



Weber's View of Confucianism Revisited*

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This article revisits Weber's view of Confucianism for two purposes. First, though many scholars have put forward persuasive criticisms of his view of Confucianism, this article tries to show that it is still valid in many essential regards, despite a number of flaws. Second, Weber attempted to construct a typology of world religions along the two axes of active asceticism versus passive mysticism and this-worldly versus other-worldly religion. It appears that Weber saw Confucianism as this-worldly passive mysticism. Schluchter and Habermas, two prominent Weber interpreters, do not agree with him and with each other. This article attempts to show that Weber came closer to the core of the dominant, orthodox strand of Confucianism, though we need to correct some of his understandings of its nature.

Keywords: Weber, Confucianism, world religion, salvation, mysticism, asceticism, analogical thinking, inaction

There are two main reasons we may want to revisit Weber's view of Confucianism. First, his view of Confucianism has constantly triggered controversies just as his thesis of the Protestant ethic has. Scholars have not yet reached any consensus on how to evaluate Weber's view of Confucianism. This article attempts to show that it is still valid in many essential aspects, despite a number of flaws. Second, Weber attempted to construct a typology of world religions along the two axes of active asceticism versus passive mysticism and this-worldly versus other-worldly religion. Weber most likely saw Confucianism as this-worldly passive mysticism, though he was not perfectly clear about this. Prominent Weber interpreters such as Schluchter and Habermas do not agree with him and with each other. While Schluchter (1981) argues that Confucianism should be seen as this-worldly active asceticism, Habermas (1984) views it as something like active mysticism. In this article, I try to show that Weber came closer to the core of the dominant, orthodox strand of Confucianism, though we need to correct some of his

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main understandings of its nature.

To show these two points requires us to look beyond *The Religion of China*. There is no doubt that he offers the most comprehensive characterizations of Confucianism in this work, and thus his critics justifiably have tended to focus on it. Yet he also provides numerous descriptions of Confucianism in “The Sociology of Religion” in *Economy and Society*, “The Social Psychology of the World Religions,” and “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions.” And while *The Religion of China* only compares Confucianism and Puritanism, the other works place Confucianism in the wider discussion of the types of religions and their historical developments, making it possible to compare it with other major and minor religions. Moreover, while the former tends to discuss only what Confucianism was, the latter allow us to see why it was what it was as well. In what follows, therefore, I rely mainly on “The Sociology of Religion” to place Confucianism in Weber’s comparative sociology of religion.

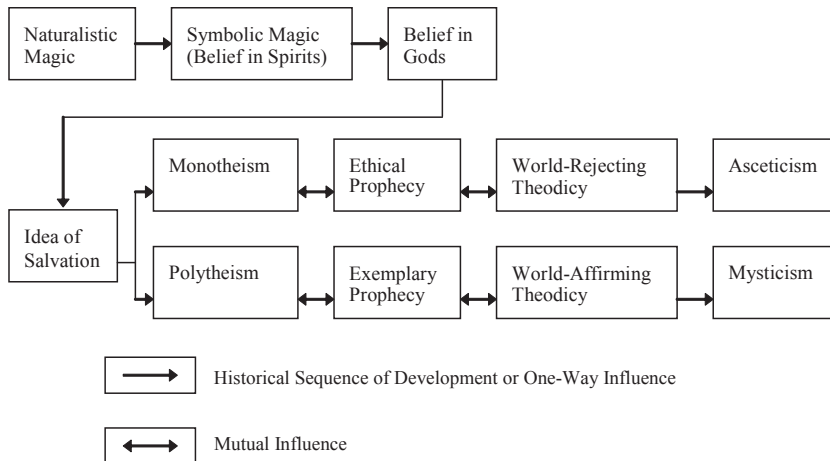
In the first section, I show that, contrary to Weber’s view of Confucianism, it did contain the idea of evil in its total rejection of human desire, though it did not seem to have deeply religious notions of sin and salvation. This allows us to place Confucianism in Weber’s famous typology of world salvation religions in which the opposition of active asceticism and passive mysticism and that of this-worldliness and other-worldliness are cross classified. Weber regards Confucianism as a this-worldly mysticism. Yet many scholars of Confucianism do not think that Confucian self-control can be adequately seen as representing mysticism. The second section takes up this issue. I argue that Confucian self-control met Weber’s two criteria by which a religion can be called ascetic, but that it was also deeply tinged with mystic traits. Thus Confucianism was this-worldly but not active and world-rejecting. The third and fourth sections are devoted to the issue of Confucian inaction or adjustment to the world. They show that Confucian adjustment can be better interpreted as inaction and that it is attributed to Confucianism’s analogical, organic cosmology as well as its mystic tendency. Neo-Confucianism was not just a religious ethic but also a comprehensive philosophical system with its own theory of knowledge and human desire/passion and its own ontology. Hence Confucianism will not be compared only with Protestantism but also with some strands of modern Western philosophy. The fifth section briefly discusses the intellectual movement against Confucianism around the turn of the nineteenth century of East Asian countries. The main purpose of the section is to further prove Confucian inaction by showing that social reformers with the Confucian background in that period themselves placed enormous emphasis on activism and energy as opposed to the traditional Confucian ethic. Finally, concluding remarks follow.

CONFUCIANISM AS A SALVATION RELIGION

One central theme of “The Sociology of Religion” in Weber’s *Economy and Society* is to trace various developmental routes from magic to rational religion and different ethical paths to the rational, methodical way of life which is an important mark of rational religion. Simplifying Weber’s complicated accounts of the evolution of religions, we may schematize the routes and the paths as shown in Figure 1. This-worldly asceticism achieves the highest degree of ethical rationalization. He seems to argue that historically this path was trodden only by the sequence of Judaism-Christianity-Protestantism. If a religion is to achieve the highest degree of ethical rationalization, therefore, it must be a religion of salvation, monotheism, ethical prophecy, and world-rejecting theodicy.¹ Not only do these factors contribute to rationalization of a religion individually, but they also combine to lead to the only path to the most methodical, active way of life exemplified by Protestantism. Different destinations of different religions are the products of actions and interactions of the various factors in the diagram.

The first great step towards ethical rationalization is the genesis of the idea of salvation. Men at the magic stage believe that misfortunes and sufferings befall upon them are the result of the weakness of their gods or spirits. Religious rituals at this stage are performed to

Figure 1. From Magic to Rational Religion



¹ One may add independent priesthood and congregation to this list, but they are not the unique characteristics of the Occidental religion but common among salvation religions. In particular, the contribution to ethical rationalization of independent priesthood is highly ambivalent. While it certainly contributes to rationalization of metaphysical views and doctrines (Weber 1978, pp. 424-7), it can be a conservative force hindering further ethical rationalization and preserve magic to maintain its “business.” The prophets had to fight the priests before they could ever deliver their revelations.

magically coerce the spirits or gods to favor the believers. The next stage is one in which such misfortunes or sufferings are not attributed to the weakness of their god but to their transgression against the god's will (Weber 1978: 437). There follows a yearning for salvation from their sufferings which are the corollary of their sins. The notion of sin is inevitably accompanied by that of conscience. The notions of salvation and sin, therefore, allow for a development of internalized ethic. As Kalberg (1985) shows, the notion of salvation has a highly significant place in Weber's sociology of religion. With this notion, magical ethic begins to be transformed into rational religious ethic. It is also the source of other religious factors – such as theism and prophecy – that are critical in transforming magical ethic into more rationalized ethic. In particular, the idea of salvation sooner or later leads the believer to face the problem of theodicy: the problem of the world's imperfections compared with God's perfection or the problem of why the perfect, transcendental god has created the ubiquitous existence of human sufferings (Weber 1978: 518-529). Different religions put forth different solutions to this problem which determine their different conceptions of the relation between God and the world and their own ethical relationship with the world (see 1978: 518-26; 1946a: 283; 1946b: 358-9). As such, the problem of theodicy is closely bound up with the second yardstick which Weber uses to assess the level of rationalization of a religion in *The Religion of China*: “the degree to which it has systematically unified the relation between God and the world and therewith its own ethical relationship to the world” (1951: 226). The problem of theodicy is unthinkable in the first place where there is no notion of salvation. In Weber's view, therefore, lack of the notion of salvation and the related notions of sin and evil in Confucianism was the most decisive reason why it maintained magic in the form of magical belief in ancestor spirits and other animistic spirits and why it was not capable of ethical rationalization.

Why, then, did Confucianism not develop the notion of salvation? No direct answers are available in Weber's work. Indirect answers, however, may be drawn from his discussion of various factors which generally tended to produce such a notion. First, the social condition of the disprivileged is a source of salvation beliefs. “Since every need for salvation is an expression of some distress,” Weber says, “social or economic oppression is an effective source of salvation beliefs” (1978: 491). Second, the petty bourgeoisie or civic strata such as urban artisans or small traders are likely to develop the notion of salvation because of their economic foundation which imbues them with “a far more rational character, viz., calculability and capacity for purposive manipulation” (1978: 483; also see 1946a: 284).² Third, intellectuals of

² The link between these strata and the notion of salvation is not very clear, however. In “The Social Psychology of the World Religions,” Weber claims that common to all civic strata is the tendency towards an ethical and rational regulation of life (1946a: 284). But he does not provide any explanation of why their practical rationalism derived from the nature of their economic life should necessarily imply “religiously” ethical rationalism, much less how their ethical and rational way of life should lead to the notion of salvation. The only connection between the petty bourgeoisie or civic strata and the notion of salvation that Weber provides seems to be their disposition “to accept a rational world view incorporating an ethic of compensation” (1978: 483). In salvation religions, salvation is given to the believers as a

socially privileged strata are likely to develop salvation religions when they “have lost their political power to a bureaucratic-militaristic unitary state” and “when they have lost either the possibility of political activity or the interest in it” (1978: 503), though such strata are more likely to develop an “illumination mysticism” represented by the religions of India. Weber also argues that the religions of monotheism, prophecy, congregation, and independent priesthood have strong elective affinity with the notions of salvation, sin, and evil.

From this discussion, it is very obvious why Confucianism did not develop the notion of salvation. That it was a bureaucratic religion seems to be most decisive in this regard. Weber speaks of bureaucratic “irreligion” (1978: 476-7), by which he would mean that a bureaucratic religion typically lacks profound spirituality and an internalized drive to salvation. Other things being equal, ruling classes will rarely evolve the idea of salvation. Confucianism did not know of a personal, transcendental god; it oppressed any independent religious movements driven by prophets; and it allowed no independent priesthood. What characterizes dominant bureaucracy is above all “a comprehensive sober rationalism,” “the ideal of a disciplined order and security,” “a profound disesteem of all irrational religion,” etc (1978: 476). Privileged strata have few, if any, sufferings to be saved from. They justify their fortunes and their inferiors’ misfortunes. For them, therefore, religion is primarily a matter of “*legitimizing* their own life pattern and situation in the world” (1978: 491; original emphasis) and is an instrument for controlling the populace. Hence Confucianism preserved the “magic garden.” Moreover, the fact that bureaucratic Confucianism placed stress on the ancestral cult based on sib organizations brought another obstacle to ethical rationalization: city dwellers in China could not cut off their link to their native village. In China, Weber says, “the great importance of the ancestral cult and clan exogamy resulted in keeping the individual city dweller in a close relationship with his clan and native village” (1978: 482). Thus Chinese cities could not develop a community, and this may have been a significant factor for China’s lack of the congregational type of religion which was connected with the urban middle class in the Occident. As a result, Confucianism was characterized by a lack of the concepts of radical evil and sin and thus “an absolute lack of feeling of a need for salvation or for any transcendental anchorage for ethics” (1978: 476). Weber argues that if there were sins, they were only “offences against traditional authorities, parents, ancestors, and superiors in the hierarchy of office” (1951: 229) and that if the Confucian desired salvation, it was salvation “only from the barbaric lack of education” (1951: 228).

reward for their god-pleasing good deeds or their obedience to the god’s will. In short, the notion of salvation implies an ethic of compensation. Civic strata have elective affinity with such an ethic because their economic foundation allows them “to entertain the view that honest is the best policy, that faithful work and the performance of obligations will find their reward and are “deserving” of their just compensation” (1978: 483). The ethic of compensation, however, does not lead automatically to the notion of salvation but may well be present in any magical belief. Weber appears to think that civic strata are more prone to the notion of salvation because of the higher possibility for them to be connected with prophetic movements as well as their practical rationality.

Many scholars of Confucianism have called into question Weber's argument about the Confucian lack of the concepts of sin, evil, and salvation (Metzger 1977; de Bary 1991; Chang 1996). They have also refuted his related argument that Confucianism did not know of the problem of theodicy and that it accordingly lacked "any tension between nature and deity, between ethical demand and human shortcoming" (1951: 235) or "reduced tension with the world to an absolute minimum" (1951: 227). Their common effort is to demonstrate that Confucianism did show tension with the world anchored in some transcendental ethical ideal. de Bary, for example, does this by functionally equating the "Mandate of Heaven" (天命) with the supra-mundane God and great Confucian gentleman-scholars with Christian prophets (1991: Chapter 1).³ Indeed, we can observe the notion of evil in the denial of human desire in the Confucian classics, though the notions of sin and salvation are hardly found there. In particular, Neo-Confucianism articulated the theme of human desire and made it one of the most central concepts in its ethical doctrines. The greatest Neo-Confucian Chu Hsi's (朱熹) own words prove this: "The teachings of the sage, whether they be a thousand or ten thousand words, are only that man should preserve Heavenly Principle (*t'ien li*) [天理] and extinguish human desire (*jen yü*) [人慾]" (quoted in Fung 1953: 560). Here, one cannot fail to see the tension between ethical demand and human shortcoming. Hence we can say that Neo-Confucianism faced the problem of theodicy in its own way. Once we recognize this, Weber's argument that "Confucianism left untouched the significance of magic for redemption" must be called into question (1951: 226-7). He himself says elsewhere that "magic was powerless in the face of virtue" for the Confucian (1951: 155). Indeed, we read in *Confucian Analects*: "The subjects on which the Master did not talk were – extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings" (Legge 1893a: 201). In short, classical Confucianism was already skeptical of magic.

Schluchter, too, thinks that Neo-Confucianism can be seen as a movement toward a salvation religion.⁴ Weber himself does not theoretically close the door to the notion of salvation to Confucianism. First, the intellectual conceptions of salvation may arise without such conditions as loss of political power "as a result of unprejudiced reflection in periods of dynamic political or social change" (1978: 504). Second, the problem of theodicy is not inherent to the religions of the personal, transcendental god alone, but "even a meaningful world order that is impersonal and super-theistic must face the problem of the world's imperfections" (1978: 519). Neo-Confucianism is a case in point. It was formed out of the chronic sense of crisis that bedeviled the intellectuals in the Sung dynasty and as a spiritual

³ Weber, however, does not regard Confucius as a prophet but simply an academic teaching philosopher. One distinctive characteristic of prophets was "vital emotional preaching" which Confucius lacked. Confucius's main concern was just with influencing princes in the direction of Confucian social reforms (1978: 445). Thus de Bary's equation of Confucian gentlemen-scholars with Christian prophets is wrong from Weber's perspective.

⁴ Personal conversation.

response to the intellectual challenge from Buddhism. It constructed a systematic metaphysics and ethics on the basis of the impersonal, super-theistic cosmological concepts of Supreme Ultimate (太極), Principle (理), and Ether (氣) as well as the more traditional concept of the Mandate of Heaven.

Weber's view of Confucianism is shaped mainly by his reading of the Confucian classics, but he never deals with the Neo-Confucian development. Yet this does not mean that he is simply wrong about the nature of Confucianism. On the contrary, many of his characterizations of it are still valid and insightful. In particular, if we distinguish between Neo-Confucianism as a philosophy and ethics and institutional Confucianism as a governmental ideology, Weber's view seems fairly correct regarding the latter. As a governmental ideology, Confucianism primarily inculcated into people quiescent submission or "adaptation" to their proper places (分) in the hierarchical order of the world. And even if Neo-Confucianism contains some elements of a salvation religion, it is still not a "true" one from Weber's perspective: it still lacked the ideas of rebirth and redemption, "the two highest conceptions of sublimated religious doctrines of salvation" (1946a: 279).

In any case, the salvational development of Neo-Confucianism allows us to attempt to situate Confucianism in Weber's typology of world religions which is designed to classify salvation religions: this-worldly asceticism, other-worldly asceticism, this-worldly mysticism, and other-worldly mysticism. In fact, Weber implicitly applies this typology to Confucianism. As Schluchter (1981: 162) shows, Weber seems to classify it as this-worldly passive mysticism.

CONFUCIANISM AS MYSTIC ASCETICISM

Once we acknowledge that Confucianism contained salvation ethic and that it was this-worldly and mystic, then it is not different from Taoism in its essentials. Indeed, he argues that the Confucian shared with the Taoist the central concept of *Tao* (道) that is "the divine All-One of which one can partake – as in all contemplative mysticism – by rendering one's self absolutely void of worldly interests and passionate desires until release from all activity is attained (*wu wei*[無爲])" (1951: 182). On the other hand, they are totally different to the extent that the former was "sober rationalism" and despised popular magical practices, while the latter built up a magic garden. The same this-worldliness implied engagement in the world for Confucianism and seclusion from the world for Taoism. True mysticism such as Taoism, even if it is this-worldly, always involves a flight from the world, because the mystic as the god's vessel can reach union with the divine only through a minimum of activity (1978: 547). In contrast, the Confucian was a "bureaucrat" who had to act in the world, even if he shared the mystic concept of *Tao* with Taoism. This may be why Weber uses the phrase "adjustment to the world," which he does not apply to any other religions, in order to characterize Confucianism

which he thinks is very mystic but still this-worldly in the full sense of the word.

One way to find the difference between the Confucian and the Taoist this-worldliness may be by examining Weber's interpretation of Confucian self-control. Weber uses the term "ascetic" in a limited sense so that only a certain strain of salvation religions may belong to active asceticism.⁵ Thus self-control is not necessarily called ascetic. We may identify two criteria of being ascetic in Weber's work. First, self-control can be called ascetic only when it is based on religious ethic. This criterion can be derived from his definition of asceticism: active asceticism obtains when salvation is viewed as "the distinctive gift of active ethical behavior performed in the awareness that god directs this behavior, i.e., that the actor is an instrument of god" (1978: 541). This criterion excludes our everyday self-control from the definition of asceticism. Second, as the above quotation already suggests, self-control based on religious ethic can be called ascetic only when it is conducted within the world. Weber explicitly mentions this criterion when he compares "mystic" asceticism such as the Quakers and mysticism per se: "it is necessary to make a very clear distinction between the two. In the sense employed here, 'world-rejecting [read other-worldly] asceticism' is primarily oriented to activity within the world" (1978: 544). That is, the Quakers, despite their mysticism, are still seen as ascetic because they act within the world.

In light of these two criteria, Weber does not view Confucian self-control as ascetic. It is not derived from the individual's yearning for salvation but from "a personal necessity which followed from his disesteem for plebeian irrationality, the disesteem of an educated gentleman who had received classical training and had been bred along lines of propriety and dignity" (1978: 619). Confucian self-control and repression of all forms of passion in favor of the equilibrium and the harmony of the soul is not based on the yearning for salvation but on the yearning for "mastering the opportunities of this world." It is not "for the sake of salvation from the world but for the sake of integration into the world" (1951: 156). Propriety, one of the central concepts of Confucianism, is here primarily viewed as ceremonial and ritualistic. Weber's dismissal of Confucian propriety as mere ritualism is related to his general view of bureaucratic religion: "For all political bureaucracies, religious duties have ultimately been simply official or social obligations of the citizenry and of status groups" (1946a: 283). In this case, a religion becomes ritualistic. The Confucian, therefore, did not know "an inward aspiration toward a unified personality" and the inner tension arising from this strife (1951: 235). Almost all scholars of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, however, would refute this somewhat pejorative interpretation of Confucian self-control and propriety. We already saw that Neo-Confucianism in particular contained some elements of salvation religion. Metzger's work, *Escape from Predicament*, is almost entirely devoted to a demonstration of the pervasive

⁵ Weber says: "This designation ["ascetic"] is for our purposes here, and we do not in any way deny that this term may be and has been used in another and wider sense" (1978: 541-2).

existence in Neo-Confucianism of inner tensions based on a resemblance of salvation ethic. It follows that Confucian propriety is not simply ritualistic but primarily an external expression of inner piety. Confucian propriety, then, is to Confucian self-control what Christian piety is to Christian prayer. Neo-Confucian self-control, therefore, seems to meet Weber's two criteria of being ascetic.

In fact, some scholars have argued that Neo-Confucianism is similar to this-worldly active asceticism. Although not quite in this direction, Habermas interprets "adjustment" as "active." In order to address Needham's (1956) paradox – namely, why Chinese scientific, technological superiority to the West until the fifteenth century ended up with her subsequent decline – he makes a distinction between ethical and cognitive rationalization of worldviews (1984: 208-12). His hypothesis is that rationalization potential in the ethical dimension is high when attitudes toward the world are active, world-rejecting and ascetic (as in Christianity), while the cognitive rationalization potential is high when attitudes toward the world are passive, world-affirming and contemplative (as in Greek metaphysics). Since he interprets Confucian adjustment as active but not as world-rejecting, his reasoning is that Confucianism's potential for rationalization in both ethics and cognition is low. Schluchter, on the other hand, outright rejects Weber's view of Confucianism as passive and world-affirming. It is simply a misclassification. Schluchter thinks that one can explain China's scientific achievements only by recognizing Confucianism as world-negating (1981: 159). Scholars of Confucianism like Metzger, de Bary, and Chang provide more detailed, convincing arguments against Weber. Consider Chang's arguments, for example. Examining the Confucian ideal of *ching-shih* (青史) (literally, "setting the world in order"), Chang (1996) asserts that Confucianism was not a secular humanism, but "its inner-worldly character was anchored in a transcendental belief that centered on the idea of Heaven (*t'ien*) [天] or "the way of Heaven" (*t'ien-tao*) [天道]." What is more, "[t]his transcendental anchorage of the *ching-shih* ideal often imparts to Confucian sociopolitical thought a religiously grounded tension with the realities of the existing sociopolitical order" (1996: 73).

Yet Chang (1980) also admits that this "transformative" moment of Confucianism was stunted in the course of Chinese history and that it was liberated only with the modern shock of the West. Even Metzger, highly critical of Weber, claims that Neo-Confucians lost the hope of transforming the "outer" realm of political, economic affairs after the failure of Wang An-shih's (王安石) radical reforms in the eleventh century, focusing their ethical project to the "inner" life of moral striving (1977: 158). These disclaimers lead us back to the fundamental question of whether Confucianism was active and world-rejecting in the same sense as Protestantism was so, even if we admit that the former resembled the latter in some significant respects.

Maruyama (1974) answered in the negative, basically siding with Weber. He argues that Chu Hsi's Neo-Confucianism completely lacked the active, transcendental, and transformative moment. He views action as the hallmark of modernity, arguing that action vs. inaction is *the*

great divide between the Chinese Neo-Confucianism represented by Chu Hsi and the Tokugawa Confucianism innovated by Ogyū Sorai (荻生徂徠). He characterizes the Chu Hsi mode of thought as follows: a moralistic rationalism that does not allow for recognition of the independent value of historical fact; a naturalistic optimism that affirms everyone's capacity to become a sage; a continuative mode of thought that views ethics as a continuation of nature; and a propensity to quiescence and contemplation (1974: 19-31).

I believe that Maruyama better captures the “dominant” aspects of Confucianism. Even if Neo-Confucianism contained the elements of salvation religion and this-worldly asceticism, it was not active and world-rejecting because it also contained a great deal of mysticism. In the next two sections, I try to demonstrate that inaction rather than action – or at best adaptive action rather than transformative action – fits in with the Confucian organic ontology and cosmology and that contemplation was a typical method of achieving salvation and the “state of grace” for the Confucian as well.

THE CONFUCIAN UNIVERSE “FOLDED IN UPON ITSELF”

Weber uses such words as adjustment and conformism to characterize Confucianism. In contrast to Habermas's (1981) argument, it is certain that Weber means “passivity” or “inaction” by adjustment. Where does the Confucian inaction originate from? Weber's answer to this question was primarily the lack of the notion of salvation and the problem of theodicy in Confucianism. In this and next sections, I explore the ontological and ethical sources of such Confucian inaction. This section is devoted to its ontological sources.

Confucian inaction stems from the organic ontology and cosmology of Confucianism. Needham characterizes the dominant Chinese mode of thinking as “coordinative thinking” or “associative thinking.” Coordinative thinking does not subsume conceptions under one another as in European “subordinative” thinking, but place them side by side in a pattern. Things are ordered not by mechanical causality but by interdependent resonance (Needham 1956: 280-1). The Confucian universe does not separate man from his environment nor distinguishes between society and nature. They are all the products of one and the same Supreme Ultimate. Chu Hsi says: “Originally there is only one Supreme Ultimate; yet each of the myriad things partakes of it, so that each in itself contains the Supreme Ultimate in its entirety. This is like the moon, of which there is but one in the sky, and yet, by scattering (its reflection) upon rivers and lakes, it is to be seen everywhere” (quoted in Fung 1953: 541). At the apex of the universe is the Supreme Ultimate which emanates the myriad things of the universe in its own image. Each constitutes a microcosm that embraces, and is embraced by, the macrocosm. Because everything under the Heaven is produced by the movement of the same Supreme Ultimate in a unified and coherent way, everything has its proper place in the universe, “connected by the

'proper channels' with everything else" (Needham 1956: 338). "The universe," to quote Foucault's words, "was folded in upon itself" (1994: 17).

Coordinative thinking is bound up with analogical thinking. Since everything is connected by the seamless universal networks of the cosmos and since every microcosm partakes of the macrocosm, analogy and correspondence plays an important role in Chinese thinking. Tung Chung-Shu (董仲舒), the eminent Confucian in the second century, wrote, for example: "If water is poured on level ground it will avoid the parts that are dry and move towards those that are wet. If (two) identical pieces of firewood are exposed to fire, the latter will avoid the damp and ignite the dry one. All things reject what is different (to themselves) and follow what is akin" (quoted in Needham 1956: 281). When water moves towards the wet parts of ground, there is no other reason than that they are both wet. Analogical thinking does not require logical proof. Description of similarity and difference replaces proof. As such, Chinese scholars did not need to investigate the causes of things but only had to describe the pattern. When the description seemed successful, there was no need to test it. Indeed, there is a deeper reason why Chinese scholars had no need for proof. Things are out there just because they ought to be. The characteristic trait of premodern Chinese thinking is the fusion of what it is and what it ought to be. Epistemology, ontology and ethics are all one.

The self in the Chinese coordinative, analogical cosmology is an "extensional"⁶ self in the sense that it is situated as a node in the seamless universal networks of the cosmos. The passages from Foucault about the Western knowledge of the classical period are again appropriate here: "The space occupied by analogies is really a space of radiation. Man is surrounded by it on every side; but, inversely, he transmits these resemblances back into the world from which he receives them. He is the great fulcrum of proportions" (1994: 23). In the Confucian space of radiation, the self is just the receiver and transmitter of the continuous flow of cosmic energies initiated by the Supreme Ultimate. The boundary between subject and object blurs, and all that exists in the cosmos is universal interdependence. Since this Confucian cosmos is simultaneously a deeply moral order, its fixed pattern admits of no human intervention and manipulation. Freedom finds no place in this perfectly ordered universe of necessity. What Weber calls Confucian adjustment to the world, then, is a sociological translation of this Confucian extensional ontology.

Habermas argues that analogical thinking is characteristic of mythological thinking whose prominent feature is the "peculiar confusion between nature and society" (1981: 48). We can add that the confusion was not just between nature and society but also between man, nature and society at the ontological level. Out of the universe of analogy, Occidental rationalization begins with objectivating attitudes toward the world. Such attitudes initiate "demythologization

⁶ This term is used as opposed to the "punctual" self, the term which Taylor (1989) uses for the Lockean self. I will discuss this momentarily.

of worldviews [which] means the desocialization of nature and the denaturalization of society” (Habermas 1981: 48). Parallel to the separation from nature and society of man is the differentiation of cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic spheres that were entwined in the morally meaningful order of the universe. Only then can science of true and false be liberated from morality of good and bad and from aesthetics of beautiful and ugly.

In addition to the objectification of nature and society that are now distinguished, the modern self further objectifies itself as in Cartesian cogito. Examining Descartes and Locke, Taylor (1989) elegantly shows what implications the distancing from itself of the modern self has for a theory of knowledge. Descartes cut the link between scientific explanation and moral vision. For him, “[t]o know reality is to have a correct representation of things” (Taylor 1989: 144). The order of things now becomes something to be constructed by the mind capable of seeing its own inside, not something to be discovered. “The Cartesian option” for a theory of knowledge “is to see rationality, or the power of thought, as a capacity we have to construct orders which meet the standards demanded by knowledge, or understanding, or certainty” (Taylor 1989: 147).

Cartesian disengaged reason opens the possibility of rebuilding and remaking myself, my mind. Locke pushes the possibility opened up by Descartes to the extreme. Represented things, namely, ideas, are the building blocks that are assembled to construct our picture of the world. Hence ideas themselves are things. The mind is reified. The resulting self is the atomized “punctual self.” The modern self can be compared to a geometrical point because it distances itself from things to fix them as objects and thus is extensionless (Taylor 1989: 171-2).

The Confucian self stands in considerable contrast to this disengaged punctual self. It is an extensional self, so to speak, as opposed to the Lockean extensionless self. The Cartesian disengaged reason and the Lockean punctual self draws in the mind things that do not have moral significance any more to dissemble and reassemble them. The contrast between the Cartesian and the Neo-Confucian theory of knowledge is obvious when we look at the Confucian theory of “the investigation of things and the extension of knowledge” (*ko wu chih chih*) (格物致知) in *The Great Learning*. Here the word “*ko*” (格) translated as “investigation” is very interesting with regard to the relationship between the knower and things. Ch’eng Yi (程頤) (1033-1108), an important Neo-Confucian philosopher whose intellectual legacy was inherited by Chu Hsi, comments: “This ‘investigation’ (*ko*) means a ‘reaching’ into (*chih*). It is like the *ko* in the expression, ‘the ancestors arrive (*ko*)’” (quoted in Fung 1953: 529). Instead of drawing things in, the Confucian reaches into them.

The “reaching into” way to cognize things fits nicely with the Confucian ontology. The ultimate aim of knowing is to realize the Principle that imparts itself to all things including the self. Ch’eng Yi says: “For there is only one Principle for other things and the self. As soon as you understand the one, you will comprehend the other. This is the way to unite the internal with the external”; “The mind of a single person is the mind of Heaven and Earth; the Principle

of a single thing is the Principle of all things” (quoted in Fung 1953: 531). Now that man and things occupy the same ontological status, man does not “stand over” but “stand with” things, to use Taylor’s (1989: 202) words. Not analysis but empathy is the Confucian mode of knowing. The Confucian does not have to represent things in the mind to reconstruct them. He only has to reach into things to find the Principle embodied in them. Of course, this is not as easy as it sounds because the mind is clouded by human desire. The Confucian Principle is of fundamentally moral nature, and hence no wonder that “human desire” enters into Confucian epistemology. Knowing, then, presupposes cultivating the character; knowing is intuitive realization that suddenly presents itself before the knower. Chu Hsi says: “When one has exerted oneself for a long time, finally a morning will come when complete understanding will open before one” (quoted in Fung 1953: 561). And since the mind of a single person is the mind of Heaven and Earth, it is possible to argue that man only has to reflect on his own mind to find the truth of the cosmos without having to reach into things. It is Wang Yang-Ming (1472-1529) who realized this possibility, when he says “The mind of man constitutes Heaven in all its profundity, within which there is nothing not included.” (quoted in Fung 1953: 601). For Wang, therefore, the self is a holoscopic self that partakes of the whole universe.

The developments of Western modern philosophy are parallel to the rise of what Weber calls means-end rationality or instrumental rationality. This rationality is the very foundation of modern activism, which requires something like Descartes’s disengaged reason or Locke’s punctual self that objectifies and dissects the world, natural, social or inner. Weber points to the connection between Puritans and Descartes, saying that “Only a life guided by constant thought could achieve conquest over the state of nature. Descartes’s cogito ergo sum was taken over by the contemporary Puritans with this ethical reinterpretation” (1992: 72). Confucianism provided no leeway for such developments and stayed within the traditional mode of thinking. Neo-Confucianism developed a theoretically highly elaborate – thus rational in some sense – cosmology. Yet it did not liberate itself from mythological legacies handed down from the ancient times. The Confucian self, therefore, remained in the cosmologically determined places in the mythological, if not magic, garden.

CONFUCIAN RETURN TO THE UNDIFFERENTIATED PRINCIPLE OF NATURE

Now a discussion of the ethical sources of Confucian inaction is in order. We have seen that Confucian self-control satisfies Weber’s criteria of being ascetic at least to some extent. Indeed, Confucian asceticism for moral perfection is so intense that the maxim of “preserve Heavenly Principle and extinguish human desire” is *the* supreme ethical ideal of Confucianism.

This asceticism, however, was confined to the inner self, but did not develop into the kind of active asceticism that pursued transformation of the outer world. Chang (1996), though

warning us of any easy Weberian dismissal of Confucianism as adjustment to the world, eventually thinks in this way, too. As we saw above, he makes a case for Confucianism as not only being asceticism but also implying a transcendental and thus world-rejecting moment. The role of the supra-mundane God in Protestantism is assumed by Heaven or “the way of Heaven.” The counsel of self-realization by “the way of Heaven” produces a tension with the world, inner and outer. While this asceticism leads to “a relentless drive to conquer the inner world of the self,” however, such a drive did not extend to the external world of nature and society (Chang 1996: 89). In his review of Metzger’s *Escape from Predicament*, Chang makes the same case, suggesting that Neo-Confucianism, though not lacking a tension with the world, still lacked the *transformative* tensions with the social world and thus a spiritual leverage to transform it (1980: 268). In Chang’s view, this is what Weber really means when he talks about the Confucian lack of tensions with the world.

The previous section attributed this Confucian passivity to the Confucian cosmology. Such passivity also stems from the Confucian ethical theory of human nature and human passion/desire. Let us begin with Confucian self-cultivation. We read in *The Great Learning* (大學): “From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of *everything besides*” (Legge 1893b: 359, original italics). “Hsiu-shen (修身),” translated as the “cultivation of the person,” literally means “cultivation of the body.” Confucian self-cultivation, then, begins with the cultivation of the body. This is because the body is the location of desire. This interpretation is supported by Chu Hsi’s commentary on another central maxim of Confucianism stated by Confucius. To his disciple’s question of what is benevolence or perfect virtue (仁), Confucius answers that it is “to subdue one’s self and return to propriety” (克己復禮 [*k’o chi fu li*]) (Legge 1893: 250). Here “*chi*” again means the body, and Chu Hsi comments in *Ssu shu chi chu* (四書集注) that “*chi* refers to the selfish desires of the body” (1956: 81).

Human desire in Confucianism is primarily bodily desire. Indeed, Chu Hsi defines desire as “what ears, eyes, mouth, nose and four limbs want” (1956: 246) or as something that “arises when things and I are exposed to each other” (1956: 125). Human desire in particular and human passions in general, therefore, belongs to human nature, which is assumed to be naturally good. Why then “extinguish human desire”? There is a great tension in Confucianism between the naturalness of human feelings/passions and the intensely felt moral need to cultivate and perfect the self by extinguishing them. The first chapter of *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸) appears to provide a solution to this tension: “While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of EQUILIBRIUM. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of HARMONY” (Legge 1893c: 384; original emphasis). Desire, then, is an excessive stirring of feelings. Yet Confucianism is inclined to dismiss human feelings and passions more radically than the passage just quoted suggests. For example, Chu Hsi says that

if only we tend toward something, it is already desire, even if we do not actually indulge in it (1956: 246).

It appears that, while no Confucian philosophers theoretically denied the naturalness of human feelings/passions, they nonetheless tended to emphasize their negativity in their ethical project of self-cultivation. This is because all human passions were attributed to the Ether, which was the original source of evils, as opposed to the Principle as intrinsically good. Insofar as human passions are generically so defined, any of them has no place in the Confucian project of moral perfection. Thus Confucian asceticism ultimately aims at liberation from, or absolute control over, human passions at least at the theoretical level. This is evidenced by Chu Hsi's constant quest for a return to the undifferentiated Principle of Nature, the equilibrium free of any feelings as the Confucian moral ideal. Confucius was the great sage who had this quality.

How can we reach that equilibrium free of any feeling? Through investigation of the Principle and meditation. To be a great man, says Chu Hsi, one must stay in "the ether of the dawn, the serene ether of the time when one has not yet contacted with things" (1956: 217) because desire arises when things and I are exposed to each other. The less I am exposed to external things, the more likely I am to be a great man. Returning to the undifferentiated Principle of Nature, therefore, represents quietism and contemplation inherent in Confucianism. Thus the Confucian tension between ethical demand and human shortcomings does not lead to an active tension with the outer world, a tension extending to the mastery of the world, but a passive tension with the inner world, a tension resolved by returning to the undifferentiated Principle of Nature through cultivating the mind.

In Confucian contemplative asceticism, human passions are something to be completely expelled from the mind. The human mind and human desire are mutually exclusive. Chu Hsi says that "if the Principle of Nature exists in the human mind, human selfish desires will not, but if human selfish desires win, the Principle of Nature will be destroyed. There has never been a case where both the Principle of Nature and human selfish desires are interwoven and mixed" (Chan 1963: 608). The means to escape the resulting predicament – that humans cannot do without desires – is primarily by collecting the mind and returning to the original equilibrium. What prevails here is tranquility over action, calm contemplation over tenacious effort. In a sense, Confucianism creates, within the innermost self, the other world for one to meditate in. The Confucian wishes to return to Nature in a natural, spontaneous, and effortless way.

If Confucian asceticism aims at a return to nature, Protestant asceticism attempts to overcome nature. Christian asceticism, Weber argues, "had developed a systematic method of rational conduct with the purpose of overcoming the *status naturæ*, to free man from the power of irrational impulses and his dependence on the world and on nature" (1992: 72). This contrast stems from the fact that, while the state of nature in Christianity was a state of "irrational

impulses” and intense passions, the Confucian state of nature was a state of pure equilibrium free from them. This difference leads to the totally different methodology of asceticism, namely action versus meditation. Weber is right, therefore, when he says that “the striving of the typical Asiatic holy man is centered in “emptying”” (1958: 338) or that its [*Tao*’s] command was not “action” but “emptiness”” (1951: 236). At the level of the method of self-realization, then, Confucianism was not greatly different from Buddhism. In contrast, Protestant rational asceticism, combined with what Taylor (1989) calls the “affirmation of ordinary life,” the life of production and of the family, led to the Protestant valuation of “restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism” (Weber 1992: 116).

Puritans’ conquest over the state of nature is guided by Cartesian constant thought. As we saw in the previous section, this implies Cartesian reason’s rise to supremacy over nature and passions. Now if reason has the supreme power to subject the world, inner or outer, to itself and thus rules passions, the latter are not something to be feared of, avoided or even extinguished any more. Instead, passions become the objects of instrumental control by reason, as Taylor aptly points out (1989: 150). Instrumental control implies utility. Thus Descartes says: “It is enough to subject one’s passions to reason; and once they are thus tamed they are sometimes useful precisely to the degree that they tend to excess” (quoted in Taylor 1989: 151). Under the guidance of reason, passions now can be liberated from the repressive grip of traditional ethics. As such, Protestant asceticism did not reject human desires and passions altogether. It was selective asceticism, so to speak. Hence Weber argues that while Protestant asceticism repressed irrational impulses, it freed “the acquisition of goods from the inhibitions of traditionalistic ethics” on the other hand (1992: 115).

The full endorsement of passions by the Enlightenment is not a far cry from this idea of passions as useful. Cassirer shows, therefore, that the affects and passions, which began to be thematized in the seventeenth century, were given a full citizenship by the Enlightenment thinkers. They were now extolled as “the original and indispensable impulse of all the operations of the mind” (Cassirer 1951: 105-6). “It is with this motivating force,” says Voltaire, “that God, whom Plato called the eternal geometer, and whom I call the eternal machinist, has animated and embellished nature: the passions are the wheels which make all these machines go” (quoted in Cassirer 1951: 107). Passions came to have a novel relationship with reason. Holbach gave a felicitous formulation to the new relationship between them: “The passions are the true counterweights of the passions; we must not at all attempt to destroy, but rather try to direct them: let us offset those that are harmful by those that are useful to society. Reason... is nothing but the act of choosing those passions which we must follow for the sake of our happiness” (quoted in Hirschman 1997: 27). Reason is now an organizer of the passions which are considered to be ethically neutral. Thus desire/passion in the modern West is directed towards the strengthening of activism and the rational mastery of the world.

CONFUCIANISM UNDER FIRE IN MODERN EAST ASIA

I have so far argued that Weber well captures some of the essential aspects of Confucianism such as inaction and quietism. For East Asian countries, therefore, modernization involved first and foremost a movement away from Confucian cosmology and ethics towards activism and the rational mastery of the world. Even if it is possible to reconstruct some strands of Neo-Confucianism in the direction of activism as does Metzger (1977), there is ample evidence that many East Asian intellectuals and social reformers around the turn of the nineteenth century saw Confucian legacies with a Weberian eye. Thus they either decisively moved away from Confucianism or integrated activism into it when they wished to preserve it. In what follows, I briefly describe this intellectual movement toward activism focusing on some influential thinkers or politicians in East Asian countries.

In China, Yen Fu (嚴復) (1853-1921) belonged among the first generation of intellectuals who faced the full impact of the West. He translated several major Western thinkers such as Spencer, Adam Smith, Montesquieu and John Stuart Mill. In particular, Spencer's social Darwinism left an indelible mark on his thoughts. What fascinated him so much was the sheer energy the Spencerian idea of progress contained. In his study of Yen Fu, Schwartz (1964: 81) sums up the contrast Yen Fu felt between the Western thinking and Confucianism: "The Western ideas of dynamism, self-assertion, realization of capacities – of freedom, democracy, and science – starkly confront the Chinese exaltation of inertia, sterile social harmony, and the negative authoritarianism which had dammed up the physical and intellectual energy of the race." As is obvious from this quotation, Yen Fu saw Confucianism as static and inactive. Moreover, he went so far as to argue translating *The Wealth of Nations* that since energy came from self-assertion, pursuing self-interest was morally right. Yen Fu went on to say that "The cleavage between 'righteousness' and 'interest' (*i li*) has been most detrimental to the advance of civilization" (quoted in Schwartz 196: 125) in both China and the West. Enlightened self-interest is righteous. Yen Fu urged China to follow the West which recently made the moral achievement of bridging the cleavage between righteousness and interest. Despite his deep Confucian background, therefore, he argued for something that the orthodox Confucian view of human desire and passion could never accept.

Yen Fu's wholehearted embrace of the Spencerian concepts of progress and energy could not be understood without taking into account the West's intrusion into China in the late nineteenth century. The contrast between China and the West was felt so huge that intellectuals could preserve Confucianism, if they wished to do so, only at the expense of doing great harm to its orthodoxy. Although K'ang Yu-wei (康有為) (1858-1927) radically reconstructed Confucianism to put forth a new utopianism (大同), therefore, this utopianism had a deep imprint of social Darwinism and the idea of progress. Chang points out that K'ang's

utopianism was different from the traditional Confucian ideals of social utopia in that the former was accompanied by “a heightened sense of future,” whereas the latter was largely past-oriented (1987: 38). No one could deny the significance of a change of the conception of time as a preeminent mark of intellectual transformation. In Weber’s terminology, the future-oriented conception of time is a characteristic aspect of purposive-rational action and thus activism, while the past-oriented conception of time is bound up with traditional action. Liang Ch’i-ch’ao (梁啟超) (1873-1929), a disciple of K’ang, also advocated the values of Western origin while trying to preserve Confucianism. For example, his “new citizen” was to embrace the social Darwinian ideas of struggle and progress, the virtues of activism and voluntarism, and the enterprising and adventurous spirit (Chang 1971: Chapter 6).

In Meiji Japan, the leading figure who spearheaded an attack on Confucianism was Fukuzawa Yukichi (福澤諭吉) (1834-1901). *An Encouragement of Learning*, the most important of his works, had an enormous influence on Japanese people who just escaped the feudal past. He opens his monumental work as follows: “It is said that heaven does not create one man above or below another man. This means that when men are born from heaven they all are equal. There is no innate distinction between high and low. It means that men can freely and independently use the myriad things of the world to satisfy their daily needs through the labors of their own bodies and minds...” (1969: 1). With this opening inspired by Western philosophy he studied in his earlier years, he shatters to the pieces the traditional, Confucian conceptual universe where people are denied free, independent, and active existence. Indeed, freedom and independence are the keywords throughout the book. An interesting example of the way in which he undermines Confucianism is given when he discusses loyalty. He does not deny loyalty to the government itself. Yet it is only conditional. If people feel injustice against the government, “they will not have to swallow their resentment and hate the government in silence....If their case is in accord with natural principle and human feeling, they should not hesitate to fight for it even at the risk of their lives. This is what we can call the ‘place’ of the citizens of the nation” (Fukuzawa 1969: 5). Note his usage of ‘*bungen*’ (分限) translated here as ‘place.’ The traditional usage of the word contains fatalism or resignation, while he uses it in the opposite sense so that disloyalty sometimes becomes true loyalty in his discussion.

The East Asian intellectuals mentioned above use the same language to attack Confucianism: Confucian inaction and fatalism. If they had seen the element of activism at all in Confucianism, they would have had no reason to level such a frontal, infuriated attack on it. Even if Neo-Confucianism retained an activist element, it was not an articulated theme, but was eclipsed by the other dominant tendency of inaction. Even if K’ang could excavate the values of activism and progress from Confucian relics, what motivated his excavation was his recognition that the West’s success rested in these values. The very paradigm, the very frame of reference from which to view the world shifted. Confucianism could not stand on its feet any more.

CONCLUSION

In Weber's developmental scheme of religion shown in Figure 1, Confucianism had some typical characteristics of a religion whose evolution was stunted at the transition from belief in spirits to belief in gods. Ancestor worship and the emperor's responsibility for rain and good harvest, for example, are seen in terms of magical coercion of spirits. On the other hand, Confucianism, as a bureaucratic religion, is characterized as a "sober rationalism" which despised popular magical practices. Weber here seems to be in an obvious self-contradiction. This is so only *prima facie*, however. In Weber's view, mere utilitarianism by which he characterizes Confucianism does not bring a high degree of ethical rationalization. He argues that it was primarily the lack of a "transcendental" anchorage for ethic that was the most decisive factor that made Confucianism incapable of a high degree of ethical rationalization. In other words, lack of the notion of salvation was crucial to the destiny of Confucianism. This leads him to dismiss the Confucian stress on self-cultivation and propriety as bureaucrats' sophistication with no ethical significance. Confucian self-cultivation, then, is not driven by the inner quest for perfection based on a transcendental anchorage.

Very few scholars of Confucianism would agree with Weber on this point. Beginning as social philosophy and statecraft, Confucianism had deepened its personal-ethical dimension over time. Neo-Confucianism articulated and developed this dimension to the point that we can speak of Confucianism as a salvation religion, if not in the full sense of the word. Neo-Confucianism revealed an acute sense of the conflict between human desire and Heavenly Principle. Its whole ethical project revolved around the question of how to preserve the mind which is naturally good because it embodies Heavenly Principle and extend it to everyday life and the outer world (Metzger 1977).

Once we acknowledge that Confucianism contained the elements of salvation religions, it becomes possible to situate it in Weber's famous typology of world religions. Weber himself employs this typology in various places to compare Confucianism with other world religions. It is seen as this-worldly passive mysticism. I have defended this position of Weber's, arguing against Schluchter and other scholars of Confucianism. Although Confucian self-control is not very different from ascetic self-control even in the strict sense of the word to which Weber is committed, I have shown that it retained a strong mystic tendency. When a salvation religion does not have a personal, transcendental god and is mystic, the believer seeks to embody an impersonal, super-theistic and cosmic being in himself. Even if the religion is this-worldly, the believer's primary effort for salvation focuses on a return to the pure, unalloyed state of nature as in the Confucian return to the undifferentiated Principle of Nature. All mysticisms tend to result in world-affirming theodicy: other-worldly mysticisms such as Hinduism and Buddhism end up affirming the world primarily because their ethical acts simply take place outside the

secular world; this-worldly mysticisms such as Confucianism also wind up so because their ethical acts focus primarily on inward contemplation of an impersonal cosmic being which also holds true for other-worldly mysticisms. Confucian inaction stemmed from this mystic tendency together with the Confucian organic ontology. The resulting self was a passive self situated in its proper place in the hierarchical cosmos of universal interdependence.

Confucianism is a complex philosophical and ethical whole that does not admit of any simplistic interpretation. Weber's may well be only one of many possible interpretations. The last section, however, showed that prominent intellectuals and social reformers in East Asia around the turn of the nineteenth century saw Confucianism with a Weberian eye, long before Weber could ever tackle it. Whatever their stances toward Confucianism, their lingua franca was energetic activism by which alone they believed their countries would be able to catch up with the West. This indirectly shows that Weber captured the dominant aspects of Confucianism correctly.

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