

# *Misinterpretations of Confucianism and Taoism by Weber: A Reading Note on "Religion in China: Confucianism and Taoism"*

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**Abstract:** By revisiting Weber's thought process in studying Chinese religions through reading "Religion in China: Taoism and Confucianism," it becomes evident that Weber's discourse still contains paradoxes, particularly in his misunderstandings of Confucianism and Taoism. The confusion surrounding the concept of "religion," misinterpretations of the concept of "unity of heaven and man," and neglect of the idea of "three teachings merging" have led Weber to overlook the characteristic of Confucianism as a doctrine rather than a religion. Moreover, his misreadings of the theoretical foundation of Taoism, confusion between Daoism and Taoism, and misjudgment of the relationship between Confucianism and Taoism have caused Weber to overlook the process of religious transformation within Daoism. Despite Weber's misunderstandings of Confucianism and Taoism, his awareness of sociological issues and the depth of his work undoubtedly make him a great scholar.

## 1. Introduction

In 1914, Max Weber began writing "The Economic Ethics of the World's Religions," aiming to study the religions of China, India, and the Jewish people from a sociological perspective. The objective was to demonstrate, through cross-cultural comparisons within a historical context, the viewpoints presented in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism<sup>[1]</sup>," namely, that the driving force behind the development of Western capitalist economy lies in the "spirit of capitalism," which, in turn, originates from Protestant (specifically, Puritan) ethics. These ethics advocate a rationalized, systematized, and ascetic way of life, driven by the pursuit of profit as a means of demonstrating divine favor. Weber believed that Puritans, who were oriented towards obeying God's commandments and yearning for salvation in the afterlife, had a mission to systematically dominate and rationally transform the world through utilitarianism. His research on China eventually culminated in the compilation of "Religion in China: Confucianism and Taoism<sup>[2]</sup>"

## **2. Raise of the problem**

### **2.1. The religiosity of Confucianism**

This proposition remains a subject of debate in academic circles. The dual nature of "philosophy-religion" that emerged during the development of Confucianism makes it difficult to encapsulate it in a single term. Confucianism encompasses both philosophical speculation and contemplation, as well as religious-style asceticism and control. From Weber's perspective, Confucianism exists as the official religion of the patriarchal Chinese state, known as "Confucianism." The philosophical speculation within its doctrines is seen as a means of constantly adapting to the secular world, a process aimed at eliminating all madness and emotional indulgence to attain the state of the "gentleman." However, the term "Confucianism" popular during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period referred to the notion of "teaching" rather than the "Confucianism" Weber referred to.

From this perspective, it is worth considering "Confucianism" as synonymous with "Confucian teachings" in advance. By approaching Confucianism through Weber's research framework, we can understand how Confucianism transformed into "Confucianism" in his view.

### **2.2. The religiosity of Taoism**

The emergence of Daoism and the introduction of Buddhism to China occurred around the same time. "A History of Chinese Daoism" points out that "Daoism is essentially rooted in Daoist philosophy<sup>[3]</sup>". The teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi from the Daoist school, the Yin-Yang school of thought, and certain Confucian ideas in the pre-Qin period are all reflected in Daoism. It is evident that the formation of Daoism underwent a process of doctrinal transformation and developed its unique pantheon of deities.

While Weber discusses the historical origins and developmental trajectory of Confucianism, he directly traces the origins of Daoism to the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi, neglecting its process of religious transformation. Considering Weber's research framework, it raises the question of whether he misunderstood Daoism and overlooked certain factors.

Upon conducting literature review, it is apparent that there is relatively little research in this area. Critically analyzing the shortcomings in Weber's discourse can contribute to a deeper exploration of the true nature of Daoism as an indigenous religion in China. This exploration can provide a foundation for the development of contemporary academic, political, and cultural domains, fostering cultural confidence and construction.

### **2.3. Localization of Buddhism**

Indeed, Buddhism arrived in China from India with a complete religious system and underwent localization during the Southern and Northern Dynasties period. It achieved religious status recognized by Confucianism after prevailing over Daoism in the debates of the "Meeting at Goose Lake" during the Yuan Dynasty. However, as Buddhism did not originate from China and is not the focus of Weber's work, it will not be further discussed in this article.

## **3. Weber's misunderstanding of religion**

### **3.1. Confusion about the concept of "religion"**

Unlike Tu Weiming's research paradigm, Max Weber did not explicitly define the core concept

of "religion" but formed a certain impression through his descriptive analysis of specific phenomena. Weber's misunderstanding of Confucianism fundamentally lies in his continuous emphasis on its religious status while simultaneously denying its religious nature.

When discussing bureaucratic systems and ecclesiastical authority, Weber points out that "China did not develop a religious ethic and education," but this conclusion is logically contradictory. Education, as the transmission of social experience and the cultivation of individuals, would not be referred to as "Confucianism" if it lacked religious ethics.

Furthermore, Weber's own discourse has some flaws. For example, when discussing Confucian education, Weber believes that due to the high degree of bureaucratization, there is no debate in China. In reality, debate has existed and continued to develop since the era of renowned thinkers during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. It has formed a highly philosophical mode of speculation and logic. However, due to the "official-centric" structure of Chinese society, debates are often encompassed within the operational mechanisms of political decision-making.

The confusion surrounding the concept of "religion" led Weber to frequently interchange and shift concepts in this book. Some aspects of the concept of "religion" are defined broadly, while others are characterized by a Western-centric perspective, treating the particularity of Christianity as universal and adopting a narrow definition. When addressing this issue, it is important to consider Weber's identity as a Western scholar. This suggests that he may have fallen into the trap of empiricism, starting from his own social context and preconceived assumption that "China must have religion," thus unquestioningly labeling Confucianism as "Confucianism" and conducting research accordingly.

### **3.2. Misinterpretation of the concept of "unity of heaven and man."**

Weber's understanding of the nature of Confucianism primarily comes from the "New Confucianism" represented by the concept of "unity of heaven and man," as he traces the historical development of various aspects of China's economy, politics, and intellectual culture from clan tribes to feudal states and then to property-based states. However, in this research process, Weber does not adhere to the chronological order of historical research and makes erroneous interpretations of pre-Qin Confucianism using Neo-Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, and even Neo-Confucianism.

The concept of "unity of heaven and man" in China is a product of the scholar-official class's efforts to uphold the authority of the patriarchal monarchy. Its theoretical connotations include the ideas of the "divine right of kings" and "following the way of heaven and governing with benevolence." On one hand, it emphasizes the inviolability of the charismatic ruler, and on the other hand, it emphasizes the supervision of "heaven" as the highest personal god over all worldly matters. In traditional Chinese culture, "heaven" is a concept with rich cultural and philosophical meanings, encompassing supernatural theology, natural order, and moral principles. Throughout the cultural development of different dynasties, the core concept that remains consistent between "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy" is the belief that "heaven reveals signs, indicating good or bad, and the sages follow accordingly<sup>[4]</sup>". Weber only focuses on the mysticism and agnosticism contained in the concept of "unity of heaven and man," believing that it contradicts the transcendent aspects of "empirical analysis" and "scientific rationality" in the capitalist spirit. However, he overlooks the inherent transcendence of Confucianism as the study of "self-cultivation, family harmony, state governance, and world peace." In other words, the Western path of social development emphasizes "breaking away from the old and establishing the new" and highlights the dichotomy between religious ethics and the secular world, while the path of social development in China is inclusive and characterized by gentle and respectful reforms.

Therefore, Weber excessively praises the direction of the West's major civilizations while actively belittling the East, deliberately pursuing "causality" in the spiritual realm, and misunderstands the essence of Confucianism.

### **3.3. The neglect of the concept of "the convergence of the Three Teachings"**

The neglect of the "convergence of the Three Teachings" refers to the phenomenon in Chinese history, from the late Eastern Han dynasty to the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, where Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism went from mutual exclusion and conflict to mutual communication, coexistence, and integration. This process was primarily led by Confucianism, which absorbed the ethics and wisdom of Taoism, Buddhism, and other teachings, enhancing its own level of speculation and laying the foundation for the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the Southern Song dynasty. The emergence of the "convergence of the Three Teachings" reflects the ideological basis of mutual integration and exchange between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. For example, it represents a rebellion against substantialism and essentialism in the worldview, as well as a conservative attitude and pluralism in methodology<sup>[5]</sup>. On the other hand, it also signifies the fusion of Confucianism with "heretical" teachings, contrary to Weber's assertion that they share a common mystical foundation in their origins.

The process of the "convergence of the Three Teachings" went through numerous protracted debates, where Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism absorbed and renewed each other, resulting in the inclusive nature of Chinese culture. For instance, in the Tang dynasty, the Huayan school of Buddhism proclaimed, "Confucius, Laozi, and Shakyamuni are all sages. They adapt to the times and respond to things, and their teachings may differ, but they mutually complement and benefit the people<sup>[6]</sup>". It is evident that as the three teachings deepened their mutual understanding, they formed a tacit agreement with a shared starting point of serving imperial authority and benefiting the people, actively placing ecclesiastical authority under the control of imperial power, thereby solidifying the traditionalism of China's family-based state. However, Weber overlooks the process of the "convergence of the Three Teachings" and interprets it as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism all being traditionalist religions. Even though they engaged in intense struggles while governing separately, he sees no practical significance for the development of the "spirit of capitalism" in China. While the logical outcome may be the same, Weber's erroneous deductive path inevitably leads to a misunderstanding of certain secondary issues related to the core problem.

At the same time, after incorporating Confucian ideas such as "the noble-minded love wealth acquired through righteous means," Daoism and Buddhism to some extent abandoned the notion of equating wealth with sin and instead considered the cultivation of "not being disturbed by wealth in one's mind" to be superior to the ordinary. However, in comparison to Protestantism, they still lack a systematic ethical framework to regulate the secular world, and they do not solely pursue economic gain through scientific rational calculation. On the contrary, for Daoism and Buddhism, the change in their perception of wealth due to the convergence of the Three Teachings merely involves "not disparaging wealth," while the fundamental viewpoint that regards wealth as "external to oneself" remains unchanged. What can bring redemption to individuals in the mundane world is still the mystical power of witchcraft rather than wealth itself.

## **4. Weber's misunderstanding of Taoism**

### **4.1. Misinterpretation of the theoretical foundation of Daoism**

Weber pointed out that the reason Confucianism cannot completely eradicate Daoism lies in their shared theoretical foundation, which is the belief in the "Dao" (the Way). However, there are two

problems with this conclusion.

Firstly, the concept of "Dao" in Confucianism and Daoism is not the same. In Confucianism, "the way of the great virtue, follows the course of the Mean," where the "Dao" represents an idealized state of governance characterized by adherence to ritual and music, and social members exhibiting a highly altruistic attitude. In Daoism, "the Dao gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to all things," where the "Dao" represents the philosophical source of all things. As stated in "The History of Chinese Daoism," "the way of Confucianism follows the daily human relationships, adheres to the path of benevolence and righteousness, and governs the state and brings peace to the world. As for the way of Daoism, it transcends heaven and earth and surpasses all things<sup>[7]</sup>". Therefore, the way of Daoism is beyond the limits of the world, while the way of Confucianism is within the limits of the world." Although they share the same name, their connotations are vastly different, reflecting the different attitudes towards the secular world between the two religious schools.

Secondly, the "Dao" theory in Daoism is not an abstract creation of "absolute spirit," but is based on the naturalistic observation of "man follows the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows nature." It is a simple ecological belief that advocates integrating human life into the rhythms of nature to achieve the state of "attaining the Dao." In this context, the "Dao" represents the constant laws governing the operation of the natural world, and the concept of "the Dao follows nature" in Daoism also encompasses the Marxist methodology that recognizes and utilizes these laws. Therefore, Daoist teachings are more akin to "philosophy of life" or "philosophy of nature" within the framework of modern disciplines, rather than the "mysticism" defined by Weber.

At the same time, Weber argues that Daoism lacks a supreme and governing personal deity, which contradicts the actual situation. The theoretical system of Daoism begins with an affinity for nature and the understanding of the existence of the "Dao," with the ultimate goal of "attaining the Dao and becoming immortal." As a result, many of its deities are not pure gods but individuals who have been sanctified due to their expertise in "nurturing life" and "prolonging longevity." From the perspective of genealogical inheritance, the current leader of Chinese Daoism, the "Purple Robe Celestial Master," is a descendant of Zhang Daoling and holds absolute leadership within the sect. From a theological perspective, Daoism includes the belief in the Three Pure Ones as the highest personal deities, and successive Celestial Masters have enriched and revised the "Encyclopedia of Deities" known as the "Ten Thousand Gods Temple." "The History of Chinese Daoism" records, "The so-called deities in Daoism encompass heavenly gods, human ghosts, earth deities, immortal beings, and collectively refer to them. The most revered among them is Laozi... The lineage of the Biographies of Immortals has gradually become embellished... However, since the Six Dynasties period, the number of deities in Daoism has increased<sup>[8]</sup>."

Yet, under Weber's discourse, Daoist leader Zhang Daoling is denigrated as a "professional sorcerer," and the belief system represented by the "Ten Thousand Gods Temple" is regarded as a religion with no theoretical system and only spontaneous functional deity worship, thus fragmenting the integrity of the religious sect. When Weber fiercely criticizes the acceptance of sorcery, he fails to see that Daoism itself is not just a sect with a sorcery-tolerant nature, but rather, the proliferation of sorcery is a result of the active alignment of the Qin and Han "fangshi" (a group of practitioners of folk religion) with Daoism.

#### **4.2. Confusion Between Daoism and Daoist Philosophy**

The religiousization process of Daoism has brought certain modifications to the teachings of Daoist philosophy, transforming the pure philosophy of returning to nature into a doctrine that



emphasizes the worship of deities and self-cultivation to attain immortality. Daoism provides its followers with the ultimate world of transcendence beyond life and death - the realm of immortals, and two paths of self-redemption leading to the realm of immortals and resolving disasters and difficulties: the art of longevity and witchcraft<sup>[9]</sup>. When discussing Daoism, Weber considers the "Tao Te Ching" and the "Zhuangzi" as the direct sources of Daoist thought, but neglects the later religious interpretations of Daoism, which often deviate from the original intentions of Laozi and Zhuangzi.

Furthermore, Daoist philosophy is metaphysical and belongs to the realm of high-level intellectuals. It is abstract and lofty, with a weak tendency toward secularization. In contrast, Daoism encompasses various deities governing people's health, wealth, and happiness, with a stronger inclination toward secularization, making it widely appealing<sup>[10]</sup>. The social foundations of these two aspects are significantly different, and equating them inevitably leads to problems.

It is worth noting that Laozi and Zhuangzi merely proposed the state of "union with heaven and earth" in a contemplative and meditative manner, and whether this state leads to immortality is still inconclusive. However, after this longevity ideal was extremely secularized, Daoism lost its noble metaphysical nature from the time of Laozi and Zhuangzi and slid toward being considered a "non-culture," "non-nurturing," and "witchcraft-oriented" Daoism.

Due to the limitations of his era, the complete blame for this misunderstanding cannot be solely attributed to Weber himself, as many sinologists he cited also share the responsibility. Due to the confusion in the available data, when discussing the political involvement of Daoist religious authority, Weber erroneously conflated the "Taiping Dao" of Zhang Jiao and Yu Ji with the "Wudoumi Dao" of Zhang Lu, considering them as having a direct lineage. However, in reality, Taiping Dao and Wudoumi Dao are two major branches of Daoism, which eventually evolved into Quanzhen Dao and Zhengyi Dao, respectively.

#### **4.3. Misjudgments on the Relationship between Confucianism and Daoism**

Weber believes that Confucianism, as the "orthodoxy" of China, portrays Taoism as its largest "heresy," artificially creating opposition between the two. In reality, rulers since the Sui Dynasty recognized that the combination of Confucianism as the foundation and the integration of the three teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) would be most conducive to governance<sup>[11]</sup>. Moreover, considering the distinct characteristics of Confucianism and Daoism, Confucianism compensates for Daoism's indifference towards the present world, while Daoism responds to the philosophical terminus of Confucianism. To some extent, during the Han Dynasty, when Dong Zhongshu proposed the concept of "unity of heaven and humanity," Confucianism and Daoism already maintained inherent unity, rather than a sharply opposing relationship.

Weber also points out the political attitude differences between Confucianism and Daoism, stating that "in the eyes of Confucius, there are no fundamental qualitative differences between people, while in the view of Laozi in Daoism, the difference lies in charisma and natural talent between those who are enlightened by mysticism and ordinary people." In the Chinese context, Weber seems to completely invert the interpretations of Confucianism and Daoism regarding the principle of equality among people. Confucius' advocacy of "self-restraint and observance of rituals" precisely introduces strict hierarchical order to regulate life and social equality, while Laozi's emphasis on individualistic salvation through closeness to nature does not involve charisma-based distinctions but offers a way of redemption open to all. Daoism's individualistic salvation not only does not undermine the orthodox status of Confucianism but instead provides a viable path for individuals who may find it difficult to obtain social integration under the political shadow of Confucianism.

Furthermore, Weber fiercely criticizes Daoism's "policy of deceiving the people," claiming that it hinders the development of natural science and the awakening of democratic consciousness. However, Laozi's "deceiving the people" does not correspond to the modern sense of dark enlightenment but advocates that people lead a simple and pure life. Moreover, the alchemy, astrology, and feng shui studied in Daoism undoubtedly represent the culmination of ancient Chinese empirical sciences. Weber mechanically applies Western mysticism theories to interpret this issue, resulting in a misjudgment of the relationship between Confucianism and Daoism due to a misunderstanding of Daoism itself.

Therefore, although there are theoretical and practical differences between Confucianism and Daoism, their relationship is by no means irreconcilable. Throughout the development of Chinese civilization, Confucianism and Daoism have continuously absorbed and mutually benefited from each other, representing a mutually beneficial and harmonious relationship.

## 5. Conclusion: The Academic Significance of "Confucianism and Taoism"

Although Weber had many misunderstandings about Confucianism and Taoism, as Chen Zhongquan pointed out, he was a "great outsider"<sup>[12]</sup>. "The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism" places the theme of "rationalization" within the "ideal type" of the entire Chinese society and explores the interaction between religious ethics and other sociological elements<sup>[13]</sup>. This is what sets Weber's research apart from ordinary historical religious studies. Moreover, in the extremely lacking firsthand data situation, relying solely on the translated texts by sinologists, the difficulty of Weber's research is enormous. Nevertheless, with his profound thinking and acute sociological sense, Weber posed and analyzed questions, minimizing the impact of the lack of historical materials on the research.

History has shown that although China did not produce the "spirit of capitalism," it still successfully propelled its own modernization process with a slight delay under the banner of "Chinese characteristics." Does this imply that, apart from capitalism and socialism, there exists a "middle way" in the Confucian sense and a "third way" in Giddens' sense to resolve the rationalist trap of modernity? Weber's analysis of Chinese religious ethics points out that China possesses unique advantageous conditions for developing the "spirit of capitalism," but it also bizarrely accompanies traditionalist and mysticist religious ethics. Based on critiques and absorption of Weber's theory, whether the wisdom of Chinese traditional culture can effectively respond to the crisis of modernity, dispel the emotional confusion and value loss of "man" as the subject, is one of the most significant inspirations left by Weber for contemporary academia.

Qian Mu pointed out in "An Outline History of China": "We cannot stand on the high ground of history and blame all the faults on the ancients." Weber's research has profound implications for responding to the crisis of modernity, seeking coexistence of diverse cultures, and other contemporary issues. His contributions lie in leaving deep research questions and broad research fields for future scholars, laying the foundation for subsequent studies in the sociology of religion, domination sociology, development sociology, and further expanding the scientific territory. In this sense, Weber and his "The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism" are undoubtedly great.

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