

## **‘THE CONFUCIAN ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM’: NARRATIVES ON MORALS, HARMONY, AND SAVINGS IN THE CONDEMNATION OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AMONG CHINESE IMMIGRANTS OVERSEAS**

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### **RESUMO**

Neste artigo, partindo de uma reflexão sobre as transformações da China contemporânea concernentes ao mercado e ao consumo, discuto o papel da diáspora no resgate de valores “tradicionais”, especialmente em relação às noções de harmonia, trabalho árduo e poupança, cuja base está no legado filosófico e religioso confucionista. Se hoje assistimos a um consumismo intenso das novas gerações que vivem na China, em sentido oposto, a condenação do consumo de bens supérfluos e a privação individual passam a ser sinais distintivos entre os imigrantes chineses, que trabalham como importadores e distribuidores de bens made in China em Ciudad del Este (Paraguai). Devido a tais características, esboço uma comparação com a ética calvinista, tal qual analisada por Max Weber, traçando aproximações e distinções entre protestantismo e confucionismo, no que diz respeito ao gasto conspícuo, à ética do trabalho e à acumulação de riquezas.

**Palavras-chave:** China, confucionismo, consumo, diáspora chinesa.

### **ABSTRACT**

From a reflection on market and consumption changes in contemporary China, this article discusses the Chinese diaspora’s role in rediscovering “traditional” values, especially those related to notions of harmony, hard work and savings, based on the religious and philosophic Confucian heritage. If, on one hand, we observe today deep consumerism among the young generations living in China, on the other hand, the denial of conspicuous consumption appears as a distinctive feature among Chinese immigrants living in Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), where they work as importers and distributors of goods made in China. Due to these characteristics, I outline a comparison with the Calvinist ethic as analyzed by Max Weber, drawing approaches and differences between Protestantism and Confucianism regarding conspicuous spending, work ethic and wealth accumulation.

**Keywords:** China, Chinese diaspora, Confucianism, consumption.

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Commerce and trade have been common traits of the Chinese diaspora, comprising today about 35 million people living overseas.<sup>1</sup> The past centuries have witnessed various emigration waves, propelled by different factors and directed to all five continents. Along this process, bonds with the homeland have oscillated between greater or lesser proximity (Chan, 2000), depending on the particular historical context. Contemporarily, given the economic boom that made China a leading global actor as well as the centralizing role of the Chinese state (Li, 2000), it can be argued that the tendency is towards the intensification of the economic and cultural links to the native land.

This study approaches empirically one of the most recent episodes of the Chinese diaspora, namely, immigration to Latin America, or the so-called “new countries”, between 1970 and 1980<sup>2</sup> (MaMung, 2000; Pan, 2006; Trolliet, 2000). More specifically, it focuses on immigrants settled in the Paraguayan city of Ciudad del Este, in the border region with Foz do Iguacu, Brazil. It is estimated that the frontier is home to ten thousand Taiwanese and Cantonese (Guangdong Province) Chinese. This migratory process stemmed directly from diplomatic moves between Taiwan and Paraguay, and, later on, from the economic boom in Southeast China. Most of these immigrants work as traders/importers of trinket-type goods. Produced on a large scale, this kind of trifle merchandise is typical of small and medium industries in Guangdong.

My fieldwork in the Brazil-Paraguay border between November 2005 and August 2006 aimed at following the Chinese trading networks. Even though formal interviews and visits to schools, churches and restaurants were helpful, it was precisely during those “*apparently* wasted hours” (Fonseca, 2000, p. 7, emphasis added) within stores, observing the back and forth routine of consumers, that the most valuable testimonies were spontaneously offered.

During these everyday events, I noticed the recurrence of a strong rhetoric based on Confucian principles<sup>3</sup> foregrounding hard work, savings and wit, family, harmony and balance, frugality, self-control and avoidance of excess. From the perspective of this ideal of life and frugality, consumption – or better put, “consumerism” – was a common target for accusations of disrepute and immorality. This symbolic system is related to the process of identity construction abroad. It refers to a moment when immigrants, distanced from China’s recent radical changes, choose to rescue what they consider their culture has of most “authentic” in order to distinguish themselves from their “Other” – that is, Brazilians and Paraguayans, regarded by the Chinese as privileging immediate drives and therefore practices of “superfluous” and “irrational” consumption.

It seems therefore paradoxical that these same immigrants became brokers in a global market of ‘made in China’ products, which they import and re-sell. It is the surrounding consumerist universe that allows for their capital accumulation. In other words, they profit from this market while decrying its double, namely, consumerism; the market-consumption dyad is therefore dissolved. In a universe where the others’

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<sup>1</sup> For Peter Li (2000), this figure is 37 million. Other two sources provide the same average numbers (between 30 and 35): Troillet’s *La Diáspora Chinoise* (2000), and Y. Live’s entry in the *Dictionnaire de l’Ethnologie et de l’Anthropologie*, edited by Pierre Bonte and Michel Izar. Data refer to the year 2000.

<sup>2</sup> In terms of the Chinese diaspora, “new countries” refer to Latin and South America. The earliest migrations were directed to the Pacific islands and Southeast Asia, and later on to Europe and the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Confucius (551-479 AC, Kung-Fu-Tze in Chinese) was a philosopher, moralist and political thinker who enjoyed great influence on China and Eastern Asia at large. Confucianism is a philosophical and religious moral ethos based on Taoist principles, originally stemming from the legacy of Confucius and, later on, of his disciple Mencius. Its leading principles are morality, integrity, modesty, and humanness.

consumption is indispensable, the Chinese have adopted non-consumption as a value for themselves.

Condemnation of conspicuous consumption and the ideal of hard work, allied to a life of frugality and self-control, are justified based on Confucian doctrine. This path revealed by ethnography gradually drew me to a comparative exercise vis-à-vis Max Weber's opus magnum, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Both ethics – Protestant and Confucian – present clear parallels in terms of a kind of individual conduct that leads to capital accumulation.

Such comparison was attempted by Weber himself, in a piece of work following *The Protestant Ethic: The Religion of China*. There, the author claimed that, even though the two ethics are similar in their degree of subject rationalization, Calvinism would bring along the spirit of capitalism, whereas the other would discourage it. Attention should be paid, however, to the distance between the reality of the contemporary, globalized world, and the Chinese and European worlds analyzed by Weber over a century ago. China, Confucianism and the world have changed. If I vindicate the fruitfulness of the engagement between the Weberian analysis and my ethnographic reality as a theoretic-methodological tool, this departs from an acknowledgement of the limits of such comparison.

Moreover, it is worth highlighting that frugality, hard work, savings and accumulation aiming at future generations are not exclusive to the universe comprised by this study, neither to the Chinese diaspora. Examples of migrants who adopt this conduct while abroad in order to amass estate abound. In this sense, a tradesman in Ciudad del Este is no different than a Portuguese baker in Rio de Janeiro, an Arab textile merchant in London, or a Brazilian running a stakehouse in Shanghai. What are then the specificities of the Chinese case under analysis? And why does Max Weber's work shed light on this reality?

The answer to both questions lies precisely in the fact that, in the universe under scope, non-consumption and savings result from the reaffirmation of a philosophical-religious ethic based on morals, family, order and balance – fundamentally Chinese notions. This is a powerful instrument for the smooth flow of business, and for fostering the development of a capitalist atmosphere par excellence which is vital to a vast market and consumption sector connecting China to South America. Today in Ciudad del Este, this group of immigrants ingeniously recast and appropriate the Confucian rhetoric at various levels of social life.

In this analysis, Confucianism is understood less as an absolute dogma or a perfect ideal model than as a flexible rhetoric (Wang *apud* Li, 2000). It therefore brings into relief this system's contradictions and negotiations. The differences between representations and practices are important, as during fieldwork I eventually came to realize that the informant who doggedly emphasized the importance of saving and of consuming only what was really "necessary" was the same who would otherwise consume as vehemently. Therefore, I sought to understand when and what informants would allow themselves to consume.

After my stay in the Brazil-Paraguay border, I followed up my research on Chinese trade networks through fieldwork in the Chinese province of Guangdong (between November 2006 and May 2007), where Ciudad del Este's goods are produced. Even though I was aware of changes in contemporary China, I could not help being shocked by a country whose large cities are pregnant with hypermodern esthetics and its younger generation, with exacerbated consumerism. I found an abyss between the sobriety of Chinese immigrants in the Brazil-Paraguay border and the performance of "modernity" in their homeland. Even though my focus was on the former, this

intriguing and telling contrast was necessary in order to entertain a discussion on consumption in contemporary China, therefore lending complexity to my analysis of the realities in the border.

### **From Maoism to consumerism: notes on consumption in contemporary China**

Among the manifestations of capitalism in China's largest cities is a remarkable esthetics marked by symbols of global capitalism, as well as intensive consumption practices among younger generations. In contrast, even though maintaining various links to China, many immigrants have not experienced with equal intensity the social changes that are radically reshaping the daily life, habits, and representations of the home country. After all, such transition took place mostly during the last decade and a half, after they had already left their homeland.

Lately, China's Communist Party itself has pondered on the potentially catastrophic effects of such rapid change on the "nation's morality". The project named "Building a Harmonious Socialist Society" was launched as a high-priority response to this challenge. China's recent economic boom – manifest in the skyrocketing growth of its market economy, as well as of its population's consumption – has pushed Chinese authorities to, at least discursively, deploy to the traditional Confucian and Taoist cultural heritage of morals, balance, and harmony.

If in my fieldwork in the border I noticed a strong, Confucianism-based discourse, the experience in China surprised me, as I ran into another attempt at rescuing that same morality in order to remediate the country's ills. Even though in public policy there is a huge effort toward salvaging Oriental values, China's social realities point to another direction, namely, "Westernization". The immigrant community, striving to rebuild China as traditionally as possible, did not seem to keep pace with such speedy transformations.

The radical changes affecting China during the last few years – accelerated industrialization, market opening, rural flight, consumerism, among others – are of course experienced differently by Chinese living within and outside its national boundaries. For many of those who were away during the last twenty years or so, the "revolution" brought about by economic growth sounds almost like a tragedy, as the words of an informant reveal: "To return to China is an impossible dream. The China of our hearts is not the one I see on TV. I cannot go back; I no longer recognize my homeland" (Li, 46 years-old).

In terms of consumption, such transformations are indeed significant if one recalls that not long ago the sober, revolutionary Maoist posture was the dominant mentality. The consumption of "superfluous" goods was repudiated. Even though initially the Communist Party under Mao Zedong had rebuffed both Confucianism and Taoism,<sup>4</sup> it is also true that it benefited from this ethos inasmuch as it concurred to the ideal of detachment from the material world.

Today, China presents a picture completely adverse to Maoist ethics and aesthetics. Younger generations in large cities not only consume goods – as a Chinese dragon, they devour them. Women no longer wear hair cut short or Mao's cap; they perm their hair, undergo surgery to widen their eyes, use the world's most sophisticated cosmetics and chief luxury brands. This reflects a society that produces at breakneck intensities, and increasingly consumes what it produces.

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<sup>4</sup> Due to its religious character promoting male supremacy.

It is however vital to pay heed to the role of the state in fostering people's consumerism. If yesterday the state repressed it, today it has unleashed it. Abundant production in the absence of a domestic market eventually caused surplus problems. It was necessary to cultivate the pleasure of individual consumption through the notion of "modern and sophisticated consumers". This was done by means of numerous governmental campaigns in the mid 1990's. Therefore, as Pun (2003) has argued, consumerist desire became generalized as the result of a top-down initiative. China's consumption revolution, or "conspicuous movement", in this author's words, began as a state strategy aiming at connecting the national to the global economy.

I just a few years, China turned into one of the world's largest consumption markets of cell phones, computers, luxury brands, cosmetics, and so forth.<sup>5</sup> All these aspects are manifest in the hypermodern aesthetics typical of contemporary larger cities and their residents. On the other hand, social inequalities between rural and urban areas, as well as between the poor and rich, are also flagrant.

During my first months in China, between Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Guangzhou, I could not hide my estrangement in relation to what was for me the utmost performance of "modernity", especially with regards to the fashion looks of young men and women. All this contrasted sharply with what I had found in Ciudad del Este. Besides, I was in the midst of an impeccable urban infra-structure, grandiose public works, and shopping mall after shopping mall scattered all over. Especially in terms of the market sector focused on by my research, I was surprised by the number of stores selling various brands, original or copies: Rolex, Dolce & Gabbana, Calvin Klein, Chanel, Dior, Tiffany, Cartier, Bally, Diesel. Not to mention Gucci and Louis Vuitton handbags, the consumption of which is widespread among the urban Chinese.

That such products are all made in China should cause no surprise; but I was amazed by the remarkably ordinariness of their consumption. Along with such handbags and accessories, iPods and especially cell phones were used as if they were an extension of individual bodies.

To understand the national government's role in this process is as fundamental as challenging. Maoism had vehemently condemned conspicuous consumption. More recently, the Communist Party itself has stimulated the dedication to shopping, at the same time it opened China's economy up to the international market. Now, as a remedy for the social and cultural changes brought about by the economic revolution, the government reenlists the Confucian legacy – dovetailing its ancient notions of harmony and balance with those of socialism – as part of an understanding that current problems are the consequence of the loss of or distancing from morality.

Official discourse declares that it was necessary to grow and accumulate in order to be able to deal with "domestic issues". There is no harmony without balance. Balance means, in this political logic, to reduce inequality, rural poverty, corruption, environmental damage, and conspicuous consumption. Artists, NGOs, educational institutions and sectors of the media were summoned to spearhead this macro-project prescribing a series of actions up to 2020 – the deadline for solving China's most imminent problems.

To rejuvenate culture and society is a key idea in the construction of a harmonious society. To rejuvenate means, paradoxically, to resort to an ancient philosophical heritage. In the optimistic words of Francis Fung (2006; my emphasis), a kind of organic intellectual of the contemporary Chinese regime:

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<sup>5</sup> As can be gathered from the latest statistics on consumption in China, available in the collection *China by Numbers 2007*, published by the *China Economic Review* (2007).

This new spirit is built on the essence of ancient Chinese teachings of harmony which remains unparalleled for its richness in the world. [...] Harmony being China's dominant philosophy for 2500 years it is no surprise, despite the *onslaught* of western culture for the last two hundred years, that China rediscovered its ancient heritage. [...] It will be an arduous and long undertaking to build a harmonious socialist society in modern China, no less challenging to the CPC than as the revolutionary "long march" of Chinese history. Oct 8, 2006 will be remembered as the most important milestone of China's Harmony Renaissance. By rediscovering harmony culture, China is rediscovering its own rich ancient cultural harmony traditions. It is of similar in importance to Europe's Renaissance after the rediscovery of ancient Greek culture. China's harmony development will herald a brand new period of vitality and national spirit as the country enters a new period of sustainable development.

Balance (meaning equality and social justice) and harmony (social well-being) are, according to this author, complementary notions:

In keeping with Chinese harmony philosophy, balance is achieved through self-discipline, high moral value, social order rather than strict law and penal system. The use of physical force is to be avoided, and employed only as a last resort. Harmony Society discussions in today's China under the present leadership are returning to the old roots [...]. This is based on the very nature of Chinese peoples' longing for harmony and the ancient teaching of tolerance, acceptance and equity. Both Laotze and Confucius teachings were comprehensive systems engineering analysis of Harmony for ancient China, and the Communiqué is a system analysis of Socialism with Chinese characteristics for today's China (Fung, 2006).

The official rhetoric conveys precisely the feeling of "lost direction" implicated in a "loss of morals". From this perspective, it makes sense to think of social justice through the Confucian philosophical legacy. It is not just about solving social problems of inequality, but also about reflecting on the directions being taken by such recent changes, and what that has meant for people's behavior. A "Chinese essence" is sought as an opposition to the recent (and encouraged) "invasion" by Western values.

Notions of harmony and balance, even though couched by Chinese authorities as a morality to be rescued – or at least, to be extended to the political and social spheres –, are in fact categories deeply entrenched in Chinese culture. For the longest of time, subjects have classified the world through them. Besides having witnessed this during fieldwork with the immigrants, later on in China itself I would constantly hear people demanding that human acts have *pingheng* (balance).

Harmony also means avoiding conflict. If Western religions think the world through a disjunction in which God (the good) beats the Devil (the evil), in Eastern philosophy these forces are neither in conflict, nor overlap, but balance each other. Balance and moderation coexist hand-in-hand. Therefore, all excess is harmful. The present is lived with an eye toward the future. In order to live a balanced life, the future should not be left to chance, it should be safe. According to this logic, savings, not lavish consumption, are necessary.

"Consumerism" would therefore stand against such constellation of ideas, as it hits it at the heart of its temporality, when objects' service life is becoming increasingly short and quickly giving way to new needs and aspirations. One spends fugaciously in order to satisfy immediate urges. If consumption has been a value in Chinese society for

only about a decade, for those who left China twenty years ago it is a distant practice-value, and even repudiated as will be seen below.

During my daily conversations in China with informants or friends, whenever I would expose my feelings of strangeness and perceived differences within and outside national borders, I was always cautioned about the naiveté and hastiness of my impressions: “Do not let appearances fool you; the face is open, but the heart is traditional”, Yifei, my interpreter and Mandarin teacher, once told me.

Although the depth of cultural changes prompted by the liberalization of consumption in China is unknown, it is undeniable that the consumption of certain technologies and other global icons brings along new perceptions of the world and certain behaviors. The wasteful logic behind consumerism, so staggeringly evident among China’s urban middle classes, has immediacy as a necessary value, and this certainly implicate deep socio-cultural changes. It goes straight to the heart of a society which has long had the future, permanence, and savings as life directions entrenched in people’s mentalities.

### **Trading without consuming: the economic boom and its implications for the Chinese diaspora**

Chinese immigrants in Ciudad del Este are central actors in a capitalist, globalized market, importing goods made in China and redistributing them in the Latin American market. Ciudad del Este is among the world’s major commercial centers (a yearly circulation of approximately 2 billion);<sup>6</sup> it is the destination of middlemen *sacoleiros* from various countries, especially Brazil, who buy merchandise in great quantities there in order to re-sell them somewhere else at a profit.<sup>7</sup>

Given that immigrants trade premium products of contemporary consumption, their extolling of non-consumption is curious: they are agents and disseminators of a practice they condemn. Wang<sup>8</sup> (52 years old), one of the most enthusiastic advocates of the moral of dispossession, runs a store selling a wide variety of toys. During my first month of research, I found some diversity there; when I returned during the next season there were only Hello Kitty products – the most ‘in’ figure at the time.

Wang, who during our conversations would often make me feel guilty even for the soft drinks I consumed, knew how to rapidly renovate his stock of toys in response to appeals by consumerist clients. He skillfully mastered market variations, but that was something he did not want for himself. What might seem at first like a contradiction is elucidated by the diverse and complex layers of social meaning by which subjects negotiate their codes of conduct and moralities vis-à-vis the world of goods. It is possible to trade, for such an act is the *others’* problem. The burden of consumerism is taken off one’s own back when one is just a broker. What is good for the *others* is bad for personal use, even though consumption by *others* is a vital pillar of capital accumulation.

No doubt that this impasse is charged with conflict. There is a tense relationship with goods, which symbolize at times fugacity, at times wealth and survival. It becomes necessary to negotiate values and to grant exceptions within one’s morality without sacrificing its meaningful core. Wang’s attitude towards the surrounding material world

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<sup>6</sup> Brazil’s 2005 Internal Revenue Service Report.

<sup>7</sup> Most merchants in Ciudad del Este are indeed immigrants, Chinese or Arab. On the mercantile system in Ciudad del Este, see Rabossi (2004) and Ribeiro (2006).

<sup>8</sup> The informants’ names were altered.

is similar to that of many other immigrants in Ciudad del Este. When, however, it is regarded from the perspective of the broader social canvass – the Chinese diaspora –, some answers to the paradox become more visible.

The Chinese diaspora, one of the oldest and largest in human history, was first directed towards Southwest Asia, from there spreading towards Europe and the “new countries”. Along the centuries, it has been characterized by several migration waves driven by various factors such as commercial trade, occupation of neighboring countries by Chinese troops, foreign invasion, political turmoil and wars, economic crises. The Southern and Southeastern provinces, located closer to the coast and characterized by an entrenched “culture of commerce and migration”, concentrate the highest rates of emigration.

The industrialization boom of the People’s Republic of China began in the 1980’s. Cities such as Shenzhen (today one of the most important in the country) were born in order to fulfill demands related to the diversification of production burgeoning in the province of Guangdong. This market generated an unprecedented flux of people and goods. Millions of people from all across China left their towns and villages in search of new job opportunities. Besides internal migration to Guangdong, a large number of residents from that province seized the moment to start trading overseas what the region was then beginning to produce abundantly.

It was in this economic and social context that many Chinese arrived at Ciudad del Este. Diplomatic relations between Paraguay and Taiwan had already prompted the presence of a significant number of Taiwanese traders, along with Arab immigrants. The Taiwanese situation is similar to that of the Cantonese: they arrived a few years earlier, also in order to trade *bugigangas* (trinkets and trifles) which, before being made in the People’s Republic of China, were manufactured in Taiwan. This migration process took place between the late 1970’s and early 90’s. As a result, in Ciudad del Este there is basically one generation of 40, 50 year-old, and then a second one of young adults or children.

If immigrants’ discourse is characterized by a rhetoric of denial and even repudiation of “superfluous” consumer goods, their situation is an effect of such expanding market. For a while, however, China itself was an industrial site because of its availability of cheap labor, which produced for an external market. Domestic production was by then detached from consumption, and for over ten years this market provided only work. As noted above with Pun (2003), it was only from the mid-90’s on that industrialization and consumption became complementary in China. Between one and the other, there is a time lag of approximately a decade. The emigration process involving my informants took place precisely during this temporal gap. In other words, when they left their homeland the “consumerist fever” had not yet begun, for the dream of consumption was only to flourish in mentalities later on.

### **Savings, wit, and privation: to accumulate without trifling away**

Besides the chronologic discontinuity between the onset of production and internal consumption, there is another, more symbolic dimension that should be taken into account: the very condition of being an immigrant. Away from their homeland, individuals identified with their native country tend to exalt their culture’s diacritic traits. Moreover, alterity before the foreigner means that “to construct oneself as a Chinese” in Paraguay is to conceive of oneself as different from Latin Americans.



For Redding (1993), Chinese immigration has been characterized by strong affective bonds with China, accompanied by a psychological feeling of not having left the homeland that may lead to its romanticizing it. In this sense, this author notes that Confucianism works as a convenient moral code due to its cherishing of family and community solidarity. Moreover, it is taken as that in Chinese culture which is *most* authentic and traditional, while being subjected to numerous (re)interpretations and adaptations depending on the context.

Much of my research observations took place during my informants' spontaneous daily activities; others included ready-made speeches especially tailored for me (a Brazilian) about China and what it is to be Chinese. Overall, notions of future, wit, and savings were always opposed to the short-term view and the Latin *jeitinho*.<sup>9</sup> This contrast flashed the idea that a "five thousand-year culture" was notoriously wiser. My fieldwork began with attempts at contacting Wang, but just as I thought our conversation was starting to flow, I was put down in my anxiety:

Easy, girl, there's no point in trying to get to know it all today. It's like eating too much food; your belly will be full and you'll throw up because there's no more space. The food will be gone and you'll be hungry. It has to be little by little; you eat a little bit each day.

For him, soda drinks were synonymous with superficiality, since thirst may be quenched by water. Clothes exist to protect the body; cars, for transportation. His looks indeed conveyed the image of a man extremely simple and dispossessed of material objects: shaved head, grayish clothes, and sandals. To this was added a Confucian rhetoric on behavior and wisdom.<sup>10</sup> One time, he spontaneously held a bottle and said, pointing to it: "This is not being Chinese: *you* are thirsty and you have this bottle filled with water. *You* are going to drink it all and quench your thirst, and then forget that tomorrow you'll have nothing left to drink".

At another occasion, Wang, a bit more exalted due to the presence of a Paraguayan man who was there to collect some bills, chided: "Latins, Paraguayans are dumb: they make a little money and fill up the gas tank on the weekend to go spend money on the beach; then they are left without money to eat. The Chinese think of the future".

Wang's statements show the importance ascribed to savings – the contrary of consumerism, in which money is spent to satisfy ephemeral desires. To save is always for a future project, often for one's children and education. Not to trifle away, to live without excess and in moderation means balance; balance on its turn will bring harmony, to be shared within the family. If saving for upcoming generations is a common trait among immigrants from various nationalities, the vision of future and harmony makes it even shaper among Chinese living abroad.

In this sense, the relationship is often conflicting between the Chinese and Paraguayans and Brazilians, who do not necessarily manifest the same attitude towards spending or consuming. As I have noticed elsewhere (Pinheiro-Machado, 2005), the

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<sup>9</sup> Translator's note: *Jeitinho* is a common socio-cultural mechanism in Brazil, usually related to bypassing institutional rules by means of interpersonal connections (see, for instance, Livia Barbosa's "The Brazilian *Jeitinho*" in David Hess and Roberto da Matta (eds.), *The Brazilian Puzzle: Culture on the Borderlands of the Western World*, Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> This evokes an interview with various traders in Shenzhen (each from a different province in China), when I was asked about what I was researching, and I replied that at that moment I was interested in Confucianism. Their response was massive laughter: "But this is so old! Why are you interested in it?"

*sacoleiros*, who are the Chinese's direct consumers, typically spend their profits right away. Whatever money they made was immediately turned into expensive gifts to be distributed throughout their networks of friends or relatives as a token of affection, even if that meant to sacrifice the capital that would have been fed back into the commercial chain. Among these traders coming from the Brazilian popular classes, the idea of immediate enjoyment found its justification in the idea that "we are all mortals".

Thus, for the Chinese, savings are the result of wit and of a balanced, excess-free life; in other words, a life without conspicuous consumption. Devotion to hard work is the way toward these ends. If a parallel is drawn with the Calvinist ethic according to Weber, which upholds austerity as life's ultimate value in order to attain divine salvation, savings and accumulation of wealth cannot be ends in themselves – even though they are the consequence of hard work and individual deprivation and, more positively, of predestination (Weber, 2003).

The difference between Confucianism and Calvinism with regards to savings can be summed up in the notions of divine and non-divine. For the former, savings are an end to be attained by a life of privation. Enjoyment, even if by future generations, has a worldly character. In Calvinism, in contrast, hard work and privation are the ideal of an individual's life; savings are therefore merely a natural outcome indicating that his mission on earth has been accomplished, and salvation is guaranteed. Thus, by its opposing motivations (divine and non-divine), both ethics are brought together in terms of man's relations to the enjoyment of material goods.

From a Calvinist perspective, consumption should have the purely practical and utilitarian goal of fulfilling individual basic needs. Besides,

This worldly Protestant asceticism [...] acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries [...] On the side of the production of private wealth, asceticism condemned both dishonesty and impulsive avarice. What was condemned as covetousness, Mam-monism, etc, was the pursuit of riches for their own sake. [...] When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save. (Weber, 2003, p. 170-172).

When Wang asserts that clothes are meant to be dressed, food to appease hunger, and so forth, a morality based on Confucianism is similarly implicated in which expenditure is managed by means of utilitarian rationality. Whatever escapes that is reprehensible.

Even though this discourse on ostentatious consumption is similar to that of the Calvinist ethic, from the standpoint of a Confucian logic the irrationality of conspicuous consumption lies in the risk of sacrificing future security, which would on its turn bring imbalance to the family. Wealth is sought without guilt, as it may serve, for instance, the end of addressing problems eventually emerging from within the family<sup>11</sup> – the guiding social institution which should be kept in harmony. In Calvinism, as Weber has pointed out in innumerable times in *The Protestant Ethic*, while accumulating capital individuals have an uncomfortable and guilt-ridden relation to wealth, as it brings the potential of diverging them from the mission predestined by God.

In this sense, the refusal of consumer goods and the rational way of accumulating capital based on Chinese philosophical, cultural and religious principles are grounded

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<sup>11</sup> To aid a relative in need, provide education for one's children, health care, etc.

on a higher level of family solidarity. After all, in *The Religion of China* – a piece of work following *The Protestant Ethic* – Weber (1968) himself asserted that this was precisely the reason behind Chinese society's inability to fully develop capitalism: family business discouraged one of its necessary conditions, namely, the bureaucratization process. However, as will be argued below, today there is extensive theoretical discussion arguing that the success of Chinese firms and entrepreneurial networks stems precisely from the fact that it unfolds through personal and family networks.

Still following Weber's (2003) lead, the devotion to work as a life-guiding practice and its connection with spiritual virtue are in many ways similar to the Confucian ethic. Both assume a life conduct led by self-control, privation of worldly pleasures and hard working hours.

During fieldwork in Ciudad del Este, as I was willing to "get immersed in the immigrants' everyday life", I was innumerable times frustrated for not being able to participate in social life beyond store hours. For almost one year I raised many questions on all sorts of topics, for which I would always get the same kind of reply:

- Why did you come here?
- To work.
- What do you do in your free time?
- I sleep, because I'm so tired from work.
- What do you do when you're not asleep?
- Nothing. I work.
- Tell me about your daily routine.
- I wake up early in the morning, work until late, get home tired, and go to bed.

At some point, the question stuck with me, "nothing happens in these people's lives?" The anxiety stemming from the lack of "something else" led me to conclude for a methodological flaw: I was not being able to take a step further in the ethnography. Talking to Quing (46 years old) – one of the most successful merchants in town, co-owner of a famed shopping mall –, already without expectations, I anticipated, "So, life is just work, right? Work, work, work, save money for educating the children, right?" His answer was a simple "yes", but accompanied by a luminous look in his eyes: "Yes, that's it. You've said it all, that's how we think, this is what matters to us".

From that moment on, I understood that the problem did not lie in the ethnography; for them, work was indeed *all*: a meaning to life, an all-encompassing social sphere in which much of the sociability and socialization took place. In this sense, the Confucian and Calvinist rationalities share the idea of an individual's duty towards his career, the obligation posed by professional activity thanks to the conscious submission to a life conduct (Weber, 2003). This feeling, along with the abdication of leisure and idleness, is decisive for the accumulation of wealth.

The issue of consumption is of course directly related to leisure and worldly pleasures. These Chinese immigrants therefore cannot "afford" superficiality, be it for its wasteful character, or for the uncomfortable feeling of guilt it entails. Lin (37 years old), who originally came from a village in Guangdong and today sells handbags and fake Dior perfumes, had privation as her guide for life. Besides being my informant, we eventually established friendship ties which extrapolated the universe of my research; there, the renouncement of consumption became even more evident.

When we were going from her store in Paraguay into Brazil through the Friendship Bridge (connecting Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este), I would always

choose to cross by bus as I thought it safer and more convenient. Lin's choice, however, was always to walk the mile, even under a 40 degree Celsius heat and in the midst of endless overcrowding. Besides saving a dollar, the sacrifice itself, regardless of weather or health condition, was needed.

I have invited Lin for innumerable promenades and meals, to no avail; in all occasions, my invitations met with negatives. Lin claimed it were all too expensive. During Carnival, when she had no clients in Paraguay, she then took the initiative of inviting me to see the free street celebrations. But even this activity should not exceed midnight, as she would have to rest for the following day's work.

For the Calvinist ethic as it was analyzed by Weber, idleness and time spent with unnecessary luxuries were the greatest of all sins. Individuals should sleep at most eight hours per night, and even sports were reprehensible as they were regarded as a waste of time and productivity that could otherwise be channeled towards the predestined calling. The Chinese immigrants, even though not taking waste of time as a danger to divine salvation, also condemned spending money and time with leisure. Also here reigns a code of moral conduct where today's renouncement means tomorrow's glory – not in the afterlife, but in the worldly enjoyment of future generations.

### **The role of the Chinese family (*jia*) in a life of privation and prosperity**

*If the family is in harmony, all enterprises will prosper...*  
(Chinese proverb)

For Weber (1968), in spite of the Chinese elevated rationality and self-control, the emergence of the capitalist ethos would be compromised in China and/or in Chinese enterprises due to certain cultural and religious aspects deeply entrenched in society.

The Confucian legacy values hierarchy, conformity with the world as it is, acceptance of order, politeness, and, especially, the importance of family and ancestral ties. There is a high level of reciprocity and mutual aid in case of adversity within families which would discourage the settling of debts. According to Weber's interpretation, all these factors would be impediments to the full development of capitalism. Besides these considerations, Shang Zhiyng (1997) adds that Confucianism tolerates the idea of the magical, values chance, and does not incorporate the notion of mission or divine calling.

In relation to the obstacles to capitalist development in China noted by Weber, Shang Zhiyng (1997) clarifies the role of the family and relationship networks:

*Jen* is the prevailing moral principle of the Confucian ethic. Its value orientation directs the personal relationship to tend to the central harmony. *Jen* has two meanings: (a) to love members of one's family, and (b) to love everyone. The way to cultivate *jen* is conscientiousness and al-truism [...]. For Confucius, *li* contains the norms for behavior and the rules for social etiquette under the direction of *jen*. Obedience to *li* is likewise commitment to *jen*, the unity of which causes both personal relationships to be harmonious and the social order to be stable.

For Confucianism and for Chinese society in general, harmony in the family (*jia*) is one of the ultimate goals in life. For Weber, however, family business would discourage a series of factors intrinsic to the capitalist ethos: characteristics such as

“paternalism, personalism, opportunism, flexibility [do] not follow the Western pattern of professionalization [and] bureaucratization” (Redding, 1993, p. 3).

However, many scholars have long drawn attention to specificities of some of China’s productive sectors that flow through family and kin networks (Chan, 2000; Freedman, 1967; Gipouloux, 2000; Li, 2000; Redding, 1993; Schak, 2000; Wei-Ping, 2000; among others).<sup>12</sup> In opposition to Weber’s thesis in *The Religion of China*, today it is widely acknowledged that family business may not only be conducive to capitalism, but a privileged locus for its development. Moreover, since Maurice Freedman’s (1967) classic work, it is known that competition and conflict are intrinsic traits to China’s family system.

According to Delaune (1998) and Granovetter (*apud* MaMung, 2000), success in Chinese commerce is buttressed by networks of favor among equals, as well as strategist skills. In the case of overseas communities, their self-reference leads to avoidance of conflict and to the promotion of higher degrees of trust. The conciliatory spirit is especially manifest in shoring up peace within the family. Family work allows information to flow more quickly, smoothly and faithfully; quarrels are more easily overcome; and profit is concentrated within a same unit. For King (*apud* Li, 2000), the basis of Chinese family (and also pseudo-family) business is the prevalence of Confucian values promoting loyalty and obligation. Business enterprises are guided by the personalization of networks and reciprocity, fostering an environment of capital investment transcending national borders.

The family and its related codes of conduct have been therefore central to understanding the success of contemporary Chinese capitalism or, less pretentiously, of some of its productive or commercial sectors. But given the cultural and social revolutions steering China during the past century, that is, since *The Religion of China* was published, it would be unfair to claim that Weber was “wrong”. The China of today and yesterday are two completely different countries. It is interesting that, even though Weber has situated Confucianism as the great impediment to the spirit of capitalism in China, most contemporary authors mentioned above, when looking at the dyad Chinese capitalism or enterprise / family, use Weber himself (on rationality and religion) to explain the Chinese specificity. They assume that the affirmation of “failure” cannot do as an explanatory model, as it is dated and China has changed. Furthermore, it would not even be possible to affirm the existence of pure Confucianism in the commercial networks under analysis, but only of the application and manipulation of an ethos according to convenience.

Among the immigrants in Ciudad del Este, family business follows a similar logic. Stability is indeed vital, as it is key to the success of a commercial enterprise. Conflict should be avoided and good, even if superficial, social coexistence should be nourished in order to maintain healthy personal relationships. But it is within the family that ideas of harmony and balance are brought into sharpest relief.

For instance, youth are very much aware that parents will work their hardest against inter-ethnic marriage, as the potential questioning of principles and practices it brings could steer conflict within the family. When I asked Pedro Li (26 years old) about this, he replied:

This is the intergenerational problem. If I marry a Brazilian girl, my parents won’t accept a foreigner, even if to me she won’t be one. The Chinese roots are too deeply entrenched inside their hearts, it’s not like us. They won’t accept... For

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<sup>12</sup> S. Gordon Redding has authored a book titled *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism* (1993).

them, culture is really within the heart, in order to avoid family problems and make communication easier.

Interethnic marriage would therefore destabilize harmony. Also in this respect, consumption reappears as a distinguishing marker of two different cultural orders (Latin and Chinese). After all, Brazilian and Paraguayan women<sup>13</sup> are regarded by older generations as bearers of futile and immediacy-driven values. That would incur in economic losses to the family; rather than to save, it would have to satisfy the daughter-in-law's consumerist "caprices".

As the fruit of frugality, wit and hard work, savings would thus be irreconcilable with "the consumerist values of Latin women". Chinese women, on the other hand, play a vital role in the maintenance of family harmony, as they are the ones responsible for raising the children and helping husbands to sustain a privation ideal. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in spite of this heated rhetoric, many immigrants do maintain interethnic extramarital relationships. This is perfectly acceptable in terms of their world-views, as it is marriage that is to be avoided. Rumors about Chinese men who left their families to "adventure" with Paraguayan or Brazilian women (besides covering them with gifts) are veritable local legends in the frontier, told with the pedagogic intent of spreading the lesson that "the end of adventurous men is misery".

While I was accompanying 36-year old Chang in the editorial room of the city's Chinese newspaper, I mentioned what Pedro Li had said about his desire to "mix". Anxiously lighting a cigarette, he said that this was no more than "youth excitement", since "marriage has to be with a Chinese woman, for they are the ones that support our growth. He knows nothing about life. Brazilian and Paraguayan women are leeches; they'll lead any man to misery".

Thanks to a happy ethnographic coincidence, the phone rang at that minute. He grumbled, smoked even more, and broke into a cold sweat. He hung up, and poured out:

It was my ex-wife... She wants more money... I'll tell you something: all Chinese men who marry Paraguayan women become poor. I know of none who hasn't, because Paraguayans take away all our money. You Latinas only think of today, today. I left China as a poor man, and amassed twenty thousand dollars very quickly here, until I married this Paraguayan woman who took away my money. I gave her everything: perfumes, house, car, cosmetics, all good stuff. She had sixty pairs of shoes and thirty blouses. I never bought anything for myself, just for her and our son. But she always wanted more, she was never satisfied with what she had. I had to give her money because she was my wife, my responsibility, and I couldn't have the mother of my children complaining about me to my son. Today I have nothing left, and no Chinese man who ever married a Latin woman does, because you only think about being happy today while you're young, don't think about tomorrow. Latin women are good to have fun, nice bodies and all that, but today I want to marry a Chinese woman in order to restructure my life and concentrate in amassing money for me and for my children's education.

In this particular testimony, Latin-Americans appear as consumerist and immediacy-driven, and Chinese as persistent. Women are a source of almost devilish

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<sup>13</sup> I say women because public interethnic relationships are in general between Chinese men and Latin-American women rather than the other way round.

temptation, money suckers who divert men from their “vocation”. They are futile and “easy”. Nonetheless, Chang carried on feeding her collection of shoes, cell phones and cosmetics, as he believed he had an unbreakable responsibility tie and the duty to maintain balance within the family according to which he would not only pay for his son’s studies, but for keeping his wife satisfied so she would not complain about him to their son. In this case, marital responsibility is begrudgingly expressed as the duty to maintain expenditures and renovation of gifts. Finally, Chinese women<sup>14</sup> appear as a source of security for a stable and moderate life, a support for a life of privation and capital accumulation.<sup>15</sup>

Marriage between Chinese, especially those sharing a common relationship network, helps to foster business, information flow, and loyalty. Harmony is then achieved, “each thing in its proper place”. A Latin-American woman would destabilize the order of things. She introduces new habits, new forms of dealing with money, and new consumption practices. This could seriously jeopardize future generations. For this reason, certain women may as well be, as in Chang’s words, “good to have fun with”, but not for marriage, a sphere where the sense of family responsibility is much sharper.

For the Chinese, the issue of consumerism is not as serious when it is someone else’s problem (for instance, of “Latin” women). The real problem emerges when it invades the space of the family and the ethnic group. One only succeeds in saving through hard work, wit, privation of leisure and pleasures, and avoiding superfluous expenditure. Savings are channeled to family security, especially the education of children. What happens in Ciudad del Este is that the second generation, in contrast to their parents who left China as poor people, go back there to attend the best universities. But rather than an expected “reunion of ties”, they return to Paraguay questioning traditional values and adhering to the consumption practices exposed by the new generation of Chinese youth.

Mp3 players, iPods, new cell phones, modern haircuts, sports cars are among the objects of desire to immigrants’ children. Thanks to their parents’ efforts for providing them with higher education, the second generation resembles much more the conjuncture of contemporary China than their parents, who were typically kept at bay from changes taking place in their homeland. In the words of Pedro Li,

The China rooted in their hearts is very strong... I’m Chinese, I like the food, the music... I know I’m different from you for instance, but I also like other things, I like to be open to the world. When I arrived in China [laughter] I was ‘more Chinese’ than my colleagues, do you understand?

The inter-generational cultural conflicts are premised, among others, on consumption. In this respect, we are left with the following questions: are the young generations introducing new values to the community which are bound to radically

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<sup>14</sup> An interesting parallel can be traced with the ideal-types of women in the male MPB (Brazilian Popular Music) imaginary analyzed by Oliven (1987, p. 57). Brazilian and Paraguayan women would enjoy easy life and take money from men, whereas Chinese women would be “submissive and passive, centered in the household, and ready to serve the men, who order social relations and the daily life”.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noticing that in spite of the prejudice and stereotype in these assertions, it is true that most Chinese men who left their wives became poor. This happens for various reasons, such as the conflictive break from a cultural and family order, the exclusion from protection and relationship networks within the community, and fascination with a new life in which everything should be radically different. While the Chinese gave everything to their women in response to what appeared almost as a cultural need by Latin women, the Brazilians with whom I talked about this would tell me, “but why do these ‘Chinamen’ give everything to their women anyway? It looks like they’ve lost their minds...”

change it? Or does the community have effective strategies to confront this situation – this being only, as Chang said, “youth excitement”, and adult life will show the way towards that which is believed to be true human virtue?

### **When one is allowed to indulge, and entrepreneurial success**

Whatever life conduct that is characterized by extreme rigor and even radicalization of norms has to make room for subterfuge and exceptions. The Confucian rhetoric operates with a strict sense of privation and condemnation of certain worldly pleasures. Well, life abroad and all novelties it brings have the double consequence of reaffirming and intensifying the discourse of cultural legacies such as Confucianism, while prompting the curiosity for experimenting something new and escaping the strictness of rules.

As I have claimed, Confucianism has to be understood as a flexible code. An understanding of its contradictions, exceptions and negotiations renders the analysis more complex. I will therefore briefly discuss “breaching the rule”, namely, practices by immigrants that are completely distanced from the rhetoric they maintain most of the time. This does not mean the immigrants are hypocritical, nor that their words are contradictory or false. It means that individuals are indeed able to deal with two (or more) codes, in this case, the Chinese world and “Latin” experiences. As mentioned earlier, as recipients of innumerable gifts, foreign women are one of these exceptions.

In Paraguay, many Chinese men maintain extramarital relationships with frontier women. Many merchants employ local young women. Let us take Wang, the most “orthodox” informant I have met. He employed two of them, who would, whenever I came into the store, look at me and giggle as if I were a potential target for their boss. In one occasion, one of them told me that I had “landed at the store like a gift”, that is, in all his frugality and humbleness, Wang did not have to actively look for a woman.

After around twenty minutes evoking Confucius, demonizing conspicuous consumption and stressing the importance of thinking about the future, Wang would always invite me out to dinner. I would typically go off on a tangent in every possible way, but then he would scale up his proposal in order to convince me: “I have a car, I can afford the most expensive restaurant you like. Choose any place, anything, I have the money, I’ll pay!” Conspicuous consumption would thus surface.

Here, it is not about invalidating or even questioning the informants’ discourse. In this case, even the strictest code of moral conduct has flexibility and malleability, especially in a situation of intercultural contact. For many Chinese men, a foreign woman is a tempting avenue for conspicuous consumption, a deviation or exception to the rule. It is the case, for instance, of Chang’s ex-wife’s “collection of shoes and cosmetics”. So is the case of the Chinese businessman who had to pay alimony for children resulting from two different extramarital relationships with Brazilian women. In Foz do Iguacu, another curious fact was revealing of the local imaginary. Whenever I mentioned to a cab driver that I was there to study the Chinese, he would tell me some story about an immigrant who had been “charmed” by local women. Many wondered why they would give them so many things.

It is interesting that the self-imposed repression of consumption by the Chinese winds up causing extreme liberalization in some situations. This may indicate a lack of learning about the consumerist limits in the frontier world. In most cases, when one decided to spend with women it meant to spend a lot and unlimitedly, and that seemed strange for many Brazilians and Paraguayans.



Beyond the sphere of affective games, the first time I went to a casino in Paraguay I was surprised by the frequency of Chinese gambling and spending their fortunes in four-digit bets... That seemed to me unconceivable given all I used to hear and see in their everyday lives.

Many studies indicate that casinos are among the chief spaces of sociability for Chinese living abroad (for instance, Chan, 1990; Wundrak, 2006). Chance and hunch are indeed important in Chinese culture, as Weber (1968) himself had already highlighted. According to the native logic, however, to spend a lot of money in a casino does not contradict the ideal of wit, frugality and savings, as this expenditure is seen by the community as a challenge to chance and self-control (verbal communication).<sup>16</sup>

If some Chinese do spend a lot in casinos, it is because many of them have been able to gather considerable riches. In general, Chinese immigration to Ciudad del Este is successful inasmuch as most people have been able to accumulate money and goods. Not few are those who got rich, and even the “poorest” have been able to acquire some patrimony.

We are thus brought back to a crucial touchstone for comparison between Calvinism and Confucianism. Chinese immigrants’ meaning of success is significantly connected to the idea of individual effort; the individual himself is to be blamed for his own failure. One does not see among them complaints about an unjust system, as it is understood that all had similar opportunities. Problems stem from some blunder along an individual’s trajectory; thus, failure is accepted with resignation, and the acknowledgement that only hard work will lead them back to good fortune.

For a while during fieldwork, I would understand Lin and Wang’s laments as an instance of failed enterprises, as compared to other Chinese and Arab merchants in the region. Both complained daily about the bad state of business and how hard was life. Lin refused to go to restaurants, and even under harsh conditions would sacrifice herself to cross the international bridge on foot. Wang wore tattered clothes and his store was extremely modest. With time, however, I came to learn about some of their possessions. Lin owned a residential apartment, two stores, one warehouse, a car and a van. Wang, on his turn, was the owner of a four-storey building...

In fact, it is precisely the devaluation of wealth (or the discourse of frugality and privation) that attracted them. As Weber (2003) has remarked, unlimited greed for profit has no affinity with capitalism, nor with its spirit. Capitalism is identified with restraint and control of “irrational” drives. The accumulation of capital in the name of future generations is therefore carried out by means of the abdication of all (or almost all!) conspicuous spending.

## **Closing remarks**

Even though many Chinese immigrants overseas maintain numerous commercial and affective bonds with China, recent radical changes in the homeland are making *being Chinese* outside of its territory quite different from those that have experienced and are still experiencing a daily revolution in values and behaviors.

Simultaneously with the flourishing of consumption as “modern hedonism” (Campbell, 1987) in many parts of China, manifest in the increased consumption of cutting-edge market goods, due to their very condition as such many immigrants walk the opposite way. This may include attaching themselves to a Confucian rhetoric of

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication by Chan, 2006.

humbleness. For these, the latter is not about a morality to be rescued, as it is being currently attempted in China through policy. It is something that makes every sense in the world, and fosters the goal of a life of privation where savings are the way toward a safe and balanced future, as well as a harmonious life and family.

Savings and privation characterize a conduct of high rationality and individual self-control, as Weber had asserted in his studies on China during the early twentieth century, when the parallels with the Protestant ethics were traced. My ethnographic material indicates that today a comparison between the two ethics, Confucianism and Calvinism, is still a fruitful analytical avenue, as in the lives of the immigrant businessmen observed Confucianism is recovered and re-actualized according to convenience, and used as a moral foundation for justifying, for instance, non-consumption.

Among the limits and possibilities of such comparative exercise, I highlight the difference between the meanings attributed to capital accumulation: for the Chinese, it is an end in itself, while work is a means towards it; in Calvinism, work itself is the predestined mission, and wealth a natural (though disheartening) consequence of God's approval. To make money, even by means of similar rationalities and sacrifices, is a worldly business for the Chinese, and a divine one for the Calvinist.

Moreover, it is possible to conclude that it is precisely a certain appropriation of the "Confucian ethic" that, for a number of reasons outlined in this article, stimulates the capitalist spirit. Today, we are faced with the phenomenon of Chinese capitalism both within and without China's national borders. My explanatory proposal for the success of a particular case was grounded in Weber's notions about the role of religious ethos in the development of business. Even though the author had asserted that Confucianism and capitalism were mutually exclusive, this article attempted to account for the Chinese market from the perspective of one of its microcosms precisely from a Weberian point of view.

Finally, I have presented ethnographic situations in which cultural codes substantiate renouncement and condemnation of conspicuous consumption (consumerism), thus highlighting the tension implicated in an expanding Chinese market. On the other hand, assuming that symbolic systems are dynamic, I have sketched some possibilities allowing moral conducts to be negotiated and reinvented when faced with the new, therefore propitiating full enjoyment of the material world.

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Received 02/19/2007  
Approved 06/14/2007

Translated by Letícia Maria Costa da Nóbrega Cesarino  
Translated from **Horizontes Antropológicos**, Porto Alegre, v.13, n.28, p. 145-174,  
July/Dec. 2007.