

Weber's Protestant Ethic and the Chinese Preference for Sons: An Application of Western Sociology to Eastern Religion*

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Abstract

Sociologists are introduced early in their training to Max Weber's proposition that the collective imperatives of modern capitalism are rooted in a cultural transformation: That the obligation to achieve and maintain systematic control of everyday life has persisted into the modern age, though now bereft of its religious underpinnings. This paper offers the proposition that Weber's analytical construct provides equally fertile application in the analysis of simultaneous cultural persistence and change in non-Western civilizations. The Chinese preference for sons originated amid the ancient reaches of Chinese folk religion's demand that parents' funeral rites and three years of mourning be presided over by their first-born son, lest the parents' souls be relegated to an eternal destiny of wandering the world as hungry ghosts. The argument offered here is that the endurance of this preference for sons, as evidenced by demographers' findings of significantly distorted sex ratios in contemporary China, can be explained, as was the rise of modern capitalism, by Weber's conception of a cultural transformation from substantive to formal rationality.

Keywords: China, sex ratio, preference for sons, funeral rites, inner-worldly mysticism, other-worldly mysticism, Max Weber, substantive rationality, formal rationality.

Introduction

This paper argues that the endurance of Chinese parents' preference for sons, as evidenced by demographers' findings of significantly distorted sex ratios in contemporary China, can be explained, as was the rise of modern capitalism, by Weber's conception of a cultural transformation from substantive to formal rationality. The paper develops this argument in three sections.

First, the concept of SRB (sex ratio at birth) is explained and the distortions that have appeared in this ratio, in China, during the past 25 years are examined. The interpretation is put forward that this demographic

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