

## The introduction and reception of Max Weber's sociology in Taiwan and China<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** To find the productive implications beyond ‘Weber fever’, a contested theme of ‘the Confucian ethic and economic development’, this article attempts to first examine the dual context in which Weber’s works were introduced before 1949, then to scrutinize the interpretations and evaluations of Weber’s work in the 1980s. Moreover, an overview of the Chinese translations of Weber’s work and influential introductory materials is also necessary to understand the reception of Weber. While the reception among early Chinese sociologists before 1949 was separated by the division of disciplines, the reinvention of Weber during the 1980s appeared in at least three different forms in Taiwan and mainland China. Both Taiwanese and Chinese sociologists played crucial roles in establishing Weber as a social theorist of modernity, respectively resisted the Americanized Weber and developed a particular image of Weber in the Chinese-speaking academic world.

**Keywords:** Max Weber, Max Weber studies, reception, modernization, translation

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: The idea of this paper was discussed in a meeting in November 2012 with the late Professor LIN Duan, Po-Fang Tsai’s PhD supervisor at the Department of Sociology, National Taiwan University. With Lin’s sudden death in January 2013, Chinese sociological circles lost an excellent Chinese social theorist and Weberian. Lin had been due to speak at the conference on Max Weber and China in September 2013, London. Tsai, who had lost his position at the university on Lin’s death, produced a paper, ‘The legal ethos of late Imperial China: two neglected and rival legal specialists’, which he presented at our conference and which was published in *Max Weber Studies* (14)1, 2014. Also in 2014, *JCGCP* went through a difficult time when expected funding for *JCGCP* failed to materialize. Meanwhile, Tsai took up the challenge of completing Lin’s work on the present paper to the best of his ability, and, as *JCGCP* was not in a position to publish it at that time, published it instead in the *Journal of Sociology* (52)1, 2016. With Tsai’s consent, and in the spirit of academic respect and camaraderie, and Sage’s permission, with a big discount, we are pleased to publish Tsai’s paper here in commemoration of LIN Duan.

Although the recovery of Weber's legacy started in the 1960s and 1970s with contributions from English as well as German scholars, the revival of Weber's sociology among the Chinese scholarly communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China itself was delayed until the 1980s, with the economic development of East Asia and the respective academic indigenizations (Bian, 2003; Chang, 2005; Chang et al., 2010; Cheng and So, 1983). This delay indicates that the reception of Weber has to be located in several institutional contexts determining how early Chinese sociologists conceived foreign sociological resources, how political factors interrupted or amended sociology at departmental level and how the recent economic take-off affects the problematic of scholars. Both Weber's works in particular and his sociological thought in general were first introduced in the 1930s and 1940s. A closer look at these early years reveals tensions which come to the fore in the exposition of Weber's sociology in the 1980s, as well as the vacuum that existed during the 1950s and 1960s.

Though recent research on Weber (Derman, 2012; Scaff, 2011) distinguishes two images of Weber – 'Weber in German-speaking Europe' and 'Weber in the United States' – the crucial scholarship lies in contextualizing how Weber's legacy changes from that of an economic historian or scholar on civilizational comparison to a theorist or diagnostician of modernity. The two prevailing modes for 'theorizing Weber' were the traditions of structural functionalism school and critical theory. Moreover, it is useful to bear in mind the internal development of sociology in Chinese intellectual communities – from a new discipline to a mature one with its established institutions – as well as external developments that reflect the location of Taiwan and China in a global economy. Both were essential in terms of their co-evolutionary relationship, but cannot be collapsed into each other.

This article addresses these concerns by looking at two formative decades, the 1930s–40s and the 1980s–90s, and thereby attempts to compare the receptions of Weber in different social and intellectual contexts. Looking back, we can see that these academic indigenizations were based on two very different images of Weber; before 1949 scholars introduced Weber as an alternative to mainstream American–British sociology, but after the 1980s scholars re-read Weber in order to eliminate elements of the modernization paradigm. The common thread is an assumption that Germany in the late 19th century might share many similarities with Taiwan or China in the late 20th century as a backward country lagging behind in the process of modernization.

### **The image of Weber in the early years of Chinese sociology**

As a modern Western discipline, Chinese sociology was established in the early 20th century but little attention was paid to Max Weber. At that time, the early Chinese sociologists were locked into a struggle with traditional intellectuals trying to renew Chinese knowledge in disciplines such as literature, history and philosophy. In competition with the 'cultural philosophers' of the New Confucian-

ism, and accompanied by their contemporary anthropologists in the intellectual field, they proposed arguments about the nature of Chinese society based on functionalist analysis and community studies (Meng, 2011; Yao, 2006).

In this regard, Weber's works were characterized in two different ways: as a subsidiary of German systematic sociology, appearing first in the 1920s in scholarly periodicals such as *Eastern Miscellany*, and then in the textbooks published in the 1930s and 1940s; and as moral and spiritual treatises rather than meditations on the institutional and material dimensions of modernization, an interpretation briefly outlined in a 1947 essay by Lin He (1902–92; He, 1988 [1947]).

In both the introductory articles in *Eastern Miscellany* and the works of Wen-Zao Wu (1901–85; Wu, 1990 [1934]) in 1934 and Ben-Wen Sun (1891–1979; Sun, 1966 [1947]) in 1947, the authors put forward the view that German sociology could be seen as an alternative to mainstream British, French and American sociology. Rejecting the biological underpinnings of Western sociologies, the early Chinese sociologists were attracted to German sociology precisely because of its emphasis on cultural elements. They identified two major approaches in German-styled 'systematic sociology': the former refers to both Ferdinand Tönnies's works and Georg Simmel's *Formale Soziologie* and the latter is represented by *Kultur Soziologie* scholars such as Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Alfred Weber and Max Scheler. In short, what caught the eyes of the early Chinese sociologists, most of whom had embraced functionalism, was that German sociology in the late 19th century seemed to have undergone a crucial transformation from *Naturalistische Soziologie (Seel-wissenschaftliche)* to *Kultur Soziologie (Geist-wissenschaftliche)*, and thereby managed to distinguish itself from other western sociologies (Wu, 1990 [1934]; Sun, 1966 [1947]).

While the focus, for the most part, was still firmly fixed on the works of Tönnies or Simmel, Weber's sociology in this context was introduced in terms of his comparative-historical analysis of world religions and use of 'Verstehen sociology' and 'ideal types' in methodology. Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* appeared frequently in bibliographies of the time, but his main problematic did not draw the early Chinese sociologists' attention. Instead, the systematic nature of Weber's work on world religions seemed to strike a balance between the different positions in the debate on 'Chinese and Western cultures'. Because of his ostensibly equal treatments of different civilizations, Weber's comparative works were identified as a more systematic and less evolutionary sociology. Furthermore, his methodological declamations earned much sympathy from Chinese scholars. Without advanced contextualization of how Weber engaged in the methodological debates in economics, sociology and philosophy of the time, his 'Verstehen sociology' and 'ideal types' were seized upon by those encouraged by the idea that researchers concerned with value-relevancy should endeavour to construct ideal types for their own culture. However, while the prevailing ethos did allow for the adoption of some key Weberian concepts, it also hindered the possibility of deepening Weber's reception, which remained at an introductory level, with no attempts to translate Weber's main works or to discuss his thoughts

at a more advanced level. These early Chinese sociologists found few applicable concepts or frameworks to develop the first-hand and empirical investigations that were urgently required for Chinese societies, while other scholars in the humanities turned their attention to philosophers of culture such as Oswald Spengler or Friedrich Nietzsche and viewed Weber as a supplementary thinker.

In addition to these introductions by the early Chinese sociologists, some traditional intellectuals who had been forced to subordinate their national studies to modern humanities also tried to introduce Weber in a way that directly engaged with the struggle between tradition and modernity. The most important discussion appeared in Lin He's *Wenhua yu Rensheng* (Culture and Life; He, 1988 [1947]). During the 1930s the debate among Chinese intellectuals underwent a transformation, from 'Westernization: pros and cons' to 'modernization: how to do it Chinese-style', as exemplified by Hu Shi's 'wholehearted modernization' and its contested nature (Luo, 2008). In other words, the struggle between Chinese culture and Western culture had become a debate between deliberative morality and infrastructural establishment.

In his essay 'Modernization: Concerning the Establishment of Material Conditions and Thoughtful Morality', He (1988 [1947]) attempted to fight against two conventions using some of Weber's insights: some argued that the modernization of thought and morality would not happen until after the modernization of material conditions, while others saw the New Culture Movement (from the 1910s to the 1920s) as an example of successfully modernized thought and morality. In He's opinion, such disagreement pointed to confusion on two fronts. First, he believed that Chinese intellectuals should not take the modernization of thought and morality for granted, but had to move beyond the antagonism between idealism and materialism. In this sense, Weber's discussion of economic ethics provided an opportunity to break away from the old binary opposition, in spite of the oxymoron inherent in the phrase 'the spirit of capitalism'. Consequently, Weber was introduced by He not only as an economic historian but also as a cultural historian of Western civilization. Second, while he was critical of Weber's overemphasis on Protestantism and the unclear cause-effect relationship in his explanation for the rise of European capitalism, He did recognize the value of Weber's insights on the interweaving of tradition and modernity. Interestingly, his temporary conclusion suggested a multidimensional approach to modernization, which not only maintained the relative autonomy of infrastructural conditions and thoughtful morality but also allowed the respective development of – or at the very least coordination among – different dimensions.

Although his arguments were not accepted by Chinese intellectuals concerned with mapping out a Chinese-styled modernity, we can nevertheless appreciate why He, as an early Hegelian in China, might consider it important to introduce Hegelian philosophy into Weberian sociology. If He's critique of Weber had been fully developed and less controversial, there probably would have been more dialogue between scholars in the humanities and the social scientists during the 1930s and 1940s. Unfortunately, awareness of Weber before the 1940s was di-

vided between two different fields, and therefore Weber's insights tended to be accepted point-by-point by Chinese intellectuals rather than taken as a whole. This situation was contrary to both the 'invention of Weberian theory' in the United States and the 'canonization of Weberian concepts' through transatlantic reception (Derman, 2012; Scaff, 2011).

The only common feature of these two introductions was that Weber was seen as a sociological historian, instead of a social theorist. In this regard, Weber was known by his historical and empirical works. From a retrospective viewpoint, this fact highlights the contexts in which Weber was read as an important social theorist during the 1980s, even if his methodological manifesto of 'Verstehen sociology' and most famous work – *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (hereafter *PESC*) – had been introduced in the 1930s and 1940s.

Apart from these early introductions, Weber's works were rarely translated into Chinese and usually read as examples of economic history. The earliest Chinese version of Weber's work was *General Economic History* (hereafter *GEH*) in 1936, translated by Tai-Pu Zheng (1901–49), who was a specialist in mathematics and physics and well known as the Chinese translator of Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1931. During the 1960s, two more of Weber's works were translated into Chinese, but published separately in Taiwan and China. One was a partial translation of *PESC*, published in 1960 in Taiwan. The translator Han-Yu Chang (1913–98), an economics professor at National Taiwan University, was a specialist in English mercantilism and translated other influential works on Western economic history such as Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* and R. H. Tawney's *Land and Labour in China*. The other was a new version of *GEH*, not published in China until 1981 but a draft of which had been circulating informally since the late 1960s. The translator Ceng-Yi Yao (1912–76) briefly held the position of professor of political science at Soochow University but retired due to illness and worked as a professional translator and editor instead. Although these two translations were more than adequate for most readers until the 1980s, the problem was that Weber's works were being read in isolation from his other works, especially *Economy and Society* (hereafter *ES*) and *The Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* (hereafter *CESR*).

### **The reinvention of Weber as theorist since the 1980s**

The transformation of Weber's academic status in the 1980s, from economic historian of capitalism to analyst of modern culture, a mass media figure celebrated by journalists as well as scholars from both the humanities and social sciences, was an unintended consequence worthy of note. The so-called 'Weber fever' started as a media event in Taiwan, with some famous scholars delivering their observations about economic growth in East Asia in newspaper columns and journalistic commentaries (Barbalet, 2014; Huang and Cheng, 2013). Both overseas Chinese scholars and western experts on East Asia speculated that there must be a spiritual or cultural component explaining the rapid economic growth in the region. It was in these circumstances that Weber took centre stage as a prophet who