**Weber’s Daoism: A Failure of Orthodoxy.**
Jack Barbalet

**Abstract**
The present paper fills a gap in the discussion of *The Religion of China* by focusing on Weber’s treatment of Daoism. In considering Weber’s location of mysticism and religion in the early Daoist text, *Daodejing*, his use of sources in this particular construction is examined. Second, Weber’s treatment of Daoism – and Confucianism – within the orthodox/heterodox framework is shown to be a European projection inadequate for understanding Chinese state practices. Finally, Weber’s general approach prevents appreciation of the contribution of Daoist thought to a Chinese entrepreneurial spirit. By reformulating Weber’s argument concerning culture and economy this important and neglected aspect of Daoism is highlighted.

**Key words**
Daoism; Laozi; orthodoxy; orthopraxy; entrepreneurship.

**Introduction**
Weber wrote *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (hereafter *RoC*) primarily to demonstrate the singular provision of the conditions for the development of modern industrial capitalism in Protestant Europe. His historical examination of China’s economic, political, administrative and social institutions provides Weber with sufficient grounds for the absence of the development of capitalism in China: ‘from a purely economic point of view … bourgeois industrial capitalism might have developed from the petty capitalist beginnings we have mentioned … [but a] number of reasons – mostly related to the structure of the state – can be seen for the fact that capitalism failed to develop’ (Weber 1964: 100). Weber goes on to argue that the necessary condition, however, for the failure of capitalism to arise in China is the absence of appropriate religious traditions. Weber recognizes a rational element in Confucianism, but ‘Confucian rationalism meant rational adjustment to the world’ (1964: 248). What is necessary for the development of capitalism, in Weber’s estimation, however, is ‘Puritan rationalism [which] meant rational mastery of the world’ (1964: 248). Weber goes on to show that the opposition to orthodox Confucianism provided by heterodox Daoism did not generate the type of tension that might serve to rectify Confucian default but in fact made matters worse by both reinforcing traditionalism and transforming ‘the world into a magic garden’, each of which are anathema to capitalist development (1964: 200).

While Weber’s treatment of Chinese institutions and social structure has drawn critical attention (Elvin 1973: 284-315; Hamilton 1984, 1990; Peng 2005; Sprenkel 1965; Zelin 2009), and his treatment of Confucianism has similarly generated much discussion (Metzger 1977; Schluchter 1989: 85-116), Weber’s account of Daoism is quite neglected. This is unfortunate because consideration of Daoism raises significant issues regarding Weber’s approach, both positive and negative. In the discussion to follow three aspects of his treatment of Daoism shall be examined. First, it will be shown that Weber’s selection and use of sources in his construction of Daoism, which parallels the way in which he constructs the concepts of ‘Puritanism’ and ‘ascetic Protestantism’ (Ghosh 2008), primarily serves his prior orientation. Second, it will be shown that Weber’s contrast of Daoism and Confucianism in the orthodox/heterodox distinction reflects a misunderstanding of Chinese state rule. Finally,
it will be shown that Weber’s interpretation of Daoist thought prevents appreciation of a key element of Chinese entrepreneurship that was evident at the time of his writing RoC.

**Daoism in Weber’s RoC**

Weber holds that Daoism is a heterodox doctrine in contrast with orthodox Confucianism. Weber also insists that Confucianism and Daoism share a number of features in common even though they became antagonistic over time. The source of Daoist thought and therefore Chinese heterodoxy is the *Daodejing* (*Tao te ching*), a text traditionally attributed to Laozi (although in reality a composite text) and often called the *Laozi*. Weber says that the meaning of Laozi’s doctrine ‘originally … did not differ in the main from that of Confucianism’ (Weber 1964: 177). Weber virtually copies this point of view from de Groot who holds that the original gods of ancient China, Heaven and Earth, are shared by Confucianism and Daoism, although Daoism later increased the number of gods, and as the augmented gods were false from the Confucian perspective worship of them was therefore heterodox (de Groot 1912: 134). According to this line of argument the principle idea of an order of nature, as represented in the concept *dao*, continues to be shared by both traditions. Additionally, de Groot holds that Confucianism and Daoism share the doctrine of inactivity or *wuwei* (1912: 142). All of these propositions are repeated by Weber and incorporated into his discussion (1964: 180-182).

Perhaps the most important point for Weber, to be addressed shortly, is the ‘famous doctrine of inactivity, or *wuwei*, preached by Lao-tszë [and] warmly recommended by Confucius’ (de Groot 1912: 142). Before taking up the question of Weber’s discourse on *wuwei* the supposed original closeness of Daoism and Confucianism can be addressed. While it is misleading to suggest an identity or equivalence of the extensive treatment of *wuwei* in the *Laozi* and its single mention by Confucius (Lau 1979: 132), the idea that the original meaning of Laozi’s doctrine and Confucianism ‘did not differ in the main’, as Weber (1964: 177) says, is to ignore the strongly anti-Confucian thrust of not only the *Laozi* but also the other early leading source of Daoist thought, the *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang Tzu*) (Chan 1963: 17-19; Mote 1989: 60-63). The idea, that both Confucius and the *Laozi* teach that ‘life is equal to the possession of a “*shen*” [love of humankind] … but [that] the means differ (Weber 1964: 180)’, is neither an adequate statement of their respective positions nor does the qualification regarding their different ‘means’ properly distinguish between them. The supposition of a unifying base of worship is not only false in itself but views Confucianism and Daoism through a religious lens that is wholly distorting of them both. The apprehension of *wuwei* by de Groot and also Weber, is similarly misleading.

a. **Daoist mysticism**

Weber is not entirely correct to say that the ‘theories of non-intervention’, which he sees as common to both Confucianism and Daoism, ‘could be deduced … from the idea of providential harmony (the *Tao* in the world’ (Weber 1964: 188). Confucianism aspires to social harmony whereas Daoism focusses on process, through which harmony is neither an objective or purpose nor a necessary outcome (Fung 1952: 180-83). But Weber is completely mistaken to say that *wuwei* through the *Tao* ‘means abstention from all action’ and ‘release from all activity’ (1964: 181, 182). As we shall see, this interpretation of radical inaction as *wuwei* serves Weber’s imputation of mysticism in the *Laozi* and Daoism, but it is not unequivocally supported by Weber’s sources. It is true that *wuwei* is typically translated as ‘non-action’, although recent commentators point out that it is better understood as ‘effortless action’ (Slingerland 2007) or ‘non-coercive action’ (Ames and Hall 2003). Weber recommends Legge as an authority on Daoist texts (1964: 290 n 1). Legge’s translations of Chinese classics, including the Daoist sources the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*,
were published in Max Müller’s important series of *Sacred Books of the East*, a 50-volume compendium of works that appeared from 1879 to 1910, which exemplified the comparative approach to the study of world religions drawn upon by Weber. In his translation of the *Laozi* Legge is careful to point out that ‘the Tâoistic “do nothing” was not an absolute quiescence and inaction, but had a method in it’, namely that *wuwei* is non-purposive because the ‘Tâo forbids action with a personal purpose [for] all such action is sure to fail’ (Legge 1962: 107, 72). The validity of this interpretation aside (Barbalet 2011: 340-47) *wuwei*, according to Legge’s approach, is correctly understood not as the absence of action, but action which accommodates to rather than confronts what it is directed toward, *wuwei* is action as synchronicity rather than forcefulness. This is action which is more mindful of the way in which things change than it is of the direct interests of the actor, it is a non-willful form of action directed to realizing the potential in events and others.

Weber’s particular construction of Laozi’s doctrine of *wuwei* is important to him because of the way it indicates and confirms Laozi’s mysticism (Weber 1964: 180), and it is this latter characteristic, Weber says, which sets Laozi and his school apart from Confucius and his school. As we have seen, Weber understands *wuwei* as being a release from action which he now extends to a release from activity, in which case ‘one’s self is absolutely void of worldly interests’ and the suspension of action or at least its minimization through *wuwei* is the ‘only proof of the mystic’s state of grace’ (1964: 182). The idea here that Laozi sought a state of grace begs the question of his intentions and of the nature of the *Laozi* in particular and ‘philosophical’ Daoism in general. The function of the proposition is to justify Weber’s description of Laozi as engaging in ‘contemplative mysticism’, a term he uses a number of times (1964: 182, 183, 186). While Weber believes that Laozi and Confucius shared much, as we have seen, this is the principal point of distinction between them, according to Weber, for the ‘Confucians … were not mystics’ (1964: 182). This difference does not embrace all of the opposition between Daoism and Confucianism, but it does alert us to some crucial distinctions.

The political differences between Daoism and Confucianism are significant. Whereas Daoism is associated with the idea that political rule is to provide a context for the spontaneity of its subjects, including freedom of economic activity, Confucianism advocates extensive administration and political management of the economy. Weber says that this difference springs from the mystical content of Daoist thought and its absence in Confucianism:

… the mystic advocated the greatest possible autonomy and self-sufficiency for the individual parts of the state, those small communities which might form a locus of plain peasant or civic virtue. The mystics upheld the slogan: as little bureaucracy as possible, for their self-perfection could not possibly be promoted by the busy state policy of civilization (Weber 1964: 184).

The other consequences of Daoist mysticism that Weber identifies promote a difference with Confucianism of degree rather than kind. That the *Laozi* represents a contemplative mysticism means that it lacks a ‘religiously motivated, active antagonism to the world’ (1964: 186). According to Weber Protestantism manifests such an antagonism, out of which modern capitalism arises; Confucianism lacks such an antagonism, although not because it embraces mysticism. Indeed, Confucianism shares with Protestantism a rationalism which Daoism lacks, but as the Confucian ethic reduced tension with the world it is necessarily traditional in its consequences (1964: 235-36). But Daoism, Weber says, because as a mystical creed it is inherently irrational, ‘was even more traditionalist than Confucianism’ (1964: 200, 205). Through its mysticism, then, and instrumentally because of its characteristic doctrine of *wuwei*, Daoism both lacks the ‘active motive of a “vocational ethic”’ and, correlatively, undermines the possibility of introducing innovation (1964: 188, 205). While the first of
these claims is open to a qualifying interpretation, to be considered below, the second is empirically not sustainable as numerous and important technological inventions emanate from Daoist sources (Needham 1956: 115-32).

For Weber, then, much hinges on the argument that Laozi is a contemplative mystic and that Daoism is a mystical creed. A version of this argument, incidentally, is the typical complaint of Confucian literati (Hansen 1992: 7) who are confounded by the characteristically paradoxical form of argument in the *Laozi* (Legge 1962: 26, 107), although there is nothing inherently mystical about an engagement with paradox, either in general or for Daoism in particular (Hansen 1992: 227-29; Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 44-51). In the estimation of one commentator there has been both in China and the West ‘attempts to put undue emphasis on the mysterious elements in the Lao tzu’ (Lau 1963: xxxviii), but the basis varies on which such emphasis is placed. Were as Weber imputes contemplative mysticism through his understanding of *wuwei* as inactivity, Arthur Waley (1958: 59) associates what he sees as the incommunicability of *dao* doctrines in the *Laozi* with mystical thinking. Another assessment is that the leading Daoist ideas are ‘more intellectual than mystical’ (Granet quoted in Creel 1977: 15).

Lau’s considered summary of the supposed mystical elements of *Daodejing* is to dismiss them as misinterpretations; the sense of the work, he says, is ‘only a rather down-to-earth philosophy aimed at the mundane purpose of personal survival and political order’ (Lau 1963: xxxviii). Indeed, in a recent close examination of major arguments concerning the supposed mysticism of the *Laozi* the conclusion is reached that:

Not only are explicit references to mystical experiences lacking in the text, but it does not seem that the earliest commentators even read the text as an attempt to express knowledge implicitly gained through such experience … it is not possible to state authoritatively that the *Laozi* is a mystical text (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 51).

Later attributions of mysticism, including Weber’s, constitute a contrary assessment. The preceding discussion is directed to the terms on which Weber constructs Laozi’s mysticism and the sources on which he draws.

b. Religion in the *Laozi*

Lau’s reference above to the ‘philosophical’ nature of the *Laozi* – more critical-practical than doctrinal or propositional (LaFargue 1998) – is a reminder that in European languages the term ‘Daoism’ may refer to both a school of thought as well as a body of religious teachings. Chinese language, however, distinguishes between them with different names, respectively *daojia* and *daojiao* (literally, *dao*-family and *dao*-teaching). Those who argue that the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* are ‘philosophical’ texts tend also to hold that *daojia* is itself without religious significance and at best only remotely if at all meaningfully connected with the cultist ritual practices and teachings that constitute *daojiao* (Chan 1963; Creel 1977; Welch 2003). Indeed, the historical and social circumstances of the development of *daojiao* or Hsien Daoism as Creel calls it, in distinguishing it from the ‘purposive’ Daoism of the *Laozi* (Creel 1977: 4-7), are quite different. The practices of the folk immortality cults that contributed to the advent of *daojiao* entertain orientations and means ridiculed in the *Laozi* (Creel 1977: 8-9), written some 500 years earlier. The historical circumstances generative of *daojiao* includes the advent of a sinicized Buddhism domesticated through assimilation of Daoist and Confucian idiom which provided in turn a monastic organizational form to *daojiao* which was previously unknown in China.

The distinction between *daojia* and *daojiao* is lost in much of Weber’s discussion of Daoism, as it was for many of the missionary sinologists of the nineteenth century who regarded the *Laozi* as a sacred text which was measured against Christian sources, as when de Groot (1912: 138) describes the ‘writings of Lao and Chwang … as the holy books
of Taoism’. Legge’s treatment insists on the distinction between daojia and daojiao but acknowledges subsequent inclinations to turn Laozi into a god:

Taoism is the name both of a religion and a philosophy. The author of the philosophy is the chief god, or at least one of the chief gods, of the religion; but there is no evidence that the religion grew out of his book ... any relation between the two things is merely external, for in spirit and tendency they are antagonistic (Legge 1880: 159-60).

An account of the development of Daoism in distinct phases, from singular reclusive scholars and holy men to monastic communities to temples and festivities and magic, is outlined by de Groot (1912: 144-54). Weber follows this chronicle and notices that the later Daoist magicians were not properly speaking “successors” or “disciples” of Laozi even though they may have so considered themselves (Weber 1964: 188-89; see also 202), largely because of an intellectual degeneration in their understanding of Laozi’s thought (1964: 204), a frequently repeated theme of the missionary and lay sinologists of Weber’s historical period. We shall see that Legge offers ambiguous support to the non-religious complexion of the philosophy of the Laozi. Indeed, both he and de Groot are of the view that the Laozi is religiously infused through its possible advocacy of both yogic breathing practices and aspirations for longevity and immortality. These are the areas in which Weber also finds the religious content of the Laozi.

Weber regards aspirations for longevity as pertaining more to later Daoists than to the Laozi, although he seems to believe it is incipient in the latter. He says that the mystic’s state of grace can be revealed through a ‘demonstrat[ion] that the world cannot touch him … [a] guarantee for the permanence of one’s life on earth’, a notion that is ‘in accord with Lao-tzu’s theories’ (Weber 1964: 182). Weber immediately adds that Laozi ‘did not develop a true doctrine of immortality; this seems to be a product of later times’ (1964: 183). De Groot (1912: 148), on the other hand, does believe that the Laozi advocates a doctrine of longevity but Legge is more circumspect. In reference to chapter 50 of the Laozi, which he says ‘sets forth the Tâo as an antidote against decay and death’, Legge goes on to ask whether the author ‘in ascribing such effects … is “trifling” … or indulging the play of his poetical fancy? or simply saying that the Tâoist will keep himself out of danger?’ (Legge 1962: 93). In commenting on a passage in chapter 52, Legge does feel ‘obliged to conclude that even in Lâo-tze’s mind there was the germ of the sublimation of the material frame which issues in the ascetism and life-preserving arts of the later Tâoism’ (1962: 96), which is Weber’s point, noted above. But the passage in question only refers to the claim that the follower of the Dao will ‘to the end of his life … be free from all peril’ (1962: 95). In commenting on a later chapter Legge acknowledges that a projected reading of the Laozi’s infrequent remarks on long life to the ‘later Tâoist dreams about the elixir vitae’ is an ‘abuse of [this] and other passages’ of the text (1962: 103).

Weber (1964: 198) also refers to the ‘old breathing technique which the Tao Teh Ching advised’, and which he appreciates is the physiological basis of mystical practices (1964: 179). Certainly de Groot (1912: 153) believes that ‘the Tao-teh-king [was] the first book that taught [man] about immortality and divinity by the discipline of the breath’. In fact, though, it is difficult to locate any advice about breathing techniques of any sort in the Laozi. At best there are metaphorical references to breathing, but these are very infrequent and function at best as images without imperative and too vague to reveal a preference or a practice. The most explicit reference to breathing is in chapter 10, which states in Legge’s translation that ‘When one gives undivided attention to the (vital) breath, and brings it to the utmost degree of pliancy, he can become as a (tender) babe’ (Legge 1962: 53-54). The chapter goes on to state: ‘In the opening and shutting of the gates of heaven’ one can take on the female role (1962: 54). Legge acknowledges that ‘this chapter is one of the most difficult
to understand and translate in the whole work’ (1962: 54), a point confirmed by the wildly opposite interpretations of the text by standard commentators (Chan 1963: 116; Duyvendak 1954: 36-39; Waley 1958: 153-54). Legge’s statement regarding the first quoted passage above, that it suggests that by ‘management of his vital breath [one can] bring his body to the state of Tâoistic perfection’ seems to be an over interpretation, but in any event the perfection that might obtain is likely to be in a physical suppleness of the body rather than its mystic transcendence. Regarding the second passage, Legge notes that ‘The “gates of heaven” … is a Tâoistic phrase for the nostrils as the organ of breath’ (1962: 54). But again there is no mystical connotation here as the image of the female role in the Laozi, to which such breathing may give access, refers to both fecund potency and the strategic advantage of weakness, neither of which is mystical.

The only other possible references to breathing in the Laozi are in chapters 42, 52, and 55 but they are without the significance we might be led to expect on the basis of Weber’s pronouncement. Legge offers no associated commentary on them. The reference to breathing in chapter 52 is particularly interesting in terms of the discussion here. From the point of view of Weber’s supposition it is entirely anomalous as it says that keeping the mouth and nostrils closed will exempt one from a life of exertion whereas opening one’s portals in promotion of his affairs means there is no safety in his life (Legge 1962: 95). Legge says that the meaning of the chapter is obscure. A possible and likely reading of this passage is that it is an ironic ridicule of the yogic breathing practices that Weber sees as given exposition in the Laozi. Finally, although there is no reference to breathing in the text of chapter 6 Legge’s comments on it claim that the chapter provides foundation ‘for the development of the later Tâoism, which occupies itself with the prolongation of life by management of the breath’ (1962: 51). While this assertion is itself without foundation it does reinforce the idea that advocacy of yogic breathing post-dates the Laozi and cannot be located in it.

Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy
Weber differentiates between the Laozi and later Daoists: He holds that the Laozi is a mystical text and acknowledges that the ‘Tao Teh Ching was apparently largely free of magic’ and that ‘Taoist doctrine may also be differentiated from these magical crudities’ (Weber 1964: 185, 200). The later Daoism, however, ‘was merely an organization of magicians’ and ‘sorcerers’ (1964: 224-25, 203). But both the Laozi and the later Daoists are together classified by Weber as a ‘heterodox tradition’, an appellation employed by Legge (1880: 200-202) and de Groot (1912: 134), as they stand in relation with and in contrast to orthodox Confucianism. Weber argues that this particular distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy is relatively permeable, however, especially with regard to magic, which Confucian orthodoxy tolerates. Indeed, Weber says that while the Confucian literati failed to understand the ‘original meaning of Lao-tzu’s philosophy’ and also ‘sharply rejected’ its ‘consequences’, they nevertheless ‘treated with tolerant disdain’ the magic of Daoist priests which they ‘regarded as a diet suitable for the masses’ (1964: 204).

The Confucian attitude to Daoist magic, as Weber describes it, indicates both the political rationale of orthodoxy in state rule and its acquiescence in the face of the beliefs of the population over which that rule is exercised. Because he held that ‘the belief in magic was part of the constitutional foundation of sovereign power’ in China, Weber says:

Confucianism was helpless when confronted with the magic image of the world, however much it disdained Taoism. This helplessness prevented the Confucians from being internally capable of eradicating the fundamental purely magical conceptions of the Taoists. To tackle magic always appeared dangerous for the Confucian’s own power (1964: 200; see also 194, 196).
Thus orthodoxy and heterodoxy balance on the fulcrum of political power. But the
toleration of Confucian orthodoxy towards magic compromises its rationalism with serious
consequences for its ‘economic mentality’, which is of ‘special interest’ to Weber (1964:
177). So while there is a ‘cleavage between the official institution of grace and non-classical
popular religion’ and while the latter is ‘source of a methodical way of life differing from
the official cult … which Confucianism … always treated as heterodox’ (1964: 174-75),
the ‘relative toleration which was granted to heterodox cults for reasons of state’ (1964:
217; see also 194), according to Weber, preserved China’s political power structure but
compromised its prospects for an economic revolution of the type experienced in Protestant
Europe.

Weber’s treatment of Confucian latitude toward heterodox religions and
magic in terms of ‘the disdainful “toleration” which is the natural attitude of every secular
bureaucracy toward religion … moderated only by the need for taming the masses’ (1964:
217) is a generous lapse on his part. Only a sentence earlier it is Confucian susceptibility to
the persuasion of ghosts that is responsible. He says that ‘according to de Groot’s very
plausible assumption, the fêng shui were decisive [in the retention of monasteries] for it was
impossible to remove places once licensed for worship without incurring a perhaps dangerous
excitement of the spirits’ (1964: 217). In fact temples and ‘places of worship’ were
traditionally communal property in China, and it was not unusual for them to be put to non-
religious use as the need arose (Yang 1961: 326, 368). Weber is doing here what he does
throughout, namely sacralizing non-religious phenomena: the concept of dao, which he says
is accepted by both Confucianism and Daoism, refers to an ‘unchangeable element’ and
therefore an ‘absolute value’ – ‘in short, it is the divine All-One of which one can partake’
(1964: 181-82). Such spiritualization and attribution of divinity to the dao is explicitly
rejected by Legge (1962: 65, 72) and none of the propositions Weber sets out here can be
supported, not only relating to the supposed divinity of dao but also its supposed unchanging
nature or abstract value, none of which either school accepts. Neither does Daoism promise
a ‘happy life in the world … beyond’, as Weber supposes (1964: 204), although in this
instance he no doubt follows Legge (1962: 75-76) in a mistranslation of the Laozi (see Lynn
1999: 112 note 4; Chan 1963: 159).

The needs and exercise of political rule are important, as Weber says, for
understanding the antagonistic differences between Confucianism and Daoism. But he is
wrong to hold that the approaches and practices he summarizes as orthodoxy and heterodoxy
gravitate around questions of belief, not only religious belief but belief at all, as we shall see.
He says that:

Ultimately, the substantive differences between orthodox and heterodox doctrines
and practices … had two sources … [first] Confucianism was a status ethic of the
bureaucracy educated in literature [and secondly] piety and especially ancestor-
worship was retained as politically indispensable foundations for patrimonialism.
Only when these interests appeared to be threatened did the instinct of self
preservation in the ruling stratum react by attaching the stigma of heterodoxy (Weber
1964: 213).

The correlative elements of Daoist heterodoxy which correspond to Confucian orthodoxy set
out here are thus, firstly, that the ‘mystics upheld the slogan: as little bureaucracy as possible’
(1964: 184) and secondly, that the doctrine of ‘little tranquility’, that is ‘the exclusive rule of
individual interest’, which Weber rightly sees as ‘so irreconcilable with the filial piety basic
to all Confucian ethics’ is an ‘anarchist social ideal’ espoused as Daoist (1964: 212).

While Weber is here describing elements of beliefs associated with Chinese
institutions as he sees them, his patterning framework is entirely European. For instance,
he regards the Confucian inclination to leave ‘the gods aside’ to be analogous to ‘Greek
philosophical schools’ which gave leeway to the ‘old Hellenic deities’ (Weber 1964: 175). This was a mirror of the Chinese situation because the ‘cult of the heroic and folk deities of “Homeric” times was correspondingly developed as the official institution; but the teachings of the philosophers were the optional concerns of private citizens’ (1964: 177). More pertinently Weber regards the Chinese state as pursuing a dogma or doctrine, any contravention of which is a heresy to be challenged and removed:

The Chinese state fought heresies, which in its view were hostile to the state, partly through indoctrination … and partly … through fire and sword, like the Catholic Church fighting the denial of sacramental grace and the Roman Empire fighting the rejection of the cult of the emperor (1964: 214).

For these reasons Weber says that ‘the Chinese state approached a “denominational” state’ which maintained its rule through ‘the rejection of false doctrines’ (1964: 215). But in making such a claim Weber simply demonstrates that he fails to understand the basis on which Chinese imperial state power rested.

The situation he describes, of a state focused on the correctness of belief and therefore directed to discovering and exorcising heresy, closely follows developments in Christian Europe and has only ever been experienced once in China’s long history and then more than half a century after Weber wrote RoC, namely during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76. Only at this time was the question of an individual’s beliefs of direct concern to a nationwide political organization that was in a position to propagate and manage a centrally-controlled ideology and which had the means to police and enforce it. The Party orthodoxy of being ‘Red’ did matter during this decade in the same way that appropriate belief mattered for the rule of European states in which the role of the Church in maintaining adherence to particular systems of belief was a core basis of upholding political order. Disagreements over religious belief were behind political changes and re-configurations which repeatedly rewrote the map of Europe from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. The entirely European view of culture and identity, as depending on the ideas a person believes, requires an encompassing apparatus, originally a dominant church organized as a national bureaucracy able to maintain control at the parish level, capable of generating and propagating to a subject population a single coherent belief system.

Chinese state adoption of Confucianism, unlike European state assertion of Christianity, served internal organizational purposes and did not entail enforced doctrinal adherence of state subjects. It is often noted that during the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) Confucianism was an ‘official ideology’ and therefore a state ‘orthodoxy’ (Balazs 1966: 18-19; Gernet 1996: 159-60). But the application of these English language terms to the Han court requires careful qualification. The regulation of both the court elite and state administration through Confucian humility, docility, submission and seniority-hierarchy as well as inculcation of its doctrines, prescribing elite-group membership, did not preclude alternate currents in the broader society (Balazs 1966: 156-57) or threaten ‘the eclectic character of intellectual life at the Han court’ (Gernet 1996: 160). Even the Imperial civil service examination system, which came into regular use during the Song dynasty (Elvin 1973: 92), based on recitation of Confucian classics, was not to establish or maintain orthodoxy but rather to promote a ‘way of thought’ (Weber 1964: 121) that both preserved privilege and encouraged status group formation (Weber 1964: 46, 86, 117).

Chinese officials, with the singular exception noted above, have never been interested in the beliefs of the religions and movements they have opposed. It is only when such forces mobilize against the state or through their behavior, including expression of strong emotion or particularistic attachment or devotion, are seen as constituting a threat to public order that the state has attempted to control them: ‘it was not philosophical or theological objection but practical political consideration that was the leading motivation for the traditional antagonism
Weber's Daoism: A Failure of Orthodoxy.

...were not concerned with ... mental constructs; what mattered was which deities people chose to worship, not what they believed about them. The state stressed form rather than content. There was never any attempt to foster a standardized set of beliefs in Chinese religion (Watson 1993: 96).

The unity of the Chinese state was achieved not by orthodoxy, as Weber supposes, but orthopraxy; not rightness of belief but of practice. Weber’s concern with orthodoxy simply fails to understand the nature of Chinese culture and mentality as based on orthopraxy and its significance for political rule.

Watson reminds us that there are two modes of societal integration, one operates through a ‘system of shared beliefs’ and the other through a ‘set of shared practices or rites’ (Watson 1993: 83). In late imperial China, he goes on to say, ‘orthopraxy (correct practice) reigned over orthodoxy (correct belief) as the principle means of attaining and maintaining cultural unity’ (1993: 84). This is not to say that the Chinese lacked a set of shared beliefs, to which we shall return in the following section, but that the ‘genius of the Chinese approach to cultural integration’, as Watson puts it, is that ‘the system allowed for a high degree of variation within an overarching structure of unity’ which allowed China ‘to attain a level of cultural unity that was never possible in other, large-scale agrarian societies’ (1993: 89, 100).

The imperial Chinese state imposed a set of rites that regulated the life cycle and brought uniformity to the practices of everyday life. The rituals associated with birth, marriage, death and relations with ancestors are remarkably similar throughout China and have continuity from earlier times to the present day. This is not to deny regional variation, but such variation is not disruptive of the commonality of practice and ritual which underlies the cultural unity of the imperial Chinese state. The meaning of the associated symbols, however, yields to enormous variety.

Through orthopraxy the same symbol may acquire a number of quite different meanings. In a study of the Empress of Heaven (Tian Hou) Watson (1985) shows that the same single god has been given quite different meanings by different classes of people and by people in different regions and locations, all which share more or less the same ritual form and symbolic expression. A diversity of meaning in such a context has no significance for attribution of heterodoxy in itself. Indeed, such an arrangement is a significant feature of the structure of Chinese power in which central authority and local communities participated (Herrmann-Pillath 2000: 181-82). Most Chinese religious observances require no clergy (Eastman 1988: 52-53) and in any event the clergy of Chinese religions has traditionally been small in number and poorly organized (Yang 1961: 307-27). This both reinforces the irrelevance of orthodoxy, through the relative absence of an apparatus of the mechanisms of uniform belief, and enhances the significance of orthopraxy as an alternative means of political order through shared practices or rites. Indeed, the centre-local relations that requires common symbols but permits diverse meanings is a characteristic feature of Chinese political rule in which the relative autonomy of local communities in their relations with a remote central authority remains ordered and unified not in spite of but through local diversity (Watson 1993: 91). The expansion and maintenance of China’s imperial political rule was achieved through a process of sinicization which ‘involved no conversion to a received dogma, no professions of belief in a creed or set of ideas’ but was realized ‘by acting Chinese, by behaving … Chinese’ through the performance of key rituals (Watson 1993: 93; see also Herrmann-Pillath 2000: 184).

We have seen that Weber believes that Confucian tolerance of Daoist religious practices and principles constitutes a weakness of its orthodoxy. From the point of view of orthopraxy, however, such absorption of ‘heterodoxy’ is an abiding strength (Herrmann-
Weber’s Daoism: A Failure of Orthodoxy.

Pillath 2000: 181-83). Indeed, in its doctrinal development and rectification Confucianism has drawn on Daoism during two significant periods of its long history, namely during the post-Han xuanxue movement of the third century and in the construction of neo-Confucianism during the Tang and subsequent dynasties from the eighth century. The xuanxue is often mislabeled neo-Daoism but it was not designed to overthrow Confucius as the highest sage but to find a surer footing for Confucian rule in the previously marginalized texts of the Laozi, the Zhuangzi and the Yijing (I Ching) (Chua 2010; Hon 2010). The availability of Daoist ideas to improve the basis and rationale of Confucian political order suggests not only the unsuitability of the concepts of orthodoxy and heterodoxy in understanding the cultural apparatus of the imperial Chinese state but also the transferable application of cultural elements that a Weberian approach will necessarily regard as problematic when ideas and values are ascribed elective affinities which are somehow inherent in the values themselves. This raises the question of what role ideas might be given in sociological explanation, and especially the ideas associated with Daoist thought.

Entrepreneurship and Daoism

In reflecting on the forces which ‘handicapped’ the development of ‘rational entrepreneurial capitalism’ in China Weber, as we have seen, mentions both institutional factors and also the ‘lack of a particular mentality’ which he locates in the orthodox ‘Chinese “ethos” … peculiar to a stratum of officials and aspirants to office’ (Weber 1964: 104). We have also seen that Weber believes that Daoism even more emphatically that Confucianism lacks the basis of a ‘vocational ethic’ (1964: 188) It is particularly interesting, therefore, that Weber acknowledges what he teasingly calls ‘Taoist “Manchesterism”’ and a ‘Taoist virtue of thriftiness’ (1964: 188). These are immediately dismissed as efficacious, however, because by hypothesis they have a pedigree irrelevant for entrepreneurship in being ‘contemplative’ rather than ‘asceticist’ (1964: 188). Yet Weber cannot help observing the worldly orientation of Daoism (1964: 183, 205) and its firm association with traders, merchants and the propertied classes (1964: 186, 204, 224). This association is by no means accidental. The great Han Dynasty historian, Sima Qian (c.145–86 BC), anticipated Adam Smith by nearly 2,000 years when he wrote:

There must be farmers to produce food, men to extract the wealth of mountains and marshes, artisans to produce these things and merchants to circulate them. There is no need to wait for government orders: each man will play his part, doing his best to get what he desires … When all work willingly at their trades, just as water flows ceaselessly downhill day and night, things will appear unsought and people will produce them without being asked. For clearly this accords with the Way [dao] and is in keeping with nature (Chien 1979: 411).

The root of laissez-faire in the concept of wuwei, which we saw above Weber regards as the basis of Daoist mysticism, is evident here not simply in the water metaphor, characteristic of Daodejing, but especially in the idea that non-interference is naturalistic. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, François Quesnay developed his physiocratic theory of laissez-faire by borrowing the concept of wuwei to indicate the absence of state interference and regulation (Gerlach, 2005; Hudson, 1961, pp. 322-26; Reichwein, 1968, pp. 99-110).

Weber would have been mistaken to believe that the traders, merchants and members of propertied classes he perceives as having an association with Daoism (Weber 1964: 186, 204, 224) were predominantly Daoist devotees. Chinese religions traditionally do not operate in terms of followers of a faith or formations of congregations, but depending on the occasion people would draw upon specialist services of Buddhist, Daoist or some other type of priest (Granet 1975: 144). Indeed, there is a certain mobility of practices and the ideas associated
Weber’s Daoism: A Failure of Orthodoxy.

with them, such that merchants in late-imperial China were likely to draw on Confucian self-cultivation practices, developed by scholars and literati, in orienting to commercial advantage (Lufrano 1997; Barbalet 2012). Before reinterpretting Weber’s observations concerning the apparent association of entrepreneurial groups and Daoist beliefs it is first necessary to consider his classic claim regarding the association of the Protestant ethic with capitalistic orientation.

The data of Weber’s well-known argument concerning the elective affinity of Protestantism and capitalism can be inserted into a different understanding of the relationship between ideas and outcomes than the one he proposes. It can be held that Protestantism contains or implies a particular cognitive apparatus in the sense that religious dissenters, as critics of an established order, may possess novel cognitive orientations or capacities. If such persons are business orientated then as a result of such cognitive dispositions they may perceive opportunities for profit making that might not otherwise be apparent. The difference between this argument and Weber’s is that it is not principally that Protestantism leads to a capitalistic ethic but that should a Protestant be capitalistically involved then their religion, not as a set of values but as an organizationally formed cognitive framework, may generate a perception of opportunity for profit irrespective of whatever motive may direct them to profit making.

The distinction drawn here is familiar as that between culture as the source of values which shape the ultimate ends of action, as in Weber’s argument concerning elective affinities, and culture as a tool kit of habits or skills from which strategies of action can be constructed (Swidler 1986). The ‘tool kit’ model of culture emphasizes its framing rather than its determinative capacities. The voluntaristic form of Swidler’s argument, though, which supposes that culture comprises de-linkable and variably available elements, consciously selected and strategically applied, fails to capture an aspect of systems of belief that includes an understanding of cognitive schemata which function as organizing principles that ‘provide default assumptions about the characteristics, relationships and entailments’ of objects and events (DiMaggio 1997: 269). This latter aspect of cultural apparatus inherent in belief systems is particularly relevant for perceiving opportunities for profit making mentioned above, an ‘ability to perceive new opportunities that cannot be proved at the moment at which action has to be taken’ (Schumpeter 1991: 417). The opportunities relevant to entrepreneurs are thus prospective not material realities and they become manifest only when they are taken. Effective opportunity structures therefore only exist as hypotheses or as discoverable possibilities dependent on conjectural perception.

The relationships that are important to enterprise in this sense are those of changing circumstances in which new opportunities for money-making can arise. In this context the ‘mentality’ most likely to capitalize on such opportunities is consonant with the Daoist intellectual tradition that assumes unavoidable change and which has no conception of an idealized and enduring stability, as in Greek and also Christian thought. In this regard Daoism is also set against Confucianism, which has a core understanding of the family as a source of assurance against external contingency. The *Laozi* and what might be called classical Daoism in general, thus, arguably presents characteristic cognitive schemata of acceptance of change and a direction of thought attuned to questions of how to deal with change and oriented to coping with it. This aspect of Chinese ‘mentality’ simply escapes Weber’s attention. It is documented in empirical studies of Chinese subjects which reveal a propensity toward recognizing and accepting change when compared with European and North American subjects (Ji, Lee and Guo 2010; Nisbett 2003). In an ethnographic study of the Penang Chinese community DeBernardi (2006: 53-80) shows how these principles, practiced as ‘improved luck’ and ‘good fate’, emanate from Daoist notions encapsulated in Chinese popular religious culture. They provide the basis of a Chinese capitalist ethos absent

The cognitive formation indicated here as contributing to schemata of Chinese entrepreneurship is readily located in a number of texts associated with the Daoist tradition. Perhaps the most familiar today is the notion of strength in weakness, of advantage in threat or danger, which generate perceptions of opportunities in market engagements which might otherwise not be perceived, stated in the Daoist Sunzi Bingfa or Art of War (Tao 2000: 51, 52, 56, 62). A more general orientation to anticipation of and responding to change is found in the Yijing or Book of Changes (Lynn 1994: 51, 56, 64-5, 77). But the most detailed and thorough statement of this perspective is in the Laozi. Laozi’s dao is paradoxically constant and continuous in its reversion and changeability; it holds that opposites are mutually productive of each other, that in order to achieve a purpose its obverse must be attempted, that a thing seems to be quite other than it is, and so on (Legge 1962: 47-48, 78, 84; Ames and Hall 2003: 80, 133, 140-41). Underlying these particular sets of relationships are the more general or abstract ideas that functionality derives from absence (Legge 1962: 54-55; Ames and Hall 2003: 91) and that a grasp of the imminent and the latent properties of things provides situational advantage (Legge 1962: 71, 106-107, 107-108; Ames and Hall 2003: 120-21, 175, 177-78). It is not assumed that these teachings have meaningful existence for persons through their participation in ritual practices. Rather, these schemata are ‘diffused’ in the sense that the outlook and concepts associated with them are insinuated in and dispersed through secular social institutions and practices, including language and popular culture (Yang 1961: 296-300).

Weber was prepared to acknowledge that the Chinese ‘would be quite capable … of assimilating capitalism which has technically and economically been fully developed in the modern cultural area’, and he suggests that this would be achieved through imitation (Weber 1964: 248, 242). But this is to ignore the success of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs in Southeast Asia who were establishing capitalistic businesses from the end of the nineteenth century. In his near-contemporary survey of foreign economic activity in the region Helmut Callis wrote of the broad participation of overseas Chinese, typically manifest in the Netherlands Indies: ‘The Chinese are the predominant factor in trade in almost every part of the country … [and] represented in almost every branch of agricultural and industrial endeavor’ (Callis 1942: 35). Unlike earlier generations of traders involved in Chinese tributary relations with peripheral states who were under imperial supervision (Wang 1991; Reid 1996; Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011) these entrepreneurs were free of the constraining institutions Weber sees as inhibitory of capitalist development in China. Their ability to establish capitalist firms is not only testament to their appropriate ‘mentality’ but their doing so was at a time when Weber was penning his argument against such a possibility.

Conclusion
The discussion above is both deconstructive and constructive. In deconstructing his treatment of Daoist ideas and texts, especially the Laozi, in terms both of his sources and more recent authorities, Weber’s disjointed presentation is evident and its limitations exposed. Weber’s appreciation of relations between religious belief and state power in European historical experience also is shown above to be projected onto his account of Chinese rule through the orthodoxy/heterodoxy framework. This too has been found wanting and an alternative pattern based on the notion of orthopraxy is presented. Finally, by reconstructing Weber’s understanding of the relationship between culture and economic practices the signal role of Daoist thought in Chinese entrepreneurship is demonstrated. The discussion of Weber’s treatment of Daoism raises questions beyond those explicitly treated here, including the value of Weber’s formulation of the concept of rationality and his understanding of not only the origins but also the operation of capitalist agency and institutions. These are questions too
large to be treated in a paper such as this, but the implications of its argument for them are indicated in what has gone before.

References
Weber’s Daoism: A Failure of Orthodoxy.


