

# Patrimonialism and Protestant Ethics

## A Process of Rationalization

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One of the fundamental themes that has been repeatedly raised by Western social scientists is the concept of a universal history. Max Weber, the 19th century German sociologist and economist, was no exception. This is evident in his introduction to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which begins: "To what combination of circumstances should the fact be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared that lie in a line of development having universal significance and value?" His conclusion was, without a doubt, "the process of rationalization," which resulted in the most fateful force in modern civilization, capitalism.

To verify this conclusion, Weber investigated the relation between religion and society from a broad perspective. By comparing the ethics of several religious doctrines, he sought to show that some had an accelerating effect and others a retarding effect on the rationality of economic activity. The ideal-type mentality, which Weber attributed to the origin of modern capitalism in the West, was the Puritan ethic based on worldly asceticism. Thus, Weber explained: "One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism, and not only of that but also of all modern culture, [is] rational conduct on the basis of the idea of calling . . . born from the spirit of



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Christian asceticism."

However, Weber did not give any fuller explanation for why one civilization should be more intelligent and rational than another. Rationality can vary not only from one culture to another but from one social group to another, depending in each case on the ends and means of that group. In other words, there can be different versions of rationality depending on different socioeconomic conditions. Certainly, there is evidence that Weber puzzled about this point, especially when he encountered Asian societies whose social structure he found to be qualitatively different from that of Western societies. Weber labeled these Asian characteristics "patrimonialism," as opposed to the Western "feudalism," which is the point of departure of this article.

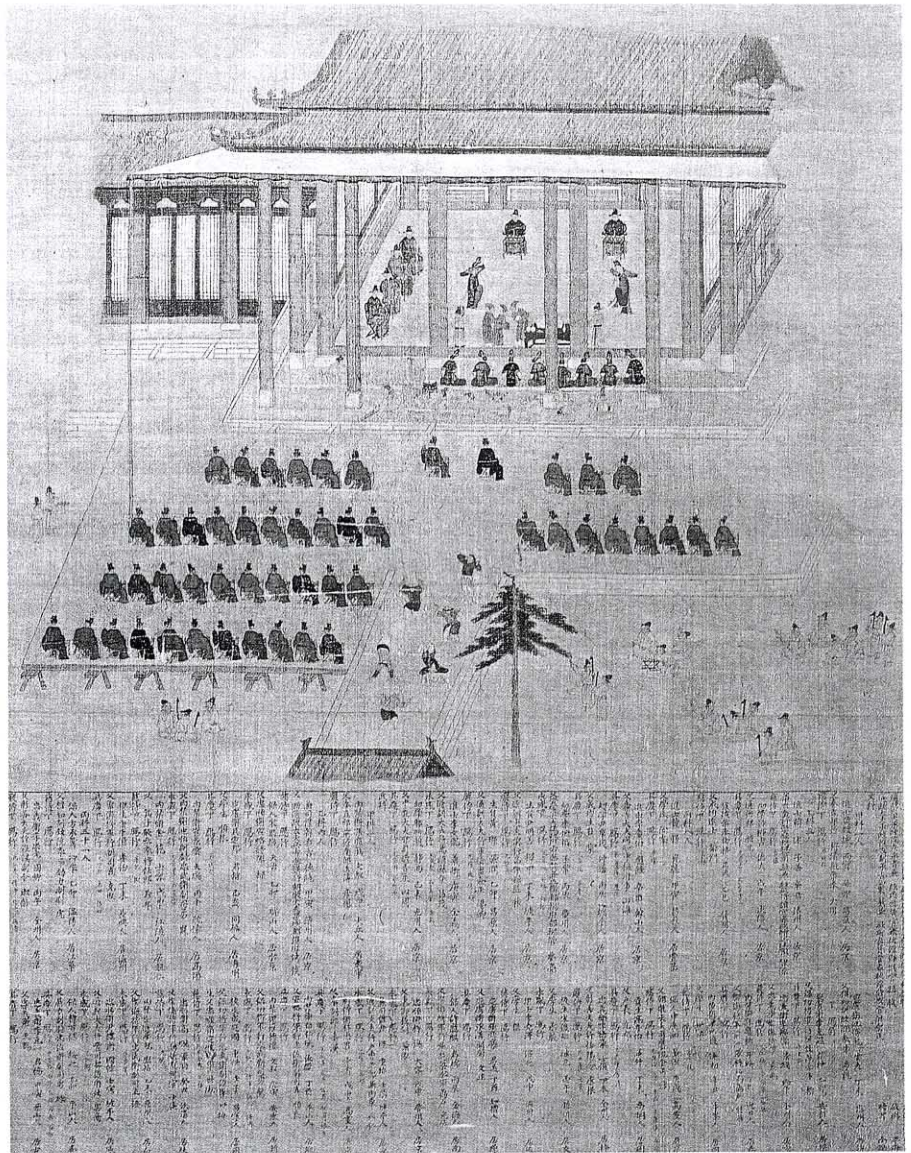
According to Weber, patrimonialism is an extension of the ruler's household whereby the relationship between the ruler and the members of his staff is based on paternal authority and filial dependency, whereas feudalism replaces the paternal relationship with contractually fixed fealty based on knightly militarism. In patrimonialism, the staff is exemplified by the ruler's personal assistant, who helps with administration. His status is dependent on the ruler's favor and is exposed to his arbitrary demands. Any attempt by independent status groups to establish a monopoly of offices is prevented by

appointing hereditary dependents, or outsiders who are completely dependent on the ruler.

However, in feudalism, the ruler's staff predominantly consists of warriors who identify their own honor with that of their ruler. They arm themselves with weapons they have been trained to use so as to serve their lord's interests, which are identical to their own. The vassal's characteristic qualification of warrior proficiency led to the development of the military notion of "status honor" among themselves, and provided the basis for the contractual relationship of reciprocal rights and duties between the ruler and his staff members.

Weber furthers his typology when he describes how the ruler pays the members of his staff. The keys are "prebends" in patrimonialism and "fiefs" in feudalism. A prebend is a lifelong but not hereditary remuneration for its holder in exchange for his real or presumed services, and the remuneration is an attribute of the office, not of the incumbent. However, a fief is the vassal's personal property for the duration of the feudatory relationship, and it remains inalienable since it is tied to a highly personal relationship, and indivisible since it is intended to preserve the vassal's service capacities.

Thus, Weber noticed the typological difference in social structure between European society and Asian society. In the West a decentralizing tendency, encouraged by the appropriation of fiefs, the contractual relations between rulers and their vassals, and the notion of status honor that accompanied knighthood, prevailed and helped the rise of the landed class, who possessed power and wealth independent of their rulers. These cardinal characteristics of European feudalism are highly suggestive in the sense that they paved the way for modern competitive capitalism; borrowing Marxist terms, feudalism contained the seeds for class struggle. In other words, feudalism, because of its structure, allows for



**King's Banquet for Successful Candidates of the Government Service Examination, 1580, anonymous (above); the ultimate goal of most *sonbi* was to become a successful scholar-official, a process that began with passing the government service examination. An engraved medallion called *map'ae* (left) indicated that the bearer was an emissary of the king. The number of horses on the medallion indicated the bearer's rank.**

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competition between social groups. It has the buds of a pluralistic society because it provides opportunities for other groups to be independent from the ruling group.

In contrast, in the East, the inherence of patrimonial authority prevented the decentralizing tendency and favored centralized control. However, a patrimonial ruler was not free from power struggles with the members of his staff. As the ruler's domain expanded beyond his direct control, he was forced to provide for a large administrative officialdom, which put him in a dilemma. The absence of a supreme officialdom could bring about the disintegration of the regime. But the existence of such an officialdom could endanger the ruler's supreme authority, especially if the officials as a group succeeded in enlisting the loyalty of the ruler's personal dependents and political subjects, thus undermining his

authority through group consolidation.

In order to counteract this tendency toward decentralization, the patrimonial ruler only grants privileges in exchange for the duties he imposes. Hence, prebend or benefice, not fief. The official's prerogatives are always at stake, dependent on the confidence of the ruler. The patrimonial ruler does not allow any possibility for independent group consolidation of power and wealth. Hence, no independent standing army, no independent landlords, and no independent bourgeoisie can form. If such groups are needed for any reason, the ruler organizes them compulsorily under the control of patrimonial officialdom. Thus, patrimonialism is structurally closed to any group competition. There exists only one all-powerful social group, the patrimonial officials, which stands above all other social groups (such as landlords, warriors, peasants, merchants and arti-

sans); yet they are unable and unwilling to unite against the ruler. Competition for the ruler's confidence has been atomized, and officials must secure their prerogatives individually.

This typological distinction of Weber provides the possibility for a different process of rational development. He touched on it in his *The Religions of China*: "Confucian rationalization meant rational adjustment to the world; Puritan rationalization meant rational mastery of the world." However, Weber was too preoccupied with seeking the mental origin of rational capitalism in history to refute Marx's materialistic determinism, thus attenuating the significance of social typological structure.

Weber, in *The Religions of China*, devoted much space to describing the social characteristics of patrimonial China, as opposed to feudal western Europe. These characteristics may be summarized as follows: a relatively strong money economy and enormous population growth without the accompanying development of capitalistic phenomena; the lack of political autonomy of cities and guilds; the persistent sib organization at the local level, which did not unite and oppose the central government; the literary qualifications for government office and the development of a civil service examination system, which promoted individual competition for offices among the candidates of the literati and thus prevented them from joining together into a feudal office nobility; and the lack of an innovative spirit, both in the orthodoxy of Confucianism and the heterodoxy of Taoism.

Weber discussed all these characteristics in close relation with the earlier unification of the Chinese state and the consequent establishment of a centrally organized officialdom, which typically has a patrimonial structure. To control China's huge territory from the center, the imperial government depended upon the administrative services of prebend-holding officials, not upon the

military services of self-armed knights. Thus, in China, the struggle for political power turned on the distribution of offices rather than on the distribution of land. The patrimonial emperors of China opposed the tendencies of the officials toward the appropriation of prebends and hence toward independence by granting only short-tenure appointments, by not appointing officials to regions where they had relatives, by supervising officials through secret inspectors, and, above all, by maintaining a system of official examinations and merit rating.

### Escape from a Predicament

By and large, these methods institutionalized both competition and distrust among the officials as well as a positive social evaluation of office holding through educational achievement. The result was that officials formed a status group whose distinct way of life set them apart from the rest of society and made them dependent upon the will of the ruler. Consequently, as individuals, Chinese officials were freely removable, unlike the analogous fief holders of western Europe who could successfully appropriate their positions and pass them on to their heirs. Once the Chinese structure had been established, it tended to perpetuate because of the collective interest of officialdom in the existing opportunities for personal income and prestige, which discouraged any tendency to seek independent group power.

Nevertheless, Weber sought to explain the failure of rational capitalism to appear in China for reasons of the Chinese mentality. His conclusion was that Chinese society presented both favorable and unfavorable conditions for the development of competitive industrial capitalism, but what was critically lacking in China was the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in Western society, which created a certain tension toward the day-to-day world. Thus, he claimed: "Alien to the

Confucian was the peculiar confinement and repression of natural impulse that was brought on by strictly volitional and ethical rationalization and was ingrained in Puritanism."

However, Thomas Metzger recently raised a serious question about Weber's conclusion. Contrary to Weber's claim, he conceptualized a "predicament" elaborated by Neo-Confucianism, the school of thought first promulgated by Zhu Xi in the 12th century that has since been adopted as the principal ideology of the Chinese state. He suggests that the condition to "escape from predicament" might be comparable to the pervasive tension that Weber found in the Puritan definition of the human condition.

To reinforce this point, Etienne Balazs emphasized the structural factor in Chinese development. For him, the bureaucratic top-down control that did not allow any room for independent accumulation of wealth among other social groups was primarily responsible for the lack of competitive capitalism. Thus, he states: "The supreme inhibiting factor was the overwhelming prestige of the state bureaucracy, which maimed from the start any attempts of the bourgeoisie to be different, to become aware of themselves as a class and fight for an autonomous position in society." He concluded that, if there were any capitalism in China, it would be a "state-led capitalism." Similarly, Fernand Braudel indicated that in China, "accumulation could only be achieved by the state and within the state apparatus, that is, there could be no capitalism, except within certain clearly defined groups, backed by the state, supervised by the state, and always remaining more or less at its mercy."

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instilled a strong tendency toward centralization rather than decentralization in Korean society. Centralized bureaucracy also dominated the process of nation building that followed liberation from Japan, as well as that of economic development after the military coup d'état led by former President Park Chung-hee. South Korea is second to almost no other developing nation in the degree and scope of the state bureaucracy's centralized control over other social sectors.

Korea's patrimonial ruling structure also played a particularly prominent role in the country's recent rapid economic development. Korea's economy has achieved sustained growth for the past three decades, thanks to the planning, execution, supervision and mobilization of resources by the state. Of course, the scope and degree of government intervention in the market has varied during these decades of growth, but it was fundamentally based on the premise that the government would play the role of the superior and private industry that of the subordinate. It is also true that the South Korean government has earned the ignominy of being branded "interventionist," defying the basic order of a market economy in order to maintain a hierarchical relationship between government and industry. Nevertheless, the Korean economy has been able to achieve steady growth as a result of government intervention.

Although Korea has now sought help from the International Monetary Fund and is currently under its supervision due to a temporary shortage of foreign currency, the government is still playing a central role in coping with the economic crisis. The state's dominant status is again being confirmed in reforming the *chaebol* or family-operated conglomerates' careless management style and in instilling flexibility into the labor market. Needless to say, Korea's patrimonial tradition lies behind the role played by the government in these matters. ♦