

Confucianism and the Chinese Self

Jack Barbalet

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Re-examining Max Weber's China

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-981-10-6288-9 ISBN 978-981-10-6289-6 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6289-6>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017954012

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Cover design by Tjaša Krivec

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.

The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

*For my son,
David*

PREFACE

The rise of China over the past 40 years is a global event of major significance. The unexpected transformation of China after the death of Mao Zedong and the speed with which China has achieved economic parity with the other major nations in the world excites the curiosity of a continually growing number of scholars. But European or 'Western' interest in China is not new. The image of China as a 'middle kingdom' isolated from the world beyond East Asia is not an accurate representation of an empire that drew the attention of travelers and traders even before the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth century, from which time it served as a beacon of hope for European philosophers who opposed entrenched privilege and sought to see satisfied opportunities for talent, possibilities which seemed evident in the imperial examination for entry into the Chinese bureaucracy. The early European use of China as emblematic of what was just and right was reversed in the post-Enlightenment engagement with China as a resource to be exploited, peopled with souls in need of salvation. This perspective and the practices commensurate with it encouraged rumblings that, by 1912, burst into a revolutionary transformation of China. These events coincided with Max Weber's preparation of his desk in order to write *The Religion of China*, a book that occupies our concern in the following pages.

Although my interest in *The Religion of China* is relatively recent, I have had a relationship with Weber over the course of my entire adult life. My very first academic publication was a discussion of an aspect of Weber's sociology, and this was followed by a flow of articles and books in which Weber's ideas are treated as central to the particular topic of the publica-

tion in question. While Weber has not monopolized my attention in research and writing over what is now a long career, I find myself frequently returning to him. Like all relationships, my relationship with Weber has had its ups and downs. Relationships of the type I mention here are unavoidably one-sided. This is not to say that my interaction with this spectre, ‘my’ Weber, has not changed over the years. But one constant in it has been my appreciation of Weber’s power to inspire thoughtful reaction and new investigation. Indeed, Weber’s work is a repository of ideas that can be drawn on and used for further scholarship and research. And his standing as a sociological classic means that engagement with his themes is to engage with core elements not only of the discipline of sociology, but also cognate studies, including history, religion, and regional studies, including China studies.

While my interest in sociology is longstanding, only relatively recently did I develop a research interest in Chinese societies. During a semester stay at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne during 2007, while engaged in unconnected research, I began a study of Chinese business practices. But it was not until I went to Hong Kong in 2011 that I could undertake China research on a more focused and full-time basis. Since that time, I have done nothing else, more or less. Although my research since arriving in Hong Kong has not been engaged only with Weber’s discussion of China, Weber has been a remarkably effective conduit through which my interest in China has been channeled and developed. My relationship with Weber in this quest, as the following chapters will reveal, has not been to directly borrow from him. Rather, it has been to revisit the terrain he so dominantly occupies, to examine again what he describes and explains, to participate in a dialogue or exchange, or, to put it slightly differently, to engage in a forceful argument with Weber about what he sees in China and how he sees it.

What is written above relates to the subtitle of this book rather than the title, to Weber not Confucius. When I presented my ideas for this book to Sara CrowleyVigneau, the commissioning editor at Palgrave, my title was *Max Weber’s China: Confucianism and the Chinese Self*. The marketing people at Palgrave, though, saw the folly in this title and brought my original subtitle to the primary place it now occupies. Weber’s *The Religion of China* is many things, including a discussion of Confucianism. This is reflected in the present book in many ways. Half way through the second chapter Weber’s ‘take’ on Confucianism is examined. The whole of the third chapter is occupied with a discussion of the historical development

of Confucianism from the beginning up to the present time. The fourth chapter also relates to Confucianism in so far as it is seen by Weber and his sources, and many others, as the orthodox thought tradition of Imperial China. The Confucian basis of the Chinese family and self-image is extensively discussed in Chap. 5. In Chap. 6, the idea that Confucianism is magic-tolerant is examined in detail. In much discussion today, Confucianism is synonymous with Chinese culture, or at least, enduring elements of it. The argument of this book shows why this view requires the most careful critical evaluation. At the same time, discussion of the Chinese self cannot avoid consideration of the influence of Confucianism. This is Weber's view also.

Finally, a note concerning terminology is required. Chinese names, in pre-1980 publications, are typically presented in terms of the Wade-Giles system of Romanization; since the 1980s, though, the Chinese pin yin system is used. Where a source uses a Wade-Giles Romanization in the chapters to follow the pin yin form is placed in parenthesis after it, as in Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was conceived and written in Hong Kong, where I was for six years Chair Professor in Sociology and Head of the Sociology Department at Hong Kong Baptist University. The Department and the city provided all sorts of benefits, intellectual and otherwise, that I gratefully acknowledge. In writing a work such as this, many debts of gratitude are incurred. It is not possible to acknowledge everyone who has contributed to this book. Through a common engagement with Weber, and China, I have become indebted to many people. Some have read chapters in various forms and provided comments; some have engaged with me in conversation, face-to-face and through email; others have listened to my seminar presentations and contributed to Q&A; some have done more than one of these. The list to follow is not complete, and it is alphabetical. I wish to acknowledge in this context Martin Albrow, Peter Baehr, Hon Fai Chen, Joshua Derman, (the late) Lin Duan, David Faure, Gary Hamilton, Xiaoying Qi, Wolfgang Schluchter, Po-Fang Tsai, Bryan Turner, David Wank, and Sam Whimster, among others. It goes without saying that none of them is responsible for what is written in the pages to follow. In Chinese tradition, the court practice of magistrates involved both their ‘human considerations’ (*qing*) and codified law (*fa*). The preceding acknowledgements spring from *qing*. It is also necessary to make acknowledgments that come from something closer to *fa*. Previously published papers are drawn upon in some of the chapters below, although in every instance rewritten for the present book. Part of Chap. 2 derives from my contribution to *The Anthem Companion to Max Weber*, edited by Alan Sica; a version of Chap. 3 originally appeared in the *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*; a version

of Chap. 4 originally appeared in the *Journal of Classical Sociology*, and parts of Chap. 5 are drawn from a paper that appeared in the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* and a paper that appeared in the *Sociological Review*. These publications and their editors are gratefully acknowledged. It is customary for authors to acknowledge the support they receive from their family. I embrace this custom. My wife, Xiaoying, has heard rehearsals of what is written below and unfailingly provided good advice. My appreciation of her wise judgment, which is by no means the only quality she possesses that I treasure, extends well beyond her support for what is written here. Although their contribution has not been so direct, my sons Tom, Felix, and David have extended my scholarly grasp and imagination, in more ways than they appreciate. It is a further pleasure to acknowledge their contribution to the writing of this book.

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Hong Kong and Melbourne
2017

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