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“WAS FEHLTE”
The place of Max Weber’s study on China within his oeuvre and in the European reception of China

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Budapest, 2016
I. Aims of the doctoral research

The dissertation provides a contextual analysis of Max Weber’s study, “Confucianism and Daoism” (“Konfuzianismus und Taoismus”, 1915/1920) in the double sense of placing the study in the context of the Weberian oeuvre while examining it in comparison to different views that emerged through the history of the European reception of China. Through this analysis the thesis aims to show how Weber’s views on “historical progress” are related to 17–19th-century philosophies of history as reflected in their depictions of China. Examining the work in these two contexts is made necessary by the fact that Weber’s thought itself has two sides, conflicting with one another in a specific sense. On the one hand, his “interpretive sociology” works with ideal typical constructions which, according to him, make it possible to examine historical and sociological processes in an “objective” and “value-free” way, based on purely scientific foundations, excluding all kinds of philosophical speculations. His examinations of China, India and ancient Judaism are also grounded on these methodological views. These studies, which were bound together with the Protestant Ethic studies in the collection, *Economic Ethics of World Religions (EEWR)*, are not meant to be “professional” in the sense modern disciplines of Oriental studies are, however, they definitely are “professional” from the point of view of the disciplines Weber mastered: sociology, economics and history of religion. On the other hand, Weber’s thought has some characteristic features which can only be approached from an essentially philosophical viewpoint, however, this non-disciplinary approach is not as adequate as in the case of Leibniz or Hegel since what Weber tried to avoid the most was that a philosophical system should be read out of his writings. The task of the dissertation is to grasp both sides of this ambivalence, and instead of stressing one of them, to make sense of conflict and correlation between them.

II. Structure and methodology of the analysis

**Section I** provides three short overviews that shed light on the intellectual history constituting the broader context of Weber’s thought. In the first, I give a brief summary of the history of interpretations of China from the early period of admiration (Leibniz, Voltaire) through the late 18th-, early 19th-century abandoning of the “Chinese stagnation” (Herder, Hegel) until 19th-century hopes for “opening” the Chinese Empire, the symbol of humanity’s backwardness (Tocqueville, Marx). In this overview I point out that for European
thinkers China always meant the “mirror” in which their own society could be reflected, whether they criticized or praised this society. In the next overview, I give a short summary of 19th-century views of history, focusing on historicism and its critiques, especially on the neo-Kantian school, arguing that the need for a universalistic explanation of history as formulated in Kant’s famous essay, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” did not disappear in the next century but rather changed from a philosophical into a positive scientific, then into a methodological need of universality. Finally, I turn to topics more explicitly related to Weber’s interpretive sociology: young disciplines of sociology and economics (Volkswirtschaftslehre), with a short discussion on Weber’s political views which are also of great importance in understanding his depiction of China. Chapter I consists of short analyses of specific questions, formulating definitions of the different views on society, economy and history – views that constitute the background of Weber’s thought.

Section II has two main subsections analysing (1) the most important aspects of Weberian methodology, and (2) the problematic points of the application of this methodology. First, I give a short summary of Weberian views on “objective” and “value-free” scientific research, as well as of his understanding of historical investigation, with a special focus on the role of counterfactual analysis, i.e., cases of thought experiments where the historian raises the question, in what measures the chain of events would change its direction if one of its elements was removed from the multiplicity of causes. After this overview I point to the importance of comparative approaches as a characteristic of Weber’s methodological thought. In these examinations I rely mainly on the analysis of Weber’s methodological writings, consciously excluding at this point all texts (by Weber and by later interpreters) that would challenge the clearest formulations of his principles. In subsection II.2. I turn to the practical side: I examine the so-called “Protestant Ethic debate”, an important controversy challenging the “objectivity” and “value-free” nature of the Protestant Ethic (PE) studies. Then, I confront famous interpretations (Jaspers, Löwith, Tenbruck, Mommsen) that ascribe a universalistic historical theory to Weber with his own description of the objective “science of reality” which abandons such kinds of speculative philosophical interpretations. While in the first part of the section the analysis is based on Weber’s text, here, I am focusing on the readings of several illustrious interpreters, readings that cannot easily be brought into agreement with Weber’s depiction of his own
strictly scientific methodology. My suggestion here, instead of taking a side, is to differentiate between two “manners of speaking” in Weber’s works: a “controlled objective” and a “reflected subjective” one, where the former is the one Weber chooses in the clear formulations of “objectivity” and “value-freedom”, while the latter appears only in a few cases, especially strikingly in certain important places, e.g., in the first paragraph of the “Preliminary Remarks” of EEWR. This distinction makes it possible to argue against Leo Strauss’ critique by pointing out that Weber’s conscious restrictions and rules of objectivity were not suggesting a relativistic Weltanschauung but, on the contrary, obliged the scientist to provide the reader with tools for deliberating and making responsible decisions. Finally, turning to my main theme, I examine the role of the studies in EEWR as a series of proofs aimed at strengthening the main thesis of PE, namely, that ideal factors can have an important effect on economic processes, as it happened in the case of the emergence of modern Western capitalism which actually did not appear anywhere else because of the lack of a “central life-orienting force of a salvation religion”, similar to that of Protestant inner-worldly asceticism. I argue that although Weber was stressing the critics’ misunderstandings in his replies during the PE debate, there definitely remained open questions he wanted to answer: questions regarding the extent of the importance of Protestant ethics in forming Western capitalism, and the uniqueness of the West in developing this kind of economic “spirit”. If we – following Weber – accept that the examination of Oriental cultures serves as the comparative analysis of the same phenomena, i.e., the Western capitalist “ethos”, then the studies of EEWR can be regarded as “indirect proofs” or quasi counterfactual examinations: cases in which it is not the examiner who excludes a certain element of the historical process in theory, but that it does not actually appear in the specific culture.

Section III, the central part of the dissertation, focuses on the various aspects of the study, “Confucianism and Daoism”. Subsection III.1. gives a historical overview of the genesis of the work, stressing its embeddedness in the PE debate (the debate was finished shortly before the first chapters of the study were written) and in Weber’s research related to the great theoretical work, Economy and Society, as well as in the scientific and political atmosphere of pre-war and wartime Germany. After these points are made clear, I also analyse the changes Weber made in the study after its first publication in 1915, at the same time stressing the fact that in spite of the significant extensions, regarding their aims
and main considerations the difference between the two versions is almost negligible. At this point, the analysis is kept within the framework of the factual and historical examination of the work’s genesis. In the same subsection I reconstruct the work in its final version, together with the “Introduction” of EEWR and the “Intermediary Reflections” (IR), which was placed between the study on Confucianism and that on Hinduism and Buddhism in the collection. The philosophical approaches mentioned above are integrated into the analysis at this point as in the examination of the more subjective, sometimes almost personal remarks in IR I turn again to questions which have an essentially philosophical relevance, referring back to Section II and arguing that the strict methodological rules and these subjective reflections can only be artificially separated. Weber’s study, as well as his oeuvre, on the other hand, can only be understood by considering these two aspects together. These are namely the two spheres of Weber’s thought reflecting on different spheres of human life among which the scientist has to find stable ground to base his objective analysis on. In the final chapter of the subsection I analyse Weber’s sources, paying special attention to the translations he used, stressing that these, although were much more scientific in their methods, regarding their religious background they rarely differed essentially from those used by 18–19th-century philosophers. This last chapter is related to the study on China in the same way Subsection I.3. is to the Weberian oeuvre: it provides short overviews of the different kinds of sources on which Weber relied in his investigations.

In subsections III.2. and III.3, I examine the two main groups of “tools” Weber uses in his analysis of Chinese society: those that help him point out the similarities between China and the West, thus ensuring an “objective”, ideal typical framework for the examination, and those with which he could establish distinctions between the two cultures, distinctions that lead to one central difference, i.e., the existence vs. the lack of the life-orienting force of a salvation religion. Pointing to the “effects” of the lack of such a force and proving that one of these effects is the lack of the spirit of capitalism constitutes the argumentation which thus becomes, as mentioned above, an “indirect proof” of the PE thesis. Both these subsections are based on textual analysis. Subsection III.2. is grounded on the examination of some characteristic paragraphs, i.e., instead of following the order of the chapters of the study I outline thematic groups in which Weber’s views can be placed. Here, I analyse Weber’s use of ideal types through three examples: “capitalism”,

“rationalisation” and “patrimonial bureaucracy”. “Capitalism” and “rationalisation” exemplify cases in which a term is used in its broadest meaning to be applicable to a cultural context essentially different from the one in which the term’s meaning originated, while “patrimonial bureaucracy” shows that if the simple extension of the term’s reference field is not wide enough to describe a different kind of historical formation or process, Weber uses two familiar terms to grasp one unfamiliar phenomena, thus creating a different structure which is similar to the other one exactly through the aspect in which it differs from it. Secondly, through the examples of “patriarchalism”, “feudalism” and “patrimonialism”, I demonstrate how the above-mentioned schemes are applied in Weber’s historical analysis of China. In the third chapter of this subsection I deepen this examination with three more exact examples, cases when specific Chinese and Western phenomena (e.g., the Chinese emperor and the Roman pontifex) are identified with each other, thus proving how the two cultures are connected in their deep structures despite all peripheral differences – until a certain point.

Sub-section III.3. is a detailed analysis of how Weber, after describing the similarities by extending the scope of his “types”, narrows the circle of various differences until he reaches the main missing link in the history of Chinese society: the presence of a salvation religion similar to that of Protestantism. Here, first, I analyse examples of differences which Weber makes use of in showing that economic and social phenomena can in each case be traced back to the influence of the Confucian literati, a social stratum that conserved the status of all other parts of society in order to strengthen its power. These argumentations stress, without exception, that all kinds of economic changes are influenced – not only but essentially – by ideal factors as well. Secondly, I show how Weber analysed the literati, their traditionalism and rationalism, the effect of which was the lagging behind of Chinese society. Rationality in this small circle of the administrative group created, as Weber argues, irrationality on all other levels of society, conserving Confucian authority for thousands of years. The literati thus become, as I point it out, an example of an ideal factor having an influence on economic process in a different sense, i.e., not as an indicator but as a hindrance, an obstacle in the way of change. The process this stratum stopped was, as I argue, not the emergence of modern capitalism since this is not something it could have hindered directly and consciously. What it deterred was the emergence of an ethic of vocation, an inner-worldly ethic that could not be born in the “magic garden” of
Daoism into which the literati locked the rest of Chinese society. Pointing to the fact that the lack of such an ethic “caused” the lack of capitalist “spirit” in the modern Western sense, Weber verifies the PE thesis in an experiment which is not a thought experiment, rather, an experiment carried out by history itself.

Section III.3. provides a “close reading” or, so to speak, an increasingly closer reading of the text, until the main chapter of “Confucianism and Daoism”, “Confucian life-orientation” is analysed in most detail. In all chapters of Section III I lay stress on the sinological background of the topics Weber discusses, while consciously avoiding any kind of sinological critique of his approaches since these are explicitly not meant to be sinological examinations of Chinese society.

Section IV is the concluding part of the dissertation in which I connect the considerations regarding Weber’s methodological and historical, as well as political views (Section II) with the results of the analysis of the study on China (Section III); then I define the study’s place in the European reception of China and the historical views reflected in it (Section I); finally, I give a short summary of the reception of “Confucianism and Daoism”. This section is thus based on comparative examinations stressing the similarities and the contrasts in Weber’s different views, as well as between his overall account on China and that of earlier interpreters. In the first subsection I show how the Confucian literati become – to use Wolfgang Schluchter’s words – “the prototype” of bureaucracy as such, thus a “mirror” reflecting the negative aspects of the process of bureaucratization, one of the most central kinds of rationalisation mechanisms. Although we find only a few implicit statements in the study itself containing such a view, it becomes obvious from Weber’s non-scientific writings, i.e., from those in which he uses the above-mentioned reflected subjective manner of speaking more often, that this aspect is an important element of his depiction of China, as important as his critique of bureaucratization is central to his critique of his time. However, Weber’s description of Confucian “rationalism” as hindering the emergence of an ethic similar to the Western kind also shows his personal ethical disposition which, on the one hand, obliged him to argue for the importance of preserving uniquely Western values, and on the other hand, to argue against grounding science on the scientist’s personal value judgments. Considering these different aspects of his views of China, as I point out in subsection IV.2., his interpretation is although related to both sides mentioned in Section I, i.e., the critique and the praise of the West, he criticised the
West through China but not by the admiration of China, and he praised the West through China but not by the devaluation of China. Thus, I argue, it is not Leibniz’, Hegel’s or Marx’, but Tocqueville’s views on China to which Weber’s view is the nearest, as he used the “mirror” of China in a very similar way, i.e., to show the dangers of the same processes he personally favoured the most. The complexity of these aspects altogether and of course Weber’s enormous factual knowledge are reasons why the study “Confucianism and Daoism” was not analysed with enough care and especially within its proper context(s), although, as the dissertation has shown, it provides important insights not only and not primarily into Weber’s account on China, but into his views on Western history.

III. Results of the investigation

Through these contextual and comparative analyses the dissertation contributes to the comprehensive interpretation of “Confucianism and Daoism” and Weber’s views on China in general, including the links connecting these views to his interpretation of history and his critique of his time. The work binds together the different results of secondary literature, i.e., those of sociological interpretations (e.g. Bendix, Schluchter, Tenbruck), sinological examinations (e.g. Schmidt-Glintzer, Zingerle), writings on Weber’s views on history and politics (Löwith, Mommsen), conflicting philosophical readings (Hennis, Jaspers, Strauss) and so on, providing one of the most extensive analyses of the study on China. Balancing between the investigation of the work’s historical, political, sociological and methodological background and its textual analysis, the dissertation makes it possible to place the study in its original context instead of giving a one-sided examination of it. Meanwhile, new light is shed on several elements of this context too, i.e., on Weber’s other writings which have been very rarely analysed in their correlation with the study on China. The most important result of the dissertation is that by placing Weber in the history of the European reception of China his views on history are also connected to 19th-century philosophies of history without abandoning the necessity of such a philosophical reading but at the same time avoiding reading the Weberian oeuvre as a series of universal-historical investigations. Instead of dissolving the ambivalences within his works his thought is examined here through these ambivalences, i.e., by understanding their roots, consequences and their importance.
IV. Publications related to the topic of the dissertation

**On Weber's works**


“A reason and nothing more” [„Egy ok és más semmi”], *Budapest Book Review [BUKSZ]*, XXVII/2, 185–191.


**Other publications related to the European reception of China**


