Blind Spot?
Weber’s Concept of Expertise and the Perplexing Case of China


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When Weber talked about the problem of the role of knowledge in society, he used a vocabulary in which the terms ‘experts’ (Experten) and ‘specialists’ (Spezialisten) are more or less interchangeable. His normative ideas on this subject were central to ‘Science as a Vocation’, where he argues that:

only by strict specialization can the scientific worker become fully conscious, for once and perhaps never again in his lifetime, that he has achieved something that will endure. A really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment. And whoever lacks the capacity to put on blinders, so to speak, and to come up to the idea that the fate of his soul depends upon whether or not he makes the correct conjecture at this passage of the manuscript may as well stay away from science. ([1919]1946, 135)

This reflected his attitude toward literary intellectuals peddling Weltanschauungen, but it was continuous with his hostility during the value-freedom debate in the Verein für Sozialpolitik (cf. Simey 1966, cited in Turner and Factor 1984, 57-58) toward the claim of the economists of the historical school to provide ‘scientific’ policy advice and his hostility to professorial prophets, both of whom, he claimed, mixed value choices, which were inherently non-rational, with the claims they could legitimately make as ‘scientists’. When these texts were written the ideal of universal knowledge and of intellectual leaders such as Goethe who could claim universal knowledge was dying a painful death. It was still upheld in literary circles and in the thought of such philosophers such as Heidegger. An underlying theme of these texts is scorn for literary intellectuals’ ambitions to be political guides. These struggles of his last decade provided the highly fraught context for Weber’s writing on China ([1920]1951).

In Weber’s discussion of Confucianism in historical Chinese society, he was faced with a bureaucracy and a judiciary which was produced by a system of examinations on what he characterizes as literary subjects. His repeated use of the term ‘literary’ is revealing. In a sense, the Confucian tradition represents the fulfillment of the fantasies of his literary critics: a stable functioning order ruled by the literati on the basis of literary expertise. For Weber this model was necessarily one which could not achieve or eventuate in rationality, and the non-rational character of this tradition and of Chinese civilization became his theme in the text. There are many peculiar issues around his conclusion which raise questions about the status and meaning of the notion of expertise itself. The issues are whether the category of expertise and the category of expert knowledge are categories with a kind of universal significance or rather merely socially variable categories for which there are fundamental possible alternatives, and whether ‘specialist’ and ‘expert’ are interchangeable concepts. The Chinese case represents a powerful example through which these questions can be considered.
Weber, in the series of studies of which his book on China was a part, was concerned with the problem of the development of modern western capitalistic economic rationality that resulted in the rationalization of the world of work, which then carried over into the rest of life. There is, however, a strong element of circularity in Weber’s general account of this problem, because of his growing insistence in his last writings, especially his lectures on world economic history (1927-1961), that the rational organization of works was a wholly distinctive historical phenomenon. Circularity arises because the various forms of rationalization that Weber argued are the conditions for modern capitalism are not quite what they might appear. In this text they are presented as ‘conditions’ or causes:

In the last resort the factor which produced capitalism is the rational permanent enterprise, rational accounting, rational technology and rational law, but again not these alone. Necessary complementary factors were the rational spirit, the rationalization of the conduct of life in general, and a rationalistic economic ethic. (1927-1961, 260)

But Weber speaks of them also as ‘the distinguishing characteristics of western capitalism’, and even follows this with ‘and its causes’ (1927-1961, 232), thus confirming the muddle.

The issue, however, runs even deeper than this particular confusion over causes and definitions: it reappears at the core of his project, in relation to rationalism itself. In his late introductory essay to the *Religionssoziologie*, which Gerth and Mills titled ‘The Social Psychology of World Religions’ (1915-1946), Weber wrote that the sources of modern rationality in the West turn out to be distinctive elements of rationality that were always there in the West and were either absent or very incompletely present (and consequently never fully developed) elsewhere (1958, 13-15). There is a strong sense that Weber in this project never in fact found the differentiating causes that led to western rationalism, but merely found fundamental differences reaching back to prior differences of more or less the same kind.

He could enumerate these differences, but not explain their appearance in history. It is striking that when he attempted to do so, he was caught up in problems over the rationality of the actions to be explained. His explanation of the relative unimportance of magic in the West, which is crucial to his comparison with China, was given in his discussion of ancient Judaism in the same series of studies. There he argued that more or less accidental peculiarities of the Jewish use of oracles resulted in the absence of magic and the development of ‘rational methods’:

The Levitical oracle required something quite different: the question had to be correctly put in order that the facts and God’s substantive will be determined simply by lot. Everything depended on the way that the question was put, thus, the Levite had to acquire a rational method to express problems to be placed before God in a form permitting answers of ‘yea’ and ‘nay’. Complicated preliminary questions had to be settled before they could be placed before God and, in many instances, this arrangement hardly left anything to be determined by oracle. . . . Particularly for private needs, the oracle inevitably became less and less important as against the rational case study of sins, until the theological rationalism of Deuteronomy (18:9-15) in substance discredited lot casting
altogether, or at least ceased to mention it. . . . The oracle by lot is mentioned by Ezekiel (21:21) for Babylonia, but it had, as far as is known, long since disappeared from priestly technique. It was not replaced by rational Torah teaching but by the collection and systematization of the *omnia* and by expert priestly interpretation. (1952, 179, 180)

The idea that small events have large consequences is not unique to Weber. But in this case the explanation seem to presuppose the rationality it purports to explain: Without a ‘rational’ or non-magical attitude to these rituals, in this case a kind of literal legalism, the Levites would not have ‘had to acquire a rational method to express problems’. Nor would they have extended the rituals in a non-magical way, and would not have excluded alternative ‘magical’ rituals from their religious practice, as they apparently did. So rationality comes first, before the thing that explains it, here and generally.

This becomes especially apparent in his discussion of China, in which one particular form of thought produces difficulties for Weber. The form is Confucianism, especially Confucianism, in its role as the basis of the conduct of officials in the classical Chinese bureaucracy. In the face of this Weber was reduced to something that looked suspiciously like name calling with a series of references to nonrationality. Thus he says:

There was no rational science, no rational practice of art, no rational theology, jurisprudence, medicine, natural science or technology; there was neither divine nor human authority which could contest the bureaucracy. Only an ethic congruent with bureaucracy could be created and this was limited solely by consideration of the forces of tradition in the sibs and by the belief in spirits. Unlike Western civilization, there were no other specifically modern elements of rationalism standing either in competition or in support of bureaucracy. Western culture in China was grafted upon a base which, in the West, had been essentially overcome with the development of the ancient polis. Hence, the culture of this bureaucracy can be considered an experiment which approximately tests the rationalism of government by office prebendaries and its effects. Orthodox Confucianism resulted from this situation. (1951, 151-2)

His explanation for this form of thought is that it is an ideology, an ideology of what he could only characterize in western terms as a body of prebends, that is to say a body of appointed officials.

But what sort of ideology was it? It was difficult for Weber to locate this system within his standard scheme of forms of legitimacy. Weber’s three types of legitimizing belief, each characterizing a form of rule, were traditional, charismatic, and rational legal. In spite of the fact that the Chinese bureaucracy assumed normal judicial functions, it was not rational-legal in the sense that it was based on law that was codified in the sense constitutive for the West through the Roman legal tradition. That is to say, a body of law which could then be reasoned about and reasoned from independently by trained lawyers to produce predictable legal outcomes. Nor was Confucianism ‘traditional’ in its function as a guide to bureaucratic action for the simple reason that once a basis for authority is written it is, almost by definition, no longer ‘traditional’ because it now constitutes an independent potential basis for action no longer connected to the authoritative interpretation by its elders for the community. And by definition, since written texts begin with historical authors, it is no longer believed in by virtue of having the prestige of having been adhered to since time immemorial. Nor is Confucianism charismatic in the normal sense.
There is no guru with special supernatural powers demonstrated through the performance of miracles, which is the paradigm for nonmilitary charismatic leaders.

Weber was nevertheless compelled by his scheme of types of authority to identify the nonrationalism of Confucianism with something ‘legitimating’ simply by virtue of the fact that it is a legitimating doctrine, a set of claims about the basis and propriety of authority that was in fact used to justify authority. His solution was to find charismatic elements in it, but this reasoning extended the notion of charisma in problematic ways, though at the same time revealing the kinship of Confucian education to other practices. He said, for example, that there is a charismatic moment in the form of education in which the teacher awakens the charisma within the student, a phenomena he also suggested is characteristic of certain forms of noble education (1951, 119).

The charismatic procedure of ancient magical asceticism and the hero trials, which sorcerers and warrior heroes have applied to boys, tried to aid the novice to acquire a ‘new soul,’ in the animist sense, and, hence, to be reborn. Expressed in our language, this means that the merely wish to awaken and to test a capacity which was considered a purely personal gift of grace. Foe one can neither teach nor train for charisma. Either it exists in nuce, or it is infiltrated through a miracle of magical rebirth – otherwise it cannot be attained. (1951, 119-20, italics in the original)

This solves the puzzle of how a form of knowledge ruled by a rigorous system of written exams could be ‘charismatic’. But Weber’s characterization of the Confucian bureaucratic ideology remains essentially a list of negatives and paradoxes.

**Expertise and Specialism**

Although this book appears in a series dedicated to the economic ethics of the world religions (and Weber does also discuss Buddhism and Taoism in this volume), we begin with classificatory problems. Confucianism is not in any usual sense a ‘religion’. Nevertheless the role it plays in Chinese society as well as the practice of Chinese bureaucracy is in many critical respects the same as the role played by religion in Christian or Islamic societies, namely as both supplying an explication and justification of social practices and institutions as well as serving as the moral and political lingua franca or scheme of moral justification for members of that society.

In this respect, Confucianism is like a religion, and, moreover, its structure of interpretive authority is not so different from religions. This further muddles the issue about expertise. Interpretation of religious doctrine often involves religious specialists, persons whose interpretations are in some sense authoritative, whether it is through their possession of divine revelations or their scholarly mastery of the religious text, or through some special genealogical connection which granted special authority over these texts, as in the case of the Brahmins in the caste system or the Cohens and Levites of the Jewish tradition.

Weber’s more fundamental problem, however, involves the association of bureaucracy and expert or specialist knowledge. It is a curious feature of Weber’s writings that the terms ‘expert’ and ‘specialist’, which Weber used more or less interchangeably throughout his texts, nowhere appear in the concentration that they do in the text on ancient China. Weber was justifiably fascinated and disturbed by the anomaly of a ‘bureaucracy’ which does not rely on
specialists. Yet, as Weber made clear, the system depended on a rigorous system of examinations on a specific and coherent body of Confucian literature, subject to extensive scholastic interpretation. In superficial respects this knowledge is similar to other bodies of expertise. Yet the attitudes of the bureaucrats (whom he characterized as prebends!) are hostile to the kind of specialized knowledge that is the hallmark of bureaucratic organization in its Western form.

The position of the office prebendary appears in ethically hallowed form. It is the one position becoming to a superior man because the office alone allows for the perfection of personality. Mencius reasons that without permanent income the educated man can be of constant mind only with difficulty, and the people not at all. Economic, medical, priestly income represent the ‘little path.’ This leads to professional specialization, a very important point and closely connected with what has been said above. The cultured man, however, strives for that universality which in the Confucian sense education alone provides and which the office precisely requires. This view characterizes the absence of rational specialization in the official functions of the patrimonial state. (1951, 160)

And again,

The Confucian aspirant to office, stemming from the old tradition, could hardly help viewing a specialized, professional training of European stamp as anything but a conditioning in the dirtiest Philistinism. This was undoubtedly the locus of much of the important resistance to ‘reform’ in the occidental sense. The fundamental assertion, ‘a cultured man is not a tool’ meant that he was an end in himself and not just a means for a specified useful purpose. (1951, 160)

The contrast to his ideal-type definition of bureaucracy, in *Economy and Society*, is unmistakable:

Office management, at least all specialized office management— and such management is distinctly modern— usually presupposes thorough training in a field of specialization. This, too, holds increasingly for the modern executive and employee of a private enterprise, just as it does for the state officials. (1968, 958)

The anomaly is not really addressed by Weber, because in one sense there is nothing to address. The Chinese bureaucracy had many elements of bureaucracy as an administrative form and had them to such an extreme extent, for example, the centrality of written examinations for employment, that there was little question about the type of administrative form it was. The problem arose with respect to the question of knowledge, that is to say the type of knowledge that the examinations tested.

For Weber, the idea of testing bureaucratic applicants on the knowledge appropriate to a literary elite is on the face of it essentially arbitrary because the knowledge is not directly connected to the actual tasks of the bureaucrats. Nor is it connected to an ascending hierarchy of specialization in which the knowledge of beginners is built on by the knowledge of the specialist as it is in western administrative law. So the problem of expertise, and particularly the problem of expertise as used in the bureaucrats political and legal capacities, becomes Weber’s focus. What he immediately discovered is that legal enactment and particularly law finding, that is to
say, identifying the relevant applicable laws, is in the Chinese system, irrational. The laws are
not organized nor was there an impulse to organize them, contrasted radically with the Roman
legal tradition and the Justinian rationalization of law precisely through this process of
codificational organization (1951, 149). Nor was there a kind of specialist legal discourse, such
as that of the European law professors who interpreted Roman law after its ‘reception’ in the
Renaissance, that would accompany a process of judicial appeal to higher and more legally
authoritative courts. It was this feature of de facto finality of the bureaucratic judges’ legal
judgements that Weber argued could be understood in terms of the ideal type that he had
constructed in connection with Islamic law, what he called Cadi justice.

Unfortunately, this characterization explains one mystery by substituting another,
because Weber’s characterization of Cadi justice, which he admits is an ideal type that is quite
unlike the actual historical institution of the Cadi (who was constrained by divine sanction to rule
on very narrow cases), but was rather a figment of the western legal imagination that depicted
the Cadi as a judge sitting under a palm tree bound by no law book or appeals court and thus free
to rule as he pleased. The opposite was in fact closer to the truth, and the position of the Cadi
was the undesirable one of enforcing divine law without discretion or human consideration. And
this leads one to suspect that the ideal type of Cadi justice is not a possible, practical form of
adjudication, but only a hypothetical limit case, and consequently was not the actual form of
adjudication in Chinese law either (1968, 1115).

Nevertheless Cadi justice, as Weber depicted it, is in some sense an element of all law, a
point which Weber’s sometime student Carl Schmitt elevated into a radical account of
discretionary adjudication that is relevant here, at least in part because of Schmitt’s interesting
conclusion. Schmitt argued that there is always a gap between the generalities of the law and the
peculiarities of cases, and that the role of adjudication or even of bureaucratic ruling was to use
discretionary power to determine the application of principles ([1922]1985, 31). Current
philosophy of law has shed this view and its implications, claiming, in Ronald Dworkin’s famous
phrase, that there is always one right solution to legal questions. Schmitt argues what is in effect
the exact opposite, namely that there is no rational-legal consideration that bears on the
application of the law to particular cases. The gaps between the law and the particular is intrinsic
to legality as such and ineliminable by any sort of legal enactment or principle of interpretation
because any new law or principle faces the problem of application in new form without
eliminating it. This led Schmitt to the view that the only source of consistency in the judicial
process of applying the law was cultural rather than legal, that is to say that the shared prejudices
of judges are made for legal consistency rather than anything ‘rational’ or ‘legal’. This appeal to
culture is revealing because it suggests that culture might in some sense be, as it was necessarily
for the discretionary situations that Schmitt described, a more or less sufficient basis of
adjudication on its own.

This point bears in a peculiar way on Weber’s problem of understanding the relevance of
literary examinations on Confucius for bureaucrats and judges. It is at least an interesting
hypothesis that the function of literary examination was precisely to produce something
analogous to what Schmitt believed had been accidently produced in Germany by the extra-legal
selection of judges from a particular social class, namely a strong cultural similarity which made
it possible for legal and bureaucratic decision making to be coherent and to an extent sufficient to
produce and sustain a form of bureaucratic and judicial rule despite the apparent lack of
codification.\(^2\)

With this the pieces begin to fall into place. If literary examinations perform the function
of testing for the possession of the shared culture necessary for bureaucratic adjudication and for the predictable carrying out of bureaucratic directives, then the system of examining and training becomes the mechanism for reproducing the particular kind of knowledge necessary for and appropriate to the bureaucracy. The knowledge in question would then not be expert knowledge in the specialist sense, but expert knowledge in a ‘cultural’ sense that also happens to be sufficient for and appropriate to the particular legal task of exercising judicial and bureaucratic discretion in a manner that is consistent with the decision of others and hence predictable.

What remains somewhat mysterious about this solution to the problem of the nature of Chinese bureaucratic knowledge is the question of the content of this knowledge. Schmitt says little about the content of the similarities between German judges that enabled them to make sense of the rules in the same way. But the impression one gets is that they are employing their discretion as conservative upholders of the existing social order and that their predictability takes the form of bias against particular groups and ideas, and toward resolutions to conflicts that favor particular kinds of people. In the Chinese case, however, the interests are created by the bureaucratic structure and the common ground is a result of the system of intense literary examinations itself. So the exams seem to function in the manner of bar exams for lawyers, but have non-legal, ‘cultural’ content.

Schmitt’s nonlegal solution to the problem of legal indeterminacy depends on the idea that there is a radical disjunction in kind between a legal consideration and the discretionary considerations and prejudices that inform the application of the law or bureaucratic decision-making. And it is this disjunction that does not hold in the case of China, though Weber strives to make it appear that it does by insisting on the ‘literary’ character of the exams. Confucianism, however, is neither simply a literary culture, nor a religion, nor a bureaucratic ideology, nor specialist expertise, but something that is all of these things and perhaps much more. So we are faced with a problem of elaborating an explanation of a systematically different nonwestern phenomenon through the multiplication of western intellectual distinctions, a process which ends in defining problems rather than explaining them.

A better analogy might be made to some accounts of American constitutional law, which suggest that there is a background doctrine that is not legal in the narrow sense but rather a kind of political theory that evolves along with adjudication and is relied on by the courts (Barber, 1993). Knowledge of this body of thought, which takes the form of interpretations of the deeper significance of precedents, is not legal knowledge in the technical sense, and not specialist knowledge either, but rather something shared by the most profound thinkers in the community of constitutional interpreters. It is at the same time, in a sense, also the philosophy of the community— but it is a deeper understanding of this philosophy than the man in the street possesses. It is not the same as a Weltanschauung, which is supposedly ‘shared’, but rather it is something understood more deeply by some than by others who also live in accordance with it.

Where Weber Went Wrong

If we grant that Weber’s interpretation went wrong, it is appropriate to ask why it did. There seem to be two reasons, one of which is conceptual, the other a failure of scholarship. I will consider these briefly. Weber, as we have seen, operated with a disjunction between rationality, embodied in expertise which is specialized, and the category of the nonrational. The way the distinction is applied has the effect of excluding the possibility of rational non-specialized
knowledge. As I have noted, this was the point of contention in the dispute that became the ‘crisis of the sciences’, which followed his speech ‘Science as a Vocation’ ([1919]1946), which dismissed various justifications and characterizations of the pursuit of knowledge and denied there was any sort of modern knowledge that was not the knowledge of specialists. In that text it is somewhat ambiguous as to whether he thinks that comprehensive cosmological rationality and knowledge is merely an absurd present aspiration or whether it was always a false aspiration, but the implication is that it was always an illusion. Thus the Platonic idea of knowledge of the forms as the highest and controlling form of knowledge is a model of possible expertise, which happens to have been based on epistemic error.

In the essay on China there is also a reference to Plato, which on the face of it is quite odd. ‘The Platonic ideal was established on the soil of the polis and proceeded from the conviction that man can attain fulfillment by being good at only one task’ (1951, 161). This would make it seem that philosophy, or that which corresponds to knowledge of the forms, is itself a form of specialized knowledge wrongly given political significance by Plato: an interpretation which would help Weber preserve his image of rationality as distinctly western and his own picture of western intellectual history as summarized in ‘Science as a Vocation’ ([1919]1946, 140-43). But of course Plato’s image of the guardians was that they would be trained in an extended hierarchy of the non-manual forms of knowledge and that on reaching the top of the hierarchy they would have the highest and most comprehensive knowledge, knowledge of the forms, which included knowledge of the form of the good. Thus the guardians were not, for Plato, specialists in ethical theory, the ‘one task’ at the top of the hierarchy of knowledge, but generalists, or at least masters of a hierarchy of types of knowledge.

In one sense, Weber’s argument is persuasive: no one now thinks that there is general knowledge of the Platonic kind: today, even the philosophers concerned with the heirs to Plato’s forms, perhaps logicians or metaphysicians, are specialists. The last flirtation in the West with the idea of philosophical leaders—Heidegger’s idea that he could be ‘the leader of the leader’, that is to say Hitler, ended in catastrophe. And the revival of the Platonic sense of philosophical rule by neo-Conservative followers of Leo Strauss, portrayed in Saul Bellow’s roman à clef about Allan Bloom, *Ravelstein*, has led to its own difficulties. Knowledge here seems indistinguishable from ideology—a point to which I will return shortly.

As a sociological claim applied to the past, however, it is misleading. One can identify a large number of cases in which bodies of learning that were highly general served as the basis of community life. The rabbinical governance of Jews after the fall of Jerusalem under the Mishnah, for example, is a clear case in which a body of thought was developed to ethically regulate life and to serve juridical purposes that applied to many domains, from economics to purely religious questions, and we can retrospectively construct the ‘theory’ behind these regulations (cf. Neusner 1990, 1991). Rabbinical learning was ‘specialist’ and ‘expert’ only in a sense that does not fit the Weberian model very well. The knowledge of Torah was specialized in the sense that it was knowledge of a text. But the realm of application was decidedly non-specialized. Moreover, it fits the model of the philosophy of the community. A similar claim could be made for Islamic jurisprudence.

Weber seems to be skeptical about the idea that these philosophies were an actually effective basis of rule. His model of philosophically grounded rule appears to be natural law. He listed natural law as a source of legitimacy rather than as a form of legitimacy, meaning that natural law or a coherent body of ethical belief could serve as a buttress for the claim of the state to authority, but that it was insufficient in itself to constitute a form of rule. In an important sense
the skepticism is justified: rabbinical rule was a matter of communal self-governance under a secular, separate state, rather than an effective blue-print for an actual form of political and juridical authority. Islamic law, similarly, ordinarily did not suffice, but rather co-existed with the law of the state (cf. Coulson 1969, 58-76).

Justified or not, this proved to be something of a blind spot for Weber’s followers in the period of Communism. Hans J. Morgenthau, one of Weber’s most successful admirers, analyzed the dictatorship of Stalin in terms of the categories of charisma conjoined with bureaucracy. This characterization had the effect of omitting the role of ideology. Of course, there is a question, historically, about the significance of ideology in Communist regimes. But the problem here is different: it is rather that Weber’s categories of legitimate authority, which are the basis for his classification of functioning political forms, do not include a form of authority that is ideological, and tend to treat ideological matters as though they had no political significance beyond the role of legitimating authority.

In short, neither Weber’s sociology of authority nor his conception of genuine knowledge had a place for comprehensive philosophies of the community. China is a case in which Imperial authority was closely tied to the bureaucracy run by literati who gained office through the examination system. Weber struggled to describe this in terms of European categories. He did not see that the ‘literary’ tradition as a community philosophy is binding on all the participants, including the Emperor— as with the ideological state, and that the mechanism of examinations served the purpose of inculcating and giving prestige to this philosophy and its adepts. Instead, he saw it as an arbitrary method of securing offices for life, prebends, with no rationality of its own.

One reason for this perception was scholarly. The examination system was criticized by Chinese modernizers ‘who questioned whether memorizing the classics and writing poems and essays were really relevant to the tasks of government, charged that the system merely tested men’s classical education, and asserted that the examination net failed to capture men who possessed genuine abilities and high moral character’ (Miyazaki [1963]1976, 124-5). Weber echoed these criticisms. But the system as it functioned, especially in the five centuries of the last imperial period when it stabilized (Elman 2000a, xvii), was not quite as Weber and the critics portrayed it.

The exams were not, however, limited to poetry, calligraphy and the classics. Questions of policy and legal reasoning were an important part of the examination procedure (Elman, 2000a, 42). The essays, in any case, were not mindless classicism. Elman discusses the rhetorical structure of one of the most famous of the essays (which were published and used as study guides and models) based on a passage from the Analects of Confucius which read ‘When the people have enough, how can the ruler have too little?’ which deals with the ‘ruler’s responsibilities to provide a livelihood for his people’ (Elman, 2000b, 381). To be sure, these essays were constructed according to complex formal rules. Nevertheless they contained chains of argument that are not unrecognizable in western terms, and which were both sophisticated and relevant to governance. In this case, he notes, the argument was designed to show ‘how low taxes would increase the overall wealth of the realm, if it remained in the hands of the people’ and also benefit the dynasty. The effect of the argument, as he puts it, was to lead to a conclusion was counter-intuitive, and ‘channeled into a literati discourse built around Confucius’s vision of a polity pegged to the interests of the people’ (Elman 2000b, 386).

The exams were not limited to a small group of office seekers, something that Weber’s account does not make clear. Huge numbers of aspirants studied for these tests, and thus were
educated in this vision of the polity, and in much more. Elman estimates that by the nineteenth century, when the population had grown over 300 million, there were three million candidates for every biennial exam (2000a, 237). Few succeeded. But the experience of studying for the exams was very widespread. And the intensity of study, along with the uniformity of the topics, must have had an unusually uniformity-producing effect.

When it is considered in detail, the examination system seems less irrational, less medieval, and less alien. Exams in the West have the same fetishistic quality, from the SAT, which is a major determinant of college admission in the United States, to the Baccalaureate in France, and the same arbitrariness of content. Weber, himself educated in one of the most arbitrary and rigorous systems of literary education in history, should have recognized the similarities. The fact that he saw the exams primarily in terms of the power of the literati is perhaps a result of his commitment to conceptual categories for which Confucius was a poor fit. As a western academic he did not see the absurdities of the Chinese system as a mirror for the absurdities of the academic rituals and distinctions of the West; if he had, he could have written a new les Lettres persanes to mock them. But although Weber was alleged to have had a sense of humor (Swedberg 2005, 119), this was not his style.

A deeper question of a more ‘philosophical’ kind also emerges in connection with Weber’s judgments of the irrationality of Chinese practice. Weber used the notion of rationality in multiple ways, which sometimes conflict: sometimes the notion is normative, as in ‘Science as a Vocation’ and elsewhere, in contexts where he is making judgments about forms of knowledge or action, such as the return to religion in an age that has eaten from the tree of knowledge; sometimes it is used as an interpretive instrument, as when he describes the task of making sense of the military decisions of Moltke, in which the problem is to explicate as rational decisions that might not on the surface appear to be rational and to show what remains to be accounted for in terms other than rationality; and descriptively as a classification device, used in causal contexts to identify causal conditions.

The classificatory use can be comfortably regarded, within Weber’s own methodology, as necessarily ethnocentric— it is an audience of westerners who are being helped toward understanding-- and of no significance beyond its uses in making causal sense of the social world as described from an Occidental point of view. But in the China volume Weber repeatedly seems to go beyond this, a problem that becomes obvious when we come to the question of whether the body of Confucian thought represents genuine knowledge. If it does not, as Platonic knowledge of the forms does not, Weber can dismiss the idea that these bureaucrats are experts rather than literati whose selection for bureaucratic office through examinations is merely an arbitrary procedure. If it is real knowledge, it presents a problem. As an interpreter, Weber would have an obligation to make rational sense of it, rather than simply labeling it irrational. If he says that it cannot be made sense of, he raises the question of whether he has understood it. The judgment in this case has to be that Weber stopped short of fully understanding Chinese thought even within the limitations of the Occidental perspective he brought to it.

The solution to this conundrum is not to be found in Weber. Indeed, the question of whether his own methodology was founded on a choice that was irrational by his own lights has persisted as the major philosophical issue with his thought. Leo Strauss himself, of course, made this point with respect to ‘Classical Political Philosophy’, by which he meant Plato and Aristotle, and argued that Weber had illegitimately ruled out the possibility of knowledge of the good ([1950]1971, 36-78. The ruling out was illegitimate because to ground it would have required Weber to engage philosophically with the claims of classical philosophy, which is to say to make
himself into a philosopher, rather than to presume that this kind of philosophy was now superseded.

There is another problem, however, that goes to the heart of Weber’s notion of expertise. The doctrines Weber was keen to reject as failures to specialize and therefore develop were doctrines which aspired to comprehensiveness. But comprehensiveness is not merely a bad goal, an illusory end rooted in literati nostalgia for the universal intellectual, as Weber seems to suggest. It is a practical imperative. There is a need to aggregate the knowledge of the specialists in order to make rational decisions. Narrowing may lead to achievement, but achievements need to be made usable for the non-specialist, or for the ruler. One aspect of the kind of intellectual mastery that the Confucians sought, and which Plato sought in his account of the ideal city, was the capacity to stand at the top of the pyramid of knowledge and decide wisely. Whether one thinks of this as specialist knowledge—whether one can be an expert about expertise—is an interesting question, but here it is beside the point: someone must use the specialist knowledge of the expert and make it into a whole. And one suspects that one source of Weber’s inability to see the point of Confucianism is connected to his failure to acknowledge the problem of aggregating knowledge.

References

Elman, Benjamin (2000b) *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Notes

2. This case has been made in extenso in a persuasive paper by Xiangyang (2006).