

Chu Hsi's Family Ethic and the Spirit of Hui Merchants

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Abstract: This essay draws comparison between Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of the Capitalism* and Chu Hsi's *Family Ritual*, examining whether Chu Hsi's Confucianist ethic preaches doctrines similar to ideas of Protestant asceticism and whether the interpretative method of Chu Hsi's teachings promotes the development of Capitalism in ancient China. The conclusion is that Chu Hsi's family ethic can be regarded as a Chinese counterpart to Protestant asceticism. His interpretive method also helped establish social rules that were impersonal and rational. Hui merchants, influenced by Chu Hsi's teachings, advanced to the second tier of the ancient Chinese caste system. However, they did not replace the literati, the highest caste, as both castes utilized the same set of Confucianist classics to safeguard their respective interests.

Key Words: Chu Hsi, Family Ritual, Max Weber, Interpretation, Caste system

Chu Hsi's direct influence on Hui merchants and the latter's prosperity during Ming and Qing dynasties is often cited as counterargument to Max Weber's assertion in *The Religion of China* that there was no Chinese counterpart to the Protestant asceticism. Based on this assertion, Weber further concludes that "the legal forms and societal foundations for Capitalist 'enterprise' were absent in the Chinese economy" (85). However, Chinese scholars who strive to refute Weber often focus either on detailing the evolution of Chu Hsi's philosophy in relation to the rise of the Hui merchants¹ or on comparing Hui merchant economy with industrial capitalism², thereby ignoring Weber's central concern regarding the interpretative role of the belief system.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, Weber employs a method that regards the inner structure of Protestant asceticism as an "ideal type", "useful fictions' arrived on the basis of what the investigator deems culturally significant" (10). That is to say, Weber picks out doctrines of the Protestant asceticism useful to the ultimate formation of social forms that facilitate Capitalist development. Then, he elucidates how individuals infuse "tremendous depth to the view and create[d] the psychological *drive* for

¹ 参见余英时：《儒家伦理与商人精神》，广西师范大学出版社，2014年，第224页。Yu Yingshi points out that Confucianism went through great changes in 15th and 16th because of inner and outer need for transformation.

² 参见梁德阔：《儒家伦理与徽商精神——“韦伯式问题”的经验研究》，上海大学文学院博士论文，2010年，第264-265页。

this norm to achieve its effect by interpreting such work as a *calling*, and as the *sole* means of making sure of one's state of grace" (Weber, *Protestant* 187). The function of individual interpretation is foregrounded, underscoring that this ability can guarantee people's entrepreneurship in the face of adversity.

For Weber, interpretive tools of Confucianism fail to cultivate entrepreneurs who establish social rules that "took on a peculiarly neutral and *impersonal* character --- one which served the rational structuring of the surrounding social cosmos" (Weber, *Protestant* 141). There has been no satisfactory answer to whether this particular verdict is true, especially concerning whether the Confucianist interpretive tools themselves were effective enough at the time of their birth.

This essay re-examines Chu Hsi's family ethic, evaluating whether his Confucianist teachings foster traits akin to those of the Protestant and whether his interpretative method is impersonal and rational. By stressing Chu Hsi's family ethic itself as the result of interaction between Confucianist literati and the merchant caste in Song dynasty, this essay concludes that Chu Hsi's family ethic qualifies as the Chinese counterpart to Weber's Protestant asceticism, and its inherent interpretative method is conducive to the thriving of Hui Merchants at the beginning but limits its development into industrial Capitalism in Weber's sense in the end.

The Protestant Asceticism and Chu Hsi's Moral Cultivation

Chu Hsi's personality resembles a Protestant radical according to Wing-tsit Chan's description in his *Chu Hsi: Life and Thought* (1987). Chu Hsi is with "the excellent quality of firmness in strength" but is "too severe in attacking opposite schools and too ready to admonish others" (2). Chu Hsi himself lived a frugal life, carrying on the Chinese tradition of being hardworking and thrifty³. He systematically elaborated on and teaches Cheng'I's (程颐) Neo-Confucianist idea of preserving the principle of Heaven and eliminating human desires (存天理, 灭人欲). This idea, as the central requirement of personal moral cultivation, shows that a Weberian emphasis of "Inner-worldly Asceticism" is in effect there. Both Chu Hsi and Weber believe that self-discipline makes "God's will" or "the Principle of Heaven" accessible to individuals.

Both theories require their followers to accept personal isolation with firm sense of commitment in the first place. Confucianism regards cultivating one's moral character (修身) as preparatory to political service. The Cheng Brothers (from whom Chu Hsi learns and whose ideas Chu Hsi furthers) deem commitment to learning the Principle (穷理) as the benchmark for self-cultivation against the idea of different inborn qualities to realize the Way (修道)⁴. This emphasis on individual devotion, proof and hard

³ 余英时:《儒家伦理与商人精神》,第224页。Yu Yingshih has pointed out that the Chinese has a tradition to praise thriftiness and to denounce extravagancy, so that there is no need to prove such evident facts.

⁴ 参见朱熹编:《河南程氏遗书一册》,商务印书馆,1935年,第76页:“善修身者,不患器质之不

work to approach the principle is similar to Calvinist belief that God's will can only be understood alone, rejecting "all sensual and emotional elements in culture and subjective religiosity" (Weber, *Protestant* 140).

Besides, both theories differentiate between right and wrong ways to live and learn. For Chu Hsi, the correct way to learn is through Investigation of Things (格物), since the Principle is prior to everything and manifests itself in the movement of everything: "principle is self-evident and self-sufficient, extending everywhere and governing all things" (Chan 112). The way the Principle binds the material forces is an equivalent to what Calvinist doctrine has established "between belief in absolutely binding norms, on the one hand, and absolutely determinism and complete transcendence of the divinity on the other" (Weber, *Protestant* 151). Both serve as "the psychological starting point for methodological morality" (ibid).

Chu Hsi's belief that the Principle attaches itself to everything yet is inexhaustive for human investigation is similar to the Protestant understanding of the grace of God, which can be detected from signs of individual life yet can never be made sure of. Both serve as everlasting psychological drive to subject individuals to inner moral self-discipline. Both Chu Hsi's idea and Protestant asceticism feature "opposite of enjoyment of life" (Weber, *Protestant* 69). Confucianist scholar Chang Yung (江永) in Qing dynasty criticized Chu Hsi's advocacy of preserving the Principle of heaven and eliminating Human desires for its "bifurcating the Principle of Heaven and human desires"(qtd Chan 30). This example shows that later misunderstanding (willingly or mistakenly) appropriates the Principle of Heaven to oppress individual desires. Similarly, Weber remarks that Protestant Asceticism "helped unwittingly to create a social and economic order its pioneers would have seen as godless, materialist and devoid of ultimate purpose" (Weber, *Protestant* 6). How individual desires were frustrated in the name of the Principle of Heaven in practice may surprise Chu Hsi to no lesser degree. After all, when Chu Hsi applied the methodological morality to create a series of rituals for domestic conducts, he was addressing the Song society where residents enjoy a great deal of freedom.

Chu Hsi's Family Rituals and Weber's Commitment to the Work

Max Weber takes Benjamin Franklin as an example to show that "the ability to concentrate the mind, as well as the absolutely vital ability to feel a sense of commitment to the work, is commonly found" (Weber, *Protestant* 81) among the Protestant. The emphasis is shifted from the ends of Capitalist work (i.e. for profit) to the way labor is devoted and life is lived. As a result, the respectability of "the rising strata of the middle class" (Weber, *Protestant* 83) can be justified by their devotedness.

美，而患师学之不明……师学之不明，虽有受道之质，孰与成之？” Translation: as for those who are good at self-cultivation, there should be no worry about their talent. Instead, what is of concern should be whether their way of learning and of being taught... if they are learning or being taught in the wrong way, how can they acquire moral achievement?

Chu Hsi also focused on how to perform duties, setting down rules for family rituals according to his new understanding of Confucianism. Chu Hsi's focus on scholarship and family life, instead of political ambition, originated from belief crisis. The failure of Wang Anshi's reformation led Confucianists such as Chu Hsi to believe in a failure of inner cultivation according to the teaching of *Great Learning* (《大学》). Therefore, Chu Hsi turned to learning and teaching, instead of working as a government official. Meanwhile, Chu Hsi was relieved from the pressure to serve the emperor for three domestic factors. First, his father's early death exempted him from possible pressure from domestic authority. Second, his mother, who was a daughter of Hui Merchant, cherished different ideas about filial expectations. Unlike women from the literati caste, Chu Hsi's mother didn't consider becoming an official the sole respectable occupation for her son. In Chu Hsi's epigraph for his mother, he especially mentioned his mother's calm acceptance of his unwillingness to be an official⁵. He also witnessed his mother's ability to cope with demanding mother-in-law, who acted as the surrogate for the dead patriarch of the family and was apparently an oppressive presence to Chu Hsi's mother. His mother's ability to make the demanding grandmother satisfied⁶ sheltered Chu Hsi from possible pressure concerning professional choice. Third, his mother's family as merchants and his mother's ability to manage domestic affairs helped relieve Chu Hsi's financial pressure so that he was able to pursue his academic path. Chu Hsi was psychologically close to his mother and grandfather. He even wrote down anecdotes of his grandfather. Chu Hsi was familiar with merchant life so that he could dispel bias against their profession. He even printed his own books out at home to sell for both profit and spread of his ideas⁷.

Since Chu Hsi's life revolved around academic devotion and domestic affairs, he only put his moral cultivation into practice on family scale. His main requirements about the family organization was the difference between the male and the female members (男女有别) and the self-discipline in order to properly perform the rituals (克己复礼). It was Chu Hsi who extended this Confucianist requirement to family members, and to ordinary people⁸. His detailed explanation on how funerals, weddings and

⁵ 参见朱熹：《朱子全書》(第貳拾伍册)，上海古籍出版社、安徽教育出版社，2010年，第4342页。

⁶ 参见朱熹著，胡岳校：《晦庵先生朱文公集》(第三十八卷)，日本国立公文书馆藏本，1532年，第49-50页。“先妣德性纯厚，事姑极孝敬。祖母性严，先妣能顺适之。治家宽而有法，岁时奉祀比躬必亲”。 Translation: my late mother was of lenient qualities, when serving my grandmother she followed the rule of filiality. My grandmother was very demanding but my late mother was able to meet her requirements. When it came to my late mother to run the family, she follows laws and attended to details concerning sacrifices and worships in person.

⁷ 参见汪大白，方利山：《朱熹与徽商》，《朱子学刊》1999年第1辑，第312-313页。

⁸ 参见李胜奎：《礼的庶民化：朱熹对礼的变革——以〈家礼〉为例》，《当代儒学》第25辑，第230-233页。

initiations should be conducted was an attempt to preserve the Principle of Heaven attached to the rituals and thereby to eliminate influence of human desires during the process. More importantly, he intended to prevent further corruption of the process by individual wishful thinkings. This actually achieved the Protestant requirement that the “ethical practice of ordinary people was divest of its random and unsystematic nature and build up into a consistent method for the whole conduct of one’s life” (Weber, *Protestant* 146). The rational corollary of the domestic moral practice was that individuals raised in such a family should enter society and live their social life also methodically.

Chu Hsi's Family Ethic and the Rise of Hui Merchants

As above-mentioned, Chu Hsi's family background has linked him closely to Hui Merchants since Song dynasty. What he deemed to be domestic virtues might have an origin in Hui merchants' tradition of life. The Hui merchants immigrated to the six counties in current Anhui and Jiangxi provinces since Tang dynasty⁹. The immigrants lay great emphasis on their origin from and continuity with central Chinese culture. Therefore, they organized villages as sibs, where members of the same family name lived together. That's why Weber identified Hui sib with Chinese sibs in general as “a resolute and traditionalist power” (Weber, *Religion* 95) where “the sib stood as one man in support of a member who felt discriminated against, ... In this fact alone, ‘work discipline’ and the free market selection of labor which have characterized modern large enterprise have been thwarted in China” (ibid). As a matter of fact, Hui sibs were more of an economic entity than a political one. Since the area (Huizhou) was mountainous and barren, the male residents were forced to leave home and became street vendors. The “work discipline” required of these loners were well formed throughout time, which we will examine in detail in this section. As for the free-market selection Weber talks about, we will address it while talking about the caste system in the next section.

Male members of Hui merchant sibs were usually doing business far away from their hometown¹⁰ and the role of the sib was more of mutual help of various economic entities connected through blood and organized as a law-abiding act¹¹. More importantly, the power entitled to the patriarch at home was usually

⁹ 参见余亚青：《试述朱熹理学思想对南宋以来徽州社会的影响》，第二届敦煌历史档案与徽州历史档案开发利用研讨会文集，2002年，第6-16页。Three factors are mentioned by the author for the popularity of Chu Hsi's ideas in Hui area: Chu Hsi's insights into Confucianism, the ruling class's enforcement of Neo-Confucianist learning and the kinship between Chu Hsi and Hui natives.

¹⁰ 参见王昌宜：《缺位与补位：明清徽州女性生存状况研究》，《合肥学院学报》2021年第38卷第6期，第74-79页。There is detailed description of the way the male members of Hui merchants marry early and travel away from home for their whole life.

¹¹ 参见王裕明：《家长制下明代徽商家庭及家庭财产的多元结构——以休宁吴文奎家庭为例》，《学术界》2023年第302期，第193页。“The so-called ‘when grandparents or parents are still alive, the sons

implemented by female surrogates such as wives and widowed mothers. These women, like Chu Hsi's mother, witnessed how capable women won respect from other family members by being hardworking and economic, by supporting the elders and by contributing capital to the family business. When these women married, they didn't regard themselves as subservient to their husband's requirement (the traditional Confucianist idea that husband is the principle of wife's moral conduct 夫为妻纲). Instead, they had clear understanding of their power as practitioner. The different ways Chu Hsi's mother and grandmother served as the family authority showed young Chu Hsi what difference a female authority may make in Hui merchant family.

The tension between filial piety (孝) and family rituals (礼) allows room for personal interpretation. Originally, Confucianism stresses children's submission to the parents' will and regards such obedience as behaviours abiding by natural laws. The inner logic is that parents and children are connected through blood, and as manifestations of the same blood, they are supposed to be the same¹². The traditional emphasis of Three Standards (三纲) relies mainly on outer discipline of individuals, forcing their obedience to the emperor, the father and the husband. Chu Hsi shifts the emphasis to inner cultivation, offering Five Virtues (五常) as impersonal standards. In this way, filial piety focuses on demonstration and appreciation of individual virtues, examining whether each social member (the emperor, the courtiers, the fathers and the sons) behaves accordingly to his role.

At the same time, Chu Hsi details rituals such as how to behave in the ancestral hall, how to organize initiation ceremony, marriage ceremony, funeral ceremony, ancestor worship ceremony¹³. This is a process of impersonalization as is described by Weber, where power-wielding patriarch is replaced by rules and laws. In this way, the authority's power is restricted to the minimal scale.

Chu Hsi's own family structure was the product of interactions between Hui Merchant family and the literati family, and as a result, Chu Hsi believed that family business should be conducted rationally and impersonally. In return, the Hui merchants welcomed these family rituals and Chu Hsi's ideas. This was not only because of their fellowship but because Chu Hsi's ideas enabled their caste's interpretation of Confucianist classics on the one hand, and offer an effective means to stabilize their patriarchal families with the absence of males on the other. These rules served as codes of behaviour that guaranteed the patriarchal will at work even when the male members of the family were absent. Meanwhile, they could

and grandsons should not set up independent residential and financial accounts' is what is required by the law, in practice, there are various practices... 'In Huizhou, the patriarchy enjoys supreme power over financial arrangement' is also a misunderstanding about history."

¹² 参见冯兵:《朱子论“孝”》,《哲学研究》2021年第1期,第82页。Ontologically, they are supposed to have the same virtues, and ethically they practice filial piety and brotherhood.

¹³ 参见朱熹:《朱子全书》(第柒册),上海古籍出版社、安徽教育出版社,2010年,第866-870页。

be bent for expediency especially by knowledgeable and capable female surrogate to make choices that were best for the interest of the family. These rules were popular to women, because they allowed them to learn how the patriarchal society works. This learning empowered them to some extent. They were able to prove their value by organizing rituals, accumulating capital through hard work and frugality. When they identified themselves with the family business that they helped to build, they were more likely to stick to the family even when they were widowed¹⁴. Similarly, when the merchant caste identified itself with the ruling literati, they were empowered for some time, but their holding onto the identification disabled their rising to the leading caste.

The rise of the Hui merchants started from the thriving of individual families and sibs. Chu Hsi's family rituals and family ethic indeed created "leverage for influencing conduct through inner forces freed from tradition and convention" (Weber, *Religion* 236). For example, Chu Hsi's mother stuck to benevolence but didn't deem becoming an official the sole respectable career for a man. Her silent demonstration of belief influenced Chu Hsi's ideas and life choices. Chu Hsi's choice to stick to scholarship and education suffered no pressure from motherly expectation, which also expedited Confucianism's systematic syncretism of Taoist and Buddhist elements. In return, Chu Hsi set down rituals that save later daughters-in-law from unreasonable and demanding mothers-in-law. For another example, Yu Yingshih records Lu Ji's expounding on the importance of extravagancy and quotes a long passage to demonstrate how Confucianist scholars try hard to integrate the needs of the merchant class (for consumption here) into the body of Confucianist virtues¹⁵.

As a result, Chu Hsi's family rituals and his scholarship on Confucianist classics helped the Hui merchants to minimize "piety toward concrete people" (Weber, *Religion* 236) and to join in a Weberian sacred cause: to pursue the Principle of Heaven through devoting to their business as Chu Hsi has made it clear.

Social Caste System and the Pro-Capitalist Institutions

Since we have made it clear that the Weberian mentality can be found in Chu Hsi's works, we proceed to examine why there is a "lack of a formally guaranteed law, a rational administration and judiciary" (Weber, *Religion* 104). Chu Hsi's stipulation of family rituals was accepted and spread quickly among the Hui merchants for their desperate need to improve their social status as the lowest caste in existing Confucianist differentiation of vocations. Weber mistakes the traditional Confucianist bias against

¹⁴ 参见高寿先:《徽州文化》, 辽宁教育出版社, 1998年, 第92页。“徽州妇女的性格可归为三个字: 俭、勤、贞。这三者都对商业发展有促进作用。” Translation: the character of Hui women can be summarized as thriftiness, diligence and chastity. All of the three promote the development of commerce.

¹⁵ 参见余英时:《儒家伦理与商人精神》, 第223-225页。

merchants for their actual deeds in history so that he believes that they lack the mentality for the rise of Capitalism. In fact, by following Chu Hsi's teachings, the merchants align themselves with the top caste, the literati, who are followers of the Confucianist sages.

Apart from educating their children to become literati and officials, the Hui merchants followed Chu Hsi's teaching on righteousness in making profit (义利). Chu Hsi reflected on his own experience of doing printing business, concluding that each vocation has their own Principle to follow. As merchants, they are supposed to make profits, which is in accordance with the Principle¹⁶. The key is to cherish the virtue of Righteousness¹⁷ and to follow the Way¹⁸ to make profit. In practice, the Hui merchants first identified themselves with Confucianist morality so that the merchant caste lifted itself to the level of Confucianist literati in terms of personal moral cultivation. When they did business, they constantly sought to justify their behaviours through Confucianist idea of Righteousness, ensuring a good reputation while making profit. They were also sensitive to moral judgements from other castes. For example, they helped the poor farmers and artisans to avoid being labelled as the unloving rich. In the long run, the Hui merchants built a credit system that facilitated their business expansion. On the limited scale of free market economy, Hui merchants indeed proved themselves to be the ideal labourers and business owners.

As a result of the rise of Hui merchants, social castes in Ming and Qing changed from the original hierarchy literati, peasants, artisans and merchants into the new hierarchy literati, merchants, peasants and artisans. The caste of literati is what Weber calls "the ramification of a system of prebends" (Weber, *Religion* 104) that hinders the development of industrial capitalism. The merchant caste identified with the literati, but they didn't "have a free hand to transform the social stratification and to structure the population according to occupation in order to meet its own requirements" (Weber, *Protestant* 65). The Chinese society was organized in an analogical fashion between family and country, where the highest caste serves as the representative of the Principle in the universe. The authority was to be obeyed even if they were in the wrong. They were never the "extremely relaxed, practically imperceptible and scarcely more than formal

¹⁶ 参见朱熹：《朱子全書》（第貳拾陸册），上海古籍出版社、安徽教育出版社，2010年，第56页。“士其业者，必至于登名；农其业者，必至于积粟；工其业者，必至于作巧，商其业者，必至于赢费。若是，则于身不弃，于人无愧。” Translation: "A respected Confucianist does his job to the natural requirement of the vocation; if he farms, he must accumulate millets; if he works as an artisan, he must make exquisite crafts; if he does business, he must gain profit. If he indeed does accordingly, he doesn't abandon himself, feeling unashamed to others."

¹⁷ 参见余英时：《儒家伦理与商人精神》，第42页。According to Yu Yingshih, righteousness is "pure moral sense without content".

¹⁸ 参见余英时：《儒家伦理与商人精神》，第9-10页。The Way represents a transcendental ideal world which the mundane life tries to follow without making it quite clear. It stresses the consistency between daily facts and subjective value.

authority” (Weber, *Protestant* 65) that the Protestant reformation sought to replace. The Chinese authority was concerned with maintenance of the current system instead of paving the way for the development of any of the lower social caste. Therefore, literati with a family background of the Hui merchants tried their best to make room for Capitalist development within the current frame of political organization. It took a long time for these literati to be powerful enough to call for political reformation such as the Westernization movement (洋务运动) in the 1860s, more than six hundred years after the death of Chu Hsi.

What Chu Hsi offered the Hui merchants was a means to reinterpret current ethical and moral standards to seek room for their development. But the caste system based on occupation could not (easily) be altered by money. The political power served the interest of the literati caste and its support of Capitalist development was gained through much effort to reinterpret and persuade, a lot of frustration, sacrifice and compromise. The merchant caste never had a free hand to set up social institutions that can free them from human authority and serve the requirement of economic growth. The contracts between merchant sibs were indeed rational and impersonal but they were powerless in the face of political power. In times of war in Qing dynasty, the merchants paid for the government's political fiasco willy-nilly.

Conclusion

From the above comparison between Chu Hsi's ideas and the Protestant ethic summarized by Weber, we can see that key elements of Protestant asceticism, such as a sense of calling and methodical labor, are all there in Chu Hsi's teachings, learnt and practiced by Hui merchants. Such mentality did help the Hui merchants to rise to the second in ancient Chinese caste system. But their willing identification with the Confucianist teachings limited their ability to replace the authority of literati with a new one that can manipulate social stratification to set up pro-Capitalist institutions and laws. Later development of the school of mind (心学) offered a more radical individualism that may facilitate institutional reformation. But it failed to appeal to the caste that was most eager and resourceful to change their social status.

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