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Confucianism, Puritanism, and the Transcendental: China and America

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

Abstract:
Max Weber examined Chinese society and European Puritanism at the beginning of the Twentieth Century in order to find out why capitalism did not develop in China. He found that Confucianism and Puritanism are mutually exclusive, which enabled him to oppose both in the form of two different kinds of rationalism. I attempt neither to refute nor to confirm the Weberian thought model. Instead I show that a similar model applies to Jean Baudrillard’s vision of American culture, a culture that he determined in terms of hyperreality. Instead of rejecting Weber’s thoughts right away, I give Weber’s model a further push and show that through a further twist that “Western culture” has received within particular American constellations, Weber’s understanding of Confucianism and Baudrillard’s understanding of American civilization manifest amazing similarities.

Max Weber examined Confucianism and European Puritanism at the beginning of the twentieth century in order to find out why capitalism did not develop in China. He found that Confucianism and Puritanism are mutually exclusive, which enabled him to oppose both in the form of two different kinds of rationalism. Traditionally, Weber’s analysis of Confucianism presents an opposing view to the capitalist, liberal West and shows that both cultures are incompatible. Though both Confucianism and Puritanism are rational and encourage self-control, for Weber, “Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world [while] Puritan rationalism meant rational mastery of the world” (Weber 1915–20: 534/248).

Weber’s findings have been discredited. More recent considerations of Chinese thought, especially those that emerged in the 1980s, have found that Confucianism can be interpreted as correlative with Western Protestantism, the main reasons being Confucianism’s high evaluation of education, its dedication to hard work, and the priority given to group over individual interests. Herman Kahn refers to Weber’s Puritan ethics to summarize the Western misinterpretations of Confucianism: “Most readers of this book are familiar with the argument of Max Weber that the Protestant ethic was extremely useful in promoting the rise and spread of modernization. Most readers, however, will be less familiar with the notion that has gradually emerged in the last two decades that “societies based upon the Confucian ethic may in many ways be superior to the West in the pursuit of industri-

In the present article I attempt neither to refute nor to defend the Weberian model of thinking. I rather accept it as an interesting reflection on a cultural phenomenon that does apply to some aspects of Confucianism. However, in the final analysis I attempt to show that the same model applies to Jean Baudrillard’s vision of American culture, a culture that he determined in terms of hyperreality. In other words, instead of rejecting Weber’s thoughts, I give Weber’s model a further push and show that just because of Weber’s findings and because of a further twist that “Western culture” has received within particular American constellations, Weber’s understanding of Confucianism and American civilization manifest amazing similarities.

I am thus not merely reiterating that the existence of Asian modernity, of Confucian Capitalism, or even of some Asian forms of “Protestant Ethics” undermines Weber’s verdict and that Asian capitalism obviously is possible (which would be a trite argument). I hold that some of the aspects of Confucianism that have been singled out by Weber can be interpreted as modern or even postmodern because they find their parallel in one of the world’s most modern, most capitalist, and most protestant countries, which is the United States of America.

The quality that both Weber’s version of Confucianism and American culture have in common is “hyperreality” in the way it has been analyzed by Baudrillard. For Baudrillard, hyperreality represents an exalted or idealized reality. It is the state in which it is impossible to distinguish reality from fantasy not because the fantasy would be such a good imitation of reality but because the images and social phenomena produced by hyperreality never existed in the first place. Hyperreality creates its own standards of reality, independently of any outside “real” condition. Hyperreality appears, for example, when the media coverage of an event becomes more important than the event itself, a phenomenon with which we have become acquainted in the coverage of some court cases. Hyperreality can also concern large scale phenomena: economies of entire countries can be liquidated because the economical system existed only as an act of simulation without being backed by anything material, letting its inhabitants one day discover with surprise that their country’s economy functioned only as a hyperreal satellite of a virtual finance world. According to Baudrillard, our contemporary world has been replaced by the world’s copy within which we are fed stimuli and in which questions of “reality” or authenticity have become redundant. In particular, Baudrillard is fascinated by the hyperreal input in American culture. Baudrillard’s subject of research is the
“hyperreal” America of faux-chateaus and sensitive therapy, of plastic surgery advertisements on billboards next to the busiest roads. It is the America that many foreigners experience as a friendly enhanced world, safely programmed, market tested, and equipped with an Oprah Winfrey self-help book (Dick Meyer 2008: 130). It is a hyperreal culture in which the actor president Ronald Reagan can slip between Hollywood and reality until the real “comes back as the double of a self that never was” (Rubinstein 1989: 583) because the sign of a president has become a presidential reality. It has created an America where General Schwarzkopf celebrates the Gulf War victory by throwing huge party at Disney World.

The methodology of the present article is transcultural because it explains certain aspects of American culture via interpretations of Chinese culture. More precisely, it employs Max Weber’s concept of “Confucianism” in order to show that the complex reality of American culture can be grasped with the help of precisely this concept. In this way the study transcends the limits of comparative methodology: it points to mutual involvements and establishes interferences, and opens new aspect of cultural development. It neither absolutizes nor relativizes one culture but highlights differences that help us to understand one culture through a concept that has been derived from the interpretation of another culture.

The “Lack of Transcendence” in Confucianism

Scholars like Victor Mair see the indigenous Chinese worldview as based in the real and the concrete, tracing both culture and the divine back to nature. According to Mair, this is different from Europe, which saw the world as based in creation; it is also different from India, which saw the world as based in illusion (Mair 1983: 6). The result is, in Mair’s view, the absence of a dialectical movement in philosophical reflection or of any tragic struggle, common in Western thought, between human culture and the divine world. Mair’s position is extreme and is not shared, for example, by David Keightley who points out that the human and the divine realms were in constant communication with each other and that they reflected the same fundamental cosmic order (most notably through social and bureaucratic hierarchies and the Chinese concern with ritualized social hierarchy). Though Keightley’s position is practically opposite, he arrives at a result not different from Mair’s: there is an “absence of dramatic tension in both philosophy and art” (1990: 42).

Weber’s belief that Confucianism lacks “the transcendent” confirms a com-
monplace that has been accepted by many authors in the past. Scholars including Voltaire, James Legge, and Hu Shi have suggested that Confucianism lacks transcendentality and is therefore incompatible with religious matters (see Yang 1957: 269). It is true that these three authors had their own ulterior motives for making such a statement and are no longer cited as authorities on Chinese religion. Also Herrlee Creel has insisted that Confucianism has been able to “divorce ethics from metaphysics” (Creel 1973: 38). More recently, Cai Zongqi suggested a more sophisticated approach saying that “Confucius believes that the Dao is to be realized by extending harmony along a horizontal axis.” Cai explains that for Confucians the Dao is an imminent principle “realized in the midst of one’s private life and social life” (Cai 1999: 335). For Cai this is proof of the absence of any transcendentality in Confucius’ teachings: “Unlike Plato, [the Confucian] does not conceive the Dao to be a transcendental entity” (ibid.). Tu Weiming, himself a controversial scholar because of his unconditional adherence to Confucianism, would certainly disagree with Cai’s assumption that in Confucianism transcendence is absent. However, in principle, Tu expresses a similar idea when saying: “Even when [Confucianism] attempts to detach itself from the temporal world and arrive at some form of pure, transcendental metaphysics there can be no hope of understanding it without recognizing its point of departure to which sooner or later it returns” (Tu 1971: 79).

It is certainly a misunderstanding to hold Confucianism to be merely a matter of utilitarian social engineering limited to worldly matters. Thomas Metzger insists that because for Confucians “the potentiality for realizing oneness with the divine existed, the cosmos included a transformative power, which the sage could tap. The crucial implication is that the human mind has a transnatural power able to tap cosmic forces” (Metzger 1977: 198). Confucianism does consider mysticism, supernatural powers, as well as religio-metaphysical dimensions of culture, but it integrates all these components into a self-sufficient rationalism. In other words, the particularity of Confucianism is that it spells out a possible transcendental surplus not as something transcendental, but that it presents transcendental phenomena as elements permeated through a phenomenal world that is part of a “rationally” constructed system. For some, this constellation makes Confucianism less rationalistic. According to C. K. Yang, “in spite of its preoccupation with this-worldly matters, Confucianism cannot be considered a completely rationalistic system of thought” (Yang: 270).

Cai Zongqi has a similar idea in mind when suggesting that Confucianism extends “harmony along a horizontal axis;” it is important to understand that this does not necessarily imply a denial of transcendence. It rather supports
the claim that in Confucianism the transcendental does not adopt a vertical but—as paradoxical as it sounds—a horizontal position. Of course, normally, ‘transcendence’ implies verticality because it means “to overcome,” but we are confronted here with a certain paradoxical constellation, a constellation that I want to interpret in terms of hyperreality.

Another way of expressing the same idea is to suggest that history employs in Chinese thought an autonomous time-space that is not bound by abstract, worldly concepts such as those presented by Kant that require history to be thought *through* time and space. Instead, Confucianism views history *as* time and space, which explains the mythical character of many Confucian philosophical discourses. Huang and Zurcher construct this argument by writing that “history is taken seriously in China as a web of space and time [and] historical *thinking* is spatiotemporally textured. According to these authors, this way of thinking differs from Kant’s who made space and time theoretical *forms* of intuition, prior to thinking, different from schema and categories of thinking” (Huang & Zurcher 1995: 18).

**Weber and Confucianism**

My intention is not to reintroduce Weberian misconceptions about Confucianism into a field from which they have been eliminated a long time ago but to put one particular idea into a comparative, transcultural context. Weber finds that the irrational rationality of Confucianism contrasts with the “disenchanted world of Puritanism” (Weber: 513). However, this does not blur the fact that both ethical traditions maintained irrational roots: in Confucianism it was magic, in Puritanism it was the “ultimately inscrutable decisions of an otherworldly god” (527) that maintained a contact with the supra-rational.

The particularity of Weber’s idea of Confucianism is that here the magical input was not otherworldly or transcendental, but part and parcel of the cultural world “just as it is.” For Confucians, Weber holds, “life remained a series of events and not an entirety methodically submitted to a transcendental aim” (521). Piety was exercised towards real (living or dead) people and not towards ideas. This system helped to domesticate the masses and the cultured gentleman could develop the tenure necessary for a life within a world of rules, conventions, customs, and political maxims. But there was no “inner striving” towards an ideal or a personal style (521). While Confucian ethics “recognizes no other social duties than those established through personal relationships” (527), Puritanism refuses to remain within the realm of the human. For Puritan
ethics, all preoccupations of “supra-worldly oriented puritan rational ethics” are the expression of a transcendental striving (534). Its human actions need to be determined by a transcendental god detached from the real cultural world.

This is the pattern leading Weber to polarize Puritanism and Confucianism. However, a consideration of contemporary America shows that Puritan transcendentalism has received a supplementary twist through the country’s impregnation with a utopian attitude that yields the impression that utopia is not aspired here—“transcendently” and in a vertical fashion—but that utopia has been achieved.

Authors who bring forward this view are Baudrillard, Louis Marin, and Umberto Eco. The main point is that in the case of an achieved utopia, “the transcendental” is no longer oriented towards a supra-worldly realm, but becomes “horizontally” distributed in the (hyper)real world in which life and death overlap because, according to Baudrillard, “the dead are perhaps even capable of going quicker (…) since they no longer have any problems” (Baudrillard 1986: 112/115). A utopia that is no longer “vertically” aspired but “horizontally” achieved reflects the above-mentioned “Confucian” paradox. Both “Confucian” historicism and American anti-historicism establish an autonomous and “horizontal” rationality.

In America, Baudrillard experiences the New World through an exoticizing lens of estrangement that has been shocking for many Americans because the country appears here as extremely distant and culturally removed. Baudrillard draws a picture of American civilization as a naïve, straightforward, and predominantly utopian affair, indefatigably preoccupied with turning things into material realities and unable to ironize upon the future because American civilization is supposed to be the future by definition.

In this sense, both Weber’s version of Confucianism and America engage in cultural simulations of the highest degree. While Baudrillard characterizes contemporary American Puritanism as an achieved utopia which, by being transcendence, has obtained the highest level of transcendence and is thus unable to go any further, Confucianism has frequently been criticized for its lack of transcendence. The possible absence of transcendence in Confucian ethics supported by a utilitarian rationalism and sobriety, indeed invites a comparison with the rational ethics of Puritanism for which transcendence is central. I am interested in a certain model of thought crystallized by Weber (who held it to be incompatible with Puritanism) and want to show through a transcultural analysis that both are identical. I am not denying that Confucianism underwent various shifts, transformations and exchanges in its five thousand years history nor do I equate “Chinese culture” with Confucianism.
Fundamentalism vs. Hyperreal Puritanism

Weber’s idea to oppose Confucianism to Puritanism might still make sense with regard to American Christian Fundamentalism which developed out of the traditions of the dominant American revivalist establishment of the nineteenth century and occupies a predominant position in modern America. This Fundamentalism can still be conceptualized with the help of the transcendentalism described above with a vertical orientation. The powerful pathos and overt desire to govern the world that Weber extracts from Puritanism (532) is continued by militant anti-modern Protestant evangelicalism as well as by Christian Fundamentalism, both of which are characterized by Biblical literalism and equally literal apocalyptic views of the future. Anti-modern evangelicalism and Christian Fundamentalism came to national prominence in the 1920s.

Of course, in some ways, the “achieved utopia” vision is also contained in Fundamentalism, as American Fundamentalists “identify America with Israel as a land covenanted to God’s People on condition that they followed God’s laws” (Ruthven 2005: 129). Still, Christian Fundamentalists strive towards expansion and domination whereas the American Puritan culture that Baudrillard describes wears the traits of a self-contained utopia with a ready-made happiness whose expansiveness operates through the rhizome-like development of American civilization.

American hyperreal culture uses Puritanism in a completely different fashion. Puritan American culture as it is described by Baudrillard is based on the idea of an achieved utopia that Weber could not anticipate. This Puritanism is up and alive in the USA and it excels in a fight against renewal that is not very different from that of the Confucian tradition. However, it does not function through those criteria that Weber found essential for the development of Puritanism.

Weber’s findings about the transcendental character of Puritan culture need to be revised. According to Weber, anti-magical Puritanism strives to transcend the real world in the direction of a godly utopia. As it desires the realization of utopia, it employs elements that Confucians were unable to obtain: a powerful pathos (Weber: 532); the development of personality (521); and a paradoxical interlinking of an ascetic negation of worldly matters. This occurred with an enhanced commercialism and the overt desire to govern the world (532). Above that, puritans had no problems integrating useful empirical and scientific knowledge into their ascetic vision of the world.

Weber speaks of the “absolute unholliness of tradition” that lets Puritans
look towards the future, constantly working on the “ethical-rational mastering and domination of the given world” and eagerly cultivating the “rational business attitude of progress” (524). This worldview should not be confused with the “Confucian system of radical world optimism” (522) which refused to perceive the pessimistic tension between the given world and otherworldly determinations. For Puritans the desire to overcome this tension represents the main driving force. Weber believed that no Christian ethics could cancel this tension and attain the kind of serene world optimism that Confucianism took for granted. As a matter of fact, Puritanism was able to cancel this tension, but first the transcendental had to be integrated in an American system of hyperreal civilization.

According to Weber, Confucianism has traditionally been opposed to the transcendentalization of a popular religious consciousness because such a process would most probably transform popular creed into alternative political powers. In the past, many people have supported this claim, as has been shown above. Weber finds that Confucianism objectifies (“versachlichen”) everything personal in order to establish a non-transcendental realm of ethics. Weber is surprised at the compact Chinese culture-religion mixture made from a mix of literature and political norms in which no prophet establishes transcendent notions like salvation or other religious powers, but where state functionaries—and not priests—interpret literary texts. For Weber, Confucianism produces an intellectual rationalism of state-functionaries for whom religion is purely instrumental (431). He also expresses his indignation at the fact that, in spite of this obvious emphasis on interpretation, the Confucian tradition has not produced a single autonomous thinker in two thousand years (441).

Lucien Pye has noted that while “in most of the societies of Africa and Asia the traditional concept of authority allowed for the epic hero, the bold leader, the imaginative warrior, the conqueror of the unknown, (...) the Chinese had little feeling for the potentialities of the virile, youthful, and dynamic leader” (Pye 1992: 30). As a matter of fact, the Chinese did not need such a leader. For Confucians, the world was the best of all possible worlds able to be pursued to perfection without restrictions as long as man was willing to adapt to the divine Dao. Weber believes that for the Chinese, the world is “just as it is”—the highest objective being, as Weber recognizes, “universal satisfaction” (Weber: 436). Developments such as a social ethics resulting from the tension between formal right and material justice will most probably not arise.

The organicist Chinese worldview has been traced to a particular agricultural experience unprepared to resist nature which has also been an obstacle to China’s modernization (Chong 1999: 131). Weber points out that in China,
there were no tensions between “nature and divinity, ethical imperatives and human imperfection, the awareness of sin and salvation, worldly deeds and otherworldly redemption, religious duty and politico-social realities” (Weber: 522). According to Pye, there were no clashes “between the private domain of the family and the role of public institutions” (Pye: 88) or between subject and object that are so typical for Western thought (Chong 1999: 130). Weber points out that the only salvation that the Confucian desired to obtain was the salvation from cultural barbarism and illiteracy (Weber: 514). In other words, culture was salvation and there was no need to transcend it towards something more abstract or more progressive. Confucians were accustomed to judging situations in the context of concrete results and reality would primarily function in the service of officials. In principle this means that a reality would evolve in an autonomous fashion producing its own rationality restricted only by some magical prescriptions, but not by an outside rational body of critical sciences.

China and America

Weber believes that Confucianism considers supernatural powers and religio-metaphysical dimensions of culture and integrates all these components into a self-sufficient rationalism. Its particularity is to interpret any magical input not as otherworldly or transcendental, but as being part and parcel of the cultural world “just as it is.” It is, of course, very easy to oppose to this understanding of Confucianism the notion of tianming (heaven’s mandate), which implies that heaven (tian) be conferred directly upon an emperor, the son of heaven (tianzi). This mandate dictates that the ruler and his officials must strive to reflect the order and will of Heaven so as to maintain legitimacy and ensure proper harmony between civilization/humans (and within human society) and “nature.” The very notion of tianming implies a teleology and aspiration towards utopian order. In this sense, the idea of a utopia that is already attained in the world “just as it is” sounds more like a Daoist ontological notion.

However, the purpose of the present study is to work with Weber’s concept and to show that American culture as it has it has been described by Baudrillard is similar as it creates a “here and now” utopia in which the transcendental is said to have been achieved “horizontally.” As mentioned, historicism joins here anti-historicism on highly paradoxical lines.

When Jean-Paul Sartre, returning from a six-month research stay in the United States in 1945, was asked about his impressions of America he reported that “the tragic sense of life, the sense of human destiny are questions an
American mind never asks itself” (Sartre 1945: 4). Raymond Aron noted that “the optimistic utopianism of the immigrant popular classes excluded both the Platonic quest for the sublime and the anguished cult of the tragic character of the human condition that remain the hallmark of European high culture” (Aaron 1955: 228, quoted from Mathy, 44). Baudrillard continues this French line of critique of American civilization—begun with Tocqueville—by describing it as a necessarily anti-tragic, self-sufficient simulation holding that American religious Puritanism establishes its own rationality through “the principle of achieved utopia [which] explains the absence and, moreover, the lack of need for metaphysics and the imaginary in American life” (Baudrillard 83/84).

In Weber’s interpretation of Confucian culture the latter remains alien to this tragic moment for the same reasons. Both Weber’s “Chinese culture” and Baudrillard’s “American civilization” can be contrasted with a historico-philosophical heritage that puts forward a tragic tension between an ideal utopia and an imperfect present. Both the quasi-virtual timelessness of those Chinese philosophical discourses which were built upon a mythical and pseudo-historical past, and the placeless, utopian civilization of the Puritans are lacking a concrete context. Nothing is spelled out through temporal and spatial particularities able to create a concept like that of the tragic. In the Platonic philosophical tradition, on the other hand, temporal and spatial particularism has been important. Plato’s arguments are characterized through a clear definition of “the time, the place, and the persons [which gave] dramatic force to Socrates’ conversations” (Keightley: 41–42).

The typical Western developments involving a social ethics flowing from the tension between formal right and material justice do not seem to arise in Confucianism; nor do they seem to arise in American Puritanism because its rationality is as autonomous as was the intellectual rationalism of Chinese state-functionaries. While “the Neo-Confucians extended their mundane horizon to include the entire universe” (Chan 1967: 27), American Puritans extended the kingdom of God to the earth. Baudrillard writes: “Whereas European societies were caught up in the revolutions of the nineteenth century, the Americans kept intact (...) the utopian and moral perspective of (...) the Puritan sects of the seventeenth century, transplanted [them] and kept [them] alive, safely sheltered from the vicissitudes of history. This Puritan and moral hysteresis is that of exile, that of utopia” (90/92).

European religiosity has traditionally been more “realistic,” offering compromises, given that utopia, in its view, is not possible. Freud explains that the “priest could only keep the masses submissive to religion by making such large concessions,” by suggesting that “one sinned and then made a sacrifice
or did penance and then one was free to sin more” (Freud 1968: 37–38). The same is true for the conciliation of religion with the modern scientific spirit. Freud recognizes that “the Americans have alone shown themselves consistent. Elsewhere the inevitable transition is accomplished by way of half-measures and insincerities” (ibid.). For the European religious person as Freud sees it, on the other hand, there is no utopia, no world “just as it is” and no paradise, but only a never-ending, dialectical process through which religion communicates with real life.

The opposite of being stuck in an eternal past is being transported, like the Kantian light dove, in free flight into the thin air of an exalted civilization or into a utopia. Baudrillard would comment here that the mushrooming of religious sects in such a constellation should cause no surprise. In America we observe, according to Baudrillard, “a radicalization of the utopian demand which was always that of the sects and the immediate materialization of that utopia in work, custom, and way of life” (Baudrillard: 75). „

Fundamentalism and Culture

Though utopian Puritanism and Fundamentalism are different in many respects, they are similar in that both are integral parts of American civilization. Terry Eagleton believes that Fundamentalism is against all values that are dear to civilization (2008), but this is not true for American fundamentalism. It is important to understand that for American fundamentalists, religion is civilization because “Christianity was recognized as the only basis for a healthy civilization” (Marsden 2006: 12). It was almost a necessity that this civilization had to be against social reform; it was also most likely that it would end up as patriotism. Only in America and in Israel are fundamentalism and nationalism barely distinguishable and not rival ideologies. In the end, the civilization that had been created in this “land covenanted to God’s People” (Ruthven 2005: 129) would have to enclose itself in a hyperreal state.

An identification of religious and scientific laws that many enlightened observers will find curious expresses a surprising equation of (divine) civilization with nature. This can be understood by considering the value of “common sense” that has always been an important input in American religious thought. As a nation born during the Enlightenment, Common Sense philosophy became dominant in America in the Nineteenth Century. However, the scientific and common sensical approach to reality did not only appeal to scientists, but also to religious people who found in Common Sense the same kind of
certitude. According to George Marsden “evangelical Christians and liberal Enlightenment figures alike assumed that the universe was governed by a rational system of laws guaranteed by an all-wise and benevolent creator. The function of science was to discover such laws, something like Newton’s laws of physics, which were assumed to exist in all areas. By asserting that the external world was in fact “just as it appeared to be,” Common Sense provided a rock upon which to build this empirical structure (Marsden 2006: 15). Until today, televangelist Pat Robertson, who believes that America will remain the world’s greatest and most powerful country as long as it keeps God’s commandments, calls the book in which he expresses these ideas, “The Fall of Liberalism and the Rise of Common Sense.”

Culture, Civilization, Nature

Here we find a parallel with Chinese thought because, on some levels of the Chinese traditions, the distinction between nature and culture/civilization does not exist in China in the same way it does in mainstream Western philosophical conceptions. The ontological structure of wen is simultaneously cultural and natural. Wenhua—generally translated as “culture”—represents the creation of a cultural pattern that also has the status of a natural pattern. The parallel between the thought of fundamentalist creationists and the Chinese conception of wen becomes clear when one considers that neither of them is ready to believe in evolution as an entirely natural phenomenon. I am not saying that Chinese do not believe in evolution, nor do I deny that the Chinese state, which saw itself as enacting the patterns of nature, could feel a strong tension between “natural culture” and “culture” as understood by the state. I am simply pointing to the fact that in traditional Chinese thought evolution would not be seen as an entirely natural phenomenon.

The aesthetic and ontological structure of wen 文 is, in traditional Chinese thought, a simultaneously cultural and natural phenomenon. Wen can be translated as pattern, structure, writing, and literature and the compound wenhua 文化—generally translated as “culture”—signifies the process through which a person adopts wen, that is, the process through which a person becomes civilized. Derk Bodde has translated wenhua as “the transforming (i.e., civilizing) influence of writing.” However, it would be a complete misunderstanding to hold that the process of wenhua turns nature into civilization. Wenhua represents rather the creation of a new pattern that makes the typically Western dichotomy of nature vs. culture redundant. Stephen Owen defines
wen as a realization through which the natural order of things becomes visible because “all phenomena have an inherent tendency to become manifest in wen” (Owen 1985: 20).

Here is the similarity with Fundamentalism because also fundamentalists affirm parallels between the laws of civilization and the teaching of the Bible. Though the Bible is opposed to the naturalism of Darwin’s position, it is not simply classified as supernatural; it rather suggests a divine version of nature out of which society is supposed to develop. This means that the Bible is based in the real and in the concrete and that it is possible to trace back both culture and the divine to nature through the Bible. This is different from the simpler myth of the “creation of nature” by God because both nature and culture are seen here as equally “created.”

Just like in Weber’s Chinese case, this view avoids a dialectical movement or tragic struggle between human culture and the divine world. The ideal world presented by American Puritanism is a sort of super civilization which rules out any “discontents” by definition. “Discontents” can arise only through atheism, that is, through something which is not compatible with fundamentalist civilization. Being afraid of civilizatory relativism, fundamentalist civilization has to exclude cultural influences as much as possible because “culture” is relativist by definition. For Freud on the other hand, civilization and its discontents would always come in a package and he believed this to be true also of religion. Freud recognized that religion has performed great services for human civilization, but simultaneously noted that an appallingly large number of people are dissatisfied with civilization and therefore also unhappy in religion, which they perceive as a yoke that must be shaken off (Freud 1968: 37). For Freud it was clear that both religion and civilization should adapt to the more relativistic demands of culture. This is one reason why the process of secularization, based as it is on nineteenth century positivistic ideas of progress and modernization, is an obvious prerequisite for modern culture in Europe, but never caught on to the same extent in the United States. In Europe, religious toleration and the secularization of government occurred more gradually, with historic state churches retaining a degree of institutional monopoly (Ruthven 2005: 51). In the United States, on the other hand, “the absence of an anti-clerical tradition and the cultural presence of Protestantism as a ‘civil religion’ have combined to make Christianity (…) an important element in public life” (Ruthven: 52). “Here secularization was not linear and religion would not retreat into ever shrinking areas. In contrast to Europe, where many of the educational, pastoral, and social functions once performed by the Church have been taken over by state authorities, America’s churches still dispose of significant social power” (ibid.).
European crises result from conflicts between a religious culture and modern civilization. Chinese crises appear when a condensed vision of the past yields no window towards any utopian future. American crises result from failed efforts to make the utopia permanent and durable. The remedies offered for this latter crisis by sects and religious fundamentalism are numerous. On a more general level, however, an efficient remedy is the establishment of a hyperreal culture that sociologists like Baudrillard have distinguished as one of the strongest characteristic of American civilization.

Monotheism

Much of what Weber and Baudrillard say about Puritanism is inherent in monotheism. Concentrating on the constant war between good and evil, “the monotheist cannot help but develop the perfect God at war with the irreparable demon” (Hsu 1970: 244). Some even think that what could be termed “transcendently motivated fanaticism” is a real Western specialty. Zi Zhongyun, for example, has explained Western religious fanaticism as a sheer consequence of the lack of the very this-worldliness which Weber and others believed to find in Confucianism. Zi’s grouping together of “religious fanaticism” with items that clearly are matters of civilization is indeed intriguing in that religious fanaticism goes with theory, science, logic, and analysis (Zi 1987). The following scheme can be derived from his article on Chinese traditional culture and modernization:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ancient technology, applied</td>
<td>theory, science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>this-worldliness</td>
<td>religious fanaticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dialectics: opposites</td>
<td>logic, detailed analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rite, authority</td>
<td>rights and obligations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, Hsin Kwanchue finds that, because the aim of Socrates’ theorizations about life was to point out a highest good, a certain rigidity and a potential fundamentalism are almost unavoidable: “In the hands of his followers this project got narrowed and limited to an attempt to discover the highest good or *summum bonum*, thus resulting in a sort of cataleptic rigidity that has hindered
the free movement of Western ethical speculation for two thousand years and more” (Hsin 2006: 148). Huang Chienchung finds that the Occident “has joined morals with religion” while the Orient has fused morals and politics.¹

However, Western culture’s willingness to give in to religious fanaticism cannot be explained through the simple persistence of monotheism that excels in “individualized and introspective prayers; a rigid dichotomy between good and evil and between the living and the dead; a concept of the necessity for permanent conversion rather than a temporary change of heart; a missionary zeal, and an elaborate theology and eloquent sermons” (Hsu 1970: 254). Though these authors intend to criticize American culture as well as European culture, there is something that sticks to American culture more than to European or “Western” culture in general. In the New World, the transcendental utopia could become a feature of national culture. In Europe, religious fanaticism could generally be stored away as a matter of pre-enlightenment culture while in America Baudrillard has the impression that the country “as a whole had espoused this sect-like destiny: the immediate concretization of all perspectives of salvation” (Baudrillard: 89/91). Theologians noted that “American civil religion, especially in its Christian-socialist form, is a social gospel of perfectionism that presumes change to be progressive, inevitable, and divinely inspired. Americans have always believed that evil can be eliminated from the universe” (Moses 2004: 290). This is of course also because the early American immigrant required

a faith as simple and emotional as himself. A faith to draw men together in hordes, to terrify them with Apocalyptic rhetoric, to cast them into the pit, rescue them, and at last bring them shouting into the fold of Grace. (…) What was demanded here, in other words, was the God and the faith of the Methodists and the Baptists, and the Presbyterians (Cash 1941: 56).

Religion and Civilization

The patterns described above explain that Evangelist America is not the America of non-civilization and counter-Enlightenment, but rather a necessary consequence of America’s civilization. Though in Europe, Biblical apocalyptic views were criticized in the eighteenth century and most resolutely discarded by historical-critical Biblical studies emerging in Germany in the Nineteenth Century, it would be hasty to conclude that a large part of America, because

¹ Comparative Ethics (1944) from O. Briere 1956: 91.
it did not undergo this rational and skeptical turn, would have become stuck in pre-civilization.

Even though some might consider Americans to be less modern because an attitude of equity and tolerance has never become an integral part of its culture among surprisingly large parts of the American population, this does not mean that Americans are less civilized. On the contrary, they are more civilized just because in highly civilized America, such modern cultural attributes can simply be ignored. This is at least Baudrillard’s interpretation of American religiosity: instead of being seen as the establishment of an anti-modern culture, the American project overlaps with “the establishment of utopia [and] the realization of absolute civilization [which] has here become a religion: a utopian society is living in the religion of the fait accompli, in the naivety of their deductions, in their ignorance of the evil genius of things” (84/85). In other words, in America, religion has become a way of life, which implies that it no longer has transcendental value. It is transcendence.

American and Chinese Hyperrealism

The Chinese believed that man needed to adapt to the Dao. This adaption was not a transcendental gesture, but one that was carried out in a rational fashion, similar to how one adapts to nature. The parallelism with America can be located here. Sartre puts forward the American ambition “to adapt man to society,” which was for him a manifestation of “the social character of their rationalism, which never looks for metaphysical problems” (Sartre 1945: 4). The parallelism becomes very clear in branches of American nationalism that employ the notion of civilization, like Josiah Strong’s Our Country: Its Possible Future and the Present Crisis, which holds that “the centre of the coming global civilization would be the USA” and that American culture would “adapt man to the demands of a higher civilization” (quoted from Laffey 1993: 25). This is also the reason why it has always been so easy to separate an abstract idea of American civilization from redneck culture (that is, from the concrete lack of civilization). Garvin Davenport explains that “the savagery of the frontier had no influence on spreading civilization. Civilization came with its own built-in form of savagery in the guise of invidious emulation and conspicuous leisure and the greed necessary to support these forms of behavior” (Davenport 1967: 90).

Cultural flaws such as “identity problems” cannot arise here by definition. While Weber’s China is “as it is” through the mere existence of a racial middle
kingdom, which automatically lends a certain cultural identity to anybody stemming from this middle kingdom, Americans transcend identity problems by referring to ideas. Pye has brought this to a point:

American nationalism is built upon the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the dream of democracy and human rights. In contrast China lacks the idealistic substance of a modern form of nationalism which can provide either inspiration for popular mobilization or disciplining constraints on elite behavior. Instead an overwhelming sense of ethnic identity operates to obscure the fact that there are very few specific ideals for defining unambiguously the meaning of “Chineseness.” (Pye: 231)

Some people have criticized the fact that contemporary Chinese culture does not offer a spiritual font or a shared sense of values. American civilization does not find those values either. The existence of America began with civilization and the establishment of absolutely transcendental values that are not shared, but that are fundamental as much as they are culturally neutral. Hans Kohn wrote that America is “not founded on the common attributes of nationhood—language, cultural tradition, historical territory or common descent—but on an idea which singled out the new nation among other nations on earth” (Kohn 1958, p. 3, from Fousek 2000: 5). Those are not cultural values, but “neutral” values of a utopian civilization, as appropriately described by Dick Meyer: “In Europe, traditional values form around religion, nationalism, language, and ancestry. In America, traditional values are based on an idea of the ‘American Way’—on a constitution, political system, work ethic, and sense of common mission” (Meyer: 72). Or, in Baudrillard’s words, utopia is here achieved in “the indeterminacy of language and the subject, of the neutralization of all values, of the death of culture” (95/97).

What is the difference with Weber’s interpretation of Confucianism? Both appear as hollow grounds under a vast superstructure or as imaginaries employed to regenerate a reality principle. Both create a hyperreality. Descriptions of the American cultural situation like that of Jean-François Mathy would be equally fitting for Weber’s Confucian cultural situation: “There is no ‘nature,’ physical or mental, to be overcome and transfigured through history, just as there is no longer, in the ‘hyperreal’ simulation of the media, a referent of signs and discourses” (Mathy: 279). Or, in the words of Baudrillard: “In the ‘savage mind,’ too, there is no natural universe, no transcendence of either man and

2 The contemporary Chinese writer Wang Shuo says: “The first time I heard the word culture was in ‘Cultural Revolution.’” Wang then points out that Confucianism, as “a philosophy that is about telling people to act one way or another,” is no substitute for a culture either. (2002)
nature or of history. Culture is everything and nothing, depending how you look at it” (100/107).

Conclusion

“Chineseness” or a fabricated sense of uniqueness and destiny cannot replace civilizational values that are required for the definition of a national culture. This is why in China identity often appears to be restricted to an obscure idea of “culture” or, in the words of Lucien Pye, “much of what is usually thought of as Chinese nationalism are really powerful sentiments of racial and cultural identity and not feelings about the nation as a state” (230). It has to be concluded that Weber’s interpretation of Confucianism is not opposed to Puritanism but highly compatible with it. If we follow his interpretation, both Confucianism and American Puritanism turn out to join the rhetoric of “absolute fake” culminating, in extreme cases, as mythical perceptions of Chinese history or of Disneyland.

The establishment of a cultural or civilizational hyperreality naturally follows out of both Weber’s Chinese system and the American system because both have been lifted out of a concrete, cultural time-space. In the Chinese case, the ritualized social hierarchy will even be coupled with the cosmic nature of the Chinese state, which can clearly be perceived as a hyperrealism. In the American case, a self-sufficient civilization makes any dialectical movement reflecting civilization against culture difficult and tends to create a similar hyperreality.

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