



Confucian Adaptation and Vitality in the Twenty First Century

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Max Weber's methodological and theoretical contributions play a substantial role in Western Studies on China. His most widely read analysis of China, published in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, falls under the larger socioeconomic research question of why modern capitalism occurred in the West and not in other parts of the world. His work sets out a basic thesis of historic social change that is placed in the context of the Western industrial revolution. This and his other important work on China, *The Religion of China*, contends that both Puritan and Confucian ethics are embodied in rationalism.

At the time of Weber's research, in the late nineteenth century, Marxist historical materialism had moved to the center of the theoretical arena. Weber's approach put ideas and ideals into the causal position and, thus, challenged the dominant economically based theory of explanation. Weber reasoned that the pervasive moral convictions of Protestantism during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries influenced the florescence of capitalism in the West. He argued that independent stages of material development in different regions reached similar conditions conducive to the rise of the similar capitalist socioeconomic systems. Using both China and India for comparison, his work also demonstrated how religious ideas were influential in either hindering or promoting bourgeois capitalism.

As Turner points out, Weber first had to identify the required conditions in order to qualify these two groups of comparison.¹⁰ Weber successfully identified the following factors that existed in China that were suitable to the development of capitalism: 1) vast internal commerce and trade with other nations; 2) equal opportunity and status attainment through the exam system; 3) social stability and peace; 4) large urban centers and few restrictions on the economy; and 5) China's status was arguably more advanced in Weber's view, with gunpowder and book printing as examples. Weber's findings suggested a number of empirical factors in addition to the influence of the religious ethic in China as inhibitors of capitalism: 1) the monetary system was problematic; 2) China had no autonomous political units because of the nature of early, unified, centralized government which limited capital enterprise; 3) China had substantive ethical law rather than legal judgment and procedures; and 4) in terms of the work force, people were classically educated rather than technically trained.

Weber's research design compared ideal types of historical religious systems in his causal analysis to investigate the driving forces behind social change. To explore the layers of influence, he first postulated the historical ideal type, Protestantism, as a key concept. The duty to produce, as a Protestant ethic, is related to the value of economic success, and included the concept that economic success must be legal. Therefore, Protestant training in terms of appropriate behavior was linked to economic success.¹¹

Weber's approach to social change is derived from his theory of social action, with emphasis on content. Weber classified social action into four types of orientation: traditional or habitual orientation; affectional orientation or emotional feeling of actor; rational orientation to an

absolute value; and purpose-rational. In his theory of social change, Weber identifies three types of authority: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal. The rational-legal system, which operates through a bureaucracy and enforces laws that, ideally, work in the interest of the public, was crucial for development.¹²

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