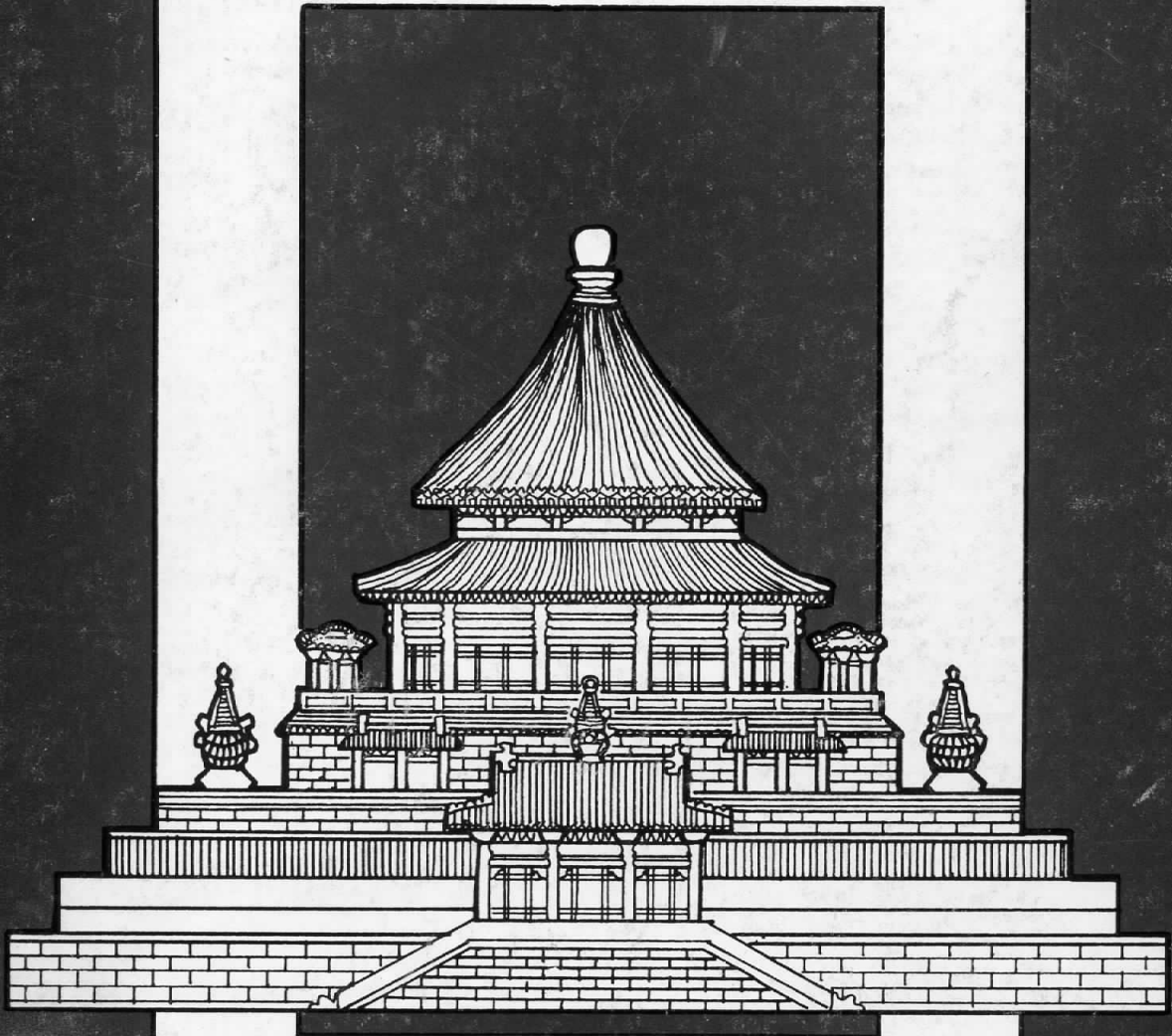


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## ***BRITISH COLUMBIA ASIAN REVIEW***

The *B.C. Asian Review* is a refereed annual journal of graduate research on intellectual, political and historical topics; textual studies in both ancient and contemporary sources; literary pieces, translations, and reviews. We welcome contributions from present and former graduate students of the University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, and Simon Fraser University; and more broadly from the general community of Canadian graduate students doing research on Asia.

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## Dedication

This issue of the B.C. Asian Review is dedicated to Dr. Leon Hurvitz (1923-1992) who passed away on September 28, 1992 due to cancer. Dr. Hurvitz served as a professor in the UBC Department of Asian Studies from 1971 until 1989. One of the world's foremost scholars of Chinese Buddhism, his study of T'ien-t'ai sect founder Chih-yi and his full English translation of the *Lotus Sutra* were two of his most noteworthy contributions to his field. Also, Dr. Hurvitz will be remembered for his warm and fun-loving personality which endeared him to all who knew him. As a teacher he was always enthusiastic and unselfish in sharing his time and knowledge with anybody who was eager to learn. His presence is sorely missed here at UBC.

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**The Protestant Ethic Analogy in the Study of Chinese History:  
On Yü Ying-shih's *Zhongguo jinshi zongjiao  
lunli yu shangren jingshen***

1. Introduction

The dramatic economic development of the Chinese societies of Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong during the last three decades has set scholars looking for causes and patterns, trying to establish whether these "little dragons" represent a unique development model or one transferable to other parts of the world.

I will here be concerned with one approach among the many taken to explain the phenomenon, *viz.* attempts to trace the roots of Chinese success to cultural factors. The guiding model in many such studies has been Weber's essay on the Protestant ethic [Weber 1920b].

Starting from the perception that the Protestant-dominated parts of Europe were industrially more advanced than the Catholic ones, Weber's central argument in this work was that the Calvinist ethic contained certain elements that fostered in its adherents economically rational behaviour patterns, which eventually led to economic success and progress. Weber never

went so far as to make the Calvinist ethic the very fount of capitalism, yet the fact that he credited ideational factors with some influence at all on economic development, set his position clearly apart from that of Marxist theory.

After World War II Weber's theories of economic rationalization became building blocks for "modernization theory," a loose amalgam of hypotheses stressing gradual, evolutionary change, designed to serve as a countermodel for revolutionary, Marxist development theory. Japan served as the first laboratory for modernization theory and became its favourite practical example.<sup>1</sup> In this line studies like Bellah's *Tokugawa Religion* [1957] came into being, which looked at cultural, and more specifically religious and ethical, factors in Japanese development. Thus, when non-Communist Chinese societies started to repeat the Japanese success, the "Protestant Ethic Analogy," as Bellah termed it later [Bellah 1970], was readily available to non-Marxist scholars as an explanatory model and was eagerly taken up as such.<sup>2</sup> The



central question posed under this paradigm was: was there some structure in Chinese religious or ethical thought that might produce effects (in terms of work ethic) similar to those attributed by Weber to the Protestant ethic in the development of European capitalism? Here a dilemma arose: on the one hand Weber's model emphasizing the importance of ideational factors in the development of capitalism was accepted by non-Marxist Chinese scholars, on the other hand Weber in his own application of the Protestant Ethic Analogy to China, *viz.* in his essay *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, had argued that neither Confucianism nor Taoism possessed a potential for disenchantment and rationalization comparable to that of the Protestant ethic. Any attempt to explain the success of capitalism in Chinese contexts by an analogy to Weber's model of the Protestant ethic thus needs had to refute the conclusions of Weber's views on China.

In this article I will discuss one such attempt to solve this dilemma: Yü Ying-shih's 1987 study on Chinese religious ethics in the early modern period and their relationship with business ethics (*Zhongguo jinshi zongjiao lunli yu shangren jingshen*) [= Yü 1987a]. This book is the revised version of an essay which first appeared in the Winter 1985 edition of the magazine *Zhishi Fenzi* 知識分子. Almost simultaneously with its 1987 publication by the Lianjing publishing house in Taipei, the study was published as part of a collection of Yü's writings by Shanghai renmin chubanshe [Yü 1987b]. In 1991 a Japanese translation appeared under the title

*Chugoku kinsei no shuukyoo rinri to shoonin seishin* [= Yü 1991a].<sup>3</sup>

Judging from its publication history, Yü's study enjoys a fairly wide circulation, so that it is all the more surprising how little attention it has received in Western language media. Although I may have missed some sources, I could only find a single Western language book review [Moran 1987]. Since therefore familiarity with the book's contents cannot be presupposed, I will include in my review article a summary overview, even though my aim is not primarily to summarize, but rather to discuss some methodological aspects.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Summary

### 2.1 Yü Ying-shih's Approach

Two distinct developments in Chinese history serve as starting points for Yü's study:

1. Chinese religions' turn to innerworldliness from about the middle of the Tang dynasty;
2. the strong development of Chinese trade from the 16th century onwards. [p.(64)]

The aim of his study is to examine the connections between these two phenomena [ibid.]. However, Yü does not want to treat all aspects of this relationship; rather he focusses his attention on a specific question posed in two places in his book:

-“Did the ethical concepts of the three religions of China—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—have a stimulating effect on the development of trade

in the Ming and Qing dynasties?" [p.(55)]

-“Did the traditional religious ethic, before the intrusion of Western capitalism into China, have any influence on endogenous trade activities? If so: what were the concrete contents of this influence?” [p.10]

The way of posing the question is closely similar to that of Max Weber's study “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” [1920b] whose model function also becomes apparent in the title chosen by Yü for his book. Quite explicitly Yü says that he wants to pose a “Weberian” question to Chinese history [p.10]. He wants to examine if Chinese religious ethic has produced something similar to the “innerworldly asceticism” of Calvinism and Puritanism. To that end, he utilizes the concept of “innerworldly asceticism” developed by Weber in “The Protestant Ethic” as an ideal-type with which to compare Chinese historical data.

In the first two chapters he traces the development of the “three religions” from the Tang dynasty and reaches the conclusion that they fulfill the ideal-type's conditions; as a by-product of this discussion, Yü criticizes specific evaluations of Chinese religion brought forward by Max Weber in his study on Confucianism and Taoism [p.(60)]. Yü explains the different conclusions of the latter study by pointing out Weber's insufficient empirical knowledge of Chinese history [pp.(69),168].

The third chapter is devoted to the demonstration that the conceptual developments uncovered in the preceding chapters

resulted among Ming and Qing dynasty merchants in the formation of a professional ethic that was very close to the ideal-type of “innerworldly asceticism.”

In the following I will summarize the contents of the three chapters.

## 2.2. Chapter 1: Chinese Religions' Turn towards Innerworldliness

Every religion is characterized by the conceptual differentiation of two worlds—the world of everyday life and a transcendent world beyond. With the advent of the Reformation we can perceive an important change in Western Christianity's stance towards the profane world from an attitude of world rejection to one of innerworldliness that enabled man to stand in a direct, unmediated relation to God [p.14 f.]. Weber thought this was phenomenon unique to Western history [p.13]. As a matter of fact, however, analogous developments are discernable in China as well, and even at a much earlier date. In the following Yü tries to demonstrate this by examining reform movements in Chan Buddhism and in Taoism.

### 2.2.1 The New Chan Buddhism (“Neo-Chan,” Xin Chan 新禪)

The extreme world rejection of the original Indian Buddhism was in the long run incompatible with the basically this-worldly attitude of Chinese thought [p.16]. Therefore, Buddhism was subjected to profound changes after it had gained access to China under the instable political conditions



of the Wei 魏 and Jin 晉 dynasties. In the 700 to 800 years from the Wei to the Tang 唐 dynasty a process of gradual change within Buddhism took place that transformed its world-rejecting attitude into one of inner-worldliness [p.17]. In this development the sixth Chan patriarch Huineng 惠能 (638–713) played such an important role that not unfoundedly he has been called the “Martin Luther of China” [ibid.]. Through his devaluation of bookish learning [p.18] and monastic life as the sole, institutionalized path to salvation [p.19] he opened to the layman new possibilities for a religious life within the world. Huineng does not affirm the value of the world as such. He rather views life in the world as a necessary phase in the process of liberation from the world. In this his attitude is comparable to that of Luther and Calvin [p.19].

A further characteristic common to Protestantism and Neo-Chan—and early modern religion in general—is the direct, unmediated relationship between individual and transcendent reality. While for the Protestant this transcendent reality is an outer one, *viz.* God, for the Chan Buddhist it is an inner one, *viz.* his own “Buddha-nature” (*foxing* 佛性) or his “original heart” (*benxin* 本心) [p.20]. However, an important difference between the two movements lies in their respective degrees of comprehensiveness: while the Protestant Reformation also contained social, political, and economic components, Huineng’s reform was purely religious and was continued as such by his disciple Shenhui 神會 [p.21].

New developments in the area of economic ethics only occurred with Baizhang

Huaihai 百丈懷海 (749-814). In the wake of the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion the economic situation of the Buddhist monasteries took a decisive turn for the worse. These circumstances favoured a revision of the Buddhist ethic which originally had taken a negative stance towards work as an entanglement in the world of illusion. Baizhang Huaihai authored a corpus of monastic rules (*qinggui* 清規) and created a new type of monastic community (*conglin* 叢麻) whose life was marked by hard physical work and frugality [p.22]. To Baizhang Huaihai the meanwhile proverbial statement “*yi ri bu zuo, yi ri bu shi* —日不作一日不食,” (“a day without work, a day without food”) is attributed [p.23], which reminds one associatively of St. Paul’s saying “if anyone will not work, neither let him eat” [cf. 2 Thess.3,10] that was often invoked by Calvin [p.25].

Huaihai and his successors, for the first time in the history of Buddhism, invested work with religious meaning—a central component of the Protestant concept of “calling” [ibid.]. This Chan Buddhist conception spread through Chinese society and became generalized by the Song 宋 dynasty [p.26].

## 2.2.2 “New Taoism” (Xin Daojiao 新道教)<sup>5</sup>

Taoism on the one hand competed with Confucianism and Buddhism; on the other hand it borrowed heavily from those two traditions.

Therefore the impulses emanating from Chan Buddhism after Huineng soon stimulated new developments in Taoism. Yü

examines these new developments by looking not at the philosophical Taoism of the elite, but at four Taoist sects:

1. Quanzhen Jiao 全真教
2. Zhenda Jiao 真大教
3. Taiyi Jiao 太一教
4. Jingming Jiao 淨明教

Most detailed is the section on the Quanzhen Jiao where Yü demonstrates that it was strongly influenced both on the institutional and on the doctrinal level by Baizhang Huaihai's monastic rules and *conglin*-system and that it held a similar ascetic work ethic [pp.28 ff.]. The new Taoist sects show a distinct trend towards innerworldliness, even outdoing the Chan Buddhists in that they added an explicit affirmation of secular society, which is probably due to Confucian influences [p.39]. Their positive valuation of worldly work fulfilled social functions similar to those of the Protestant concept of calling [p.40].

### 2.3 Chapter 2: New Developments in Confucian Ethics

In the beginning of the Tang period Confucianism was caught in a crisis. It had intellectually retreated into infertile philology of the classical canon and the ritual management of the aristocratic families [p.43]. In its stead, Buddhism, particularly Chan Buddhism, responded to the metaphysical needs of the people. Confucianism was perceived as providing only behavioural rules and lacking an underlying worldview [p.54]. Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) and Li Ao 李翱 (772-841) recognized this

weakness of the Confucian teachings. Deeply influenced by Chan Buddhism they tried to reinterpret Confucianism as what it—in their opinion—used to be: a design for a human life, a *dao* involving the whole person, a moral teaching determining human behaviour [p.44]. In their effort to develop an ethic relevant to everyday life they went further than Chan Buddhism. While the latter never completely transcended its world-rejection and conceptualized secular life only as a step towards salvation from the world, the Tang Confucians explicitly affirmed the world's value, i.e. the social and political system. Even though Confucianism and Chan Buddhism moved into the same direction, their paths were different and so conflict between them was inevitable.

In spite of this conflict Han Yu borrowed from Neo-Chan. His redefinition of the teacher-disciple-relationship clearly bears the mark of Chan Buddhist influence [pp.46 ff.]. This Buddho-Confucian fusion continued into the Song dynasty where the internal organisation of the Confucian academies (*shuyuan* 書院) shows similarities to Baizhang Huaihai's monastic rules [p.51 f.]. The determinative influence of Buddhism, however, made itself felt in Neo-Confucian metaphysics. In response to the Buddhist challenge the Song Neo-Confucians developed their own anthropology and cosmology (*xinxinglun* 心性論). While beginnings of this are already visible in the work of Li Ao [p.53 f.], it only came to full fruition in the philosophy of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200). His school countered the Buddhist notion of the world as illusion by

insisting on the metaphysical and objective reality of “heaven” (*tian* 天). The Neo-Confucian cosmos was governed by the interplay of two forces: “principle” (*li* 理 or *tianli* 天理) and “material force” (*qi* 氣). The latter crystallizes in human nature as its desires (*yu* 欲) which have to be reined in and brought under the control of *li*. This serves to show that Weber erred in thinking that Confucianism did not recognize a tension between this world and a transcendent counterpart and took this world as the best of all possible worlds [p.58]. As a matter of fact, there exists a fundamental tension between the two worlds of *li* and *qi*. These two concepts are opposites, but they are not completely separated. It is man’s task to reform this world in terms of *li*; this world, however, is real and need not be transcended [pp.60-65]. For the individual striving to fulfill his destiny this results in a state of tension, which expresses itself in *jing* 敬<sup>6</sup>, a state of intense spiritual concentration enabling the individual to act according to *li*. Further hints of such a state of tension are found in the Neo-Confucian valuation of work and condemnation of time wasting [p.68 f.].

If you substitute the Puritan term “God” for the Neo-Confucian *tianli*, the comparability of the two ethics becomes evident. They differ, however, in their metaphysical basis: while the actions of the Puritan are directed towards God as an external entity, the Confucian bases his behaviour on *li*, which is within the things of the world. Another difference is that the Puritan regards worldly success as a “symptom of virtue,” an indicator of resting in a state of

grace; in Neo-Confucianism there is no such idea (with a possible exception in the thought of Chen Liang 陳亮 (1143-1194) [p.71 f.]).

Neo-Confucians and Calvinists and Puritans do share a strong elite-consciousness. But the Calvinist drew his elitism from the consciousness of being in a state of grace and was thus directed towards individual salvation, while Neo-Confucians lacked not only the notion of a “state of grace” (*Gnadenstand*), but also did not seek individual salvation. Rather their effort was directed towards society as a whole [pp.72 ff.]. As an example, one might quote Zhu Xi’s approval of Fan Zhongyan’s 范仲淹 (989-1052) maxim of “taking the world as one’s own responsibility” (“*yi tianxia wei ji ren* 以天下為己任”). The social role of the *shi* 士 (“literatus-official”) is being invested with a religious meaning that it did not have in the Confucianism of the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties [p.74 f.]. It is an expression of a social self-definition which is not dissimilar to that of the Calvinist [p.75].

This ideal, *viz.* to reform the world in terms of a Confucian cultural order, was shared by both major schools of Neo-Confucianism, the Cheng-Zhu 程朱 -school as well as the Lu-Wang 陸王 -school. They were, however, divided over how to go about realizing that ideal. There exists a significant difference between Zhu Xi and Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139-1192) as to their audiences: Zhu Xi, himself the descendant of a scholarly family, targeted the literati-officials; once enlightened, this social group should go about educating the other three

classes [p.85]. Lu Xiangshan, on the other hand, was the son of a merchant and directed his teachings not exclusively to the *shi*, but also to the common people. This attitude found expression in his depreciation of book learning [p.86]. In a way, Lu Xiangshan relates to Zhu Xi in a manner similar to the way Martin Luther related to Erasmus of Rotterdam [p.88]. Lu's appearance is a sign of the incipient social changes leading to the gradual ascendancy of the merchant class [p.89].

However, only in the Ming 明 dynasty, when these changes had come to full fruition, could Lu Xiangshan's teachings in the form propounded by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1528) gain wider currency. Wang's philosophy addressed all four classes; its simplicity made it easily popularizable and closed the gap between the scholar and the people opened by Zhu Xi's teachings [p.90 f.]. After Wang's death his thought was further developed among the lower classes by the Taizhou 泰州 school, whose founder was the merchant Wang Gen 王艮 (1483-1540) [p.90]. A development similar to that in Europe occurred: there the Reformation generalized monastical asceticism and made it accessible and obligatory for the layman. Similarly, Wang Yangming gave everyone the chance to become a saint (*shengren* 聖人); in his own words: "The streets are full of saints!" (*man jie dou shi shengren* 滿街都是聖人) [p.91]. Wang's historical significance rests in his popularization of the Neo-Confucian ethic. In the process of their "socialization" (*shehuihua* 社會化) the Neo-Confucian teachings gradually filtered down through the structure of

society; the first social layer they encountered was that of the merchants. This encounter is observed by Yü in chapter 3.

#### 2.4 Chapter 3: The Spirit of the Chinese Merchants

The rapid development of trade from the 16th century onwards forced the literati-officials to re-evaluate the social standing of the merchants [p.104]. A funerary inscription written by Wang Yangming for the merchant Fang Lin 方麟 exemplifies this change: here the *dao* is understood as eventually identical for all four classes. Anybody can become a saint who "puts all of his heart" (*jin xin* 盡心) into following his calling (*ye* 業) [p.105 f.]. Such a view of the occupation of the merchant and the concomitant relativization of the literatus-official's position is a symptom for an important change between the 11th and the 15th centuries in the ranking of the four classes of the people, which put the merchants de facto into second place behind the literati-officials [p.110]. The social boundary between *shi* and *shang* became increasingly blurred. The sons of scholarly families engaged in commerce ("*qi ru jiu gu*" 棄儒就賈), while sons of merchant families were sitting for the official examinations. Reasons for this change in the value system of the Ming and Qing dynasties are, among others:

- an explosion of the population that led to much fiercer competition for bureaucratic careers and subsequently to the drifting off of failed candidates into commercial occupations;

- the in comparison to an official's salary temptingly high income of merchants;

- the possibility of purchasing official status (*juanna* 捐納) which enabled many merchants to rise into the bureaucratic hierarchy [p.117].

A blurring of boundaries also took place on the intellectual level. The merchants, being the second best educated class of society, had access to the written tradition [p.122]. Besides entertaining literature [p.123] they also consumed Confucian writings [p.125]. From the latter they specifically sought out those aspects which were useful to them in conducting their affairs. They thus adopted and reinterpreted in light of their own needs concepts like *zhi* 知 "knowledge," *ren* 仁 "humanity," *yong* 勇 "courage," *qiang* 強 "strength," and *xue* 學 "study" [p.128].

Confucian teachings reached the merchant class on two levels:

- a "folk-cultural" (*tongsu wenhua* 通俗文化) Confucianism was inculcated in everybody with a minimum of formal education, as all formal education was heavily Confucian in outlook;

- access to Confucian ethical teachings, the "elite-cultural" (*gaoceng wenhua* 高層文化) Confucianism, however, was gained only at a higher level of education.

This "elite-cultural" Confucianism played an important role in the evolution of a merchant ethic [p.129]. It thus has to be stated that Weber erred in denying Chinese merchants an autonomous, inwardly determined moral consciousness [p.141]. Such virtues typical of Protestant merchants like "diligence," "frugality," and "honesty" we

can encounter just as readily with their Chinese colleagues [pp.137-142]. These virtues had their metaphysical roots in Confucian concepts like *tiandao* 天道 ("the Way of Heaven") and *li* 理 and in folk religious ideas of moral retribution like *tianbao* 天報 ("heavenly retribution") [p.142 ff.].

The term *gudao* 賈道 ("The Way of the Merchant"), appearing in the Ming dynasty, points to two important new developments:

- the merchant's profession had a *dao* of its own which endowed it with religious meaning [pp.148 ff.]. As a result "virtue" (*de* 德) in the sense of reliability and trustworthiness played an important role in the merchants' dealings among each other [p.151 ff.].

- trade also had a *dao* in the sense of established rules and methods for the maximization of profit: rational methods of marketing and sales were developed, documenting an increasing rationalization of business management [pp.157-161].

To sum up: On the level of social history we see a significant upgrading of the merchants' social position between the 16th and 18th centuries and an increasing amalgamation of literati-official and merchant classes [pp.161 f.]. On the ideational level this corresponded to a re-evaluation of the merchant's occupation in social and in religious-ethical perspective by both the merchants themselves and the literati-officials [p.162 f.].



### 3. Yü Ying-Shih and Max Weber

#### 3.1 Backgrounds

I would first like to describe two existing discourses on capitalism and modernization in China which Yü discusses as critical impulses in his decision to engage in this study:

a. the discussion about the “buds of capitalism” (*ziben-zhuyi mengya* 資本主義萌芽) among PRC historians;

b. the attempts of Western social scientists to apply the theses developed by Max Weber in his *Protestant Ethic* concerning the relationship between religious ethics and economic attitudes to explain the successful modernization of several East and Southeast Asian economies [p.(57)].

On a. This discussion was kindled in the 1950s by a statement of Mao Zedong who had said:

The development of the commodity economy within Chinese feudal society already contained the buds of capitalism. Even without the influence of foreign capitalism, China would have gradually developed into a capitalist society. [ibid.]

Yü Ying-shih believes that the innumerable social- and economic-historical studies undertaken subsequently in the search for these “buds of capitalism” resulted in the final analysis from an effort to prove the scientific solidity of Mao’s statement [ibid.]. This statement and therefore the whole historical dispute following it were founded on the premise that the model of historical stages developed by Marx from

European history possesses universal validity, i.e. that it represents a model of social evolution applicable to all human societies, including the Chinese. Working from this premise, one logically must postulate the possibility of an endogenous Chinese capitalism.

Against this position, Yü first argues immanently, i.e. within the Marxian discourse, that Marx himself did not attribute universal validity to his five-stage model of historical evolution and that he had developed as an alternative the idea of the “Asiatic mode of production” [p.5].

Then he approaches the problematique by taking a closer look at the concept of “capitalism:”

If—according to Weber—the term ‘capitalism’ refers to the use of capital by private persons in an exchange economy for the sake of making profit, then a capitalist economy is already present not only in the antiquity and middle ages of the West, but also in the classical ages of all Eastern countries. Following this definition, China, of course, had ‘capitalism’ since the period of the Warring States. [p.6]

This concept of a generalized “commercial capitalism,” however, must be kept distinct from modern industrial capitalism:

But the capitalism appearing in the modern West after the Industrial Revolution is a specific historical phenomenon which is the product of a multitude of individual, specific historical factors. This capitalism is unique in the history of mankind and can appear but once. [ibid.]



Therefore modern industrial capitalism is to be regarded as a specific product of Western history and not as a universally valid stage of social evolution:

...modern Western capitalism originated against an extremely complex historical background containing both accidental and essential factors. However, whether accidental or essential: all these factors arose within Western history. Until today no unequivocal traces of these factors have been discovered in Chinese history. [p.171]

Yü thinks that without Western influence modern industrial capitalism would probably never have developed in China. The burgeoning capitalism in modern East Asia thus has been transplanted there from the West [ibid.].<sup>7</sup> Questions like “Why didn’t China develop modern capitalism?” are therefore from the outset mistakenly posed because they presume that the Chinese development should have been the same as that of the West and that hence the non-appearance of capitalism in Chinese history represents a problem to be explained [cf.p.170]. In Yü’s view, this mistaken manner of posing heuristic questions was the ultimate reason for the failure of the “buds of capitalism” discussion [p.(59), 170]. One positive outcome of this discussion, however, was the wealth of valuable materials on Ming and Qing dynasty economic and social history unearthed in its course. On these sources, along with the excellent Japanese studies in this area, Yü drew heavily for his present study [p.(59)].

On b. The remarkable economic development of several East and Southeast Asian

states (particularly Japan and the “Four Little Dragons” South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) has stimulated among Chinese and foreign scholars a renewed interest in Max Weber’s hypotheses on the origins of capitalism. As all of these countries are strongly Confucian in outlook,<sup>8</sup> the discussion tended to centre on the relationship between “Confucian ethics” and capitalism [p.167]. In this academic discourse two approaches are discernable: one takes Weber’s study of the relations between Protestant ethic and capitalist economic attitudes as a model for the analogous study of Confucianism; the other critically re-evaluates and corrects Weber’s China study [ibid.]. As stated above, Yü fuses both approaches in his study.

Yü Ying-shih, however, views the whole Max Weber debate critically insofar as he is of the opinion that it is to a large extent lacking an empirical basis, and for this reason he does not want to directly participate in it [p.(60)]. He warns against a simple transplantation of Weber’s hypothesis on East Asian societies [p.169]. This would be just another example of the bad habit common among Chinese scholars to a bit too enthusiastically graft Western theories onto Chinese history [p.(73 ff.); 10]. Instead, we should carefully distinguish between the specific and the general elements of Weber’s hypothesis and reformulate his questions to adapt them to their new object [p.169]. As positive examples for such a creative application of Weber’s approach, Yü cites Robert N. Bellah’s *Tokugawa Religion* [1957] [ibid.] and Clifford Geertz’s “Religious Belief and

Economic Behavior in a Central Javanese Town" [1968] [p.(63)]. He advocates that research on the relationship between Confucian ethics and economic development first ought to proceed immanently, that is, first one should make an exhaustive study of Chinese economic and intellectual history and history of ideas to provide a solid empirical basis for discussion and strip the debate of its hitherto highly speculative nature. His present, explicitly historical [p.(71)], study is meant to be a contribution to building such a basis.

But why, then, does Yü draw so heavily on Max Weber? This I will discuss in the following section.

### 3.2. Why Max Weber?

To answer this question, we first have to discuss Yü's understanding of historiography.

In a long essay [Yü 1982a (in Chinese); 1982b (in English)] he describes this understanding in a critical examination of the two main schools of historiography, which he defines as the "data school" (*shiliao xuepai* 史料學派) and the "interpretation school" (*shiguan xuepai* 史觀學派). While the proponents of the data school see the task of historiography in collecting and presenting "facts," the interpretation school tries to deduce regular patterns in historical processes. Yü criticizes the former for an unreflective positivism that leads them to the mistaken belief that working with pure facts in complete objectivity and personal distance, they can write an "ultimate history" [Yü 1982a:3; 1982b:8]. On the

other hand, he blames the interpretation school for its propensity to overemphasize theoretical constructions and the social relevance of its work and to deny historical facts any autonomous meaning:

The problem with historians of the 'Interpretation School' does not lie in their commitment to seeking universal laws or models; it lies in their failure to adequately understand the concept of 'law' as rigorously defined in science. They have mistaken certain partially effective generalizations about Western history for universally valid historical laws. Thus, instead of searching for a pattern of historical development based on the rich Chinese data, they have chosen to make the Chinese evidence fit Western theories. [Yü 1982b:15; 1982a: 12]

This "Procrustean" [ibid.] approach is particularly evident in Marxist historians, his main target of criticism in the present study (cf. his discussion of the "buds of capitalism" debate above). Yü perceives his own approach, which he characterizes as "middle-range," as lying in the middle between the two extreme positions [Yü 1982a:26 ff.; 1982b:24 ff.]. In my opinion, however, his attempt to hold a middle position is not entirely successful. In his effort to build a bridge between the two poles he moves towards the "interpretation school," but in the end his allegiances to the "data school" remain stronger. Confronted with a choice between theory and empiry, his scales dip towards the latter:

A historical study should contain both arguments (*lunzheng* 論證) and evidence

(zhengju 證據); it was always so. Of these two, however, the evidence clearly occupies the more fundamental position. If the evidence is complete, but the argument is insufficient, the result will be a rather rough historiography. But if it is all argument and next to no evidence, then we can hardly call it historiography at all. [Yü 1987a:(73)]

Despite his efforts to be open to impulses from the social sciences, Yü remains a historian in the narrower sense of the word, and retains a critical stance towards the historiography of the interpretation school, particularly in its Marxist version. Here we may have found one reason for his interest in Max Weber. For one thing, Max Weber has been put up as a counterfoil to Marx in the social sciences. Also his “historical sociology” possesses a special affinity to historiography, particularly in its methodological aspects.

Yü Ying-shih sees Weber as sharply opposed to historical materialism; after describing the contemporary background against which *The Protestant Ethic* has been written, Yü interprets Weber’s stance in the following way:

Viewed in this way, it appears as if we cannot consider *The Protestant Ethic* a work written specifically as a refutation of the Marxist view of history. On taking a closer look, however, this specialized study is indeed diametrically opposed to the materialist view of history. Weber takes a position of fundamental opposition to the materialist view of history. As far as my own study is concerned, we can propose the following hypotheses:

1. Weber rejects any historical monocausality and therefore cannot agree with the theory of economic determinism.

2. Weber does not recognize the theory of social evolution; the Marxist view of history, however, is one of the strictest expressions of evolutionism. Weber did not believe in the existence of any essential stages of development in history; hence, of course, he could not accept the five-stage-theory of historical materialism.

3. The materialist view of history interprets the political and cultural superstructure as determined by the economic substructure. Weber, on the other hand, proposed the view that the same substructures could possess different superstructures. And what is more; he was obviously convinced that cultural factors, like thought, could further economic changes. That is exactly the core point of *The Protestant Ethic*. (...)

Regarded in this manner, *The Protestant Ethic* indeed is a forceful refutation of historical materialism. [Yü 1987a:4 f.]

There do exist passages in *The Protestant Ethic* which support such an interpretation [e.g. Weber 1920b:82 f.], but I do not want to follow up the question whether Yü’s evaluation of Weber in this respect is correct. What is important is that Yü does interpret Weber in this particular way, because this constitutes one reason for his interest in Weber.

Another reason lies in the attractiveness of Weber’s methodology. In the next section I will discuss Yü’s reception of this methodology.

### 3.3 The Ideal-typical Method

The recent “Max Weber renaissance” is not confined to the social sciences, but also extends into historiography. Historians are especially interested in Weber’s ideal-typical method which is seen as a potentially useful part of their methodological apparatus:

For historiography, the ideal-typical use of theories and models is particularly appropriate, because thereby the source’s statements are not subsumed as data under a generalizing theory in order to falsify or support it. The ideal-typical procedure rather tries to determine the ‘distance’ between theory or model on the one hand and reality on the other hand, to examine the changes of this distance in time and to come to an explanation of this distance and its changes. The ideal-typical procedure allows for a flexible linking of theory and empiry, adequate for historiography. [Kocka 1986:20 f.]

In the following I will first summarize Weber’s ideal-typical method, before addressing Yü Ying-shih’s use of this method.

Weber does not consider the aim of historical knowledge to be the reduction of reality to a few processual patterns; it rather should explain individual phenomena in their causal context. These individual phenomena, however, are parts of an amorphous, infinite reality. This results for Weber in the following problem:

...how is the *causal explanation* of an *individual* fact possible—since the

description of even the smallest slice of reality can never be exhaustive? The number and type of causes which have influenced any given event are always infinite and there is nothing in the things themselves to set some of them apart as alone meriting attention. [Weber 1922: 177; transl. Weber 1964:78]

It is not possible to explain an individual element of this reality by trying to “reduce it to the totality of its conditions and thus provide a ‘total’ explanation of it” [Rossi 1986:38]:

A chaos of ‘existential judgements’ about countless individual events would be the only result of a serious attempt to analyze reality ‘without presuppositions.’ And even this result is only seemingly possible, since the reality of every single perception discloses on closer examination an infinite number of elements which can never be exhaustively expressed in perceptual judgements. [Weber 1922:177; transl. Weber 1964: 78 (slightly modified)]

The knowledge of individual phenomena becomes “logically meaningful” [ibid.] only if the researcher weighs them according to his heuristic question and attributes different meanings to them:

Order is brought into this chaos only by the circumstance that in every case only a part of concrete reality is interesting and *significant* to us, because only it is related to the *cultural values* with which we approach reality. Only certain sides of the infinitely complex concrete phenomenon, namely those to which we attribute a general *cultural significance*

are therefore worthwhile knowing. They alone are objects of causal explanation. [Weber 1922:177 f.; transl. Weber 1964: 78 (slightly modified)]

To repeat this: the purpose of knowledge is the causal explication of events; laws are its means, not its purpose [Weber 1922:178]. The knowledge of causal regularities makes possible the knowledge and causal linking of “culturally significant” elements of reality [ibid.]. Such culturally significant elements and their relations among each other are gathered into a unified conceptual image, the ideal-type. Its conceptual purity causes the ideal-type to be unreal, i.e. not an image of reality [Weber 1922:191]. But that anyway is not what it is supposed to be; it is merely an analytical instrument whose purpose it is to serve as a standard “with which the real situation or action is *compared* and *measured* for the explication of certain of its significant components.” [Weber 1922: 194] In itself, the ideal-type thus is not a hypothesis about reality; rather it assists in formulating hypotheses by conceptualizing empirical reality in terms of its distance from the ideal-type [Weber 1922:190]. The validity of such a conceptual image is tested by its application to empirical data with which it thus stands in a relation of mutual determination [Weber 1922:193].

In a similar manner Yü Ying-shih outlines Weber’s ideal-typical method in his 1987 study [p.(62 f.)], stressing particularly the close connection of generalization with empirical basis. He isolates the in his opinion essential elements of the Protestant ethic, like state of tension towards the

world, unmediated relationship with transcendental reality etc., fuses them into the ideal-type “innerworldly asceticism,” and proceeds then to test whether early modern Chinese religious ethics, and particularly Confucian ethics, can be conceptualized with the help of this idealtyp, i.e. if a type of innerworldly asceticism is discernable [cf. Yü 1987a:(68)]. The result is positive:

Of course, I do not want to say that Chinese and Protestant ethic are fundamentally identical...I only want to stress that, as far as the ‘ideal-type’ is concerned, the ‘innerworldly asceticism’ outlined by Weber can accommodate Chinese religion. We can say that the differences between the two are only gradual: the spirit of innerworldly asceticism appearing in Protestantism is in comparison to the Chinese stronger, more distinct, and therefore more typical. But as long as we do not reconstruct Webers ‘ideal-type,’ we cannot continue to use his original concept of ‘innerworldly asceticism’ as an effective standard to differentiate Confucianism and Protestantism. [Yü 1987a:(69)]

Any comparison of Confucian and Protestant ethic naturally involves a cross-cultural dimension. In the next section I will therefore address the functions of cross-cultural comparison in Weber and Yü Ying-shih.

### 3.4 Cross-cultural Comparison

Yü Ying-shih opens his discussion of cross-cultural comparison with a quote from Zhuangzi:



If you look at them from the viewpoint of their differences, from liver to gall is as far as from Ch'u to Yüeh; if you look at them from the viewpoint of their sameness, the myriad things are all one. [Yü 1987a:(65); transl. Graham 1981: 76f.]

Applied to cultures and translated into modern concepts, the “differences” (*yi* 異) are the specific elements (*teshuxing* 特殊性) of a culture, the “sameness” (*tong* 同) those general elements (*pubianxing* 普遍性) it shares with other cultures [Yü 1987a:(65)]. Only if specific and general elements are distinguished, can a comparative perspective be fruitful [Yü 1987a:(65 f.)]. The purpose of comparison must always be to gain a deeper understanding of one of the two sides compared. The purpose of using data of Western history comparatively in a study of Chinese history thus must always be to achieve a better understanding of Chinese history, and not to force Chinese history into the conceptual framework of Western history. Used in the right way, cross-cultural comparison is an indispensable part of the historian's methodological apparatus, because only comparison enables him to judge uniqueness or specificity of historical phenomena:

The search for the unique pattern and developmental process of Chinese culture implicitly takes on a comparative viewpoint. Without comparison, we shall not be able to illustrate the special pattern of Chinese culture. [Yü 1982b: 22, 1982a:22]<sup>9</sup>

Yü sees the danger lying in the wrong handling of comparison. If, for example, the

question “Why did modern science not develop in China?” is concerned, the comparative approach often consists in using modern (Western) science as a standard and looking for traces of this science in Chinese history. A genuinely comparative approach would compare the relevant Chinese concepts such as *zhishi* 知識 with their Western counterparts in order to arrive at a better understanding of the traditional Chinese conception of science [Yü 1987a:(66)]. Yü perceives his approach in the present study in just this way:

The comparative perspective of this book follows the same requirements. Religion and trade are common to all cultures; their contents, position and developmental situation, however, differ from culture to culture. Only if we compare commonalities and differences between China and the West on all levels, can we comprehend from our modern viewpoint the meaning of the changes in early modern religious ethic and society. The present book is about Chinese history; therefore its principal task is of course to demonstrate the specific process of Chinese religions' turn towards innerworldliness and the specific manner of the merchants' class' ascendancy. Comparison and contrast do not serve to prove that China, too, had a Calvinist ethic or the buds of capitalism; rather they are to bring the specificity of Chinese history into sharper relief. On the other hand, however, a religious turn towards innerworldliness and the rise of the merchant class are phenomena common to both the Chinese and the



Western historical process, even if there are great differences in the concrete historical experience on either side. [Yü 1987a:(66 f.)]

Yü's use of cross-cultural comparison corresponds to Max Weber's in his *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*. The purpose of this series of studies was "to correct the isolation of this study [=The Protestant Ethic] and to place it in relation to the whole of cultural development" [Weber 1920b:206; transl. Weber 1958: 284]. Hence other religions are analyzed mainly in those aspects which relate to the Protestant ethic:

Thus, the following presentations do not in any way constitute a *systematic* 'typology' of religions. On the other hand, they do not constitute a purely historical work, either. They are 'typological' in the sense that they consider what is typically important in the historical realizations of religious ethics. This is important for connecting religions with the great contrasts of the *economic* mentalities. Other aspects will be neglected; these presentations do not claim to offer a well-rounded picture of world religions. Those features peculiar to the individual religions, *in contrast* to other religions, and which *at the same time* are important for our interest, must be brought out strongly. (...) Even those features of religions that are important for economic ethics shall interest us primarily from a definite point of view: we shall be interested in the way in which they are related to economic rationalism. More precisely, we mean

the economic rationalism of the type which, since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has come to dominate the Occident as part of the particular rationalization of civic life, and which has become familiar in this part of the world. [Weber 1920a: 265; transl. Weber 1958x:292 f. (slightly modified)]

Weber's aim in proceeding in this way is to "use comparison in order to genetically more accurately delineate the historical specificity of the development of European culture." [Weber 1922x:258]

Yü's approach is very close to that of Max Weber's *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen* in general and *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus* in particular, much closer than to *The Protestant Ethic* whose model he seemed to follow at first sight. Just like Weber in *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*, Yü approaches the Chinese material with a comparative quantity, i.e. the results of Weber's study of Protestantism. Differences do exist, however, in their respective heuristic interest: Max Weber wanted to make a statement about European culture, Yü aims at a better understanding of Chinese history. Weber wanted to emphasize the uniqueness of the occidental development, Yü wants to call into question this uniqueness—at least as far as the form of rationality related to "innerworldly asceticism" is concerned.

#### 4. Critique

##### 4.1 Yü Ying-shih's Use of Max Weber's Methodology

Using a similar methodological approach, Yü Ying-shih reaches conclusions totally different from those of Weber. While Weber, in his *Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, concluded that “[t]he contrast between this [= the Confucian] socio-ethical position and the whole religious ethic of the Occident was unbridgeable” [Weber 1920a:522; transl. Weber 1951: 235], Yü comes to the conclusion that the conditions of the ideal-type “innerworldly asceticism” are essentially fulfilled by the early modern Chinese religious ethic [Yü 1987a:(69)]. This discrepancy Yü attributes to Weber’s insufficient empirical knowledge of China:

Judged from the level of modern-day historical knowledge, Weber’s understanding of Confucianism and Taoism in *The Religion of China* appears as basically mistaken and superficial, even if some observations resulting from his perspective of comparative cultural history can still provide stimulation today. The canon of Confucian and Taoist classics to which Weber had reference did not exceed *Lun Yu* 論語, *Mengzi* 孟子, *Laozi* 老子, and a few other translations. His knowledge of Chinese history was for the most part restricted to a French translation of the *Tongjian gangmu* 通鑑綱目 and the works of early missionaries and sinologists. [Yü 1987a: 168]

The fact that China, too, had an “innerworldly asceticism” does not mean however, in Yü’s view, that China sooner or later would have developed an endogenous capitalism. He points out that Weber mentioned further factors within Chinese

society that obstructed such a development [Yü 1987a:(70)], such as lacking rationalization in the juridical and political systems:

If we had to answer Weber’s question why China did not develop capitalism, we might say: The reason is not that China lacked an ethic of “innerworldly asceticism,” but that China’s politics and law had not yet undergone the process of rationalization. That, however, would still be a Weberian answer. [Yü 1987a: (71)]

A possibility to “save” the Protestant Ethic Analogy would be, according to Yü, to redefine the ideal-type and to emphasize more strongly those specific elements of the Protestant ethic—absent from Confucian ethics—which contributed to the development of capitalist economic attitudes [Yü 1987a:(70)].

Such deliberations, however, would be relevant only if Yü Ying-shih had actually succeeded—as he says he did—in proving that Chinese religious ethics possessed a concept of “innerworldly asceticism” in the sense of the term used by Max Weber. In my opinion, Yü has not delivered this proof. In the following, I will try to substantiate this assertion.

Yü Ying-shih does not particularly facilitate the scrutiny of his conclusions, as he gives no clear-cut definition of his ideal-type “innerworldly asceticism.” In one place he provides an outline of its meaning in the context of Weber’s *Protestant Ethic* [1987:7], in another place he refers to several relevant passages in Weber’s *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* [Weber 1972] [1987:(69)]. Since he nowhere explicates a

definition of his own, I will assume that he bases himself on Weber's understanding of the concept and evaluate his argumentation accordingly.

In the comparisons Yü draws between Chinese religious ethics and Calvinist-Puritan ethics, the following elements appear as those parts of the Protestant ethic shared by its Chinese counterpart:

1. Innerworldliness [e.g. pp.14-19];
2. unmediated relationship with a transcendent reality [e.g. p.20];
3. religious valuation of work; concept of calling [e.g. p.25, passim];
4. tension between transcendent ideal and reality [e.g. p.57];
5. elitism [p.72];
6. certain merchant's virtues, such as honesty, thriftiness, and diligence [pp. 137 ff.].

Yü's argumentation neglects, however, a central motif in Weber's thought, *viz.* that all these elements of the Protestant ethic are of interest only because they stimulated social action and produced a rational planning of the individual's life. Here we ought to recall Weber's definition of the tasks of sociology:

Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. [Weber 1972:1; transl. Weber 1978:4]

This idea of sociology as "interpretive science of social action" [Aron 1962:178] led Weber to approach the problem of the origins of modern capitalism (and the

modern state) from the angle of a theory of action. Modern capitalism in this view is a system of action, functioning according to the principle of instrumental rationality; it is the product of the gradual institutionalization of instrumental-rational modes of social action [cf. Habermas 1987:236-238]. First hints of this process are discovered by Weber in the "practical rationality" (= a mixture of instrumental rationality and value-rationality) of the Calvinist and Puritan ethic:

The linking of instrumental-rational and value-rational action produced the type of action which fulfilled the conditions of *practical rationality as a whole*. When persons and groups generalize actions of this type through time and areas of society, Weber speaks of a *methodical-rational conduct of life*. And he regards the Protestant occupational asceticism of Calvinism and the early Puritan sects as the first historical approximation to this ideal-type.... [Habermas 1987:245]

Weber thus was not interested in Calvinist and Puritan theology as such, but in their effects on the everyday conduct of life:

We are naturally not concerned with the question of what was theoretically and officially taught in the ethical compendia of the time, however much practical significance this may have had through the influence of Church discipline, pastoral work, and preaching. We are interested rather in something entirely different: the influence of those psychological *impulses* which, originating in religious beliefs and the practice

of religion, gave a direction to the conduct of life and held the individual to it. [Weber 1920b:86; transl. Weber 1958: 97 (slightly modified)]

The cultural meaning of the Protestant concept of calling, of predestination, of the state of tension with the world etc. rests in their permeation of the whole conduct of life and the subsequent formation of a rational systematization of life:

The God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single 'good works,' but a *systematized* practical saintliness.... The moral conduct of everyday man was thus deprived of its planless and unsystematic character and made into a consistent method for conduct of life as a whole. [Weber 1920b: 114 f.; transl. Weber 1958:117 (slightly modified)]

"Innerworldly asceticism" hence was in the first place a style of life, a type of rational-methodical conduct of life:

The 'innerworldly ascetic' is a rationalist, not only in the sense that he rationally systematizes his own conduct of life, but also in his rejection of everything that is ethically irrational.... The distinctive goal always remains the 'alert,' methodical control of one's own conduct of life. [Weber 1972:329 f.; transl. Weber 1978: 543 f. (slightly modified)]

This rational-methodical conduct of life is the mechanism which, through the idea of the calling, transforms value-rational motivation into instrumental-rational economic action.

This ultimately decisive aspect of "innerworldly asceticism," i.e. its quality as a type of social action, is neglected by Yü

Ying-shih. He tries to demonstrate the existence in Chinese religious ethics of those factors which in the case of Calvinism had produced a systematized, methodical life conduct. But he rarely addresses the central question of whether those factors produced a similar effect in China. He touches the point in a few places, e.g. when discussing Baizhang Huaihai's *qinggui*-system, which, however, would not correspond to Weber's notion of innerworldliness (as monastic rules are *per se* "outerworldly," cf. Weber 1920b:118 f.). The question is also referred to indirectly when Yü describes the Neo-Confucians' concept of *jing* [p.67], their positive valuation of work [p.68], and their rejection of time wasting [p.69] and points to the important role of incessant self-cultivation [pp.72 ff.]. In the chapter on mercantile ethics he stresses the importance Protestant virtues like diligence, thriftiness, and honesty had for Chinese merchants. He also shows that Ming and Qing merchants held a religious interpretation of their profession [p.147 ff.] and that the term *gudao* contained elements of (instrumental) rational economic planning [ibid.]. In my opinion, however, Yü's treatment of the matter remains fragmentary. Why is that so? Because Max Weber's heuristic interest in "innerworldly asceticism" as a type of methodical-rational conduct of life is meaningful only within Weber's theoretical framework—and this framework is lacking in Yü Ying-shih's study.

I have discussed above one aspect of this framework, *viz.* its basis in a theory of

action. Another important aspect already mentioned is that of rationalism. In Max Weber's perspective the Protestant ethic is a stage within Western history in the ongoing process of increasing disenchantment of the world, of the growing dominance of instrumental-rational modes of social action. Both aspects of the framework were relevant in Weber's study on the economic ethics of world religions: here, too, he was principally concerned with those "features in the overall image of a religion," "which were decisive in shaping the *practical* conduct of life where it was *different* from other religions." [Weber 1920a:267]. He considered the world religions particularly under the aspect of their relation to occidental "economic rationalism" [cf. above p.21] Hence he intended these studies to be a "contribution to the typology and sociology of rationalism" [Weber 1920a: 537].<sup>10</sup>

This whole theoretical framework is conspicuously absent in Yü Ying-shih's study. The term "methodical-rational conduct of life" does not even appear in his book. "Rationalization" and "rationalism" are mentioned from time to time, but do not have the integrating meaning they have in Weber, because Yü concerns himself with Chinese religious ethic in itself and not as part of a wider process of rationalization (as Weber did). This is evident in some loose ends of his argumentation, such as when he speaks of the turn towards innerworldliness as a common feature of early modern Chinese and Western religions [pp.(67);20] without following up the implications of such an assertion which would have to be

done in terms of a process of rationalization. It also becomes apparent in Yü's "Weberian" response to the question why there developed no capitalism in China: Yü rather carelessly isolates two factors of insufficient rationality from a complex of features which taken together characterize China as a traditional-patrimonial state [p.(71); cf. above p.18].<sup>11</sup>

Yü Ying-shih's procedure of taking concepts out of Weber's theoretical framework becomes particularly problematic when he tries to generalize their contents. To make Weber's study on Protestantism suitable for cross-cultural comparison, Yü wants to reduce the types and causal chains developed in it to their general, non-specific elements:

If we take Weber's original theory as an absolute dogma and treat its every single element—such as predestination and the resulting psychic tension—as necessary spiritual factors for capitalism, then it cannot have any relation to the study of Chinese history. As a matter of fact, we do know that the concepts of God and society of Calvinism are unique phenomena. Therefore only if we remove the incidental factors, can Weber's theory have some relevance for the study of Chinese history of ideas and social history. [Yü 1987a:169f.; cf.p.22]

Such a reduction can easily lead to wrong conclusions if one does not pay sufficient attention to the larger context outlined above in which Weber's study of Protestantism is embedded. This danger is particularly great when working with "individual" or "historical" ideal-types such



as “innerworldly asceticism”.<sup>12</sup> I will try to clarify this point with an example.<sup>13</sup>

Yü Ying-shih repeatedly compares the Neo-Confucian's feeling of quasi-religious obligation to fulfill his social role as *shi* to the Puritan idea of calling [e.g. Yü 1987a: 67,71]. Such a comparison, in my opinion, is possible only if you strip the concept of calling of almost all its specific meaning and reduce it to something like “positive religious valuation of a regular occupation or social function.” And indeed, to Yü this seems to be the relevant meaning of “calling” [cf. for example pp.25,39]. Under such a broadened notion he can then subsume both the Neo-Confucian and the Calvinist occupational ethic. Beneath this apparent similarity, however, great differences are hidden which become clear when we leave the level of ideas and take a look at how these ideas are carried out on the level of social action: a consequence of the Puritan valuation of occupational work was an impoverishment of life-style, a single-minded ascetic concentration on one's calling, on rational-methodical profit-making, to assure oneself of his state of grace. This Puritan attitude towards life stood “at the cradle of modern ‘economic man’” [Weber 1920b:195] and marked the beginning of a development which will finally produce, as Max Weber feared, only “specialists without spirit” [Weber 1920b: 204]:

The Puritan *wanted* to work in a calling; we are *forced* to do so. [Weber 1920b:203; transl. Weber 1958:181 (slightly modified)]

If Puritan and Neo-Confucian ideas of calling really were comparable, they would have comparable effects on the level of social action; the above outline of the Puritan “man of calling” would also have to fit the Confucian *junzi* 君子 (“noble man”) or Wang Yangming's *shengren*. That nothing, however, could be more opposed to the Confucian ideal of true humanity than such a narrow “specialist without spirit” has already been recognized by Max Weber [Weber 1920a:532 ff.] and would certainly be acknowledged by Yü Ying-shih as well.<sup>14</sup>

Yü isolates concepts of Protestant ethics from their theoretical and historical context in a way that gravely distorts their meaning. This I tried to demonstrate by the example of his use of the term “calling.” Here his neglect of the theory of action level in Weber's work makes itself felt particularly strongly. Many an apparent analogy between Neo-Confucian and Protestant ethics on the level of ideas dissolves into nothing when the translation of the respective psychological impulses into social action are taken into account, because on this level very different results can appear. It was this fact which induced Weber to sharply distinguish Confucian rationalism from that of Protestantism, in spite of their initial apparent similarity [Weber 1920a:534].<sup>15</sup>

Considering the aforesaid I have to conclude that Yü Ying-shih did not succeed in proving the existence of a type of spiritual attitude and social action comparable to the Protestant “innerworldly asceticism”—as Weber understood it.



## 4.2 Concluding Remarks

As I pointed out above, there are several problems with Yü's methodology which seriously impair the effectiveness of his argumentation. His type of cross-cultural comparison does not work out well for either of the two sides compared. On the one side, in reducing it, he distorts Weber's historical ideal-type of "innerworldly asceticism" and disregards its dimension as social action, on the other side, he attaches pseudo-Weberian labels to his Chinese data, thereby obscuring their meaning. Indeed, he seems to use (in reverse) Weber's approach in the study on Confucianism and Taoism, but does so in such a way that he retains its distortions and disadvantages without reaping its benefits.

When I am saying that the methodological flaws of the book impair its conclusions, I am not saying that Yü's argument is wrong in substance. The materials he adduces are in fact very suggestive as to possible relations between economic action and moral attitudes in the Chinese context. However, I believe Yü could have done a much better job in uncovering those relations if he had stuck to the internal evidence of his source materials and had not tried to force them into a comparative perspective, i.e. if he had remained true to the task he set for himself - to lay the empirical foundations for a meaningful comparative discussion without participating in it.

## Notes

- 1 For an analysis of the dominance of modernization theory in post-war Japanology see Dower 1975.
- 2 The development of the Protestant Ethic Analogy debate among Chinese scholars is a fascinating topic that would merit a separate study. Its interest is far from being purely academic as it has proven to possess practical relevance, e.g. by heavily influencing educational policy decisions in Singapore. Weber's essays on the Protestant ethic and on Confucianism and Taoism were published in a new Chinese translation in 1989 [cf. Ku 1989 who also gives an interesting and circumspect evaluation of the possible uses of Weber's sociology for Chinese historical research]. The topic has also been taken up, though of course from a quite different viewpoint, in the People's Republic of China [see for example Su 1988].
- 3 Yü's preface for this Japanese edition has also been published separately in Chinese [Yü 1991b].
- 4 After the completion of the main corpus of this article I chanced upon an earlier Chinese review article [Hangzhi 1988] which bears out some of my own conclusions and will be adduced in the relevant places.
- 5 The term "Neo-Taoism" is used here to refer to the Taoist sects from the Song dynasty onwards. In other contexts Yü uses it to refer to the Taoism of the Wei and Jin dynasties (see Yü 1985).
- 6 For a discussion of *jing* see Ching 1986.
- 7 I.e. it is the product of a so-called "contact metamorphosis" [cf. Zingerle 1972:103 ff.].

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- 8 Vandermeersch calls them "*les sociétés confucianisées*" [1986].
- 9 On the function of cross-cultural comparison as a "test for uniqueness" cf. also Hamilton 1985, particularly p.65 f.
- 10 On the interpretation of the question of rationalization as an overarching aspect in Weber's work see Ku 1987:24ff. Yü's neglect of this rationalist dimension of Weber's ideal-type of "innerworldly asceticism" is also being remarked upon by Hangzhi 1988:403f.
- 11 As Hangzhi [1988:414] trenchantly points out: "If Prof. Yü's 'Weberian' answer to the question why China did not produce capitalism is that the reason is not the lack of an 'innerworldly-ascetic' ethic in China, but rather that the Chinese political and legal system had not undergone a process of rationalization, then we would like to ask (and Prof. Yü should answer): why did the process of rationalization not reach politics and law? That exactly is the question Weber wanted to ask. In other words, what Weber really wanted to look into was: why were Confucian ethics not able to break through the restrictions of traditionalism, causing every sector of life to be permeated by a process of rationalization, while the Protestant ethic did have that effect? To this question Weber has furnished an answer. Prof. Yü has not."
- 12 On the distinction between "individual" and "general" ideal-types see Mommsen 1974: 228f.; Rogers 1969:88f.
- 13 For further discussions of Yü's reductive treatment of several of Weber's key concepts see Hangzhi 1988.
- 14 On Yü's understanding of the role of the *junzi* see Yü 1987c.
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- 15 For an analysis of this distinction see Habermas 1987:281f. Cf. also Tu 1984:67ff.

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