appropriation and Refutation: On the Significance and Reception of Max Weber in China” conference organized in collaboration with the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Peking University on March 20–21, 2018, to inaugurate the newly established China Branch Office of the Max Weber Foundation.⁶ With a history that reaches back to the founding of the German Historical Institute in Rome in 1888, the name of Max Weber was added to the Foundation’s name in 2012. One reason for the name change was that Weber’s comparative approach, which went far beyond Germany and even Europe, meets well with the Foundation’s mission to promote social sciences and humanities in an international context and to maintain research institutes outside of Germany for this purpose. To mark its renaming, the Foundation organized a conference on “Max Weber in the World” in July 2012 with a focus on the reception of his writings in those countries in which it maintained research institutes. However, since the Foundation was not active in China at the time, the published proceedings from that conference does not include an article devoted to the Chinese reception of Max Weber.⁷ The Foundation’s new presence in China provided an opportunity to remedy this shortcoming.

The first article is by Su Guoxun 苏国勋 (born 1942), who was a central figure in early Weber reception in mainland China and during the ensuing “Weber fever” period. A paper read on his behalf (he was unable to attend due to illness) at the conference on “Max Weber and China: Culture, Law and Capitalism,” held in 2013 at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London,⁸ shocked participants because of its harsh critique of “Weber’s reductionist account of Confucianism” and especially his argument “that it is impossible for Westerners to understand certain aspects of Chinese culture.”⁹ This conference paper is also the starting point for Don S. Zang’s 2014 analysis of recent Weber reception in China as part of an “anti-modern project.” However, even though Zang quotes Su’s paper, the English version was never published. The translated article here is probably not identical to the paper presented in London, but since it is based on Su’s previously published

5 See <http://www.qdxq.sdu.edu.cn/info/1059/9075.htm> [last accessed 9 May 2019].

6 For the complete program, see https://erccs.hypotheses.org/277_ [last accessed 9 May 2019].

7 Kaiser and Rosenbach 2014.

8 See <https://www.soas.ac.uk/max-weber-and-china/> [last accessed 18 June 2019].

9 Caldwell et al. 2014, 141. Also Zang 2014, 34–35.

articles in Chinese it offers a good summary of his views. One might not agree with his arguments, but Su Guoxun no doubt represents an important strand of Weber reception in China and a full translation of his article allows us to gain a better understanding of this distinctly Chinese reading of Weber.

It begins with a brief historical outline of Weber reception in China, in which Su in particular points out the early reception of the 1930 and 1940s and discusses the circumstances which explain why it remained incomplete until the renewed interest of the 1980s. After three decades of learning and receiving Weberian thought, Su sees the present moment as ripe for Chinese scholars to absorb and reflect on it from a Chinese perspective. However, before Su himself engages in such a Chinese-led “dialogue” with Weber, he first briefly presents beneficial and inspirational aspects of Weberian thought, which shows that despite his criticism Su is much indebted to Weber’s ideas. His criticism of Weber amounts to three main points. Firstly, Weber misunderstands and misinterprets Confucianism; not only does he ignore historical change within Confucianism but also the important role of syncretism in China (interestingly though Su does not make any reference to Buddhism). Secondly, Weber’s model of ideal types is based on binary oppositional thinking deeply rooted in Western tradition. Thirdly, Weber’s comparative research builds on the idea of an evolutionary development of a universal history with Europe as its model and ultimate destination. Su’s allegations of Weber’s Eurocentrism are most evident in the two last points. While he first ranks Weber’s “typology” as an “enlightened Eurocentrism” because it is “a theoretically inspiring Eurocentric thinking,” the “evolutionary ideology” of universal history brings it into the “pitfall of normative Eurocentrism.” In the end, Su’s “dialogue” with Weber boils down to a comparison of Chinese and Western culture at large. Moreover, it carries an explicit value judgment. Traditional Chinese thinking with its more holistic view of the world is presented as the cure for the overly “divisive approach” of Western rationality. Su praises traditional Chinese culture as “opposed to ‘ruling by force’ and ‘hegemony’ and instead advocates ideas of order, peace, coexistence of differences, complementation by diversity and mutual reinforcement.”

The articles that follow, by Hans van Ess and Thomas Fröhlich, albeit not written as responses to Su Guoxun’s, may in part be read as such. Both remind us that Weber’s point of departure is the historical question of why modern capitalism developed in Europe. He only turned to China as an illuminating contrast to capitalism in Europe without an interest in Chinese culture (or other cultures) as such. He also had neither serious interest in contemporary development in China nor in the question of whether it could develop capitalism in the future. Although, as van Ess points out, Weber did not deny this possibility and actually remarks that the Chinese would be quite capable of assimilating modern capitalism. Fröhlich concedes that Weber’s approach rests on a “*methodological* Eurocentrism which presupposes the uniqueness of the European formation of

modernity,” but, unlike Su Guoxun, he underlines that this is no value judgment about the superiority of European civilization. Both van Ess and Fröhlich mention the discussions on the economic rise of Asian countries and the claim that Confucian values played a crucial role in this development. These discussions clearly refer to Weber’s argument that Confucianism, as his heuristic equivalent to the Protestant ethic, prevented China from developing capitalism. However, Confucianism cannot be both hindrance and promoter of modern capitalism at the same time. Van Ess points out that in today’s China, Confucianism no longer serves as the institutional basis; a development that was already under way during Weber’s lifetime. Van Ess and Fröhlich thus agree that was Weber to make a comparative study on modern China today he would certainly not focus on Confucianism. The conclusion van Ess draws is that the economic development in China actually proves Weber right. Fröhlich, on the other hand, makes clear that the discussions’ reference to Weber is distorted since many of the participants ascribe to Confucianism an immediate impact on the economic development while Weber’s argument rests on the assumption “that the Protestant spirit had shaped modern capitalism without there being a conscious Protestant effort to do so.” Contemporary Confucian revivals demonstrate the exact opposite, “namely ill-fated attempts to recover a vanished continuum of Confucian traditions for the sake of coping with the downsides of rapid socioeconomic and political transformation.” Fröhlich finds that such reductionist understandings of Confucianism follow, as it were, the rationale of instrumental reason, and thus unwittingly confirm Weberian pessimism about the outgrowth of instrumental reason in modern capitalist societies.

Hoyt C. Tillman’s article offers a detailed introduction to Yü Ying-shih’s monograph *The Religious Ethic and Mercantile Spirit in Early Modern China* (1987), a study inspired by Weber but not with the ambition to prove him right or wrong. Yü embraces the Weberian approach that religious beliefs had a profound impact on merchant ethics and explores Chinese historical materials looking for parallels with Weber’s Protestant ethic. Through his examination of changes in the religious ethics, taking into consideration the developments in Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist thought, he finds that all three teachings knew an ethic of labor. Therefore, he argues that the idea of an “inner worldly asceticism” was not unique to Europe. At the same time he also diagnoses a general rise in the status of merchants as the traditional boundaries between scholars and merchants became progressively less demarcated in imperial China. How far the ethic of labor influenced this change remains open to question. Nonetheless, Yü does not disagree with Weber’s conclusion on the unique development of modern capitalism in Europe but thinks Weber’s explanation of why China did not produce a capitalist spirit is wrong. At the same time he points out that to Weber it is clear that inner worldly asceticism was

not the sole force to producing the spirit of capitalism. Yü Ying-shih especially appreciates Weber for this multicausal approach and Tillman concludes that Yü's book mainly targeted reductionist argumentation on historical causation as held by Chinese Marxists.

The final paper by George Kam Wah Mak is an addition from an earlier Max Weber conference organized by the late Lin Duan and held at the National University of Taiwan in 2013.¹⁰ In contrast to the other contributions to this thematic focus, Mak analyzes not Weber's views on China, nor his reception in China, but the use of the sources he used in his study on Confucianism and Taoism. He provides some additions to earlier assessments of Weber's sources, with a focus on missionary sources, which have been particularly blamed for their biased views allegedly leading Weber astray. Of course a distinction between missionaries and sinologists in this period is not always easy. Some missionaries became sinologists, others pursued scholarly research on the side. Nonetheless, it is obvious that missionary sources make up for a large part of the material used by Weber. Mak stresses that at the time missionaries had very comprehensive knowledge of Chinese society, because many had lived there for decades. He shows that Weber was well aware of evangelical bias and made use of all his sources critically. And at the same time Weber also complemented the outside view by missionaries and Western scholars with sources in English, French, and German by educated Chinese who had attended universities in Europe.

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10 I have to thank Tsai Po-Fang for his suggestion to include this paper and his help in contacting the author.

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Appendix 1: Chinese Translations of Max Weber's *Confucianism and Taoism*

#	Translator(s)	Transl. from	Year	Publisher	Place
1	Kang Le 康樂; Jian Huimei 簡惠美	English (consulted Japanese transl. and German original)	1989	Yuanliu chuban shiye gongsi 遠流出版事業公司	Taipei
			1995		
		Revision based on German original	2010	Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe 广西师范大学出版社	Guilin
2	Hong Tianfu 洪天富	German	1993	Jiangsu renmin chubanshe 江苏人民出版社	Nan- jing
			2008		
			2010		
			2018		
3	Wang Rongfen 王荣芬	German	1995	Shangwu yinshuguan 商务印书馆	Beijing
			1999		
			2002		
			2004		
		Revised	2008	Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe 广西师范大学出版社	Guilin
			2012	Zhongyang bianyi chubanshe 中央编译出版社	Beijing
2018					
4	Zhang Dengtai 张登泰; Zhang Enfu 张恩富	Not specified [English?]; illustrated (no footnotes)	2007	Renmin ribao chubanshe 人民日报出版社	Beijing
5	Yue Wen 悦文	Not specified [English?]	2010	Shaanxi shifan daxue chubanshe 陕西师范大学出版社	Xi'an
6	Fu Qiang 富强	Not specified [English?]	2012	Anhui renmin chubanshe 安徽人民出版社	Hefei

- Except for #1, which uses the title *Zhongguo de zongjiao: Rujiao yu daojiao* 中國的宗教: 儒教與道教 / 中国的宗教: 儒教与道教, all translations are published as *Rujiao yu Daojiao* 儒教与道教.
- #1 to #3 are the most widely cited.
- The contents of #5 and #6 appear to be identical.

Appendix 2: Chinese Translations of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

#	Translator(s)	Transl. from	Remarks	Year	Publisher	Place
1	Zhang Hanyu 张汉裕	German	Consulted Parsons and Japanese transl.; footnotes not translated	1960	Xiezhì gongyè gongshù chubān gōngsī 协志工业丛書出版公司	Taipei
2	Peng Qian 彭强; Huang Xiaojing 黄晓京	English [Parsons]	Consulted German original and Chinese transl. (#1); includes transl. of Parsons' footnotes	1986 1987	Sichuan renmin chubanshe 四川人民出版社 Tangshan chubanshe 唐山出版社	Chengdu Taipei
3	Yu Xiao 于晓; Cheng Chaoliang 程朝翔; Xu Pei 徐培; Liu Duo 刘鐸; Wang Meixiu 王美秀; Kang Xiaobing 康小兵; Chen Yiliang 陈宜良; Tong Xin 童欣; Deng Zheng 邓真; Tao Ning 陶宁; Chen Weigang 陈维纲	English [Parsons]	Collective translation, each chapter translated by different person; complete translation checked by Su Guoxun 徐国勛	1987 1988 1991 2006 2001 2005 2008	Sanlian shudian 三联书店 Gufeng chubanshe 穀風出版社 Tangshan chubanshe 唐山出版社 Shaanxi shifan daxue chubanshe 陕西师范大学出版社 Zuonan wenhua 左岸文化	Xi'an Beijing Xindian Taipei Xi'an Taipei
4	Lei Zhen 雷震	Not specified [English?]		1999	Zhongguo shehui chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社	Beijing
5	Li Xiujian 李修建; Zhang Yunjiang 张云江	English [Parsons]	Bilingual edition; consulted Chinese translations	2000 2007 2009	Jinghua chubanshe 京华出版社 Jiuzhou chubanshe 九州出版社 Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社	Beijing Beijing Beijing
6	Kang Le 康乐; Jian Huimei 简惠美	German	Generally considered most accurate and closest to the original	2014 2007 2007 2010 2019	Jiangxi jiaoyu chubanshe 江西教育出版社 Yuanliu chubān shìyè gūfēn yǒuxiǎn gōngsī 远流出版事业股份有限公司 Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe 广西师范大学出版社 Shanghai sanlian shudian 上海三联书店	Nanchang Taipei Guilin Shanghai
7	Chen Ping 陈平	Not specified [English?]	Illustrated; explanatory footnotes	2007	Shaanxi shifan daxue chubanshe 陕西师范大学出版社	Xi'an
8	Long Jing 龙靖	English [Parsons]	Consulted Chinese transl. (#2, #3); illustrated	2007 2012	Quanyan chubanshe 群言出版社 Anhui renmin chubanshe 安徽人民出版社	Hefei

9	Zhao Yong 赵勇	English [Parsons, Kalberg 3rd edition] German	Consulted German original	2009	Shaanxi renmin chubanshe 陕西人民出版社	Xi'an
10	Zheng Zhiyong 郑志勇	German	Consulted English translation; explanatory footnotes; intended for non-academic readers	2010 2019	Jiangxi renmin chubanshe 江西人民出版社	Nanchang
11	Yan Kewen 阎克文	English [Parsons]	see [*] below!	2010 2012 2018	Shanghai renmin chubanshe 上海人民出版社	Shanghai
12	Su Guoxun 苏国勋; Qi Fangming 覃方明; Zhao Lijun 赵立玮, Qin Mingrui 秦明瑞	English [Kalberg, 3rd edition]	Consulted German original; includes translation of Kalberg's introduction	2010	Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe 社会科学文献出版社	Beijing
13	Ma Qiyun 马奇炎; Chen Jing 陈婧	Not specified [English?]	Illustrated; footnotes not translated	2012	Beijing daxue chubanshe 北京大学出版社	Beijing
14	Shen Haixia 沈海霞; Long Jing 龙婧	Not specified [English?]		2013	Dianzi gongye chubanshe 电子工业出版社	Beijing
15	Zhu Qian 朱倩; Ni Shoupeng 倪寿鹏; Zhang Chong 张冲	English [Parsons]	Bilingual edition; textbook for university students	2014	Shanghai waiyu jiaoyu chubanshe 上海外语教育出版社	Shanghai
16	Li Chunxiang 李春香	Not specified [English?]	Illustrated; footnotes not translated	2016	Zhongguo gongren chubanshe 中国工人出版社	Beijing
17	Liu Zuobin 刘作宾	Not specified [English?]		2017	Zuojia chubanshe 作家出版社	Beijing
18	Yuan Zhiying 袁志英	German		2018	Shanghai wiyen chubanshe 上海译文出版社	Shanghai
19	Yu Zhejian 郁喆隽	German	see [**] below!	2018	Zhejiang daxue chubanshe 浙江大学出版社	Hangzhou

* Includes translations of numerous English prefaces (Parsons, Giddens, Tawney); translations of selected footnotes by Kalberg; includes translations of contemporary critical replies to Weber (based on English translations)

** Selective translation; illustrated; intended for non-academic readers

— Except for #1, which uses the title *Jidu xinjiao de lunli yu ziben zhuyi de jingshen* 基督新教的伦理与资本主义精神, all translations were published as *Xinjiao lunli yu ziben zhuyi jingshen* 新教伦理与资本主义精神 / 新教伦理与资本主义精神.

— Parsons's English translation with some minor explanatory footnotes in Chinese was published by Shanghai waiyu jiaoyu chubanshe 上海外语教育出版社 (2004).

— Not a translation but an extensive introduction and guide to *The Protestant Ethic* that should be mentioned in this context is: Gu Zhonghua 顾志华, *Weibo de Jidu xinjiao lunli yu ziben zhuyi jingshen* "daodu 韋伯的“基督新教伦理与资本主义精神”導讀, Taipei: Taiwan shudian 臺灣書店 1997 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe 广西师范大学出版社 2005).