5 Chinese Religions: Confucianism and Taoism

WEBER ON THE RELIGIONS OF CHINA

In his study of the indigenous religions of China – Confucianism and Taoism – Weber is as much concerned with the overall structure and character of Chinese society as he is with the religious system. He is interested in those factors which would have tended to favour or inhibit the development of rational capitalism of which religion is one. In the first part of the study Weber outlines the particular features of Chinese society in order to show how they compare to those of the West. He considers the Chinese city, the system of government and administration, the official class who staffed these organisations and the way in which religion was organised on the institutional level. From the outset of his account it is clear that he does not find that everything in China bar religion is conducive to the development of rational capitalism. Rather he shows that despite being in some respects conducive to such a development, Chinese conditions and institutions were not on the whole favourable and often quite unlike those prevailing in the West.

Weber points out that the nature and position of the city in China differed from that in the West. It lacked political autonomy, had no citizenry and did not have at its disposal a military force for its protection. The Chinese city, in fact, was unable to act as a corporate body and had fewer guarantees of self-government than had the Chinese village. While the residents of the city in China did perhaps regard themselves as members of the community, they retained strong and overriding links with their own kinship groups. All important ties were with a person’s kinship group or clan centred on its place of origin – a particular village. The survival of the clan as an important institution was connected with ancestor worship in which a person’s relationship with the spiritual was through the medium of kinship, unlike those religions that have emphasised a personal relationship with God.

In China, then, there were forces which prevented the fusion of urban dwellers into an autonomous status group as occurred in the West. A second aspect associated with the city in China relates to its origin. In China few cities grew up, as they often did in the West, as a
result of foreign trade. Also, in the West cities were often established by princes as a means of raising revenue but could not be governed and ruled by princes because they lacked the means of administration and because cities could resist the interference of princes by using their militias to close the gates and defend the city against them. In China the city was highly dependent on the central bureaucracy. This was the consequence, according to Weber, of the fact that the city was dependent for its prosperity upon the imperial administration of water resources – of rivers and irrigation systems. The Chinese city, Weber claims, was the product of rational administration and there was ‘an absence of fixed, publicly recognised, formal and reliable legal foundations for a free and cooperatively regulated organisation of industry and commerce, such as is known in the Occident’ (1951, p. 20).

This is one important difference, then, between China and Europe. In Europe the character of the city was an important factor in the development of capitalism. The autonomy of the city and its involvement in trade and commerce allowed an accumulation of capital relatively free from the predations of the nobility and the state. Once other conditions were favourable for the development of industrial capitalism the wealth of the powerful merchant class could be invested in manufacturing enterprises. True, the guild regulations of the cities often prevented investment of this wealth within the city itself but outside its limits the guild regulations did not apply and new centres of manufacturing grew up.

None of this was possible in China. The city was not as important as a trade centre. Whatever money was earned in urban centres was subject to the arbitrary appropriations of the state. Kinship obligations tended to dissipate wealth away from the cities to the rural areas.

Another crucial difference between China and the West identified by Weber was the nature of the state and of government. In China patrimonial government prevailed and with it the associated traditions of prerogative and favouritism. Rational capitalism, Weber said, is particularly sensitive to political factors of this kind and is greatly impeded by them. The patrimonial state embodies a system of law inimical to the development of rational capitalist enterprise.

Patrimonial bureaucracy was associated in China, according to Weber, with the need to control the rivers and with large-scale irrigation. When translated into religious conceptions we get the idea of a god who is like a king. In both Egypt and China and in irrigation civilisations generally, the peasantry see the king as having ‘created’ the harvest. The king is thought to be responsible for general welfare.