Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Chinese Preference for Sons: An Application of Western Sociology to Eastern Religion

James H. Mahon

Abstract
Sociologists are introduced early in their training to Max Weber’s proposition that the collective imperatives of modern capitalism are rooted in a cultural transformation: That the obligation to achieve and maintain systematic control of everyday life has persisted into the modern age, though now bereft of its religious underpinnings. This paper offers the proposition that Weber’s analytical construct provides equally fertile application in the analysis of simultaneous cultural persistence and change in non-Western civilizations. The Chinese preference for sons originated amid the ancient reaches of Chinese folk religion’s demand that parents’ funeral rites and three years of mourning be presided over by their first-born son, lest the parents’ souls be relegated to an eternal destiny of wandering the world as hungry ghosts. The argument offered here is that the endurance of this preference for sons, as evidenced by demographers’ findings of significantly distorted sex ratios in contemporary China, can be explained, as was the rise of modern capitalism, by Weber’s conception of a cultural transformation from substantive to formal rationality.

Keywords: China, sex ratio, preference for sons, funeral rites, inner-worldly mysticism, other-worldly mysticism, Max Weber, substantive rationality, formal rationality.

Introduction
This paper argues that the endurance of Chinese parents’ preference for sons, as evidenced by demographers’ findings of significantly distorted sex ratios in contemporary China, can be explained, as was the rise of modern capitalism, by Weber’s conception of a cultural transformation from substantive to formal rationality. The paper develops this argument in three sections.

First, the concept of SRB (sex ratio at birth) is explained and the distortions that have appeared in this ratio, in China, during the past 25 years are examined. The interpretation is put forward that this demographic

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statistic is evidence of an enduring Chinese preference for male children, and several other indicators are examined that make this interpretation plausible.

Second, the paper reviews what scholars of comparative religion have written about the religious foundations of this Chinese preference for sons in terms of (a) the eschatology of Chinese religion; (b) the ritual practices associated with funeral rites and mourning; and (c) the consequences for a soul when these rituals are not carried out. It also reviews the entirety of Weber’s argument about how the rise of modern capitalism was, in part, the result of certain ways of orienting oneself to the world, which were based in the Puritans’ quest for salvation; and how these orientations remained embedded in the culture, long after they had been separated from their religious roots.

The paper then concludes by returning to the Chinese case, to ground formally the proposition that the empirical preference for male children is another case of a cultural transformation from substantive to formal rationality.

**Sex ratio at birth (SRB) among Chinese newborns**

Demographers, analyzing Chinese census data, find that sex ratios of newborn children in China do not comport with expected values (Kristof 1993; Riley 1996; Zeng et al. 1993). The expected ratio of male to female births within a calendar period is 105 to 106 male births to 100 female births (Haupt and Kane 1998: 6; Mc Falls 1998: 30; Weeks 1999: 283). Demographers surmise this preponderance of males over females at birth is nature’s recognition of males’ higher mortality rate (Riley 1996: 4; Westley 1995: 1), and they note that the relationship between males and females in a birth cohort reaches equality usually around age 15, and that by age 80 there are expected to be five females for every two males in the cohort (Mc Falls 1998: 30; Weeks 1999: 334-345). The Chinese case differs substantially from these benchmarks. Sex ratios at birth have been found to range higher than 118 males for every 100 females in a birth cohort. This says that, in a given birth cohort, there is as much as 11 percent or more males being produced than nature typically provides.1 Viewed from a slightly different perspective, it says there are 10 fewer girls2 being born for every 106 boys than demographic principles would lead us to expect.3 The question to be investigated is, Where have these girls gone? and Why? What has distorted the natural SBR in China?

1. \((118 - 106) / 106 * 100 = 11.3\%\)
2. \(106 : (100 - x) : : 118 : 100\)
3. A recent comment on this matter (Rosenthal 2001) reports that,’ In rural China,
Yi Zeng and co-authors (1993: 285) argued that this undercount in females is a consequence of three factors: (1) underreporting of female births; (2) an increase in prenatal sex identification by ultrasound and other diagnostic methods for the illegal purpose of gender-specific birth control; and (3) a very low-level incidence of female infanticide. They found that ‘...the underreporting of female births accounts for about 43 percent to 75 percent of the difference between the reported sex ratio at birth during the second half of the 1980s and the normal value of the true sex ratio at birth’ (Zeng et al. 1993: 289); that sex-selective abortions following sex determination by ultrasound and other diagnostic methods such as amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling contribute another ‘...major reason for the shortfall of girls’ (Kristof 1993: 6); and that female infanticide, although significant in the 1930s and 1940s (Gu and Roy 1995: 2), now ‘...cannot be a significant factor’ (Zeng et al. 1993: 295). They concluded that ‘...sex-differential underreporting of births and sex-selective induced abortion after prenatal sex determination explained almost all of the increase in the reported sex ratio at birth in China during the late 1980s, ruling out the possibility that female infanticide and abandonment are main contributing factors’ (Zeng et al. 1993: 295-96).

Data shows that the appearance of distorted Chinese sex ratios coincided with ultrasound machines becoming widely available to prospective Chinese parents. According to Zeng and colleagues (1993: 291), China manufactured its first ultrasound machine in 1979 and began to introduce ultrasound B technology on a large scale in 1982. Kristof (1993: 1) reports that, according to one demographer’s estimate, ‘...100,000 ultrasound scanners were in place around the country by 1990’. In parallel with the growing availability of ultrasound machines, the reported sex ratios for second births to families grew from 105.0 in 1982 to 120.9 by 1989, a 15.9 percentage point increase (Zeng et al. 1993: Table 1). In a more recent study, Junhong Chu (2001) found conclusive evidence, based on interviews with 820 women in one county in central China, that '[p]renatal sex selection was probably the primary cause, if not the sole cause, for the continuous rise of the sex ratio at birth in [her] study area in the past decade'.

A principal factor associated with couples’ tendency to act to control the gender of their spawn seems to be China’s population policy and its

there are more than 120 boys for every 100 girls because rural couples, who favor sons, abort fetuses and abandon newborns that are female’. Another report (Eckholm 2002) states that, in the 2000 census, two southeastern provinces ‘reported newborn ratios of more than 130 males to 100 females’; and yet another ‘showed an average sex ratio as high as 144 boys for every 100 girls, or about three boys for every two girls’.
consequences for that country’s total fertility rate (TFR). During 1978 and
1979 China adopted a one-child-per-couple policy, and in 1988 relaxed
that policy only to the extent that rural couples were allowed a second
child after an appropriate interval if their first child were a girl (Tien
et al. 1992: 9, 11-12). In less than the last quarter century, China passed
through the demographic transition. Its total fertility rate has declined to
near the population replacement level of 2.1 children per couple—the
same process that in the West took more than half a century (Gu and
Roy 1995: 2; Lee and Wang 1998: 4; Westley 1995: 2). Thus, China has
achieved the goal of its population policy: reducing its rate of population
growth to near zero. However, an unanticipated consequence of this
success has been the emergence of the abnormal SRB. It was the 1980s
‘...that witnessed the rise in the sex ratio at birth, particularly...the late
1980s’ (Gu and Roy 1995: 2-3). Similar patterns have been found to occur
in Taiwan and the Republic of Korea where there is no state-mandated
fertility control program, but where the total fertility rate has also passed
through the transition to replacement levels (Gu and Roy 1995; Park and
Cho 1995).

A plausible inference to be drawn from the unmistakable distortions
in sex ratios at birth is that a traditional strong preference among
Chinese for male children still prevails. The negative correlation between
the rapid decline in Chinese total fertility rates and the corresponding
growth in sex ratio at birth, when combined with further demographic
data, supports the inference that it is a strong son preference that leads
Chinese parents intentionally to interfere with fertility behavior. Gu and
Roy (1995: 10) report that the SRB imbalance occurs ‘mainly among
women who already have one or more children, but especially among
women having daughter(s) but no son’. These authors also cite a study,
which disaggregated SRBs for 29 provinces of China, that found ‘the
mean value [of the SBR numerator] for parity 3 women with two previous
male births was as low as 81 [while the numerator of] the sex ratios
at birth for those with ...two previous female births [reached] as high as
208...’ Zeng et al. (1993: 284, Table 1, and 296-97, Table 9) report similar
findings: Sex ratios during the 1980s exhibited an increasing trend for
higher births, reaching as high as 131.7 in 1989 for fourth order births.
Further, although naturally occurring mortality rates are expected to be
higher for males than for females, in China where child mortality is
generally low, death rates are higher for girls than for boys (Westley
1995: 2), suggesting that boys receive better care than girls. For example,

4. In demographics, the term ‘parity n women’ refers to women who have given
birth to n children.
the Washington Post reports research that shows families often do not provide medical care for their daughters (Pomfret 2001: 3).

Another indicator of son preference, this one found by Jingshan You (1993) based on 1988 survey data, is that the sex ratio of one-child certificate holders in Shaanxi Province was 159 compared with 97 for non-certificate holders. Still more evidence showing association between son preference and high sex ratios was found by Graham, Larsen and Xu (1998) in Anhui Province where sex ratios reached as high as 1.22 between 1987 and 1993. There ‘families with many daughters continue to have children until a son is born and then end childbearing; girls are breastfed for a significantly shorter period than boys’, suggesting that ‘the women in the sample become pregnant sooner after the birth of a girl than after the birth of a boy;’ and couples are more likely to use a contraceptive if they have had a son than if they have not (Graham, Larsen and Xu 1998: 4, 5, 7). Finally, the government’s 1988 policy modification allowing rural couples to have a second child if their first child was a girl seems to have acknowledged that the tenuous rate of compliance among rural couples with the one-child-per-couple policy has roots in efforts by Chinese parents to generate male offspring.

The question to ask is, What may be the motive for this empirically obvious preference for male children among Chinese parents? When Chinese married couples are asked, they explain their attitude in explicitly economic terms. According to Kristof (1993: 6) it is because they believe ‘...sons can do more work in the fields, and because traditionally it is they [the sons] who provide for aging parents’. One rural mother is quoted as saying, ‘The real reason is that we need someone to fetch water, to guard our orchard, to work in the fields and to care for us when we get old’ (Pomfret 2001: 3). Kristof adds (1993: 6), ‘Sons, in other words, are the rural Chinese equivalent of retirement pensions, social security and individual retirement accounts’. Zeng et al. (1993: 296) concur in this interpretation when they write that ‘...social and cultural traditions and daily living conditions make it very important for families to have a son, especially in rural areas’.

However, we must question the validity of these economic reasons when (1) we recall that the official one-child policy in the People’s Republic was later modified to allow rural couples to have a second child when

5. ‘Couples with one child are encouraged to apply for a one-child certificate that is offered nationwide for those applicants who have signed a contract with a local family planning agency promising to have only one child. In return, they receive a monetary bonus and preferential assignment of housing and employment’ (You 1993: 1).
their first child is a daughter; (2) when we note that the state has enacted social security programs targeted at people who do not have a son (Taljapurkar, Li, and Feldman n.a.: 5); and (3) when we also recall that in Taiwan and the Republic of Korea similar fertility behavior has become evident as a way to resolve a conflict between the desire to have only two or three children and the desire to have a son, and, again, this in the absence of any state-imposed program of fertility limitation. We have to look further than to social security to explain the persistence and ubiquity of these fertility choices.

Religious foundations of the Chinese preference for sons

Some authors, who look beyond contemporaneous economic demands, attribute son preference among the Chinese to the enduring influence of Confucius and the system of ethics that bears his name (You 1993: 1; Westley 1995: 1). While Confucianism is certainly a carrier of this cultural norm, it is more accurate to locate its beginnings much earlier, for instance according to Lee and Wang (1998: 3), in the second and third millennia BCE. The preference for male children is rooted in China’s traditional religion and how it understands what happens when one dies. According to Robert Henricks’ telling (1994: Lecture 8), indigenous Chinese religion is an amalgam of historical influences including Confucianism, Taoism, shamanism, divination techniques, and Buddhism, particularly the latter’s notions about karma and rebirth. The religion had its earliest origins in China’s pre-history and reached its final form by the end of the Tang period, around 900 CE. Its eschatology posits a fate for two souls upon death of the body, a physical soul and a spiritual soul (Henricks 1994: Lecture 9). The physical soul accompanies the body to the grave and in due time dissipates. The spiritual soul, by contrast, is conducted to the underworld by a local deity and there begins its journey to eventual rebirth.

Following death, the spiritual soul passes through ten courts. The first of these involves an administrative reception into the underworld, and the last comprises mustering out procedures when the soul’s destiny in its next incarnation is determined. The other courts (courts two through nine) interrogate the soul regarding various kinds of sins/crimes the deceased person may have committed in life. If a court finds it guilty of a punishable offense, it confines the soul to a prison associated with that court for some decree (and prolonged) period. Then, following the time of expiation, the soul passes in sequence through to the next courts and in each is again reviewed and placed at risk of further sanctions. The entire adjudication takes 49 days for the soul who is not condemned to
sojourn in any of the hells. When the soul finally exits the last court, it enters into a life in the underworld that mirrors life in the upper world and lasts for some 27 months. It is then that the soul is reincarnated, embarking on a different form of earthly existence and beginning another life journey.

The short description in the preceding paragraph is, at best, a superficial and inadequate schematic outline that scarcely renders justice to the rich body of Chinese beliefs about the fortunes of the spiritual soul after death of the material body. 6 Marcel Granet (1975) formulated provocative hypotheses regarding the social forces that influenced the emergence of these beliefs in an ancient agrarian society, and C. Wright Mills (1967) probed more deeply, trying to capture the processes by which social structures and social interactions ultimately determined the perceptual schemas Chinese society constructed to understand ultimate reality. The central point to observe in the exploration at hand, that of the Chinese preference for male children, is that the soul’s successful navigation of the underworld is believed to be entirely dependent upon correct conduct of funeral rites within the family, and that it is the first-born son who bears responsibility to ensure that this takes place. First, let us consider the funeral rites themselves.

Mills (1967: 482) captured the orienting centrality of these socially prescribed mourning practices when he noted that in the language of the Chinese

…there is not one expression which in a socially neutral manner conveys the general and abstract idea of ‘death’. It cannot be spoken of without evoking (by the use of a single monosyllable) a set of intricate ritual [sic], and an entire sector of social action. By a single word one disposes of the defunct, assigns a mourning practice suitable to his rank, fixes his destiny in another life, [and] classifies his family.

Hendricks (1994: Lecture 9) and Feuchtwang (1992: 20-23) describe the rituals associated with the soul tablets that descendants use to care for the souls of the deceased during the mourning period. In modern day Taiwan, a soul tablet comprises a black and white photo of the defunct plus his or her name and death date. It is placed on the domestic altar at the beginning of mourning, and after one or two generations pass, and the living no longer have personal acquaintance with the departed, it is moved to the village ancestor temple or common clan hall. It is at the soul tablets where offerings of food remembered as the relatives’ favorites are placed in the morning and evening, and on the anniversary of the death day; and where facsimile spirit-money and other accoutre-

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ments of daily life are placed for the souls’ use in the underworld. The aim is to provide for the souls of the departed until they are reborn. The mourners ask spirit mediums to find out how the departed may be faring in the underworld, and whether there is anything the living can do to move them along more quickly toward rebirth. They also ask Buddhist monks to recite masses for the souls of the dead. The belief is that the bodhisattva of the underworld will hear these petitions and intervene to hasten the souls’ rebirth.

The next point to consider is, What happens to the spiritual soul if these rites of mourning are not conducted on its behalf when it is separated from its physical body and physical soul by death? The answer supplied to this question by Chinese basic/folk religion is that such souls become hungry ghosts (kui). Hendricks (1994: Lecture 9) describes the condition of these souls as being uncared for and hence unable to enter the underworld to begin their journey to rebirth. They have no soul tablet, no food, none of the supplies a soul needs to live in the underworld. They are angry at their fate, forever suspended as they are between the overworld and the underworld, orphan souls. They ‘…are supposed particularly to haunt paths, streams and bridges’ (Feuchtwang 1992: 100) taking their anger out on those still living. They must be propitiated else they cause people trouble. Feuchtwang (1992: 41-42) as well as Hendricks (1994: Lecture 9) describe a Chinese festival observance (similar to Halloween in the Christian West and el día de muertos in Mexico) held in the seventh moon of the year, when a village invites the orphan souls en masse to a charitable feast in exchange for their staying away during the coming year. Feuchtwang (1992: 99) says that the people believe the hungry ghosts are to be pitied and given care, and that ‘…they will support anyone who feeds them’.

Feuchtwang (1992: 99) describes the circumstances that lead souls to being abandoned after death when he writes that these kui are believed to be ‘spirits without descendants’. In other words (Hendricks 1992: Lecture 9), one is destined to become a hungry ghost, condemned never to find peace and rest, if she or he dies as an infant, or dies away from home, forgotten (e.g., soldiers). Murder victims and those executed unjustly also join the ranks of orphan souls, raging across the earth causing trouble, unwilling to go to the underworld until justice is done. Suicides are also included among their number for they died at the wrong time and are therefore not allowed into the underworld. But most prominent are those who die childless, especially without sons. Without a male descendant, such persons have no one to remember them, no one to conduct their funeral rites, no one to observe the prescribed three years of mourning. It is this belief, I argue here, although lost and forgotten in the obscure past
of traditional Chinese religion, much of which has been formally pro-
scribed for 50 years by the government of the People’s Republic (Stock-
well 1993: 38-39), that is embedded in Chinese culture and continues to
evoke an abiding value orientation or preference for male offspring. To
present this argument, it is necessary first to review Max Weber’s conceptu-
talization of the relationship among world religions, Western rational-
ism, and the rise of modern capitalism.

Max Weber’s concept of rationalization of the life
world and the rise of modern capitalism

Max Weber observed (1958a) that there arose in the West (i.e., in North-
western Europe, England, and the United States) and only in the West, a
new type of capitalism. It was distinguished from earlier forms of capita-
talism (e.g., booty capitalism, adventure capitalism, colonial capitalism)
by the way it oriented economic activity according to the calculation of
anticipated contribution to capital from continuous peaceful market
exchange, as measured by rational accounting. Constituent profit-gener-
ating undertakings exploited the rational organization of free labor and
technology, which was derived from the natural sciences based in mathe-
matics and the controlled experiment. The economic sphere itself was so
structured that the industrial workplace was separated from the house-
hold, enterprise wealth was walled-off from personal wealth, and the
entire complex of economic strivings was supported by structures of
formal law and administration. It was this aggregate of cultural con-
figurations that Weber described as a ‘rationalism’ specific to modern
Western civilization, and the problem he set for himself was to explain
why this phenomenon occurred where it did and only where it did.

Weber concluded (1958a: 26-27) that the rational organization of all
aspects of the life world which modern capitalism requires can only
occur in a culture (1) that is already predisposed to organize social
structures and social behavior in a practical rational manner; and (2)
where individuals are not prevented by religious ideas from adapting
themselves to the rational conduct which modern capitalism requires.

According to Stephen Kalberg (2002: lxxix,lxxx) Weber’s concept of
rationalization (and its various cognates such as rational, rationalizing,
and rationality) refers in general to systematizing one’s actions to accord
with a value or an end in the sense of ‘methodical-ness’ and taming the
spontaneous aspects of human nature. The concept takes on slightly dif-
frent shades of meaning at different places in Weber’s studies. In the
context of an individual’s social action it denominates either a relation-
ship between means and ends where the means chosen are determined to

be technically most adequate for achieving a desired end (instrumentally rational action), or the choice of a behavior because of a belief that it possesses some ethical, aesthetic, or religious value in its own right, irrespective of its prospects for success (value rational action) (Weber 1978: 24-25). Sometimes it refers to a cultural predisposition to master the world rather than passively to adapt to it or to go along with routine, as exemplified by the large-scale flood control initiatives undertaken in ancient China and Egypt (Weber 1951: 51), or when legitimacy is claimed for the exercise of authority based on the sanctity of age-old rules and powers (Weber 1978: 226-227). At other times it describes a feature of institutions (e.g., law, bureaucracy, market) that gives their activities and procedures a quality of predictability and regularity (Weber 1978: 225, 161-164, 656-657).

Table 1. Initiatives to rationalize the life world unique to Western civilization

| • universally valid science      |
| • systematic theology           |
| • astronomy with a mathematical foundation |
| • science based on mathematics and the experimental method |
| • medicine with a biological and biochemical basis |
| • rational chemistry            |
| • rational jurisprudence as found in Roman law and canon law |
| • rational harmonic music with distinctive musical instruments and their organization into an orchestra |
| • rational calculation of load-bearing capacities of vaults and arches in architecture |
| • a literature designed for print |
| • universities systematically organized into scientific disciplines |
| • pursuit of science with trained personnel |
| • systematic historical studies and political thought |
| • use of perspective in art and painting |
| • trained personnel as the foundation for bureaucratic administration of the state |
| • nation state based on rational law, rational constitutions, and the concept of citizen |
| • rational bookkeeping to calculate profit and loss from enterprise |
| • a form of capitalism characterized by the rational organization of free labor, with workplace separated from the household, enterprise wealth disaggregated from personal wealth, exploitation of technology derived from the natural sciences, activity oriented to anticipated profit from market exchange as measured by rational book-keeping, and supported by systems of formal law and administration. |

Weber devoted much of the introduction to his collected works on the sociology of religion (1958a) to offering evidence of the sort listed in Table 1 to support his proposition that there was a cultural predisposi-
tion in the West to effect the rational organization of the life world. Reading this litany-like recitation reinforces the conclusion reached by Reinhard Bendix (among others) that the Protestant ethic was only one of several phenomena that pointed in the direction of an increased, many-sided rationalism peculiar to Western civilization (Bendix 1962: 68-69). In Weber’s words (1958a: 160), ‘...rationalizations have occurred in the various arenas of life in highly varying ways and in all circles of cultural life’.

To analyze whether a society’s religion placed obstacles in the way of its rationalizing everyday life as required for the development of modern capitalism — the second independent variable in his proposition about the rise in history of modern capitalism — Weber developed the concept of a religion’s economic ethic, which he defines to be ‘the practical impulses for action which are founded in the psychological and pragmatic contexts of religion’ (Weber 1946b: 267). By this he meant the reciprocal linkages or recursive influences, which a body of religious beliefs, values, and norms fashions for its adherents, between ultimate reality as the members understand it to be, and the social system in which they live out their lives.

To develop his notion of the economic ethic of world religions, Weber first distinguished between two fundamental types of religious orientations towards the world: religious accommodation to the world and religious rejection of the world. The attitude of religious accommodation to the world is the product of an ethic that seeks adjustment to the world, which aims to achieve an harmonious alignment of the social world with the principles that govern the universe and produce social order. The attitude of religious rejection of the world arises out of an understanding that a tension or conflict exists between the religious believer and the world because acceptance of the world leads to alienation from one’s god or ultimate destiny. According to Weber, the believer resolves this tension by choosing one or other of two different types of religious behavior: asceticism or mysticism. By asceticism he meant a practice of mastery where the subject actively and systematically tries to bring the self or some other aspect of the physical world into alignment with the divine will. By mysticism he meant a practice of resigned acceptance or adjustment to things as they are, where the goal

7. The following account of Weber’s concepts of economic ethic of a world religion, religious rejection and religious accommodation as orientations towards the world, asceticism and mysticism as types of religious behavior, and inner-worldly and other-worldly loci of religious behavior depends extensively on Weber 1946c and Weber 1978 (vol. 1: 541-56).
is not to be God’s instrument, but to become God’s vessel; where the goal is to achieve contemplative possession of, or mystical union with the divine.

Table 2. Weber’s economic ethic of world religions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Rejections of the World</th>
<th>Religious Accommodation to the World</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner-Worldly</td>
<td>Other-Worldly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asceticism</td>
<td>Confucianism, Taoism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed Protestantism</td>
<td>Christian monasticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mysticism</td>
<td>4th stage Hindus, Buddhist and Jain Monks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Judaism; early Christianity; Buddhist and Jain laypersons; 2nd stage male and all female Hindus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weber further distinguished between two venues in which ‘rejections’ of the world may occur: one location is within the world (inner-worldly) where one pursues either the ascetic or mystical path while remaining engaged in the non-religious spheres of social life; the other venue is outside the non-religious spheres of the social world (other-worldly) where one pursues the ascetic or mystical path after fleeing or retiring from everyday social life. These concepts can be combined for analytical purposes into the two-celled typology shown in Table 2. The rightmost cell is labeled ‘Religious Accommodation to the World’. The leftmost cell is labeled ‘Religious Rejections of the World’ and is further divided into a two-by-two, four celled table whose columns are labeled ‘inner-worldly’ and ‘other-worldly’, and whose rows are labeled ‘asceticism’ and ‘mysticism’. Elements of the cells are individual religions that, based on their characteristics, are slotted into to one of the five possible categories:

- religious accommodation
- religious rejections
  1. inner-worldly mysticism
  2. other-worldly asceticism
  3. other-worldly mysticism
  4. inner-worldly asceticism

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8. José Casanova first introduced me to this formulation of Weber’s typology of religious rejections of the world during a course in the Graduate Faculty at the New School in 1989. It is suggested by formulations proposed earlier by Wolfgang Schluclchter 1981(156-66) and 1987(109-113)
Religious accommodation
Schluchter (1981: 163, 1987: 111-12) summarized Weber’s evidence that indigenous Chinese religion was oriented to worldly accommodation. Confucianism sought to transform the world politically and socially, but the path it took was through transformation of the inner man, not through asceticism. The world, as well as the men in it, was viewed as ethically good in itself and therefore perfectible. Li and jen were to be aligned through learning and ritual, and salvation lay in filial obedience to the secular rulers. The philosophy of Taoism carried the ancient belief in a cosmic governing order that ultimately determined all outcomes, and hence was to be accommodated, not denied. Weber’s argument was that ‘Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world [not] rational mastery of the world’ (Weber 1951: 248) and consequently the Chinese ‘failed to originate on the economic plane those great and methodical business conceptions which are rational in nature and are presupposed by modern capitalism’ (Weber 1951: 242).

Religious rejections
Inner-worldly mysticism: According to Weber’s conception (1978: 550-51), the inner-worldly mystic conforms to the demands of his religion by living his life in the world, where he accepts the secular social structure as he finds it while remaining relatively indifferent to it. He does not try to change it on the basis of a methodical pattern of life directed toward external success. The world is simply something presented to him, something that has been in the nature of things from the beginning. For example, the early Christian lived with the eschatological expectation that the Master was soon to return and consequently his only task was to await the parousia. Attending to the affairs of the world would only distract from this religious duty and hence was to be disregarded. In the case of ancient Judaism—and prior to, and independent of the consequences for rationalism posed by the emergence of ethical prophecy—Yahweh was a god who had given positive commandments which one had to follow; that was all—God would provide the rest. ‘...[T]he world was an historical product designed to give way again to the truly God-ordained order. The whole attitude toward life of ancient Jewry was determined by this conception of a God-guided political and social revolution’ (Weber 1952: 4, italics added for emphasis). Likewise, religious action in the world with mystical features is characteristic of Jain and Buddhist laypersons who hope for the opportunity to pursue religious virtuosity in subsequent incarnations.
**Other-worldly asceticism:** The other-worldly ascetic, in Weber’s telling (1978: 542, 544-45), conforms to the requirements of his religion by formally withdrawing from the world: From social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic and erotic activities. The other-worldly ascetic, however, more ‘rejects the world’ than physically flees from it. His activity is primarily ‘within’ the world, where his goal is to experience psychological victory over ever-new temptations that he is bound to combat actively, time and again. He gains certainty of his salvation by mastering himself through methodical denial of sleep, food, sexual gratification, and so on; and by mastering the world through preaching, opposing heretics, performing works of charity, teaching, and so forth, for example, Catholic monks and nuns.

**Other-worldly mysticism:** In Weber’s formulation (1978: 544-51) the other-worldly mystic conforms to the requirements of his religion by contemplation where he strives to achieve rest in God and in him alone, mystical union with the divine. Typically, for contemplation to be successful, all everyday mundane interests must be eliminated: God can speak within one’s soul only when the creaturely element in a person is altogether silent. Contemplation entails inactivity and, to the extent possible, cessation of thought. One’s life is only an instrument for attaining the goal of contemplation, and is characterized by the avoidance of all interruptions caused by nature and the social milieu. The other-worldly mystic abandons the unilluminted, and those incapable of complete illumination, to their inevitable fate, for example, the Jain and Buddhist monk, the upper caste Hindu male living in the fourth stage of a successful life.

**Inner-worldly asceticism:** Weber’s argument was that inner-worldly mysticism, other-worldly asceticism, and other-worldly mysticism all placed religious obstacles in the way of transforming a traditional economy into a modern capitalist economy (Weber 1958a: 26-27). On the other hand, he concluded, inner-worldly asceticism as found in reformed Protestantism in the West (i.e., in Calvinism) not only did not place obstacles in the way of such a development, but actually evoked the very kind of behavior for the practice of religion that was required for the practice of modern rational capitalism (Weber 158b: 170-183).

Weber’s inner-worldly ascetics (1978: 542-544) conform to the requirements of their religion by participating within the world (or more precisely, within the institutions of the world but in opposition to them) as the elect instruments of God. The religious individual believes the world to be his responsibility. His goal is to transform it in accordance with his
ascetic ideals by reform or revolution. Although he is forbidden to enjoy wealth, it is his vocation to engage in economic activity which is faithful to rationalized ethical requirements and which conforms to strict legality. He regards success as the manifestation of God’s blessing upon his labor and God’s pleasure with his economic pattern of life. Inner-worldly asceticism demands not celibacy, but the avoidance of erotic pleasure; not poverty, but the avoidance of all idle and exploitive enjoyment of wealth and income; not the ascetic death-in-life of the cloister, but an alert, rationally-controlled patterning of life, and the avoidance of all surrender to the beauty of the world, to art, or to one’s own moods and emotions, for example, Weber’s Puritan, the Parliament of Saints under Cromwell, the Quaker State of Pennsylvania.

*From ethical to economic imperative: A cultural transformation*

How did capitalism emerge out of the practice of inner-worldly asceticism? According to Bryan Wilson (1989: 75-78) Weber saw this change as a two-step cultural transformation, a process that involved a confluence of reciprocal interactions among the cultural, social and personality systems of the human social order.

*Step 1.* The doctrines of Calvinism include the belief in double predestination, namely, that since God is all-powerful and all-knowing, there is nothing that he cannot do or cannot know. God knows the entire past and the entire future, and by his power he has ordained everything that is to be. This implies that everything that everyone does is already pre-determined. Whether one will be good or bad is determined, and so is whether one will go to heaven or hell. There is nothing anyone can do about it. Further, a person cannot know if he is one of God’s elect, destined for eternal salvation. However, he is not to doubt it; each is to live as if he were saved.

The effect of this doctrine, according to Weber’s analysis, was to produce in the individual Christian a severe psychological distress. To relieve this psychological distress, the individuals collectively constructed the belief that success in one’s calling in this world indicated one’s prospects in the next. It was the human energy produced by the need to prove to oneself and to one’s community in this world that he was destined to be saved in the next world that (according to Weber’s theory of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism) fueled the emergence of the cultural foundations and social structures of capitalism in the modern world. “[T]he Puritan outlook...favored the development of a rational bourgeois life; it was the most important...influence in the

development of that life. It stood at the cradle of the modern economic man’ (Weber 1958b: 174).

Step 2. Eventually, however, after those first generations of Puritans passed from the scene, capitalism developed its own set of meanings (beliefs, values, norms): invest capital, generate profits, reinvest the profits, make more profits, reinvest the profits, and so on, without ceasing. It is being bound inescapably by the logic of this cycle that Weber called modern humankind’s Iron Cage or Iron Suit.

It was not the Puritan’s religious motivations that transformed the world and supplied the values and norms to which we must now adhere. As capitalism grew, Puritanism faded away. ‘[W]ith the dying out of the religious root, the utilitarian interpretation crept in unnoticed... [T]he essential elements of the...spirit of capitalism are the same as...the Puritan worldly asceticism, only without the religious basis’ (Weber 1958b: 177, 180). The social system that grew out of the Protestant Ethic now operates without religious legitimization. Weber knew this had already happened and ended his essay on the Protestant economic ethic with this pessimistic, despairing lament:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which, with irresistible force, today determine the lives of [all] individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition. Perhaps it will so determine [the everyday lives of people] until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.9 In Baxter’s view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the ‘saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment’. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage [from which none of us is now able to escape] (Weber 1958b: 181).

Weber characterized this cultural transformation as a change from logic grounded in substantive rationality to logic based in formal rationality. Substantive rationality means choosing an action based on ultimate values, for example, striving to achieve economic success because it is God’s will that one behave in this way (such as when producing food to relieve people’s hunger). Formal rationality means choosing an action based on the outcome of rational calculation, for example, striving to achieve economic success by reinvesting profits in activities where calculations predict that more profits will be produced (such as when producing food to

9. Note that Weber did not anticipate the industrial use of oil and nuclear energy.
produce profits). Thus, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber posited that economic behaviors, which stood in an elective affinity with modern capitalism, were initially motivated by substantive rationality, but then later, although the behaviors remained the same, were the consequence of formal rationality. The Reformed Protestants sought to maximize return on their investments to gain assurances of their eternal salvation; succeeding generations have done so simply to merit the opportunity to use those earnings to earn yet additional return on investment.

**The Chinese preference for sons:**

*A shift from substantive to formal rationality*

The underlying logic of Weber’s ideographic analysis of the rise of modern capitalism as outlined in the preceding section is that the normative directives of modern capitalist society had their origins in early Puritan fears for their eternal salvation. As Bryan Wilson (1982: 75-76) put it, ‘Protestantism in Europe was...a re-direction of man’s energies towards this-worldly concerns... Thus was established a psychological mechanism that promoted the work ethic and directed men to the goal of achievement.’ However, the religious imperative that underlay the construction of this systematic, disciplined life world soon dissipate. The Arminian correction to Calvin’s doctrine about double predestination\(^\text{10}\) took increasing hold in officially Calvinist churches, removing communicants’ nagging fears that they may not be numbered among the elect. But in an outcome of universal historical significance, the way of life that moved persons toward material acquisition remained firmly ensconced in the Western world’s normative structures. Patterns of behavior remained invariant while motives for the behavior metamorphosed.

Initially, men sought personal reassurance of their worth in the eyes of God by their worldly success. In the course of a very few decades, capitalism had acquired its own rationale, and achievement had become its own end, without further thought of what it intimated about the divine will. What, under Puritanism, had been a stimulus to action that Weber described as substantively rational, in that it was action which had a given arbitrary end (the glory of God), became under capitalism, essentially action of a formally rational kind, in which every end was merely the means to some less proximate end. The process was, of course, a religiously inspired transformation of culture (Wilson 1982: 77).

\(^{10}\) The theology of Jacobus Arminius (c.1560-1609) countered that of Calvin by asserting, among other points, that (1) whoever believes will be saved, (2) that predestination means that God foresees who will believe, and (3) Christ died for all, not just the elect. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* s.v. ‘Arminianism’.

The proposition of this paper is that Weber’s analytical conclusion that
the rise of modern capitalism was a religiously inspired transformation
of culture is equally applicable to understanding Chinese couples’ per-
sisting quest for male offspring. It was the belief of ancient Chinese
basic religion that the parents’ first-born son was warranted to be the
active agent in conducting their funeral rites, and in leading the 27
months of mourning following their death. Without a son parents would
be doomed to wander the earth as hungry ghosts, forever barred from
entering the underworld and wending their way to a propitious rebirth.
Historically this eschatological understanding often led to the abandon-
ing or outright killing of economically burdensome female children.

China has entered the modern world, led there during the last century
under the aegis of what has been called the last great Christian heresy
(Sugrue 1995: Lecture 4), Marxism-Leninism and its dialectical material-
ism. The collective goal of its government and its people is to develop
economically and militarily, to secure a place on the world stage com-
mensurate with its population size and the glories of its past civilization.

While the government allows persons to practice the religion of their
choice, so long as it is not used ‘...to engage in activities that disrupt
public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educa-
tional system of the state’ (Stockwell 1993: 14), the government itself
expects its members to be atheists (Stockwell 1993: 14) and it neither
supports nor encourages any religion. Surveys of China’s young people
report that they overwhelmingly find religion to be of little or no impor-
tance in their lives.11 Still, male offspring are coveted with enough inten-
sity that couples, especially in rural areas, frequently contravene the
government’s population policy by not reporting female births, or engag-
ing in sex-selective abortions, which are formally proscribed. As we saw,
the reasons given for this stance are modern in their reference: ‘Sons are
preferred because...they can do more work in the fields, and because
traditionally it is they who provide for aging parents’ (Kristof 1993: 6).

It is empirically obvious that a characteristic pattern of behavior has
remained invariant while motives for that behavior have metamor-
phosed. Under the direction of traditional religion the stimulus to pro-
duce a male offspring had been to seek out one’s salvation, an end that
Weber would have described as substantively rational. Today the same
action is merely thought to be technically the most adequate means to
produce a calculable future, a formally rational end. Keeping with the
paraphrase of Wilson’s analysis, we can plausibly assert that the endur-

11. Reported to me in a private conversation by G. Wang, associate professor of
sociology at William Paterson University.
ing Chinese preference for boys is the product of a religiously inspired transformation of culture, a shift from substantive to formal rationality.

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