Since the late twentieth century, the phenomenon of the booming capitalist economy of the Asian countries and areas under the historical influence of ancient Chinese culture, vis-à-vis the temporary burgeoning of the so-called sprouts of capitalist economy in early modern China, has become a focus of multidisciplinary scholarly investigations. These investigations are generally inspired by Max Weber's monumental study of the causal role of the Protestant ethic in the birth of modern capitalism, and accordingly driven by the central question whether ancient Chinese culture, particularly its religions, played any similar role in such an economic phenomenon.

As a prestigious intellectual historian of China, Yü’s major contribution to these investigations is to have uncovered abundant historical materials so as to help “understand how merchants dexterously made use of certain elements in Chinese cultural traditions to develop their ‘Way of business’” (p. 203). Yü’s major argument in the book unfolds in three steps: First, while inquiring into the sprouts of capitalist economy in early modern China, Yü keeps in line with the methodology of sociological and historical studies of Max Weber, and remains suspicious toward the Marxist historical materialism. Yü advocates that the causal explanation of historical events is multidimensional, and the same economic infrastructure could support varying noneconomic superstructures. Most importantly, culture plays a significant role in causing or influencing the development of economic activities, and therefore, while adopting the Weberian perspective in the study of Chinese history, Yü believes it is worth asking “did the traditional religious ethic exert any influence on indigenously developed commercial activities?” (p. 8).

Second, despite methodologically agreeing with and ideologically remaining inspired by Weber, Yü critiques many aspects of Weber’s study of Chinese religions, and the critique also becomes the second motive for Yü to ask the quoted central question of the book. For instance, Weber once asserted that Protestant churches broke the fetters of kinship and helped to sever the family entirely from commerce, and this was why the spirit of rationalization could be created for the development of modern capitalism in the West. Comparatively, Weber also averred that devotion to one’s family and the corresponding lack of similar religious organizations impeded the capitalist economy in ancient China. However, Yü
unearths instead historical evidence to prove that ancient Chinese commercial activities were not entirely constrained by the family, and the flourishing of the “partner-assistants” institution in the concerned period of time of the book (largely from sixteenth century to the end of imperial China) particularly provides a counterargument to Weber’s view. Furthermore, Yü discerningly points out the significant role of the family in the initial stage of Western industrialization and effectively critiques some aspects of Weber’s study of the dynamics of early Western capitalism as well (p. 192). Given the recent manifesto made by scholars of religion on the need to investigate the corporate form of religion,[1] Yü’s critique of Weber’s work is particularly valuable because it uncovers a different dynamic of religion vis-à-vis economics in a premodern and non-Western context and therefore helps to undermine a variety of binaries (such as sacred/secular and religious/economic) that these scholars seek to dismantle in their study of Japanese religions.

Notwithstanding many of such critiques offered by Yü, a caveat needs to be added lest we misunderstand the overall intention of Yü’s research. In the original argumentative structure of Weber’s work, the study of Chinese religions was taken as a “controlled” case to evince what outcome ensued in a non-Western society when a crucial viable, viz., the Protestant or similar ethic that pivots upon “this-worldly asceticism” was taken away.[2] In other words, even if Weber’s study of Chinese religions turns out to be significantly flawed largely due to the lack of accuracy and sophistication of sinology in his time, these flaws Yü has helped to expose do not falsify Weber’s key argument regarding the causal role of the Protestant ethic in the creation of modern capitalism. This is because the key argument follows its own logic outside the context of ancient China. On the other hand, since Yü’s view is not that Chinese religions influenced the development of the Western type of capitalism in late imperial China, the intellectual resource of Weber’s sociology is not taken by Yü as a research project per se. Rather, it is treated more as a catalyst to facilitate Yü’s understanding of the commercial history of China, and therefore, all critiques offered by Yü are for illuminating varying aspects of Chinese history, rather than for the ultimate purpose of refuting Weber.

Third, with Yü’s method of adopting Weber clarified as such, we’ll find that the most exciting and informative part of Yü’s book is to explain how a secularizing trend common to Chinese religions, which is both similar to and different from the this-worldly asceticism of the Protestant ethic, influenced the organization of business activities and helped to shape the self-identification and the broader social recognition of merchants as a rising class in early modern China. The overall story of the formation of the secularizing trend of Chinese religions told by Yü can be summarized as follows:

The new Chan Buddhism, compared to previous forms of Buddhism in India and China, developed an “inner-worldly orientation” (p. 52) in its ideology after the seventh century, while it also set up monasterial rules to practice “one day no work, one day no food” (p. 27) for achieving the Buddhist enlightenment in this world. This ideological orientation and its social embodiment in the monastic practice of Chan Buddhism challenged while simultaneously stimulating Confucianism in the concerned period of history to rediscover its spiritual sources in ancient Confucian classics. Afterward, “new Confucianism” (which is normally referred to as Neo-Confucianism in current English scholarship) became the most significant force among secularizing Chinese religions, and devised a variety of means to fulfill its transcendent commitment to the Heavenly Principle (天理) via secular activities such as education, business management, social activism, and political involvement. The confluence of Chan Buddhism and new Confucianism was also manifested in varying forms of the Daoist religion such as the
Complete Truth sect (全真教), the Supreme Unity sect (太一教), and others, which, though interpreting the “other world” in different ways, indicated a strong affinity with the fledging this-worldly oriented work ethic, and hence, provided further momentum to the secularizing trend of Chinese religions.

Since the impact of Chinese religions upon the formation of the mercantile spirit in early modern China was the most palpable from new Confucianism, apart from the first two chapters respectively dedicated to Chan Buddhism and Daoism, all of the remaining ten chapters of the book either discuss or exclusively focus upon the Confucian tradition. Important themes addressed by these Confucian chapters include: the relationship between Chan Buddhism and the rising new Confucianism (chapter 3), how new Confucianism conceptualizes the other world in its ultra this-worldly ethic (chapters 4-6), the inner diversity of new Confucianism (chapter 7), how new Confucian scholars reconstructed their thought of self-interest and four traditional social classes to fit an increasingly mercantile society (chapters 8 and 9), and how merchants proactively learn Confucianism as both a source of general education and one of skills of business management (chapter 10-12).

Yü’s conclusion, as I understand, is at least fourfold: first, the secularizing Chinese religions in the early modern period invigorated merchants’ commercial activities both ideologically and sociologically. Second, what lies at the center of the pro-commercial Chinese religious ideas is a form of this-worldly asceticism, which, despite not being entirely the same as the Protestant ethic comprising uniquely Christian concepts and ideas, played a parallel role in promoting rationalized commercial activities and fostering a mercantile spirit prevalent in early modern China. Third, if the Weberian question—that is, why ancient China did not develop the full-fledged form of capitalism in early modern period—is therefore worth asking, the answer ought not to lie, as Weber originally thought, in the lack of this-worldly asceticism similar to the Protestant ethic. Fourth, to reinforce the third point, Yü furthermore concludes that the lack of rationalization in the system of government and law is a more identifiable reason for the stalled transformation of early modern Chinese commercial activities into their more modern capitalist forms. Yü laments the situation at the end of the book: “With the autocratic bureaucratic system constituting all-encompassing nets above and snares below, how, for all their strength, could the merchants break through?” (p. 205).

I agree with all four aspects of Yü’s conclusion and recommend the book for an upper-division undergraduate course in disciplines such as sociology and the history of religion, Chinese history, Asian studies, and comparative religion. For instructors who need to focus upon a specific tradition, chapters 1 and 3 will be useful for illustrating the social impact of Chan Buddhism in China, and chapter 2 evidences the development of the Daoist religion in its early modern period, whereas other chapters will be fit for varying themes related to Confucianism.

There are clearly directions of research that scholars may pursue along the path paved by Yü, and I will raise two points of my critical thought as follows. First, Yü explains well why new Confucian thinkers did not fear to borrow the individual and monasterial spiritual practices of Buddhism, as he so eloquently expositus: “it (the borrowing) involved only a methodological issue that has nothing to do with the fundamental difference in spiritual orientation between the two teachings” (p. 78). Nonetheless, the entire story told by Yü regarding the formation of the secularizing trend of Chinese religions in the concerned period of time lacks a crucial preclude. In other words, the this-worldly orientation of Chinese Buddhism, as instantiated in Chan and other forms of Buddhism, appears to be even more distinctive in comparison to more original forms of
Buddhism in ancient India. This feature of Chinese Buddhism implies that the indigenous Chinese culture before the migration of Buddhism must have contributed to the latter’s increasingly secularizing capacity. Therefore, intrigued by Yü’s appealing narrative of the impact of Chan Buddhism on the secularization of new Confucianism and Daoism in early modern China, readers may wonder whether Chan Buddhism might not be the earliest force of such a secularizing trend. As potent intellectual and spiritual traditions, Confucianism and Daoism existed long before the migration of Buddhism to China, and it was through interacting with them that the texts and practices of Indian Buddhism were translated into the Chinese world. In a word, to perfect Yü’s narrative of the secularizing trait of Chinese religions, scholars need to go beyond the concerned period of time to broadly investigate how indigenous and foreign religions interact each other in order to shed light upon a more complete picture of the religious landscape of early modern China.

Second, as an intellectual historian, the strength of Yü’s research consists in the rigorous study of historical materials and evidence on themes in the history of China, which are of broad significance to a variety of academic disciplines. This is a major reason why Yü is so broadly read, particularly among scholars whose work focuses upon some aspect of Chinese thought. Nevertheless, since Yü’s research goal is normally not to conceptually analyze the thinking systems of varying traditions or individuals per se, some of his comparative thought regarding Chinese and Western religions is in need of a philosophical uplift in order to achieve greater clarity and profundity. For instance, employing terms invented by contemporary new Confucian philosophers such as Mou Zongsan, Liu Shu-hsien, and Tu Wei-ming, Yü frequently invokes the distinction of Chinese culture from Christianity as consisting in a so-called mode of “inner transcendence” (pp. 64, 74, and 85). For instance, while discussing the immanent nature of transcendence in new Confucianism, Yü writes, “Yet because Chinese culture belongs to an ‘inner transcendence’ model, the relationship between these two worlds is one that remains neither too familiar nor too distant, and its tension is likewise an inner one that is not perceivable, in all its confrontational manifestations, from the outside” (p. 64).

Three major confusions may be caused by such a not-quite-careful philosophical analysis of the concept of transcendence in new Confucianism. First, without an in-depth explanation of the involved terms, readers not versed in the philosophical discussion regarding transcendence among contemporary new Confucian thinkers may find the statement rather perplexing. Second, whether either Chinese culture in general or Confucianism in particular can be characterized as “inner transcendence” in comparison to the Christian West is actually an ongoing debate among philosophically and theologically seasoned scholars,[3] and hence, Yü’s use of it as a conclusive term may look premature from the perspective of the debate. Third, which is also the most important, a major endeavor made by Yü in chapters 4-7 is to showcase how the tension between the other world and this world in new Confucianism is best embodied by how new Confucians were dedicated to transforming the society via various secular activities while still being committed to the normative ideal of the Heavenly Principle. However, the statement that this tension is an “inner one that is not perceivable from the outside” (p. 64) seems to contradict such a major effort. Taking all three confusions into consideration, it is clear that Yü’s comprehensive narrative of Chinese intellectual history could benefit from more delicate philosophical tools; consequently, scholars would better understand the complicated intersections of Chinese religions and economy.

To conclude my review, I must confess to readers that the day I received this book sent graciously by the editorial team of H-Net Buddhism was coincidentally the same day that I heard that
Prof. Yü had just passed away. My reading of Prof. Yü’s works far surpasses the reviewed book, and throughout the years and decades, his works have become a library of references for my study in comparative religion, philosophy, and theology. Therefore, I would like to pay sincere tribute to Prof. Yü using this opportunity of reviewing just one among so many of his excellent monographs and essays, a lot more of which need translations as fine as this one. Prof. Yü, I believe generations of scholars will continue to read your books long after your departure, so please rest in peace.

Notes


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