Weber and Confucius in East Asia: The Great Experiment

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INTRODUCTION

Nations in East Asia have a long tradition of what has been referred to as “Confucian bureaucratic culture” (Frederickson 2002, p. 614). This has been both a point of pride and contention for these nations as they have moved from traditional societies, in a Weberian sense, to more modern, post-industrial economies and more democratic political regimes. China, however, despite its historical role as the source of Confucian thought, teachings and influence, has rejected the tenets of Confucian teaching more severely than its neighbors, South Korea and Japan. Especially under former Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong, Confucian philosophy and the so-called ‘feudal thinking’ that it epitomised were rejected, and later during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, more radical rejection was associated with violence (Bianco 1971).

In Korea, in the aftermath of the Korean conflict of the early 1950s, the government was reeling from the effects of the war, and
was compelled to essentially start from scratch. Building a new Korean national identity was both a response to the attack from the north (e.g. how is the South different from the North? It was previously one people, and is now two) and a rejection of the years of occupation by the Japanese and subsequent military rule by the US after the end of World War II (Kim 2012). The country’s most recent indigenous governing system had been during the late Choseon Dynasty (ending in 1897), which, towards its end, had seen increasing criticism of the formalism that had become synonymous with the behavior of the ruling elite. This critique was captured by Sil-hak, a Confucian reform movement that emphasised ‘practical learning’ and a more egalitarian approach to rule (see Kim 2012, pp. 219–220, on the writings of Chong Yak-yong). It is important to note that this critique was not a rejection of Confucianism, simply a shift in focus to attempt to create a more flexible system of governing that could adapt to the rapid changes that were occurring in Korea at that time. So when a new government formed in the 1950s, it incorporated several influences from outside of Korea, but it had an essential Confucian core that remained intact.

Both China and Korea have been influenced at different points in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by the writings of Max Weber, especially in the field of public administration. But Weber, who is often seen as the spokesperson for modernisation, is perceived as both a student and a critic of Confucianism and its ‘bureaucratising effects’ on society. As both China and Korea search for ways in which their provision of public service might be improved, each nation has expressed some ambivalence toward Weberian perspectives. This ambivalence can be traced to two sources: one, an attempt to protect what is seen as an indigenous system of governing, and therefore, one that is more culturally appropriate; and two, a misreading, perhaps, of what Weber’s ideal types mean for ‘Confucian bureaucratic culture’. However, there may be far less distance between Confucius and Weber than one might think. This chapter will attempt to examine Confucian approaches to governing within two different contexts: within Korea, where these approaches have never quite been fully rejected; and within China, where the rejection was absolute and highly political. These contexts will be examined through Weber’s depictions of modernisation, or the ‘rationalisation of value spheres’, which includes a depiction of bureaucracy as an ideal type. The ways in which Weber’s depiction of this ideal type differ from traditional authority approaches may offer some insight into where the mismatch between Confucian systems of thought and Weberian ideals can cause confusion. I will then use
the perception of corruption to illustrate how this conflict in ideals manifests this confusion, and then will highlight some practical implications for policy.

**China and the West and Confucianism**

Chinese intellectuals were no strangers to the writings of German philosophers at the turn of the twentieth century (Bianco 1971). But the West, in contrast, knew remarkably little about China, partly because of the isolationist stance of the country over long periods of time, including a ban on international trade during the Ming dynasty. Max Weber, with his publication of several essays on the world’s religions, was actually responsible for a resurgence in interest in China and Confucianism, especially within Europe. But much of his writing, and indeed, the basis for his conclusions about modernisation and the rise of capitalism in the West, but not in the East, were based on very limited sources: poorly translated, and often unsubstantiated accounts of life inside China (Radkau 2011). That said, Weber’s inductive approach to his development of theories of human behavior and social structures have incorporated a perspective on bureaucracy that uses China as a heuristic for understanding traditional legitimacy. This reasoning is based on his understanding of Confucianism and the role it played in Chinese society and government. One of the key characteristics that Weber examines is the prevalence of bureaucratic forms and the relative importance of bureaucrats within Chinese society.

Weber’s conception of bureaucracy is an oft cited and as often misunderstood notion of the social structure that exercises authority within a given society. The roots for this conception were developed over a period of many years, and mostly as commentary on the logical progression of ‘modernisation’ and the rise of capitalism. These ideas were most famously articulated in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, originally published in 1905 shortly after his first (and only) visit to the United States (Coser 1977, pp. 237–239). The theme of this work was by no means unique to Weber (see Felix Rachfahl’s critique for a notable list, nicely summarised by Chalcraft and Harrington 2001, pp. 89–90). But his reasoning was focused, as noted by Radkau (2011), on a moralistic core in the public sphere:
"What was at issue was ... how the connection between Protestantism and capitalism should be conceived. The idea suggested itself that the link between the two was not so direct but passed through a shared third element. And for an educated liberal this was likely to be the Enlightenment and modern science, both of which had developed mainly on the ground of Protestantism that was also especially favourable to the advance of secularism. However, it is precisely vis-à-vis Rachfahl's alternative picture of the genesis of capitalism that the distinctiveness of Weber's thesis appears most sharply. For Weber sought the origins of capitalism not in the Enlightenment and the process of secularization, nor in the dissolution of religious attachments, but on the contrary in religious passion... he was convinced that the modern vocational ethic must have sprung from a powerful instinctual force, and he located this neither in the Enlightenment nor in philosophical idealism but in the realm of religion. (p. 185)

For Weber, the connection between religious fervor and vocation remained a powerful link, one belied by later interpretations of the 'ideal' bureaucrat as 'relentlessly objective'. The times were those of Frederick Taylor and the machine, the ultimate manifestation of a perfect work ethic for some, but not for Weber. He was, at best, ambivalent about the future of modern society and its embrace of capitalism, and the specter of the iron cage was his harbinger for the modern industrial worker. This is why his later work turned east, to more 'traditional societies' with distinct roots for bureaucratic systems.

**Weber's Ideal Manifestations of Authority**

Weber's notion of the 'ideal type' of legal-rational authority was bureaucracy, and as an ideal type, it had certain characteristics that helped manifest the theoretical underpinnings of this kind of legitimacy. The main characteristics are six, as put forward in the Gerth and Mills translation (1946) and focus on the primacy of rules, the importance of expertise, and the application of reason to the execution of one's duties (pp. 196-198). As the name implies, the basis for authority in the modern state was a body of law, or rules, that carried power quite separately from the body or individuals who were responsible for the drafting of the law or rules. It is this dispossession of the law that gives it an objective nature, which Weber refers to as follows: "The theory of modern public administration, for instance, assumes that the authority to order certain matters by decree—which has been legally granted to public authorities—does
not entitle the bureau to regulate the matter by commands given for each case, but only to regulate the matter abstractly" (Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 198). In other words, there should be an overarching principle that can be applied in a general fashion to cases that are deemed similar.

Weber’s conception of the nature of this ‘modern officialdom’ differed from ‘traditional’ systems in this separation of law from its makers. As he explains,

Bureaucracy, thus understood, is fully developed in political and ecclesiastical communities only in the modern state, and, in the private economy, only in the most advanced institutions of capitalism. Permanent and public office authority, with fixed jurisdiction, is not the historical rule, but the exception. This is so even in large political structures such as those of the ancient Orient, the Germanic and Mongolian empires of conquest, or of many feudal structures of state. In all these cases, the ruler executes the most important measures through personal trustees, table-companions, or court-servants. (Gerth and Mills 1946, p. 196)

Weber saw repudiation of certain components of ‘traditional bureaucracy’ as necessary for true modernisation to take place. In particular, he saw the personal nature of law and power in traditional societies as being antithetical to the modern state. The modern state was, in his eyes, a manifestation of rationalisation, where cause and effect were linked in a systematic way, and this meant that the individual must be capable of engaging in this process in order to function properly in society.

In his study of the world’s religions, which included Taoism and Confucianism, he saw societies that had developed such religions as capable of becoming modern and achieving rationalisation. Eisenstadt (1986) called such societies ‘axial’ in reference to what Jaspers (1948) called ‘the Axial Age’. But, as Bellah (1999) states:

Rationalizing potentialities exist in all the axial civilizations, but, according to Weber, it was several tendencies within Western Civilization that led to the decisive breakthrough into modernity, the third of his major evolutionary stages, one characterized by a high degree of rationalization in every sphere and the increasing disjunction between the spheres. Although Weber used the term “capitalism” as his most frequent way of referring to modern society, he by no means considered economics the key to the entire complex. He attributed to the Protestant Reformation, particularly in its Calvinist and sectarian forms, a key role in the emergence
of modernity; especially through its relentless criticism of magic and its methodical organization of ethical life in an effort to transform the world. (Bellah 1999, p. 279)

The ‘spheres’ Bellah references here and their ‘disjunction’ are key to grasping how Weber sees a ‘modern’ bureaucracy as opposed to a ‘traditional’ one. There are six spheres: the kinship sphere; the economic sphere; the religious sphere; the erotic sphere; the political sphere; and the intellectual sphere (Oakes 2003, p. 29). As society evolves, these spheres separate and become ever more distinct, and tensions between them can drive an evolution to a new social form. In more traditional societies, such as China, Weber interpreted much of what he read as overlap between spheres, and the importance of the kinship sphere in all others was not conducive to modernisation in his eyes. This is why he concluded that China, while it embraced Confucian norms, would never become a ‘capitalist’ society, since the bonds of kinship would prohibit business relations with those outside one’s own circle. Kinship enables a given group to exercise its own authority over members, meting out punishment, for example, for transgressions against other members. This is why one only engages with others from the same group—authority ends at the group’s edge, and the norms and expectations of behavior are different beyond that boundary. Thus there is no recourse for enforcing an obligation beyond the limits of kinship. For Weber, modern capitalism required the ability to move beyond kinship boundaries by recognising and honoring the rules of external trade.

There are two important observations to make of Weber’s conclusions. The first is his underestimation of China’s size, complexity and diversity. To say there is ‘one China’ or a unified ‘Chinese’ approach to conducting affairs of business or state is a caricature that does little justice to the China of Weber’s time or the modern version. Weber saw the importance of kinship ties within Chinese society as emblematic of a feudal society (a view with which Mao concurred), and therefore a barrier to modernisation. This was only partly true, since there were places within China where such ties were looser than in others, the coastal regions and urban areas, for example, where international trade was vigorous and lively. But for Weber, rooted in the European transition to a more technologically and industrially driven society, the bonds of kinship were shackles rather than supports.
The second observation is with regard to Weber’s conception of evolution. He is not saying more evolved forms are more desirable than traditional forms. He is simply describing what he sees as a progression from a less fragmented and perhaps more holistic societal arrangement to one that is more structurally diverse, where new social forms may create tension with older ones. These areas of tension appear to have held some fascination for Weber, since he saw them both as an impetus for progress (modern science, technological advances) and as a source of human misery (destruction of familial ties, social alienation, industrial loneliness). It is, as Radkau (2011) outlines, this perception of the capitalist motivation to accumulate wealth as an internalised drive, not something external, that leads Weber to his conception of the ‘iron cage’ in which modern man finds himself. And as the name implies, this is not necessarily a natural or comfortable place for mankind to be.

Confucius and Chinese Bureaucrats

Confucian thinking, as outlined in the Analects and in the works of later Song dynasty scholars, such as Zhuxi (朱熹) is articulated as an understanding of how people interact with the world around them (Rarick 2007). It is the nature of this relationship between mankind and the natural world that serves to guide the relationships between people. What is natural is that which does not require learning, that which is innate. But how this manifests itself is through thought and emotion, which can have both positive and negative influences on the outside world. George Frederickson (2002) has articulated many of the principles of Confucian thought that hold interest for Western students of public administration, but he does not address Weber’s conceptions of ideal types in this discussion. It is worthwhile, however, to revisit his perceptions of the important tenets of Confucian systems of thinking and juxtapose these with both the Weberian ideal and the thinking of current Chinese intellectuals on Confucianism and its potential role in shaping public service.

Frederickson’s account of the Confucian approach to public service is introductory and broad, but it serves to highlight the distinctions between this approach and what Frederickson characterises as a ‘Western’ approach in some detail. He engages in this comparison through the lens of ethics and the idea of bureaucratic morality. He provides a breakdown of these differences by directly comparing ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ approaches to the characteristics of what he calls ‘bureaucratic morality’
(Frederickson 2002, p. 623). He does so to illustrate the central focus of his article: understanding the role of the Confucian bureaucrat and his internalisation of a moral code of conduct. Frederickson highlights the important distinctions between behavior and intent, and how these manifest the characteristics of virtue. The most important distinction, in his opinion, is between intelligence (the recognition of right and wrong) and righteousness, which is doing right, as distinct from doing what is proper. Propriety is what has been accepted by society at large as appropriate behavior if one is doing right. But this distinction recognises that society can sometimes be wrong. As Frederickson puts it, “One is intelligent if one knows that murder is wrong. One is righteous if one does not murder. It is especially important, however, that one does righteous things for the right reasons. Righteousness always trumps propriety, and the righteous act done with a pure and unselfish heart is greater than mere serviceable goodness” (pp. 621–622).

Although Frederickson refers to his list of characteristics as representing an ‘ideal type’ of Confucian thought, he does not reference Weber or his conceptions in his comparison. If one compares the characteristics of the ideal bureaucracy to the characteristics of Confucian thought articulated here by Frederickson, however, there is one characteristic that seems consistently distinct (see Table 4.1). Confucian systems focus on virtue and its different types, and this forms the core that helps explain not just how people behave but how they should behave. It is inherently normative and intended to be so. This is why Frederickson refers to his rendition as an ideal type. Weber’s ideal bureaucracy is also normative, but the norms articulated through bureaucracy’s characteristics are the logical outcomes of a society based on legal-rational authority. Thus, Weber is describing a system that should exist if such authority truly holds sway. It is a predicted future, based on a distinct set of values important to modernisation, and the supreme value is rationalisation.

As Table 4.1 illustrates, the Weberian ideal and the general understanding of ‘western’ conceptions have some overlap but there are important distinctions, especially with regard to Confucian concepts. Two concepts, in particular, are worth highlighting because they play an important role in understanding the following discussion of how Confucian values can lie underneath the surface of what appears to be ‘Western’ or ‘Weberian’ approaches to public authority. The first is with respect to the instruments of governance, and is discussed by Frederickson in some detail: that Western and Weberian conceptions are


Table 4.1 A modified comparison of approaches to bureaucratic morality in Weberian, Western and Confucian thought

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Weberian thought</th>
<th>Modern western thought</th>
<th>Confucian or East Asian thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instruments of governance</td>
<td>Laws, rules and documents (files)</td>
<td>Constitutions, laws, regulations</td>
<td>Man, judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>From the law and reason</td>
<td>From authority, from position</td>
<td>From morality; from position, by example</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>To apply expertise to the proper implementation of rules</td>
<td>Efficiency, effectiveness, equity</td>
<td>Understanding, to do good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules and roles</td>
<td>Clear and hierarchical</td>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>All management based on written documents (files). Strict separation between public and private resources</td>
<td>Good management, total quality, scientific, decision making</td>
<td>Moral conventions, intuitive, judgmental, moral action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Expertise and rationality</td>
<td>Neutrality, policy advocacy</td>
<td>Virtue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Expertise</td>
<td>Knowledge, skills</td>
<td>Understanding, virtue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Hierarchy and jurisdiction</td>
<td>Fluid, loosely coupled, ambiguous, judgment</td>
<td>Hierarchy, clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities</td>
<td>Vocation, judgment</td>
<td>Competence, judgment</td>
<td>Virtue, judgment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td>To master and rise (promotion)</td>
<td>To serve, to lead</td>
<td>To do good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards</td>
<td>Laws, rules, clear delineation and execution of tasks</td>
<td>Constitutions, laws, regulations, codes of ethics</td>
<td>Moral conventions, self-cultivation, virtue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


similar, and constitute the basis of the 'rule of law', or as John Adams outlined in the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, "A government of laws, not of men" (1780). The Confucian approach, however, places the instruments squarely in the hands of men, and this is rooted in the Confucian notion that man is part of nature and therefore inherently good (Rarick 2007). This distinction highlights the importance of the character of those who rule in a Confucian context, where
a good man\textsuperscript{1} may be the source of laws. In the Weberian context, the law has legitimacy because it comes through a vetting process that has been accepted by a majority of the people under its rule with appropriate representation across society. Therefore, no individual is above the law nor can he or she unilaterally change it. In the broader Western context, however, constitutions outline the distribution of power and its institutions in society, and governance is thereby guided by whomever drafts such constitutions.

The second important distinction can be found in the processes used by bureaucrats. Within the Weberian context, bureaucrats are bound by two limits: rules and the separation of public and private spheres. A bureaucrat is a public official, and therefore his or her private affairs have no place inside the office that he or she occupies. In the Western context, there is instead a collection of practices that emphasise the particular area of expertise a particular bureaucrat may hold and exercise within the confines of his or her position. But in the Confucian context, the discretion of the individual official reigns supreme. This is not necessarily a contradiction with the Weberian ideal, but the explicit distinction between rules and person is not articulated. Moral convention may be the external imposition of societal rules and values, but the source and relative worth of those values are decided by the individual. Thus, for two different individuals to come to the same conclusion, they would have to be educated in the same way and to have followed similar paths to the understandings that they bring to bear on a particular subject.

The conclusions that we may draw from such observations are as follows: first, these three types of officials (Weberian, western and Confucian) may look and behave in similar ways at first blush—all recognise hierarchy as a means for organising complex actions; all value education and experience and the knowledge such things impart; and all are concerned with carrying out their duties in ways that are seen by society to have merit. However, the second conclusion renders the first as superficial; the source of one’s legitimacy and therefore the reach of one’s power in Western and Weberian systems differs substantially from Confucian systems, especially in the Weberian context. An official has no jurisdiction outside of his or her position. For example, just because someone is a ranking bureaucrat does not necessarily make him or her a good parent. Parenting falls within the private sphere, and is irrelevant to whether one can fulfill his or her public duties. But within a Confucian system, such an expectation does exist. The duties that one performs at
home and in public are similar, and thereby behavior should reflect that similarity. This means that if one scolds a child for improper behavior, one may also scold a junior colleague in the same way. Thus, similarities in structure and appearance between Weberian and Confucian systems are not necessarily indicative of the differences that lie beneath the surface. This is why examining the distinct environments where Confucianism has been attacked and embraced can provide a better understanding of how it is manifested in the behavior of public officials.

**Modern China, Rejection and Return to Confucian Values**

Mao’s rejection of Confucian ideals began much earlier than the overt campaign during the Cultural Revolution and the rule of the Gang of Four. As a student in Changsha and later as an organizer of peasant guerilla units in the skirmishes between the early Communist recruits and the Kuomintang, Mao had been highly critical of ‘feudalism’, especially the components that perpetuated conditions of abject poverty for the poorest peasants and relative comfort for those who owned the land. The landed class was extremely diverse in China, with some landowners in the Western provinces living barely better than their tenants, whereas others in the east and north fared much better (Bianco 1971). But the burden of relatively rigid class structures was often cited as too difficult to reform in a better way, especially during a time of warfare. Mao saw this as an excuse, which he later referred to in his rejection of the Soviet and Marxist models of communism, where revolution lay in the hands of the urban labor class. China’s urban laborers were much better off than their peasant counterparts and knew it. Thus, they had little incentive to pursue new structures, and were far too disparate to organize in a meaningful way. Mao saw revolution as only possible with the peasantry, whose living conditions had deteriorated over the last part of the nineteenth and early parts of the twentieth century (Bianco 1971). Caught between starvation and crushing debt, they had little to lose. So, for Mao, the rejection of old class structures was in part a rejection of the Confucian value system: to seek virtue was a lofty ambition, but it was often used to hide less virtuous intentions. In the public sector, this often led to corruption and the entrenchment of an aristocracy that helped its own rather than seeking broader well-being (Adler 2011).
After the revolution and the military victories of the Communists were cemented with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) depended greatly on its ability to show that a newly reconstructed society would reap benefits unknown to previous generations. This meant a strong and thorough rejection of ‘feudal’ ways, which included redistributing land, often by force, and dealing harshly with those who objected. Confucian ideals and values were quickly determined to be too risky for those who wished to live longer lives, and so the revolution attempted to undo over 2500 years of social conditioning within a relatively short time. The fact that the CCP was at all successful in this endeavor speaks volumes to both the tenacity and the use of both force and reward of early party leaders. It also clearly highlights the desperation of the peasants who supported them.

Aside from class structure there were specific components of the political aspects of Confucianism to which the CCP objected. The deference to elders and gender-bias were key components, since both had been written into law over centuries, thus making change more difficult. By the time the Cultural Revolution had run its course, and at the height of the rule of the Gang of Four, Confucius and his teachings were held in such low regard that they were described as follows:

Confucius was a reactionary who doggedly defended slavery and whose doctrines have been used by all reactionaries, whether ancient or contemporary, Chinese or foreign, throughout the more than 2000 years since his time. The bourgeois careerist, renegade and traitor, Lin Piao was a thorough devotee of Confucius and, like all the reactionaries in Chinese history on the road to their doom, he revered Confucius, opposed the Legalist School and attacked Chin Shih Wang, the first emperor of the Chin dynasty (221-207 B.C.). He used the doctrines of Confucius and Mencius as a reactionary ideological weapon in his plot to usurp Party leadership, seize state power and restore capitalism in China. (Adler 2011, p. 7)

The understanding of capitalism here is what might be called ‘crony capitalism’ today. This is very much in keeping with Weber’s perspective of the inability of a Confucian China to engage in modern markets, where trade occurs between strangers and transactions are driven by profit-maximisation for individuals and little else. The fusion between the political
and economic spheres was where Weber also found China lacking in its ability to modernise.

But the China of today is a far cry from either the China of Weber’s studies or Mao’s China. How have the ‘marketisation’ policies of the last twenty-five years affected Weber’s predicted future? Has China’s rejection of Confucian thinking helped make the opening of markets with international trading easier? This is a difficult question to answer with a simple examination of China’s recent history, which is never really simple. To offer what Weber called ‘understanding through opposition’ (Radkau 2011), it is perhaps constructive to compare what is currently articulated by Chinese scholars on approaches to management in the public sector—which oversees the opening of trade to other countries—with scholars’ views on management from a context that is still very much steeped in Confucian thinking, South Korea. By examining the context of public bureaucracies in South Korea, where neo-Confucianism enshrined many of the traditions against which Mao and the CCP railed, it will become clearer as to what Weber meant by ‘rationalisation’ and modernising the state, and why he saw Confucian states as unlikely to modernise.

KOREA AND CONFUCIANISM

Anyone who has visited South Korea within the last decade would have difficulty concluding that it was not a ‘modern’ state. With a high degree of urbanisation (91.6% of the population lives in urban areas, according to a United Nations 2011 report), a highly efficient infrastructure, including global shipping and transportation capacity, South Korea functions at most levels as part of the developed world. Its government is highly centralised and unitary, so the degree of control exercised by the national government over affairs of state and economy is considerable. Yet it has done so in apparent contradiction of Weber’s predictions, since the public sector (and indeed much of private sector corporations as well) has firm roots in Confucian ideals and values. So, was Weber wrong?

A closer examination of the Korean system may help answer this question. There is remarkably little literature on Confucian influences on Korean management, either public or private, and this in itself may be telling. But recent attempts to chronicle the history of public service in Korea have generated some interesting observations.
Kim (2012) notes that in the 1990s, a growing interest in ‘Koreanisation’ of public administration developed, in addition to the idea of indigenisation. As he explains, “The terms Koreanization and indigenization sound similar, but have slightly different connotations...In general, Koreanization implies that the pattern of development needs to reflect the Korean values and behavioral factors of Korean public administration” (Kim 2012, p. 229). This does not mean a return, as he puts it, “to old Confucian values. Instead, it could be seen as a way to find Koreans’ own identity and realization of remaining relevant with a reasonable synthesis between domestic and foreign ideas” (p. 228). But unfortunately, he does not elaborate further on what the more modern values might be.

The pervasive influence of Confucian values in East Asia was addressed by Frederickson, but in an overarching manner, with little attention paid to particular approaches within nations. More recently, however, Im et al. (2013) have examined how the neo-Confucian teachings of the late Chosun dynasty still resonate in the current Korean civil service. Here, the focus is on indigenisation, but from a historical perspective that attempts to document where Confucian tenets may conflict with prescriptions from public administration theory borrowed from the West. The authors discover “a good deal of continuity between these unique features of the Chosun administration and the contemporary state, including the relationship between the state and society and the individual behavior of government officials” (p. 294). Some of the most important are those articulated in the moral obligations of the state. But the manifestations of these obligations play out in three ways:

Much like the structure of state-society relations, the organizational culture of the South Korean bureaucracy today contains many features that derive from the country’s Confucian heritage. In particular, the low substitutability of employees, a cultural acceptance of bureaucratic discretion, and a promotion-driven incentive system can be understood as key features of the Korean bureaucracy that distinguish it from Western models. (Im et al. 2013, p. 292)

Unlike Frederickson, Im and his co-authors clearly have the Weberian legal-rational model in mind as the epitome of ‘Western’ thinking. And the distinctions they articulate go a long way toward highlighting the different conceptions of the behavior of a public official within a Confucian system and one adhering to Weber’s legal-rational tenets. The insights
offered into why a Korean public official may behave in ways that would not make sense within a Weberian logic are compelling. Since a Confucian system internalises rules within individuals through learning and study, each individual in the system may have a unique set of skills that s/he brings to her/his organisation. This is what Im et al. mean when they describe ‘low substitutability of employees’. Rather than having the position dictate the skills of the occupant, as the Weberian system is often interpreted as requiring, the occupant defines the position.

This articulation of the Confucian basis for public officials and their behavior is probably the most important because it highlights both the ideal of the ancient regimes and how far the current practice has both been adhered to and deviated from. Key to the training of public officials and their subsequent execution of duties was the idea that a proper education would provide them with the appropriate tools to do what was necessary. As Frederickson states, “In the Confucian states, it is assumed that both governmental and family investments in education will reap cultural, social, and especially economic benefits... Through education, one could become a good official, part of the ruling elite. In this way, Confucius built an enduring link between education and political power” (2002, p. 618).

However, this approach is prone to the same problem that Weber identifies in modern societies, where the means for producing something of value (say, capital) become ends in and of themselves. This is where Weber’s idea of the means becoming the ends in modern society is both prescient and predicted by Confucius himself. As Im et al. explain:

Just as a whole-of-the-person approach reduces substitutability in government organization, greater individuation of employees also makes any failures on the job inseparable from personal failures on the part of the offending employee. The emphasis in Korean culture on “saving face” motivates employees to avoid exposing themselves to criticism or fault wherever possible. As such, Korean culture tends to produce a highly “bureaucratic type” that relies upon the rules and regulations of the organization in the process of carrying out their duties. This reliance on rules reduces the chances that one would have to act in a discretionary manner, thereby opening his or herself up to censure should the discretionary action produce negative or unintended consequences. Thus, reliance on the rules allows bureaucrats to preserve their honor and reputation within a system where personal relations go deeper than formal organizational ties, a behavior grounded in the deeper cultural context of the bureaucracy.
rather than a respect for the legal-rational authority base of the organization in the Weberian sense of term. (Im et al. 2013, p. 293)

Herein lies the heart of the distinction—the source of the laws, rules and regulations that Weber saw as the basis of modern society was not a monarch or a benevolent aristocracy, learned or otherwise. In Europe, the social contracts between rulers and the ruled had long since soured. As in China, the obligation of the ruling class to care for those less fortunate has been abandoned. Once that social contract was broken, and the bonds of noblesse oblige rent asunder, any law based on traditional authority would be challenged. The source of Weber’s legal-rational authority was not a monarchy offering decrees for the population but rather laws arrived at through the consultation and competition of democratic political systems. Without this key component undergirding legal-rational authority, it would be easy to mistake one set of laws and rules for another.

So, the Korean system has managed the task of producing a modern economy with some deference to Confucian norms (the dominance of chaebol, the large corporations led by powerful families, for example). But it has done so with a burgeoning development of its political systems at the same time (Kim 2012), which may mean that Weber was not too far off the mark. How does this help us to understand what may happen in the future in Korea, and what the implications are for China? Again, a comparison may be useful.

**CHINA AND KOREA: QUASI-CONFUCIAN?**

China has been attempting ‘marketisation’ within a communist context, which may seem odd for a country that used to denounce ‘running dog capitalists’ and saw the accumulation of wealth as ‘spiritual pollution’ (Snow 1937). However, the CCP leadership after Mao’s death saw the need to try alternatives from state-centric models, especially to stimulate growth and then provide better distributions of societal resources. Both of these goals are very much in keeping with the CCP’s central concerns: address abject poverty and maintain the social contract between the Party and the people. The real question is whether this constitutes capitalism as a manifestation of Weber’s rationalisation.

In South Korea, as discussed above, there are lingering shadows of Confucian structures within public service, but as the nation has moved
towards more democratic manifestations of governing, the rules of the
state have reflected this movement. In China, there have been calls
to re-introduce Confucian values in public service sectors as wealth
has increased and the privileges (and excesses) associated with politi-
cal power have become more obvious. If Weber’s conception of legal-
rationale authority is correct, then we might expect to see a number
of things develop in both countries as markets and political systems evolve.
Before addressing where these systems may go in the future, summaris-
ing where they are now with respect to manifestations of Confucianism
and Weberian rationalisation is a logical precursor.

Where Are We Now?

Thus far, Weber’s legal-rational authority and Confucianism have been
presented as separate and somewhat contradictory ideals for adminis-
trative systems. They have, however, both been manifested to different
extents in the two countries examined, and now we have a better idea
as to what brings us to the twenty-first century and how these ideals
might play out in the two systems. But until now, one key component
of societal change has been left unexamined, and it seems appropriate to
address it here, since it is pertinent to where both countries may go in
the future. This is the question of industrialisation, and its impacts on
social ties, especially those considered central to Confucianism, such as
the relations between members of the family. As industrialisation has
moved societies into the era of mass production and consumption, the
impact on familial and social networks has been well-documented by
sociologists (e.g. Durkheim’s anomie), as well as its impact on public
institutions and whether or not they suffer dysfunction (Merton 1940).
This is where the parallelism of Confucian norms in both public and pri-

As societies industrialise, the role of government in this process can
take many forms. In China, the communist state played the role of
family organiser, restructuring social ties in ways that included pull-
ing women into the industrial labor force in a public and official way
(Cooke 2001). The concerted effort to make women equal partners in
the new state was an open rebuke of the fundamental division between
male and female roles in Confucian society. Although this rebuke has not
been as successful as first envisioned (Kanthor 2016), compared to the
status of women in South Korea, Chinese women have, to date, fared
much better (Cooke 2010). This can be linked directly to Confucian norms, and their repudiation in Mao’s China.

The Confucian model of societal relations is premised on the family and the roles played within this sphere, which Weber acknowledges as distinct from the public sphere. However, as Arendt (1958) argues, the family can never be viewed as a democratic unit, and the inherent conflict between an autocratic head, no matter how benevolent, and pluralistic models, creates dysfunctions in the fabric of society. As Merton notes (1972), the opportunity for a state to rewrite social relationships presented by industrialisation can render very different sets of conditions within public organisations. And in East Asia, depending on how firmly the state adheres to Confucian norms, one of the clearest manifestations of such adherence presently can be found in the role women play in public organisations. One might argue that ‘modernisation’ in East Asia must face this question head on, as the state plays a mediating role between the increasingly separate public and private spheres Weber predicts. If Confucianism is brought back in its original form as a governing template, there will be a heavy cost for precisely this reason. The social structures that underlay relationships in Confucian times have changed substantially, in both overt (e.g., visible roles for women in public institutions) and covert (e.g., restructuring of generational family ties) ways. The fit will be a difficult match, given these changes, and may require substantial rethinking by states looking for a path forward.

That said, does the Weberian ideal offer a viable alternative? One might argue that Weber’s cautionary tale of modernisation does, at least, give form and name to the pitfalls that lie along the path toward greater reliance on law and empiricism, and an articulation of what may be lost when we label individual discretion as inherently undesirable. In his discussions of different systems of jurisprudence and the exercise of justice, Weber notes that the discretion exercised by judges in traditional systems can favour the poor in a way that brings equity to an inequitable system (Weber 1954). Empirical justice systems, in contrast, offer no such path. Thus, if society becomes less equitable, a legal-rational system will simply make things worse. From his nineteenth century vantage point, Weber was peering around the arc of history, buoyed by his analysis of the past to try and see what brave new world the rapid change of his age might bring. The modernism he saw was technological in form, advancing through the discoveries of science, and offering exciting possibilities for what was to come. But it lacked a solid grounding in
human social structures, which is precisely what confounded his observations and necessitated the creation of ideal types. Weber saw mankind as driven, but not necessarily by the same natural benevolence presupposed in Confucianism. The darkness of rationality, especially in its nineteenth century German context, lies in its separation from compassion. So, while Weber’s approach may recognize the rising influence of legal norms that push beyond national and cultural boundaries, the key to creating an administrative apparatus that is responsive to indigenous needs in non-western contexts lies in being able to produce rules that have a feel for their local conditions. This is where Confucian norms provide common ground, and where the two approaches might combine to form a quasi-Confucian, hybrid approach.

CONCLUSION: WHERE MIGHT QUASI-CONFUCIANISM LEAD?

If the twenty-first century truly is an Asian century, then there will have to be a reconciling of these approaches. Fortunately, as discussed thus far, they are not so far apart as might be expected. However, the problems lie in their similarity of form, and the conclusions drawn by those who think that structure dictates function, and can lead to misinterpretations of behavior. Thinking about how such differences may play out within the context of Chinese and South Korean administrative systems can be instructive in showing how the dissimilarities under the surface may be revealed and thus better understood, both inside and beyond the borders of East Asia. What might we expect as these systems move forward into a more interconnected and interwoven system?

First, higher levels of transparency will become crucial to maintaining public trust in both systems. Contrary to popular conceptions of the authoritarian state in China suppressing all dissent through force, or the Korean government being democratically responsive to its citizenry, both countries rely on the consent of the governed to maintain their rule. Bureaucrats play a key role in the perception citizens have of their governing classes and the relationship between those classes and the public at large. Expanding power, whether economic or political, may be the driving incentive behind the modern state, but when private interests violate and corrupt public trust, the law must reflect and enforce balance. This is in keeping with both a Confucian pursuit of virtue and a Weberian sense of vocation for public officials.
How the state accomplishes this may be seen by examining attempts to combat corruption in the public sector, which for both countries is a perennial concern. This is perhaps the stickiest issue to address, since the source of authority in a Weberian system and a Confucian system are quite different. A hypothetical example helps to illustrate this difference. In both systems, let us agree that corruption occurs when a public official uses the power of his or her office for personal gain. But how is this determined? From the outside, if a public official decides favorably in a case where a plaintiff is within the public official’s network of relations, has corruption taken place? Within a Weberian system, the answer to this question might be answered by looking at the underlying laws or rules that guided the decision. If it appears that the rules have been executed objectively, then we may draw the conclusion that corruption is not an issue. But within a Confucian system, such scrutiny does not yield a ready answer. If we trust that the official is behaving with propriety, then we may conclude that no corruption has taken place. But if we do not know whether or not the official has propriety, then no such trust can be assumed. This gray area, where the manifestations of both proper and improper behavior might be one and the same, is an unresolved problem for Confucian systems. Thus, higher levels of transparency, and practice with explaining how and why decisions were reached may become more common.

Second, the role of the public sector as a supporter of markets will shift from direct financial backing (through state banks) to research oriented support. This has already begun in China, where significant portions of the national budget are being poured into research and design in all areas of the economy. Public officials have become more specialised in particular areas of expertise. This is not yet the case in Korea, but there have been recent movements in a similar direction. This is again a fusion of the Confucian value of filial piety, where the state is responsible for leading the way to a better life for the people, and the Weberian ideal of specialised expertise that requires training and mastery to execute.

Third, and perhaps most important, may be a loosening of the kinship ties that often drive bureaucratic behaviour. In China, the expression “you guanshi keyi cai hou men” (有关系可以开后门, or “if you have connections, you can open the back door”) illustrates the importance of personal relations to getting government bureaucrats to respond to requests for assistance. In Korea, these ties are illustrated by the way in which information is shared within an organisation. If no formal relationship
exists between people, then rarely does an informal relationship develop to help overcome some of the structural barriers to communication. This can often slow down the exchange of information necessary for individual bureaucrats to complete tasks or expedite their fulfillment of duties. As these ties loosen and more informal ties are made that smooth communication, formalism may decline (some would argue it has already declined too far in China). This will be the most disruptive change in South Korea, since many social norms are premised on the formal relations between individuals.

At the end of this examination, as indicated at the outset, there is far less distance between Confucius and Weber than one might think. However, the world that Weber foresaw is one that had been rejected by Confucius as unsustainable and out of sync with the natural world, and therefore, out of balance with heaven (tian 天). Weber would have agreed, since he drew small pleasure from watching the efficient exercise of industry in his own nation, and saw the ways in which empire could become little more than an instrument of war. But if Confucian values can inject sustainability into Weberian rationalisation, this may be a path worth pursuing. Weber himself might concur.

**Note**

1. The use of the male term only here is intentional—Confucianism is very clear on distinct roles for men and women in society, and this should not be overlooked.

**References**


