

漢學研究中心叢刊 論著類第7種

社會、民族與文化展演 國際研討會論文集

· 下 冊 ·

主編 王秋桂·莊英章·陳中民



漢學研究中心編印

中華民國九十年三月

Center for Chinese Studies Research Series No. 7

Proceedings of the International Conference on Society, Ethnicity and Cultural Performance

(II)

Edited by

Ch'iu-kuei Wang, Ying-chang Chuang, Chung-min Chen

Sponsor

Council for Culture Affairs, Executive Yuan

Organizers

Institute of Anthropology, National Tsinghua University

Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica

Center for Chinese Studies

Published by Center for Chinese Studies

Taipei, Taiwan, ROC, 2001

GPN: 1009000915 (下冊)

ISBN 957-678-318-6 (下冊)

ISBN 957-678-316-X (全套)

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協辦單位 美國俄亥俄州立大學東亞研究中心

財團法人施合鄭民俗文化基金會

會議時間 民國八十八年五月廿八日至三十日

會議地點 國家圖書館國際會議廳

臺北市中山南路二十號

漢學研究中心印行

中華民國九十年三月

國家圖書館出版品預行編目資料

社會、民族與文化展演國際研討會論文集 / 王秋桂, 莊英章, 陳中民主編. -- 臺北市: 漢學研究中心, 民 90
冊; 公分. -- (漢學研究中心叢刊. 論著類; 第 7 種)

ISBN 957-678-316-X(一套: 平裝). -- ISBN 957-678-317-8(上冊: 平裝). -- ISBN 957-678-318-6(下冊: 平裝)

1. 民族誌 - 中國 2. 少數民族 - 中國 3. 中國 - 文化

536.207

90003961

社會、民族與文化展演國際研討會論文集(下冊)

發行人: 莊芳榮

主編: 王秋桂、莊英章、陳中民

執行編輯: 蔡慶郎

出版者: 漢學研究中心

100-01 臺北市中山南路 20 號

電話: 02-23147321 傳真: 02-23712126

承印者: 天翼電腦排版印刷股份有限公司

106 臺北市敦化南路一段 294 號 11 樓之 5

電話: 02-27054251 傳真: 02-27016432

出版日期: 中華民國九十年三月

定價: 臺灣地區 NT\$700 元(兩冊合售); 其他地區 US\$35 元(含海運郵資)

ISBN 957-678-317-8(上冊) 957-678-318-6(下冊) 957-678-316-X(全套)

GPN: 1009000914(上冊) 1009000915(下冊)

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The Moral Tenets of Chinese Economic Culture: Evidence from Lin Village, Fujian

Shu-min Huang

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Abstract

Based on extended fieldwork in Lin Village, Fujian, between 1985 and 1997, this paper examines the economic transformation in this village as a microcosm of China's metamorphosis from a closed, collective socialist entity to a market-oriented society. The waning of the utopian Marxism and the restoration of market mechanisms in the past two decades permit researchers the rare opportunity to examine the fundamental beliefs, moral assumptions, and value orientation that underscore the operational principles of the traditional Chinese economy that have long been overshadowed by formal Confucianism. Among the key moral tenets are: inborn inequality among human beings, gender-inequality, competitive and exploitative market behaviors, and, a wide range of commodities, including not only goods and services as ordinarily understood, but also human beings and life itself.

Key Words: economic culture, moral tenets, Confucianism, modernization, China

1. The Role of Culture in East Asian Economic Development

The ebb and flow of economic fortune in East Asia in recent decades has engendered and/or rekindled scholarly debates about this region's unique social, historical, cultural, economic, philosophical, and political characteristics (e.g., Brook and Luong, ed. 1997; Hefner, ed. 1998; Ikeoed. 1997). One of the controversies, and perhaps the most contentious one, is the locus of traditional culture as the key to understanding economic growth. Social scientists of the mainstream modernization school, following Max Weber's well-known position (1930; 1951), undoubtedly support the view that the rise of industrial capitalism is a unique European historical experience. The reformation of Christianity in Western Europe after the 16th century, and the resulting rise of a new Protestant ethic, characterized by individualism, material success as evidence of divine favor, and this-world orientation, produced a comprehensive cultural configuration that explains and justifies the arrival of capitalism in Western Europe. Following this logic, the lack of capitalism in non-European countries can be attributed to the lack of such cultural and psychological predispositions (e.g., Inkeles and Smith, 1974; Lerner 1958; McClelland 1961).

Thus, China's failed response to Western challenges since the mid-19th century, as well as its failed attempt in pursuing successful modernization projects during the first half of the 20th century, has been squarely blamed on the persistence of its traditional culture, especially Confucian orthodoxy, Weber first diagnosed this phenomenon, which was shared by most Chinese reformers or revolutionaries during the first half of the 20th century (see Alito 1979; Bianco 1971;

Hayford 1990; Weber 1951).¹ For defenders of traditional Chinese culture who argued for the relevance of Confucianism in the modern era, their tasks were to identify the presence of certain “modernizing” features, such as the presence of “individualism” and “liberal” traditions within Confucian or Neo-Confucian cultural heritage (de Bary 1953, 1979; Metzger 1977), or the rise of secular economic culture along with the rise of Neo-Confucianism comparable to “the Protestant ethic” (Yu 1987).

Recent dramatic economic growth in East Asia, first among the so-called “Four Little Dragons” since the 1960s, and later followed by two decades of robust economic expansion in China since 1979, sent researchers scurrying for alternative explanations. Perhaps Confucianism (or Neo-Confucianism) indeed contains some positive cultural ingredients that are conducive to modern industrial capitalism after all (de Bary 1984; Kahn 1979). Or perhaps there is another path to modernity that doesn’t entirely fit into the Eurocentric trajectory that Weber portrayed, such as the development of “network capitalism” in the Chinese cultural context (Hamilton 1998; Hefner 1998).²

Thus, the Confucian tradition in East Asia, according to these

1 Why premodern China failed to develop capitalism is examined in Weber’s research on Confucianism and Daoism (1951). As Confucian China was characterized by a “patrimonial state,” it relied on a particularistic interpersonal social network for economic operation in lieu of universal laws. Furthermore, while Chinese business people followed rational in general, they “lacked the central, religiously determined, and rational method of life which came from within and which was characteristic of classical Puritan” (1951:242).

2 The so-called “network capitalism” implies the reliance on extensive particularistic interpersonal connections to buttress or circumvent formal regulations that Weber considered detrimental to normal economic operation. Modern researchers such as Gary Hamilton (1998) and Hefner (1998) certainly take an opposite view. On the other hand, James Dorn (1998) sarcastically calls it “crony capitalism.”

scholars, is both a positive factor in fostering economic growth and a negative one in hindering modernization, depending on the post hoc analyses of economic performances during various time periods and in a specific country or region. Or perhaps it is only one of the superfluous conditions, as proposed by yet another view, that argues for the importance of more “fundamental factors,” such as the state apparatus, in its determination of economic development, and its ability to mobilize the masses (Peng 1997).

For a skeptic like me who has been conducting long-term, empirical research in contemporary China, these debates seem to be predicated on a concept whose validity is questionable on both empirical and theoretical levels. For us to accept the premise that Confucianism has either a positive or negative impact on East Asia’s historical and current capitalistic development, we are making several assumptions that need to be proven. First is the assumption that Confucianism (or Neo-Confucianism, or Post-Confucianism) still holds sway among citizens in East Asia, either directly or indirectly. While this argument may be partially true (yet to be empirically proven) for people in societies formerly or nominally under Confucian influences, such as China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, it will be a really imaginative stretch to include people in other societies, such as Islamic Malaysia and Indonesia, the Philippines, where Catholics predominate, and Thailand and Cambodia that have long embraced the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

The second empirical problem in attributing Confucianism (or Neo-Confucianism or Post Confucianism) as the determining factor in contemporary East Asian economic performance is to equate it as the sole, ideational component of this culture. Every anthropologist understands the tremendous gaps between the “ideal” and the “real”

culture. Even in the heyday of pre-modern China, we may argue that Neo-Confucian ideals, as analyzed by Thomas Metzger (1977), were cherished primarily by a small segment of the elite literati.³ Underneath this formal, ideal Confucian norm is another real cultural current that he identifies as “economism”: Just like many modern Chinese intellectuals, Neo-Confucians had a snobbish contempt for people who ‘busied themselves with property’ (*wen-she qiu-tian*), but this economism was part of a crucial set of cultural orientations shaping the lives of those Chinese who in fact carried China’s economy on their back” (Metzger 1977:54). This bifurcated nature of traditional Chinese culture clearly demonstrates the formal versus the economic domain, with different rationality, operational mechanism, and evaluative framework.

The last fundamental problem in the current debates on the roles traditional culture plays in East Asian economic transformation is in defining the concept of “capitalism” and its historical significance. Whether the development of capitalism is a single, historical European event is a premise never questioned by Marxists and Weberians alike. If the development of capitalism in Europe is preconditioned on the conflation of Protestant ethic, this-world orientation, individuatism, and a whole congeries of ther social institutions, then we are describing a peculiar European event that has no cross-cultural or historical relevance. If, on the other hand, capitalism is defined as “a system of socioeconomic organization dedicated to the

3 Following Metzger’s cultural psychological interpretation, traditional Chinese cultural “grammar,” which has dominated its intellectual circles since the Song Dynasty (AD 960-1279), is clearly imbued with a sense of contradiction: the educated elite should safeguard the bequeathed Confucian wisdom of universal harmony through exemplary personal behavior and moral refinement, and yet the fallible minds a la Buddhism could never overcome mundane material needs and insatiable greed (1977).

systematic investment of wealth into enterprise productive of additional wealth, where the primary means of production are privately owned and where there is sufficient market competition to create systematic incentives for the owners of the means of production to reinvest a portion of their profits as capital back into the productive activities" (Hefner 1998:29), then we can avoid the Eurocentric trapping in both Marxism and Weberian sociology, and apply this concept cross-culturally.⁴ If we strip away some of the auxiliary and yet essentially fundamental conditions arbitrarily imposed by Marx or Weber on the development of capitalism in Europe, we can recast this concept in its original and generic connotation and identify comparable sociocultural developments relevant to capitalist development in other parts of the world.⁵

2. Locating Chinese Economic Culture

This restrictive and Eurocentric view of capitalist development as a unique European event had compelled scholars to seek alternative concepts and models to explain modern East Asian economic

4 A similar definition of capitalism, based on the Marxist tradition, can be found in Robert Gilpin's recent work, in which he summarizes: "The defining characteristics of capitalism as defined by Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels . . . are the private ownership of the means, of production, the existence of free or wage labor, the profit motive, and the drive to amass capital" (1987).

5 For instance, in his study of traditional Chinese bookkeeping and accounting systems, Rober Gardella (1992) challenged the conventional Weberian argument that there was a lack of essential rationality in the Chinese accounting system that prevents the development of full-fledged capitalism. He argued that there is no intrinsic difference between the pre-capitalist china and the capitalist West in this regard. Equally important, he pointed out that both went through comparable transformations at approximately the same time to meet expanding commercial needs.

development. One such example is the concept of “petty capitalist mode of production” (PCMP) or “petty capitalism,” recently proposed by anthropologist Hill Gates (1996) in her otherwise interesting book on Chinese economic culture.⁶ Gates correctly points out the two contrasting trends, or dualistic nature, in Chinese culture: on the one hand, it emphasizes formal moralism, personal loyalty, generosity and harmony; on the other hand, it underscores frugality, calculation, competition, and even ruthlessness in market transactions that form the undercurrent in daily reality. Such duality, as Gates points out, can be best seen in the Chinese family: on the one hand, it emphasizes filial piety, the devotion and submissiveness from children to their progenitors, and, conversely, parental self-sacrifice for their children’s well-being; on the other hand, however, there is exploitation of family labor, gender discrimination, and, in extreme cases, the selling of daughters into prostitution and female infanticides in difficult times.⁷ The former of this duality Gates attributes to “the tributary mode of production” (TMP)—the great tradition associated with Confucianism and its moral tenets as seen in statehood and education, and its representatives of the literati gentry classes. The latter, as seen in the daily reality of life struggles among ordinary folks in market transactions with strong pecuniary concerns and shrew calculations, has been practiced since the Song Dynasty,

6 The term “petty capitalism” used by Max Weber refers to a variant of incipient capitalism associated with medieval European artisan craftsmen. Their special privileges and legal status permitted them to operate their trades with economic rationality. Weber suggests that this was one of the factors for the rise of industrial capitalism (1951:20, 100).

7 Recent Work by James Lee and Cameron Campbell (1997) indicated that female infanticide was far more widespread in late imperial China than social scientists and historians have realized.

more than 1,000 years ago, and can be considered “petty capitalism,” according to Gates.

While the contrasts constructed by Gates reveal the interesting dualistic nature of Chinese culture, the term “petty capitalist mode of production” is an unfortunate word choice. By “petty capitalism,” she ostensibly implies something lesser, inferior, and not genuine “capitalism.” There is no need to invoke a China-centered historical viewpoint to counter this Eurocentric bias, as historian Paul A. Cohen (1984) would have attempted. We can nevertheless build upon Gates’s heuristic contrasts by associating one with the formal, Confucian tradition, which represents the “ideal” Chinese culture. I use terms like “formal” or “ideal” Chinese culture for this cultural domain. Beneath these formal cultural ideals are the practical solutions of needs-satisfaction that involve production of valuables to sustain life and for market exchange, contentious bargaining, rational calculations, short- and long-term strategies for deploying scarce resources—the practical culture that concern people in daily life. The distinctiveness of this practical side of Chinese culture that I want to underscore in this context are clusters of specific “recipes” people rely on in their daily problem-solving processes. For lack of any better term, I use “economic culture” as the catch-all phrase for all related ideas and practices in the cultural domain.

The duality between what constitutes the formal versus the economic is probably not an exact reflection of the cleavage between social classes that Marxist and Neo-Marxist scholars would have triumphantly declared. This simplistic division would probably have the “ideal” be associated with the gentry-literati classes, whereas the “economic” would be embraced by the less fortunate “proletarians.” Instead, the coexistence of these dual cultural orientations can be found in the same individual, as well as in the same class of people,

according to situational needs and personality differences, as historian Madeleine Zelin (1984) shows in her study of early Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty financial and taxation policies. She examines how these two diametrically different orientations affected the policies of two emperors during the "High Qing" period (approximately mid-17th to late 18th centuries). Emperor Kangxi (K'ang-hsi, AD 1661-1722), who considered Confucian ideals of harmony, benevolence and kindness the moral guidelines of the kingdom, was quite lenient with corrupt officials and fiscal irregularities. And "when the level of unpaid taxes rose too high, the K'ang-hsi emperor would simply declare a tax amnesty" (Zelin 1984:22).⁸

The contrast can be seen in his son and successor, Emperor Yongzheng (Yung-cheng, AD 1723-1735). He was known for his ruthlessness and pragmatism, plus he was facing an almost empty state treasury. And, to his advantage, there was no significant internal opposition by the Han majority as his father experienced. Thus, Yongzheng was able to launch fiscal reforms immediately after ascending to the throne, cleaning out tax irregularities and prosecuting corrupt officials. Confucian ideals faded as economism dominated his reign. The interplays between the formal and the economic is thus situational and personal, depending on the degree of conformity to the ideal and the short-term, pragmatical concerns for survival that may override moral imperatives. However, due to the formal culture's overshadowing dominant position in intellectual circles,

8 Being a devoted Confucian follower certainly account for part of Emperor Kangxi's generosity, even to the point of facing an almost empty court coffer during the last few years of his reign. The other part of this story, as Zelin points out, was his political calculation that being the first Manchu ruler who completely conquered over the Chinese kingdom, Emperor Kangxi might have to play up his Confucian belief in order to gain legitimacy and acceptance from among his Han Chinese subjects.

there have been few systematic elaborations of this economic culture. It is always the undercurrent, the undesirable flip side of whatever the ideal culture is.

Efforts to delineate the nature of Chinese economic culture in recent decades have produced interesting findings. W.E. Willmostt (1972) sums up four salient features that he considers essential for the operation of the premodern Chinese economy. First is the prominent role of the state in economic affairs, such as its monopolistic control of salt trades, and through its various agencies to coordinate, intervene and co-op fragmented regional economic enterprises. The hegemonic power of the state is acknowledged and accepted as normal by citizens. The second is the emphasis of group- or community-based collective responsibility for individual material well-being. Group affiliation thus defines an individual's basic economic condition. The third is the emphasis on hard work and competition as the avenue for success. And finally is the emphasis on long-term, multi-strained, comprehensive relationships in economic transaction, rather than single-strained, short-term profit maximization. In other words, economic activity is embedded in a broader social context, the well-known particularistic relationship, the *guanxi* network, rather than being considered a distinct, compartmentalized behavior as we know it in modern economics.⁹

Empirical research, based largely on historical data or ethnographic fieldwork in Taiwan, overseas Chinese communities and, more recently, mainland China, have further elaborated on these themes. The ubiquitous role of the state in regulating and monitoring economic affairs, and its critical role in directing societal change has

9 For a discussion on the use of *guanxi* network in a modern anthropological context, see Weller (1998), Yan (1996) and Yang (1994).

been clearly delineated from the late Qing to the current regime (e.g., Amsden 1979; Brook and Luong 1997; Gold 1986; Hamilton 1998; Hofheinz and Calder 1982; Metzger 1972). Similarly, the cellular nature of the Chinese society, including both urban and rural enterprises, the co-opting of the individuals by their work units, and the particularistic nature of economic relationships prompted Andrew Walder (1986) to coin the term “neo-traditionalism” for urban enterprises, and Jean Oi’s “clientelism” for rural economic life (1989). The family-based economic calculation is the driving motivation for individual success, a standard ethnographic portrayal in Taiwan (Cohen 1976; Gallin 1966; Harrell 1985; Hefner 1998; Wolf 1969). The well-entrenched gender discrimination against female household members (Brook and Luong 1997; Gates 1996; Greenhalgh 1994) produced the kind of mental complex, comparable to the *marianismo* complex in Latin America (Stevens 1972). It was characterized by the self-indulgent image of filial daughters who, through self-sacrifice, endurance and resilience provided reliable incomes for struggling families as well as a reliable workforce for new industries in Taiwan (Kung 1983) and Hong Kong (Salaff 1981). Finally, the use of and reliance on formal written contracts, and the importance of formal procedure to reach contractual agreements, are also ubiquitous in economic transactions (Cohen 1972; Gardella 1992; Hansen 1995).

While these ethnohistorical studies have unraveled the tangible behaviors and operational mechanisms of Chinese economic culture, they nevertheless failed to address the underpinning ideologies and values that provide moral justification and ethical guidance for such activities. What are the referential frameworks within which these social actors make their decisions? Are they always treating each other formally even when they are engaging in competitive economic transactions? How do people differentiate one situation from another