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Abstract
A concept of self-interest, through which different interests relate to distinct temporal phases of selves, is examined by considering the operation of self-interest in a context in which it is frequently held to be absent. Chinese culture, frequently described as collectivist, developed intellectual traditions in which self-interest is assumed. Chinese sociologists affirm the centrality of self-interest for understanding social relationships and practices. Confucian antipathy to selfishness relates to admonishment of satisfaction of the interests of present selves against those of past selves. Variable institutional selection of distinct temporal phases of self is core to understanding major differences between Confucianism and Daoism and their respective conceptions of self-interest.

Key words
Confucianism, Daoism, relational self, Fei Xiaotong, institutional selection.

Introduction
In mainstream economics the concept of self-interested action is regarded as universally applicable and heuristically essential. In sociology, on the other hand, the term is seen as historically coterminous with the development of European capitalism from the eighteenth century. Except for its recent application in rational choice theory ‘self-interest’ is typically dismissed by sociologists as denying the prior efficacy of relational, institutional or normative and structural determinations of action. An influential statement is Granovetter’s description of self-interested action as ‘behavior affected minimally by social relations’ in sharp contract with ‘[embedded] behavior … [which is] constrained by ongoing social relations’ (Granovetter, 1985, pp. 481-82). The idea that self-interested action is necessarily ‘atomized’ (Granovetter, 1985, p. 485) signifies sociological derogation. Granovetter’s defense of a notion of game-theoretic rationality, however, such that a stampede from a burning building is not an instance of irrational behavior as characterized by collective action theory, suggests that a concept of self-interest might not be so readily dismissed. This is because ‘each stampeder is actually being quite rational given the absence of a guarantee that anyone else will walk out calmly, even though all would be better off if everyone did so’ (Granovetter, 1985, p. 490).

One reason for sociological unease with the notion of self-interest is its perceived underlying assumptions of utilitarian orientation and calculative reasoning, even though they are not necessarily entailed in the concept (Barbalet, 2012). Indeed, the development of sociology in antipathy to the utilitarian tradition is evident in Weber’s augmentation of means-ends rationality with value rationality (Weber, 1968, pp. 24-25) and the addition of ‘ideal’ to ‘material’ interests, both subordinate to ‘world images’ or values (Weber, 1970, p. 280). Durkheim’s skepticism is more total, regarding self-interest as unavoidably egoistical, socially destructive and fleetingly transitory (Durkheim, 1964, pp. 203-204). The pivotal distinction between self-
interested and other-interested action, however, is not as sharp as the utilitarian purchase on ‘self-interest’ assumes (Barbalet, 2009). Neither need it be held that the interests that selves pursue are necessarily material and pertain only to economic utilities or their equivalents. By distinguishing between a material self, a social self and a subjective self, each of which is self-seeking, it is possible to develop the idea that self-interest has a number of dimensions; in addition to an interest in material well-being a person may have an interest in how they are seen by others and also an interest in value consistency through self-appraisal (Barbalet, 2008a, pp. 804-807).

There are additional aspects of self-interest which both confound the narrow utilitarian sense that sociology avoids and provide the basis of an institutional development of the notion. These include the issue of the different types of interest that arise in terms of distinct temporal phases of self-manifestation, the different interests of past, present and future selves. One way of developing this understanding of temporally differential self-interests is in terms of an analysis of the Chinese or more specifically Confucian critique of selfishness, which is widely taken to be a critique of self-interest itself. In the discussion to follow the place of self-interest in a non-capitalistic context shall be considered. Then the notion of a ‘relational self’ that is taken to be characteristically Chinese will be examined. Out of a critical treatment of the latter an understanding of self-interest in terms of temporal phases of self shall be developed.

Self-interest in Chinese Traditions

Self-interest is quite unthinkable not only in traditional but also present-day China, according to a number of standard accounts. In a recently published Introduction to the Chinese Economy it is advised that ‘China has a collectivist culture’ (Guo, 2010, p. 154), which means that ‘the needs and goals of the individual must be subordinate to those of the group’ (Guo, 2010, pp. 154-55). This statement does not deny China’s post-1978 market economy. The rampant opportunism (shìlì) of market actors in China operates through guanxi networks, in which the interest of participants is to maintain the networks themselves. In the private economy family enterprise dominates and family obligation socially persists in the absence of state-provision of child- and aged-care. In a collectivist culture self-abnegation is seen as a dominant expression of individual conduct; self-interest is mediated by association. This is a view indicated by Donald J. Munro, that ‘selflessness … is one of the oldest values in China, present in various forms in Taoism and Buddhism, but especially in Confucianism’ (quoted in Hall and Ames, 1998: 24). It is frequently acknowledged in such sources that the prerogatives of self in the form of self-cultivation also have a place in traditional China, but these are typically seen as means to become more loyal, filial and brotherly in enhancement of group authority and discipline (Triandis, 1995, p. 91). Weber’s assessment is similarly that:

The official Chinese state cult everywhere served only the interests of the community; the ancestor cult served those of the sib. With both of them individual interests per se remained out of the picture (Weber, 1964, p. 173). It is widely noticed that Confucian encouragement of self-cultivation co-exists with admonishments against selfishness and placing self-interest above the interests of the group. These ideas are intensified in the refinements of Neo-Confucianism, from the
eighteenth century, in which individual desire is necessarily selfish and selfishness the origin of evil (Fung, 1953, pp. 449, 603, 666).

While the conventions referred to above diminish the role of self-interest in Chinese discourse and practice, indeed exclude it from them, as a preliminary corrective it is important to acknowledge that there are traditions of Chinese thought in which self-interest is foregrounded. It is also important to distinguish between the ideological representations of the conventions which exclude self-interest and the actual conduct of social relationships. After briefly considering the place of self-interest in non-Confucian Chinese thought, its role in Confucian bureaucracy is noted.

The language of self-interest is pivotal in the utilitarian Legalist school (法家). Lord Shang (Shang Yang), a fourth century BC statesman and thinker, held that human nature leads people to strive for profit and comfort and avoid their obverse, so that it is necessary for rulers to ‘give due consideration to what is profitable’ because people will ‘fear punishment and easily suffer hardship [in order to attain gain]’ (Shang, 2006, p. 121). In this way the ‘method by which a ruler of men prohibits and encourages is by means of rewards and penalties’ (Shang 2006, p. 325). The idea, that self-interest underlies human nature and that behaviour in livelihood, military affairs and governance must operate in terms of it, is further developed in the third century BC Hanfeizi (Fung, 1952, pp. 327-28) and also in the slightly later and more benign Huainanzi (Ames, 1983). Indeed, this approach, which assumes that ‘people like personal profit and emoluments but dislike punishments and penalties’ (Hanfeizi quoted in Ames, 1983, p. 156), parallels the formation of self-interest as a vocabulary of motive in eighteenth century Europe, where the promotion of self-interest functioned to curtail disruptive and destructive impulses (Hirschman, 1997, pp. 39-42).

An additional significant source in Chinese understandings of self-interest is the thought of Yang Tzu who ‘sought fulfillment of life not in its prolongation but its intensification’ (Bauer, 1976: 46). Nothing of Yang Tzu’s writings survive although a chapter bearing his name in the Liehzi (Graham, 1990, pp. 135-57) is sufficient to indicate that his position is not the simplistic egoism dismissed by Mencius, the principal interpreter of Confucius, when he says: ‘Even if [Yang Tzu] could benefit the Empire by pulling out one hair [of his head] he would not do it’ (Mencius, 2004, p. 151). The translator of Liehzi regards the Yang Tzu chapter as anomalous in this Daoist text, supposing its position to be merely ‘hedonistic’ (Graham, 1990, p. 1). But others recognize that Yang Tzu’s outlook, which holds that a person is responsible for their own wellbeing, is consonant with the tenets of philosophical Daoism as expressed in its principal texts, the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi (Fung, 1998a, pp. 260-63) and, it can incidentally be added, anticipates the idea in Adam Smith (1979, pp. 82-83) that ‘every man is … first and principally recommended to his own care … [and] therefore is much more deeply interested in whatever immediately concerns himself than in what concerns any other man’. We shall return to aspects of this theme below.

It cannot reasonably be said, therefore, that the concept of self-interest is absent in classical China. Indeed, the strong negative attention given to ‘selfishness’ in Confucian and Neo-Confucian writing indicates a concern with an ever-present ‘problem’ of self-interest. It has been suggested by Wang Bi, a third century philosopher, that a system of moral virtue, such as Confucianism, may paradoxically
promote practices of self-interest. The social and political preferment of moral conduct may lead one to ‘cultivate that which can exalt him in hope of the praise involved and cultivate that which can lead to it in the expectation of the material advantage involved’ (Wang, 1999, p. 39). One may be moral because it is right, if others see that it is right then it is in one’s self-interest to behave morally: ‘Because of hope for praise and expectation of material advantage, he will conduct himself with diligence, but the more splendid the praise, the more he will thrust sincerity away, and the greater his material advantage, the more contentious he will be inclined to be’ (Wang, 1999, pp. 39). The point of this caution is not merely that Confucian admonishments against selfishness may themselves promote self-interest but that proscription indicates the probable currency of what is opposed; there is no point prohibiting what is not likely to occur.

Confucian thought provides organizing legitimacy to state bureaucracy. The norms of loyalty to emperor based on filial piety within the family explicitly disqualify self-interest or ‘selfishness’ as an independent basis of motive. The practices of those operating within the imperial bureaucracy, however, were frequently marked by behaviours that may be seen as outcomes of self-interest, namely corruption and bribery, underhand dealings, avoidance of responsibility and scapegoating, and unscrupulous ambition (Balazs, 1964, pp. 12, 18, 41-42). Indeed, the terminology of self-interest is required not only to characterize such improper selfishness but for an understanding of the optimal operation of imperial administration.

An official in China’s imperial bureaucracy was subject to the ‘continuous conflict between two incompatible organizational systems to … which he owed loyalty’ (Yang, 1959, p. 158). One was the imperial bureaucracy itself, in which the official’s conduct of office required ‘formalistic impersonality’; the other was the pressure of informal personal relationships, especially although not only those of kinship. The imperial system effectively generated this conflict by promoting kinship not only at the level of Confucian doctrine regarding the primacy of filiality but also in associated practices, encoded in formal rules, including the conferring of titles on the parents, wife and sons of outstanding officials (Yang, 1959, p. 159). A resolution at the individual level of the pressures of personal relationships on officials formally bound to execute the impersonal requirements of office is therefore made more difficult by these aspects of the operations of the imperial system itself.

Yang (1959, pp. 158-59) describes a number of strategies engaged by individual bureaucrats which in different ways acknowledged these competing influences and attempted to manage them. While Yang does not provide a sociological account of the resolution of such conflicts of value systems, which could not themselves arbitrate between the demands of impartiality of office and partiality of kinship, the mechanisms of their resolution must include a consideration of the individual official’s understanding of his own best interests. Indeed, Yang (1959, p. 159) hints at such a necessity when he notes that in addition to temperament and social prestige, that enter ‘into the functioning of [the official’s] status with social approval, if not formal legitimacy’, is his ‘private material interests’.

Against the conventional denial of the possibility of self-interest in Chinese discourse and practice the following sections of this paper will outline the basis of
self-interest and indicate its significance in analyzing Chinese social practices. It is necessary to begin with conceptions of selves that may have interests of their own.

*Self beyond the Confucian Matrix*

A number of writers have penetrated beyond the erroneous idea that the self is absent from the Confucian system and presented instead the notion of a relational self that is characteristically Chinese. An acknowledgement of the centrality of the family in traditional Chinese society and in its Confucian representation is fundamental to these discussions. Commentators note that the three familial elements of the five cardinal relations of Confucian ethics, namely those of father and son, elder and younger brother, and husband and wife, are relations of discrete social roles. The remaining cardinal relations, of ruler and subject and of friendship, are conceived as analogues of familial roles. The practice of self-cultivation in the Confucian system is designed to align an individual’s self-identity with these roles. Fung Yu-Lan (1998b, p. 634) therefore claims that in traditional Chinese philosophy ‘the emphasis is upon the individual … [insofar as it] is the individual who is a father or a son, a husband or a wife’. A person exists as an individual in this sense through their role compliance and performance. It is therefore ‘quite wrong’, Fung (1998b, p. 636) holds, ‘that there was no place for the personality of the individual’ in traditional Chinese society. Indeed, Fung adds a further dimension to his recognition of the significance of the individual self in traditional Chinese society and Confucian thought when he says that according to them ‘every individual is the centre of a social circle which is constituted of various social relationships’ (Fung, 1998b, p. 635). These relationships radiate in both vertical and horizontal directions, and ‘[w]ithin the radius there are different degrees of greater and lesser affections and responsibilities’ (Fung, 1998b, p. 635).

The idea that the self may be located at the centre of relationships is sociologically elaborated by Fei Xiaotong (1992) and Ambrose Yeo-chi King (1985). The relational as opposed to the collective nature of Chinese society has been strongly emphasized in Fei’s (1992, p. 67) account of the ‘egocentric’ rather than the group-centric nature of the self in Chinese traditions. That this egocentric self is at the centre of ‘elastic networks’ rather than formal organizations justifies the claim that ‘this notion of the self’ does not amount, though, to ‘individualism’ (Fei, 1992, p. 67). The difference is that the egocentric selves Fei refers to operate in a system of qualitatively different categories, classifications or roles, whereas individualistic selves operate in formal organizations that are characterized by equivalence, equality and therefore constitutionality (Fei, 1992, pp. 65-66). Confucian individuality thus emphasizes the uniqueness of each person in the performance of the roles they occupy, not their autonomy from prescribed positions in relationships (Hall and Ames, 1998, pp. 25-28; see also Hamilton, 1990). Yet the networks resulting from the interactions of such selves are elastic because the context of action can be defined by the actor (Fei, 1992, p. 69). This is a result of the fact that ‘the self is an active entity capable of defining the roles for himself and others and, moreover, of defining the boundaries of groups of which the self is at the centre’ (King, 1985, p. 64). The volitional and active imperative of Chinese selves acknowledged by both Fei and King is explained by them in terms of the ambiguities of the traditional roles of Chinese society (Fei, 1992, pp. 69-70; King 1985, pp. 64-65). Such ambiguity and lack of clarity therefore leaves room for individual discretion at the margins over who
is and who is not a family or other group member (King, 1985, p. 65). Indeed, kinship terms are frequently applied to biologically unrelated persons in order to generate a relational closeness, obligation or favour (Baker, 1979, pp. 162-67). These ambiguities therefore require individual decision or ‘egocentrism’ in the determination of role behaviour and network construction and maintenance. As King (1985, p. 60) implicitly acknowledges, however, when paraphrasing Dennis Wrong that ‘a human being is never merely a role player’, this is a universal and not a Chinese feature of roles and of the actions required to animate them. Those accounts, which explain Chinese selves as ‘a relational being endowed with a self-centred autonomy’ (King, 1985, p. 66), in terms of limitations of clarity in the Confucian system require closer examination.

According to King (1985, p. 62) Confucian social ethics ‘has failed to provide a “viable linkage” between the individual and the ch’ü̇n [qūn], the nonfamilistic group … [The] boundary between the self and the group has not been conceptually articulated’ (see also Fei, 1992, p. 70). Indeed, the absence of this conceptual articulation is seen as the reason why ‘all apparently group values and interests … centre around the self’ (King, 1985, p. 62). The absence of Confucian clarity is thus seen as the basis of the egocentric relational self of Chinese society (Fei, 1992, p. 69). Whether or not these characterizations of the limitations of Confucian theory are adequate, it is difficult to see how they could justify the causal supposition they propose: an absence is not a cause. King (1985, p. 61) relates that Confucians regard the human community as comprising three categories, the individual (jī), the family (jiā) and the group (qūn); the last of these, qūn, lacks ‘formal treatment’ and even jiā is ‘conceptually unclear’ in the Confucian system, according to King. While this may be true it is unlikely to have the significance ascribed to it by these authors. It does, though, indicate something of importance for an understanding of self that King, Fei and Fung do not discuss, to be developed below.

Before it is anything else Confucianism is a system of moral governance focusing primarily on the maintenance of family order through filial piety (xiao) and political order through loyalty (zhōng) to the sovereign. The relations between the three spheres of self, family and group (or country) is set out in the Daxue (Great Learning), an early text elevated by the Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi:

Wishing to order well their States [the ancients] first regulated their families.
Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons … Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their States being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy (Legge, 1971, pp. 357-59).

Such propositions concerning the centrality of the family in this scheme and the implied subordination of the individual to both xiao and zhōng in order to bring about group harmony or peace require not conceptual clarity regarding the units of analysis but that the statement as a whole is taken for what it is, namely an injunction to accept the moral and political imperatives internal to it.

In a formalized system of instructions or edicts for proper behaviour conceptual boundaries do not require the type of clarification King and also Fei note are absent in the Confucian system. This is because the ‘individual’, ‘family’ and ‘group’ referred to in it are experiential or common-sense notions that are self-defined in the practices of xiao and zhōng rather than in a sociological theory about them.
Relatedly, the concept of group or society in a sociological sense is redundant in the Confucian theory of social morality when governance through *xiao* and *zhong* are sufficient in understanding how ‘peace in the world’ might be achieved. The society to which these edicts are addressed is more or less composed of family, including clan structures, and the political state and its instrumentalities. In such a world, in which there is an absence of the voluntary associations of autonomous individuals, which incidentally replaced the established forms of reciprocity and mutuality in Europe during the eighteenth century (in which the question of groups and society first arose in a sociological sense), only a morally infused political philosophy is possible. It is under conditions of the type found in eighteenth-century European developments mentioned here that political theory loses its monopoly of intellectual discourse and sociological and economic theory gain ascendance over it.

What is described in the preceding paragraph, regarding a shift in eighteenth-century Europe toward a sociological sensibility concerning group formation, constitutes the conditions under which there was a transformation in the experience of self, in which a person possessing the ‘faculty of forming a judgment of their own interests’ indicates the historical move from a society in which self is based on ‘status’ to one in which it is based on ‘contract’ (Maine, 1905, p. 150). The only point to take from this statement for the purposes of the present argument is that the particular notion of self which emerges historically, like the one that historically preceded it, is institutionally determined. Such a proposition seems to be absent in the account of the Chinese relational self that is discussed in the preceding paragraphs and exemplified in the accounts of Fei and King. In both of these writers the selves they describe are free to interpret the roles they occupy and those to which they relate. While a lack of clarity in Confucian categories explains the relative freedom of relational selves the direction in which that capacity is exercised is simply taken for granted. While relational selves function within networks their volitional capacity to define those networks is conceived in terms of their ‘egocentricism’; why one form of association is chosen rather than another form is not explained when it is assumed to operate in terms of an ambiguity-based freedom to choose; in that sense it is without an institutional basis and the relational self might be described as pre-social.

**The Institutional Context of Selves and their Interests**

The idea in Fei and King of an active voluntaristic self at the centre of flexible networks is not disputed here. The notion of a self that is interested in the roles it performs and how it performs them indicates an interest in the agent’s own identity, a quality of the Chinese self for which there is literary evidence from at least the sixth century BC (Elvin, 1985, p. 159). Self-interest in this sense has a necessary volitional and therefore self-determining dimension, which Fei and King recognize and which forms the basis of their conception of a relational self. It is necessary to add, however, that this active capacity of self is practiced in not merely a social but especially an institutional context. Interactions between the self and the context it occupies contribute to the formation of the self. This aspect of the argument is quite undeveloped in Fei and King. The social context mentioned here includes the gaze and evaluation of others. *Face* (*mainzi/lian*), in the Chinese cultural context, is made up of a projected self-image (Cheng, 1986, pp. 337-44) which is validated in public perception (Hwang, 1987, pp. 960-62). The interest social actors have in their ‘face’,
including how it is perceived by others and the relations internal to it (Qi, 2011), is one mechanism regulating the egoistic selves at the centre of the elastic networks (guanxi wáng) Fei and King refer to.

There is a deeper level of determination of self suggested by the brief reference above to eighteenth-century Europe and the historical nature of societies. Implicit in Maine’s characterization of social change in terms of a move from a society in which status predominates to one in which contract principally operates is the idea that there are historically variable institutional selections of the form of self. This notion is developed in an evolutionary framework by Thorstein Veblen. Veblen holds that within human nature there are a number of instincts, including the opposing instincts of ‘workmanship’ and ‘predation’; which one of these predominates at any given time will be determined by habituation through institutionalization (Veblen, 1946, pp. 38-39). More generally:

Social evolution is a process of selective adaptation of temperament and habits of thought under the stress of the circumstances of associated life. The adaptation of habits of thought is the growth of institutions. But along with the growth of institutions … is a correlative change in human nature (Veblen, 1970, pp. 145-46). Veblen’s characteristic account of social evolution refers to institutional selections of different forms of self.

Historicizing ‘self’ in terms of variable institutional selection of self-forms can be connected with the fact that the self also has an historical or at least temporal dimension. Every person has a past and a future self as well as a present self, each with its own distinctive features and interests (Barbalet, 2009; Barbalet, 2012). In the formation of the self and its interests there are relations with other selves, including other temporal selves of the same person. The institutional patterns of self-formation which pay attention to the distinct temporal selves of a single person can be readily indicated (Pizzorno, 1986, p. 370). The institutional form of the traditional family is one in which past selves command present selves. In this case the ‘past selves’ include not only past other selves, in the form of ancestors, but also the past self of an individual person in so far as their birth, birth-order and endowments of upbringing determine the decisions and especially the interests of their present self. The institutions of a market economy, on the other hand, tend to select future selves and their interests as crucial in self formation, on the basis of past endowments of experience and skill and present opportunities. This is because economic ambition and striving for commercial or occupational success are necessarily future orientated and in attempting to realize them future selves effectively deploy resources generated by past selves. In this way the institutional framework links persons not only horizontally, through relations of inter-personal connections with others, but also vertically in the form of inter-temporal connections of the distinct selves of the same person.

Different societies will have different arrangements of institutions and different hierarchical relations between institutions with corresponding consequences for self-formation. A person’s actions will be directed to the satisfaction of the interests of their past or future selves, depending on the institutional context within which the action occurs. Having now indicated the nature of institutional contexts of self-formation, left unclear by Fei and King, it is possible to appreciate the nature of
classical Chinese concerns regarding ‘selfishness’ in terms of priorities of inter-temporal selves and their interests. The family in the Confucian system can be thought of as an institution which constitutes a person in terms of prioritizing the interests of the past self against the requirements of a present or future self. In this sense Confucian admonishments against ‘selfishness’ are not prohibitions against self-interest so much as a formation of self-interest through an enforcement of the predominance of the interests of past selves against present and alternately-possible future selves. More shall be made of this in the following section.

Like all institutional arrangements conformity with the norms of the traditional family requires preparation and training, achieved through the Confucian practices of self-cultivation. It is of interest that self-cultivation implicitly acknowledges a distinction between the different temporal selves of an individual person in the sense that it seeks to achieve a future self with qualities, endowments and orientations absent in a past self. Self-cultivation is a means of achieving an articulation of role requirements and role performance. The requirements of roles in the Confucian system include the predominance of the interests of past selves in generation of present and future actions. But the general form of self-cultivation within the Confucian system, through which an individual develops their own powers of concentration, attention and direction, can be removed from its original institutional context and transferred to non-familial applications.

**Self-interest in Chinese sources**

Traditional Chinese society was institutionally complex, comprising a national bureaucracy which was politically centralized but operationally dispersed, heterogeneous local communities in which kinship relations dominated, a national market economy without the benefit of comprehensive and centrally enforced property rights, and an ideological framework dominated by Confucian thought but in which Daoist and Buddhist reference points operated along with a myriad of local symbols, meanings and practices. Within this institutional matrix self-interest necessarily took as many forms as the corresponding formations of selves were manifest. Commercialization of the Chinese economy, which began during the Song Dynasty in the tenth century, did not disrupt the agrarian nature of the society. This meant not that rural society escaped the influence of market relations but rather that peasant households were fully integrated in markets. The practices of everyday life were shaped by market institutions, so that not only was there ‘respectability [in] the pursuit of riches’ but also ‘legitimacy of careful and interested financial dealings between neighbours and even close kinsmen’ (Freedman, 1979, pp. 25-26).

A number of handbooks were published and circulated during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) based on Confucian principles but directed to the guidance of merchants in pursuit of their pecuniary careers. In drawing on Confucian self-cultivation practices merchants advanced their future interests against the interests of their present selves, against ‘selfishness’. This is not to say that Confucian values can consistently legitimize a profit motive and market activities. Such a ‘rhetorical strategy’ practiced during the sixteenth century, and at the present time, invites ‘the opposite [Confucian] rhetoric of profit making as socially destabilizing’ (Brook, 1997, p. 38). To say that recruitment of a ‘Confucian genealogy’ in advocacy of market
rationality is entirely ‘forced’ (Brook, 1997, pp. 41) does not deny ‘polarities in Confucian thought’ (Schwartz 1959). But the sixteenth century texts:

… speak of commerce in the language of ‘making’ (gong), ‘living’ (sheng), and ‘growing’ (zhi). This language contrasts starkly with the anti-commercial vocabulary of conventional Confucianism, which expressed the essence of its Way in the language of ‘reversion’ (fu), ‘preservation’ (shou), and ‘antiquity’ (gu) (Brook, 1997, p. 35).

These texts thus engage a temporal vocabulary of commercial future-orientation and a past-orientation of family-centric Confucian thought, mentioned above.

In his discussion of the merchant handbooks Richard Lufrano (1997) shows how the traditional Confucian practices of self-cultivation were transferred from the institutions of kinship and state bureaucracy to those of the market. Whereas in their original context these practices safeguarded past selves against the interests of present selves, in the market context they safeguarded the interests of future selves against the desires of present selves. In each case ‘selfishness’ is the problem dealt with. The ‘inner mental attentiveness’ (jing) central to Confucian self-cultivation functioned to firstly dispel or at least manage the external distractions which might lead ‘honourable merchants’ to errors of judgment in business and, secondly, to renounce the appeals of ‘gambling, whoring and opium smoking’ to which ‘petty merchants were particularly attracted’ (Lufrano, 1997, p. 64). The importance of self-control in suppressing selfish desires or the immediate interests of present selves in advancing economic success associated with the interests of future selves is explicit in these manuals (Lufrano, 1997, pp. 63-67).

The late-Qing merchants who drew on Confucian self-cultivation principles in safeguarding the pecuniary interests of their future selves, against the ‘selfish’ satisfaction of sensual pleasures demanded by their present selves, enacted a self-regulation that is arguably a local variant of a more general phenomenon.

Seventeenth-century European entrepreneurs found similar benefit in the guidance provided by Protestant tracts against ‘spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment’ which distracted from money-making (Weber, 1991, p. 119); contemporary manuals of emotions management performed the same function for early modern European capitalists irrespective of their religious background (Barbalet, 2008b, pp. 85-102). Late modern corporate executives similarly employ forms of self-regulation to subordinate short-term interests in order to achieve more profitable long-term outcomes (Akerlof and Kranton, 2010, p. 5).

The distinction between the interests of a present self and the interests of a future self, which underpin the discussion here, is acknowledged in different ways. The difference is understood psychologically as a distinction between short- and long-term interests, manifest as intra-personal interests, about which there is intrapsychic bargaining (Ainslie, 1986, pp. 143-49). More abstractly, a difference is drawn between a ‘present aim’ theory of rationality and a ‘self-interest’ theory; the first referring to pursuit of aims formed at the ‘moment of deliberation and action’ and the second taking into account more-long-term considerations of welfare (Frank, 1988, pp. 67-68). These are distinctions between immediate appetites and reflected considerations. The failure to make the distinction clear is not confined to Confucian treatments of ‘selfishness’ but has been a recurring problem in economics, to which Ainslie and also Frank, mentioned above, responded (see Knight, 1971, pp. 130-31).
The necessity of training, through Confucian self-cultivation or other means, to safeguard non-present-self-interests, either past or future, against the appetites of present selves derives from the quite different constitutions of the distinct temporal selves. Whereas present selves are experienced through sensory stimulation, past selves exist in a memory of such experiences. Future selves and their associated interests are paradoxically prior to experience of them and can only be known through the imagination (Barbalet, 2009; Barbalet, 2012: 424-27). But this imagination may be more present to consciousness than sensation, especially in pursuit of (economic) ambitions (Knight, 1971, p. 202). Indeed, memory relating to past selves also has a significant imaginative component. Thus, while pursuit of present interests requires no special preparation beyond the sensory apparatus which guides it, that humans have in common with other animal species, orientation to satisfaction of the interests of past and also future selves requires careful preparation assisted by manuals of self-cultivation, which frequently begin with admonishments against ‘selfishness’. Confucian self-cultivation manuals and practices were not the only instruments of guidance in recognition of the interests of non-present selves in traditional China.

Self-cultivation practices serve all Chinese philosophical traditions. The principal text of Daoist thought (an alternate to Confucianism), Daodejing, was written as a self-cultivation text for aspirants to state rule (LaFargue, 1998, p. 263). Daodejing is known in sociology through Weber’s (1964, p. 186) treatment of it as an exposition of ‘contemplative mysticism’. Mysticism, involving self-surrender or self-transcendence, leaves self-interest without a subject. The supposed mystical elements of Daodejing, however, are ‘misinterpretations’ (Lau, 1963, p. xxxviii) and there is no evidence in the text of mystical practice or endorsement (Barbalet, 2014; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). The widespread view that Daodejing advocates self-abnegation has textual support: ‘[the sage] benefits [others] yet exacts no gratitude; he accomplishes ... task[s], yet lays claim to no merit’ (Lau, 1963, p. 6). But subordination of the actor’s present purpose is to realize the full potential of events as they unfold, and the actor’s apparent disengagement leads to satisfaction of their future interests: ‘the sage puts his person last and it comes first ... Is it not because he is without thought of self that he is able to accomplish his private ends?’ (Lau, 1963, p. 11). The institutional basis of orientation to future interests is state leadership and administration, served by the sage who draws upon Daodejing (LaFargue, 1994, pp. 51-94). Thus, sacrificing present interests can serve to realize future interests. Indeed, this is the interpretation of Han Dynasty commentaries on Daodejing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999, pp. 46-48). Approximately 30% of the chapters of Daodejing include reference to the realization of interests of future selves against the satisfaction of present self-interest. In this account is the idea that Daodejing presents an alternative to the Confucian focus on the interests of past selves through filial piety; more positively, Daodejing indicates the realization of the interests of future selves and in this sense at least shares with Confucianism a disdain for the satisfaction of present self-interest or ‘selfishness’.

Conclusion

By focusing on a non-capitalistic and pre-modern context typically ignored aspects of self-interest are identified. The notion of self-interest is difficult to
conceptualize on the basis of Confucian sources, yet an account of it is necessary in order to understand the organization of traditional Chinese society. One of the concerns latent in the discussion above is the salience of cultural readings of social relationships. There is no doubt that Fei and King are justified in regarding the relational self they describe as a particular feature of Chinese society. A question arises, though, of whether the relational self is explicable only in terms of Chinese values and mores, or whether it may be an expression of institutional arrangements understood through more general categories. The discussion here places the relational self in a context of institutional selection and a resolution of self-formation into the generational capacity of relations between selves, including different temporal selves of the same person through which institutional arrangements operate, in the practical deployment of different self-interests.

One consequence of the characterization of self-interest in terms of the different possible interests of distinct temporal phases of selves is a novel characterization of two major strands of Chinese teachings, Confucianism and Daoism, and their concerns. The depiction of the Daodejing in particular, as a reference for the achievement of future-self-interests, challenges most familiar interpretations of this text. It is shown here that a neglected dimension of both Confucianism and philosophical Daoism, namely their respectively different conceptualizations of self-interest, clearly distinguishes them and is the fulcrum around which better known attributes of each philosophy rotate.

The Chinese case has been drawn upon in development of an argument concerning the constitution of self-interest. The difficulty of isolating self-interest in Chinese traditions which exemplify relational if not collective selves is arguably less apparent in present-day China, which is undergoing ‘individualization’ (Yan 2009; Hansen and Svarverud, 2010). The reforms since the 1980s have generated changes in practically all areas of social life, through the advent of private- and self-employment markets (Davis, 1999; Yueh, 2009), commercial housing markets (Wang and Murie, 1999), private health care (Eggleston and Yip, 2004) and so on. Compared with the preceding Mao period, in which collective and socialized forms predominated, the novelty of individual prerogative through marketization is exceptional. But in terms of the period prior to the foundation of the People’s Republic in 1949, when pervasive market relations operated for 800 years since the Song Dynasty (Elvin 1973; Mann 1987), there is less disjunctive separation. In earlier marketized China the Confucian distinction between a ‘greater self’ (da wo), on the one hand, representing filial piety and kinship networks, and a subordinate ‘lesser self’ (xiao wo), on the other, did acknowledge individual prerogative, but only in order to subordinate it to the compulsion of family association.

These configurations continue today in ‘individualized’ China. The market reforms of the last thirty years began with the spontaneous development of family contracts and enterprise, known as the ‘household responsibility system’ (baocuan daoHU), in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Faure, 2006, pp. 73-80), which continues to drive economic reform (Peng, 2004), supported by filial piety (Whyte, 1997). Market transactions, economically privatized, are socially enacted through guanxi networks among businesses (Gold, 2002) and workers in labour markets (Bian and Huang, 2009; Huang, 2008). The facilities through which the self-interest of such market actors is expressed require commitment to family and network association: the
interest of members of guanxi networks is to maintain the network, in service of which they devote resources that detract from their individual consumption. Self-interest in Chinese market relations is submerged in and apparently subordinate to the interests of the associative networks through which market actors negotiate their exchanges and from which their economic capacities derive. Indeed, Chinese scholars recently reported that:

the Chinese … will not sacrifice their own long-term interests for group interests, even though they often claim to do so to justify their behaviour. Yet the Chinese are willing to sacrifice short-term interests for long-term favour exchanges, since they know that the benefit of group effort will be much greater than that of an individual endeavor (Luo and Yeh, 2012, p. 65).

In untangling this pattern in present-day as well as imperial China the meaning of self-interest can be revealed only through sociological excavation.

While the argument concerning the nature of self-interest developed in this paper operates in terms of Chinese subjects, the analysis has broader application. The understanding of self which is outlined here, in terms of a differentiation of temporal phases of individual selves, and the idea that each phase of self might have its own interest, was originally presented by William Hazlitt (1969) in the early nineteenth century and has more recently been given philosophical respectability (Parfit, 1986, pp. 199-306), although it remains relatively neglected in sociology (Barbalet, 2009), possibly because it goes against the widely accepted idea of a continuous self, supported by individual personal narratives and other cultural means that function in terms of psychological continuity or consciousness through time. By treating self-formation in terms of relationships between other selves, including other temporally-based selves of the same person, through institutional selection, then a sociological account of self-interest is possible that can uncover the operations of self-interest even when it is made obscure by prevailing doctrines in which selfishness is admonished and the possibility of self-interest apparently denied.

References


