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Thinking with Weber's *Religion of China* in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new approach to Max Weber's *Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, which is to make the development of Confucianism, rather than the development of modern capitalism, the dependent variable in our analysis of Chinese society. In this light, Weber's treatment of Confucianism and Daoism as an interconnected whole (the orthodoxy and heterodoxy of Chinese society) may be seen as a promising step in understanding the ecological dynamics of the Chinese religious system. In this system, diverse religious traditions coexist and are often interdependent, forming a rich tapestry of practices, beliefs, and ethics that give meaning to people in their everyday lives.

Keywords

Max Weber and Chinese religion – “orthodoxy and heterodoxy” in Chinese religion – Confucianism and Daoism – Chinese religious systems

在二十一世纪思考韦伯之《中国的宗教》

摘要

这篇论文提出对马克斯·韦伯的《中国的宗教：儒教与道教》新的解读。传统的解读强调儒教与现代资本主义兴起的关系，考察儒教是否可为之精神的源起。在新的解读里，我们强调注重儒教(儒家)在当代中国社会中的具体生态，以儒教本身的发展为分析的主体，而非现代资本主义的发展。本文强调韦伯的一个有益思路，即把儒教和道教(他称作“中国社会的正统和异教”)看作中国宗教里一个相互联系的整体。这可成为理解中国宗教如何如生态系统一样运作的有希望的一步。在这个理论框架里，各种宗教传统不止共存，更相互依存，儒教，道教和其他传统共同在日常生活中赋予人们宗教实践的指导，精神信念的理解，以及伦理道德的象征。

关键词

韦伯与中国宗教，中国宗教中的“正统与异端”，儒教与道教，中国宗教系统

Max Weber published his groundbreaking treatise on China, *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, in 1915, followed by a revised version in 1920 (Weber [1915–1920] 1989). Hans H. Gerth's English translation, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, appeared in 1951 (Weber 1951). It has been one hundred years since the publication of *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, and fifty years since the publication of its English version. There can be no dispute over the great impact Weber's text has had on the study of Chinese society and Chinese religion, both in the West and in China, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Numerous books and articles have been devoted to the assessment of Weber's claims, and countless symposia have been held to discuss the validity of Weber's arguments.¹

1 This symposium, "Confucianism and Daoism: From Max Weber to the Present," which took place in March 2018, is one of the latest efforts to reconnect Weber's analysis of China with current scholarship. Two recent examples are the conference "Max Weber and China: Culture, Law, and Capitalism," held at the SOAS Chinese Institute in 2013, and "Max Weber and Chinese Culture: *The Religion of China* Centennial International Conference," held at the National Taiwan University in the same year. Jack Barbalet (2018, 2017, 2014) has produced the

In this paper, I propose not to argue with Weber, as many great scholars have done in the past, but to think with Weber.² My central argument is that we may be able to find new ways of thinking about Chinese religion, especially Confucianism and Daoism in the twenty-first century, along the sociological path Weber traveled. However, to do so requires a radical redirection of Weber's as well as our own attention, namely to move our gaze away from the problem of modernization, particularly the emergence of the spirit of modern capitalism, which was Weber's central concern in his ambitious sociology of world religions project. We need to turn our gaze toward the actual development of religious life in Chinese society and examine the sociological factors that determine and condition its course in the contemporary world.

The reason for this turn is that, fundamentally, Weber treats Confucianism and Daoism as independent variables in his analysis, and modern capitalism as the dependent variable. What he really cares about is the development of modern rational capitalism, the increasing rationalization in all spheres of social life, and the eventual forging of the iron cage. For Weber, his "sociology of world religions" project is essentially a project about the fate of modernity, understood comparatively, on a global scale.

The Weberian concern about modernity and rationalization has been dominating conversations about Chinese religions in the social sciences and sinology for most of the twentieth century (Yu 1987). Much valuable work has been done in this important direction, from studies of the impact of Confucian ethics on regional economic development in the Asian countries most influenced by Confucianism, such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore (Tu 1996), to discussions about Confucian merchants and business ethics in Meiji Japan and Ming–Qing China (Sagers 2018; Tucker 1989; Dillon 1989). However, much of the content of these rich analyses is on the level of philosophical or historical discussions. Only recently have empirical social scientists turned to the contemporary realities of economics and Confucianism—and Chinese religious life in general—promising an exciting new direction of analysis (such as Herrmann-Pillath, Guo, and Feng 2020).

Outside of the paradigm of Confucianism and modern capitalism, however, there are other possibilities for understanding religious life in China. Many

most systematic sociological analyses of Weber's *The Religion of China*, among other notable ones, such as Dingxin Zhao's examination (2015). For a recent critical account of Weber's "sociology of world religions" project, see Ertman 2017.

2 I thank the two reviewers of this article for their very helpful suggestions. I also thank all the participants at the symposium "Confucianism and Daoism: From Max Weber to the Present" for their valuable comments.

scholars of Chinese religions are for the most part unconcerned about the uneven global development of modern capitalism and whether Confucianism has either hindered or aided its cause. We care about Confucianism and Daoism as what they are: rich, diverse, and complex traditions that have been affecting the lives of millions of people throughout history as well as today. It is only natural for us to treat Confucianism and Daoism as the dependent variables in our analysis and to examine the empirical factors that may have contributed to their never-ending changes and transformations. In the past ten years, there have been a growing number of empirical studies of Confucianism that focus on its lived reality in China and beyond (for example, Jeung, Fong, and Kim 2019; Billioud 2018; Sun 2018; Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Hammond and Richey 2015; Sun 2013; Chen 2012a, 2012b; Yang and Tamney 2011).

In the rest of this paper, I first consider Weber's *Religion of China* in its historical context. I then propose a sociological framework within which we may examine factors relevant to the function of Confucianism in contemporary societies. My final task is to offer some brief accounts, based on recent scholarship, of the diverse configurations of these factors in different national contexts, from Mainland China to Japan, from the United States to Indonesia. My intention here is to lay the ground for a bigger claim, which is that a sociology of comparative study of Confucianism inspired by Weber may carry us on to a further stage of analysis, one in which we must take Confucianism seriously within the global context, where many of its newer expressions are now emerging.

1 Looking for Religion in Weber's *The Religion of China*

Konfuzianismus und Taoismus, Weber's original text, was published ten years after *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*), which appeared in two installments in 1904–1905 in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. The next text in Weber's sociology of world religions project did not take nearly as long to complete; he published *Hinduismus und Buddhismus* in 1916. It was translated into English in 1958 as *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. The last material to be published from Weber's larger project was *Das antike Judentum* (*Ancient Judaism*), which appeared in 1917–1919 in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. It was later included in the volumes of *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, published after Weber's untimely death in 1920, at age 56. Weber's grand plan was to include Islam as well, but he did not have a chance to pursue a book-length study of it.

The English translation of *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus* was published in 1951 (Weber 1951). For the 1964 republication of this translation, Ch'ing-K'un Yang (1911–1999), known as C. K. Yang, wrote an excellent introduction (Yang 1964). Yang belonged to the same generation of Chinese social scientists as Fei Xiaotong, who was arguably the forerunner of both anthropology and sociology in twentieth-century China. Like many scholars of their age, Yang and Fei received a thorough classical Chinese education before being introduced to Western learning. The two young men were roommates at Yenching University in Beijing before going abroad to study; Yang received his PhD in sociology at the University of Michigan in 1939, and Fei received his PhD in anthropology at the London School of Economics in 1938. A professor at the University of Pittsburgh for most of his life, Yang is much admired for his book *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Yang 1961). For many scholars of Chinese religions today, this study remains one of the most perceptive and stimulating, with its conception of the “diffused” nature of Chinese religions.

In his introduction to *The Religion of China*, Yang makes the following discerning remarks:

In this volume of Confucianism and Taoism, renamed *The Religion of China* by Gerth to avoid the isms, Weber continued from his theme in the *Protestant Ethic* by trying to contrast the distinguishing features of traditional Chinese society, Confucianism and Taoism, with the characteristics of the capitalistic economy and the spirit of capitalism. In reading this volume, the general reader may be puzzled if he guides himself too strictly by the translation title, *The Religion of China*, for the book deals with much more than religion. In fact, of the 249 pages of translated text, 141 pages, or better than half of the total, were devoted chiefly to characterizing various aspects of Chinese society and their contrast with analogous parts in the Western and other societies, and religion was taken up only in occasional sections. (Yang 1964:xviii–xix)

He goes on to issue a much-needed directive to the reader:

Moreover, Weber treated Confucianism more as an ethical doctrine than as a theistic religion because of its lack of metaphysical foundations, in spite of its toleration of magic. It may help the general reader to follow Weber's theme better if the volume is treated as a study of Chinese social structure, ethical values, and religion with special relevance to their propensity toward development of rational bourgeois capitalism. (xix)

The wisdom of this suggestion becomes more evident when we examine the structure of Weber's text, which has three parts:

- Part One: Sociological Foundations
 - City, Prince[,] and God
 - The Feudal and Prebendal State
 - Administration and Rural Structure
 - Self-Government, Law, and Capitalism
- Part Two: Orthodoxy
 - The Literati
 - The Confucian Life Orientation
- Part Three: Taoism
 - Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy
- Conclusions: Confucian and Puritanism

Indeed, as Yang notes, what we see here is a book-length study of Chinese society in terms of which of its elements—"a mixture of structural or 'material' characteristics" (xix)—are favorable to the development of modern capitalism, and which ones are not. In this analytical process, Daoism is brought in mostly as a native tradition and system of values that is in contrast with the orthodoxy of Confucian rationalism. There is a constant underlying comparison with Western society, especially between Confucianism and Protestantism.

Through it all, Confucianism is used to determine whether China has had a similar ethical source that could motivate people to achieve the same "peculiar ethic" that connects the capitalist work ethic with salvation, made possible in the West by Calvinist beliefs. Weber's verdict is a famously negative one:

Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world; Puritan rationalism meant rational mastery of the world. Both the Puritan and the Confucian were "sober men." But the rational sobriety of the Puritan was founded in a mighty enthusiasm which the Confucian lacked completely; it was the same enthusiasm which inspired the monk of the Occident. The rejection of the world by occidental asceticism was insolubly linked to its opposite, namely, its eagerness to dominate the world. (Weber 1951:248)

Here Weber is bridging the "this-worldly asceticism" of the Puritan, the new norm after the Reformation, with the "other-worldly asceticism" of Catholicism, the old form of Christianity. What makes "this-worldly asceticism" unique

in world history is its ability to be transformed into worldly activities, “rational mastery of the world.” For Weber, Confucianism simply cannot offer those values that are essential to the development of modern capitalism:

The Chinese in all probability would be quite capable, probably more capable than the Japanese, of assimilating capitalism which has technically and economically been fully developed in the modern culture area. It is obviously not a question of deeming the Chinese “naturally ungifted” for the demands of capitalism. But compared to the Occident, the varied conditions which externally favored the origin of capitalism did not suffice to create it. Likewise capitalism did not originate in occidental or oriental Antiquity, or in India, or where Islamism held sway. Yet in each of these areas different and favorable circumstances seemed to facilitate its rise. (248)

It is crystal clear by now that what Weber cares about is not religion per se. The central concern for Weber, the dependent variable in Weber’s sociological analysis, is the rise of modern capitalism. The independent variables are external social structures such as urban development, the state, status groups such as the literati class, the law, and, most importantly, religious beliefs and ethics. His entire sociology of world religions questions whether—and how—different religions might facilitate this process differently.

2 **Turning Religion into a Dependent Variable: Studying Confucianism in the Twenty-First Century**

Regardless of whether we share the same conceptual passion about the evolution of modern capitalism, what makes Weber essential to any sociology of religion is his insistence on the centrality of religion in the development of modernity. This is not a viewpoint to be taken for granted even today, when many scholars still do not see religion as a vital and indispensable component of social life.

But if we could turn the Weberian comparative analysis in a new direction, that is, by switching his dependent variable from the rise of modern capitalism to the development of religion in modernity, we might discern a path leading through the tangled realities of twenty-first century social life. This path might be especially useful in our global age, when necessity requires us to conduct sociological analysis comparatively. For religions often travel widely and rapidly, and this is true not only of the self-consciously evangelical traditions. Here I only focus on the development of Confucianism, although one could

certainly make a similar argument for the case of the development of global Daoism.

Confucianism has taken a strong hold in East Asia for centuries, leaving distinct legacies in Korea and Japan, from religious life to cultural norms, from economic ethics to the practice of politics (Ivanhoe 2016; Paramore 2016; Deuchler 2015; Kim 2014; Tu 1996). It has also had significant impact in Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia (Pezzutto 2019; Tran 2017; Chen 2012b; Kelly 2006; McHale 2003). The twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Confucianism as a strong religious tradition in Indonesia, with Chinese-Indonesian communities promoting Confucian culture and ritual activities under the constant constraints of racism and oppression (Chen 2020 [in this issue]; Long 2019; Chen 2012b). We also see the gradual flourishing of Confucianism in the United States, where generations of Chinese Americans have embraced their Confucian heritage through familial ethics and the Boston Confucians have endorsed the theological and philosophical values of Confucian ethics and ritual propriety (Jeung, Fong, and Kim 2019; Neville 2000).

These transnational expressions of Confucianism as diverse religious and ritual traditions in different societies are leaving their vivid imprints on global modernity. If we change the phrase “modern capitalism” to “global Confucianism,” or “global Confucianisms,” we would have a path of investigation that could yield fruitful analytical results.³ For sociologists of religion, the following question naturally arises: How do we analyze the conditions under which Confucianism as a religion might develop successfully in the global context?

C. K. Yang (1964:xx) has a good account of Weber's analytical strategy regarding part 1 of *The Religion of China*: “Weber chose five major concrete factors in the Chinese social system as characterizing features having relevance to the functional requirement of modern capitalism: monetary system, cities and guilds, the patrimonial state, kinship organization, and law.” Based on my ethnographic fieldwork on contemporary Confucianism in China, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, and Indonesia, I propose that we may identify the following concrete factors in the social system as characteristic features relevant to the functional requirement of the development of global Confucianisms:

- a) Religious institutions
- b) State apparatuses and policies
- c) Political ideology

3 I thank P.J. Ivanhoe for suggesting the plural term “Global Confucianisms,” rather than “Global Confucianism.” I discuss “Global Confucianisms” in more depth elsewhere (Sun, forthcoming).

- d) Legal systems
- e) Educational systems
- f) Grassroots organizations
- g) Ritual traditions and activities

These rubrics can be used to examine the multiple empirical realities of Confucianism as a religion in any given society. Here I shall only use the case of Confucianism in Mainland China as an example, although the rubrics can be applied to places as diverse as Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, the United States, and others.

Historians were the first to turn to the institutional, material, and other more tangible aspects of Confucianism.⁴ Benjamin Elman's (2000) magisterial study of the civil examination system in late imperial China allows us to see clearly, for the first time, the complex social and cultural conditions under which the Confucian elites were produced and reproduced. Thomas Wilson (2002, 2003) has shown us the intricate operations of the imperial cult of Confucius from early to late imperial China. His bold theoretical vision incorporates comparisons with cults in Roman religion, a dynamic move that sheds light on how Confucius worship should be understood not in isolation, but comparatively.

In the past decade, we also see the emergence of social scientific studies of Confucianism, based on extensive empirical research. The methods are drawn from fields ranging from anthropology and sociology to art history and political theory. The objects of analysis encompass intellectual controversies, ritual activities in temples, grassroots organizations, and the operation and function of sacred sites. These notable studies include *Confucianism as Religion: Controversies and Consequences* (Chen 2012a); *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Sun 2013); *The Sage and the People: The Confucian Revival in China* (Billioud and Thoraval 2015), *Monument, Materiality, and the First Temple of Confucius* (Flath 2016), and *The Varieties of Confucian Experience* (Billioud 2018).

New theoretical discussions of Chinese religions and politics have also appeared during this period, such as *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (Yang 2011). Fenggang Yang's "three market" theory of state control of religion provides an important framework for understanding how state policy, both sponsorship and suppression, disseminated by the State

4 In this article I primarily focus on recent work published in English. The Chinese-language materials are vibrant, diverse, and immense, thanks to the centrality of Confucian studies in the fields of history and philosophy in China. For an intellectual-historical account of recent developments, see Makeham 2008.

Administration for Religious Affairs⁵ and other state apparatuses, may interact with and have a strong impact on formal and informal religious organizations. These political and institutional interactions in the end inevitably affect individual religious practices in substantial ways. What is also intriguing is how fast the religious policies may be changing, especially with regard to Confucianism, which has been used for different political and cultural purposes in the past twenty years by different Chinese political leaderships. Stephen Angle's (2012) work on contemporary Confucian political philosophy, including his formulation of "Progressive Confucianism," is a significant development in the field of political theory, along with Daniel Bell's (2008) much-discussed study of "New Confucianism" in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

An overview of the studies mentioned above shows that they are in fact dealing with—to use Weberian terms—"major concrete factors in the social system as characterizing features having relevance to the functional requirement of the development" of Confucianism. If we revisit the list proposed earlier, we can fill in the blanks easily and specify their relative importance:

- a) Religious institutions
Important: Religious institutions such as Confucius temples, ancestral halls, and other sacred sites for Confucian activities are crucial to the development of Confucianism in China today (Sun 2013; Billioud and Thoraval 2015; Flath 2016).
- b) State apparatuses and policies
Important: State agencies and the religious policies they reinforce are crucial in setting the political, social, and religious boundaries for the development of Confucianism (Yang 2012).
- c) Political ideology
Mixed: Confucianism is not the official state political ideology, despite the attempts of Confucian intellectual activists such as Jiang Qing, and it may never achieve this distinction. There are also scholars who promote Confucianism as a source for civil religion in China, which is still a discourse in the making (Sun 2013; Chen 2012a).
- d) Legal systems
Not important (yet): There are currently no legal stipulations regarding participation in Confucian organizations, nor are there

5 The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), founded in 1951, changed its name in 2018 to the National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA); it is now part of the Department of United Front Work and under the direct leadership of the Communist Party Central Committee.

any legal constraints regarding Confucian practice (Sun 2013; Yang 2012).

e) Educational systems

Important: Selections from the Confucian canon are now part of the Chinese school curriculum, and there are private educational institutions in metropolises as well as small towns that focus on traditional Confucian education (Billioud and Thoraval 2015).

f) Grassroots organizations

Important: Grassroots Confucian organizations such as Yidan Xuetang 一耽学堂, what Billioud calls “the Jiaohua Organizations” (nonprofit associations that promote the transformation of the self and others through teaching), play a crucial role in promoting localized Confucian activities and facilitate new expressions of Confucian identity (Billioud 2018; Billioud and Thoraval 2015).

g) Ritual traditions and activities

Important: Although Confucius temple rituals, both public ceremonies and private offerings, may be considered the most obvious Confucian ritual practice, it can be argued that ancestral rites, conducted in the Confucian mode, are also essential Confucian rituals. Several scholars have suggested that the revival of ancestral rites is the most significant religious development in China in the past twenty years (Billioud 2018; Sun 2018; Sun 2013).⁶

These factors are variables that we should continue to track as we study the current growth of Confucianism in Mainland China. We should also keep in mind that these social factors are inherently comparative, which allows for cross-national—and perhaps even cross-historical—analyses of the development of Confucianism.

3 Weber's Overlooked Legacy: Connecting Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Chinese Religion

Because of the attention scholars have paid to Weber's comparison of Confucianism and Protestantism, another crucial part of his theory of Chinese

6 This is the central focus of my current book project, *The Social Life of Prayer: Understanding Religious Life in Contemporary Urban China*. See also Sun 2016.

religion is often overlooked. This is part 3 of *Religion of China*, entitled "Taoism," and it opens with the chapter "Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy."

As C. K. Yang (1961:xxxiv) puts it, "[F]or two millennia, Taoism as the leading heterodoxy existed in a heretic status under the official dominance of the Confucian orthodoxy." For Weber (1951:173), Confucianism could not fulfill the need for individual salvation, and this was a lack that had to be addressed:

The official Chinese state cult everywhere served only the interests of the community; the ancestor cult served those of the sibs. With both of them individual interests *per se* remained out of the picture. (173)

Indeed, Weber believed that "the individual's mystic or ascetic quest for salvation was an interest entirely alien to (classical) Confucianism" (178). This is where the heterodoxy of Daoism comes in:

We are interested in the cleavage between the official institution of grace and non-classical popular religion. And we wish to inquire whether the latter could have or has been the source of a methodical way of life differing from the official cult in orientation. Such might appear to be the case. The cults of most popular deities, unless they were Buddhist in origin, were considered part of a religious current which Confucianism and the institution of grace under its control have always treated as heterodox. This current, like the institute of grace oriented to Confucianism, on the one hand consisted of cultic and magical practice and on the other hand, doctrine. (174–175)

Weber proceeds to inquire whether Daoism has "the source of a methodical way of life different from the official orientation' and could have initiated a trend toward capitalism" (Yang 1964:xxxiv, citing Weber 1951:174), the same question he has posed to Confucianism. The conclusion he reaches is "No," for Daoist mysticism does not privilege the transformation of the world, nor prize this-worldly asceticism for the sake of salvation (it has other-worldly asceticism instead). But his analysis does not end here.

In the section entitled "Systematic Rationalization of Magic," Weber (1951:196) discusses the nature of magic in Chinese society: "The toleration of magical and animist conceptions by both orthodoxy and heterodoxy and their positive cultivation by Taoism have been decisive for their continued existence and their tremendous power in Chinese life." What is fascinating is not only Weber's concern that the dominance of magic prevents the Chinese from developing the path to personal salvation through rationalization and

this-worldly activities—which, according to his argument, will necessarily lead to the development of modern capitalism—but also his profound insight that this might be something that bounds rather than separates Confucianism and Daoism, despite the constant tensions between the two:

Confucianism was helpless when confronted with the magic image of the world, however much it disdained Taoism. This helplessness prevented the Confucians from being internally capable of eradicating the fundamental, purely magical conceptions of the Taoists. To tackle magic always appeared dangerous for the Confucian's own power. [...] In China the belief in magic was part of the constitutional foundation of sovereign power. (200)

Regardless of whether one agrees with Weber's account of magic in Chinese society, what he suggests here is valuable to our thinking about Confucianism and Daoism as parts of a larger whole. It is also clear that Weber is grouping popular religion with Daoism, effectively fusing them as the "heterodox tradition." As Barbalet (2017: 89) points out, the term "heterodox tradition" is also "an appellation employed by [James] Legge and [J. J. M.] de Groot, as these traditions stand in relation with and in contrast to what these writers regard as 'orthodox' Confucianism." There are ongoing tensions as well as interdependencies between orthodoxy and heterodoxy throughout Chinese history, and Weber (1951:201) shows the interconnectedness of the two in many spheres of religious life:

As is to be expected from what has been said, Taoism shared part of its non-ritualistic literature with Confucianism. [...] The same held for the general magical presuppositions. [...] [W]hat Confucianism failed to do the plebeian priesthood of Taoism did. They satisfied the need for a certain systematization of the pantheon on the one hand and the canonization of proved human benefactors or spirits on the other.

The issue of "plebeian priesthood" is related to another thesis of Weber, which is that Daoism functioned as "an organization of magicians" (225). As part of the same development, "Buddhism in its imported form was no longer the redemptory religion of early Indian Buddhism, but had become the magical and mystagogical practice of a monastic organization" (225).⁷

⁷ For a recent critique of Weber's account of magic, see Barbalet 2017.

Although Weber discerns the importance of Buddhism, he nevertheless treats Confucianism and Daoism as the two main religious systems that dominate and determine the trajectory of life in China. In spite of how they occupy different religious and social spaces and serve different religious and societal needs, Weber views Confucianism and Daoism as having much in common, from sacred texts to certain rituals, from the pantheons of gods to shared cosmologies. It seems that, for Weber, the core of the “religion of China” consists of the following:

- a) Common “non-ritualistic religious texts”
- b) Common “supernatural presuppositions”
- c) Common pantheon of gods and spirits
- d) Common ritual activities (with the exception of state or court rituals)
- e) Common religious ethics (notwithstanding the distinction of ethical demands between elites and the masses)

For Weber, the relative stability of the “systematic rationalization of magic” is in the end what decided China’s fate in modernity through its lack of religious resources for the development of modern capitalism.

But we do not have to agree with Weber—or care about whether Confucianism can be a resource for developing the spirit of modern capitalism—to see the value of treating Confucianism and Daoism as a profoundly interconnected entity. In Weber’s account, orthodox Confucianism makes use of heterodox magic to legitimize its political power and dominance, whereas practitioners of popular magic—Daoist and otherwise—are under the ethical demands promoted and enforced by Confucian social, educational, and cultural systems. If we ask new questions and address different concerns than those pursued by Weber, then the tensions as well as interdependencies of Confucianism and Daoism can indeed be seen as the source of vitality and change in the ongoing development of Chinese religious and social life.

4 **The Chinese Religious Ecological System: Transforming the Weberian Legacy for the Twenty-First Century**

Although we have been speaking of Confucianism and Daoism as two separate religious traditions—and they certainly have been, in a variety of ways, throughout Chinese history—it is also important to consider the fact that the boundaries between Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—the so-called

sanjiao 三教 or “Three Teachings”—have always been fluid and porous, both in textual traditions and in ritual practices (Kleeman 2016). Many scholars have questioned the validity of the existing classification of Chinese religions, although no consensus has been reached regarding how to speak of the interconnected nature of Chinese religious life while still keeping the classificatory boundaries somewhat intact. David Palmer, Glenn Shive, and Philip Wickeri’s edited volume *Chinese Religious Life* (2011), like its companion website, “Religious Life in the Chinese World,” consciously avoids the trap of classifications of Chinese religions and instead focuses on the diversity of religious practice in Chinese life. Adam Chau’s (2011) “five modalities of doing religion” is an essential model for this approach, which cuts across differences in religious traditions and analyzes distinct modes of practice. John Lagerwey’s “The Continent of the Gods” offers an illuminating account of the evolution of the gods in Chinese history by reconsidering the distinction made by C. K. Yang between organized and diffused religions. Lagerwey connects the gods in the “Three Teachings” traditions with the ones in popular religious practices, focusing on “the local, anthropomorphic gods” (Lagerwey 2019).

New conceptualizations and categorizations of Chinese religions would certainly be helpful to us in thinking about developments such as Yiguan-dao (Billioud 2020) and Tiandijiao (Ju and Lu 2017). These are religious organizations—“redemptive societies in modern China,” as Prasenjit Duara (Duara 2001) puts it—with pronounced components of Confucian and Daoist as well as certain Buddhist teachings and practices (Broy, Reinke, and Clart 2017; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Palmer, Katz, and Wang 2011).⁸ Weber might have seen such organizational development as an unavoidable “distortion” of the orthodox Confucian religious system, when its “rationalization of magic” fails to contain the cross-pollinations of Confucian ethical teachings with “magical” conceptions migrating from both Buddhist and Daoist traditions. But without committing to Weber’s disparaging view of magic, we could still make use of his framework of the coexistence of orthodoxy and heterodoxy to reimagine new and varied reconfigurations of the Chinese religious system.

The often ambiguous terms “popular religion” and “folk religion,” which are meant to catch anything that does not fit into the official “Three Teachings,” have been widely used by scholars in the field of Chinese studies. In an analysis of the genealogy of the terms, Palmer (2019:156) notes that they can be traced back to Vico’s and Herder’s “view of the *popolari* or the *Volk* as the prime movers of history rather than the abstract rationality of the Enlightenment.” In the

8 I thank one of the reviewers for raising this very interesting question about contemporary Confucian cults.

Chinese context, the dynamics between the popular/folk tradition and the non-popular/folk tradition has different emphases:

The tension between the two may be described in the manner of a *yin-yang* dyad, with the “popular” being the *yin* to the “orthodox” *yang*—the more obscure, chaotic, ecstatic, localized, dispersed, marginal, feminine, and embodied religion, in contrast to the more public, ordered, central, masculine, civil, and government-oriented religion; each is always simultaneously opposed to but dependent and complementary to the other. And seen in such a light, “popular religion” is a category defined only by context: a county deity cult patronized by local elites might be “popular” in relation to the central state, but “orthodox” in relation to local female spirit-mediums. But these *yin* and *yang*—or, as Kenneth Dean (1998) puts it, *ling* 靈 and *sheng* 聖—forms of religion, will usually combine in a single festival. (Palmer 2019:157)

This analysis is clearly in accord with the dynamics between orthodoxy and heterodoxy suggested by Weber. What Palmer stresses here is the relational nature of the two, as well as the political forces at play. Weber's binary account—Confucianism versus Daoism—is certainly more rigidly defined and hence ignores the significance not only of local practices such as spirit-mediums but also of Buddhism, whose diverse practices are fundamental to Chinese religious life (F. Yang 2018:2). Yet Weber's framework is not incompatible with Palmer's more fluid account of the relational nature of “popular” versus “orthodox” practices.

These issues are not merely theoretical. The classificatory categories are essential to the production of empirical data, and confusing labels, such as “five major religions” plus “folk religion,” would yield questionable datasets for further sociological analysis (Sun 2013). For example, as Fenggang Yang (2016:19) points out:

Using the Social Change Surveys of Taiwan, we found that 80–90 percent of Buddhists and Daoists believe or practice folk religion, and 40–60 percent of Christians and Muslims also believe or practice folk religion (Hu and Yang 2014:93). These findings show that we must pay more attention to the various types of religion and develop better measurements of religiosity.

How do we understand lived religious experience in China, if we cannot easily separate one religion neatly from another, nor easily identify individuals as

“adherents” of a certain religion? This applies not only to followers of Confucian, Daoist, or Buddhist practices, but also to Christians and Muslims, as Yang suggests, who may also practice the so-called “folk religion” (Yang and Hu 2012). The picture gets even more complicated when we realize that the “folk” religious practices may be Confucian in origin, such as ancestral rites. Religious identity is not a good measurement in China—with the notable exception of Christians and Muslims—for two main reasons: (1) there is no obligatory religious conversion or initiation process for lay followers of Confucianism and Daoism; and (2) traditional Chinese religious do not emphasize exclusiveness in terms of religious identity or ritual practice (Sun, forthcoming).

A possible solution to these entangled categories is to view them as part of a larger system, a set of “linked ecologies.” I have suggested elsewhere that the notion of the “linked religious ecologies” of Chinese society could take into account the linked ecologies of religious institutions, practices, habitus, and materiality (Sun 2016). As a result, we may speak of a “Chinese religious ecological system,” a linked ecological entity that has fluid interactions among its diverse elements, with local ecological systems responding to as well as shaping the process of the growth of the macro system.⁹

Although here we are using terms rooted in contemporary sociological discussions, it is not difficult to recognize a certain continuity between these efforts at emphasizing connectivity and codependency with Weber’s forceful relational analysis of religion in China, published over a century ago. Indeed, Weber was the first scholar to view the Chinese religious system as a whole, and this is something that we are finally paying more attention to in our own sociological analysis. Even if one does not share many of Weber’s intellectual concerns, one can certainly appreciate his anxieties about modernity and rationalization, and the ways in which he takes religion seriously: as subjective meaning, as ethical systems, as institutionalized structures, as individual practice, and—last but not least—as magic and enchantment, that elusive yet often central element to human religious experience.

9 Besides the concept of “linked ecologies,” there are other conceptual tools that could be used to discuss these dynamics, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the field. For an illuminating discussion of rituals as civilizational techniques in the Chinese religious field, see Dean 2020 (in this issue). However, the advantage of the linked ecologies concept is that it allows for analyses of not only the ecological dynamics of local cases, but also connections between these cases (from micro to macro), which may allow us to uncover patterns of interactions, such as strategies of “hinges” and “avatars” (Abbott 2005; Sun 2016).

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